Frontier

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Chapter 1

"What should I call you?" Vincent asked in a timid whisper.

"Well, I suppose you'll call me Lieutenant Bowers when we're on duty, but I'm not sure about when we're alone. What would you like to call me?" Joe asked in return.

"I dunno. It feels funny to call you Joe since you're older than me... It's like I'm being disrespectful." Vincent said in thought.

"And you would NEVER do that." Joe said with a smirk.

Vincent put on his most innocent expression, but it only held for a few seconds before he broke into giggles.

With a fond smile, Joe said, "I understand what you mean. How about Uncle Joe?"

Vincent shook his head and said, "It doesn't sound right to me since you're kinda like my dad or step-dad or something."

Joe nodded his acceptance of the reasoning, then quietly said, "It's okay if you want to call me dad."

"It might be nice to pretend for a while, but you're not my dad. I don't want you to be him, I want you to be you... Um, did that make sense?" Vincent asked with a confused look as he replayed the words in his head.

"Perfect sense." Joe said quietly.

"What about Daddy Joe?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"I like that. You don't have a problem with that do you Lawrence?" Joe asked as he turned his attention to his son on his other side.

"No, we shared his dad for all these years, it's only fair if we share mine now." Lawrence said with a warm smile at his half-brother.

"When we get to the Yorktown, should I tell people that you're my dad or my step-dad or should I act like I don't know you or what?" Vincent asked in deep thought.

"I think that rather than trying to explain to everyone we meet that you're my ex-wife's son from her second marriage, it would just be easier to introduce you as my son. If there's a reason to go into more detail with someone, we can." Joe said in thought.

Vincent nodded as he considered the words.

A voice came from the front passenger seat of the Caravan they were riding in. "Vincent, if you'll look out your window, you just *might* get a surprise."

Vincent looked out the window and carefully looked around to see what Lieutenant Thompson might be talking about.

All of a sudden, he spotted it.

"There's a Federation shuttlecraft! Do we have time to stop and look at it? Do you think there's any way I can touch it?" Vincent asked with excitement.

"Oh, I think you'll be able to touch it, that's how we're getting to San Francisco." Lieutenant Thompson said seriously.

"No way! Really? I thought we were going to take a plane!" Vincent said happily, never taking his eyes off the shuttlecraft.

"Hey, I'm Starfleet security, I don't lie." Lieutenant Thompson said in a mock stern voice.

"I'm sorry Uncle Brady. I didn't mean to say that you were lying." Vincent said quickly.

"I know what you meant Vincent, I was just playing. As soon as my brother finds a parking place, we'll be able to go have a look at her." Brady said with a genuine smile.

"Actually, since I'm not going with you I'll just let you off in front of the terminal." Allen said as he approached the building that served as a transit station for all the shuttlecrafts.

Within a minute Allen had found a close spot to drop his passengers off.

"Joe and Vincent. It was good to meet you. I hope you have a good journey." Allen said as he opened the back of the Caravan so they could get their luggage.

"Thank you for giving us a ride. It's been really nice meeting you too." Joe said sincerely.

"Maybe next time you're in town you two can stop by my place. I know my boys would enjoy visiting with Vincent." Allen said as he stood aside and watched Brady, Joe and Vincent gather their luggage.

"Bye Daddy, I'm going to miss you." Lawrence said as he walked to his father and gave him a hug.

"Now that I've found you again, I promise that I'll keep in touch. Expect a lot of messages from both of us." Joe said with a smile.

"Yeah, that sounds great. I hope you two have a great time out there." Lawrence said with a smile as he took a step back.

"It's about time for us to leave, are you guys ready?" Brady asked as he picked up his flight bag.

"Just a second." Vincent said, then ran to Lawrence and gave him a hug.

"I'm gonna miss you Vince. I hope you have fun out there." Lawrence said as he hugged his brother tightly.

"I'll miss you too." Vincent said, then pulled Lawrence down slightly and gave him a firm kiss on the cheek.

Vincent shifted Lawrence down a little more so he could whisper in his ear and said, "If you're gonna be queer... I mean gay. I'm glad you found someone nice like Deacon to be your boyfriend."

"Thanks Vince." Lawrence said in a whisper as he let Vincent go.

Joe motioned with his head to 'come on' and led the way up the sidewalk.

Vincent looked in surprise at the car that had pulled in behind them.

A boy was being shifted out of the back seat of the car and into a wheelchair.... A boy with red hair.

"Rory? Is that you? What are you doing here? Are you going with us?" Vincent asked in wonder.

"Yeah. Are you going to Vulcan too?" Rory asked with surprise.

"No. We're going to Alpha Centauri." Vincent said with a grand smile.

"Wow. That's really cool." Rory said, then turned his attention to Solak, his Vulcan doctor who was now standing by his side.

"Our transport will depart shortly." Solak said seriously.

Vincent watched with a small ache in his heart as he saw Rory get hugs and kisses from both his parents.

The realization awoke in Vincent that both his parents were dead and he would never get hugs and kisses from them again.

"You okay champ?" Joe whispered from Vincent's side.

Vincent looked up at Joe with teary eyes and said, "No. But I will be."

Movement drew Vincent's attention and he looked in time to see a boy give Rory a long, slow kiss.

Vincent quickly turned away from the scene and looked at the Spaceport terminal building.

"Do you have everything?" Joe asked in a quiet voice.

Vincent hefted his carry-on bag onto his shoulder and picked up his suitcase, then nodded that he was ready.

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After a minute of watching Vincent shifting around and looking at everything in the shuttle, Joe quietly said, "Settle down Vincent. You need to get your seat belt on before we take off."

"Okay, I'm sorry. It's just that this is so cool." Vincent said with excitement as he adjusted his seatbelt to fit him comfortably.

Conversation stopped in the shuttle as everyone felt the engines powering up.

Vincent looked out the view port with excitement as the shuttle lifted into the air.

"So what are you going to do on Alpha Centauri?" Rory asked from two seats away.

Vincent leaned forward to see past Joe and Solak before saying, "We're just hauling some cargo and exchanging some personnel."

"We? It sounds like you're going to be a part of the crew." Rory said cautiously.

Vincent smiled and proudly said, "I am."

"Oh wow. That sounds like it's going to be great!" Rory said with a brilliant smile.

"Yeah. I think it will be. What are you going to Vulcan for?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Solak is going to try out a new treatment on me and maybe he can make me better." Rory said happily.

"You mean you'll be able to get out of the wheelchair?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"Maybe. We won't know until we've tried it." Rory said in a considering tone.

"You need to let me know how it's going. You know, send me messages and stuff." Vincent said with excitement.

"Yeah, that sounds good. The easiest way to get in touch with me is through Clan Short. But I want to know how you're doing too. How can I get a message to you?" Rory asked with a smile.

Vincent thought about it, then looked at Joe with question.

"Well, since Clan Short is collectively Vincent's guardian, I'm sure you could get a message to Vincent through them, but the most direct way would be to send your message to Starfleet directed to Crewman Vincent Winters on the USS Yorktown." Joe said with a smile.

"Crewman?" Vincent and Rory asked simultaneously.

Joe chuckled at the stereo effect and said, "I wasn't going to tell you until we were onboard because it isn't official until you've reported in with Captain Byrne. But you will be listed as a crewman on the crew roster and have all the rights and responsibilities of any other crew member."

"I didn't think I'd be listed like a real member of the crew." Vincent said in shock.

"At first your duties will be the same as any other crewman, but once you've learned the basics, you'll be receiving a module of your course studies that will include leadership training. If everything goes to plan, you'll eventually be given the responsibility to lead others and be offered a commission as a junior grade Ensign." Joe said seriously.

"But aren't the adults going to have a problem with taking orders from a kid?" Rory asked with concern.

Joe turned his attention to Rory and said, "Probably. I'm hoping that with the proper training, Vincent will be able to deal with that situation when the time comes."

Vincent looked at Joe with wide eyes of fear and question.

"Vincent, you're not the first one to have to deal with something like this. Cory and Sean both had to overcome this when they received their commissions. When the time comes, get in touch with them and they can tell you how best to deal with it." Brady said seriously.

Vincent looked at Brady and gave a nod of relief.

"Thank you Lieutenant Thompson. That's very good advice." Joe said with a smile at Brady.

"I'm happy to do it. Let me know if you have any problems and I'll do whatever I can to help." Brady offered sincerely.

"I'll do that. I guess for some reason I thought that since I was Vincent's mentor, I'd be teaching him all by myself. It's good to know that I have someone to ask for advice when I need it." Joe said with a smile.

"I'll do anything I can to help my nephew. So far none of my other nephews has shown much interest in Starfleet. It's such a large part of my life, I'd really like to be able to share it with them. It looks like this is going to be my only chance." Brady finished with a shrug.

"I know exactly what you mean. When I first met Lawrence, it was obvious that he didn't have any interest in Starfleet. I mean, I can tell that he respects me and appreciates the rank that I've achieved, but he hasn't expressed any desire to... follow in my footsteps, I guess." Joe said, then hugged Vincent with one arm and continued, "Lawrence and I have other things in common, but I'm really glad to be able to pass on what I've learned to one of my sons."

Brady smiled at the sight and said, "I hope to be able to do the same thing one day. But until that day comes, I'll always be available to help you however I can."

"Thank you Uncle Brady. I'll be sure to call you if I have any problems." Vincent said seriously.

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"I guess this is goodbye Brady. I hope we'll run into each other again sometime soon." Joe said as he and Vincent gathered their belongings.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we do, the Enterprise seems to cross paths with the Yorktown every few months. Besides that, Lawrence lives right across the street from my brother so we'll probably end up seeing each other here on Earth." Brady said with a smile as he picked up his flight bag.

"It was nice to meet you Solak. Peace and long life." Joe said respectfully.

"It was a pleasure for me as well. Live long and prosper." Solak said formally.

"I hope Solak can make you all better. Send me a message when you get there and tell me what Vulcan is like." Vincent said with a smile.

"Yeah. I will. Remember to call me if you need anything. Since I'm a member of Clan Short, I'm one of your guardians. It's my job to take care of you." Rory finished with a smile.

"Okay, but only if you'll call me if you need something too." Vincent said seriously.

"It's a deal. Oh, we've got to go. Our shuttle's about to leave." Rory said as he looked at the large clock at the information counter.

"Enjoy your trip to Vulcan." Joe said as he lifted one small bag in sort of a wave.

"You two enjoy your trip to Alpha Centauri." Rory said with a smile and wave as Solak began to push his wheelchair away.

"Where do we go now?" Vincent asked as he looked around at the bustling spaceport.

"We're going to go to our shuttle. But before we do that, I need to tell you something very important." Joe said firmly, gaining Vincent's full attention.

"This place can get really crazy and it's possible that we could get separated." Joe said as he looked into Vincent's eyes.

"Do you see that tall building right there?"

Vincent looked where Joe was pointing and nodded.

"If something happens and you lose track of me, I want you to go into that big building and go to the number one elevator." Joe said seriously.

"What floor should I go to?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I don't want you to get on the elevator, I want you to wait outside of it. That building is a landmark that you can see from anywhere in the spaceport complex. If something happens and I lose you, I'll go to the number one elevator and wait for you there." Joe said seriously.

"I'll remember... Thank you Daddy Joe, I would'a been scared if I'd got lost in a place this big and busy, but now that you told me what to do, I won't be scared at all." Vincent said with a smile.

"Good. Hopefully we won't need to make any trips to the number one elevator today. Our shuttle should be fairly close, this way." Joe said as he hefted the luggage and started walking.

"Daddy Joe?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yeah?" Joe responded and slowed his pace a little so Vincent' wouldn't have to fight to keep up.

"Do I have any grandparents... I mean... like a grandma Joe and a grandpa Joe?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Joe chuckled at the question, then said, "Yes you do. They live in a little trailer park on the Georgia side of the border with Florida. I haven't seen them in years. Maybe next time we're on Earth we could stop by and get your brother, then go visit them. "

"That sounds like fun. What are they like?" Vincent asked, then moved close to Joe's side for a second to avoid the elbow of a man walking past them.

"They're good people. I think you'll like them, and I know they'll love you." Joe finished with a smile.

"Why haven't you seen them in years?" Vincent asked curiously.

"They never had much money but... somehow that didn't matter to them. When I met your mom, I was obsessed with what I didn't have and all the things I couldn't offer her... " Joe trailed off in thought.

"Did grandma Joe and grandpa Joe like my momma?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Back then, I thought they hated her. But now that I'm older... I think they hated the person that I became when I was around her." Joe said carefully.

"Were you mean or something?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

"No. Not the way you mean anyway. I was ashamed of my parents. I wanted to impress Peggy and give her things to make her happy. I think my parents recognized what I was doing, but couldn't snap me out of it. I guess in the back of my mind I've always kind of blamed them for my marriage failing because they weren't rich and didn't support my relationship." Joe said with regret.

"So you said stuff that you really didn't mean because you were mad and couldn't stop yourself?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Joe looked at Vincent with surprise and finally said, "That's exactly what I did. I guess I need to work on that."

"Me too. We can work on it together." Vincent said with a smile.

"This is it." Joe said as they stopped beside a long-range shuttle.

"Wow, it's a lot bigger than the last one we were on." Vincent said in awe.

"Well, the only reason they'd send the Windsor down is if we have a large group going back to the ship tonight. We'd better get aboard and get our seats. It might be standing room only." Joe said as he started toward the shuttle.

Vincent took one last look at the shuttlecraft before following Joe aboard.

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"It looks like you made a new friend while you were planet-side." A casually dressed man in his thirties said as he took the seat next to Joe, the other side from Vincent.

"I guess you could say that. Dennis, this is my son Vincent." Joe said proudly.

"Son? Back up Joey and tell me how you managed that. Last I heard you were a confirmed bachelor." Dennis said with surprise.

"Didn't you ever wonder *why* I was a confirmed bachelor?" Joe asked frankly.

"I just thought you liked being single. Y'Know, playing the field. A different woman every night. The usual stuff." Dennis finished with a shrug.

"My momma tore his heart out. She ripped it right outta there. When she was done with him, he didn't want to be married ever again." Vincent said with a serious expression as he looked Dennis in the eyes.

Dennis looked at Vincent with shock as Joe looked on with amusement.

"Joey, you shouldn't be telling your kid stuff like that about his mother."

"Daddy Joe never said anything bad about my momma. He loved her a lot, she was just... high maintenance?" Vincent finished with a questioning look at Joe.

Joe chuckled at Vincent and said, "That's exactly right."

"There's Debbie, I'm going to see if I can get a seat next to her. I'll talk to you guys later." Dennis said in a rush, then hurried toward the back of the shuttle.

"I think you shocked Dennis. He didn't know what to make of you." Joe said with a chuckle.

"Good, because I knew exactly what to make of him." Vincent said seriously.

"What's that?" Joe asked curiously.

"A used car salesman or maybe a video preacher. He called you Joey and didn't even say 'hi' to me. I think he's one of those people who acts nice to get you to do stuff for them." Vincent said in thought.

Joe laughed and said, "I think you're right. Put a leisure suit and a bad toupee on him and he'd be ready to sell some cars."

"I figured out that you gotta be super honest with people like that. When they know that you'll tell them exactly what you think of them, they get away from you quick." Vincent said seriously.

"Do you really feel that way about your mother?" Joe asked with concern.

"No, I don't feel that about my momma. I feel that about the woman you married. From the way you talk about her, they're not the same person." Vincent said in thought.

Joe nodded and said, "That's a good way of looking at it Vincent. People change over the course of their lives. Someone you meet today might be a very different person twenty years from now."

"Dennis won't be. I bet that twenty years from now he'll still be selfish and rude and wearing so much cologne that you have to wonder what terrible stink he's trying to hide." Vincent said in a speculative voice.

Joe was fighting to hold in his laughter and only nodded his agreement.

Vincent got a considering look for a moment, then said in a much quieter voice, "I'm sorry if I said bad stuff about one of your friends. I just, I don't know... I feel like I can tell you stuff like that and you won't get mad."

Joe gave Vincent a gentle smile and said, "I think your assessment of Dennis is right on the money, so don't worry about it. And you can tell me whatever you feel like telling me. If I disagree with something you say, I'll just tell you."

Vincent smiled, then knelt in his seat to look behind them in the shuttle before saying, "Thanks Daddy Joe. That makes me feel better... Well, except for one thing."

"What's that?" Joe asked with concern.

"I feel sorry for Debbie." Vincent said, then turned to look at Dennis talking enthusiastically to a woman who was leaning slightly away from him.

"I could go rescue her if you want. We seem to have one empty seat in our row." Joe said with pride for Vincent's thoughtfulness.

"Yeah, I think that'd be nice." Vincent said with a smile.

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"Please excuse me for interrupting, but I'd like to introduce Debbie to my son before we take off." Joe said shyly.

"Thank you Joe, I would love to meet your son. It was nice talking with you Dennis, I'll see you on board." Debbie said quickly, then followed Joe back to his row of seats.

"Debbie, would you like the window or the aisle?" Vincent asked as he stood beside the row of seats.

"I think I'd like the aisle. Thank you for asking." Debbie said with a smile.

Vincent took the window seat and waited for Joe and Debbie to be seated before saying,"I'm Vincent, Joe's son."

Debbie smiled a genuine smile and said, "It's very nice to meet you Vincent. I'm Debbie."

"What do you do on the ship Debbie?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I work in communications." Debbie said seriously.

"I bet that's fun, you must be really good at electronics. I've heard that the communications circuitry is really complicated." Vincent said with interest.

"Yes. I suppose it is. I guess it's like anything else, when you've done it for a while, you get used to it and it becomes easy." Debbie said happily.

"I bet it isn't easy when a circuit gets fried. That sounds like it would be a mess to fix." Vincent said as he turned more in his seat so he could look Debbie in the eyes.

"No, that's actually easy. All you do is change out the board that burned out. The real challenge is when something small goes wrong and you have to trace out the circuits and test all the components of almost the whole communications console to track down the problem." Debbie said with a smile.

"Wow. I didn't think of that. I guess when a circuit board fries, the smoke coming off the bad board would be a big clue to tell you where the problem is." Vincent said with a smile.

"That's right. Finding the problem is usually the bigger part of the job. Once you know what's wrong, fixing it generally takes a few minutes." Debbie said in a considering tone.

"Yeah, and people think all you do is sit all day and open hailing frequencies." Vincent said with a knowing smile.

"Tell me about it. Without the communications console, we're alone in the universe. Scanners and sensors can show you what's going on right in front of you, but communications lets you know what's happening in the system you're traveling toward, or the emergency that might have happened where you just left." Debbie said passionately.

"I guess that's why there's a whole communications staff to take care of it." Vincent said seriously.

"Yes. And that's why we have so many redundant systems. The ship can't afford to be without communications for even a minute." Debbie said frankly.

Vincent nodded seriously at the statement, then looked at Joe.

Debbie looked at Joe and said, "I'm sorry if I was ignoring you Joe. It just isn't very often when someone asks me about my work. I can't remember the last time I talked seriously about communications with someone outside my department."

"That's fine Debbie, I'm happy sitting back and being proud of my son." Joe said with a smile at Vincent.

"I can see why. He's smart, well mannered..."

"And he's the one who asked me to rescue you from Dennis." Joe admitted shyly.

"Really?" Debbie asked Joe with surprise, then looked at Vincent curiously.

"Dennis came over here and talked to us before you came on board. I kinda got rid of him, but then he went to you. I felt bad because it was like we sent him to you or something..." Vincent trailed off shyly.

"Thanks for your concern Vincent. Don't worry about Dennis, I know how to handle him. And once we get back on the ship, the only thing he'll be able to think of is his galley." Debbie said with a smile, then got a strange look of distraction.

Vincent looked over the back of the seat to see a black haired man motioning to Debbie to sit with him.

"Connie wants me to sit with him, I'm guessing he has some news. Do you guys mind?" Debbie asked hopefully.

"No. That's fine. Just tell him that his Lieutenant will expect a full report in the morning." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent looked at Joe curiously as Debbie moved back to join her friend farther back in the shuttle.

"That means I want him to tell me all about it when he comes to work... Connie is in deflector control with me." Joe said with a smile.

"Oh. It sounded like you were his boss or something." Vincent said in thought.

"Well, officially I am. But you couldn't tell it by the way we work together." Joe said with a smile.

"All hands, ready for departure in two minutes."

"Is your seatbelt on?" Joe asked as he looked at Vincent carefully.

Vincent quickly turned in his seat and put his seatbelt back on.

"Are you saving this seat?" A female voice asked quickly.

"No. Go ahead." Joe said as he turned his attention to the woman who had joined them.

"Lieutenant Joseph Bowers took shore leave? The fabric of the universe must be tearing apart..." The woman said dramatically.

"Family emergency." Joe muttered shyly, feeling that her loud, blunt statement was drawing the attention of everyone on the shuttle.

The woman looked at Joe with a calculating expression, then said, "Since when do you have any family? A priority one subspace message from Starfleet Command and all of a sudden you're a family man?"

Joe looked at the woman with surprise at the question.

"My Daddy Joe was there when I needed him most." Vincent said defiantly, then in a voice that was more accusatory than questioning, he asked, "Does anyone need you?"

"You have a kid? How did that happen?" The woman asked with disbelief.

Joe sat in stunned silence, trapped between the brashness of his long time friend and Vincent coming to his defense.

"Well, when a mommy and daddy love each other very much..." Vincent began to say, but was interrupted.

"My ex-wife recently passed away. Vincent has been accepted into a Starfleet mentoring program so he is coming to live with me on the

Yorktown so I can train him to be an officer." Joe said quickly, before Vincent could go any further.

"Ex-wife." The woman said as she shook her head in exasperation, then continued in an absent voice, "You never go out on dates, you don't even look at women... or men for that matter."

"Daddy Joe? Is this lady my grandma?" Vincent asked, trying to sound serious.

"No Vincent, this is Ensign Danietta Collins. Why would you think she's your grandmother?" Joe asked cautiously, not having any idea of what to expect.

"Cause she's asking you questions like she's your mother, that'd make her my grandmother." Vincent said with an impish grin.

Joe blushed and gave Danietta a helpless shrug as if to say 'Kids!'.

Danietta chuckled at the gesture then turned to Vincent and said, "Honey I've just known your father for a very long time and it's a shock to find out something like this about him."

"At ease Champ, Danietta is a good friend and is just worried about me." Joe said to Vincent seriously.

"Oh, okay... If you want I could tell Ensign Collins the story so she won't have to worry." Vincent said carefully.

Joe looked at Vincent with a loving expression and said, "You can tell anyone you want. It's your story too."

Vincent nodded and said, "My Daddy Joe met my momma and they fell in love. but Daddy Joe was poor and felt real bad cause he couldn't give my momma nice things. I guess him feeling bad made him say and do things that wasn't always nice..."

"...I sometimes do that too..." Vincent said as an aside, then continued, "Daddy Joe felt bad, Momma felt bad and they finally got a divorce..."

Joe couldn't resist the urge and gave Vincent a quick hug.

Vincent smiled for a moment, then in a serious voice continued, "My momma married my dad, then last week, my dad killed her then wrecked his car and killed himself."

Danietta looked at Joe with wide, disbelieving eyes.

Joe noticed and quietly said, "Vincent's older brother Lawrence had been thrown out of the house by their father and was living in the streets. He

came into contact with Clan Short of Vulcan. That's what the priority one message was about. Commander Dodds arranged for me to be reunited with my son."

"And when my parents died, Daddy Joe said that I could come into space with him and learn about starships and Starfleet." Vincent said quietly.

"You're very lucky Vincent, I've known your father for almost ten years and have never seen him open his heart to anyone before. You must be very special to get through his defenses." Danietta said warmly.

Vincent shook his head and said, "I think that maybe my brother Lawrence is the special one. Lawrence cracked the shell, I just sneaked into one of the cracks when no one was looking."

Joe gave a full hearty laugh and said, "That's exactly what you did."

"Did you feel that? They just powered up the engines. We should be leaving in a few seconds." Danietta said with a smile directed at Vincent.

"KEWL!" Vincent said happily.

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Joe and Danietta both watched as Vincent pressed his face to the view port to watch the San Francisco Spaceport become smaller and smaller in the distance.

"Joe?" Danietta whispered.

Joe turned in his seat and looked at her with question.

"How are you?" She asked in a serious voice.

"I'm really happy Dani" Joe said as the inner joy he was feeling shown clearly in his expression.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Danietta asked in amazement at the transformation of her long-time friend.

"You know I got that call. All I was told is that I was to report to Commander Dodds at the Southcrest Ranch in Orlando." Joe said as his gaze became distant.

"You must have been scared to death." Danietta said with a chuckle.

"I thought I was going to be transferred to the *Enterprise*." Joe said frankly.

Danietta thought about it for a second, then nodded. She could see how easy it would be to make that assumption.

"Well, when I got there, Commander Dodds introduced me to Teri Short, the Director of Federation Youth Services." Joe said seriously.

"You met Teri Short? That woman is a living legend! I've never heard of anyone who could cut through the bureaucratic mess and get things done like her." Danietta said in wonder.

Vincent turned from the view port when he heard Teri's name and began to listen to the story.

"She's just as amazing in person. Anyway, Commander Dodds and Director Short started telling me about how my son Lawrence had been physically and verbally abused for years, then thrown out of the only home he'd ever known." Joe said in concentration.

"How horrible." Danietta said distantly.

Joe nodded his agreement, then said, "From what I understand, Lawrence didn't have an easy time of it living on the streets. One night he was in a desperate situation... he was getting beaten up in an alley, when a group of children came to his rescue. They were members of Clan Short of Vulcan."

"So your son was literally rescued by Clan Short?" Danietta asked in amazement.

Joe nodded again, then said, "Some of the people who helped him, a pair of brothers, took him into their home and accepted him as part of their family."

Danietta smiled at the good news.

"Well, I guess one night Lawrence was talking to one of his neighbors who is a member of Clan Short and asked if there was any way that the Clan could help him find his biological father." Joe said as tears started welling up in his eyes.

Danietta reached over and patted his hand in comfort.

"They found me and called me." Joe finished quickly as he got his emotions under control again.

"So what happened when you met?" Danietta asked impatiently.

Joe chuckled and said, "I was at Southcrest waiting for him. There were about five other boys with him, but I knew as soon as I saw him that he was my son."

"Was he happy to see you? Was he angry? What?" Danietta asked, seeming to be seconds away from trying to shake the answers out of him.

"Dani. He's amazing. I told him what happened with his mother and he understood completely. He doesn't hold it against me at all. I've been dreaming about what my son might be doing or what kind of man he would grow into someday, but he went way beyond any of my dreams for him." Joe said, as the tears were now gliding down his cheeks.

Danietta felt tears welling up in her own eyes, then noticed Vincent watching them.

"What about this young man? He must be very special to be given an opportunity like this." Danietta said with a smile.

Joe turned in his seat and pulled Vincent into a one armed hug as he said, "He is. When he arrived at the Southcrest Ranch he was introduced around and made a very good impression on some very important people."

"I did?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"Yes you did. I guess I should have told you this before, but one of the reasons you were offered placement in the mentoring program is because Commander Dodds recommended you. He said... I think his exact words were, 'Vincent has the proper mindset and a realistic attitude toward becoming a Starfleet officer'." Joe said with a smile.

"He really said that?" Vincent asked in wonder.

"He sure did. Then he said that not putting you in the mentoring program would be a horrible waste of your potential. On top of that, Captain Spock said that you would be an 'acceptable' candidate for the mentoring program. That's about the best compliment you could hope to get from a Vulcan." Joe said proudly.

"Wow. I didn't know any of that. Commander Dodds was really nice... And he cooks good too." Vincent finished with a smile.

Joe nodded and said, "That was the absolute best brisket I've ever tasted in my life. Dani, if you ever get the chance to go to a cook-out at Commander Dodds house... accept."

"Maybe next time you could take me as your date?" Dani asked with a smile and a flirtatious wink.

"I've, um. Kind of got someone on Earth that I'm seeing." Joe said shyly.

"You do?" Dani asked in wonder.

"Grandma Mona?" Vincent asked quietly.

Joe turned to Vincent and nodded, then hesitantly asked, "That's okay with you isn't it?"

Vincent blinked with surprise at being asked, then said, "Yeah. That's great. She's really nice. I like her a lot."

"So let me get this straight. You went from being a dateless bachelor who never takes shore leave to a man with two sons and a girlfriend in the space of five days?" Danietta asked carefully.

Joe thought about it for a second, then said, "More like four sons, but yeah. That's basically right."

"I've got two other brothers? Who?" Vincent asked quickly.

"Billy and Deacon. I told Billy that if they ever needed a dad, I'd be there for them. I don't think they're ready to fully accept another father figure into their lives yet, considering the way their parents treated them. But I'll keep checking in on them and make sure that they know I'm available when they're ready." Joe said carefully.

"I didn't know you adopted Billy and Deacon too." Vincent said in thought.

"Well, I don't think I'll ever 'officially' adopt them. But there are times in your life when you need your family... I want to be there for them at those times." Joe said carefully.

"Like at the funeral." Vincent said in a whisper.

"Yeah. Like that." Joe said as he renewed his hug with Vincent.

Joe offered Vincent silent comfort in his arms as he looked out the view port at the stars.

* * * * *

"There it is." Joe finally said.

Vincent pulled away from Joe and slowly turned to look out the view port.

After looking all around the TerraMain space station, Vincent finally said, "Where? I can't see her."

"I meant TerraMain. The Yorktown is docked inside." Joe said with a smile.

"Oh." Vincent said and looked at the elegant design of the huge structure floating in space.

"You probably won't be getting much of a look at her when we enter TerraMain. Most likely we'll just go directly for the shuttle bay." Joe said hesitantly, not wanting Vincent to be disappointed.

"That's okay. I'd rather learn her from the inside out anyway." Vincent said happily as he watched them getting closer and closer to the space station.

Joe chuckled and said, "We'll get right to work on that."

Vincent nodded happily and turned his full attention to the view port.

"Now before we go on board, I need you to remember that you're still a civilian until you've met with Captain Byrne." Joe said seriously.

"I'll remember Lieutenant Bowers." Vincent said seriously.

"At ease Vincent. Save that for when we get on board." Joe said with a smile.

"Yes sir." Vincent said playfully, then turned his attention back to the view port.

* * * * *

"NCC 1717... United Federation of Planets." Vincent read the writing on the nacell slowly as they approached the shuttle bay.

"Your new home." Joe added with a gentle smile.

Chapter 2

"Before we land, I need to tell you what to expect." Joe said seriously.

Vincent moved away from the view port and looked at Joe with question.

"When we leave the shuttle, all the new personnel are going to meet with the captain to be officially welcomed aboard and given their duty assignments." Joe said carefully.

Vincent nodded his comprehension.

"What I need to know is if you would like for me to stay with you, in case you need me to explain something." Joe said quietly.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Cory had a talk with me before we left. He said that I'm a Vulcan citizen now and that if I act like a kid, I'll be treated like a kid and kids don't get to be in Starfleet."

"But you are a kid." Joe said with concern.

Vincent smiled at Joe and said, "Yeah, but I don't have to act like one. Cory told me how him and some of the other Clan members handle that."

Joe looked at Vincent with question.

"He said that it won't work if I try to act like an adult all the time, so when I need to be a kid, I should spend some time with you and let you be the adult for a while." Vincent said shyly.

"Your patriarch sounds like a very wise young man." Joe said with a tender smile.

Vincent nodded, then said, "So I think I should go and talk to the captain by myself, but after he's done talking to me, I might need some kid time."

"I'll be in deflector control until after we're away from TerraMain. I need to be there to be sure everything is running properly. Will you meet me there?" Joe asked quietly.

Vincent smiled and said, "Yeah, thanks Daddy Joe."

Joe and Vincent looked up as the door of the shuttle opened.

Vincent took a deep breath for courage, then unbuckled his seat belt and picked up his carry-on bag from under his seat.

Joe looked at Vincent with concern, wanting to shelter him from what was to come.

Vincent glanced up at Joe and recognized the expression of concern.

"Don't worry Daddy Joe, I'll make you proud." Vincent said with a toothy grin.

"You already have." Joe said quietly.

Joe noticed that the shuttle was nearly empty and quickly picked up his flight bag.

"Go ahead, I'll see you in deflector control." Vincent said as he followed Joe to the door.

"I'll be waiting." Joe said quietly.

* * * * *

Vincent stepped off the shuttle and noticed a gathering to one side.

He walked over and sat his carry-on bag aside, then took his place standing in line.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Joe step onto the turbo lift at the far end of the bay.

The muttered conversation around Vincent stopped as he noticed two officers approaching.

One was a slender, older man with short brown hair graying at the temples and captain's bars on his collar. The other was a huge black man, at least a foot taller than the captain and he wore the rank insignia of a commander.

"I'm Captain Leland Byrne and at my right is Commander Oliver M'Butu, my first officer. Once introductions are made, Commander M'Butu will see to assigning rooms and duty schedules." The Captain said seriously.

Vincent did his best to stand at attention and keep his gaze forward.

"Sometimes it is said that I am an easy captain because I don't require the intricate formalities that some others do. I can't speak to that point. I believe formality has it's place in ceremonies with visiting dignitaries, but in day to day life aboard a starship it is an unnecessary source of stress. What I do require of my crew is proper courtesy and respect. If you behave in a manner that is rude or disrespectful, you may find yourself assigned to another posting or in the worst case scenario, put off the ship at the nearest Federation facility to await transport back to Earth." Captain Byrne said seriously as he walked up and down the line of people who were joining his crew.

Captain Byrne stopped at the other end of the line from Vincent and said, "Lieutenant Morgan, I'm glad you decided to come out of retirement. No disrespect intended toward your replacement, but I swear that the engines just haven't *felt* right since you left."

"Thank you Captain. I've missed being on the *Yorktown*. I'll get right to work on getting the engines tuned to your liking."

"Thank you Richard, it's impossible to relax properly when it feels like something is out of place." The captain said with a gentle smile, then walked to the next person in line.

"Chief Morgan and I are old friends from a time before most of you were born, will the rest of you please introduce yourselves?" The captain asked pleasantly with an expectant look at the next person.

"I am Ensign T'Lani daughter of Sufaal of the house of Sukaan of Vulcan." The Vulcan woman said very precisely.

"Ah yes. Our new medical assistant. Dr. Perry will be happy to see you, she's been doing without a second duty nurse for over a month." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"I will endeavor to perform my duties adequately." Ensign T'Lani said in a flat tone.

"Welcome aboard Ensign T'Lani." Captain Byrne said, then moved to the next person in line and waited expectantly.

"Cadet Darin Cooper reporting as ordered, sir." The young man said in a somewhat forceful and panicked voice.

"At ease Cadet... on second thought, step forward." Captain Byrne said, then looked to Commander M'Butu with question.

The Commander handed a small box to the captain, then took a step back to watch.

"This isn't a training vessel, so there is no place for a cadet on my ship." Captain Byrne said firmly.

Cadet Cooper's eyes went wide at the declaration and every bit of color seemed to drain out of his face.

"So after a review of your academy transcript, I am happy to say that my first duty as your commanding officer will be to promote you to the rank of Ensign. Welcome aboard Ensign Cooper." Captain Byrne said as he attached the triangular rank insignia onto Ensign Cooper's uniform.

"Thank you sir." Ensign Cooper said, looking like he was about to explode with excitement.

Captain Byrne smiled then took a single step and looked down at Vincent with question.

Vincent forced himself to remain calm and remembered what Cory told him about his proper title in the Clan. He looked the Captain in the eyes and carefully said, "I am Vincent Winters, son of Clan Short of the house of Surak of Vulcan."

Captain Byrne looked at Vincent with an appraising eye for a moment before saying, "Vincent, when I was contacted by Admiral Morrow about the possibility of you joining my crew, I was not enthusiastic about the idea. Every crew member on this ship is here for a purpose. The proper place to receive training is the academy, not my ship."

Vincent maintained his calm appearance and waited until he was asked to make a comment.

"But after receiving assurances from Patriarch Short, Director Short, Commander Dodds, Captain Spock and Ambassador Sarek that you would be an asset to my crew, I decided to give you a chance. What you do with that chance is entirely up to you."

"I understand." Vincent said carefully.

"Welcome aboard Crewman Winters." Captain Byrne said formally.

"Thank you sir." Vincent said in an equally formal tone.

"Now Commander M'Butu will give you your assignments. It was a pleasure to meet all of you." Captain Byrne said, then walked away.

"Chief Morgan, it's good to see you again. Your quarters are just where you left them." Commander M'Butu said with a kind smile.

"Thank you Oliver. Once I've had a chance to settle in, come down to the engine room so we can catch up." Chief Morgan said in a casual tone.

"I'll do that Chief." Commander M'Butu said then watched as Chief Morgan gathered his things and walked toward the turbo lift.

"Ensign T'Lani, your cabin assignment is on G-deck, section H4, room two. And of course you are assigned to Medical. Dr. Evelyn Perry will be your direct supervisor. When you've stowed your gear, check in with Dr. Perry to receive further instructions." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Yes sir. Thank you sir." The young Vulcan Ensign said formally, then gathered her things to leave.

"Ensign Cooper, your cabin is on G-deck, section D7, room four. You are assigned to Environmental Control and Lieutenant Nyman will be your direct supervisor. You will meet with Lieutenant Nyman tomorrow morning at 08:00 in Environmental Control." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Commander?" Ensign Cooper said cautiously.

"Yes Ensign?" Commander M'Butu said as he looked up from his data padd.

"There must be some mistake. I've only received the required courses in Environmental Systems. I'm specialized in Helm and Navigation." Ensign Cooper said slowly.

"I see. I'll have to check into that. Excuse me for just a moment." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Yes sir. Thank you sir." Ensign Cooper said quickly.

"Crewman Winters. you have been assigned to share quarters with Ensign Cooper. That's G-deck, section D7 room four. You're assigned to Deflector Control and Lieutenant Bowers will be your direct supervisor. I have a note here saying that your uniforms arrived earlier today, you'll need to go to the quartermaster's office to pick them up." Commander M'Butu said as he looked at the data padd.

"Commander, I'm a crewman. Shouldn't I be assigned to enlisted quarters?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Commander M'Butu smiled at the question and said, "The only difference between enlisted quarters and junior officer's quarters is the company you keep. The rooms are identical. Since you are in the mentoring program, we thought it would be good for you to live among the junior officers. You might end up learning a thing or two that they didn't think to include in your lessons."

"I understand, thank you sir." Vincent said seriously.

"Ensign Cooper, I'll see what I can find out about your orders and contact you when I know what's going on. Enjoy your evening." Commander M'Butu said casually.

"Yes sir. Thank you sir." Ensign Cooper said in a somewhat disbelieving voice.

Vincent picked up his carry-on bag, then walked over to the shuttle and retrieved his suitcase.

As he started toward the turbo lift, he noticed that Ensign Cooper was still standing in the same spot with a bewildered look on his face.

"Are you going to our quarters now?" Vincent asked as he altered his course to stand beside the Ensign.

After a blink and an absent shake of his head, Ensign Cooper said, "What? Oh, yeah. Give me a second."

Vincent watched as the new Ensign retrieved a single piece of luggage from the back of the shuttle.

"Do you know where we're going?" Ensign Cooper asked with distraction.

"Yeah. Do you want to go right to our cabin or do you mind if I stop by the quartermaster's office to get my uniforms first?" Vincent asked casually as he began to walk.

"I don't mind. It looks like I have all the time in the universe." Ensign Cooper said distantly.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked curiously as he stopped to wait for the turbo lift to arrive.

Ensign Cooper looked at Vincent with distraction and said, "I kept telling myself it was too good to be true. I wasn't at the top of my class, I never did anything that made me stand out... I kept saying it had to be a mistake, it was too good to believe..."

The doors to the lift opened and Vincent led the way inside.

As soon as they were inside, Vincent said, "Deck G, Section D7."

"When I finally got here, I started to believe, and then the Captain promoted me to Ensign..." Cooper said in a distant voice of shock.

Vincent felt the turbo lift change direction from vertical to horizontal.

"...I thought my dream was coming true." Ensign Cooper finished in a whisper.

"Come on, we're going to the cabin." Vincent said as the lift doors opened.

"What about your uniforms?" Ensign Cooper asked in a confused voice.

"I'll go back for them. Come on, our room is right down here." Vincent said as he led the way.

Ensign Cooper followed along, only half aware of his surroundings.

"This is it." Vincent said and walked up to the door.

Ensign Cooper stepped into the room and looked around.

"I'll take the top bunk if you don't mind... it's a kid thing." Vincent said as he opened his suitcase and began unpacking his things into a small built-in cabinet.

"Yeah... yeah. That's fine." Ensign Cooper said as he sat down on the bottom bunk.

Ensign Cooper looked around the room curiously and asked, "Is this all there is?"

Vincent smiled at the question and said, "Unless you want to count the bathroom through that door that we have to share with two other people."

"I guess I thought it'd be bigger. It's like a closet." Ensign Cooper said absently.

"It's not that small... but I guess when you're my size things look bigger." Vincent finished with a smile as he stowed his suitcase in the bottom of a locker built into the closet.

"How old are you?" Ensign Cooper asked hesitantly.

"I'm nine. How old are you?" Vincent asked as he pulled the contents of his carry-on bag out and put them away.

"Twenty. I don't know what I'm going to do..." Ensign Cooper said distantly.

"What do you want to do?" Vincent asked seriously as he put his carry-on bag into the storage locker with his suitcase.

Ensign Cooper thought about it for a moment, then said, "All I ever wanted was to be part of something. I want to belong."

Vincent looked at Ensign Cooper carefully, then said, "Okay. What about being a part of the *Yorktown's* crew? Would that work?"

Ensign Cooper looked at Vincent and said, "It's a mistake. I don't belong here."

"Listen up. I'm a nine year old kid. If anyone doesn't belong here it's me. But I'm here and I'm being given a chance to be a part of all this. If I screw up, I'm gone. But if I can learn the stuff I need to learn and do the jobs I'm given, then I'll be able to stay here." Vincent said firmly.

Ensign Cooper looked at Vincent with question, not understanding his point.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "You're being given a chance to be a part of all this. Yeah, someone probably made a mistake. So what? You're here and this is your chance. Take it. When you talk to Commander M'Butu, let him know what you can do and see if there's any way he can make you a part of the crew permanently. There's a ton of jobs for navigators and helmsmen. I think that if he knows that you really do want to be here, he'll help you."

"You think so?" Ensign Cooper asked with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"It's worth a try. You've got nothing to lose and everything you always wanted to gain." Vincent said with a smile.

Ensign Cooper smiled and said, "You're right. Thank you."

"No problem. Now I've got to go to the quartermaster's office to get my uniforms. Do you want to come with me?" Vincent asked casually.

"Yeah. Do you know where it is?" Ensign Cooper asked slowly.

"Sure. I've pretty much memorized the constitution class deck plans. You ready?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Ensign Cooper looked at his suitcase still sitting in the floor, then shrugged and said, "Sure. Ready when you are."

* * * * *

"Excuse me sir. I was told that there was a delivery waiting for me in here." Vincent said timidly to an older man engrossed in something on his terminal screen.

The man looked up slowly at Vincent, but didn't say a word.

"Commander M'Butu said that my uniforms would be here. I'm Crewman Winters." Vincent said, even more slowly.

Finally the man said, "My youngest grandson is older than you."

Vincent held back the immediate insult that popped into his head and decided to try that thing the Captain had talked about... respect.

"I bet you'd be really proud of him if he was my age and he was made a member of the *Yorktown* crew." Vincent said carefully.

The man smiled at the statement and said, "Yes. I suppose I would be. What was it you were looking for again?"

"Uniforms. Commander M'Butu said that Patriarch Short had them sent here." Vincent said, trying not to sound too demanding.

"Short? Oh, the delivery from the Vulcan consulate. Yes, I know right were that is, give me just a minute. A curious name for a Vulcan, that..." The man muttered as he walked over to a large rack of shelving.

Ensign Cooper leaned down and whispered, "Maybe you should think about trying out for the diplomatic corps."

Vincent giggled and said, "Not for a while, my mouth still likes to run off on it's own too much. You just got to see me one of the few times I caught it before it got away."

"Here you go Crewman Winters. Will you need a carry-all for this?" The quartermaster asked as he sat a stack of uniforms on the counter.

"I can get it if Ensign Cooper will help me." Vincent said with a smile at his companion.

"Only if you'll call me Darin." Ensign Cooper said with a smile.

"It's a deal Darin, come on." Vincent said as he gathered half the stack into his arms.

* * * * *

"How do I look?" Vincent asked as he walked out of the bathroom.

Darin looked at Vincent curiously.

"What? Did I miss something?" Vincent asked as he looked down at himself.

"What is that symbol on your arm?" Darin asked as he stood.

Vincent looked at the upper left sleeve of his uniform and saw the Clan Short symbol.

"That's the symbol of my Clan. It just identifies me as part of Clan Short of Vulcan." Vincent said as he started putting away the rest of his uniforms.

"I was wanting to ask about that. You obviously aren't Vulcan, but you introduced yourself as a Vulcan and you wear a Vulcan symbol." Darin said carefully.

"It's kind of a long story and I need to go check in at Deflector Control right now, is it okay if I tell you when I get back?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure. I still have to unpack, then I should probably go back to the quartermaster and get some uniforms too. I just realized that I only have Cadet uniforms." Darin said in thought.

"Okay. I'll see you in a while." Vincent said quickly, then hurried out the door.

Darin smiled at the door, then opened his suitcase to begin unpacking.

* * * * *

"Crewman Vincent Winters reporting as ordered." Vincent said just inside the door of deflector control.

"At ease Crewman." Joe said with a gentle smile.

Vincent assumed a relaxed posture and waited for Joe to tell him what to do.

"We'll be leaving TerraMain in a few minutes. As soon as we're up to speed and we're sure that everything is working the way it should, we can get out of here." Joe said casually.

Vincent didn't see any need to reply so he waited to be told what to do.

"Let me give you the grand tour." Joe said and gestured to the large control panel nearly filling one wall.

"This is the nerve center of deflector control. If something should ever happen that we can't use this main panel, there is a duplicate panel in main engineering and less complex versions of this control panel on the bridge and the auxiliary bridge." Joe said from Vincent's side.

"The other workstations in the room are for sub-system analysis. That's where we do the majority of our work. When the deflector is working properly, someone just needs to man the main station and the rest of us can check the back-up systems and do whatever maintenance needs to be done." Joe said seriously.

"What will my job be?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Your first job is to not touch the main console. There are only five people on this ship approved to operate the main deflector console and you're not one of them. Do you understand?" Joe asked firmly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said seriously.

"Good. Tomorrow we'll start you on the training simulation for the command systems. Once you have a working knowledge of the software,

we'll dive into the hardware and teach you how to troubleshoot and repair the equipment." Joe said in thought.

Vincent smiled at the announcement. He was glad to know that his Daddy Joe was going to treat him like a real member of the crew.

"Did Commander M'Butu tell you about your duty schedule?" Joe asked seriously.

"No. He just told me to report to you." Vincent said as he looked up at Joe.

"Basically, you'll be working alpha shift with me this week. After that, you will be assigned to work in the area that you're placement test says you're strongest in. At that time schoolwork will be added to your work day." Joe said as he watched for Vincent's reaction.

"School work?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Learning to perform your duties doesn't take the place of a good, strong education. After some time to settle into your routine, you'll move to your new post and you'll begin your course studies. You'll have study materials that you can download and study in your own time and you'll have class time via subspace. Basically, instead of working a five day work week like the rest of us, you'll be getting a three day week in whatever duty station you're assigned to and a three day week in school. If you like, I'll try to set it up so that we can have one day off together each week." Joe said with a smile.

"Yeah. I'd like that a lot." Vincent said happily.

"Connie, this is Crewman Vincent Winters. He'll be training with us this week." Joe said proudly.

The man Vincent had seen with Debbie on the shuttle turned in his chair and looked at Vincent with surprise.

"Have you noticed that as you get older, the new people seem to be getting younger." Joe said with a teasing smile at his friend.

"Debbie told me about you. It's a pleasure to meet you Vincent." Connie said as he turned in his chair and offered his hand.

"Thank you, it's nice to meet you too." Vincent said as he shook the hand firmly.

A beeping on the main console drew everyone's attention.

"Okay, stations everyone. It's time." Joe said as he stood before the big console.

Connie got out of the chair and moved to one of the smaller workstations.

"I'm here." A woman's voice said as she emerged from behind a partition.

"Susan, this is Crewman Winters. We're about to get underway." Joe said as he took the seat Connie had vacated.

The woman looked at Vincent curiously, then hurried to another workstation.

"Has anyone seen Larissa, Kent or Jimmy?" Joe asked as he worked the controls.

"Jimmy is up in main engineering double checking the power distribution conduit that was replaced while we were docked. I don't know about the others." Susan said seriously.

Joe shook his head and said, "Vincent, take the third station and just watch it. If you see anything but green lights across the board, call it out immediately."

"Yes sir." Vincent said quickly and took a seat at the station next to Susan's.

"Here we go." Joe said and started working the controls.

Vincent looked down at his panel and saw the systems starting to come alive.

One by one the lights on his panel started turning green.

"Green across." Connie called out from his station.

Joe didn't acknowledge the statement as he continued to work the controls.

"Sorry. I just wanted to be sure they didn't miss anything when they did the installation." A young man said as he hurried into the room.

"Thanks for checking on that Jimmy, take station three. Vincent, watch what he does." Joe said without looking up from the main console.

Vincent quickly moved out of the chair and watched as Jimmy started pressing buttons on the control station.

He recognized that Jimmy was doing system checks on all the deflector control consoles.

"Status?" Joe called out.

"We're good to go." Susan said in a firm voice.

"Green across." Connie repeated.

"Green board." Jimmy said quickly.

Vincent felt the ship shudder and was aware of the feeling of the engines causing a slight hum through the ship.

"We've almost cleared the doors." Joe announced in a voice of deep concentration.

Vincent watched Joe at the main console for a moment, then remembered that he was supposed to be watching what Jimmy was doing.

Jimmy was simply watching the control panel intently.

A low hum seemed to fill the room and Vincent looked around in wonder.

"Deflector at full power. Systems status?" Joe called out.

"I show a faulty power distribution conduit... E4. I'm bypassing." Connie said seriously.

"Jimmy, isn't that the one that was replaced while we were docked?" Joe asked in concentration.

"Yes sir. I just ran a level two diagnostic on it. There's nothing wrong with it." Jimmy said in a lost voice.

"We're going to have to check the distribution node and the control circuit." Susan said from her console.

"Good idea. Susan, take Vincent with you. He can hand you tools." Joe said seriously.

"Yes sir." Susan said quickly and hopped up from her seat.

"Vincent, go with Susan. She'll be working in a tight space and she'll need you to hand her the tools she'll need." Joe said firmly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said quickly and followed Susan to the locker at the side of the room where she was getting her tool kit.

"Jimmy, do you have any idea where Larissa or Kent are?" Joe asked in concentration.

"No sir. They left the ship when we docked. I don't know anything about their plans." Jimmy said seriously.

"Will you have any problem moving to Beta shift? If they don't show up, I'll need to replace them on the schedule." Joe asked hesitantly.

"That won't be any problem for me." Jimmy said with a smile in his voice.

"Thanks Jimmy. You've just been promoted from tool passer to status board watcher." Joe said with a smile.

* * * * *

"I can carry that for you." Vincent said as Susan picked up the cloth bag.

"Oh. Thank you Crewman Winters." Susan said and handed the bag to him.

"It's okay if you call me Vincent." He said with a shy smile.

"We didn't get formally introduced. I'm Crewman Susan Walker, you're welcomed to call me Susan." She said as she led the way out of deflector control.

"It's nice to meet you Susan." Vincent said as they walked down a catwalk toward the turbo lift.

"Aren't you a little young to be in Starfleet?" Susan asked curiously.

"Yeah. I guess. But age is just a number. I've met a few people who are plenty old enough to be in Starfleet but wouldn't be able to handle it." Vincent said seriously as they boarded the lift.

"Main Engineering." She said into the air as the lift doors closed, then she turned to Vincent and said, "You got me there. Well, if you need any help with anything, just let me know. I've been serving on the *Yorktown* for three years, I know my way around pretty well."

"I'll remember that. I'm doing okay so far, but I'll probably need some help getting used to some stuff." Vincent said in thought.

The lift stopped and the doors opened to reveal a bustle of activity.

"Welcome to Main Engineering." Susan said as she led the way off the lift.

Vincent followed silently, trying to absorb everything about his new surroundings.

"Chief Morgan?" Susan said in surprise.

The man Vincent had seen earlier in the shuttle bay was standing at the main engineering console.

"Susan? Is that right?" The man asked in a cautious voice.

"Yes sir. I'm impressed that you remember me. It's good to see you again. We're here to check on a faulty power distribution conduit, E4." Susan said seriously.

"Isn't that the one the young Crewman was checking earlier?" Chief Morgan asked carefully.

"Yes sir. The conduit was replaced while we were docked. We're here to check the distribution node and the control circuit." Susan said and indicated Vincent at her side.

"We? Oh! They certainly are making the crewmen tiny now-a-days." Chief Morgan said with a wide eyed look at Vincent, then in a more professional voice he said, "If you end up having to replace the control circuit, bring me the old one. When I was reviewing the logs I noticed that they seem to be failing a little more than they should."

"I'll do that Chief. Thanks for telling me, I'll check the control circuit first." Susan said seriously.

Chief Morgan nodded, then turned his attention to another member of the engineering staff.

"Come on Vincent, it's over here." Susan said and started to walk.

"Do you have to report like that to the Chief Engineer whenever you come into Engineering or just when you're fixing something?" Vincent asked curiously.

"We should definitely check in when we're doing any kind of repairs, but it's a good idea to check in with the Chief Engineer when you're going to be in his area. It's just the courteous thing to do." Susan said, then stopped in the hallway.

"Hand me the decoupler." Susan said as she started to remove a panel in the wall.

"Which one? You've got about five of them here." Vincent said as he looked through the tool bag.

"The star-head one. If I ever need one of the others, I'll ask for it by name." Susan said as she sat the cover plate aside.

Vincent quickly pulled out the requested tool and handed it to Susan.

"Hand me the test unit, then hold a light so I can see what I'm doing." Susan said as she leaned into the small space.

Vincent took out the test unit and handed it to her quickly, then retrieved the flashlight and squatted so he could watch what she was doing.

"I'm going to test to verify that the unit is unpowered. It's very important that you do this every single time you work on any equipment. You don't get a second chance if you forget." Susan said seriously.

"I understand." Vincent said quietly as he watched.

"Good. Now I'm going to switch over to the diagnostic mode of the tester and see if this thing really is bad." Susan said as she pressed a few buttons on the test unit.

"Shouldn't it show as a bad control circuit instead of a bad conduit in deflector control?" Vincent asked in thought.

"Not if part of the problem with the control circuit is it's diagnostic routine." Susan said as she watched the test program running.

"So does that mean that maybe the control circuit is fine and the diagnostic is wrong?" Vincent asked carefully.

"That's a good question. Let's check that out." Susan said and started pressing some buttons on the test unit.

Vincent watched what she was doing carefully for a moment and tried to anticipate where she would need the light.

"It looks like you're right. It's the diagnostic that's making the computer think the conduit system is bad." Susan said, then handed out the test unit.

Vincent took the test unit and picked up the decoupler again.

"Decoupler." Susan said and the tool was in her hand before the word was completely out of her mouth.

"You must have done this before." Susan said with a smile as she worked to get the control unit detached.

"I just handed tools to my dad when he was working on his car a few times." Vincent said casually.

Susan chuckled and said, "Well, you'll probably get a lot of use out of that skill for a while. You're starting off better than Jimmy. He didn't know what a decoupler was."

"I've seen pictures of the tools, but this is the first time I'm seeing most of them for real." Vincent said, then accepted the decoupler from her.

Susan handed out the control circuit, then started to extricate herself from the tight space.

"We need to go get a replacement for this unit. That diagnostic failure bothers me." Susan said as she stood.

Vincent picked up the tool kit and walked to her side.

"If the diagnostic system can malfunction and give a false positive, it could just as easily give a false negative." Susan said in thought as they walked to the supply room.

"You need to tell Chief Morgan about this. If you're right, there could be hundreds of control circuits lying to us all over the ship." Vincent said with concern.

"Right. Come on." Susan said and changed direction to main engineering.

* * * * *

"Chief Morgan, Vincent has found a potential problem." Susan said seriously.

Vincent looked up at her in surprise.

"What did he find?" Chief Morgan asked curiously.

"When I was checking the Control Circuit, Vincent suggested that it might be giving a false diagnostic report and triggering a false positive reading for the power distribution conduit. Show him the tester Vincent." Susan finished seriously.

Vincent opened the tool bag and handed the test unit to Chief Morgan.

After a moment of pressing buttons, Chief Morgan looked carefully at the tester's results.

"I see what you mean. This shouldn't be able to happen." Chief Morgan said in thought.

"You said that there were other control circuit failures. If they were the same as this one, then there could be unsafe systems all over the ship." Susan said seriously.

"If the diagnostic can lie and tell you that good systems are bad, then they could be lying and saying that bad systems are good too." Vincent interjected.

Chief Morgan handed Vincent the tester, then said, "May I have the control circuit unit when it is removed?"

Vincent reached in the bag then handed the control unit to Chief Morgan.

The Chief turned the unit over and appeared to be looking for something in particular.

Susan and Vincent watched without comment as Chief Morgan inspected the unit carefully.

"You say you just uninstalled this unit?" Chief Morgan confirmed.

"Yes sir. Not more than five minutes ago." Susan said cautiously.

"Come with me to the supply room. I would like to approve the replacement you're given." Chief Morgan said as he led the way.

Susan and Vincent shared a questioning look and followed behind.

* * * * *

"What can I get for you today Chief Morgan?" The supply officer asked with surprise.

"A replacement for this." Chief Morgan said and sat the control circuit unit on the desk.

"Oh sure, just be a minute." The supply officer said as he picked up the unit.

"I'll have that back before you go." Chief Morgan said firmly.

The supply officer looked at the unit in his hand, then hesitantly handed it back to Chief Morgan.

As soon as the supply officer was out of the room, Vincent said, "I think he knows what's wrong. He really didn't want to give that back to you."

"I noticed." Chief Morgan said with concern.

Susan and Vincent shared a look of question at each other as they waited for the supply officer to return.

Chief Morgan took a seat behind the desk and pressed a few buttons beside the terminal, then said, "I need a security team to Main Engineering supply."

"*Right away sir.*" A voice responded.

Vincent and Susan both looked on in surprise.

"Sorry that took so long Chief, a lot of stuff to look through." The supply officer said in a nervous voice and he was visibly sweating.

"I'm sure." Chief Morgan said slowly.

"Here's what you were looking for. Will there be anything else?" The supply officer asked in an almost frantic voice.

"Susan, would you test this unit to see that it behaves properly before we leave?" Chief Morgan asked casually.

"Of course." Susan responded as she accepted the new control unit.

Before she could ask for the tester, Vincent was handing it to her.

* * * * *

Two security officers walked into the supply room and looked at Chief Morgan with question.

"Please take Chief Petty Officer Marks into custody. We're going to need to ask him a few questions." Chief Morgan said slowly.

"Yes sir." One of the security officers said, then gestured for the supply officer to come with them.

"I was just doing what I was told." Chief Petty Officer Marks said as he walked toward the security officers.

"I'm sure you were. We'll discuss it shortly." Chief Morgan said in a disappointed tone.

Susan looked up from the tester at Chief Morgan and said, "This unit seems to be working properly."

"I thought it might. Go ahead and install it. Don't be surprised if you get a call later to come to security... both of you." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Yes sir." Susan and Vincent said in unison.

"Go on. I'm sure Joe is fretting about where you two are by now. He's probably convinced himself that you've fallen into the warp core or some such thing." Chief Morgan said with a smile.

"That sounds like him." Susan said with a chuckle.

Chief Morgan smiled at the pair and nodded.

Once they were gone, his gaze fell on the faulty control circuit and the smile fell off his face.

* * * * *

"I was thinking you two had run off with Larissa and Kent." Joe said from the main console.

"No sir. Just a little problem with the control circuit." Susan said as she took her seat and quickly glanced at the readings.

"What kind of problem?" Joe asked with concern at her tone.

"The kind that shouldn't be able to happen. Chief Morgan is looking into it now and I'm sure we'll be hearing about it soon." Susan said seriously.

"Is E4 ready to go online?" Connie asked from his station.

"It checks out as fine, but I'd like to run a level 3 diagnostic on the entire E4 system before we bring it up." Susan said frankly.

Joe was surprised by the request, knowing that it would take nearly an hour to run a diagnostic with that level of precision. But he knew Susan well enough to know that she must believe it was important.

"Go ahead Susan. Connie, do you mind taking over the main while Susan runs her diagnostic? I need to make a few calls and see if I can track down our wayward children." Joe said with a smile.

"I've got it Joe. Just let us know when you find something out." Connie said as he moved to the main console and took Joe's place.

"It's a deal." Joe said and hurried out of the room.

After starting the diagnostic scan, Susan noticed that Vincent was standing in the middle of the room with a lost expression.

"Vincent, why don't you put the tool bag in the supply locker, then come over here." Susan said in a friendly tone.

Vincent was startled to realize that he had been standing there lost in thought. He quickly put the tool bag into the locker Susan had taken it from, then walked to stand by her side.

"On second thought, I think what you need to learn is the station that Jimmy is working right now. Unless Lari and Kent come up with a really good story, chances are that Jimmy is going to take Kent's place on Beta shift and you'll be taking Jimmy's on Alpha." Susan said as she got up from her station.

"Really?" Vincent asked in wonder.

"We have to be able to cover the shifts. Without Larissa, Connie is going to have to move to Beta to run the main. We'll still be one short, but we can manage if we have to." Susan said seriously.

Connie turned in his chair and glanced at Susan and seemed to be thinking about her statement.

"Joe will take Alpha shift, Connie will go to Beta to cover Larissa, Lou will work Gamma shift. I'll probably second Joe, Jimmy will second for Connie, and Judy will second for Lou." Susan said in thought.

"Which means that Vincent will be third spot on Alpha shift and Beta won't have a third spot." Connie said carefully.

"No. That can't work. We need a third person on Beta shift too." Susan said with a shake of her head.

"Um. If I can leave for a minute, I may know someone who can help." Vincent said carefully.

Connie looked over the main console quickly to see that nothing needed to be done, then said, "Go ahead."

Vincent nodded and hurried out the door.

* * * * *

Darin was sitting on his bunk lost in thought when Vincent came running into the room.

"What's got you so excited?" Darin asked curiously.

"Did you talk to Commander M'Butu yet?" Vincent asked quickly.

"No. I've just been waiting for him to call." Darin answered slowly.

"Do you still want to stay on the *Yorktown*?" Vincent asked, nearly bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"Yes. I'm just not sure how I can make that happen." Darin said in a small voice.

"Have you studied anything about Deflector Control?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure. It's part of the standard Engineering course. It was one of my better classes. I qualified for everything except the main position." Darin said carefully.

"Then if you'll come with me and talk to Lieutenant Bowers, maybe we can make it so you can stay." Vincent said happily.

"Really?" Darin asked with surprise.

"Yeah, but you gotta hurry before he finds someone else." Vincent said quickly.

Darin looked down at the new uniform he was wearing, wanting to be sure that he was dressed properly.

"Come on!" Vincent said urgently as he ran out the door.

Darin quickly stood then took off at a run to follow.

* * * * *

"I found Larissa and Kent." Joe said in a low voice as he walked into Deflector Control.

"I'm guessing that it's not good news." Connie said as he turned to look at Joe.

"No. Not good at all. They went on a five day drinking binge and ended up in jail in Rio de Janeiro." Joe said quietly.

Susan shook her head and said, "I thought she was doing so much better."

"We all did." Joe said with regret.

"So what's going to happen to her?" Connie asked with concern.

"I really don't know. This is probably it for her. Even if they decide not to throw her out of Starfleet, I don't think they'll ever offer her a position of responsibility again. I think it's safe to say that she won't be back." Joe said with regret.

"What about Kent?" Susan asked quietly.

"As far as I know, this is his first time in trouble. He'll probably be ordered into counseling or something like that. I doubt that he'll be back either." Joe said in a hollow voice.

A long moment of silence fell over the room as everyone considered what had happened to their friends.

The door opened and Vincent hurried in, followed by a timid looking ensign.

Vincent ran to stand before Joe and tried to calm himself before saying, "Lieutenant Bowers, can I... may I speak with you privately for a moment?"

"Of course Crewman Winters. Will the hallway be alright?" Joe asked curiously.

Vincent nodded and ran back to the door.

Joe followed more slowly and noticed the timid young ensign standing just inside the door as he passed.

* * * * *

"Ensign Cooper is here by mistake. He knows about Deflector Control stuff and wants to stay on the *Yorktown*." Vincent said quickly.

"At ease Champ. Calm down and explain this to me a little more slowly." Joe said in a gentle voice.

"Ensign Cooper was sent here to work in Environmental Control, but he doesn't know about that stuff. Someone messed up on his paperwork or something and he got assigned here by accident. He studied Deflector Control stuff at the academy and maybe if you give him a chance, he could stay on the *Yorktown* and help you out." Vincent said hopefully.

"Okay, I think I understand what you're saying. Let's go back inside and see what Ensign Cooper has to say about it." Joe said quietly.

Vincent nodded happily.

* * * * *

"Ensign Cooper, I'm Lieutenant Bowers. Crewman Winters says that you have the required skills to work in deflector control." Joe said carefully.

"Yes sir. I've taken the required courses at the academy. I can work with all the systems except the main console." Darin said quickly.

Joe nodded, then looked around at the other people in the room with question.

"I say give him a try. It sounds like he could second for either of us." Connie said frankly.

Joe nodded in thought, then asked, "What about the engineering side of things. Would you be able to repair or replace a defective piece of equipment?"

"Yes sir. I did very well in my engineering courses." Darin said hopefully.

"Connie, what would you think about having Susan and Jimmy on Beta shift with you? I could take Ensign Cooper and Vincent on Alpha shift with me. Would that work?" Joe asked in a considering tone.

"It sounds like you're going to be wanting Beta shift to do the majority of the work while you're training your new crew." Connie said in thought.

"Something like that. We'll do as much as we can, but you'll probably get more than your share... Unless you have a better idea?" Joe asked seriously.

"No. Actually, I think it works best this way. You'll have full coverage for anything that pops up during your shift and I'll have the more experienced team to do the bulk of the work on mine." Connie said carefully.

"I agree. Then all that's left is to convince Commander M'Butu to let us have Ensign Cooper." Joe said seriously.

Connie chuckled and said, "Sometimes it's good to be a lowly Ensign."

Joe smiled at the statement, then said, "Come on guys. Let's talk to Commander M'Butu about making everything official."

* * * * *

As they exited the turbo lift, Vincent realized that they were on Deck B, right below the bridge.

The lift let out in front of Commander M'Butu's office, which didn't have a door.

"Commander M'Butu, may we speak with you for a moment?" Joe asked carefully.

"Of course. And if you're calling me by my title, I'll assume this isn't a social call." Commander M'Butu said as he sat back in his chair.

"No sir. I have a few personnel matters to discuss with you." Joe said quietly.

"What can I help you with Lieutenant?" Commander M'Butu asked professionally.

"Ensign Hampton and Crewman Simmons didn't report back to the ship before we disembarked." Joe said seriously.

"I know. I just received the report from Starfleet security a few minutes ago." Commander M'Butu said solemnly.

"That leaves us understaffed by two people and I wanted to ask you to consider making Crewman Winters posting to Deflector Control indefinite and assigning Ensign Cooper to us." Joe said hesitantly.

Commander M'Butu looked at Vincent curiously, then said, "As long as Crewman Winters doesn't mind staying in Deflector Control, I have no problem with it."

Vincent smiled at the statement.

"As far as Ensign Cooper, I'm still investigating why he's here at all." Commander M'Butu said as he turned his curious gaze to Darin.

Ensign Cooper did his best not to cringe when Commander M'Butu's attention turned to him.

"As near as I can tell, six of Ensign Cooper's classmates were assigned to various duties that were obviously beyond their ability to perform. Their academy transcripts were altered and somehow their fraudulent orders were 'forced' into the Starfleet personnel system. This appears to be a prank, but I assure you that Starfleet is taking the breach of security very seriously." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

Darin thought he was going to pass out for a moment, then made the conscious effort to start breathing again.

"However, no one has suggested that Ensign Cooper or any of the others effected had any part in the prank and therefore should not be penalized for it. But that still leaves us with Ensign Cooper who was promoted for invalid reasons and assigned to duties he is unqualified to perform." Commander M'Butu said in a considering voice.

Joe looked at Commander M'Butu with question, hoping that he was considering letting Ensign Cooper stay.

"You say that Ensign Cooper has the skills required to fill an open position in Deflector Control?" Commander M'Butu asked in thought.

"He has the required course studies. He lacks any practical experience. But I think that if he's given a chance, I can have him up to speed in no time." Joe said carefully.

"It sounds like a workable solution to our problems. We are scheduled to be back at Earth in two weeks. If everyone is willing, Crewman Winters and Ensign Cooper could work in Deflector Control until we return to Earth. We can evaluate the performance of both and make a more permanent decision at that time." Commander M'Butu said in thought.

"Thank you Commander. That sounds like a good idea." Joe said happily.

"Crewman Winters, Ensign Cooper, do you have any problem with this arrangement?" Commander M'Butu asked in a professional tone.

"No sir." Ensign Cooper said, a little too quickly.

"No problem sir." Vincent said in a more casual voice.

"Then if there is nothing else, you are dismissed." Commander M'Butu said formally.

"Thank you sir." Joe said, then led the way to the turbo lift.

* * * * *

As the trio walked into Deflector Control, Joe announced, "It's official. Crewman Winters and Ensign Cooper are now assigned to deflector control."

Susan and Jimmy hurried over to offer handshakes and congratulations.

"Welcome to the team guys." Connie said with a smile from the main console.

Chapter 3

The single tone of an incoming message drew everyone's attention.

Joe pressed the button to accept the message and said, "Deflector Control."

"*Lieutenant Bowers, Crewman Walker and Crewman Winters are to report to briefing room one immediately.*" A female voice said through the intercom.

"We're on our way." Joe said quickly then pressed the button again.

Everyone looked at Joe with question.

"Don't ask me. But it's not good to keep the captain waiting. Let's go." Joe said as he started walking toward the door.

"Jimmy, will you keep an eye on my diagnostic?" Susan asked with concern.

"I've got it." Jimmy said seriously and moved to her station.

Susan checked to see that she was presentable, then walked to Joe and Vincent who were waiting at the door.

* * * * *

As the lift came to a stop, Vincent was stunned by the realization that he was visiting the B deck, right below the bridge, for the second time that day.

When the doors opened, Vincent recognized several of the people sitting at the large conference table immediately.

Captain Byrne was sitting at the head of the table, Commander M'Butu and Chief Morgan were sitting to his left.

The next person in line at the table reminded Vincent very much of his Uncle Brady and he suspected that it was because this man was probably a security officer.

Joe, Susan and Vincent formed a line just inside the room and stood at attention.

"Please have a seat. We haven't much time." Captain Byrne said in a distracted voice.

Joe was first to move and took the chair across from Commander M'Butu.

Susan sat down across from Chief Morgan and Vincent took the next seat, across from the man he was now sure was a security officer.

The lift doors opened again and four more people emerged.

"Please, everyone take a seat so we may begin." The captain said in a voice filled with concern.

Vincent glanced over to see that the people who had joined them were all Lieutenants.

"First of all, Crewman Walker, could you tell us how you came to find the faulty control circuit today?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Yes sir. Before we docked at TerraMain we registered a failure in the E4 power distribution conduit. We put in a work order and while we were docked, the engineering crew replaced the entire conduit. When we brought the deflector online, the new power distribution conduit failed. So Vincent and I went to check the distribution node and the control circuit since it isn't likely that a brand new conduit would fail." Susan said carefully.

"Vincent?" The man across from Vincent asked.

"I'm sorry, I meant Crewman Winters." Susan corrected quickly.

The man nodded for her to continue.

"So while we were testing the control circuit, Crewman Winters asked a question about the diagnostic routine. I tested the diagnostic system and found that it wasn't operating as it should." Susan said carefully.

"Excuse me, what was the question Crewman Winters asked?" Chief Morgan asked seriously.

"He asked why the diagnostic would show as a bad power distribution conduit rather than a bad control circuit." Susan said in thought.

Chief Morgan nodded at the answer.

"What did your test of the diagnostic system show?" Commander M'Butu asked curiously.

"That the diagnostic system was generating a false reading of a conduit failure. The strange thing is that the reading was coded as coming from the control circuit, not the diagnostic. As I understand the design of the diagnostic system, that shouldn't be possible." Susan said carefully.

"No, it shouldn't be." Chief Morgan said gravely.

"Do you happen to know if the new conduit was tested before it was brought online?" A woman asked from the other end of the table.

"Yes. Crewman Tullis from deflector control ran a level two diagnostic on the system just before we left TerraMain. It showed the system to be functioning perfectly." Susan said carefully.

"I see." The woman said in a dark tone.

"So that means that standard diagnostics won't detect the problem. Chief Morgan has done some investigation and found that nearly all the control circuits in the supply room have been altered to mask the fact that they are refurbished used parts." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"And that means that every control circuit on the ship is suspect. We will have to go in and manually test each and every circuit the way Crewman Walker did to find if they have been altered." Captain Byrne said in a low voice.

"Excuse me Captain, but why do we have refurbished parts?" The woman at the far end of the table asked curiously.

"Lieutenant Simms?" Captain Byrne prompted.

"It appears that certain past and present members of the crew have been selling the used parts from the *Yorktown* rather than discarding them as is proper. Those parts were then refitted and altered to pass as new parts. Then those same parts were sold back to us as new. The result is an increasing failure rate as the worn parts are removed and reinstalled again and again." Lieutenant Simms said carefully.

"How long has this been going on?" The Lieutenant next to Vincent asked curiously.

"Almost two years. But the records have been routinely falsified to prevent anyone from noticing a trend in failed parts. We can't count on our records to tell us which parts we have replaced in that time." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Is it just control circuits or are there other parts we need to be worried about?" Joe asked curiously.

"Any part that could conceivably be reworked and reused, has been. But a control circuit with a properly functioning diagnostic system can be used to determine the need for replacement parts in their sub-systems. The replacement of the control circuits is of the utmost concern at this time." Chief Morgan said firmly.

"Which means that we have to manually check every single control circuit on the ship." Commander M'Butu said to no one in particular.

"But what do we do for replacements?" The woman at the end of the table asked.

"My staff is working on that right now. They are undoing the work-arounds on the control circuits from the supply room so they will give us accurate readings. They might still be more prone to failure than a new control circuit, but the diagnostic systems will be operating correctly." Chief Morgan said seriously.

Captain Byrne looked around the table and said, "Then we'd better get to it. Chief Morgan, I want all engineering staff from all shifts put on this immediately. Commander M'Butu, talk to the division heads of sciences, ship's services, security, communications... talk to all of them and get them to commit anyone with the necessary skills to help in the effort to resolve this problem."

"Lieutenant Bowers, I want to commend you and your staff for uncovering this problem. A note will be made in your service records recognizing this contribution to the ship's safety. Well done." Captain Byrne said to all three deflector control personnel.

'Thank you sir." Joe said with astonishment.

"Now it's time to get the crew working. It's going to be a very long night." Captain Byrne said frankly.

Joe nodded and quickly stood.

Vincent and Susan followed a moment later.

* * * * *

"What's up boss?" Connie asked as Joe led the trio into deflector control.

"It seems that two of our crewmen have stirred up a hornet's nest on the ship." Joe said, then the synthetic two-tone whistle of a ship-wide announcement came over the comm system.

"***All engineering staff, all shifts, report to duty stations immediately. All engineering staff, all shifts, report to duty stations immediately.***" A female voice said in a firm tone.

Connie looked at Joe with wide eyes.

Joe looked around the room and said, "I guess someone let their greed override their good sense and they've been selling our used parts back to us

with a modification to the diagnostic program to make us think they're working properly."

"Oh my God! How could anyone do that?" Connie asked in horror.

"For money." Joe said simply.

"And this is probably just the tip of the iceberg. We won't know how serious the problem is until we have the diagnostic systems working." Susan said seriously.

The doors to deflector control opened to admit two very sleepy looking women.

"Okay, now that we're all here, let's get to work. We have to go through every power conduit that routes into deflector control and manually check the control circuits to see that the diagnostic program hasn't been altered or disabled." Joe said to the room.

"You've got to be kidding!" One of the women said in a whimper.

"Sorry Lou, but it has to be done." Joe said with sympathy.

"You've just had five days off, you should be well rested." Connie said to Lou cheerfully.

"Blow me, Connie." Lou said in a snarl.

Vincent and Darin looked at Joe with identical expressions of shock.

"Lou works third shift, she's a little grumpy when she gets called into work four hours early." Joe explained quietly.

"Where's Lari and Kent? If we have to be here, they sure as hell can't get out of it." Lou said to Joe in a raspy voice.

"They're gone Lou. Larissa fell off the wagon and it looks like she took Kent down with her this time." Joe said quietly.

Lou's eyes opened fully for the first time since she entered the room.

The woman beside Lou looked around and her gaze stopped on Vincent and Darin.

"Crewman Vincent Winters and Ensign..." Joe stopped, not remembering if he had ever heard Ensign Cooper's first name.

"Darin." Vincent said quietly.

"Thank you Vincent. Crewman Vincent Winters and Ensign Darin Cooper, I'd like you to meet Ensign Lourdes DeGama and Crewman Judy Wills." Joe said professionally.

"You gotta be shitting me Joe. What are we supposed to do with a five year old and a cadet?" Lou asked in disbelief.

Joe's expression turned hard as he said, "I know you feel like crap Lou, and I'm sorry you had to wake up early. But don't take it out on Vincent and Darin. We're lucky to have them. It's thanks to Darin that you won't have to pull twelve hour shifts for the next two weeks to cover Larissa and Kent's places on the schedule. And it's thanks to Vincent that we might get to live to see the next two weeks."

Everyone, including Vincent looked at Joe with question at the last statement.

"It was because Vincent asked a question about the work Susan was doing that caused her to investigate the diagnostic feature of the control circuit they were working on. If he hadn't asked the question, Susan would have probably replaced the faulty unit and not even thought about 'why' it had failed. And right now the *Yorktown* would be traveling on her merry way and we wouldn't have any idea that there are diagnostic systems all over the ship giving false readings." Joe said seriously.

"So that's why every person in engineering was called to duty?" Lou asked in thought.

"Not just engineering. Everyone on the ship who knows how to use a tester is probably being called to duty right now." Joe said carefully.

"Got it... sorry guys. I'm not a pleasant person when I first wake up." Lou said to Vincent and Darin.

"Really?" Vincent asked in his most sarcastic voice.

"Oh, a smartass. You'll fit in fine around here." Lou said with a tired smile.

"That being said, let's get to it people. I've got the main. Connie and Darin, go check E1. Susan and Vincent, E2. Lou and Judy, E3. Susan and Vincent already took care of E4. Jimmy can stay here and second for me while you're gone. Call in when your conduit is ready for testing and Jimmy will run a level three on it." Joe said firmly.

Vincent walked immediately to the locker where Susan's tools were and got her tool case.

* * * * *

When Vincent and Susan stepped off the turbo lift, it looked like the engineering crew were tearing the place apart.

"Where are you headed Susan?" Chief Morgan asked before they had taken two steps into Engineering.

"E2." Susan answered immediately.

Chief Morgan made a note on his data padd, then said, "Nyman's crew are taking care of the R-cells, so you won't have to deal with any of the battery distribution nodes. And I have a team working all the consoles in engineering so you won't have to worry about the back-up deflector control console."

Susan nodded and said, "I'll tell Joe when we check in. What about the bridge station?"

Chief Morgan shook his head and said, "It'll probably be faster if you get your own people on that. We're working our way through the bridge stations by their priority and the third back-up deflector control panel isn't way up on our list."

Susan noticed that Connie and Lou were waiting to check in and said, "Got it. We'll let you know when it's done."

"Thanks." Chief Morgan said quickly, then turned his attention to Connie.

* * * * *

Susan went to the panel she needed and started to pull it down.

Rather than ask for the decoupler she would need to release the access panel inside, she just held out her hand, knowing that Vincent would already have it out and waiting.

"I don't think I've ever seen this many people working in here at once." Susan said conversationally as she worked her way into the tight space.

Vincent pulled out the tester, then glanced up and down the corridor they were in to see about half the panels down and people working everywhere.

"Tester." She said quickly.

Vincent handed her the tester, then automatically shined the flashlight so she could easily find the test points.

After a moment of testing, Susan said, "It's a good one. Let's check in with Joe then move on to E5."

Susan handed the tester out, then began to work her way out of the tight space.

An electrical sound drew Vincent's attention and he turned to see someone jerking violently, hanging half out of a panel.

Vincent dropped the decoupler he had been holding and ran to the nearest comm station on the wall.

He hit the button and quickly said, "Medical emergency right behind main engineering, port side. It's an electrical discharge."

"*A medical team is on it's way.*" A voice responded immediately.

Vincent hit the button to turn off the comm, then ran to see if there was anything he could do to help.

Everyone had stopped what they were doing and were gathering around the man who was now lying in the floor.

"Someone call for help. He's not breathing." A crewman hunched over the unconscious man said in a panicked voice.

"They're already on their way. But they won't be able to get to him with everyone standing here." Vincent said forcefully.

"Come on people. Make a path!" Susan said loudly.

As everyone realized what Vincent and Susan were saying, they made an effort to step away and clear a decent path for the medical team to use.

Just then the medical team entered the hallway and hurried to the unconscious man's side.

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Vincent and Susan stood against the wall and watched from six feet away as the medical team worked.

When it was obvious that they had succeeded in stabilizing the man, Susan said, "We need to check in with Joe."

Vincent looked up and saw her expression of concern.

"Yeah. Let's go." Vincent said quietly.

* * * * *

After two hours of work, Vincent and Susan made their way back to deflector control.

They had had to replace three control circuits and weren't looking forward to the tasks that lay ahead of them.

"What next?" Susan asked in a tired voice.

Joe looked up at her and gave a tentative smile.

"No. Not that... Why am I always the one who has to work on the bridge?" Susan asked in a pained voice.

"Your winning personality?" Joe offered weakly.

Susan shook her head, then thought to ask, "How are things down here?"

"Not too bad. The diagnostics haven't turned up anything terrible. We'll have a little extra work for a few days, but so far it's all minor." Joe said with a small amount of cheer in his voice.

"Well, that's something anyway. How are the other teams?" Susan asked in thought.

"Fine. Lou and Judy are finishing up E16. Connie and Darin are checking the auxiliary bridge console." Joe said seriously.

"How are you doing Jimmy?" Susan asked with concern.

"Me? Oh I'm fine. I've always wanted to run thirty level three diagnostics simultaneously." Jimmy said in a tired voice.

"I tell you what Jimmy. As soon as Vincent and I are done on the bridge, I'll come down and give you a break for a while." Susan said gently.

"Thanks. That would be great." Jimmy said with a tired smile.

"Ready?" Susan asked Vincent as she turned to leave.

Vincent let out a long sigh, then said, "Yeah. Let's do it."

Joe watched with concern as Vincent and Susan walked out of the room.

* * * * *

"How many control circuits do you have to check on the bridge?" Vincent asked quietly as they walked toward the turbo lift.

"Just two. A main and a redundant." Susan said, matching his quiet tone.

"Good. I feel like I could sleep for a week." Vincent said as they finally got on the lift.

"Main bridge." Susan said into the air.

There was a moment of silence before Susan finally asked, "Are you sorry that you came to work on the *Yorktown*?"

Vincent didn't even have to think about it before he answered, "No way. It's just nothing like what I expected. I think I'm going to be really happy here."

"I'm glad. You've been a big help to me already." Susan said with a smile.

"Thanks, you've helped me too. I'm learning a lot." Vincent said, then fell silent as the turbo lift doors opened.

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Vincent looked around in wonder as he stepped onto the bridge.

"Over here." Susan whispered and started walking to one of the bridge stations along the edge of the room.

Vincent forced himself to move and followed her to the console.

"Hex decoupler." Susan said as she knelt down in front of the station.

Vincent fumbled through the bag of tools and finally found the one she wanted.

After a moment to get the panel off, Susan said, "Tester."

Vincent handed the tester to her, then automatically held the flashlight to help her see what she was doing.

"We've got a bad one. This is really wedged in here. Go to engineering and get a replacement while I work this out." Susan said with effort in her voice.

"Okay. I'll be right back." Vincent said and sat the flashlight back in the tool bag.

Vincent walked to the turbo lift with purpose and the doors opened as he approached.

"Crewman Winters, I heard about what you did in engineering this evening. You're making quite an impression on your first day." Commander M'Butu said as he stepped off the lift.

Vincent looked at him in confusion, then asked, "What did I do in engineering?"

Commander M'Butu chuckled and said, "From what I just heard in Sickbay, you're being credited for saving Crewman Channing's life."

"All I did was call for help. Anyone could have done that." Vincent said in disbelief.

"But the fact of the matter is that anyone didn't do it, you did." Commander M'Butu said with a smile.

Vincent thought about it, then said, "Yeah, I guess so, but I just did the same thing you would've done."

"Perhaps. Be that as it may, well done Crewman." Commander M'Butu said with a grand smile.

"Thank you sir." Vincent said with a small, proud smile in return, then stepped onto the turbo lift.

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"Can I have two control circuits? I know I need one for sure, but the console we're working on has two and I'd like to be prepared." Vincent said seriously.

A very tired looking crewman stared at Vincent for a moment, then said, "Sure. But it may take a few minutes, I think they're testing a batch of reworked control circuits right now."

"Okay. Thanks." Vincent said quietly.

"He looks like I feel." A voice said from beside Vincent.

Vincent turned to see Darin.

"How is it going?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"I couldn't sleep last night because I was so excited about my orders. It's finally catching up to me." Darin said with a tired smile.

"How are you liking the job?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"It's great. All this time I thought I wanted to be a helmsman, but I think if I was permanently assigned to deflector control I wouldn't mind a bit." Darin said in thought.

Vincent smiled and said, "I'm really glad. I like it too. It's nothing like I thought it would be."

Darin chuckled and said, "I'm with you on that one. Somehow I thought deflector control would be a big quiet room where all you'd do is sit at a console all day and push a button every hour or so."

Vincent laughed at the statement, then heard a throat clearing.

He looked up to see the very tired crewman holding out three control circuit units to them.

"Thanks. I'll bring the old ones down as soon as we've got them out of the console." Vincent said quietly.

"Thanks." Darin said as he accepted the other unit.

The crewman gave a tired little nod, then walked to another person who had just approached the counter.

"Well, I guess we'd better get back to it." Darin said in resignation.

"Yeah. I'll see you later." Vincent said and started for the door.

As he was about to walk out the door, he glanced at the guy behind the counter and felt sympathy for the tired man.

* * * * *

"I brought you two control circuits just in case you needed to change them both." Vincent said as he squatted beside Susan.

"Good work Vincent. I had time to check the other one while you were gone and it was bad too. Hand me the first one, then you can take the bad ones to engineering. This will take me a few minutes and I'm sure they're needing them." Susan said seriously.

Vincent handed her the first control circuit, then picked up the two bad units and said, "I'll be back in just a minute."

"Take your time, these things are really packed in here." Susan said in concentration.

Vincent took the bad control circuit units and headed for the turbo lift.

"P Deck" Vincent said as the doors closed.

* * * * *

As soon as the doors opened, he walked with purpose to the engineer's mess hall.

When he used to study the deck plans, he had thought it was interesting that the engineering crew had their own separate mess hall on the deck below main engineering. But after his first day on the job, he felt that they deserved to have something that they could call their own.

Finally Vincent spotted what he was looking for and went to a coffee dispenser at the end of a long serving line of food.

"I've heard that coffee will stunt your growth." A young crewman said as he watched Vincent filling a cup of coffee.

"You heard right, I'm twenty-six years old." Vincent said as he put a lid on the cup, then picked up the faulty control units to leave.

The crewman laughed at the statement and asked, "You're that new guy in deflector control, aren't you?"

"Yeah. That's me. I'm Vincent." He said as he turned.

"I'm Chance." The young man said with a smile.

Vincent was going to offer his hand but one hand was holding a cup of coffee and the other held two faulty circuit control units.

Chance laughed and said, "It's nice to meet you Vincent. I heard about what you did for Channing and I wanted to say thanks."

"Um... Sure. How's he doing?" Vincent asked timidly.

"Doc Perry says he's going to be fine. She said she'd call me when he wakes up... Oh, you probably need to be going, I bet someone is waiting on those things." Chance said as he looked down at the control circuits.

"These are bad ones, but yeah. I'd better get going. I'll talk to you later." Vincent said with a smile.

Chance nodded with a smile of admiration as he watched Vincent walk out the door.

* * * * *

Vincent waited in line at the supply desk for about two minutes before he made it to the front.

"It'll be about ten minutes." The tired young man said when he saw the control circuits in Vincent's hand.

"No. I already got the replacements, I'm just turning these in." Vincent said as he sat the control units and coffee on the desk.

The crewman looked at the coffee, then up at Vincent with question.

"You looked like you could use this." Vincent said quietly.

"Thanks" The tired crewman said with an almost happy smile.

Vincent smiled and nodded, then got out of the way so the next person could move up in line.

* * * * *

"Are you ready for the next one yet?" Vincent asked as he knelt beside Susan.

"Oh, you have perfect timing. Yeah, hand it in." Susan said with surprise.

Vincent handed the control circuit in to her and waited for her to take it.

Vincent looked around the bridge briefly, then at Susan working in the small space and asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. Just stay there for a minute. The second one isn't in too bad of a place. I'll have it installed in no time." Susan said in deep concentration.

"What do you think we'll have to do next?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I don't know for sure, but if the diagnostics don't show anything dangerous, we'll probably call it a night and you'll be back at 08:00 to work your shift." Susan said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then asked, "Is it always like this?"

Susan chuckled and said, "No. It's always different. No two days are exactly the same. Some days are boring, some are exciting and some are even a little scary."

Vincent smiled and said, "Well I don't know if any day is going to be better than this one."

Susan chuckled again and said, "That's a good sign. If at the end of your first day you're tired and happy, then you've got a good shot at making a career out of Starfleet."

Vincent smiled at the thought, then noticed that Susan was starting to work herself out of the tight space.

"That should do it." She said as she finally backed completely out of the opening under the console.

Vincent took the tester from her when she handed it to him and had the decoupler ready when she needed it.

* * * * *

"So, what did we miss?" Susan asked as she and Vincent walked into Deflector Control.

"One major headache and several small nuisances." Joe said seriously.

"What's the headache?" Susan asked with concern.

"When Connie and Darin replaced the control circuit on the auxiliary bridge console the diagnostic system showed that the central processor for the console is bad." Joe said flatly.

"And they have to basically dismantle the entire console to get to it." Susan said in a tired voice.

"I'm guessing they've got about half an hour of work ahead of them." Joe said frankly.

"Maybe it's not so bad getting stuck with the main bridge console." Susan said in thought.

"Is there anything we can do to help them?" Vincent asked carefully.

"No. It's a two man job at most. Anyone else would just be in the way." Joe said regretfully.

Vincent nodded.

"So Vincent, if you want to go back to our cabin, I'll see you there when everyone's back. It shouldn't be too long." Joe said with a note of regret at not being able to go with him.

"Our cabin?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there when you finished your talk with the captain, but I really needed to check in here before we left TerraMain." Joe said with concern at Vincent's expression.

"I was assigned to quarters on G deck. Darin is my bunk mate." Vincent said carefully.

"Oh... I thought you would be sharing quarters with me." Joe said in a small voice.

Vincent could tell that Joe was disappointed but didn't know what to say to make it better.

"I guess since you're going to be doing an adult job, you should have some independence and live on your own." Joe said in thought.

Vincent looked around and saw that Susan was taking the second control station and Jimmy was walking toward the door.

Quietly, Vincent said, "I'm still going to need kid time. In fact, if you didn't have to stay here with that control panel, I think I'd be asking for some kid time right now."

Joe smiled at Vincent's statement and said, "As soon as Connie gets back, we'll go and have as much kid time as you need."

Vincent smiled, then had a thought.

"You said you'd be here for about half an hour, right?" Vincent asked seriously.

"More or less." Joe said cautiously.

"I've got something I'd like to do. I'll be back before you're done." Vincent said in thought.

"Are you going to tell me what you're going to do?" Joe asked hesitantly.

"Only if you order me to." Vincent said with an impish grin.

Joe shook his head and watched as Vincent left.

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"It'll be five minutes until anymore control circuits are ready." The crewman said in a tired voice.

"My department is done, I just wanted to stop by and see if there's anything you guys in supply needed. You know, like coffee or anything like that." Vincent said quietly.

"Oh, it's you. You're a real lifesaver." The Crewman said with a tired smile.

Vincent smiled at the compliment and waited expectantly.

"Oh, um. Come on back. Let's ask the guys what they want." The Crewman said with distraction.

Vincent walked around the desk and followed the crewman to the back room.

* * * * *

Vincent was surprised to see only two crewmen working on the control circuits.

"I thought there would be more of you." Vincent said in surprise.

"There were, but as the different departments finished, our guys went to work on other things. Gary and Brock are keeping up with the demand fairly well." The Crewman said casually.

"What's the kid here for?" One of the guys asked as he looked up from his circuitry for an instant.

"This is the guy who brought me the coffee a while ago." The crewman said shyly.

Both guys looked up from what they were doing simultaneously, then one of them said, "From the way Randy described you, I thought you'd have wings."

"He came down to see if you guys wanted anything." Randy said with a smile.

"Up." Vincent corrected.

"What?" Randy asked in confusion.

"I came up. I'm in deflector control." Vincent said and pointed at the floor.

"Oh. He came up to see if you guys wanted anything." Randy said with a smile.

"Really? Well it looks like we're going to be here for a while, so one of those coffees Randy was talking about sounds really good." One of the guys said.

"Yeah, make that two." The other one said quickly.

"Do you guys like cream or anything?" Vincent asked casually.

"No way! Cream is a sin against good coffee." One of the guys said forcefully.

The other one nodded his agreement.

Vincent smiled, then asked, "Would you like another one Randy?"

"Um. Sure. I really appreciate it..." Randy trailed off, silently asking for Vincent's name.

"Vincent. I'll be back in a few minutes." Vincent said quickly and rushed out of the room.

* * * * *

Vincent looked around the coffee station and found a cup carrier.

After filling and capping three cups of coffee, Vincent made his way out of the engineering mess hall and nearly walked straight into Chief Morgan.

"Crewman Winters. Our paths seem destined to cross today." Chief Morgan said pleasantly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said shyly.

"It looks like deflector control must be settling in for a long night if Joe sent you out for coffee." Chief Morgan said with a smile.

"No. I think once the auxiliary bridge station is fixed, there's only small stuff left to be done. I'm getting coffee for the guys in the Engineering Supply room." Vincent said timidly.

"Why in heaven's name are you doing that?" Chief Morgan asked with surprise.

"Because I could tell that they were really tired. Everyone on the ship has been coming to them for hours asking for stuff. But every time I asked for control circuit units they were nice about it. So when my work was done and I had some time I thought I'd bring them some coffee to let them know I appreciate the job they're doing." Vincent said in thought.

"Would you mind if I come with you? Now that you've pointed out the fine job that they're doing, I think I'd like to express my own appreciation." Chief Morgan said with a smile.

Vincent giggled as he said, "I bet when they see you, they're gonna think they're in trouble."

Chief Morgan chuckled and said, "You're probably right."

* * * * *

"Chief Morgan, what can I get for you?" Randy asked as he stood from behind the desk.

"Nothing right now. Come in the back for a moment." Chief Morgan said, not betraying any emotion in his voice or expression.

Randy paled slightly and hurried ahead of Chief Morgan into the back room.

Vincent tried to keep his giggles to himself as he followed Chief Morgan.

* * * * *

Brock and Gary dropped what they were doing and stood when Chief Morgan entered the room.

"Please sit down. I've just had a report about the conduct of Engineering Supply that I wanted to discuss with you." Chief Morgan said seriously.

Brock and Gary hesitantly took their seats and waited apprehensively.

"It has been brought to my attention that after the unusual demand that has been put on this department, you've kept up with demand and maintained a level of professionalism and courtesy when dealing with your

fellow crew members. Well done gentlemen." Chief Morgan finished with a grand smile.

The level of tension in the room seemed to wash away in one big gust of relief.

"And I brought your coffee." Vincent said in a small voice as he walked from behind Chief Morgan.

Randy couldn't contain his laughter and fought to say, "Thank you Vincent."

"I thought we'd screwed up one of the control circuits. You scared me half to death." Brock said with nervous laughter.

Vincent smiled as he handed out the cups of coffee.

"No. You've done a fine job. It's in a crisis that people tend to show their true colors. You've shown yourselves to be the type of people that Captain Byrne wants all his crew to be. I'm very proud to have you as part of my Engineering crew." Chief Morgan said warmly.

"Thank you Chief. We really appreciate it." Randy said sincerely.

Chief Morgan nodded, then walked out of the room.

A long moment of silence fell over the room before Randy finally said, "You're the one who told him, aren't you Vincent?"

Vincent nodded and said, "He asked where I was taking the coffee, so I told him."

Gary chuckled as Brock said, "I think Randy was right about you. I'm starting to see the wings."

Vincent smiled at the statement, then said, "I've got to get back to deflector control now. Thanks again for all you did today."

"Thank you too Vincent." Randy said with a genuine smile as he watched Vincent leave.

* * * * *

Vincent walked into deflector control and to Joe's side.

"How are things going?" Vincent asked quietly.

Joe looked at Vincent and gave a gentle smile before saying, "We're going to be busy for a few days, but I think it will be a good experience for you and Darin. By the time we're done with our list of repairs, you'll probably be familiar with most of the deflector control systems."

"How much longer until Connie is done?" Vincent asked curiously.

"A few minutes. He's finished the repairs, he's just waiting on the diagnostic to come back clear before he closes it up." Joe said casually.

"Are we going to get something to eat when we leave?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"That sounds like a great idea." Joe said with a smile.

"I think I want to have the chicken. It looked really good." Vincent said with excitement.

"When were you in the mess hall?" Joe asked curiously.

"Just a few minutes ago. I was getting some coffee for someone who looked even more tired than Lou." Vincent finished with a giggle.

"I'll have to take your word on that because I can't even imagine anyone looking more tired than she did." Joe said with a smile.

"Would it be okay if I invited Darin to have dinner with us? He's probably hungry too." Vincent asked hopefully.

"I don't know if he'd feel comfortable in the officer's mess hall." Joe said in thought.

"I thought we'd eat in the engineer's mess hall. I mean, deflector control is a part of engineering." Vincent said carefully.

Joe shrugged and said, "If that's what you want. I'm just used to eating in the officer's mess because my cabin is on E deck."

"Oh. I didn't think of that. Well, I really want to have dinner with Darin so he doesn't have to eat his first meal on the *Yorktown* alone." Vincent said quietly.

"Works for me." Joe said with a smile, then looked at the door as Connie and Darin entered.

"How are things on the auxiliary bridge?" Joe asked with a smile.

"As exciting as ever." Connie said dryly.

"Are you ready to take the main?" Joe asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah. Go and get some rest. It looks like you're going to have a long day tomorrow." Connie said with a slight smile.

"Why do you say that?" Joe asked hesitantly.

"Oh, I don't know. You and two trainees for an eight hour shift... Who knows? Maybe it'll fly by." Connie said before breaking up into laughter.

Joe shook his head and smiled, then noticed Darin watching them.

"Vincent and I are going to have dinner. Would you like to join us Darin?" Joe asked in a friendly voice.

"Really? I mean yeah. Thanks." Darin said in surprise.

"You ready Vincent?" Joe asked as he stood.

"Ready, starving and able." Vincent said with a grin.

* * * * *

All three made their way through the serving line and filled their plates with something beyond the standard portions of food.

When they finally sat down at a table, Joe looked at Vincent's plate and said, "You weren't kidding about getting some of that chicken."

Vincent smiled and said, "I told you it looked good. I bet you go back for some more."

Darin watched the pair and tried to understand their relationship.

"So Darin, how was it working with Connie?" Joe asked casually.

"It was great. He was explaining everything he was doing while he was doing it. I learned a lot." Darin said happily.

"I'm glad. You'll be the one doing repairs tomorrow." Joe said simply.

Darin looked at Joe with a frightened expression.

Joe smiled and said, "You won't be disassembling an entire console like you did today. Tomorrow you'll probably be replacing faulty relays and switches, little stuff a first year cadet could do. I'm just glad you got to see Connie in action so you'll know how we do things."

Darin smiled in relief and said, "Okay. You had me scared for a second. When he started taking that console apart, I was sure we were never going to get everything back in its right place."

Joe nodded and said, "It can look like that. But if you decide to stay in deflector control, you'll eventually get to the point where you'll be able to do the same thing. You just get so familiar with all the components after a while that you don't even think about it."

"What about you Vincent? Did Susan show you a lot of things too?" Darin asked casually.

"Yeah. But we didn't get to disassemble a console. Just about everything we did had to do with the control circuits. But I got to see her change so many out I could probably do it myself." Vincent said in a cheerful voice.

"And we meet yet again Crewman Winters." Chief Morgan said with a chuckle as he approached the table.

"Hello Chief Morgan, would you like to join us?" Vincent said happily.

"No thank you Vincent. I'm just here to refill my cup. It's good to see you Joe, and... Ensign Cooper is it?" Chief Morgan asked, straining his memory.

"Yes sir." Daren said shyly.

"You three have a good meal. I'm sure you've earned it." Chief Morgan said with a smile.

"We will. Thank you Chief." Joe said in a slightly bewildered tone.

"He seems like a really nice man." Darin said as he watched Chief Morgan walk away.

"He really is. But he also knows how to get things done. I doubt that there are five other chief engineers in all of Starfleet that could handle a situation like today without it breaking into complete chaos." Joe said frankly.

"Hey Vincent, how are you doing?" A voice called from behind him.

Vincent turned and smiled when he saw a trio of crewmen approaching.

"Hi guys." Vincent said as he stood.

"Does this mean you're done in deflector control for the day?" Gary asked casually.

"Yeah. Come over here. I want to introduce you." Vincent said happily.

The three crewmen approached cautiously when they recognized that the other two people at Vincent's table were officers.

"This is Randy, Gary and Brock from engineering supply. Guys, this is Lieutenant Joe Bowers and Ensign Darin Cooper from deflector control." Vincent said happily.

"Nice to meet you." The three crewmen said in unison.

Joe nodded his greeting and Darin was frozen in place.

"So did you guys just get off?" Vincent asked casually.

Randy turned to Vincent and smiled at his casual nature.

"Chief Morgan is giving us a break. All three of us are gamma shift, so we have to be back on duty in about an hour." Randy said with a peaceful smile.

"And we had to come down and get some more of that coffee. That stuff really did the trick." Brock said happily.

"Would you guys like to have dinner with us?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"No thanks. We have some other things to do first. We're just here for the coffee. We saw you here and wanted to say hi." Randy said with a smile.

"Oh. Okay. Well I hope you guys have a good night." Vincent said with cheer.

"Yeah. You too." Randy said as he turned to walk toward the coffee dispenser.

"Was that the tired guy from the supply room?" Darin asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. I guess since he's on gamma shift, it's time for him to be awake now." Vincent said with a shrug.

"It looks like you've made a few friends today." Joe said with surprise.

"I guess so." Vincent said, then noticed someone else approaching.

"Channing wants to talk to you." The young man said seriously as he walked up to Vincent.

"Um. Chance, this is Lieutenant Bowers and Ensign Cooper from deflector control." Vincent said quickly.

Chance looked at the officers and stood a little straighter as he said, "Please excuse me for interrupting your meal. I just had something important to tell Vincent."

"That's okay. Go ahead." Joe said cautiously.

"Channing just woke up and after he found out what happened, he wanted to talk to you. Will you come with me to Sickbay?" Chance asked hopefully.

Vincent looked up into Chance's hopeful eyes, then asked, "Do you mind if Lieutenant Bowers and Ensign Cooper come too?"

"No problem. Just come on before he falls asleep again." Chance said urgently.

Vincent picked up his nearly empty plate and stopped at the feeling of a hand on his arm.

"I'll take care of it. You go ahead and we'll catch up to you in Sickbay." Joe said quietly.

"Thanks." Vincent said with a full smile and handed his plate to Joe.

* * * * *

"He's right in here." Chance said quickly as he led the way.

Vincent followed, and walked into a bright sterile room.

"I got him Chan, just like you wanted." Chance said in nearly a whisper.

"Thanks." Channing said with a small smile, then turned his head slightly to look at Vincent.

"You're just a kid." Channing said with confusion.

Vincent smiled at the statement and said, "Yeah. I am."

Channing got a look of concentration, then asked, "Are you the one who saved my life?"

Vincent quietly said, "When I saw you get shocked, I called for a med team. That's all I did."

Joe and Darin walked into the room in time to see a Vulcan woman approach Vincent.

"Your statement is inaccurate." She said firmly.

Vincent turned and looked at the medical assistant with question, then said, "I remember you, you're Ensign T'Lani daughter of Sufaal of the house of Sukaan of Vulcan."

The Vulcan woman raised an eyebrow, then responded, "And you are Crewman Vincent Winters, son of Clan Short of the house of Surak of Vulcan. And your statement regarding your contribution to Crewman Channing's well being is in error."

Vincent looked at the Vulcan woman with question, then asked in his most reasonable voice, "How am I in error?"

"You called for a medical team immediately following the incident. You stated clearly and concisely where the incident occurred and what had caused the injury, which enabled us to have the supplies and equipment to give proper treatment. Reports indicate that your subsequent action of asking people to stand aside assured that the medical team would not be delayed in their efforts to give immediate aid to Crewman Channing. The result of your actions is that Crewman Channing is expected to make a full recovery. Given the nature of his injury, if you had not taken these actions, Crewman Channing would in all probability be facing months of treatment to deal with the effects of prolonged oxygen deprivation... assuming that he survived." Ensign T'Lani said firmly.

"Um... okay." Vincent said weakly.

Channing giggled and said in a whispery voice, "I guess she told you."

Vincent smiled at the man in the bed and said, "Okay. I guess I did do all that stuff. I'm just glad you're going to be okay."

Channing held out one hand to Vincent, palm up.

Vincent took the hand and held it firmly.

Channing looked him in the eyes and said, "Thank you."

Vincent smiled and said, "Anytime."

Channing closed his eyes and the grip on Vincent's hand went slack.

Vincent looked at Ensign T'Lani with concern.

"His recent trauma has caused fatigue. Do not be concerned, he is sleeping." T'Lani said seriously.

Vincent carefully laid Channing's hand on the bed, then turned to see Joe, Darin and Chance all watching him.

"Thank you." Chance said quietly.

Vincent smiled and nodded.

"Are you guys about ready to call it a day? We have work in the morning and it's getting late." Joe said quietly.

"Yeah. I'm ready." Vincent said as he walked toward the door.

Joe, Vincent and Darin walked slowly out of Sickbay.

Chance looked at T'Lani and said, "It just seems unreal that a kid could save Channing's life like that."

T'Lani looked at Chance with full Vulcan calmness and said, "Crewman Winters is a son of Clan Short. Perhaps if you were to investigate what that means, you would understand how it is so."

* * * * *

"It sounds like you've had a very interesting day." Joe said as the trio walked slowly down the corridor away from Sickbay.

Vincent shrugged and said, "I think if it was Cory or Sean doing that stuff instead of me, no one would have thought anything about it."

"But you're not Cory." Joe said carefully.

Vincent stopped in his tracks and looked Joe in the eyes as he said, "No. I'm not him. But him and Sean and the other guys in the Clan are fathers to me just like you are. For the first time I have people in my life that I want to be like. When I saw the guys in supply all tired and working so hard and still being nice, I thought about what Sean or Cory would do. When I saw Channing get shocked, I thought about what you would do. I didn't really do anything special today, I just did what you guys would have done if you'd been there."

Darin looked at Vincent with wonder and said, "I think I understand something that I never understood before."

Joe and Vincent turned to look at Darin with matching looks of question.

"I've always thought I wasn't good enough to do... anything. I worked hard and did my best but... I never felt like it was enough. It's like I'm... scattered." Darin said with difficulty.

"I would look at people around me and see that they had things like courage or ambition and I couldn't find those things in me."

"But what you just said made sense. I don't have to find those things in myself, I can find them in the people I respect. Then I just have to try and honor them by doing things the way they would... It makes so much sense. I can't believe I never saw it before." Darin finished in wonder.

"Maybe you needed to get to know someone who lives with that philosophy before it would make sense." Joe said with a loving look at Vincent.

Darin looked at Joe and said, "You're probably right. Would it be... um, weird or anything if I... tried to be like you?"

Joe chuckled at the question and said, "No, it wouldn't be weird at all. In fact, I can't think of any greater compliment that anyone could give me."

"Thank you Lieutenant Bowers." Darin said shyly.

"Darin, if you're going to be one of my sons, I'll be very offended if you don't call me Joe."

On impulse, Vincent went to Joe's side and gave him a warm hug.

Joe put an arm around Vincent, then looked at Darin with question.

"Okay Joe." Darin said in a surprised but happy voice.

Joe held out his other arm in invitation.

Darin hesitantly walked to Joe and was pulled into a gentle hug.

Chapter 4

"Are you too tired for your 'kid time'? We can save it for tomorrow if you would like." Joe said quietly as he held Vincent and Darin gently.

"I'm tired, but I think I really need a little bit of kid time before I go back to our cabin." Vincent said in thought.

"Then let's go to my cabin for a little while. You haven't seen it yet, have you?" Joe asked with a gentle smile.

Darin pulled out of the hug and hesitantly said, "That sounds like something private. I should go back to my cabin now."

Vincent pulled away from Joe and said, "I don't mind if you come with us Darin. 'Kid time' is just a time for me to act like a normal kid for a while instead of a crewman. Maybe if you wanted, you could have some kid time too."

Darin looked at Vincent and Joe curiously, not sure what he should do.

"You really are welcomed to join us. I promise that it's not half as strange as it sounds. Besides, I think it would be a good chance for us to sit and talk for a while. We really haven't had the time to get to know each other." Joe said carefully.

"Okay Lieu... Joe. That sounds good." Darin said in thought.

The trio approached the turbo lift and waited for it to arrive.

When the doors opened, Vincent happily said, "Okay Daddy Joe, you get to drive."

Joe looked at Vincent cautiously, then turned to Darin and said, "I think kid time has already started."

Vincent giggled at the statement as they walked into the turbo lift.

"Deck E, Section C2." Joe said into the air.

As the lift started moving, Joe looked down at Vincent to find him looking up at him with a happy expression that was almost glowing.

Joe couldn't help but smile at the expression and gave Vincent a quick one armed hug.

"Please excuse me for asking, but there's something I don't understand." Darin said slowly.

The lift doors opened and Joe stepped out into the corridor.

"It's right here." Joe said and walked the five steps to his cabin door.

After keying in his entry code, Joe stepped aside to allow his guests to enter.

* * * * *

Darin looked around Joe's cabin and was frankly impressed.

It was definitely bigger than the room he was sharing with Vincent.

The double bed in the room was bigger than the bunk bed he had slept in the night before. Also, Joe had a small desk work area with a built in terminal which gave the room a feeling of being something more than a place to sleep.

The built in furniture in this room had a decorative look, appearing to be the regular furniture in a person's home rather than the military style cabinets that he and Vincent shared.

The net result was a cabin that looked comfortable and inviting... a home.

"Come on in and have a seat. You had a question Darin?" Joe asked pleasantly as he walked over and took a seat on the edge of the bed.

Vincent immediately walked over to sit beside Joe and snuggled in under his arm.

Darin smiled at the move, then said, "I just... I don't want to upset you or anything, but I don't understand... Are you Vincent's father?"

Joe chuckled and said, "There's not a simple yes or no answer to that one. Come over and have a seat and we'll tell you the story."

Hesitantly, Daren sat on the bed beside Joe and Vincent, leaving about a foot of space between them.

"Do you want to tell Daren the story?" Joe asked Vincent as he hugged him gently.

"No. I want to hear you tell it. It makes me feel good when I hear you say that you want me to be here." Vincent said happily.

"You got it Champ." Joe said with a smile.

"I guess the story starts when I was a little bit younger than you are Darin. I met a beautiful girl and fell in love." Joe said in a voice of distant memory.

"That was my momma." Vincent interjected.

"Peggy and I had a son, his name is Lawrence... Vincent, would you mind getting Lawrence's picture out of my flight bag over there? It's in the side pouch." Joe asked casually.

"Okay." Vincent said quickly, then hopped off the bed and ran to the piece of luggage.

"Anyway, things didn't work out between me and Peggy and she finally divorced me." Joe said quietly.

"Is this it?" Vincent asked as he held up something that looked like a leather bound notebook.

"Open it and find out." Joe said with a chuckle.

Vincent opened the photo album, then looked at Joe with question.

"Billy snapped that when you weren't looking." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent carried the book over and handed it to Darin.

Darin was surprised when he opened the book to find that there were no pages in it; Just two pictures, one on the inside of the front cover and one on the inside of the back.

The first picture was of Vincent with his hands on his hips and looking like he was about to scream at someone. The other was of a slender boy with the same light blond hair and blue eyes as Joe.

"That's Lawrence, Vincent's half-brother." Joe said as he pointed.

"Half-brother." Darin said in confirmation.

"That's right. I'm Lawrence's father and Peggy was his mother. Peggy was also Vincent's mother but his father was the man Peggy married after she divorced me." Joe said quietly.

"My dad killed my momma then killed himself last week." Vincent said seriously.

Darin looked at Vincent in thought for a moment, then suddenly said, "Wait a minute... Winters... the postal worker that went on a killing spree in Florida and ended up killing two people and shooting a police detective. Then he died trying to attack the home of the Director of Federation Youth Services..."

Vincent nodded sadly.

"THAT was your father?" Daren asked in disbelief.

Vincent nodded again.

"I'm sorry Vincent. It's just that it was all over the news... I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk about it." Darin finished quickly.

"It's okay Darin. If it was gonna bother me, I wouldn't tell you." Vincent said quietly.

"Okay. But I won't tell anyone else." Darin said seriously.

"Thanks." Vincent said, then moved back to Joe's side and was pulled into a warm hug.

"Let's see... I met Vincent on... Wednesday. And before anything happened with his parents, I had already told him that I was his step-father because I used to be married to his mother." Joe said in thought.

Vincent smiled at the memory and turned so he could put his arms completely around Joe and give him a proper hug.

"Then after we got the news about his parents, several people got involved and worked together to help Vincent." Joe said carefully.

"I wanna tell this part. Can I?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Go ahead son." Joe said with a smile.

"So I'm sitting there trying to figure out what I'm supposed to do since I don't have any parents or home or anything at all no more. Then Daddy Joe comes up to me with David... Um... that's David Gallagher from the Richie Rich Christmas movie..." Vincent added in thought.

"You mean David Gallagher from Seventh Heaven?" Daren asked with wide eyes.

"Yeah, that too." Vincent said with a smile.

Daren turned to face Vincent more fully, devoting his complete attention.

"It was Daddy Joe, David, Commander Dodds and um... Aunt Teri." Vincent said in concentration.

"Teri Short, Director of Federation Youth Services." Joe added for clarification.

Vincent nodded, then continued, "Then David said this big long thing that meant that him and Clan Short were adopting me."

Joe considered the statement and finally said, "Something like that."

"So now David and Aaron Carter and Commander Dodds' sons and a whole bunch of other people are my guardians." Vincent said happily.

"When Vincent told Teri that he wanted to be in Starfleet, she remembered the Starfleet mentoring program. So she talked to a few people, Commander Dodds talked to a few people, Patriarch Short talked to a few people and... well, here's Vincent." Joe finished with a smile and a big hug for Vincent.

"Wow. That's really amazing. But I don't really understand about Vincent being a Vulcan." Darin said carefully.

"Oh, that's easy. I was adopted by a Vulcan Clan, so that makes me a Vulcan citizen." Vincent said happily.

Darin thought about it, then slowly said, "Vincent Winters... son of Clan Short... of the house of Surak of Vulcan."

"That's me." Vincent said happily.

"I guess that's about it." Joe said in a considering voice.

"No it isn't. You didn't say it." Vincent said with a tone of warning.

"What? Oh... I'm sorry Vincent." Joe said quietly, then turned to Darin and said in a serious voice, "When Teri told me about her plan to get Vincent into the mentoring program, I told her that I wanted to be his mentor and be like a father to him so he could come and live with me on the *Yorktown*."

"Thanks Daddy Joe." Vincent said happily and hugged Joe gently.

"I'm glad you did. Without Vincent's advice and help today, I'd probably be sitting in my cabin waiting to go back to Earth and wondering what I should do next." Darin said quietly.

"I just did what Cory would have done." Vincent said dismissively.

"You've mentioned him before. Who is Cory? He must be a really great person from the sound of it." Darin said in thought.

"He is. His name is Cory Short. Clan Short is named after him, he's the Patriarch. He's saved a lot of kids' lives and started a camp for kids who don't have any homes and even stopped a bunch of bad people who were using little kids for porno stuff." Vincent said in a rush.

"And he's fourteen." Joe interjected.

Darin looked at Joe with disbelief.

"And he's adopted five kids." Vincent added.

"Do you mean like the way he adopted you?" Darin asked carefully.

"No. The whole Clan adopted me. Cory really adopted them. They had their names changed to Short and they live with him and he's their real dad." Vincent said happily.

Darin thought about what Vincent said, then quietly asked, "Would you like to be adopted like that?"

Vincent tilted his head as he thought about it for a few seconds, then said, "No. If I was adopted like that then I couldn't be a crewman or live on the *Yorktown*. Kid time is nice for a while, but that would be like having kid time all the time and I don't think I'd like that."

"Guys. It's getting late. I think it's about time to call it a night." Joe said with regret.

Vincent gave Joe a tight hug, then said, "Okay, I'm done."

"If you would like, I could stop by your cabin at 07:00 and go to breakfast with you." Joe said to Vincent with a smile, then turned to Darin and added, "Both of you."

"We'll be ready at 07:00. We're on Deck G, Section D7, cabin 4." Vincent said as he straightened his posture and made his voice more mature.

"I'll see you then. You two have a good night." Joe said, sounding just a bit more professional and detached.

"You too Joe. Thank you for... everything." Darin said haltingly.

"It was my pleasure Darin. I'm really glad that Vincent found a good person to share a cabin with. And I was serious about considering you to be one of my sons. If you have any problems or just want to talk or anything like that, I'll be here for you." Joe said sincerely.

"Thank you Joe. I don't think I was really ready for this, I mean leaving Earth. I guess I always had the feeling that if I blew it in Starfleet, I was just a phone call away from my parents. Having you guys as my family on the *Yorktown* will make it a lot easier for me to get used to things... and I was serious about wanting to be like you." Darin finished in a quieter tone.

"I know Darin, and I was serious about it being the best compliment you could have given me. Now you guys had better get going. We've got work in the morning." Joe said gently.

"We'll see you at 07:00." Vincent said with a smile as he walked toward the door.

"Deck G, section D7, room 4." Joe said as he walked to the door and watched them walk to the turbo lift.

* * * * *

When the doors of the turbo lift closed, Darin quietly said, "Thanks for telling me all that Vincent."

"Deck G, Section D7." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift, then he turned to look up into Darin's eyes and said, "Most of the people on the *Yorktown* will only get to know Crewman Winters. I wanted you to know the rest of me."

"Well, just so you know. I like all of who you are." Darin said with a smile.

"You're not going to hug me are you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. I distinctly remember you saying that kid time was over." Darin said, trying to sound serious.

"I'm glad you understand." Vincent said as he turned his gaze toward the front of the lift.

The doors of the lift opened and the pair made their way back to the cabin.

"We'll need to put entry codes on the door... tomorrow. I'm too tired now." Vincent said as he pressed the entry button.

"I'm with you. Maybe we'll feel like it in the morning." Darin said as he started to undo the shoulder strap of his uniform jacket.

"Yeah, right." Vincent said with full sarcasm.

Darin smiled at the response as he took off his jacket.

Vincent took a pair of pajama pants out of his cabinet and looked at Darin with question.

"What is it?" Darin asked casually.

"I never thought about it before, but are we supposed to go in the bathroom to change or do we do it in here?" Vincent asked in thought.

"Honestly, with four of us sharing a bathroom, I doubt that it will be very long before none of us have anything the others haven't seen. Just do whatever makes you most comfortable." Darin said frankly.

"Okay, I just didn't want to do something wrong and make you think I was perving on you." Vincent said with a mischievous grin.

Darin chuckled and said, "Go ahead and get ready for bed. I'm dead on my feet."

Vincent started to get out of his crewman's jumpsuit uniform while Darin pulled off his shirt.

"I never thought about this part of being in Starfleet. I didn't even think about sharing quarters." Vincent said casually as he worked the jumpsuit off his legs.

"Well, we roomed together at the academy, so I'm kind of used to it now. But I'm really glad that I ended up sharing quarters with you. My roommate in the academy was a real jerk." Darin said as he pulled down his pants.

Vincent pulled on his light gray sleep pants then looked at Darin and asked, "How was he a jerk?"

Darin walked to his cabinet and pulled out a pair of sleep pants exactly the same color as Vincent's, then said, "He was loud, forceful and insulting. He seemed to enjoy making my life miserable."

Vincent looked at Darin with wide eyes and said, "So he did stuff to make you feel bad on purpose?"

Darin nodded and said, "Yeah. Everything Skippy said was a filthy joke or some kind of put down. He was a disgusting pig of a roommate and I have no idea how any woman could have been attracted to him, but for some reason they were... He was just nasty."

"Wow. I really got lucky getting you as a roommate." Vincent said with relief.

Darin smiled as he pulled back his covers and said, "Me too."

Vincent stood on the edge of Darin's bed, then hoisted himself up into his bunk.

Darin couldn't help but giggle at the maneuver.

"Don't forget to set your alarm." Vincent said as he set the wake-up alarm built into the wall at the head of his bed.

"Who's the adult here?" Darin asked in a playful voice as he also set his alarm.

"I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know." Vincent said with a smile as he laid back and got comfortable.

"Good night Vincent, sweet dreams." Darin said as he hit the switch by his bed that turned off the lights.

"Good night Darin. Sweet dreams to you too." Vincent said in a sleepy voice.

Before a minute had passed, both were fast asleep.

* * * * *

A soft beeping intruded on Vincent's peaceful sleep.

He reluctantly opened his eyes and looked around in confusion until he focused on the soft light of the alarm button blinking at the head of his bed.

Vincent pressed the button, then the room's light control beside it to bring the lights in the room up slightly.

He smiled as he remembered that he was on the *Yorktown* as a member of her crew.

After a glance at the ship's time, he took a moment to straighten the spread on his bed, then slowly climbed down, careful not to wake Darin.

Vincent noticed that the uniform he had worn the day before was laying crumpled in the floor.

Somehow it seemed wrong to have the symbol of his membership in the crew being treated so disrespectfully.

Vincent picked up the uniform and draped it over his arm, then proceeded to the bathroom.

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Vincent scuffed into the bathroom and dropped his uniform into the laundry fresher unit just inside the door.

He stepped into one of the two bathroom stalls and relieved himself.

Next, he crossed the room and stripped out of his sleep pants and underwear and stepped into the sonic shower.

He had heard the sensation of a sonic shower described before, but the reality of it wasn't what he expected.

From the way people had talked about it, he thought it would be a 'crawly' feeling on his skin.

All he noticed was a hum and he could feel a sensation like brushing or a whispery breeze.

It didn't exactly feel 'good' but it wasn't the unpleasant experience he had been expecting.

As he was finishing, he heard the door of the bathroom open.

Cautiously, Vincent reached out of the shower unit and picked up his sleep pants.

After pulling on the sleep pants, he stepped out of the shower and looked around.

A tall dark haired man wearing only sleep pants was standing there and looking at him with surprise.

"Hi." Vincent said hesitantly.

The man seemed to snap out of whatever trance he had been in, then his eyes widened in an expression of panic.

Before Vincent could utter another word, the man ran to the door that led into Vincent's quarters and looked at the bed where Darin was still sleeping.

"What..." Vincent began to say when the man turned back toward Vincent with an expression of horror.

"I need to call security, stay right here." The man said quickly as he turned toward the opposite bathroom door to enter the other quarters.

"What for? Is something wrong?" Vincent asked in confusion.

The man stopped suddenly, then turned and asked, "Are you okay? I mean, do you need to see a doctor or anything?"

Vincent blinked in confusion at the question then stammered, "I'm fine. What's wrong?"

The man knelt down to be closer to Vincent's eye level, then said in a more gentle voice, "My name is Rad. Everything is going to be fine. I'm just going to call security and they're going to ask you a few questions, then we'll get you back to your parents. Don't worry about anything, it's going to be fine."

Vincent squinted his eyes in thought, then opened them wide as he realized what Rad was thinking.

"Now if you'll just stay here for a few seconds, I'll call security. Okay?" Rad asked gently.

"Will you let me do one thing before you call security?" Vincent asked carefully, not wanting to do anything to cause Rad to react.

"What's that?" Rad asked with concern.

"Will you give me one minute so I can get dressed?" Vincent asked seriously.

"You're not going to leave are you?" Rad asked cautiously.

"No. I won't, I promise. You can even watch me from the door if you want." Vincent said carefully.

"Okay. Go get dressed, I'll be right here." Rad said quietly.

Vincent hurried into his room and noticed that Rad was standing in the doorway, watching Darin intently, making sure that he wasn't waking up.

Vincent quickly grabbed a clean uniform from the closet, then moved where Rad could see that he wasn't going to try to leave.

Reluctantly, Vincent slipped off his sleep pants, very aware that his bare butt was exposed to Rad.

Quickly, he stepped into his uniform and pulled it up in one fluid move.

Vincent was grateful that his uniform was a one piece jumpsuit so he wouldn't have to deal with a shirt and uniform jacket.

He hurried to Rad's side and said, "Okay. If you want to call security now, I'm ready."

Rad looked down at Vincent, then took a step back in astonishment.

"I'm Crewman Vincent Winters, you can call me Vincent if you want to. It's nice to meet you." Vincent said with a mischievous smile.

"You... I thought..." Rad stammered.

Vincent giggled at Rad's expression and said, "I think I know what you thought, but it's okay. I live here. I was assigned to these quarters."

Rad smiled, then broke into relieved laughter.

Vincent giggled and asked, "Is your name really Rad?"

After a moment for the chuckles to subside, Rad said, "My real name is Ensign Rayne Radovanovich, but most people call me Rad."

"Why don't they call you Rayne?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Mainly because I don't like it. I guess it wouldn't be so bad if my middle name weren't Beau." Rad said with a sour look.

"Rayne Beau?" Vincent asked incredulously.

Rad nodded with a pained expression.

Vincent forced down his smile and said, "I understand."

Rad gave Vincent a smile of gratitude.

"Um, Rad. I'm on alpha shift so I need to get ready." Vincent said seriously.

Rad looked down at himself wearing only sleep pants and said, "Me too."

"Oh, and that guy in my room is named Darin, he's an Ensign like you. We're going to breakfast at 07:00. Would you like to have breakfast with us?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure. That sounds like a good idea." Rad said with a smile.

The sound of Darin's alarm drew both their attention.

"I'd better get dressed. I'll be over at 07:00." Rad said casually.

"Okay." Vincent said happily.

Rad retreated into the bathroom as Vincent went to finish getting ready for his day.

* * * * *

Darin had turned off his alarm, but showed no sign of getting up.

"Darin, you need to wake up." Vincent said quietly.

"I don't have class until 09:00." Darin muttered into his pillow.

Vincent smiled at the response, then said in a firmer voice, "Ensign Cooper, you have to be on duty in Deflector Control at 08:00."

Darin's eyes snapped open and he sat up abruptly.

"Good morning." Vincent said with a smile.

Darin looked around, then said, "Yeah. Good morning. What time is it?"

"06:45. Daddy Joe will be here in fifteen minutes to go to breakfast with us." Vincent said as he went to his cabinet.

"Oh, yeah. I'd better get ready." Darin said in a daze.

Vincent smiled, then thought to say, "I met our neighbor in the bathroom. His name is Rad. He seems like a nice guy."

"Um... yeah. That's right. We share a bathroom." Darin said hazily as he forced himself to get out of bed.

Vincent tossed his clean underwear and socks onto the edge of his bunk and looked over in time to see Darin stand up.

Darin glanced at Vincent, then down at himself and turned away quickly to hide his morning erection which was making a decent sized tent in his sleep pants.

Vincent giggled and said, "Too late. I saw it."

"I'm sorry about that Vincent." Darin said quietly.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "You don't need to be sorry, you just need to get ready before Daddy Joe gets here."

Darin smiled with relief as he went to his cabinet and gathered his things

"I think it's going to be great having you as a roommate." Darin said casually.

"Yeah. I think so too. Go on." Vincent said, then started taking off his uniform so he could put something on underneath it.

Darin took his clothes into the bathroom as Vincent finished getting ready.

* * * * *

"Am I too early?" Joe asked when the door opened.

"Nope. Right on time." Vincent said with a big smile.

Joe gave Vincent a quick hug, then looked over and said, "Good morning Darin. How are you today?"

Darin smiled at the warm greeting and said, "I'm fine. Vincent has been keeping after me so you won't have to wait."

Joe smiled, then said, "Well then, I guess we're ready to go."

"Wait a second. I invited our neighbor to eat with us... that's okay, isn't it?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Of course." Joe said with a gentle smile at Vincent.

The door to the bathroom opened as Rad called out, "Are you guys ready to go?"

"Rad?" Joe asked in surprise.

"Joe." Rad said in astonishment.

"Oh, I guess you already know Rad. He lives right next door." Vincent said happily.

"Yeah. How have you been Joe?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Fine... I wasn't sure you were still on the ship. I haven't seen you around for a while." Joe said quietly.

"I've been keeping to the lower decks..." Rad said, then gave a helpless shrug.

"It looks like you changed cabins." Joe said, at a loss for what else to say.

"Yeah, about a month ago." Rad said uncomfortably.

Vincent looked at Darin with question to find the same expression looking back at him.

"Rad and I are old... friends." Joe said, not sounding at all certain of it.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked as he looked back and forth between the two men.

"I just did something a while back..." Rad trailed off with a pained expression.

"...And I overreacted." Joe said, finishing Rad's statement.

"Rad, are you sorry you did whatever it was you did?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Yeah. I really am." Rad said as he reluctantly looked at Joe.

Vincent turned to Joe and asked, "Do you forgive him?"

"It wasn't really his fault..." Joe began to say.

"He feels bad and needs to hear you say it. Do you forgive him?" Vincent asked firmly.

"Yeah. I forgive him." Joe said to Vincent, then glanced at Rad.

"Good. Now, are you sorry you let your mouth get away from you and said stupid things like a big jerk?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Hey! You don't even know what I said." Joe said with a surprised look at Vincent.

Vincent said nothing as he looked Joe in the eyes, waiting for an answer.

Joe thought about it for a second, then said, "You're right. I was a big jerk. I'm sorry Rad."

Vincent turned to Rad and asked, "Do you forgive him?"

Rad opened his mouth to begin to explain, but stopped at Vincent's determined gaze.

"Yeah. He's forgiven." Rad said quietly.

"Good. Now let's go eat." Vincent said firmly.

Joe and Rad both looked at Vincent and broke into laughter.

"This crewman seems to like ordering officers around." Joe said in a teasing voice.

"Only when you're in my cabin and keeping me from my food. Now come on. I'm starving." Vincent said seriously.

"Let's not keep the crewman waiting." Rad said with a smile at Vincent.

* * * * *

The group made their way to the Engineering Mess Hall and made their selections.

As they sat down, Rad cautiously asked, "How have things been going Joe?"

"Okay. Mostly the same old routine." Joe said in thought.

"Yeah. Me too." Rad said carefully.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Joe asked cautiously.

"No. I'm taking a little time off from dating." Rad said as he looked at his plate.

"I met someone." Joe said quietly.

"Really? What's she like? It is a 'she' isn't it?" Rad asked, sounding really interested.

"Yeah. Her name is Mona, she's... amazing. She's strong, independent and beautiful." Joe said in a distant voice.

"Good. I'm happy for you." Rad said with a contented smile.

"Really?" Joe asked, before he could think better of it.

"Yes really. Ever since I've known you, you've always seemed so lonely. I'm really glad you found someone." Rad said, sounding a little bit offended.

"Oh. Well, thanks Rad. I just thought..." Joe trailed off.

"You thought that because I was interested in you that I wouldn't want you to find someone? Just how shallow do you think I am?" Rad asked in an increasing voice.

Before Joe could answer, Vincent said, "Sometimes Daddy Joe's mouth likes to talk before his brain can tell him it's a bad idea."

Rad looked at Vincent with question for an instant, then broke into a smile as he said, "That really explains a lot. Thank you Vincent."

Joe smiled at Vincent and said, "My life would have been a lot easier up to now if I'd had Vincent around to let people know that about me."

"Well, you've got me now Daddy Joe." Vincent said with a smile.

Rad looked at Joe with question.

"Vincent, do you want to tell it?" Joe asked casually, then took a bite of his breakfast.

"Um... Okay... I'm his kid." Vincent said to Rad simply, then looked at Joe and asked, "Is that good enough?"

Joe smiled and said, "That's fine."

At Rad's surprised look of question, Joe said, "There's a whole long story that goes with it, but that's the important part. Vincent is my son... well, at least in my way of thinking if not legally."

"I'll look forward to hearing the whole story sometime." Rad said seriously.

"Maybe after our shift? Do you have any plans at 18:00?" Joe asked with a smile.

"Not a thing. Do you want to meet here?" Rad asked happily.

"Sounds great. What about you guys?" Joe asked Darin and Vincent casually.

"Okay with me, what about you Darin?" Vincent asked in a friendly tone.

"Sure, 18:00." Darin said with a smile.

"Okay, now that that's settled. What do you guys know about the big control circuit mess from yesterday? Do you have any idea what's going on?" Rad asked as he leaned forward with interest.

Before Vincent or Darin could answer, Joe quickly said, "We know something about that. But I think we'd better not spread it around until security has finished their investigation."

"Oh, an ongoing security investigation... and I've already heard that CPO Marks has been detained. I have a feeling that this puzzle doesn't have too many more pieces." Rad said with a smile.

"I wouldn't count on it. I have a sneaking suspicion that what happened yesterday didn't just happen on the *Yorktown*." Joe said carefully.

Rad froze in thought at the statement.

"I tell you what Rad. I'll talk to security today to make sure it's okay to talk about it, then I'll tell you whatever I can at dinner." Joe said seriously.

"Okay. Thanks Joe." Rad said in thought.

"I need some more juice. Would anyone like some more coffee?" Vincent asked as he stood.

"Sure. Thanks Vincent." Rad said in surprise, then handed Vincent his cup.

Joe nodded and also handed his cup to Vincent.

"I'll help you." Darin said and picked up his own cup and Vincent's juice glass.

"Be right back." Vincent said happily as he led Darin away from the table.

* * * * *

Joe and Rad watched as Vincent and Darin walked away.

"He's something else." Joe said with a tender smile.

"I remember you telling me that you had been married and had a son..." Rad trailed off and looked at Joe with question.

"My son's name is Lawrence, he's Vincent's half-brother." Joe said quietly.

Rad fell silent as he thought about that.

Joe looked over to see that Vincent was at the coffee station before quietly saying, "Both Vincent's parents died last week. I was there when he found

out. Apparently he has had an interest in Starfleet for years and he turned out to be a good candidate for the mentoring program."

"But I thought the mentoring program was for gifted fifteen or sixteen year olds." Rad said carefully.

"I think that's what they had in mind when they developed it, but due to the differences in childhood development among the different species of the Federation, they didn't specify a cut-off age in the criteria." Joe said carefully.

"So he really is a crewman?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Yes. And after what I saw yesterday, I think he's doing better than quite a few new crewmen fresh from the academy." Joe said frankly.

Joe looked up as a cup of coffee was placed before him.

"Thank you." Joe said gently.

Vincent smiled, then placed a cup before Rad.

"Thanks." Rad said with a smile then noticed Darin out of the corner of his eye.

Deciding to take the initiative, Rad turned to Darin and asked, "So how are you liking the *Yorktown*?"

Darin nearly choked on his coffee and sat the cup down quickly before saying, "Fine. Everyone's been really great."

Rad smiled at Darin's flustered state and said, "I'm glad. I'm guessing that you're fresh out of the academy. A lot of people find the transition to starship life to be a real culture shock."

Darin thought about it, then said, "I guess it would be for me too if it weren't for Joe and Vincent. They've really made me feel like I fit in here."

"You *do* fit in here Darin." Vincent said firmly.

"See what I mean?" Darin said with a teasing smile.

Rad smiled and nodded his agreement.

"Well, it's time for us to finish up. We've got to be on duty in a few minutes." Joe said reluctantly.

"I'd better go now. I'll see you guys at 18:00." Rad said as he stood.

"I'll see you then." Joe said as he also stood.

They stood facing each other for an instant, neither sure about what they should do.

"Hug." Vincent said firmly as he started gathering the breakfast dishes from around the table.

Both men looked at Vincent with surprise, then started laughing.

Joe put an arm around Rad and pulled him into a friendly hug.

"I'm really glad that's over. I've missed you." Joe said quietly, so only Rad could hear.

"Me too. It's been lonely as hell without my best friend." Rad said in a whisper.

The hug broke and both men smiled at each other before Rad reluctantly turned and left.

Vincent and Darin quickly took care of the breakfast dishes, then joined Joe who was still standing, watching the door that Rad had walked through.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked.

Joe shook himself out of his wandering thoughts and said, "If I were gay, that's the kind of guy I'd want to end up with."

Darin looked at Joe with surprise.

"Come on. It's time." Joe said and led the group out the doors toward the nearest turbo lift.

* * * * *

The trio walked into Deflector Control to find Lou engrossed in her work on the main console.

"How are things this morning Lou?" Joe asked as he walked to her side.

"Pretty good. The Beta crew stayed about an hour over to get some of the worst of it done and Judy has been working all night on the one man jobs... You'll want to look at this." Lou said, then brought up a report on the console.

Joe read for a moment, then said, "Vincent, I think you'd better see this."

Vincent stepped away from the third console and walked to Joe's side.

"It looks like you've made the big time." Joe said as he pointed to a passage of text.

"...Crewman Susan Walker and Crewman Vincent Winters of the *USS Yorktown* have been credited with uncovering a plot to defraud Starfleet of millions of dollars at the cost of the safety of the crews of several ships and star bases throughout the Federation..."

"Later on in the report, it says that nearly fifty people have been taken into custody. Four other starships and three star bases have reported finding the modified control circuits. They're reopening investigations into a few recent 'incidents' in which equipment failures have caused significant damage or a loss of life." Lou said seriously.

"Wow. All I did was ask one little question." Vincent said in wonder.

Lou looked at Vincent and chuckled as she said, "I'm scared to think of what will happen if you ask a big question."

Joe smiled and nodded at Lou with agreement.

"Joe, if you want, I can take the main in Engineering for a few minutes so you guys can make a few repairs on the main in here. It's all minor stuff, but I'd feel better if we got it done now." Lou said seriously.

"Sounds good. Vincent, get your tool kit. Darin, check station three and get a list of what repairs are needed and upload it to a padd." Joe said as Lou walked for the door.

Vincent went to the lockers and grabbed Susan's tool kit.

"That's Susan's. Your tool kit is two lockers down." Joe said with a grin.

Vincent put Susan's tool kit away, then walked two lockers down and took another tool kit out.

"Do we have to go to supply to get all these parts?" Darin asked as he looked at the list.

"You should have most of them in the side pouches of the tool bag. Once I've seen the list, I'll tell you." Joe said seriously.

Vincent opened the tool kit, then looked in the side pouches to see what components he had on hand.

A tone sounded and Joe pressed the button to answer it.

"I've got it Joe." Lou's voice said over the intercom.

"Thanks Lou. We'll try to make it quick." Joe said and switched over control to the console in Engineering.

"You guys go ahead and work this console as if I weren't here. I want to see how you work as a team." Joe said and took a step back.

Vincent opened his tool bag in front of the console and waited for Darin to finish looking over the list.

Joe looked at Vincent and said, "You'll want to grab some extra couplers from the supply locker. You're going to need them for just about every job."

"Where's the supply locker?" Vincent asked as he stood.

Joe opened a locker and showed Vincent where the most common supplies were kept.

"This isn't so bad. It's all simple stuff." Darin said as he handed Joe the data padd.

"You should have all these components except the harmonic wave modulator in the bag. I think..." Joe trailed off, then pulled a small circuit board out of the supply locker.

"...Yes. We have one. We like to keep an extra in here because they degrade with prolonged use." Joe said, then handed the board to Darin.

"Are you ready Vincent?" Darin asked with a smile.

Vincent grabbed a handful of couplers and nodded happily.

Joe watched with pride as 'his boys' went about the work of repairing the main deflector console.

* * * * *

"Hi Joe, how are things going?" Judy asked casually as she walked into the room, carrying her tool kit.

"Just fine. The guys are just finishing up the maintenance on the main console." Joe said with a smile.

"I was able to get a good chunk of the repairs done last night. The only thing left that really bothers me is the power distribution node in J-27. The readings show that it's operating at about 70% which means that it could fail at any time." Judy said as she put her bag away.

"The guys will get right on it. They're just about to close it up." Joe said as he glanced at what Darin and Vincent were doing.

"Do you want a level two on the main?" Judy asked as she walked to the third work station.

"No. I want the guys to do it. They need to get used to the process." Joe said seriously.

"Right. Is there anything else you need done?" Judy asked as she looked around.

"No. Thanks for everything you did last night. That status board was looking like a Christmas tree when I left yesterday. You really got a lot accomplished." Joe said with a smile.

"Go ahead and do a level two Vincent." Darin said as Vincent walked toward station three.

"Level two?" Joe asked Darin carefully.

"Yeah. Everything we just did can be checked by a level two diagnostic and it'll only take a few minutes. I mean, unless you want me to do a level three." Darin said, then looked at Joe with question.

"No. You're exactly right Darin, I just wanted to be sure you understood which was the correct diagnostic level to use and why. You explained it perfectly." Joe finished with a smile.

"All green." Vincent called out from his station.

Judy stepped over to read over Vincent's shoulder, then said, "It looks like I'm leaving you in good hands Joe."

Joe walked to the main console and pressed a few buttons, then said, "I think you're right. Lou will be done in just a minute, do you want to meet her up there?"

Judy smiled and said, "Yeah. Tell her I'm on my way."

Joe nodded and made one more quick system's check before pressing the direct comm link to the Engineering console and saying, "That's it Lou, I'm ready to take it back."

"It's all yours." Lou responded.

"Judy is on her way up. You two have a good morning." Joe said with a smile.

"You too Joe." Lou said peacefully.

"What do we need to do next?" Vincent asked as he walked to Joe's side.

"The most important thing on the list is to replace a distribution node in J-27. It isn't switching efficiently, which means that it could fail at any time." Joe said seriously.

"We'll have to go to supply for something that big." Darin said in thought.

"That's right, you'll also have to go into the jeffries tubes to get to it. And that reminds me, you two will need to carry communicators when you leave." Joe said, then checked some readings on his board.

"Because there aren't any comm stations in the jeffries tubes?" Vincent asked carefully.

"That too. But mainly because I'm tied to this control board. You guys are my hands if anything needs to be done, so I need to be able to call you whenever you leave deflector control." Joe said as he glanced at Vincent.

"Where do we get communicators?" Darin asked quietly, feeling like he should already know the answer.

"On the left side of the door. Just tell me which number you're taking so I'll know who I'm calling." Joe said, then turned his attention back to his board.

Vincent walked to the little rack built into the wall and took down two communicators, then handed one to Darin.

"I've got three." Vincent said, then hooked it on his belt.

"I have four." Darin said and did the same.

"Okay guys. Go get that distribution node and call me as soon as you're done." Joe said seriously.

Vincent quickly picked up his tool bag and hurried to Darin's side.

* * * * *

Darin and Vincent had just left the supply room and were heading for the jeffries tube they needed when a sound stopped them in their tracks.

"What kind of a moron are you? It's just my luck to get stuck with a worthless idiot rookie who can't even tell the lines apart." An angry voice called from ahead of them.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen." Another voice whimpered.

Darin looked at Vincent, trying to decide what was the proper thing to do in this situation.

Vincent looked up at Darin and quietly asked, "What would Daddy Joe do?'

Darin thought for a moment, then straightened his posture and forced himself to walk around the corner.

* * * * *

Just around the corner, Darin saw two men working in a panel.

"Is there a problem here?" Darin asked in a professional tone.

"Yeah. The academy ain't teaching these guys the difference between an input conduit supply line and a distributed feed line. This moron just fried the distribution node." The angry crewman said with disgust.

"Crewman Winters, would you please bring me the distribution node?" Darin asked seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said immediately and took the new distribution node out of his tool bag.

"Do you know how to hook up a distribution node?" Darin asked seriously.

"No sir. I know what it does, but I don't know how to install it." Vincent said carefully.

Darin took a minute to show Vincent where the main power feed connected, and then carefully explained the different connections that went into the unit.

"Do you understand all that?" Darin finally asked.

"Could you show me how to properly seal the connections. I haven't seen that done and I wouldn't want to do it wrong." Vincent said in thought.

Darin showed Vincent the proper way to seal a connection, then stood back and said, "Okay Crewman Winters. It's all yours."

Vincent nodded and went to work.

Darin turned to the two crewmen who had been watching and said, "What you just saw was how we work as a team. I check to be sure that Crewman Winters understands what he's doing, and he knows that if he doesn't understand something he can ask and I'll explain it to him. From what I heard when I walked up, you guys might think about trying something like that."

Darin turned to face the older man who had been yelling and said, "You need to have patience with new people. If you teach them to do it the right way, later on it will pay off for you because they will eventually be doing everything the way you like."

After receiving a nod from the older man, Darin turned to the other man and said, "And you need to tell him if you don't understand something. A

failure of communication like this one could end up costing you more than a few minutes of work. It could cause extensive damage to the ship or might even kill you."

"Ensign Cooper? Will you look to see that I'm doing this right?" Vincent asked from the panel.

Darin turned his attention to Vincent and watched as he sealed a connection.

"That's perfect. Good job." Darin said with a smile, then turned back to the two men.

"What's your name Crewman?" Darin asked the younger of the two.

"Crewman Tidwell." He answered immediately.

"Crewman Tidwell, would you go to the supply room and get a replacement distribution node for me?" Darin asked in a professional tone.

"Yes sir. Right away." Crewman Tidwell said quickly and rushed off.

Darin looked at the other crewman with question.

"Crewman Hartman, sir." He said reluctantly.

Darin looked at the rank insignia on the crewman's sleeve and said, "Crewman Hartman, this isn't a threat, just some advice. You should consider taking a voluntary reduction in rank so you'll only be responsible for your own actions. As a petty officer, you are going to have to train new people and be responsible for them. If you get promoted, you'll have even more people to train and be responsible for."

"Yes sir." Crewman Hartman said quietly.

"If you would prefer to stay at this rank, then you might consider some leadership training. If you can't become comfortable training and supervising new personnel, then you're just going to get more and more frustrated and probably take it out on your trainees. And one of these days you'll either run into a crewman who won't put up with it and will do something drastic to you... or you'll find one who believes what you're saying to him and he'll do something drastic to himself because he believes that he's a worthless idiot."

"I get what you're saying. Maybe I ain't cut out for this..." Crewman Hartman said quietly.

"That's up to you to decide. But seriously consider the leadership training. With just a little work, I bet you'll become more comfortable with training

new people and eventually you won't be able to remember what used to make you so miserable at work every day." Darin finished with a smile.

Crewman Hartman hesitantly nodded.

"Otherwise, I'm afraid that this limitation might cause your career in Starfleet to hit a dead end. To increase in rank, you *have to* be able to lead." Darin said in an imploring voice.

"I'll think about it. Thank you sir." Crewman Hartman said sincerely.

"I'm done. Do you want to check this out?" Vincent asked as he pulled away from the panel.

"I'll be right there Crewman Winters." Darin said with a smile, then carefully checked over Vincent's work to see that everything was connected correctly.

* * * * *

As Darin and Vincent were once again on their way to the jeffries tube, Vincent asked, "Did I really do okay back there?"

"Sure, you did fine. Why do you ask?" Darin asked curiously.

"You guys were talking really quiet and looking at me while I was working and I thought maybe I was doing it wrong or something." Vincent said with concern.

"You installed that distribution node perfectly. I was just giving Crewman Hartman some advice about how to train a new crewman." Darin said in thought.

"So does that mean that maybe he'll stop yelling at that other guy? That made me feel bad for him." Vincent said quietly, then stopped and said, "This is it."

Darin looked at the wall plate beside the opening in the wall to confirm that they were in the right place, then climbed into the jeffries tube, followed by Vincent.

"I hope that Crewman Hartman will do something to make a change. What he's doing now isn't doing anyone any good. He's making himself miserable, he's making his trainees miserable... and I hate to think of what his bunkmate has to put up with." Darin said as he crawled along, then asked, "Where is the distribution node?"

"The deck plans that I had didn't show little stuff like distribution nodes, but it's up ahead of us." Vincent said as he followed, dragging his tool bag.

"If your deck plans don't show where the distribution nodes are, then how do you know it's up ahead?" Darin asked curiously.

"Because it isn't behind us and it isn't here." Vincent said with a smile.

Darin stopped for a second, then said, "That confirms it, you *are* a Vulcan."

* * * * *

"Are you sure?" Darin asked carefully as he looked into the open panel.

"You just showed me how to do it. I need the practice." Vincent said seriously.

"Okay. But I was only showing you so I could demonstrate to Crewman Hartman and Crewman Tidwell the right way to work together." Darin said carefully.

"Yeah, I thought it was something like that." Vincent said, then tested the old distribution node to see that it was unpowered.

"You need to test across all five points. If this distribution node is failing, it's possible that it could be storing a charge in one of the connector points." Darin said carefully.

"Thanks. I didn't know that." Vincent said, then proceeded to check the other points.

"You did a good job back there. It really helped that you asked questions, they needed to see that." Darin said as he watched Vincent carefully.

"I thought you did a really good job too. You explained everything so I could understand it." Vincent said, then sat his tester aside.

Darin pulled the decoupler out of the tool bag and handed it to Vincent before saying, "I just did what I thought Joe would do."

Vincent smiled and said, "It really works, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. They should be teaching that at the academy." Darin said with a smile.

"This one's stuck. I can't get it loose." Vincent said as he tried to get the coupler to release.

"Let me try." Darin said, then moved in and took the decoupler from Vincent.

After a moment, Darin said, "It's jammed. Hand me the laser drill and I'll cut it out."

Vincent pulled out the laser drill and handed it to Darin.

"Move back a little. Sometimes they pop when you cut them loose." Darin said and waited for Vincent to scoot away.

After a moment of work, there was a little pop, then Darin sat the laser drill aside.

"That's got it. Go ahead, but be careful, it's going to be hot." Darin said as he moved away from the distribution node.

Vincent pulled the old distribution node out of the small space, then moved the new node into place.

"Make the first two connections and seal them before you secure the unit. The space is too small for you to get the sealer behind the unit to do it later." Darin said instructively.

"You're really good at this." Vincent said in an impressed voice.

"I guess I am. I never really thought I'd be using these skills when I was taking the engineering classes. I was sure I was going to be a helmsman." Darin said distantly.

Vincent finished sealing the first two connections, then moved the new distribution node into place.

Darin reached into the tool bag and brought out the extra couplers that Joe had asked Vincent to bring and handed them to him.

"Thanks." Vincent said and began to fasten the unit down.

"I never really understood why we use couplers instead of nuts and bolts." Darin said as he watched Vincent work.

"Oh, that's easy. Bolts are threaded, so the vibration of the ship would cause them to work loose. Couplers lock into place so you don't have to worry about that." Vincent said as he fastened the last coupler into place.

Darin chuckled and said, "Well that's another of the mysteries of Starfleet solved. If you ever go to the academy, I think you'll do great. You'll be starting out a lot better off than I did."

Before Vincent could respond, the hum of the ship's engines changed.

"We've increased speed." Vincent said in concentration.

"Scoot over. I'm going to make the connections and you can seal them." Darin said seriously.

Vincent scooted slightly, then sealed the connections as Darin made them.

The sound of an alert klaxon could be heard clearly in the distance.

Darin listened carefully for a moment, then said, "It's a yellow alert."

Chapter 5

"Let's hurry." Darin said abruptly.

"Last one." Vincent said as he concentrated on his work.

The beeping of both their communicators surprised them.

"Go ahead, I've got this." Vincent said as he worked on sealing the last connection.

"Ensign Cooper." Darin said into the communicator.

"Is Vincent with you?" Joe asked with obvious concern.

"Yes. He's right here." Darin said quickly.

"You two get down here right away. We're at yellow alert and I'm going to need you in deflector control." Joe said firmly.

"We're done here. We'll be right down." Darin said seriously.

"Hurry." Joe said, then terminated the transmission.

"Close it up. We've got to go." Darin said as he started putting the tools away.

"I need to test it." Vincent said firmly.

"We don't have time." Darin said impatiently.

"But if we test it and I screwed something up, we can fix it right now." Vincent said in a reasonable tone.

"Crewman Winters, close the panel. We're getting out of here." Darin said seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said reluctantly and put the access panel back into place.

As soon as the panel was in place, Darin secured it with couplers, then threw the decoupler into the tool bag.

"Hand me the bag." Darin said as he turned himself around in the confined space.

Vincent handed him the bag then followed him back the way they came.

* * * * *

As Vincent and Darin ran into deflector control, they noticed that Connie, Susan and Jimmy were also there... in various stages of wakefulness.

"Okay, it looks like there's no rest for the weary. Connie, take the main, Susan, station one, Jimmy, station two, Vincent, station three. Darin stow your tools and be ready to jump in wherever you're needed." Joe said as he worked the console.

"What's going on?" Vincent asked as he took his seat.

"We're at yellow alert and traveling at... warp eight point eight." Joe said in concentration as he stood away from the console and allowed Connie to take the seat.

Darin walked to the locker and put away the tool bag he was carrying.

"The J-27 distribution node is bypassed." Susan called out from her console.

"We just finished replacing it, but we didn't have a chance to test it." Darin said quickly.

"I'm on it." Jimmy said in concentration.

"Status?" Joe called out.

"Green across." Susan said quickly.

"One bypass, the rest operating normally." Jimmy said carefully.

"All green." Vincent said seriously.

"Darin, I need you to make sure the lockers are secured, just in case this turns into a bumpy ride." Joe said as he kept his focus on the main console.

Darin ran to one end of the lockers then started working his way down the line checking to see that each door was securely closed.

"***All hands, we are responding to an automated distress beacon from a Federation colony. We have not been able to establish communication with the colony to ascertain the nature of the distress call. Engineering, Security and Medical teams need to be on standby and ready for mobilization in two hours. We will remain at yellow alert until further notice***." Captain Byrne said firmly.

There was a moment of silence, until Joe finally said, "Darin, I need for you to walk Vincent through all the stations. I was hoping to ease him into it gently, but that's not an option now. Show him the basics of each console so he knows what to do if Connie needs something."

"Yes sir." Darin said immediately.

"Connie, you've got the main. Vincent is going to be your second. You two will have the 04:00 to 16:00 shift. Lou and Judy will have 16:00 to 04:00. Everyone else is with me." Joe said firmly.

"Joe, I wouldn't mind going..." Connie said carefully.

Joe smiled and said, "I know. And if I knew what we were about to face, I'd probably send you. But since we're facing an unknown, I'll take care of it this time. You can have the next one."

"That's what you said last time." Connie said indignantly.

Joe chuckled and said, "Yeah, I did, didn't I?"

Connie shook his head in amusement, then turned his attention back to the main console.

"Darin, you've got one hour. Teach Vincent everything you can in that time, then come down to the hanger bay." Joe said seriously.

Darin looked at Joe with surprise, then motioned for Vincent to come with him to the second console.

"Jimmy and Susan, you know the drill. Grab your tool bags and stock them up. We're heading to the hanger bay." Joe said firmly.

Jimmy and Susan hopped up and ran to their lockers.

"Oh Darin?" Joe called across the room.

Darin looked up from the console quickly.

"Your tool bag is in the next locker past Vincent's. It should be fully stocked, but make sure to grab plenty of extra couplers from the storage locker and some extra power cells from the store room." Joe said as he pointed to a partition in the room.

"Yes sir." Darin said quickly.

Joe nodded, then walked to the first locker and picked up his own tool bag.

* * * * *

"I think that's about it." Darin said in thought as they finished going over console one.

"I don't understand how to run a bypass without disrupting power to the deflector." Vincent said with concern.

"Well, you actually don't have to worry about that. The safety system won't allow you to accidentally disrupt main deflector power. You have to have command codes to do something like that. But let's go ahead and do a bypass so you'll see how it's done." Darin said seriously.

"But won't that cause a dip in power?" Vincent asked in a worried voice.

"No. The power transfer is seamless. Let's just do it so you can see." Darin said carefully.

"What do I do?" Vincent asked as he looked over the various controls.

"Crewman Winters, the E-11 power conduit has just been severed. The safety system automatically switched over to the R-16 battery reserve." Darin said as he stood back from the console.

Vincent thought about what Darin was saying, then traced his finger along the path from the E-11 control to the R-16 control. Suddenly he understood the configuration and quickly programmed the power distribution to bypass the E-11 conduit and route the power through the E-3 conduit. He made a quick adjustment to the distribution node, then pressed the activation sequence to run the program.

"Perfect." Darin said with a proud smile.

Vincent felt a cold sensation wash over him and said in a shaky voice, "I... I just... diverted power from one conduit to another... I mean... I REALLY did it."

Darin nodded in understanding and said, "And now you know that you CAN do it because you've really done it. Remember that. If you end up having to reroute power in an emergency, just remember that you've already done it. You know what you're doing. You've proven it to me and to yourself."

Vincent nodded hesitantly.

"Now I think you should bring E-11 back online. You never know when the Chief Engineer might be looking at your systems." Darin said with a smile.

"Or the guy at the deflector control main." Connie called out from his station.

Darin and Vincent both looked at Connie with question.

"Good job Vincent. I was watching what you were doing on the main board. Go ahead and bring E-11 up. Then come over here." Connie said seriously.

Darin looked at the ship's time on the console and quickly said, "I've got to get to the hanger bay."

"Take care of yourself." Vincent said with a look of concern directed at Darin.

"You too little brother." Darin said with a quick smile, then hurried to the lockers on the other side of the room.

Vincent looked at Darin with surprise for a moment, then turned and quickly pressed in the sequence to switch the power flow back to it's original configuration.

* * * * *

"What do you think is going to happen?" Vincent asked quietly as he stood beside Connie.

"Well, right now Joe and the rest of the team are getting everything together that they could possibly need in an emergency situation. When we arrive, we'll see what the situation is, and if it's something that Deflector Control can help with, the team will beam down and do whatever they can to fix the problem." Connie said as he kept his gaze on the control panel in front of him.

"How long will they be gone?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No telling. If there's nothing for them to do, they'll be right back. On the other hand, they could be down there for days if it's a problem that has to do with their shield generators." Connie said as he turned in his chair.

Vincent nodded in thought.

"Why don't you go over to station two and run a systems check for me? We need to be sure that everything is up to specs before we come out of warp." Connie said carefully.

"What are you worried about?" Vincent asked as he walked to the console and began to run a series of level two diagnostics on the power systems.

"Well, we know that we're going to check on a colony that we've lost contact with. There's a chance that they were attacked from space..." Connie trailed off.

"Shouldn't the team be here in case that's what happened?" Vincent asked as he turned away from his console.

Connie shook his head and said, "If it's something like that, Joe and the guys will come right back here. We can hold it together until they get back. It's more important for them to be ready to go deal with whatever is wrong."

Vincent nodded in thought, then looked over his console.

"The level three diagnostic shows that the J 27 distribution node is hooked up right and ready to use." Vincent said in concentration.

"Bring it online." Connie said without looking up from his panel.

Vincent carefully pressed in the sequence to divert the energy flow back to it's proper circuit, then keyed in the command to run the new configuration.

Connie had station two's console showing on the main board so he could interrupt Vincent if he made a mistake.

"There, it's done." Vincent said with a voice of accomplishment and sat back in his chair.

"Run a level two on the E-9 through E-12 systems that route through that distribution node to be sure that everything is working the way you expect it to." Connie said seriously.

Vincent sat forward in his chair and began to initiate the diagnostics.

"You know what *should* happen when you replace a distribution node. But what *should* happen isn't always what *does* happen. A variation in the harmonics or fluctuation in the power feed might cause something further down in the system to react badly." Connie said instructively.

"I understand. All systems are showing green." Vincent said as the diagnostic results came up.

"Good. Then I think that it would be a good time to make a round of the stations and do a quick status check on everything, starting with station one." Connie said seriously.

Vincent moved to the console and looked it over carefully before initiating a series of diagnostics.

Connie switched his view over to station one so he could watch.

"I'm showing increased power usage in the forward field generators." Vincent said as he looked at the readings carefully.

"That's right. I did that because we're traveling at... warp 8.93. I punched up the shields a little just in case." Connie said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then said, "There's a heat build-up in the primary distribution coils."

"Let me see." Connie said as he pulled up the readings, then said, "That's within tolerance. But if it were too hot, do you know what you'd do?"

Vincent looked at the console to confirm the sequence, then said, "I'd feed backup power to the secondary coil, then tell the computer to switch coils when the secondary field generator was up to full."

Connie smiled and said, "I thought I had you on that one. That's exactly right... how did you know that?"

"Darin mentioned that the field generator needed the coil at full power before it could be used." Vincent said with a smile at the praise.

Connie shook his head and said, "We really lucked out getting you two. You wouldn't believe some of the people who've rotated through here."

Vincent smiled, then moved to console two to start running diagnostics.

Connie got a sudden look of realization, then asked, "The Captain said two hours, right?"

"Yeah." Vincent said as he looked at Connie with question.

Connie started pushing buttons quickly to determine their heading.

After a moment to study the panel before him, Connie absently muttered, "Shit."

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked as he hurried across the room.

"It seemed strange that the captain didn't mention the name of the colony that we were going to check on." Connie said in deep thought.

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Look at this." Connie said and pointed to a star chart in front of him.

"Is that the *Enterprise*?" Vincent asked as he pointed at a symbol on the chart.

"That's right. They were closer, not by much, but when we changed course, they were closer than we were." Connie said seriously.

"So why did they call us?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Because the colony that we're going to check on is called Kimber IV." Connie said in a dark tone.

"I've never heard of it." Vincent said quietly.

Connie turned to look at Vincent and said, "It was just established two years ago. There are about a thousand colonists and one of their leaders is a young man named Cyril Byrne."

Vincent looked at Connie with wide eyes and asked, "Like Captain Byrne?"

Connie nodded and said, "His youngest son."

Vincent looked at the readings on the main deflector console and noticed that they were now traveling at warp 9.02.

"I'm going to get back to my systems checks. I want to be sure we've got everything perfect to help Captain Byrne's son." Vincent said as he walked back to station two.

Connie stared at his console for a moment, then said, "Me too."

* * * * *

There was a sense of overwhelming silence as the loud hum of the ship's engines abruptly stopped.

Vincent looked around, not knowing what to expect, half afraid to breathe and break the silence.

Connie looked carefully at his panel and said, "Good news. There are no other ships in the area."

Vincent went to Connie's side and looked at the readout.

"But look at this..." Connie said with concern and pulled up a filtered image of the local star.

Vincent's eyes went wide as he saw the surface of the bright yellow sun churning and violently spewing out plumes of molten debris in all directions.

"See those dark spots?" Connie asked as he pointed at an area on the star's surface.

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Those areas are cooler than the bright spots on the surface. That's what we call sunspots. Check out these readings." Connie said and pressed a few buttons on the main console.

Vincent looked at the readings and said, "They're all over the place, there's all kinds of radiation and... what's that?"

"That's the subspace interference it's generating. I'm surprised they were even able to get an automated distress beacon through that." Connie said seriously.

"How about that?" Vincent asked as he pointed at another indicator.

"That's our shield output. Don't worry. Our shields can protect us from just about anything it can throw at us except a direct hit with a solar flare." Connie said frankly.

Vincent looked back at the churning and spewing star again with worry.

Connie noticed and said, "If it ejected anything directly toward us, we'd have about half an hour to get out of the way. There's nothing to worry about."

Vincent nodded, then quietly asked, "How's the colony?"

"It's still there. But that's about all I can tell you. I don't have access to the scanners." Connie said as he looked over the readings before him.

"What do we do now?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"We wait. We have to be here in case the ship has to leave suddenly." Connie said quietly.

"I hate to wait." Vincent said in a small voice.

"So do I, but that's part of our job. We have to trust that the people in charge know what they're doing and be ready to do whatever we can to help out as soon as we're asked." Connie said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then walked over to his locker.

"What are you doing?" Connie asked curiously.

"I'm going to stock up my tool bag in case they need me for something." Vincent said in a small voice.

Connie nodded and turned away, knowing that Vincent would probably be the last person on the ship who would be asked to help.

* * * * *

"What's going on?" Lou asked as she and Judy walked into deflector control.

"Oh, a colony distress call, a yellow alert, and that." Connie said as he gestured toward the image of the violently churning star on the main console's view screen.

"Why didn't you call us?" Lou asked seriously.

"I was going to let you sleep until 16:00. Joe put us on 12 hour shifts while the repair team is off the ship." Connie said frankly.

Lou nodded and said, "We fell asleep as soon as we got back to our cabin and just woke up. I noticed that we were at yellow alert and thought I'd check in." Lou said as she looked over the readings on the main console.

"What's our status?" Judy asked in a timid voice.

"On standby. All systems are go." Connie said as he turned in his chair.

"Hurry up and wait." Lou said with a nod.

"It looks that way, but Joe and the team have been gone for a couple hours, so maybe they're doing something to help out the colony." Connie said frankly.

"Well, why don't you go hit the head or grab something to eat or whatever. I'll watch it for a few minutes." Lou said firmly.

"Thanks Lou. I owe you one." Connie said with a smile as he stood.

"No problem." Lou said as she took his place at the console.

"Come on Vincent. It's time for us to take a break." Connie said with a smile.

Vincent nodded and followed.

* * * * *

As Connie and Vincent walked from the turbo lift to the mess hall, Vincent's eyes went wide in disbelief.

There were about thirty civilians in the Engineer's mess hall.

Some of them were soaking wet, some were coated in mud and most of them looked like they were chilled to the core.

"Oh my God. It must be hell down there." Connie said in wonder from Vincent's side.

Vincent looked around, and spotted Brock standing in line to get to the coffee dispenser.

"Let's see if Brock knows what's going on." Vincent said and urged Connie to follow him across the room.

* * * * *

"Do you know what's happening?" Vincent asked in a loud voice.

"Only bits and pieces. It looks like the solar flares and sunspots made the planet's climate go crazy. They've got killer storms that have nearly destroyed the colony. We're evacuating them as quick as we can but there's so much lightning and solar radiation that we're having trouble getting a transporter lock. And you can forget about shuttles..." Brock said, then took a step forward in line.

"They look cold and hungry." Vincent said quietly as he looked around the room.

"I guess their crops were destroyed by the storms and I don't know what else happened, but they've been starving for nearly two weeks." Brock said, then took another step forward in line.

"A thousand people..." Connie said in thought.

Vincent looked up at Connie with question.

"If we end up evacuating the entire colony, we're going to be packed to the bulkheads. I suggest that while we have a few minutes, you get everything that you have packed and ready to move. Most likely we're going to be consolidated into as few cabins as possible so the colonists can have a place to stay." Connie said frankly.

"Yeah, Gary and Randy are getting our stuff ready to go. We'll be ready to move as soon as we get the assignment." Brock said, then took another step forward.

Connie nodded in thought, then said, "Vincent, do you think you could take care of Darin's things? I'll take care of Jimmy and Susan's."

"Yeah. But... What do I do with it once I've got it packed?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Bring it to deflector control. If they call us after Lou and Judy leave we won't be able to go back and get our stuff." Connie said seriously.

"Got it. I'm going to go now. All of a sudden I'm not hungry." Vincent said seriously as he watched the increasing group of people in the serving line.

"I know what you mean. I'll see you back in Deflector Control when you're done." Connie said as he turned to leave.

"If you guys need anything, we're planning on sticking to the supply room. We might end up bunking there." Brock said quickly.

"Same thing if you need anything, we may be sleeping in deflector control." Connie said over his shoulder.

Brock nodded that he heard as Connie walked away.

* * * * *

Vincent ran into his cabin and pulled all the luggage out of the storage locker in the closet.

"You too?" A voice came from the bathroom doorway.

"Me too what?" Vincent asked as he began to pull clothes from the cabinets.

"I was just sent to pack my gear and told to report to the rec hall." Rad said quickly.

"We kind of figured that we'd be asked to move. I'm taking our things to deflector control until I know where we're going." Vincent said as he quickly packed Darin's suitcase.

"Good plan. I can stow my gear in transporter control until I know for sure where I'm going to end up." Rad said in thought.

Vincent's communicator beeped, causing him to freeze in mid motion.

He opened his communicator and quickly said, "Crewman Winters."

"*Crewman Winters, this is Commander M'Butu, you are to transport to my location immediately.*" Commander M'Butu said firmly over a very scratchy connection.

"Yes sir." Vincent said immediately.

Before Vincent could say another word, there was a burst of static, then silence. The connection had been lost.

"I'll take your stuff to deflector control. Go on." Rad said with concern in his voice.

"Thanks Rad." Vincent said as a distinctly uneasy feeling washed over him.

Vincent took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, then walked toward the door.

Rad looked at Vincent and Darin's suitcases for a long moment, before going about the business of packing for them.

* * * * *

As the transporter beam cleared, Vincent could see that he was inside a large building that looked like a warehouse or an industrial workshop.

"Crewman Winters, over here." Commander M'Butu called out in a scream to be heard over the cracks of thunder and howling winds outside.

Vincent hurried over to the Commander and stood at attention.

Joe was standing at Commander M'Butu's side with a look of obvious distress in his eyes.

"Crewman Winters. The building that houses the main reactor for the colony has collapsed and there is no way for us to get in and shut it down. The reactor core has been damaged and is flooding the surrounding area with radiation." Commander M'Butu said in a strained voice.

"There is a maintenance shaft that leads directly into the control room, but it's too narrow for any of us to fit through. There's a possibility that you'll be able to make it through." Commander M'Butu said, and Vincent could detect a note of hesitance in his voice.

"What do I have to do Commander?" Vincent asked loudly to be heard.

"Crewman... Vincent, you don't have to do this. There is a chance that you won't be able to get through. If you do, there's a chance that you won't be able to shut down the reactor before it goes critical. And even if you do..." Commander M'Butu trailed off.

"...There's a chance that you'll absorb a lethal amount of radiation." Joe said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"I wouldn't ask, but we're doing good to get enough of a transporter lock to get fifty people an hour out of here. The reactor is going to go critical before we have even half the colonists evacuated at this rate." Commander M'Butu said, then winced at a particularly close crack of thunder.

Vincent glanced at Joe, then looked Commander M'Butu in the eyes and said, "I understand sir. Please tell me what I have to do to shut it down."

Commander M'Butu nodded and said, "There's an emergency shutdown sequence. Here's a diagram of the console."

Vincent looked at the diagram then asked, "What's the sequence?"

"Bring the emergency systems online, then override the safety protocols." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Could you show me? I don't want to misunderstand." Vincent asked seriously.

Commander M'Butu pointed to each of the buttons on the diagram.

"Okay, I've got that. Then what?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Then you just have to initiate the emergency core shutdown procedure by pressing the fifth button, then acknowledge the override command on the keypad by pressing 'enter'." Commander M'Butu said as he pointed to each button as he described it.

"I've got it. What now?" Vincent asked seriously.

"There's access to the maintenance shaft in the floor over there, you'll just follow the power conduit from this building right to the control room." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"Do you have any extra couplers?" Vincent asked Joe quietly.

"I doubt that you'll need them for this job." Joe said hesitantly.

"Whenever one of us goes to do a job you always make sure we have extra couplers. I just want them... for luck." Vincent finished shyly.

"I have a few. Here you go, but you have to bring them back if you don't use them." Joe said as he forced a smile onto his face and handed Vincent a small handful of couplers.

"It's a deal. I'll make sure to bring them back." Vincent said firmly, then looked up suddenly as the building shuddered and groaned from a sudden gust of wind.

"I'll be waiting." Joe said as his eyes filled with tears.

"Okay Vincent. One last thing. The longer you're in there, the lower your chances for survival. Go in, do what you need to do, then get out as quickly as you can." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said formally.

* * * * *

"He's here. Come on out so he can get going!" A man called into the crawlspace entrance in the floor.

A moment later a thin teenager covered in mud climbed up out of the crawlspace.

"I got as much of it cleared out as I could all the way up to the junction. Three power lines feed into the tunnel at that point and I can't fit through." The teenager said through heavy breathing.

"Are you ready Crewman Winters?" Commander M'Butu asked seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said as he stood at attention.

"You said you had a crewman smaller than Benny, you didn't say you were sending a kid in there." One of the men said as he looked at Vincent.

"Lieutenant Bowers has assured me that Crewman Winters has the skills necessary to do this job. He's also the only one who can make it into the control room in time to shut down the reactor." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"Does my father know about this?" A young man asked as he stepped forward.

The man's slight British accent immediately reminded Vincent of Captain Byrne.

"He knows. He isn't happy about it, but he knows." Commander M'Butu said in a more gentle voice.

The young man shook his head and said, "It isn't right. I can't allow it."

Vincent walked up to the young man and said, "Maybe it's not right. But it still needs to be done. Either I go in there right now or a lot of people are going to die."

"What's your name?" The young man asked gently.

"My name is Vincent, and I'm betting that your name is Cyril." Vincent said with a smile.

Cyril chuckled and said, "You're right. I guess my father's been telling stories about me."

"No, well at least not to me. But maybe when I get back, you could tell me some stories about him?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"It's a deal. Be careful." Cyril said as he stepped back.

"I'll save being careful for next time, this time I'm just going to be quick." Vincent said seriously.

Cyril chuckled and said, "It sounds like you know what you're doing. I'll leave you to it."

"Ready?" Joe asked past the lump in his throat.

"Yeah." Vincent whispered and walked to the edge of the hole in the floor.

"Benny, give him your light." Cyril said firmly.

The mud covered teenager handed the flashlight to Vincent.

Vincent fastened the strap of the flashlight around his forearm so he wouldn't have to hold it, then looked up to see Joe holding out his hand.

Vincent took the offered hand and started climbing down into the hole.

* * * * *

Vincent crawled down the long wet tunnel hearing the trickle of water and the sounds of his own breathing.

Icy cold water was pouring in from above and Vincent absently wondered if he was also in danger of drowning on top of everything else.

As he continued down the tunnel, he noticed a buildup of mud under the water. It was gluey and slowing him down.

The cold of the water was making his hands ache, but he tried to put that out of his mind and focus completely on achieving his goal.

He knew that he had to reach the control room and shut down the reactor. No one else could do it. And if he didn't do it in time, a lot of people would die.

The transporters were having problems with the solar radiation and the weather. If he couldn't stop the reaction, Susan or Darin might be stuck behind when the reactor exploded...

...Or Joe...

The realization came over Vincent that if he didn't shut down the reactor, Joe would probably die.

Joe wouldn't leave someone behind.

He'd stay to help people until the last minute.

Vincent broke out of his thoughts abruptly as he approached the junction where conduits came together from two other tunnels and fed into a third tunnel. Vincent carefully made the turn and realized why he was needed.

The power conduits left barely enough room for him to squeeze into the space.

As soon as he got his shoulders into the opening, he was sure that he wasn't going to have a problem.

A drop of water on his neck got his attention, and he suddenly started backing out of the space.

The water on his neck made him stop and consider just how little water it would take to drown him with his face nearly pressed into the floor of the tunnel.

As soon as he was out, he turned himself over and started scooting himself on his back, rather than crawling face down.

* * * * *

Time lost all meaning as Vincent pulled himself along the power conduits and pushed with his legs.

He was focused on the single thought, the single goal of getting to the control room and shutting down the reactor.

The sounds of trickling water, his own breaths and an occasional grunt were the only sounds to keep him company in the tight darkness.

* * * * *

Finally, Vincent saw a light in the distance and renewed his effort to scoot himself along the tunnel.

As he got closer, he could hear an emergency buzzer going off.

Fighting his tired muscles, Vincent gave another burst of effort and finally came to a grate in the side of the passage.

He curled himself into a ball, then with one forceful kick, forced the grate out and away from the opening.

Vincent crawled out of the tight space and brought himself to standing as his eyes adjusted to the dim emergency lighting in the room.

He quickly found the control panel and hurried over to it.

Using his flashlight to confirm what he was seeing, he surveyed the main console panel.

It was dead.

Vincent quickly looked around the room and found a secondary panel by the opening he had emerged from.

He hurried to the console and was thankful to see that it was similar to the control panel he used on the *Yorktown*.

With a few quick presses of keys, he ran a level two diagnostic and was able to identify the problem with the main console.

The console had lost main power.

A few key presses revealed the power configuration of the building, and Vincent was relieved to find an emergency power feed.

"You can do this. You've already proven it." Vincent said absently as he studied the power system.

He worked a quick override to shunt power from the emergency system to the main.

As he hurried to the main console, he noticed a sensation, a stinging, like he'd been out in the sun too long.

Vincent quickly put it out of his mind as he looked at the main console again.

"Bring the emergency systems online, then override the safety protocols." Vincent muttered as he looked for the yellow button he needed.

After pressing it, he found the two blue toggles and pressed them.

A flashing text message popped up on the screen asking if he needed to initiate an emergency procedure.

Vincent carefully pressed the fifth of six buttons.

The message 'Emergency Core Shutdown?' was displayed on the screen.

Vincent moved his hand down to the keypad and pressed the enter key.

He heard something like rushing air around him and a fine mist of water started to spray from the ceiling.

"I've got to get out of here." Vincent muttered to himself and hurried to the opening in the wall.

Blue lights came on throughout the room and the emergency buzzer stopped.

Vincent wedged himself into the impossibly small space and started the long journey back to the warehouse... back to Daddy Joe.

* * * * *

Vincent felt a stretching sensation on his skin, like his skin was drawing up.

For the first time, he started to consider his own life.

As he pulled himself along the dark tunnel, he thought about how he used to tease Lawrence and say the most horrible and cruel things to him.

Of all the things he had ever done, the things he had said and done to his brother were his biggest regrets.

"I'm going to live." He said firmly as he pulled himself along the pipes with renewed strength.

"I'm going to live long enough to tell you I'm sorry." Vincent said in a voice that almost sounded angry.

After a few minutes of forcing his muscles to continue on, even though they felt past giving out, Vincent finally added, "And that I love you."

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters?" A voice called from the darkness.

Vincent scooted and pulled himself along the tunnel as quickly as he could to get to the voice.

"Crewman Winters. How are you?" The voice asked with concern.

"I think I'm okay. I just feel like I got burnt a little bit." Vincent said as he pushed even harder to reach the voice.

"That's okay. That's why I'm here." The voice said seriously.

Vincent could finally see a small light ahead of him.

"Who are you?" Vincent asked with effort.

"I'm Benny. You saw me upstairs." The voice said hesitantly.

"Oh yeah. The muddy guy." Vincent said as he could finally see the end of the tunnel.

There was a laugh, then Benny said, "Yeah, I guess that's me."

"Well, it's me too now." Vincent said as he finally reached the end of the tight tunnel.

Benny backed away from Vincent and said, "You need to take off those clothes right now and hold still while I hose you down."

"Why?" Vincent asked as he was finally able to get the upper half of his body out of the tight space.

"Because I need to get rid of any radioactive dust that you might have carried out of there. Just strip." Benny said firmly from one of the side tunnels.

"Okay." Vincent said reluctantly.

As he was wriggling out of his clothes, he noticed that his hands were red and had the beginnings of blisters forming on them.

"Worry about that later. Get your clothes off." Benny said in a voice that was almost panicked.

It was hard for Vincent to undress in the small space, but he finally was able to get his boots and socks off. Next he opened the top of his jumpsuit and wriggled to get it down and off his shoulders. It was short work after that to get the jumpsuit off his legs.

In one last triumphant move, he kicked the jumpsuit away.

"Everything." Benny said firmly.

Vincent let out an exasperated sigh, then wriggled out of his underwear.

"Hold still, this is going to be a little bit cold." Benny said, then started to hose Vincent down with a thick liquid that seemed to be nearly freezing.

Vincent let out a yelp of surprise and pulled himself into a ball, trying to block the stream of cold goo.

"Hold still. This might mean the difference between life and death for you." Benny said in an angry voice.

Vincent forced himself to uncurl as Benny hosed him down from head to toe with the thick liquid.

"Roll over." Benny said firmly.

Vincent turned, then flinched when the cold liquid hit him in the back.

"Nice butt." Benny said seriously as he sprayed the fluid over Vincent.

Vincent looked over his shoulder and said, "Thanks, that's what was missing from today. First I get to crawl through cold mud, then I get blasted with radiation, and finally I get some muddy guy perving on my bare butt while he's hosing me down with frozen snot."

Benny laughed and said, "I just wanted to take your mind off the shower. We're done. Come over here, I've got a blanket for you."

Vincent crawled toward Benny and was handed a blanket.

"I need to get my clothes." Vincent said as he turned back around.

"No you don't. Those clothes are still going to be here long after you and I are far away from this place. Come on." Benny said as he started down the tunnel.

"Isn't the warehouse at the end of that tunnel?" Vincent asked in confusion and pointed.

"It used to be. The storm destroyed it about twenty minutes ago. Don't worry, we could tell that it was about to collapse and got everyone out in time. This tunnel leads to the basement of the town hall. Everyone's waiting for us there." Benny said quickly.

"Okay." Vincent said and began to follow Benny down the different tunnel.

* * * * *

"I'm really tired." Vincent said as a wave of exhaustion washed over him.

"Oh, yeah. See if you can come up here beside me." Benny said and came to a stop.

Vincent crawled forward, fighting to keep hold of the blanket with his cold numb hands as he did so.

Finally he made it to Benny's feet, then wedged himself into the space beside Benny in the tunnel.

"Hold it there, I need to be able to use my hands." Benny said seriously.

Vincent stopped with his face just about even with Benny's stomach.

"Give me your arm." Benny said as he worked to get something out of his pocket.

Vincent pulled the blanket away from his shoulder and turned his exposed arm to Benny as best he could.

"This is some medicine to help you deal with the radiation. It should make you feel better." Benny said and injected Vincent with the hypo spray.

"Benny? Can I ask you something?" Vincent asked carefully.

"Anything." Benny said with concern at Vincent's tone.

"If I die, would you give someone a message for me?" Vincent asked seriously.

"You're not going to die. You're going to be just fine." Benny said, forcing cheer into his voice.

"Yeah. Sure." Vincent said sarcastically, then continued, "If I die, would you tell my brother that I'm sorry for... well, pretty much everything I ever said or did to him?"

There was a long moment of silence, then Benny quietly said, "Yeah. Who's your brother so I can find him to tell him?"

"Lawrence Winters of Clan Short of Vulcan." Vincent said seriously.

"I'll remember, and if something happens to you, I promise that I'll tell him." Benny said as a vow.

"Thanks Benny... I don't even know your last name." Vincent said with surprise.

Benny laughed and said, "Benjamin Summers at your service."

Vincent smiled and said, "Summers and Winters. It sounds like we could be a good team."

"I thought of that too. But after what you just did, I don't know if I could keep up with you." Benny said frankly, then started crawling again.

"Like you wouldn't have done exactly the same thing if you could fit through the tunnel." Vincent said as he followed Benny.

"I would have tried. But I wouldn't know what to do once I got there." Benny said in thought.

Vincent thought about the fact that he had to reroute power to the console, but remained silent.

"Do you think someone like me could get into Starfleet?" Benny asked quietly.

Vincent smiled and said, "I bet if you really wanted to, we could find a way to get you in."

"I thought I had plenty of time to decide what I was going to do but..." Benny trailed off.

"You can't change what's going to happen tomorrow and you can't go back and change what happened yesterday. You just have today." Vincent said seriously.

"When I was your age I was such a kid. All I did was play with my friends and never worried about tomorrow." Benny said in a distant voice, then turned his flashlight on Vincent and said, "We're here."

Vincent looked at the side tunnel.

"How long does this one go on?" Vincent asked, making an effort to keep his teeth from chattering.

"Not far. It let's out into the basement of the town hall. Your Commander and Lieutenant are waiting for you there." Benny said as he led the way into the new tunnel.

"Benny, I'm scared." Vincent said quietly.

"So am I Vincent. Not for the same reasons, but I'm scared too." Benny said in thought.

"Don't worry, Captain Byrne and Commander M'Butu will make sure everyone's taken care of." Vincent said with assurance.

"I believe that too. I'm just scared of losing everything that I am. My life, my friends, my home..." Benny said in almost a whisper.

"I know how that feels Benny. If you want, I could help you with it." Vincent said in a considering voice.

"Help me how?" Benny asked cautiously.

"I lost everything and everyone in one day. After it all happened, I was sitting in a woman's lap. She told me to call her Grandma Karen, but I never met her before that day. Anyway, I was sitting there when it came to me. I had nothing. My parents were dead. My home was gone. I had nothing and no one." Vincent said distantly.

"How did you get from being like that to how you are now?" Benny asked in fascination.

"I had lots of people help me. That's why I think I can help you. If you're having trouble with something I went through, I can tell you what they told me, if it's something I don't know how to deal with, I'll find someone who knows how to take care of it." Vincent said seriously.

"Benny? Is Vincent with you?" Joe's panicked voice called into the tunnel.

"I'm right here Daddy Joe." Vincent called out with relief.

"Come on guys. Let's get you two back to the ship. We're getting out of here." Joe said happily.

* * * * *

Benny emerged from the tunnel first and was pulled into a quick hug by Joe.

"Thanks for bringing him back to me Benny." Joe said with relief.

"I was glad to help." Benny said as he enjoyed the hug.

Vincent poked his head out of the tunnel and looked around curiously.

"Come on Champ, let's get you out of there." Joe said and helped Vincent out of the tunnel.

"Okay Daddy Joe. I'm sorry, I wasn't able to bring the extra couplers back to you... they're kind of glowey now." Vincent said as he hugged Joe tightly.

Joe chuckled, then held Vincent out at arms length to look at him.

"I think we need to get you to the ship. You look like you got a pretty good dose." Joe said with concern.

"Can Benny come with me?" Vincent asked quickly.

Benny looked at Vincent with surprise, then at Joe with question.

"Um. Sure. Just a second." Joe said, then hurried to a cluster of people at the other side of the room.

"Why do you want me to go with you?" Benny asked cautiously.

"So we can get started on your new life." Vincent said with a smile.

Benny looked past the blisters and reddening skin on Vincent's face and into his honest and hopeful eyes.

"Okay." Benny said as he tried to force a smile for Vincent's benefit.

Joe approached the pair with Commander M'Butu following him.

"I see what you mean." Commander M'Butu said to Joe, then opened his communicator and said, "*Yorktown*, I have a priority one transport from this location to sickbay."

After a moment and a crackle of static, the technician said, "*I'm detecting an unusually high amount of radiation from your location that might interfere with the subject of transport. Can you move away from the source of radiation?*"

"The source of the radiation IS the subject of transport. And I need you to get him to sickbay. NOW!" Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"*Oh... Yes sir. Right away sir.*" The transporter technician said in a flustered voice. At the same time a crack of thunder echoed through the building.

"I'll see you on board." Vincent said with a smile at Benny.

"I'll be right behind you." Benny said as he watched the transporter beam envelope Vincent.

Commander M'Butu waited a moment for the transporter beam to completely clear, then said, "I have one more to transport from this location."

There was a crackle of static, then the transporter technician could barely be heard saying, "*No one came through. Isn't he still there?*"

Chapter 6

"What do you mean? NO. He's not here." Commander M'Butu said immediately.

There was a moment of crackling static before the transporter technician said, "*Sir. He didn't come through... Wait... There's a procedure to follow if this happens... where is it?*"

"Joe, we need you to look at the transfer bridge." Jimmy said as he ran to Joe's side.

"In a minute Jimmy." Joe said as he waited to see what Commander M'Butu was going to do.

"We don't have a minute. We just received a report. There's a tornado heading our way, it's five miles wide and getting bigger. If we don't get a shield up right now we're all going to die!" Jimmy said desperately.

"I'll take care of him Joe. I promise. Don't let everything that Vincent did be in vain." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Joe looked at Commander M'Butu with pain for an instant, then said, "Oliver, please call me as soon as anything happens. Can you arrange for Benny to beam aboard? When they find Vincent, he might be afraid and I don't want him to have to be alone."

Benny looked at Joe with surprise then saw the anguish in his expression.

"I'll take care of it Joe. Now go on." Commander M'Butu said with sympathy.

"And I promise that I'll take good care of Vincent." Benny added as a solemn vow.

Joe gave Benny a grateful smile and a nod, then turned to Jimmy and said, "Okay, tell me what you've got done so far."

* * * * *

Commander M'Butu turned his attention back to his communicator and firmly asked, "To whom am I speaking?"

"*This is Ensign Bergman, sir.*" The transporter technician said in a frightened voice.

"Commander, the roof just came off the clinic. I think we got everyone out before it went..." An Ensign said as he ran to Commander M'Butu's side.

The Commander nodded to indicate that he heard then carefully said into the communicator, "Ensign Bergman, I need for you to open the transporter's log file and find out where Crewman Winters was transported."

There was a loud crackle of static, then a pop that coincided with a particularly close lightning strike.

"*Um... I just...okay. I've got it.*" The transporter technician said in a desperate voice.

There was a booming crack of thunder that could be felt as well as heard and a trickle of dust fell from the ceiling.

"Where is he Ensign?" Commander M'Butu asked, wishing he could reach through the communicator and shake the answers out of Ensign Bergman.

Benny looked around the room in fright and noticed that the town council were gathered in a tight group around a communications console.

"*There... I've got him... he's in the transporter's buffer... it can't... finish him. Oh God! The pattern's been corrupted. I've got his matter, but the transporter can't put him back together.*" The transporter technician said in panic.

"Ensign Bergman. Lock down the transporter and call Chief Morgan to deal with this. You're out of your depth in this matter." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"*Sir.... yes, sir. I can do that. I'll call him now.*" The Ensign said in a terrified voice.

"Uncle Oliver, you should think about getting your people out of here. There's a tornado closing in on us and it may only be a matter of minutes." Cyril said as he ran to Commander M'Butu's side.

"I think you know that's not going to happen Cyril. There's no way my people would willingly leave anyone behind. Just work to save as many as you can." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Cyril nodded his understanding, then turned to go back to the group of the colony's leaders.

Silence.

For the first time in weeks, the colonists heard nothing.

Everyone looked around in wonder as the devastating storm seemed to completely disappear in an instant.

There was a crackle of static from the communicator in Commander M'Butu's hand, then a familiar voice.

"*Ensign Bergman says we have a bit of a problem here, would you care to fill me in?*" Chief Morgan asked, somehow managing to sound casual.

"Crewman Winters shut down the reactor and was exposed to some radiation in the process. When he tried to transport up a combination of the radiation, the storm and the solar flares must have corrupted his signal. Now his matter is stored in the transporter's buffer and the computer doesn't have enough of a pattern to put him back together." Commander M'Butu said carefully, trying to be brief while providing the most important facts.

"*Oliver, from what I understand, you have quite a situation on your hands down there. Leave this to me. I'll call you when I have this all sorted out.*" Chief Morgan said in a confident voice.

Commander M'Butu smiled with relief and said, "Have I mentioned how happy I am that you're back?"

"*I believe so, but I don't mind hearing it again from time to time. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll attend to Crewman Winters.*"

"Of course Richard. Thank you. M'Butu out." Commander M'Butu said with an aire of relief.

"Morgan out." The Chief Engineer said before terminating the transmission.

Commander M'Butu turned and gave Benny a considering look, then said, "First things first. You have a promise to keep, and in order to do that, you'll need to be on the ship."

* * * * *

After a moment to look over the transporter, Chief Morgan turned to the frightened young Ensign and said, "Ensign Bergman, I have a very important job for you. Are you up for it?"

"Yes sir." Ensign Bergman said as he tried to compose himself.

"Good. Since Crewman Winters was on the surface, he must have transported down. I need you to find out where he transported from and locate his transporter trace file." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"How can I do that? There have been hundreds of people transporting since we got here and no one has kept a record of who was coming and going." Ensign Bergman said helplessly.

Chief Morgan shook his head and said, "Damned sloppy. We'll just have to do this the hard way. Make a ship wide announcement if you have to. Just find out who transported the nine year old Crewman to the surface."

"Nine? I killed a kid?" Ensign Bergman asked as tears welled up in his eyes.

"No. You didn't kill him. He's alive and floating in an electronic limbo inside this device. But if you want to keep him alive, you'll find me his transporter trace." Chief Morgan finished firmly.

"Yes... yes sir. Right away." Ensign Bergman said quickly, then ran out of the transporter room.

Chief Morgan shook his head, then pressed the comm switch on the transporter console.

"Communications." Was the immediate response.

"I need Ensign Radovanovich in transporter room three immediately." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"*Yes, Sir. I'll get him to you as fast as I can. It's good to have you back, Sir.*" The woman in communications said quickly.

After a moment to consider the voice, Chief Morgan gave a gentle smile and said, "Thank you Debbie, It's good to be back. Morgan out."

"*Patterson out*." Debbie said, then closed the connection.

Chief Morgan placed his palm flat on the console before him and said in a gentle voice, "Don't worry Vincent, we'll get you through this."

* * * * *

Commander M'Butu walked up the stairs and into the main room of the town hall to find Joe, Susan, Darin and Jimmy looking at him with anticipation.

"Chief Morgan is personally taking care of Crewman Winters. I'll keep you posted. Would you care to fill me in on what you just did?" Commander M'Butu asked with interest.

"Darin... I mean Ensign Cooper suggested that instead of using the shield generators to create shields over the main buildings, that we synchronize them and create one massive shield to cover the entire colony." Susan said with accomplishment.

"But the units were designed to operate independently and can't cover nearly that much area. How did you manage that?" Commander M'Butu asked curiously.

"Vincent and I were talking about the Yorktown's field generators and how to do a seamless power transfer before I beamed down. That made me think about applying the same reasoning to the modulation of the shield harmonics to make them work in tandem. The synchronous field harmonics allowed us to extend the maximum area of the shielding. We constructed a data transfer bridge to synchronize them and with everyone's help, we made it work." Darin said with excitement.

"How will this effect our evacuation efforts?" Commander M'Butu asked carefully.

"It will actually make things easier. We just have to give the Yorktown our shield frequency and she'll be able to beam people through the shield as if it weren't there. And the way this thing is rigged, we should be able to keep it up until the last person is transported out." Joe said seriously.

"Good work. All of you. I assume that you'll need to stay here and monitor the equipment." Commander M'Butu said in thought.

"Yes sir. The shield is stable, but we should really have the team here to keep it that way. Especially with the tornado that's about to hit." Joe said with a look of regret directed at the commander.

"Understood. I'm going to get back to the business of evacuating this place. I'll let you know as soon as I have any news." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Thank you sir." Joe said, and reluctantly looked over at the bank of portable shield generators all wired into one central unit.

* * * * *

"Ensign Radovanovich reporting as ordered." Rad said as he hurried into transporter room three.

"Come over here, we have a crewman stuck in this thing. I seem to recall hearing that you faced a similar challenge once before." Chief Morgan said seriously.

Rad paled at the statement as he walked over to the console.

"Do you think you can help him?" Chief Morgan asked with hope.

"I don't know... The last time I tried to do this it didn't turn out too well. What came out of the transporter... well, fortunately it didn't live." Rad said grimly.

"Perhaps you have looked back on that experience and wished that you could have done something differently. Now you have that chance. I don't know of anyone else on this ship who would have a better chance of retrieving Crewman Winters from the transporter's buffer." Chief Morgan said honestly.

"Vincent's in there?" Rad asked with horror.

"Yes. And to make matters worse, he was exposed to radiation before he transported up." Chief Morgan said, then pointed to the radiation reading from the transporter's log file.

"I need his trace... we were together in section D when Commander M'Butu told him to transport immediately, so he probably went to transporter room five." Rad said in thought.

Chief Morgan hit the button on the console quickly and said, "Transporter room five, this is Chief Morgan."

"*Yes, Chief, what can I do for you?*" The technician asked quickly.

"A nine year old crewman beamed down to the surface some hours ago. We believe he might have used your transporter." Chief Morgan said hopefully.

"*Yes sir. I remember him.*" The transporter technician said carefully.

"We need his transporter trace pattern. Is there any way you can locate it? We need it desperately." Chief Morgan said urgently.

"*Um... yeah. I went on break right after I transported him. Let's see... yeah. There's the log showing where I signed off... so now I can just go back by the time stamp on the files... yeah, everyone else was beaming up. His was the only outgoing transport I had in that session. Where do you need the file sent?*" The technician asked seriously.

"Transporter room three." Chief Morgan said abruptly.

"*You should have it now. I hope it helps.*" The technician said with concern.

"Thank you, who am I speaking to?" Chief Morgan asked curiously.

"*Ensign Foster, Sir.*" The transporter technician said professionally.

"You may have just helped to save a crewman's life Ensign Foster. Thank you for your help. Morgan, out." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"*Foster, out*." Ensign Foster said, and a smile could be heard in his voice.

"This isn't going to be easy." Rad said as he looked at the transporter trace.

"Just tell me what you need. I can tear one of these things down and put it back together with my eyes closed, but what you're about to make it do is unfamiliar territory for me." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"I've only tried this once before... But I've got to make it work." Rad said in concentration.

"Oh, excuse me. There's one other thing I must attend to." Chief Morgan said absently, then pressed the comm button.

"*Communications*." The voice responded immediately.

"Debbie, would you locate Ensign Bergman and tell him to return to transporter room three." Chief Morgan asked as he watched Rad examining the pattern buffer data.

"*He's right here. He's been trying to get me to make a ship wide announcement, but I can't make sense out of what he wants me to say.*" Debbie said frankly.

"It doesn't matter now, we found what we were looking for." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"*He heard you, he's on his way. Did Ensign Radovanovich make it down there?*" Debbie asked with concern.

"I'm right here, Debs. Kinda busy now, I'll tell you all about it later." Rad said, not taking his eyes off the screen before him.

"*Got it, Rad. Communications, out*." Debbie said quickly and terminated the transmission.

"I think I can make this work. I just need to render the transporter trace pattern and make some adjustments before we can use it." Rad said carefully.

"How do you mean?" Chief Morgan asked as he watched Rad punching in commands.

"When we did this before, we didn't take into account things like clothes, jewelry, the things in his pockets. The transporter usually takes care of those things automatically, but this is like an ultra strict version of the manual mode. We have to be very specific about what's to be done. And even then... well, we can't worry about that." Rad said, then pressed one final button and waited for the image to appear on the screen.

"I honestly didn't know that could be done." Chief Morgan said in an impressed voice.

"Well, it can't without a little reprogramming. I just imported a program that I wrote a while back and prayed that I would never need." Rad said, then started typing in commands.

"Starting with the trace image... First, I'm removing the uniform." Rad said seriously, then executed the commands.

"Next the boots... then the socks... finally the underwear..." Rad said carefully.

"I find the fact that you can do this somewhat disturbing." Chief Morgan said honestly.

"Don't worry Chief, I'd never use my powers for evil." Rad said with a smile, then zoomed in on Vincent's face in the image.

"I didn't think he had any jewelry, but I had to be sure." Rad said seriously, then adjusted the view to look at his hands.

"Good. That's the easy one." Rad said, then stored the altered file.

"How do you mean?" Chief Morgan asked curiously.

The door to transporter room three opened and Ensign Bergman hurried into the room.

"I mean, that his image isn't complete. I don't know how bad it will be, but don't let it bother you. We're going to use his transporter trace to fill in the blanks of whatever is missing." Rad said seriously.

"Proceed." Chief Morgan said, then glanced to see Ensign Bergman standing at his side.

When the image finally resolved, Ensign Bergman took in a gasp of horror at the sight.

Chief Morgan looked away, unable to bear the sight of the grotesque monster before him.

The image showed portions of Vincent's face missing and a claw-like hand clutching a blanket.

The first thing that Rad thought when he saw Vincent's rendered image was 'The Cryptkeeper'.

"Oh Vincent..." Rad said with pain.

"Did... did I do that?" Ensign Bergman asked in a small voice.

"No Ensign. The radiation and the storm did that. Your logs show that you did everything perfectly. None of this was your fault." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Thank you Chief." Ensign Bergman said, not sounding convinced.

"Let's get rid of that blanket..." Rad said carefully as he entered a series of commands.

The image changed to expose large portions of Vincent's body without skin, and his hands were little more than bones.

Rad shook his head and said, "We're going with plan B."

"And what, pray tell, is Plan B?" Chief Morgan asked as he hesitantly looked at the screen again.

"Vincent's core... his brain and neural activity, are the most protected parts of his pattern. I'll have to assume that that's intact." Rad said carefully, then pressed a few buttons and the view changed.

Black patches began to fill in most of the areas of missing skin, the effect was somehow more disturbing than the mass of bones and muscles they had been looking at before.

"This shows his cellular viability. I'm just going on a hunch here. But from the look of it, the radiation has already killed off a significant portion of the skin on his hands and face and... his eyes are severely deteriorated... and his lungs... oh Vincent." Rad said as he looked at the image with pain.

"Keep your focus, you're doing fine." Chief Morgan said quietly.

Rad nodded, then said, "What I'm going to do is an overlay. Wherever there is missing data, we'll fill it in from the transporter trace... that's plan A. If we just left him like that, he would be blind, permanently disfigured and I don't even know how extensive the lung damage would be. I think we can do better."

"Plan B. Wherever we find dead cells in one profile, I'm going to replace them with living cells from the other profile... In theory, the two patterns should have exactly the same amount of mass and when the unified pattern is applied to the matter stream he should come out of it with living skin and eyes." Rad said carefully.

"What about the radiation?" Chief Morgan asked slowly.

"I'll take care of that now." Rad said seriously, then pulled up the transporter log to see the types of radiation and the levels.

"Since the radiation is absent in the original transporter trace, I'll just have the filter flush any traces of radiation that aren't present in both images." Rad said as he keyed in the instructions.

"Why don't you have it flush out all the radiation?" Ensign Bergman asked curiously.

"Because I'm not sure how that would be interpreted by the program. It might stop all neural activity, effectively killing Vincent without any hope of reviving him." Rad said, then activated his program.

"What condition do you expect him to be in when he emerges from the transporter beam?" Chief Morgan asked with concern.

"I wish I could tell you. I'm using every trick I know or have ever dreamed of here. I can't predict how the computer will interpret my commands on an operation of this scale. I've tried to keep it as simple and straight forward as I can." Rad said with worry.

"I'm going to brief the captain then request that a medical team be present when we rematerialize Crewman Winters." Chief Morgan said firmly.

"That sounds like a good idea. I've got a few more minutes of work to do here. I still have to compensate for his digestive processes." Rad said in concentration.

Chief Morgan nodded, then turned and left the transporter room.

* * * * *

When the transporter beam finally faded, Benny looked around cautiously.

"If you'll just move off the transporter pad, someone will be here in a moment to take you to get you some food and find you a place to sleep." The transporter technician said in a sympathetic tone.

"I... um... I'm supposed to find someone named Ensign Bergman." Benny said hesitantly.

"You need to find Terry? Oh, give me a second and I'll find him for you." The transporter technician said and started pressing some buttons on his console.

"He's logged in at transporter station three. Just walk through these doors and right across the hall." The technician said professionally.

"Thank you." Benny said shyly.

* * * * *

"We can watch after the shields if you want to go check on him." Jimmy said quietly.

Joe looked up with pain in his eyes, then said, "Commander M'Butu was right. Vincent went into that reactor to save all these people's lives. If I let anything happen to them, then his sacrifice would mean nothing."

"You're talking like he's dead. He isn't. They just misplaced him. You know that Commander M'Butu will tell you what's going on, even if it's something you don't want to hear... right?" Susan asked firmly.

Joe reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"Then right this minute all we know for sure is that Vincent has been misplaced and Chief Morgan is personally taking charge of finding him. Right?" Susan asked as she looked him in the eyes.

"Right." Joe said as he fought to get his emotions back under control.

"Now lets check out these systems, it looks like the tornado is about to hit us." Susan said as she turned her attention back to the equipment.

Joe let out a resigned sigh, then said, "Right."

* * * * *

"Captain Byrne, do you have a moment?" Chief Morgan asked hesitantly as he walked to the Captain's side on the bridge.

Captain Byrne gave Chief Morgan a considering look and said, "Yes, of course. In fact, I believe it would be a good time to regroup and assess our situation."

Captain Byrne looked at the helm and said, "Lieutenant Morris, you have the bridge."

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Morris said immediately.

"Lieutenant Patterson, please have Cyril, Commander M'Butu, Dr. Perry and Lieutenant Simms meet me in the conference room for a briefing. You should be there as well." Captain Byrne said as he started walking toward the turbo lift.

"Right away sir." Debbie said quickly, and began trying to locate the requested individuals.

* * * * *

"Excuse me?" Benny said as he walked into the transporter room.

"You can't be in here. Just wait a second and I'll get someone to take you to the rec hall so you can get something to eat and get checked in." Ensign Bergman said as he walked toward Benny.

"Vincent's Daddy Joe asked me to come here so I can stay with Vincent when you find him. He doesn't want Vincent to have to be alone." Benny said quickly.

"Come on in. What's your name?" Rad asked from the console.

"I'm Benny." He said quietly.

"Come over here Benny and I'll fill you in on what's going on." Rad said seriously as he watched his program manipulating the image.

Benny walked to Rad's side and gasped when he saw the grotesque image of Vincent covered with huge areas of black.

"What happened to him?" Benny asked in horror.

"Honestly, I don't know exactly what caused this. It appears that the areas most affected by the radiation were... lost." Rad said in a considering voice.

"Can you do anything to help him?" Benny asked desperately.

"That's what I'm doing now. Just hold on Benny. I can't say for sure, but I think I might be able to undo most of the damage." Rad said carefully.

Benny looked at the picture on the screen, then noticed one of the black patches disappear.

"You're putting him back together?" Benny asked as he looked at Rad with question.

"That's right. We have a... well, it's kind of a pattern that was created when he transported down. We're using that to fill in the gaps where there's missing information." Rad said carefully.

"Wow. That's really amazing." Benny said as he looked at the console's screen again.

"Benny, I don't want to get your hopes up. This might work, but what you're seeing on the screen is the composite pattern that I'm constructing. When we try to take Vincent's matter and apply it to the pattern... well, I honestly don't know what will happen." Rad said in a pained voice.

"I don't understand." Benny said with concern, not looking away from Vincent's image on the screen.

"What you're seeing is a very simplified version of the actual pattern. It's a computerized estimation in the same way that a globe is an incredibly simplified representation of the Earth. I'm making corrections based on what I can see here but... I just don't know what condition Vincent will be in when we get him out of the transporter." Rad said, feeling pain at saying the words.

"Is there anything else you can do?" Benny asked quietly.

"No. This is it. This is everything I know to do to help him." Rad said quietly.

"Then it will have to be enough. I promised that I'd stay with Vincent and no matter what condition he's in when he comes out of the transporter, I'll keep my promise." Benny said, trying to sound definite.

Rad nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"It's here." Jimmy said as he looked out the window.

"Do you really think this is going to hold?" Darin asked Joe quietly.

Joe smiled at Darin and said, "I think it's got a good chance of holding up. If this works, you'll know that you saved a few hundred lives."

Darin looked at Joe with wonder.

"The way we were going to set up the individual shields would have offered protection to... maybe two or three hundred people at the most. There's just no way we could have saved everyone from this tornado. On top of that, the Yorktown would have to compensate for each different shield frequency, which would have slowed the evacuation effort. If this transfer bridge holds up, you may have just created something that will be saving lives for years to come." Joe said seriously.

"Wow. And all I did was apply the same logic from power distribution to field harmonics." Darin said in amazement.

Joe chuckled and said, "You sounded like Vincent when you said that."

Darin's smile faded as he thought about Vincent being hurt and missing.

Joe put a hand on Darin's shoulder and said, "Susan's right. All we know for sure is that he's missing. Hopefully they've found him by now and he's back on the ship waiting for us."

Darin nodded. He couldn't find any words of comfort or encouragement to offer in return.

* * * * *

"Commander M'Butu, we'll start with you. What's the situation on the surface?" Captain Byrne asked from his place at the head of the conference table.

"Much improved. Deflector Control was able to put up a shield to blanket the entire colony... or what's left of it. Without having to fight the weather, the search and rescue efforts are going much more smoothly. We've been able to evacuate approximately 50% of the colonists so far." Commander M'Butu said professionally.

Captain Byrne nodded, then asked, "Dr. Perry, what can you tell me about the condition of the colonists?"

"They're cold, hungry and several have been injured as a result of the storm. We're being overwhelmed by the shear number of people in need of medical attention, but the injuries haven't been life threatening for the most part. We've called on personnel with medical training from other departments to aid in the treatment. So far we've been keeping up with the demand." Dr. Perry said in thought.

"Good work. Lieutenant Patterson, what is the status of communications?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Currently, we have no communication outside this system. We're in the process of modifying a series of probes to act as relay buoys away from the local star. It's our hope that when they're launched, we'll be able to have full communication with Starfleet." Debbie said carefully.

"How long until we're ready to launch the probes?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"Five minutes at most. In fact, if I may be excused, I would like to launch them as soon as they're ready." Debbie asked hopefully.

"Yes, go on. And contact me as soon as we have communications with Starfleet." Captain Byrne said in thought.

"Yes sir." Debbie said immediately, then hurried out of the room.

"Lieutenant Simms, any matters of concern with security?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"No sir. I've instructed my people to treat our guests with the same courtesy we'd extend to visiting dignitaries. So far everyone has been very cooperative and things have been running smoothly. But I'm concerned about what's going to happen when the rest of the colonists are brought onboard." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

"What concerns you?" Captain Byrne asked with interest.

"When a large group of people are packed into a small space, violence will erupt. I don't have any suggestions of how to prevent it from happening, I'm just saying that it's a well documented psychological phenomenon. We've been working to disburse the people evenly through the ship, directing them to all the mess halls, assigning them quarters as family units and trying to keep them focused on helping each other. But as the number of people increase, I anticipate problems with short tempers, violent outbursts... possibly even claustrophobia issues." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I see. Keep me informed of any developments that concern you. We'll do our best to minimize the impact on our guests. Any thoughts on the matter Cyril?" Captain Byrne asked of his son.

"The council may be able to rally people to keep a positive attitude. Once communications have been established, it might be helpful if we could get some indication of what's to happen to us. If I can tell everyone where we're going, it would allow them to focus on the future rather than worry about their losses." Cyril said carefully.

"I'll see what I can do. Now Chief Morgan, what can you tell us of the condition of Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked seriously as he turned his attention to the Chief Engineer.

"When he was transported aboard, his pattern was corrupted. We have his matter, but the transporter can't reassemble him." Chief Morgan said frankly.

Captain Byrne looked down at his folded hands in front of him as he said, "I see. What steps are being taken?"

"Ensign Radovanovich has had to deal with a situation like this once before. He's using the transporter trace from when Crewman Winters transported down as a template for his reconstruction... From the level of degradation of the transport pattern, I can't say that I'm optimistic, but it's the only chance Crewman Winters has for survival." Chief Morgan said gravely.

"Is there anything we can do for him?" Captain Byrne asked carefully.

"Yes. I'd like for a medical team to be present when we bring him out of the transporter. There's no telling what condition he'll be in." Chief Morgan said in a reluctant voice.

"Yes, of course. Dr. Perry will see to it that someone is there." Captain Byrne said and spared her a glance.

"I'll take care of it personally." Dr. Perry said immediately.

"I'd also like to have one armed security officer present." Chief Morgan said reluctantly.

Captain Byrne looked at Chief Morgan with surprise.

"It just might end up being the most merciful thing." Chief Morgan said as his gaze fell to the table.

"I'll be there." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"Captain, I have Starfleet Command for you." Debbie's voice came over the intercom.

"Good work. Put them through." Captain Byrne said as he looked at the view screen.

"Leland, I was beginning to worry about you. What's your situation?" Admiral Morrow asked with concern.

"As near as we can tell, when the orbits of the planets of this system brought them all on the same side of the local star, the combined gravitational forces caused a violent reaction in the star. The result being sunspots, solar flares, and subspace interference. The effect on the planet has been devastating. Violent storms are effectively scouring the surface clear of every living thing. The colony has lost an estimated one hundred people and the solar radiation and storms have severely hindered our efforts to evacuate the colony." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"I see. I'll divert the Enterprise immediately to aid in the evacuation. What else can we do to help you?" Admiral Morrow asked with concern as he nodded to someone off screen.

"It's been suggested that the morale of the colonists might be greatly improved if they had an idea of where they were being taken. Uncertainty about their future might contribute to the feeling of confinement that they will almost certainly begin to experience as the reality of their situation begins to set in." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"I understand. We'll get right to work on that and get back to you as soon as possible... The Enterprise is expected to arrive at your location in three hours. Perhaps making preparations to relocate a portion of the colonists to the Enterprise will take their minds off other things for a while?" Admiral Morrow suggested.

"Yes, I believe I'll let the colony's governing council handle those arrangements. They should be able to include their people in the decision making and divert their attention for a time." Captain Byrne said with a considering look at his son.

Cyril nodded his agreement.

"We've received your log reports and sensor data. Contact us immediately if there is any further support we can offer." Admiral Morrow said seriously.

"Yes sir. Thank you." Captain Byrne said respectfully.

"Starfleet out." Admiral Morrow said calmly.

"Yorktown out." Captain Byrne said, then pressed the button to terminate the transmission.

"Anything further?" Captain Byrne asked as he looked around the table.

Everyone looked around and shook their heads.

"Keep me posted. And Richard, let me know immediately how things work out with Crewman Winters." Captain Byrne finished in a sympathetic tone.

"Yes sir. I believe Ensign Radovanovich should be ready to attempt retrieval soon." Chief Morgan said as he stood.

"I'll be down in a few minutes." Dr. Perry said as she got up from the conference table.

"I'll go down with you Chief." Lieutenant Simms said in a low voice.

Chief Morgan nodded and reluctantly began to walk toward the turbo lift.

* * * * *

"How are you doing Joe?" Commander M'Butu asked as he approached the group.

"How's Vincent? Did you find him?" Joe asked desperately.

Commander M'Butu nodded, his expression letting Joe know that all was not well.

"Please, tell me." Joe said in a whisper, bracing himself for the news.

"His pattern was corrupted when he transported. His matter is being held in the transporter's buffer." Commander M'Butu said quietly.

Susan's eyes began to fill with tears as she felt arms come around her.

She turned to see Jimmy looking back at her with tear filled eyes and holding her gently.

"You need to call Rad, he knows what to do..." Joe said in a burst.

"He's already there Joe. Everything that can possibly be done is being done." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Joe fought down his emotions and haltingly said, "Thank you Oliver."

"I'll come and tell you as soon as they've gotten him out of there." Commander M'Butu said quietly.

Joe nodded that he heard.

Commander M'Butu turned and walked to the other side of the room to get back to the business of evacuating the colony.

* * * * *

"Report Ensign." Chief Morgan said as he entered the room with Lieutenant Simms at his side.

"The program should be done with the overlay and substitution any second. After that we just apply the filter, then start the matter stream." Rad said reluctantly.

Chief Morgan nodded.

The doors to transporter room three opened to admit Dr. Perry and two medical assistants.

"Whenever you're ready Ensign Radovanovich." Chief Morgan said carefully.

Rad looked down at his console and said a quick internal prayer for Vincent's protection as he brought the transporter's filter online.

"If you want, I could take over." Chief Morgan said gently.

"No sir. I'll see it through." Rad said quietly.

Chief Morgan nodded and stood away from the console.

"Here we go." Rad said in a shaky voice, then activated the control to apply the pattern to the matter stream.

The transporter sounded like it was straining as the bluish light started to sparkle on the transporter pad.

"It's trying to resolve the incongruities between the pattern and the matter stream. Give it a second." Rad said in concentration.

"I see something." Benny said with worry as he saw a faint outline in the transporter's beam.

"Stay back. We don't know how stable he's going to be." Rad said with concern.

Benny looked at Rad with confusion at the statement.

"He might pop." Ensign Bergman said, then a look of horror came over his face as he realized just how inappropriate it sounded.

Chief Morgan looked at Ensign Bergman with disapproval for a moment then said, "A bit simplistic, but essentially true. Come over here and wait with me young man."

Benny hesitantly walked to Chief Morgan's side.

"Why is it taking so long?" Dr. Perry asked as she watched the barely visible form trying to resolve into being.

"Because the filter is doing about twenty things at once. The process is slow, but with any luck Vincent will come out of there in better shape than he went in." Rad said as he watched the console before him with concern.

"Is it working?" Chief Morgan asked carefully.

"The program hasn't thrown any errors. So it's doing what I told it... I just hope I told it the right things." Rad said as he watched the readings carefully.

A beeping drew everyone's attention.

"Something's wrong." Rad said as he started checking the readings.

"What is it?" Chief Morgan asked immediately.

"It's showing that there isn't enough matter to complete the reconstruction... I screwed something up." Rad said in horror.

"What are you going to do?" Ensign Bergman asked in confusion.

"He needs more matter... wait... 0.00032... it's just a few particles." Rad said with relief.

"I don't understand." Lieutenant Simms said cautiously.

"It's nothing. The transporter was just trying to make an 'exact' match between Vincent's pattern and the available matter. I'll just have it disregard the missing particles and it will be fine." Rad said as he started pressing buttons.

"There." Rad said, then pressed the activation button.

There was a sparkling in the transporter beam and a humanoid shape started to take form.

"It looks like you may have done it." Chief Morgan said as he watched the boy's body resolve into being.

Silence fell over the room as everyone saw what had taken form before them.

It was a mass of misshapen raw flesh and open sores from head to toe, there were ribbons of loose skin hanging in places and only a few small patches of pink skin to let anyone know that the thing before them had once been human.

The sound of the door opening broke the silence as Ensign Bergman dashed out of the room.

Benny's eyes went wide in horror as he took in a gasp at the sight before him.

Chief Morgan instinctively pulled Benny to his side and held him close in a hug of comfort.

Rad's eyes filled with tears at the horrifying sight before him as he felt like there was some horrible force inside him, crushing his soul.

Dr. Perry looked on with amazement at the sight before her. In her nearly thirty years of medical practice, she had never seen anyone in this condition... No one alive anyway.

Lieutenant Simms reluctantly raised his phaser, then adjusted the power setting to 'kill'. He tried to fight down the image of the nine year old boy who sat across from him in the conference room the day before and focus on the necessary and 'merciful' thing that needed to be done.

The moment of silence seemed to stretch on forever as Lieutenant Simms raised his phaser and pointed it at the hideous lump of flesh.

As his finger tightened on the trigger, a small voice quietly asked, "Can someone help me? I can't see."

Chapter 7

Benny broke out of Chief Morgan's arms and stood in front of Lieutenant Simms with his arms outstretched, blocking him from firing at Vincent.

"Vincent? How are you feeling?" Rad asked with disbelief.

"Um... Okay I guess, I just feel kind of heavy... like I'm wearing a mask or something and I can't open my eyes." Vincent said in confusion.

"Let me see what I can do for you." Dr. Perry said as she hurried to Vincent's side.

"Who's that?" Vincent asked in confusion as he stretched his arms out in front of him.

"I'm the Yorktown's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Perry. Would you please hold still for a minute so I can see how you're doing?" She asked slowly.

Vincent put his arms down and said, "Sure. What happened to me?"

"If you'll hold still for just another few seconds I'll see if I can find out." Dr. Perry said as she carefully scanned him with her medical tricorder.

Lieutenant Simms adjusted his phaser back to the 'stun' setting then put it back into the holster on his belt.

Benny reluctantly put his arms down, but continued to watch Lieutenant Simms' every move.

"Crewman Winters, have you ever had a sunburn?" Dr. Perry asked carefully as she continued to scan.

"Yeah, sure. Once when my dad took us out on a boat I fell asleep and I had my feet propped up and I got sunburned on the bottoms of my feet. I couldn't go to school for a whole week because I couldn't walk." Vincent rambled.

Dr. Perry chuckled, then said, "Well, when you're sunburned, you know how your body gets rid of the damaged skin by causing it to peel off?"

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Well my young Crewman. It seems that you've just received the equivalent of a few hundred sunburns. That weight you're feeling is just damaged skin gathered on the surface. I'm happy to say that besides that, you're perfectly fine." Dr. Perry said with a smile.

"So my eyes are just scabbed shut?" Vincent asked carefully.

Dr. Perry considered the question for a moment, then said, "Sure. That's as good a way to describe it as any. Let's get you to sickbay where we can make you comfortable. I'd like to get you on a biobed to do some more detailed scans. It will just take a minute to get a gurney for you."

"I can walk if someone will help me." Vincent said quietly.

"I'll help you Vincent." Benny said and ran to Vincent's side.

"Benny? How did you get here before me?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"Well, I guess even though you're little enough to fit through a conduit pipe, you're still too big to fit through a transporter beam... you got stuck in there for a while." Benny said as he took hold of Vincent's hand and guided it to his arm.

"Oh. Okay." Vincent said in thought.

"If you gentlemen will follow me, we'll go to sickbay." Dr. Perry said with a relieved smile.

"Wait, I thought I heard Rad a minute ago... Is Rad here?" Vincent asked as he stopped in his tracks.

"I'm right here Vincent." Rad said happily.

"Will you tell Daddy Joe that I went to sickbay and that I'm okay? I don't want him to be worried about me." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure thing Vincent. I'll tell him right now." Rad said peacefully.

Vincent nodded, then gripped Benny's arm, letting him know that he was ready to go.

* * * * *

The people in the hallway stood back and stared in horror at the naked boy covered with misshapen flesh that looked like it was rotting off his body.

"Are people staring at me?" Vincent asked as he heard people stop talking as they went by.

"Yeah." Benny said honestly.

"Why? Do I look really bad?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Yeah. You look like ninety pounds of chewed bubble gum." Benny said frankly.

"Oh." Vincent said in thought.

"And you're naked." Benny added.

Vincent stopped in his tracks at the statement.

"Crewman Winters, we're almost there. If you're worried about being exposed, standing in the hallway isn't going to make it any better." Dr. Perry said, trying to fight down a chuckle.

"Don't worry about it Vincent. You look so gross right now I don't think anyone's even noticed that you're naked." Benny said as he placed Vincent's hand on his arm again.

"Um... Okay. I guess that makes me feel better." Vincent said slowly.

Benny chuckled at Vincent's statement.

"Where are we?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Walking from transporter room three to the sickbay." Dr. Perry said then turned as they reached the sickbay door.

"Oh, I see, we're on the same deck. I got the feeling that you were taking me the long way around." Vincent said as he was led into sickbay on Benny's arm.

"Yeah, we just wanted to show you off." Benny said playfully.

Vincent wasn't capable of making any facial expressions in his condition, but for some reason, Benny was fairly certain that somewhere under there, Vincent was rolling his eyes.

"Would you help Crewman Winters onto the bed?" Dr. Perry asked as she gathered some medical instruments.

Benny tried to guide Vincent up on the bed, but wasn't having much luck.

One of the medical assistants that had followed them from the transporter room stepped up and helped get Vincent onto the bed.

"Let's see what we've got here." Dr. Perry said as she turned on the biobed.

Dr. Perry looked carefully at the biobed's reading's and said, "I don't know exactly what your friend 'Rad' did back there, but whatever it was took care of the radiation. I can't find any trace of it."

"Are you going to be able to fix Vincent to like he was before?" Benny asked hopefully.

"Let me see one thing before I answer. Crewman Winters, you may feel a pulling sensation on your arm. Let me know if it causes you pain." Dr. Perry said, then picked up a pair of forceps from beside the bed.

"Okay." Vincent said reluctantly.

Dr. Perry took the forceps to the edge of the loose misshapen flesh on Vincent's arm and began to pull on it gently.

"That feels weird." Vincent said as she began to pull the damaged skin up and away from the layer of pale skin underneath.

Dr. Perry carefully pulled the skin up just a little bit more.

"That hurts." Vincent said through gritted teeth.

Dr. Perry stopped pulling at the skin and held it up like a flap.

"Young man, come over here." Dr. Perry said to Benny insistently.

Benny hurried around the table to Dr. Perry's side.

"I want you to look at this and tell your friend what you're seeing." Dr. Perry said seriously.

Benny leaned in to get closer, then said, "The Doctor is pulling up the scabby skin on your arm and there's new skin underneath. It's not scarred or anything."

Dr. Perry released the piece of damaged skin and allowed it to fall back into place.

After a moment of consideration, Dr. Perry said, "Crewman Winters, from what I can tell of your condition, you're going to be perfectly fine. While it would be possible for me to remove the damaged skin right now, it would be a time consuming task and I'm afraid that other patients would have to go untreated for their injuries while I was working on you. So in the interest of providing the best possible care for the most people, I would like to delay the procedure until those most in need are taken care of. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. I'm not hurting or anything, so it's okay." Vincent said carefully.

"Thank you Crewman Winters. I promise that I'll get you taken care of as soon as possible." Dr. Perry said with a gentle smile.

"Do you think you'll be able to get it taken care of tonight? I have to be at work at 04:00." Vincent asked quietly.

"For the next three days at least, you are officially off duty. That's an order Crewman." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Yes Doctor." Vincent said with disappointment.

"Dr. Perry? Can I stay with Vincent? Y'know, to be like his eyes and hands until he can do things for himself?" Benny asked hopefully.

Dr. Perry gave Benny a smile and said, "That sounds like an excellent idea. In fact, if you two will follow my instructions for Crewman Winters' care exactly, I might authorize him to leave sickbay tomorrow... with your help of course."

"That would be cool. Then I could go to deflector control and find out how everyone is doing." Vincent said quickly.

Dr. Perry motioned for a medical assistant to come to her.

"Please find Crewman Winters a bed in the convalescent ward. Oh, and get him a gown."

* * * * *

"Ensign Radovanovich, would you care to accompany me down to the colony to deliver the good news in person?" Chief Morgan asked with a smile.

"I'd love to." Rad said happily.

Chief Morgan looked around the transporter room and casually said, "It seems that our transporter technician has run off."

"Oh. I forgot about him." Rad said suddenly.

Chief Morgan went to the comm panel and casually said, "Ensign Bergman to transporter room three."

"I'd better clean this up before we leave." Rad said, then began to set the transporter controls back to their regular settings.

Chief Morgan nodded, then pressed the comm again and said, "Chief Morgan to Captain Byrne."

"Go ahead Chief." Captain Byrne said immediately.

"Crewman Winters has been retrieved from the transporter. Dr. Perry says that he's in good condition, although his appearance is a bit... disconcerting at the moment." Chief Morgan said carefully.

"How so?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"He appears to have a covering of dead skin over the majority of his body. Dr. Perry explained that it was something like a peeling sunburn. He didn't seem to be in any pain." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"I'm sure I'll get a report from her soon. Good work." Captain Byrne said with relief.

"I'd like to request your permission to beam down to the colony with Ensign Radovanovich to deliver the good news to Joe and Oliver in person if I may." Chief Morgan asked hopefully.

Captain Byrne chuckled and said, "You two have earned it. Permission granted, and be sure to pass on my congratulations."

"Yes sir." Chief Morgan said happily.

The doors opened to reveal Ensign Bergman looking timid and apologetic.

"He's going to be fine." Chief Morgan said firmly.

Ensign Bergman looked at Chief Morgan with disbelief.

"Terry, all the damage that you saw was to the surface of his skin. He's really going to be okay." Rad said assuringly.

"Really?" Ensign Bergman asked, not able to believe that the thing he saw was alive and well.

"Yes. Really. You can go to sickbay and check on him for yourself... when your shift is over. Right now we need for you to transport us down to Commander M'Butu's location." Chief Morgan finished seriously.

"Chief... I'm sorry. I know I didn't react well..." Ensign Bergman said in a repentant voice.

"I understand Ensign. Take your experiences today and learn from them. Ensign Radovanovich has had to face a situation like this before and was able to take what he learned from that horrible tragedy and use it to save Crewman Winters." Chief Morgan said instructively.

"Thank you sir. I'll do that. Whenever you're ready I'll transport you down." Ensign Bergman said as he walked to the transporter's controls.

Rad and Chief Morgan walked to the transporter and took their positions on the pads.

Chief Morgan gave a nod to indicate that they were ready.

"Thank you for trusting me to do this Chief Morgan. I really appreciate it." Ensign Bergman said, then energized the transporter beam.

* * * * *

"Wow, this place is really packed." Benny said as he led Vincent to the edge of the bed the medical assistant indicated.

"Yeah, it sounds like it." Vincent said as he felt the edge of the bed, so he could get into it.

"You look really funny wearing that gown." Benny said as he helped Vincent onto the bed.

"What do I look like?" Vincent asked curiously.

Benny thought about it for a moment, then said, "Just imagine the Toxic Avenger in a little white dress."

Vincent thought about the description, then broke into a fit of giggles.

"Is he going to be okay?" The man in the next bed asked with concern.

"Oh yeah, he just looks nasty and gross, but underneath this crust he's just fine. The doctor says that he'll be back to normal in a few days." Benny said with cheer.

The man looked uncertain but tried to accept the explanation.

"My name is Benny, what's yours?" Benny asked casually.

"Channing. It's nice to meet you."

Vincent sat up and turned toward the voice.

"Channing? It's me, Vincent."

"Vincent?" Channing asked in horror.

"Yeah. How are you doing? Are you feeling better?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine. The doctor just wants to keep me here for one more day to be sure." Channing said as he looked at Vincent cautiously.

"I'm off duty for the next three days. But Dr. Perry said that if I do everything she says today, that tomorrow maybe she'll let me leave sickbay." Vincent said happily.

"What happened to you?" Channing asked with concern.

"Can I tell him Vincent?" Benny asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Sure." Vincent said and laid back on the bed to listen.

"For the past couple months we've been having some really bad storms. They just seemed to get worse and worse. I didn't know it back then, but the Council lost contact with the Federation about a month ago. Anyway, about three weeks ago we got hit by a storm that didn't stop. There was lightning and hail and really bad high winds. I guess about the second or third day of the storm, a tree came down on the main storehouse where we keep most of our food and supplies and stuff and then it caught fire. By the time we were able to get the fire put out, nearly everything had been destroyed." Benny said in thought.

"Hey, I thought this story was supposed to be about me." Vincent said playfully.

Benny laughed and said, "I'm getting to your part, I just wanted to set the scene."

"Okay..." Vincent said in a playful hesitant voice.

Channing smiled at the boys' banter.

"Okay, so we were all stuck with just the food we each had in our own homes. The council told everyone to bring their food to the town hall and we'd use it to feed everyone... it was pretty good and really cool to have everyone there at once. It was like all of us were one big family." Benny said carefully, then noticed Vincent.

In his condition, Vincent was incapable of making any kind of recognizable facial expression. And his eyes were completely hidden by the mask of dead skin... yet somehow Benny just knew that he was getting 'the look'.

"Don't look at me like that Vincent, I'm getting to it." Benny said impatiently.

Vincent didn't move a muscle, but inside he was laughing at the statement.

"Okay, so yesterday the AGREC building... I don't know what it stands for, it's something about farming... anyway, the wind just picks the whole thing up and drops it right on the power station." Benny said seriously.

"Okay, it sounds like we're coming to my part." Vincent said reluctantly.

Benny nodded and said, "Well, we can't get into the power station to shut it down. It's leaking radiation and we figure it's about to go critical and blow up and kill us all."

Channing turned in his bed, completely enthralled by the story.

"So they figure that since the control room is like, in the belly of the building, it probably survived and if someone could get in there, they could shut it down. But then they realized that there just wasn't any way to do that. Even if we didn't have a major lightning storm trying to kill us if we stepped outside, you'd need some major heavy equipment to get in there." Benny said frankly.

"Wake me up when you get to my part." Vincent said in a serious voice, then broke into giggles.

"My part first, then yours." Benny said with a chuckle, then continued, "So one of the councilmen pulled up the plans to the building and found out that there were underground conduit shafts that carried the power to the town. They thought they could go down into the tunnels and just crawl right into the control room and shut the thing down, but when they went down there they found out that it was too narrow for any of them to fit through."

Channing nodded for Benny to continue.

"Well, I was in the town hall because.... well, because my home was destroyed by the storm. I wasn't there when it happened, but I guess the wind just caved the whole house in and my parents and my sister were in there..." Benny said reluctantly.

Vincent felt around blindly until he found Benny's arm, then patted his way down until he found Benny's hand and took it into a firm hold.

Benny took a moment to choke down his tears, then said, "The council said that since I'm skinny, I could probably fit through the tunnel. They told me how to shut down the reactor then took me down into the tunnels. I tried to squeeze in there, but no matter how hard I pushed, I just wouldn't fit. Anyway, that's when the Yorktown showed up and called us. Commander M'Butu came down and we told him what was going on. He called the ship and they did some tests or sensor readings or something, then they said that transporters wouldn't be able to function in the radiation. Someone would have to get in through the tunnel. That's when Commander M'Butu looked like he was about to throw up."

Channing looked at Benny with surprise.

"All he said is that the Yorktown had a crewman smaller than me. Then he went to talk to someone, I'm pretty sure it was Vincent's Daddy Joe." Benny said in thought.

"So I went down into the tunnel and tried to clear out as much of the mud as I could from down there to help whoever they sent down." Benny said carefully.

Vincent let out a very obviously fake snore.

Benny smiled, then started to tickle his ribs.

After a minute of playful wrestling and tickling, Benny said, "Then they sent Vincent down... I think he should tell you his part."

"I went in, turned it off, came out, then this big old pervert made me get naked then hosed me down with freezing snot." Vincent said in an aggravated tone.

"You suck at story telling." Benny said flatly.

"Yeah. But I've got a cute butt. You said so." Vincent said triumphantly.

Channing couldn't help but laugh at the scarlet blush that crept up Benny's face.

"Anyway, after Vincent got back to the town hall, he beamed up to the ship. But the radiation or the storm or something made the transporter lose part of his signal. So even though it got him, it didn't know how to put him back together." Benny said uncomfortably.

"You mean he was lost in the transporter?" Channing asked in horror, that being one of his biggest phobias.

"Yeah. But Ensign Radovanovanovich was able to put him back together." Benny said happily.

"You gave him an extra 'van'." Vincent said in thought.

"I did?" Benny asked curiously.

"Yeah, his name is Radovanovich, you gave him an extra 'van'." Vincent said seriously.

"Oh well, he earned an extra 'van' for what he did today." Benny said with a smile.

"I'll tell him you said that." Vincent said playfully.

"So what happened?" Channing asked curiously.

"Oh, so Ensign.... the Ensign does all this really high level programming stuff, then hits the button and the transporter sounds like it's trying to pull a heavy load up a steep hill." Benny said in thought.

"Nice simile." Channing said with a smile.

"Thank you." Benny said proudly, then continued, "Then Vincent comes out of the transporter looking all chewed up and gooey."

"Thanks." Vincent said dryly.

Benny stood from the edge of the bed where he'd been sitting, then walked to Vincent's side to look closely at him.

"Is something wrong?" Channing asked with concern.

"No. I don't think so. He's just drying out. I think that's supposed to happen. When he came out of the transporter he was all gooey, but now he's getting crunchy." Benny said as he looked carefully at Vincent's skin.

"You make me sound like a candy bar." Vincent said with a smile.

"More like a prechewed jerky stick." Benny said in a teasing voice.

"Channing, if I asked you really nice, would you hit him for me?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sorry Vincent, I can't... Doctor's orders. But maybe you can talk to Chance about it when he comes in to visit." Channing said with a smile.

"Yeah, then you're gonna get it." Vincent said playfully in the general direction of Benny.

Benny smiled and sat back on the edge of the bed and said, "How about if I just don't call you a prechewed jerky stick anymore."

"That'll work." Vincent said in triumph.

Channing glanced at the boys, then rested back with a contented smile.

* * * * *

Commander M'Butu looked up with concern at the transporter beam forming beside him.

When he saw who it was, all thoughts of evacuation and tornados left his mind.

"He's going to be fine." Chief Morgan said with a glorious smile.

"Thank God!" Commander M'Butu said in a gust of relief.

Chief Morgan chuckled with delight as he nodded his agreement.

"Is he really okay?" Commander M'Butu asked hopefully.

"Well, he looks a little worse for wear, but from the way Evelyn was talking, he'll be just fine in a few days." Chief Morgan said carefully.

"Out with it Richard, what's wrong?" Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"He's perfectly healthy and in no pain. The only after effect seems to be a layer of damaged skin over most of his body that is quite... disturbing to look at. You'll need to talk to Evelyn to be sure, but from what I saw of him, I believe he's going to be just fine." Chief Morgan said seriously.

Commander M'Butu nodded, then noticed Rad standing beside Chief Morgan.

"Thank you Ensign." Commander M'Butu said sincerely.

"I'm just glad that Vincent's going to be okay. I thought for a minute that it didn't work." Rad said honestly.

"I'm going to expect a very detailed report from both of you about what caused the situation and how you resolved it. I believe that there are a few people at Starfleet who will be very interested." Commander M'Butu said speculatively.

"Oliver, do you think we might be able to tell Joe now? I'm sure he's quite concerned for his student." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Come off it Richard. Joe is that boy's father. I don't care what any court paper or DNA test says, all you have to do is be looking into his eyes when you say Vincent's name to know it's true." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Chief Morgan chuckled and said, "Quite right Oliver. Should we go tell him now?"

Commander M'Butu smiled and said, "He's upstairs. Come on."

* * * * *

"Pssst. Benny." Vincent whispered.

"What?" Benny whispered in return.

"Could you sneak out and get me some food? I didn't eat lunch today and I'm really hungry." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Why don't I just ask Dr. Perry if I can go get you something? She seemed nice. I don't think she'd mind." Benny asked seriously.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay. If you want to do it that way."

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Don't go anywhere." Benny said with a smile.

Vincent knew the eye roll was wasted because Benny couldn't see it, but still felt that it had to be done.

"Are you really okay Vincent?" Channing asked from the next bed.

Vincent turned to face Channing's voice and said, "Yeah. I mean, I was scared back when I was on the planet because I thought that the radiation might kill me, but now... I'm fine. I mean, I feel okay and I know as soon as Dr. Perry has time to work on me she'll fix me back to like I was before."

Channing thought about the words, then said, "Vincent, you saved my life and that makes me feel like, not like I'm in debt to you, but like we have a special bond or something. If you're feeling afraid or alone or anything like that, I'm here for you. I'll listen to what you have to say and I'll honestly care."

"Okay. I do have a question for you. But you don't have to answer it if you don't want to." Vincent said carefully.

"Ask me anything you want." Channing said seriously.

"What's your first name? Everybody calls you Channing." Vincent asked with a smile.

Channing laughed and said, "My first name is Ellery."

"Oh. That's um... really.... um..." Vincent said brokenly.

"Yeah, that's what I say. My parents hated the name too. But my grandmother Channing just had to have me named after some guy we're related to from the 1800's that no one ever heard of." Channing said sourly.

Vincent giggled and said, "I never really liked the name Vincent before I came on the Yorktown. But now that I've heard everyone else's names, I don't think mine's so bad."

"Dr. Perry says that it's okay. Is there anything you especially do or don't like to eat?" Benny asked as he walked to the bed.

"Um. Not really. Just the usual stuff. If it's really bad for me, I'll probably love it. Just no milk to drink. I don't like milk." Vincent said seriously.

"No milk. Got it. I'll be back in a few minutes." Benny said, looking unsure about leaving Vincent alone.

Channing looked Benny in the eyes and gave an assuring nod, saying without words that he'd watch after Vincent.

Benny smiled and returned the nod before hurrying out the door.

* * * * *

Joe looked up and icy fingers of dread crept up his spine when he saw Commander M'Butu, Chief Morgan and Rad approaching... without Vincent.

"How is Vincent?" Darin asked desperately before Joe could find his voice.

"He's going to be fine." Chief Morgan said assuringly.

Joe wanted to be happy about the news, but couldn't help asking, "Going to be?"

Rad walked to Joe and pulled him into a tight hug before saying, "He's got some dead skin covering a good portion of his body, but he's really okay. Dr. Perry says that underneath it he's just fine."

"Thank you Rad." Joe said in relief as tears started streaking down his cheeks.

"Really?" Darin asked hopefully.

"Yes Ensign, Crewman Winters came through the experience wondering what all the fuss was about. When you transport to the ship you can see for yourself." Chief Morgan said peacefully.

Joe released Rad from the hug and gave him a grateful smile.

As Rad stepped away, Darin pulled him into a hug and said, "Thank you for saving Vincent. He was my first friend on the Yorktown."

Rad gladly returned the hug and realized just how good it felt to hold Darin in his arms.

"I'm glad I could help." Rad said quietly into Darin's ear.

Darin felt an involuntary shudder run through is body at the sensation of the warm breath on his ear.

Rad noticed the shudder and hoped it meant what he thought it did.

Susan and Jimmy were hugging each other in complete joy at the good news.

Commander M'Butu and Chief Morgan looked on with satisfaction at everyone's happiness.

"I suppose while I'm here I should check on the status of the shields." Commander M'Butu said to Joe with a casual smile.

"They're fine. The synchronized harmonic matrix that we've established is as stable as any shield configuration that I've ever seen. I think we've really accomplished something significant here Oliver." Joe said frankly.

"I think you're right. When this is all done, your team should get together and write a very detailed accounting of what you did here today. I get the feeling that there are some people at Starfleet that are going to be very interested in this new way of using the portable field generators. If I'm right, the new data bridge that you've developed will be standard issue on every Starship and Star base by the end of the year." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"We'll get right on it Commander. I have a feeling that you're right." Joe said in thought.

"And you should think of a name for it. As the inventors of the thing, you get the honor of naming it." Commander M'Butu said with a smile.

"The Cooper Bridge." Joe said without hesitation.

Darin looked at Joe with wonder and said, "I didn't build it, everyone worked on it."

Joe smiled at Darin's expression and said, "We'd be here huddling under shields, each one in a different building if it weren't for your idea. We all worked to construct the bridge, but without your idea, none of the rest of it would have happened."

"Then it should be called the 'Winters Bridge' because it was Vincent who inspired me to think about the shields like this." Darin said firmly.

"I'm sure Crewman Winters would appreciate the sentiment, but I agree with Lieutenant Bowers. Accept this honor and do your best to live up to it." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Yes sir. I'll try." Darin said in thought.

"Besides, I was going to name my transporter retrieval method after Vincent." Rad said with a smile at Darin.

"That sounds like a good idea." Commander M'Butu said in a considering voice.

Rad looked at Commander M'Butu with surprise, then said, "Wait. You're just saying that because my name is so long and difficult to spell, aren't you?"

"Yes Ensign, that is correct." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

* * * * *

"Could I talk to you for a minute?" Lieutenant Simms asked quietly as he walked to Benny's side in the serving line in the Mess Hall.

Benny felt a momentary spark of fear when he recognized the Security Officer, but it passed when he saw the concerned expression in Lieutenant Simms' eyes.

"Sure. I'm just getting some food for Vincent." Benny said hesitantly.

"Benny, what you did in the transporter room was very brave." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

Benny looked at Lieutenant Simms with question.

"Standing in front of me when I was about to fire my phaser. I could have killed you." Lieutenant Simms said with concern.

Benny nodded that he understood, then said, " Vincent risked himself to save all our lives. I couldn't let him be killed. Besides, I promised his father that I'd watch out for him."

"Where are your parents Benny?" Lieutenant Simms asked quietly.

"Dead. Our house caved in and... I wanted to help search for them but... the people in the town hall wouldn't let me. Then the whole thing with the reactor happened and I was the only one old enough and skinny enough who could help." Benny said in thought.

"I'm sorry... Benny, after all this is over I think there may be something I can do to help you." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Help me? How?" Benny asked quietly.

"From what I've seen of you, you're brave and loyal. I think you would be an excellent candidate for Starfleet Security. You don't have to decide right now, but if that's something that would interest you, I can talk to a few people to help prepare you for entry into the academy. I would be honored to sponsor you and help you however I can." Lieutenant Simms said as he looked Benny in the eyes.

"I... yeah. I'd like that." Benny said in disbelief.

Lieutenant Simms shook his head and said, "Your life is in upheaval right now. Wait for things to settle down and see what other opportunities you have. Then when you're ready, think about it and let me know."

Benny hesitantly nodded.

Lieutenant Simms smiled and patted him on the shoulder as he said, "Now you should get Crewman Winters his food. I'm sure he's hungry after the day he's had."

Benny smiled and said, "Yeah. And thank you. I'll really consider it."

Lieutenant Simms smiled again, then walked away, leaving Benny with a variety of food selections before him.

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters, you have an incoming priority one transmission from Earth." Ensign T'Lani said as she pulled a video monitor on a swing arm away from the wall and adjusted it to be focused on Vincent.

"Do you know who it is?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. I was just told that it was a priority message for you from Earth." T'Lani said seriously, then asked, "Are you ready to receive the transmission?"

"Yes, thank you." Vincent said as he sat up a little straighter in the bed.

There was a long moment of silence, before Vincent finally said, "I can't see whoever it is. You'll have to talk to me."

"I'm sorry Vincent. I... I wasn't prepared for the sight of you." A voice said in a hesitant tone.

"I don't know.... Cory? Is that you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry Vincent. The sight of you just shocked me a little. The report that I received didn't mention your... condition." Cory said reluctantly.

"I'm fine Cory. I guess I look bad, but I'm really okay." Vincent said honestly.

There was a long pause before Cory finally said, "When Starfleet received the reports about today's incidents, they contacted the Clan to let us know that you had been injured. I've been given a brief overview of what happened."

"One way of looking at this is that you did a very brave thing and saved a lot of lives. No matter what else happens, I'm very proud of what you did today." Cory said in a firm voice, obviously wanting to stress that he really meant it.

There was another long pause and Vincent felt a sense of apprehension growing in him. He could tell that Cory was building up to something.

"Another way of looking at it is that the people we trusted to train you to become an officer and see to your well being used you and were willing to sacrifice you for their own benefit." Cory added in an emotionless voice.

Vincent was stunned by the statement and couldn't think of any way to respond to that.

"I realize that things aren't always as they appear on the surface. I'm not there to investigate this and don't have any way of finding out what happened for myself so I don't feel that I should make the decision about what should be done next." Cory said in a considering voice.

Vincent could tell that whatever Cory was going to say next would most likely hold the key to his future.

"The Enterprise has been diverted to your location to help in the evacuation efforts. Rory will be there within two hours to talk to you and everyone else involved. Please try to understand that we're responsible for doing what's best for you, even when it isn't what you want. We don't want to shelter you from life or keep you from realizing your dreams, but at the same time, we have to be sure that you aren't being exploited."

Vincent heard Cory take a deep breath, as if bracing himself for something difficult.

"If Rory decides that it's in your best interest to be taken out of the mentoring program and brought back to Earth, I will support his decision completely." Cory said firmly.

Vincent's mouth fell open in shock at the statement.

"It's okay if you hate me for doing this Vincent. I'd rather you be alive and hating me than dead and thinking I'm really kewl." Cory said in a pained voice.

All Vincent could manage was a nod that he understood what Cory was saying.

"Short out." Cory said, then the transmission went silent.

Chapter 8

Rad watched a group of mud covered colonists cross the room and prepare to transport when an idea suddenly came to him.

"Did Vincent have any mud on him when he beamed up?"

"Only from head to toe." Joe said frankly.

Rad shook his head in wonder and said, "That's it. The transporter image didn't render the mud. I thought about his clothes but didn't even consider the mud that was covering him. It makes sense now, I just couldn't figure out why there was so much damaged skin. The substitution matrix I programmed must have substituted the living cells from Vincent's trace pattern in place of the 'dead' mud."

Chief Morgan thought about it for a second, then said, "I think you may be right. So when the dead skin covering is removed, Vincent's own natural skin will be underneath."

"Right. I thought it had something to do with the radiation, but the difference in mass didn't add up."

"Quite right. I don't think this will effect Vincent's treatment, but it will make a significant difference in your report." Chief Morgan said seriously.

The beeping of Commander M'Butu's communicator drew everyone's attention.

"M'Butu here." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"*Commander, it seems our situation has just gone from bad to worse*." Captain Byrne said in a worried voice.

"How so?" Commander M'Butu asked seriously.

"*The planet appears to have reached some sort of saturation point. The upper atmosphere is destabilizing, causing holes to form which allow the solar radiation to reach the surface. Projections show that within the hour there will be no atmospheric protection whatsoever. Given the rate of bombardment, we estimate that within thirty minutes, the area you are in will be unable to sustain life. If there is any good news in all this, it would be that the storms seem to be dissipating as the lower atmosphere breaks down. We should be able to get more dependable transporter locks without the interference*." Captain Byrne said with regret.

"Less than thirty minutes? Then it's time for a change in tactics. Chief Morgan, beam aboard and give every transporter operator on the ship a

section of the colony to sweep. Have them lock onto every speck of a life sign that they can find and beam it aboard. I'll call the search and rescue teams in and get them started up." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"I'll go with you Chief." Rad said as he moved to Chief Morgan's side.

"You guys go too. I'll stay with the shield generators." Joe said to his crew.

"But Joe..." Susan began to say.

"That's an order crewman. All of you, transport up now." Joe said firmly.

"Yes sir." Susan said reluctantly and picked up her tool bag.

"Darin." Joe said more quietly.

Darin walked to Joe's side.

"If something happens to me, will you take care of Vincent?" Joe asked hesitantly.

Darin was astonished by the request, but quickly said, "I will, I promise."

"Thank you Darin, now go on." Joe said as he tried to smile and look unconcerned.

Darin took his place beside Susan and Jimmy and watched Joe until the shower of sparkles completely obscured his vision.

* * * * *

"I will leave you now so you may feel free to express an emotional response to this announcement." Ensign T'Lani said calmly.

"Um, no thank you. I'll probably have an emotional response later... a big one. Right now there's something I need to figure out, would you help me?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"Proceed." Ensign T'Lani said without expression.

"I'm just trying to figure out what I did wrong. I mean, why wasn't it enough? What else was I supposed to do?" Vincent asked in a lost tone.

"Crewman Winters, you appear to be working under a misconception. To my knowledge, you made no error in your decisions or actions. Your patriarch recognizes this and has stated as much by expressing his pride in your accomplishments. His concern appears to be focused on those who are responsible for you. In seeing the outcome of the past days events, he has sufficient reason to question their dedication to your well being. If you look at your current state and recognize that this level of damage occurred in

less than one standard day of being in their care, you will see that the concern is logical." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"But there wasn't anyone else who could do it. I know Cory would have done exactly the same thing I did if he was here." Vincent said in frustration.

"If that is the case, can you speculate on the reaction of the one who is responsible for his care?" Ensign T'Lani asked in a leading tone.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Aunt Teri would probably be mad that he did something dangerous, but I think that she'd be proud of him and understand that he was doing his job."

Ensign T'Lani waited as Vincent put the pieces together in his mind.

"So it's not about what I did, but about what they let me do. What's important right now is to help Rory understand why Daddy Joe and everyone else made the decisions that they did." Vincent said in thought.

"That would seem a logical pursuit. And there is one other action that you could take at this time that may be of benefit." Ensign T'Lani said in a considering tone.

"What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Before I answer, I must ask you some questions." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"Okay. Go ahead." Vincent said as he sat up straighter in the bed.

"Were you ordered to put your life in danger or did you choose to do so of your own free will?" Ensign T'Lani asked carefully.

"Commander M'Butu asked me, he said that I didn't have to do it." Vincent said in thought.

"Did you carry any food or water with you?"

"No. I just had three couplers in my pocket and a flashlight strapped to my arm."

"During the incident, were you completely alone?"

"Yes. I mean, Benny was there after I finished shutting down the reactor, but that was something like fifteen or twenty minutes later after I was done crawling down the conduit pipe."

"Was there any time during today's events that you believed you might not survive the experience?" Ensign T'Lani asked in a notably softer voice.

"Yeah." Vincent said quietly, not wanting to go into detail.

"Then I believe you have satisfied the conditions that would allow what you did today to be considered a successful completion of the *Kahs'wan*." Ensign T'Lani said carefully.

Vincent nodded in thought as Channing asked from the next bed, "What is that?"

"The adulthood test." Vincent said distantly.

"I believe a more accurate translation would be 'The Ordeal of Maturity'. One who has completed the *kahs'wan* is considered an adult by Vulcan law. If you choose to pursue this option, you will need to contact the eldest member of your house and ask that today's events be recognized as your *kahs'wan*." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"How does that help him? I mean, that guy is still coming to see if Vincent was put in danger, right?" Channing asked curiously.

Vincent shook his head and said, "I'm a citizen of Vulcan. If I'm considered an adult by Vulcan law then I can make my own decisions."

"So if that Cory guy tells you that you have to come home, you don't have to listen to him?" Channing asked to be sure.

Vincent thought about the question seriously, then said, "Not exactly. I'll still be a son of Clan Short and a member of the House of Surak. Because of that, they can still tell me what to do. But they can't say it's because I'm too young or because it's not safe here. I'd be allowed to make choices like that for myself... it's kind of hard to explain."

"I believe you have explained it well Crewman Winters. If your request for recognition is accepted, you will be able to speak to your Clan Patriarch as one adult to another rather than as a child to a parent." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"Can you help me do it Ensign T'Lani? I can't see to work the terminal to contact Ambassador Sarek myself." Vincent said as he turned to face where he thought she was standing.

"I would be honored to assist you Crewman Winters." Ensign T'Lani said and moved to the terminal by Vincent's bed and opened a direct transmission.

"*Vulcan High Command*." A female voice said in formal Vulcan.

"I wish to speak with Ambassador Sarek." Ensign T'Lani said in a clear firm voice.

"*The ambassador is en route from Earth to Vulcan, we have just received notice that his ship has been diverted from it's projected course. We are unable to predict when contact will be possible.*" The woman said formally.

"Is he on the ***Enterprise***?" Vincent asked in barely passable Vulcan.

The Vulcan woman on the screen arched an eyebrow of surprise at either Vincent's appearance or his horrible pronunciation, then carefully responded, "*That is correct.*"

"We will contact him directly. T'Lani out." Ensign T'Lani said flatly.

"*Vulcan High Command, out.*" The woman said without emotion and disconnected the transmission.

"Hey Vincent, did you really just speak Vulcan?" Channing asked in wonder.

"Um, yeah. It's not that big a deal. One of my guardians, a guy named Xain telepathically taught me how to speak a bunch of languages... But I didn't say it just right. I know the words in my head but it's hard for me to say them." Vincent said carefully.

"Proper pronunciation requires practice. Your pronunciation in this instance was adequate." Ensign T'Lani said as she opened another transmission.

"*Communications.*" A woman said pleasantly.

"This is Ensign T'Lani in sickbay. Would it be possible to open a channel to the *Enterprise* coded as a Vulcan diplomatic transmission directed to Ambassador Sarek?"

"*Yes. It might take me a few minutes to locate them. If you would like I could call you back when I've established contact.*" The communications worker said efficiently.

"That would be acceptable." Ensign T'Lani said formally.

"*T'Lani, Raul, Baker. I need you in my office immediately.*" Dr. Perry's voice called over the intercom.

"I will return as soon as I am able." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"I'll be fine. Thank you for all your help." Vincent said with a smile in her general direction.

"Should you have need of my assistance, you have but to ask." Ensign T'Lani said formally, then hurried to the back door of the room.

"Vincent, you are full of surprises." Channing said with a chuckle.

"What do you mean?" Vincent asked curiously as he turned in his bed.

"I've never had a woman, Human or Vulcan, talk to me the way she just talked to you. She respects you." Channing said in wonder.

"Yeah. I guess so. But why does that matter to you? I mean, I thought you and Chance were, um... like boyfriends or something." Vincent said carefully.

Channing chuckled and said, "A lot of people think that. Chance and I roomed together at the academy the whole time we were there. I got posted to the *Excelsior* and Chance got posted here. After six months I was transferred to the *Yorktown* and we worked it out so we could room together again. He's like the younger brother that I always wanted."

"So you don't care that people think you're gay?" Vincent asked carefully.

"Why should I care? I'll tell anyone who's interested the truth if they have the guts to ask. If they don't then it's not my problem." Channing said casually.

Vincent smiled and said, "I think you'd like my Daddy Joe, he thinks about stuff the same way you do."

"*Ensign T'Lani, I have your diplomatic channel.*" The communications officer said seriously.

"She was called away, but she was opening the channel for me. Can you put it through for me? I, um... can't see." Vincent finished shyly.

"*Yes, of course*." The woman said, then there was a moment of silence.

"He's waiting for you to start." Channing whispered from the other bed.

"Ambassador Sarek, I am Vincent Winters, son of Clan Short of the house of Surak of Vulcan." Vincent said in his best attempt at formal Vulcan.

"*The members of Clan Short are my grandsons, therefore you are my great-grandson. As such you are entitled to call me great-grandfather or grandfather if that is more comfortable. And please feel free to speak English. I am fully versed.*" Ambassador Sarek said, trying to keep the pained note out of his voice at the butchering of his native language.

Vincent nodded, then continued in English, "Grandfather Sarek, I'm not sure if there's some kind of formal way I'm supposed to do this, but I need to ask you a favor."

"*The most logical way to proceed would be to disregard formality and simply ask what you will.*" Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"I went through something today, I guess you'd call it an ordeal. I don't know exactly what you need to know but I'll tell you the important parts."

"I went into a damaged reactor that was leaking radiation to shut it down. It was my choice to go and I could have turned around and gone back to the ship whenever I wanted.... I don't think anyone would have been mad at me if I'd changed my mind... I don't even think they would have been disappointed in me."

"But I made up my mind and did what needed to be done to help a lot of people. I went alone and took no food or water..."

"...And I really thought I was going to die."

"Grandfather Sarek, as the head of the house of Surak I'm asking if you'll accept what I did today as my *kahs'wan*." Vincent finished quietly.

There was a long moment of silence, then Vincent said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you that I'm blind right now. If you're nodding or something I can't see it."

"*No. I am considering the conditions of the kahs'wan. The* ***Enterprise*** *will be at your location shortly. I will review the facts of the matter. When the* ***Enterprise*** *arrives, I will transport to the* ***Yorktown*** *and inform you of my decision*." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"*Din-tor heh smusma - sa'mekh'al*." Vincent said carefully, trying as hard as he could to get the pronunciation just right.

Ambassador Sarek cringed slightly, then hesitantly said, "*Peace and long life, grandson.*"

The screen went dark, then Channing whispered, "He's gone."

Vincent let out a gust of breath in relief, then flopped himself back on the bed.

"You did good Vincent." Channing said encouragingly.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "Wait. Did I just say *dif-tor* or *din-tor*?"

"Um, the second one I think." Channing said in thought.

"Are you sure?" Vincent asked more quietly.

"Yeah. Pretty sure."

"Oh, that's just great!" Vincent said sarcastically.

"What's wrong?" Channing asked slowly with concern.

"That was my Vulcan great-grandfather, the guy who's deciding if I'm mature enough to be considered an adult..." Vincent said seriously.

"Yeah."

"I think I just told him to 'Misunderstand Me and Prosper'." Vincent said in a pained voice.

"Really?" Channing asked as he tried to fight down his laughter.

Vincent nodded, then stopped when he heard Channing lose the fight.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry I took so long. You wouldn't believe how many people are in the cafeteria and now the hallways are starting to fill up." Benny said as he walked to Vincent's bed.

"Thanks, Benny." Vincent said quietly as he sat up.

"Is something wrong?" Benny asked with concern as he tried to get the collapsible tray table built into the side of the bed to lock into place.

"Yeah. There's someone coming who might make me go back to Earth because he thinks it isn't safe here for me." Vincent said quietly.

"You've got to be kidding. Why would he think something like that?" Benny asked in disbelief as the tray table finally did what it was supposed to.

"Um... Look at me." Vincent said and held out his arms.

"Oh yeah. I guess I'm getting used to seeing you like this." Benny said as he placed the plate of food on the tray table.

"There's really not anything I can do until Rory gets here." Vincent said in thought.

"You can eat. Open wide." Benny said as he cut a bite size chunk of roast beef.

"What are you going to feed me?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Old prunes and goat cheese." Benny said playfully.

Vincent chuckled, then felt the food touch his lips.

He opened his mouth and accepted the bite of food.

"I got to see some people I know down there. They seemed really scared about what's going to happen to us next." Benny said as he speared a chunk of potato.

Vincent swallowed his food, then said, "I bet Captain Byrne is already working on finding you a new place."

"Open." Benny said firmly.

Vincent obediently opened his mouth and was fed the chunk of potato.

"You said this guy is coming to make sure that you're safe, right?" Benny asked carefully.

Vincent nodded as he chewed.

"Well, if we find a new place to live, you know, a new colony. That would be a safe place, wouldn't it?" Benny said conversationally.

Vincent swallowed, then asked, "Are you asking if I want to come and live with you?"

"Open." Benny said, then in a quieter voice he said, "Yeah, kind of. I don't know what my life will be like now that my family is gone. But I know that the colony is my family too and they'll make sure I don't have to do without stuff until I can find a way to make a living."

Vincent accepted a fork full of steamed green beans, and nodded his agreement as he chewed.

"So maybe we could share a place, the house of Summers and Winters." Benny said with a smile.

Vincent swallowed and said, "That sounds nice."

"Crewman Winters, I'm sorry to interrupt your meal but I need to do a quick scan." Dr. Perry said as she rushed to his side.

"Okay." Vincent said with caution at her tone.

She quickly scanned him with the tricorder, then said, "Good, you're doing fine. I need for you and your friend to go directly to deck T and find a comfortable place to relax there."

"What's going on?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"Too much to tell. It just looks like we're about to get very busy and we'll need every bed that we can free up. Anyone who doesn't need critical care is being moved." Dr. Perry said as she turned and scanned Channing.

"Is Channing going to deck T with us?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Yes. I'll have one of the doctors join you down there shortly to oversee everyone. Please hurry now." Dr. Perry said as she moved to the next bed.

"Come on Vincent. We'll do it just like before, you can take my arm." Benny said as he helped Vincent to stand.

"Channing, do you need help to walk?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I'm just a little shaky, I think I'll be okay." Channing said as he tried to gain his balance.

"Benny, why don't you let Channing hold on to you. I'll walk on his other side and he can guide me." Vincent said seriously.

"That's okay Vincent..." Channing began to say.

"If you feel yourself getting weak, you can hold on to us and we'll keep you up." Vincent said firmly.

"I know better than to argue with you. Let's go, it looks like everyone is going down with us." Channing said as he looked around the room.

With Benny's help, Vincent made his way to Channing's side and took hold of his arm.

"He's the one." Someone whispered as the trio started across the room.

Vincent didn't know how many people were in the room, but he felt like there were a thousand eyes staring at him as he caught bits and pieces of whispered conversations.

"...Is that really him?"

"...Look at what happened to him..."

"...just a little boy..."

Vincent felt a hand on his arm as a girl's voice whispered close to his ear, "Thank you."

* * * * *

Vincent heard the acoustics change as they walked into the hallway, then asked, "Who was that?"

"Her name is Samantha." Benny said quietly.

"What was she thanking me for?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I'm not sure. Just about everyone from the colony knows that you're the one who shut down the reactor. So she was either thanking you for saving her life or for saving the lives of the people she loves." Benny said as the trio walked.

Channing guided Vincent to walk a little bit in front of him as they stepped into the turbo lift.

More and more people crowded in and finally the doors closed.

"Deck T." Channing said into the air.

The lift started to move horizontally until it reached the central shaft, then changed direction and began the long journey to one of the lowest decks in the ship.

* * * * *

The transporter beam cleared to show a twelve or thirteen year old boy hunched over, digging at the floor with his hands.

"Send me back! I can save them!" The boy begged as tears streaked down his cheeks through the mud that was covering him.

"No one is going back. Were you looking for someone from where I beamed you up?" Rad asked with sympathy.

"Yeah. I got knocked out when the wall fell in on me, but I'm okay so they have to be okay too. Please let me go back. They're my family, they're all I've got!" The boy begged in a panicked voice.

The security officer walked toward the transport chamber to move the boy off the pad when Rad raised a hand in a 'stop' gesture and shook his head.

"I tell you what, if you'll move off that transporter pad, I'll scan the area where you were and beam anyone I find up. But to do that I need you to move." Rad said, carefully walking the fine line between being sympathetic and demanding.

The boy looked at Rad with a lost expression, then stumbled off the transporter pad and waited expectantly.

"Okay, watch now. I'm going to target the area where I found you and lock on to everything I can find." Rad said as he looked at the transporter's scans with pain.

There was a faint blip and he locked onto it as quickly as humanly possible.

Rad initiated the transport and his hopes fell as he saw a small animal appear on the transporter's pad.

"Fizgig!" The boy said happily and ran to the small wet animal.

Rad shook his head as he looked at the area devoid of other life signs.

After a moment of watching the boy comforting the cold and frightened animal in his arms, Rad came to a decision and pressed the comm button.

"Sickbay." Rad said carefully, then waited for the computer to direct his call.

"*Sickbay here. What can I do for you?*" A frantic voice asked.

"Is there any way I can speak to Crewman Winters? It's kind of important." Rad asked hopefully.

"*He was moved to deck T with all the other convalescent patients.*"

"Thank you, I'll try there." Rad said, then rekeyed the comm.

"Pool area, general announcement." Rad said, then waited a second for the computer to route the command.

"Crewman Vincent Winters, please contact transporter room two. Crewman Vincent Winters, please contact transporter room two." Rad said desperately.

The boy looked up from his dog, then over at Rad with question.

With a stab of pain through his heart, Rad shook his head at the boy.

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"Vincent, be glad you can't see this." Channing said as the trio stepped off the turbo lift on Deck T.

"I can hear them, is it as crowded as it sounds?" Vincent asked as he held tightly to Channing's side.

"Probably more. We'll be doing good to find a place to sit down in here." Channing said as he looked around.

"Channing? How are you feeling?" A security officer asked as he approached the group.

"Hi Neil, I was feeling better until I saw this." Channing said seriously.

"What are you doing down here? Shouldn't you be in sickbay?" Neil asked cautiously.

"Dr. Perry's sending all the convalescent patients down here from sickbay because she's expecting to get overrun with new patients." Channing said carefully.

As if to prove his words, the turbo lift doors opened to reveal another load of patients.

"There's got to be someplace else for them to go, we're packed in here already." Neil said to no one in particular, then walked away.

Someone bumped into Vincent and knocked him into Channing's side which made them both have to fight for balance.

"This is no good. You guys aren't in any condition to have to deal with this." Benny said in a firm voice.

"***Crewman Vincent Winters, please contact transporter room two. Crewman Vincent Winters, please contact transporter room two.***" Sounded over the public address speakers of the pool area.

"Get me to a comm station." Vincent said loudly to be heard over the increasing voices in the tightly packed room.

"There's one in the observation bay, come on." Channing said and started to guide the trio to the observation lounge directly across from the turbo lift.

As the trio approached the comm station, Neil noticed them and said, "I'm sorry guys but the comm stations are off limits until the colony is evacuated. We need them open for the emergency services."

"This is Crewman Vincent Winters, he was just paged." Channing said seriously.

"Crewman? Oh, you're the one who... um, go ahead." Neil said in astonishment.

Channing pressed the comm station button and said, "Transporter room two."

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"*This is Crewman Winters.*" Vincent said through the speaker.

"Vincent, this is Rad. I really need your help. I've got a boy here who just lost his whole family, is there any way you can find someone to bring you up here? I know you've got your own problems right now, but this kid really needs help. I can't help him, I have to keep transporting people up." Rad said as he divided his attention between the crying boy and his scans of the surface.

"*Yeah, I'll be there as quick as I can.*" Vincent said immediately.

"Thanks Vincent." Rad said appreciatively as he continued to scan.

The security officer looked at Rad with question.

Rad noticed and said, "Just leave him be. Someone will be here to help him in a minute."

"What do I do now?" The boy asked in a lost and helpless voice.

"Just wait for one minute. Someone is on his way to help you." Rad said seriously.

"No one can help me..." The boy said distantly.

"...everyone who helps me is dead..."

"...I should be dead."

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"Do you want to come with us or stay here Channing?" Vincent asked as he took firm hold of Channing's arm.

"Honestly, right now I'd gladly get into a space suit and cling to the side of the ship to get out of this room. I'm going with you." Channing said as he looked around.

"What about you Benny?" Vincent asked, not knowing where to direct his voice, but knowing that Benny was still around.

"Where you go, I go." Benny said firmly.

"Then let's go... one of you guys should probably lead the way." Vincent finished with a teasing smile.

As the trio approached the turbo lift, a security officer said, "I know it's miserable down here, but we're trying to work something out. We can't let anyone go up until we have another place for you to go."

Before Vincent could say anything, Neil spoke up from behind him, "It's okay, Matt. These three were just called to transporter room two to help with an emergency."

Matt looked at the young boy who looked worse than the burn victims in the Starfleet training videos, then at the skinny teenager who looked like he had been dipped in a vat of mud. Finally his gaze stopped on Channing who was ghost pale and looking like he would pass out at any second.

"Think about it Matt. If there's someone who needs these three to help, they must be in pretty bad shape up there." Neil said seriously.

"Yeah, go on. Good luck guys." Matt said as he stood aside.

The turbo lift doors opened to let another group of people off. Neil and Matt tried to direct them out of the way to keep some sort of a path open.

As soon as the last of the people had passed, Channing guided Benny and Vincent onto the lift, letting them support most of his weight.

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"JonJon?" Benny asked in surprise as the trio walked into transporter room two.

"Benny?" The boy asked in confusion.

"Guys, can you take him down to the pool area with you? He can't stay here." Rad asked as he locked onto three people and began the transport.

"No way. It's packed down there. We could hardly breathe." Vincent said frankly.

"They're dead." JonJon said in a hollow voice as he approached the trio with Fizgig in his arms.

Vincent heard the words and froze, everything else was forgotten in an instant.

"I know it hurts. The same thing happened to me and Vincent." Benny said as he did his best to hug JonJon with one arm while still supporting Channing's weight.

JonJon looked at Vincent curiously and asked, "What is it? A Suloban?"

"A what? No. He's a human, he's just got a full body scab." Benny said carefully.

Conversation stopped as the security officer led the three people away from the transporter and into the hallway.

Rad looked carefully at the readings on his transporter station, then hit the comm and called out, "Sickbay!"

"*Sickbay here*." A young man answered in a shaky voice.

"I need a med team to transporter room two immediately." Rad said quickly as he worked the transporter's controls.

"*We don't have anyone to send you. We're treating patients in the hallways here*." The young man said franticly.

"I've got three people who need emergency care. How about this? Clear out a spot for me and I'll beam them directly into sickbay." Rad said firmly.

"*It'll take me a few minutes to clear a space, we're packed in here.*"

Rad looked at his scanner and said, "I don't have a few minutes. I'll beam them in here and you call me when you've cleared a place for them."

"*It'll just be a few minutes.*" The young man said desperately.

"Call transporter room two when you're ready to receive them. I can't tie up the transporter any longer." Rad said quickly, then initiated the transporter.

A pile of three intertwined bodies appeared on the transporter pad, then just as suddenly disappeared and reappeared on the floor beside the transporter's control console.

Benny looked away from the horrific scene as Channing quietly asked, "Is there anything we can do to help them?"

"I don't know. Maybe you can separate them so I can transport them one at a time when there's a place for them to go." Rad said as he began to scan his area of the colony for other life signs.

"But shouldn't we leave them like they are until a doctor can see them?" Channing asked as he looked at the pile of twisted bodies helplessly.

"I really don't know, I just think the one on the bottom probably needs to breathe." Rad said, then spotted a cluster of life signs on his scanner.

"Right. Let's shift them." Channing said with resignation.

"JonJon and I can do it. You're too weak. Stay here so Vincent can hold you up." Benny said firmly.

Channing wanted to argue, but could barely stay upright when Benny carefully got out from under his arm.

"Leave Fizgig with Vincent and help me." Benny said firmly to JonJon.

"It won't eat Fizgig, will it?" JonJon asked cautiously as he looked at Vincent with fear.

Benny smiled and said, "I told you, this is Vincent. He's a Human. He'll take good care of Fizgig for you, won't you Vincent?"

"Yeah, I promise I won't hurt him." Vincent said with effort as he supported the majority of Channing's weight.

Benny and JonJon hurried to the pile of twisted bodies and stopped to try and determine how to separate them.

"Benny?" JonJon called out in a squeak.

"Come on JonJon, help me." Benny said as he reluctantly took hold of the top person's arm.

"Benny, that's your mom." JonJon said with wide horrified eyes as he pointed.

Benny looked where JonJon was pointing and was overwhelmed by the sight.

"Mom?" Benny said in a small child's voice as tears filled his eyes.

The transporter energized and six people appeared looking cold and haggard.

"Step off the transporter and someone will be here in a minute to take care of you." Rad said quickly as he began to scan again.

After a few careful pulls and tugs, Benny was able to get his mother separated from the others and carefully turned her so he could get a grip under her arms.

JonJon took hold of her legs and helped Benny to move her as gently as possible.

The door opened and the security officer hurried in.

"If you'll go with him, he'll see that you're taken care of." Rad said quickly, then energized the transporter to beam three more people into the room.

"There's no place to take them. They'll need to stay here for a minute while I check in." The security officer said quickly.

Benny and JonJon worked to gently turn the next body over.

"Dad?" Benny said as the tears continued to flow.

"Oh God." The security officer gasped as he saw the girl who had been underneath Benny's father.

Her small thin body was twisted into an impossible position. Her arm was turned and twisted enough to prove that her bones weren't just broken, they were mashed.

Rad took one look at her, then started pressing buttons on his console.

As soon as he found enough floor space in Sickbay to fit her body, he initiated transport and said, "Ready or not."

Benny looked at the spot where the mashed girl had been laying and whispered, "Callie?"

"Vincent, I really think you need to get him out of here." Rad said as he continued to scan.

"*Transporter room two, we've got the first one, and I've got a place for the other two now.*" A man's voice called over the intercom.

Rad locked in on the voice and verified the location, then initiated the transport.

"*I've got them.*"

"Are they going to be okay?" Benny asked in a trembling voice.

"*I hope so. I promise that we'll do whatever we can to help them.*"

"Can I go to sickbay to stay with them?" Benny asked hopefully.

"*I'm sorry. Sickbay is packed. If you can tell me your name and where you'll be, I'll call you as soon as I know anything.*"

"His name is Benny and he'll be in Deflector Control." Vincent said from across the room.

Benny looked at Vincent with question.

"*Got it. Benny, I'll call you as soon as I know anything.*" The man said with distraction.

The sound of the transporter energizing drew everyone's attention.

"Oh thank God!" A woman said in a gasp as she stumbled off the transporter pad.

"It's like hell down there. Things are starting to catch fire... Nothing's starting it, everything's just bursting into flames." A man said as he followed her.

"Please step down, we don't have much time." Rad said desperately.

As soon as the last person stepped out of the transporter chamber, the transporter activated again and six people materialized on the pad.

"Everyone step off the transporter pad. We need to hurry." Rad said as he continued scanning.

"Guys? It's getting crowded in here, Channing's getting really heavy and I think Fizgig just peed on me. We need to get to deflector control now." Vincent said loudly to be heard across the room.

Benny shook himself out of his thoughts and put a comforting arm around JonJon to guide him across the room.

The transporter energized again and two men materialized, clutching to each other desperately both with wisps of smoke coming off their clothes.

"Thank you! Oh, thank you!" One of the men said in a gasping voice.

"Rad, will you please make sure the deflector control team gets out?" Vincent asked hopefully in Rad's general direction.

"Joe is the only one still down there. Don't worry Vincent, I've got a lock on his communicator. He'll want to stay until the last minute, but I'll make sure he gets out in time." Rad said as he kept his focus on his scans.

"Thanks." Vincent said, then felt someone take Fizgig out of his arms.

"How are you doing Channing?" Benny asked with concern at the hollow look in Channing's eyes.

"I think I can make it... but we'd better hurry." Channing said in barely a whisper.

"Help us to the turbo lift." Vincent said seriously as he tried to steady Channing.

"It's just a few steps out this door." Benny said encouragingly.

JonJon cuddled Fizgig to his chest and followed behind the trio as they left the transporter room.

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"I thought it was packed in the hallway outside the transporter room. It's worse here." Channing said as the turbo lift doors opened.

"Left, down the catwalk and through the doors." Vincent said with effort at supporting Channing's weight.

"Dear God! You need to see a doctor!" One of the colonists exclaimed when he saw Vincent.

"The doctor's busy with people hurt worse than me." Vincent said firmly.

"Can you please let us through? We need to get to that door." Channing said in as loud a voice as he could manage.

"Please, can't you see they're hurt?" Benny called out as he tried to force his way through the crowd.

"They won't let you in there. It's a restricted area." A woman said seriously.

"Vincent works in there. They'll at least let him in." Channing said weakly.

"You don't look so good. Maybe you should stop and rest." An older man said with concern as they made their way down the catwalk.

"No. Just a little bit more." Channing said with effort.

"Vincent. We're here. You need to talk to them and ask them to let you in." Channing said seriously.

"Okay. Hit the comm button." Vincent said tiredly.

"*I'm sorry, but this is a restricted area. No entry.*" Connie's voice said over the comm unit.

"Connie, this is Vincent. There's no place else for me to go. Can you please let four of us in?" Vincent asked hopefully.

There was a moment of silence, then the door opened.

"Hurry." Susan said and pulled the trio of Vincent, Channing and Benny through the door.

Benny reached back and plucked JonJon out of the crowd behind him just before the doors closed.

"I think someone got their math wrong because that looks like more than a thousand people." Susan said, then looked at Vincent in horror.

"Oh Vincent. How are you feeling? Does it hurt?" Jimmy asked before Susan could find her voice.

"I'm fine, but Channing needs to lay down. I think he's about to pass out." Vincent said seriously.

"Come with me, we've laid out some sleeping bags in the supply room." Susan said and took firm hold of Channing's arm.

"What about the rest of you guys. Do you need anything?" Jimmy asked as he looked at Benny and JonJon cautiously.

"Benny's family is in sickbay and they're hurt pretty bad. We told them to call here to let him know how they're doing." Vincent said seriously.

"I'll call you if we hear anything. Why don't you guys get some rest, you look like you could use it." Connie said frankly.

"Yeah, do you want to lay down? There's plenty of beds." Jimmy said quickly.

"I've been laying down for a while. I think I'd rather sit down. Is anyone at the auxiliary stations?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"No. Let me help you." Jimmy said and guided Vincent to sit in one of the two auxiliary station chairs.

Jimmy looked at Benny and JonJon consideringly for a moment, then said, "You can sit here if you want or go in there and lay down."

Benny hesitantly took the seat beside Vincent.

JonJon walked to Benny and slowly climbed onto his lap, asking with his eyes if it was okay.

Benny gave a faint smile and a nod to say that it was.

"How bad is it out there?" Susan asked cautiously as she walked back into the main room.

"They're packed in tight on every deck we've been to so far. It's a nightmare." Benny said as he hugged JonJon tightly.

"*Cooper to Deflector Control*." Darin said loudly over the comm to be heard over the voices talking in the background.

"Deflector Control here." Connie said seriously.

"*I can't find Vincent anywhere. Sickbay said he was sent to Deck T but there's at least a hundred people down here and I can't find him anywhere... Someone could be standing on top of him and I wouldn't even know it*." Darin said on the verge of tears.

"Calm down Darin, he's here with us in Deflector Control." Susan said quickly.

"*Really?*" Darin asked hopefully.

"Yeah, he just got here and he's fine. Come on up." Susan said with concern.

"I'm just waiting on you, 'big brother'." Vincent called out playfully.

"*I'll be there in ten or fifteen minutes*." Darin said loudly as he tried to make himself heard over the clamor of voices.

"Where else are you going?" Susan asked loudly in response.

"*Nowhere. It's just going to take me that long to get through all these people*." Darin said frankly.

Before Susan could respond she heard Darin say, "*Ouch! Shit!*" Then the comm went silent.

"The *Enterprise* had better get here quick, these people aren't going to stay friendly for very long in conditions like this." Connie said gravely.

Susan nodded her agreement.

A whimper drew everyone's attention as Fizgig squirmed to try and get out of JonJon's grasp.

"I bet this little guy is hungry. Let me take him for a minute to get him some food and water." Susan said gently.

JonJon looked at Susan with fear then turned more into Benny's chest to hide Fizgig from her.

"JonJon, Fizgig will get sick if he doesn't eat and drink. This woman is just trying to help him." Benny said quietly.

JonJon looked up at Benny with tears in his eyes and whispered, "But he's all that's left. I can't let him go."

Vincent heard the words and carefully said, "Then why don't you go with him? I bet if you asked Susan nicely, she'd show you where the food and water are so you could feed him yourself."

JonJon glanced at Vincent, then at Susan with hope and question in his eyes.

Susan gave him a gentle smile and said, "Come back to the supply room and I'll show you where we keep the emergency rations."

JonJon reluctantly got off Benny's lap, then followed Susan into the supply room.

There was a long moment of silence in Deflector Control until it was broken by Connie asking, "He's an android, isn't he?"

Chapter 9

Benny looked at Connie cautiously for a moment, then said, "Yeah, he's an android. But please don't treat him like he's a thing because of it. His dad made a big deal when we moved to the Kimber colony to be sure that JonJon would be treated like everyone else. I don't know what JonJon's going to do without him."

Connie turned back to his console and looked it over as he said, "Back in the village where I grew up there was a rich old man on the outside of town who had an android like JonJon, the same model I think. Some of the old folks in town thought it was wrong or unnatural or something, but all us kids treated him like he was one of us."

Connie slowly turned in his chair to look at Benny before saying, "No one saw Leander for over a week. Um, that was his name. Anyway, we went up to the house to see if he was okay and we found them both dead."

Benny felt a chill run up his spine at the words.

"The coroner said that Mr. Tselios died in his sleep. All we could think is that after Leander found Mr. Tselios, he must have torn the cord off the toaster and hooked it into his data port... then plugged it in." Connie said slowly.

"Stop it." Vincent said firmly as he felt beside him to find Benny and take his hand.

"Vincent, I'm not trying to be mean. I'm trying to make you realize that JonJon might decide to do something like that now that his father is gone." Connie said with sympathy.

"Not just his father." Benny said quietly.

Connie looked at Benny with question, silently asking him to continue.

"JonJon lost both his parents and his brother." Benny fought to say past the lump in his throat.

"Guys, I don't know how an android thinks or feels, but I know without a doubt that they can love." Connie said seriously, then turned back to his console when a beeping drew his attention.

* * * * *

"What's our shield status Joe?" Commander M'Butu asked as he hurried into the main room of the town hall.

"Stable for the most part. A few microwave bursts have gotten through. I keep readjusting the electro-magnetic properties of the field generators to block the worst of the radiation... I just wish there was something I could do about the diminishing atmosphere." Joe said as he looked at Commander M'Butu with concern.

"It'll have to be enough. There are less than fifty people on the surface now. Get ready to pack it in." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"We're not going to be able to save the equipment. I don't know if you realize how bad it is out there right now. The instant the shields go down, everything here is going to go up in a burst of flame." Joe said and pointed to the scanner readings that were focused outside the shield.

Commander M'Butu looked at the read-out and his eyes went wide. The conditions outside the shield were far worse than he expected. The upper level of the atmosphere had completely broken down and was offering no protection from the solar radiation.

"It's a miracle that we're still alive with that hanging over us." Commander M'Butu said in amazement.

"I give it ten more minutes before the radiation overpowers the shields. Not that it matters since the oxygen level will drop below minimum safe levels in less than seven minutes." Joe said seriously.

"Everyone will be out in less than five. Do a detailed scan of the 'Cooper bridge', then call for a beam out. You've done everything that can be done here." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"I'd really like to stay until everyone else is out, just in case there's something I can do to buy them one or two more seconds." Joe said frankly.

"It's your decision Joe. I'll call you when the last person is beaming up. But don't wait any longer than you have to. I don't want to have to face Vincent if anything happens to you." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

"Yes sir." Joe said with a smile.

"Oh, and Joe?"

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to turn out the lights when you leave." Commander M'Butu said with a smile, then walked for the door.

Joe chuckled at the statement, then said, "I'll do that."

* * * * *

"Deflector Control." Connie answered cautiously as he glanced at Benny.

"*Connie, do you have any idea where Vincent might be? I've got a diplomatic transmission for him and he's not answering the page in the pool area.*" Debbie said in frustration.

"He's here with me Debs. Put it through to Deflector Control Auxiliary two." Connie said with a gentle smile.

"*Will do. Thanks Connie.*" Debbie said, sounding much relieved.

Vincent turned his chair and grasped the edge of the console to orient himself.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" Benny asked quietly as the screen came to life.

"No. Would you mind staying here? I can't see and might need some help." Vincent said shyly.

"*Vincent?*" A voice asked in nearly a squeak.

"Yeah. Who is this?" Vincent asked carefully.

"*OH MY GOD!!!! What happened to you?*" Lawrence wailed.

"It's my brother." Vincent said quietly in Benny's general direction.

"*How did this happen? Does it hurt? How... how...*" Lawrence screamed, then broke down into hysterical crying.

"He's freaking out." Benny said hesitantly as he watched the blond boy crying on the screen.

"I noticed." Vincent whispered to his side, then in a stronger voice directed at the console, Vincent said, "Lawrence."

"*You shouldn't have gone. You're just a little kid. You should have stayed here with me where you'd be safe. I know you can't stand me, but I should have found a way to make it work.*" Lawrence said in anguish.

"Lawrence!" Vincent barked.

"*Why did this have to happen to you? It's my fault. I should have tried harder to get you to stay. Cory said you were hurt but he never said...*" Lawrence cried, then let out a heart wrenching sob.

"LAWRENCE!" Vincent screamed at the crying voice.

"Um... he's gone." Benny said hesitantly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Deacon, are you there?"

"*Right here*." Deacon said with distraction as he fought the urge to run to Lawrence and comfort him.

"Good. Will you tell Lawrence that I'm really okay? I've just got this crust of dead skin on me. As soon as they have time to peel me, I'll be fine." Vincent said seriously.

"*Are you really okay?*" Deacon asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I really am, I promise. Can you try to calm him down? I need to tell him something important." Vincent asked hopefully.

"*I'll try... I'm glad you're alright*." Deacon finished quietly.

"Thanks Deacon." Vincent said shyly.

"Now he's gone too." Benny said from Vincent's side.

"That was my brother's um... boyfriend." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Oh." Benny said quietly, sensing that Vincent wouldn't want to talk about it now.

There was a moment of silence, then Benny whispered, "I can see them on the other side of the room. They're kissing."

"Yeah. They do that a lot." Vincent said in a tone of long suffering.

"No. You don't get it. I mean, they're REALLY kissing. I think maybe they're gonna do it." Benny said in shock as he watched the two boys kissing passionately.

Vincent shook his head, then said in a loud firm voice, "Guys. We're on subspace."

Benny chuckled at Lawrence and Deacon's surprised expressions as they realized that they weren't alone in the room.

A moment later Lawrence took his seat before the terminal and shyly said, "*I'm sorry Vince. When I saw you I just kind of...*"

"...screamed like a girl. I heard you. Lawrence, can you just listen to me for one minute? Then you can get back to your freaking out or making out or whatever." Vincent said sternly.

Lawrence nodded that he would listen.

"He's nodding." Benny whispered.

"Lawrence, when I was down on the planet, I thought I was going to die." Vincent said seriously.

Lawrence let out a little 'eep', but did a reasonable job of keeping calm and quiet.

"I was alone down there and had time to think about a lot of stuff." Vincent said carefully.

Lawrence calmed down and focused his attention on what Vincent was saying.

"I'm sorry for the way I treated you Lawrence. I know that I was just doing what Dad did but... well, that's no excuse. I promise that I'll never make fun of you or call you names again." Vincent said firmly.

"*It's okay Vince. You were just a kid, you really didn't know any better.*" Lawrence said quietly.

Vincent nodded and said, "Maybe not, but I do know better now and I feel bad about all that stuff. I love you Lawrence and from now on I'll try to be the kind of brother you deserve."

"*I love you too. And you're just perfect the way you are.*" Lawrence said, and it was obvious that he was crying again.

Vincent chuckled and said, "I'm a long way from perfect, but I'm really trying to be better. Can I talk to Deacon for a second?"

"*Oh. Um... sure.*" Lawrence said with surprise.

A moment later Deacon took Lawrence's place in front of the terminal and said, "*I'm here.*"

Vincent ducked his head shyly and said, "I'm sorry I wasn't nice to you when I was on Earth."

"*That's okay. I wasn't that nice to you either.*" Deacon said honestly.

"If you'll tell me what I can do to make it up to you, I'll do whatever I can." Vincent said quietly.

There was a long moment of silence, then Deacon said, "*I know it's going to sound silly, but there's something you could do that would really mean a lot to me.*"

"What's that?" Vincent asked carefully.

In a whisper Deacon said, "*Sometime when you send Lawrence a letter or card or something, I don't know... just kind of include me, I guess.*"

"I don't understand." Vincent said slowly.

"*I hate feeling left out and ignored. When I met you the first time, that's kind of how I felt. I just thought that if you were sending Lawrence a message and you thought about it, maybe you could say 'hi' or something to me too.*" Deacon said hopefully.

"I will Deacon. I promise." Vincent said peacefully.

"*Lawrence has something else he wants to say.*" Deacon said quickly.

"Okay. I'll talk to you later Deacon." Vincent said with a gentle smile.

"*I just wanted you to tell my dad that I love him and miss him.*" Lawrence said quickly.

"I'll tell him, I promise." Vincent said with a smile.

"*I'd better get going now. I'm glad you're okay. I love you Vince.*" Lawrence said as tears began to well up in his eyes.

"I love you too." Vincent said with a gentle smile.

When the terminal went dark, Benny whispered, "He's gone."

Vincent nodded a little bit sadly, then said, "Thanks for helping me Benny."

"No problem." Benny said cheerfully.

"Would you mind helping me with something else? I need to get changed. I smell like dog pee." Vincent finished quietly.

"Sure, let's go." Benny said as he stood and guided Vincent's hand to his arm.

* * * * *

Joe smiled as his scan of the 'Cooper Bridge' completed.

He glanced at the readings on the shield generator and noticed that the microwave radiation was increasing faster than expected and as a result, the entire system was on the verge of overload.

After a split second of consideration, Joe shook his head and grabbed the communicator off his belt, then heard a sound from above him.

Before he could dodge completely out of the way, a large chunk of plaster and a wooden beam had fallen on top of him, pinning him to the floor.

As he strained to work his left arm free, he heard a beeping from his communicator.

Joe looked around the room quickly and finally spotted his communicator in the floor, nearly four feet away.

An alarm sounded from the field generators and Joe could only speculate on which of many horrible scenarios was about to play out.

His vision seemed to narrow into a long white tunnel as he felt himself fighting for breath.

* * * * *

It took a few minutes for Benny to find where Rad had stored Vincent's suitcase.

While Vincent was changing into a uniform, Benny looked around the supply room.

There were two women he didn't know sleeping snuggled together at the far end of the room. A few sleeping bags down from them Channing was fast asleep.

A sound drew Benny's attention and he watched with amusement as Susan and JonJon were feeding Fizgig.

"I'm ready." Vincent said as he pulled on his boots.

Benny hurried to Vincent's side and helped him to stand.

As Vincent and Benny walked back into the main room of Deflector Control, a general announcement sounded over the comm.

"*Attention all hands, please stand by for an announcement from the captain.*"

There was a long moment of silence as Vincent heard the murmur of voices outside Deflector Control begin to quiet.

"*This is Captain Leland Byrne, may I please have your attention.*" The Captain said firmly.

"***Please accept my apologies for the current conditions, circumstances didn't allow us much choice in the matter. If you will listen carefully, we can begin to take steps to make everyone more comfortable.***"

"***We will rendezvous with the 'Enterprise' in approximately ten minutes. At that time the cargo and personnel being transported to the Alpha Centauri station will be transferred to the 'Enterprise'.***"

"***Likewise, we will transport the critically injured and those who wish to return to Earth.***"

"*When the 'Enterprise' departs, the 'Yorktown' will be traveling to a distant star system listed on the charts as SA-14.*"

"*The Soleen-Avalla are a rather... isolated race. In point of fact, no Federation representative has ever been allowed in their area of space. We have only ever had contact with them via subspace.*"

"*Be that as it may, Starfleet Command made a general announcement of the recent events and the Soleen-Avalla offered our displaced colonists a new home.*"

A moment of silence fell over the ship as everyone absorbed the statement.

"*I don't have many details to share with you about your new home. I only know that the outpost is located in a solar system that borders the Soleen-Avalla system and that it has stood unmanned for over one hundred years.*"

"*The 'Yorktown'will transport you to your new home and remain in orbit until we are certain that you will be able to sustain yourselves.*"

"*Now on to our current situation.*"

"*Those who will be transferring to the Enterprise, please contact Commander M'Butu's office to receive shuttle assignments. Those guests who will be remaining on the 'Yorktown', please gather yourselves into groups or families, then find one of the security officers that will be circulating all decks. They will assign you quarters.*"

"*If everyone will be patient for just a bit longer, we will get this sorted and be on our way as quickly as possible.*"

"*There is one other thing. Would the person or persons responsible for the livestock on the northern edge of the colony please report to cargo bay two immediately. Your animals didn't react well to being transported.*"

"*I will make further announcements as information becomes available. Thank you for your attention.*"

* * * * *

Joe noticed that music had started playing in the distance, it was an unfamiliar tune, but it was pleasant.

He looked around cautiously and recognized where he was. It was the gymnasium of his old high school. It was decorated in the school colors with crepe paper and hand made signs announcing homecoming.

As he looked around, he didn't recognize any of the couples dancing around him, then he looked down at himself and noticed that he was wearing his Starfleet dress uniform.

"It's good to see you again Joe." A delighted feminine voice said from behind him.

Joe turned and looked at the vaguely familiar woman curiously.

"Well, how's that for a kick in the ego. I go to all the trouble of setting the perfect scene, and my favorite ex-husband doesn't even recognize me." She said dramatically.

"Peggy?" Joe asked with shock.

She nodded and gave him a gentle smile.

"How are you?" Joe asked in wonder.

"Dead." She said frankly.

"Oh yeah. I'm sorry. Does that mean I'm dead too?" Joe asked hesitantly.

"Maybe, but I don't think so. I was just checking on Vincent and noticed your um... situation. You were so close to the veil, that I just couldn't miss the opportunity to talk to you again. How about a dance for your dearly departed ex-wife?" Peggy asked peacefully.

Joe reluctantly nodded and took her into his arms.

"You're just as gentle as I remember." She said with a smile as she began to move to the music.

Joe looked into her eyes and smiled at the peace and love that shined there.

"I really loved you. Did you know that?" She said quietly.

Joe hesitantly shook his head.

She giggled and said, "Well, admittedly, not while we were married, but years later, after I married Victor... Oh, did I love you. When I was at my lowest points, I'd remember back to some of the silly, sweet things you used to do for me and I'd know that at least once in my life, someone really loved me for me."

"I loved you too Peggy. I'm sorry things worked out the way they did." Joe said sadly as he continued to glide her around the dance floor.

"I'm not. Well, I have my regrets of course. But I had two beautiful, wonderful children who made the rest of my life worth it. And thanks to you I know that they're both going to have wonderful futures. Thank you for taking care of Vincent. I can't think of anyone else in the world... or the universe for that matter, who could have put him on the right path." Peggy said peacefully.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do now." Joe said as he looked around the room in confusion.

"What do you want to do?" Peggy asked gently.

"I want to go back and take care of Vincent." Joe said hopefully.

"Well, I'm not sure, but I think you need to go through that door." Peggy said and stopped dancing long enough to point to a doorway.

"I've got to go now. Vincent needs me." Joe said with regret.

Peggy smiled peacefully and said, "And you need him too. Go on."

Joe nodded and released her.

"Let the boys know that I love them." Peggy whispered, then gave Joe a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"I'll never let them forget." Joe said as he walked toward the door.

Peggy gave a joyful smile and a small wave as Joe walked through the door and into the light.

* * * * *

"Wow. They really found us a new colony." Benny said in wonder.

"The Captain said that no one's been there for a hundred years. I hope it's still in good enough shape for you to live there." Vincent said speculatively.

"We don't need much. You should have seen what we started with at Kimber." Benny said frankly.

A beeping comm signal drew everyone's attention.

"Deflector control." Connie answered hesitantly.

"*This is Nurse Young from Sickbay. I need to speak with Benny.*"

"I'm here. What happened? How are they?" Benny asked in panic as he ran across the room to Connie's side.

"*Your father regained consciousness during the captain's announcement and is asking for you.*" The young man said carefully.

"I'll be right there." Benny said quickly.

"*Ask for Nurse Young when you get here or they might not let you in.*"

"I will. Thank you." Benny said as he rushed toward the door, then froze in his tracks as he saw Vincent sitting blind and alone.

"I'll take care of him, go see your father." Jimmy said assuringly.

Benny glanced at Jimmy, then back at Vincent with indecision.

"I'll be fine. Go." Vincent said sternly.

"But JonJon..." Benny began to say.

"We'll take care of him. Go!" Vincent said firmly.

Benny nodded and nearly walked face first into the door.

"I've got to release it from here." Connie said and pressed the door release.

When the door opened, Benny quickly rushed out.

Before the door could close, someone else slipped in.

* * * * *

Joe walked down the tunnel and could see vague images of people all around him.

He recognized his third grade teacher, then the old doctor that he used to go to when he was a kid.

Each of the people invoked a different memory as he passed them.

Finally at the end of the tunnel, he saw a vague shape standing before him.

"Am I dead?" Joe asked the shape cautiously.

A very familiar grin was the only answer.

* * * * *

As Benny stepped out the door, he noticed a complete difference in the mood.

When he had entered Deflector Control, he had felt hopelessness and despair in the hallway. Now there was a buzz of excitement and happiness flowing through the room.

"Benny, did you hear it? They found us a home." A woman asked Benny as he walked down the catwalk.

"Yes. I heard." Benny responded and couldn't help but smile at her joy.

"I was so afraid that we were all going to get shipped off to Earth and split up and never see each other again." She said with a radiant, peaceful smile.

"Please excuse me. My father is waiting on me. I'll talk to you later Mrs. De Luca." Benny said quickly.

"Yes you will. We'll be having our regular class as soon as we have a school to conduct it in... And you still owe me a book report." Mrs. De Luca said firmly.

Benny stopped and looked at her with disbelief.

She chuckled and said, "Just kidding, go on."

Benny smiled at the joke, then hurried down the catwalk toward the turbo lift.

* * * * *

As the haze cleared from Joe's vision, the grin remained before him.

"Do you think I'd let you die?" Rad asked with a huge grin as he walked to the transporter pad to help Joe to stand.

"Ow. My shoulder." Joe said with effort as he stood.

"I've been watching your life signs for the past ten minutes. As soon as they started to flicker, I beamed you out of there." Rad said seriously.

"Thanks. The ceiling caved in on me and I dropped my communicator." Joe said semi coherently.

"Now I see where Vincent gets it." Rad said with a chuckle.

"Do you know where he is? I need to see him." Joe said with effort.

"Hold on Joe. The last thing he needs is to see you like this. Go to the sickbay and get your shoulder taken care of, then get cleaned up. You'll just worry the hell out of him if you go to him now." Rad said seriously.

"Do I really look that bad?" Joe asked cautiously.

"You're all bloody, your hair is singed and... wait, why do you have lipstick on your cheek?" Rad finished with a wide eyed expression.

Joe looked Rad in the eyes and gave a shy smile.

"You go now. I'll stop by Deflector Control after my shift and you can tell me all about it." Rad said as he stopped at the door.

"I'll do that. Thank you Rad." Joe said seriously.

"Anytime my friend." Rad said with a smile.

* * * * *

"I didn't think I was going to make it." Darin said past his panting breaths.

"What happened to you?" Connie asked with concern and noticed that Darin's right eye was swollen and blackening.

"Someone hit me, it's nothing. Where's Vincent?" Darin asked in a rush.

"I'm right here." Vincent said from his seat.

Darin stared at Vincent in horror.

Vincent waited and tried to imagine Darin's expression.

"Does it hurt much?" Darin finally asked in a whisper.

Vincent smiled and said, "No. It doesn't hurt at all. I'm fine."

Darin looked at Vincent carefully, then cautiously said, "I know it isn't kid time, but if you'd let me, I'd really like to give you a hug right now."

Vincent chuckled and said, "Okay. Just this once."

Darin walked to Vincent and guided him to stand, then pulled him into a tight hug of relief.

Vincent smiled and returned the hug.

* * * * *

Benny finally got off the catwalk and worked his way through the groups of happily chattering people, toward the turbo lift. As he got closer to the turbo lift he noticed that there were four security officers, each one talking to a group of people.

After a few more seconds of squeezing past people, Benny stepped toward the turbo lift and one of the security officers held up a hand to caution him to stop.

After the officer excused himself from the group he was talking to, he took a small step to stand before Benny and said, "I'm sorry, but you'll need to get in line and wait to be assigned quarters."

"I'm not here for that, I need to go to sickbay." Benny said hesitantly.

"Oh? Are you feeling sick?" The security officer asked as he looked Benny over for signs of illness or injury.

"No. I just got a call that my father is awake in sickbay and asking for me." Benny said urgently, hoping that the security officer wasn't going to give him too much trouble.

"I see." The officer said and stopped to consider what he should do.

"He's hurt really bad and... I don't know if this might be my last chance to talk to him." Benny choked out as his eyes filled with tears.

The security officer took hold of Benny's arm.

Benny looked down at his arm, then at the officer with question.

No one in line made any protest as they watched Benny being guided past the other security officers and toward the turbo lift.

"Go take care of your dad. I hope everything works out for you."

"Thanks." Benny whispered.

The officer nodded, then released Benny's arm as the turbo lift door opened.

* * * * *

As Benny stepped off the turbo lift, he was surprised to see people laying, lined along the walls leaving a walking path open down the middle of the hallway.

Medical teams were efficiently working their way up and down the corridor and checking on the condition of each patient.

Benny looked down at the people as he slowly passed them and recognized almost every one of them.

There was a security officer standing by the sickbay door watching Benny approach.

"My dad's in there and Nurse Young called me and said that he's asking for me." Benny said seriously.

"If your father is well enough to speak then you'll need to go into the room down there. We only have critical care patients in here."

Benny realized that the other door was the door to the convalescent ward and nodded.

"Good luck kid." The security officer said as he watched Benny walk away.

* * * * *

Benny cautiously stepped into the Sickbay door and looked around.

What had seemed like such a large and sterile room earlier in the day was now crowded and almost claustrophobic.

Every bed had been filled and so had the cots that had been placed between the beds.

"I'm sorry, only patients are allowed in here." Dr. Perry said quickly as she ran her medical tricorder over a young girl.

"Nurse Young told me to come up here. He said that my dad was asking for me." Benny offered quietly.

"Oh. *You're* Benny?" Dr. Perry asked carefully as she looked up from the tricorder.

Benny nodded cautiously.

"Nurse Young had to go to Deck T. Come with me, your father is right over here. He's been very insistent about talking to you. Please try not to keep him awake too long." Dr. Perry said as she led him across the room.

"Okay. Thank you, Doctor." Benny said, then rushed to his father's side.

"Benny?" His father asked as he looked around.

"Yeah Dad, I'm right here." Benny said and looked closely at his father who seemed to look small and frail in the bed.

"How are you doing Benny-boy?" His dad asked as he squinted and strained to see his son.

"I'm fine Dad. I'm not hurt at all." Benny said as he noticed that his father's eyes were nearly swollen shut.

"Did you hear what the Captain said?"

"Yeah Dad, I heard it." Benny said past the lump in his throat as his eyes filled with tears.

"You need to go to the new colony and get us a place set up."

"But I want to go with you and mom and Callie and make sure you're all okay." Benny said quietly.

"Listen son. I know the doctors will do everything they can to fix us up. But if you come with us, we won't have anyplace to go when we're better. I need you to go to the new colony and make a place for us."

"Okay Dad, I'll go." Benny said quietly as he fought back his tears.

"If you can send us pictures and tell us all about our new home, it will give us something to look forward to."

"Dad, JonJon's family was killed in the storm. I was wondering if it'd be okay if he came to live with us." Benny asked quietly.

"Son, I've been watching you struggle to try and discover who you are. Some days you're my little boy, and others you're an independent young man."

"I wish I could give you a little more time to be a child, but we don't have that luxury anymore. I'm going to have to depend on you to take charge of things at the new colony and be the man of the family for a while. You decide what you think is the right thing to do and I'll stand by your decisions."

"Okay Dad. I'll make you proud." Benny said with tears in his eyes.

Benny felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Dr. Perry looking at him sympathetically.

"Your father needs his rest." She said quietly.

"I'll send you a picture of the new place as soon as I get there. I love you Dad." Benny said in a whisper.

"I love you too Benny-boy, now go and make our future." His father said as his eyes drifted shut.

Benny stood for a moment and watched his father drift into sleep, then started silently crying.

* * * * *

"Vincent, your little friend needs you." Susan said as she hurried out of the back room.

"Can you take me to him?" Vincent asked as he stood.

Susan took hold of Vincent's arm and guided him into the supply room.

"I don't know what happened, he was petting his dog, then he just started crying and won't stop." Susan said quietly.

"I don't know if he'll listen to me, but I'll try to help him until Benny gets back." Vincent said as he took unsteady steps across the sleeping bags in the floor.

"Sit down, you're right beside him." Susan said gently.

Vincent heard JonJon's whimpering and carefully sat down.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Susan asked with concern.

Vincent felt beside him and found JonJon curled into a ball, crying quietly.

"No. I think I'll be okay. I'll call you if I need help." Vincent said seriously.

After a moment to be sure that Susan had left the room, Vincent laid down beside JonJon and did his best to hug the boy.

"You're not alone." Vincent whispered as he laid his head against JonJon's back and hugged him tightly.

"Yes I am." The boy whispered in return.

"JonJon, you've got people who love you and care about you or you wouldn't be here right now." Vincent said carefully.

JonJon thought about the words, then turned himself around and hugged Vincent in return.

"It's going to be okay JonJon." Vincent said quietly.

"How can it be?" JonJon asked desperately.

"I don't know yet, but I've got lots of friends who can help me make sure that you'll be okay." Vincent said quietly.

"You're nice. I think I like you." JonJon said as he snuggled into Vincent's chest.

"I think you're nice too. Now try to get some rest. I'm sure you'll feel better after you've had some sleep." Vincent said as he gently smoothed JonJon's hair with one hand.

Vincent thought he felt something wet on his fingertips and wished for the thousandth time that day that he could see.

* * * * *

Benny felt an arm come around him and looked up in surprise.

"How are you doing Benny?" Joe asked in a gentle voice.

Benny turned and hugged Joe tightly.

Joe held Benny gently, then looked up as Dr. Perry approached.

"Come back tomorrow and I'll check out that shoulder again. And try to take it easy Joe." Dr. Perry said gently.

"I'll do my best." Joe said in a quiet voice as he held Benny carefully.

"You two should get out of here now." Dr. Perry said quietly.

"We will." Joe said in nearly a whisper as he tried to guide Benny to walk with him.

"How are my mom and my sister?" Benny asked suddenly.

Dr. Perry looked at Benny with concern and said, "I think your mother will probably recover just fine, in fact, she has a better chance of a complete recovery than your father."

"What's wrong with my dad?" Benny asked desperately.

"His spinal cord was severely injured. It's a real mess and there's no way to tell just how bad it is until the swelling has gone down... there's a chance that he may not walk again." Dr. Perry said seriously.

Joe held Benny more tightly to offer whatever comfort he could.

"What about my mom and Callie?" Benny asked in a small voice.

"Your mom's injuries are severe and it will take several months and quite a few surgeries to get her put back to right. But I've seen people fully recover from worse." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"And Callie?" Benny asked, even more quietly.

"I just don't know Benny. I wish I could say that she's going to be fine, but the truth is that she could go either way right now. We're doing everything we can." Dr. Perry said quietly.

"Can I see them?" Benny asked hopefully.

"No, I'm sorry. It just isn't possible. They're both in the critical care ward and... you just can't." Dr. Perry said with regret.

"Will you call us if there's any change?" Joe asked quietly.

"I promise that I'll call you right away if anything at all happens." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Come on Benny, let's get out of here." Joe said as he urged Benny to walk with him.

* * * * *

Vincent heard a whirring noise in the supply room with him and turned to face it, even though he couldn't see.

"Vincent?" A small shaky voice asked.

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly, not sure of who was in the room with him.

After a long moment of silence, Vincent hesitantly said, "Can you tell me who it is? I can't see you."

"It's Rory."

Vincent turned slightly to be more comfortable and continued to hold JonJon who had fallen asleep against his chest.

"Hi Rory." Vincent said quietly, not sure about what he should do.

"I'm sorry that I'm the one who has to do this Vincent. Cory called me and told me that since I'm the only Clan member out here, that I need to check this out." Rory rambled.

Vincent smiled peacefully and said, "You don't have to worry about that. I know you're just doing what needs to be done and I'm not mad at you at all."

"Oh good. Thanks Vincent. I really wasn't wanting to upset my only friend in this part of the galaxy." Rory said with relief.

Vincent smiled at being called Rory's friend, then said, "I don't know exactly what you're going to do, but I'll help you however I can."

"I just need to figure out why this happened to you. Maybe if you tell me what happened, it will help." Rory said seriously.

"Um. Okay, I guess it's really pretty simple. There was this damaged reactor that was going to explode and kill a few hundred people if someone didn't shut it down. They couldn't transport anyone in there because of the radiation and none of the adults could fit through the underground pipe to get into the control room."

"They asked me if I would go in and shut it down, so I did. I got some radiation, but I really don't know if I would have got sick or died from it. This thing with my skin is what happened to me in the transporter. It was kind of an accident and there wasn't any way anyone could know that it was going to happen." Vincent said carefully.

Rory thought about the words, then asked, "If the adults couldn't go into the control room and shut it down, couldn't they send some other kid?"

Vincent shook his head and said, "The main control panel was dead and I had to reroute power from the emergency systems to the main before I could shut it down. You could tell a kid how to shut down the reactor, but there's no way some other kid would have known how to shunt the power into a new power configuration. I bet there's some crewmen on the *Yorktown* right now who don't know how to do that."

"Okay, so you were the only person small enough who knew how to do the job." Rory said slowly.

"Yeah. It sounds really simple when you say it that way." Vincent said distantly.

"What do you mean?" Rory asked carefully.

"Think about it Rory. Captain Byrne and Commander M'Butu had to decide what to do. I had the easy part, all I had to do was go in there and risk my own life. Captain Byrne and Commander M'Butu had to ask someone else to risk their life while they were safe... Can you imagine how that must have felt? I don't know if I'd have the guts to make a decision like that."

"I never even thought about that." Rory said quietly.

JonJon snuffled against Vincent's chest for a moment, then came to rest.

Vincent started stroking JonJon's hair gently, then quietly said, "Rory, this is JonJon. He'd probably be dead right now if I hadn't gone down there and shut down the reactor. Him and a few hundred other people are still alive right now because Captain Byrne and Commander M'Butu had the guts to ask me to go in there. They did what was right and if we ever end up facing the same kind of problem again, I would want them to do exactly the same thing."

"No. Even if you stay, they're going to have to promise that they won't put you in danger like that again." Rory said firmly.

"Then I might as well go back to Earth with the *Enterprise*. Captain Byrne doesn't need another passenger on his ship. He needs a crewman to do a job; A real job that's sometimes dangerous." Vincent said firmly.

"But Vincent, you weren't even on board for a full day." Rory said in an imploring tone.

"It happened when we got the distress call. It doesn't matter if that was my first day or fiftieth day or five hundredth day on the ship." Vincent said firmly.

"You really want to stay here, don't you." Rory asked quietly.

"I belong here. The people I work with don't treat me like a kid. They depend on me to do my job. Instead of sitting in school and studying so I can dream about 'someday' doing 'something' I'm out here actually doing stuff that matters." Vincent said seriously.

Rory nodded in thought, then asked, "They really don't treat you like a kid?"

"If you need proof, just look at what happened today. If they thought I was just a kid, there's no way they would have even let me transport down to the surface. But instead they looked at me as a crewman who could do what needed to be done... I just hope that they'll keep looking at me that way after all this." Vincent finished quietly.

"I don't think you need to be worried about that Crewman Winters." A firm voice said.

"Captain Byrne?" Vincent asked in confusion, then tried to gently shift JonJon off his chest.

"At ease Crewman. That young man looks like he needs the rest." Captain Byrne said in a more gentle tone.

"Grandfather Sarek and Uncle Chip came over here with me, Captain Byrne met us in the shuttle bay and came down here with us." Rory said quietly.

"I'm sorry Captain, I didn't know you were here." Vincent said shyly.

"Crewman Winters, when you came aboard the *Yorktown* I tried to explain what it means to be a member of the crew. I wasn't sure if you understood what I was saying, but now I have no doubt. Even if circumstances force you to leave us for a time, I will be proud to claim you as a member of my crew." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Thank you sir." Vincent said in his 'mature' voice.

"Captain Byrne. With your permission I'd like to take Crewman Winters to the *Enterprise* so Doctor McCoy can help him with his condition." Chip said firmly.

"It's okay Commander Dodds. I'm not hurting and I can wait until the people from the colony are taken care of." Vincent said as he tried to determine where Chip was in the room.

"From the look of things, it still may be some time before Dr. Perry can attend to you. Since the most seriously injured patients will be transferred to the *Enterprise* when Dr. McCoy is prepared to receive them, I believe the doctors should have time to take care of you if you go now." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Can JonJon come with me? He doesn't need to be alone, and I promised Benny that I'd take care of him." Vincent asked hopefully.

"I don't see any problem with that. Just hold still for a second and I'll get him." Chip said quietly.

Vincent laid back and let Chip pick JonJon up from his chest.

After a moment, Vincent stood then said, "I'm going to need someone to help me. I can't see."

"Come Grandson. I will guide you." Sarek said peacefully.

"Thank you Grandfather."

* * * * *

"Where is Vincent?" Joe asked as he walked into Deflector Control with Benny at his side.

"You just missed him." Connie said frankly.

"Where did he go?" Joe asked with concern.

"I'm guessing he went to the *Enterprise*. He left with Captain Byrne, Commander Dodds from the *Enterprise*, someone who I'm pretty sure was Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan and a red headed kid in a wheelchair." Connie said seriously.

"Rory." Joe said absently.

Benny walked into the supply room, then back into the main room and looked around before asking, "Did JonJon go with Vincent?"

"Yeah. Commander Dodds was carrying him." Jimmy said from across the room.

Joe glanced at Darin and found him looking back with concern.

"I'm okay." Joe said before Darin could ask.

"What happened?" Darin asked quietly.

"Not much. I just stayed with the shield generators until the building started coming down around me. I was hit in the shoulder by... something. A piece of the ceiling I guess. The next thing I knew I was laying in transporter room two with Rad grinning at me." Joe said with a smile.

"You look like you got singed." Susan said from her station.

"A little bit. I needed a haircut anyway." Joe said with a shrug, then winced at the movement of his shoulder.

"Should we go make sure Vincent's okay?" Benny asked with concern.

"Don't worry about Vincent. There are almost as many people on the *Enterprise* who care about Vincent as there are on the *Yorktown*." Joe said seriously.

Benny nodded his acceptance, but didn't look convinced.

The comm alerted everyone to an incoming message.

Connie reluctantly pressed the button and said, "Deflector Control."

"*Yorktown Deflector Control, this is the shuttlecraft Galileo...*"

Chapter 10

"What?" JonJon asked as he looked around in confusion.

"Don't worry JonJon, we're just going to the *Enterprise* for a few minutes so the doctor can look at me." Vincent said calmly.

"Where are we?" JonJon asked in a daze.

"You are on the shuttlecraft Galileo." Chip said from the front of the shuttle.

"How did I get here?" JonJon asked as he noticed the red headed boy in a wheelchair looking at him.

"Commander Dodds carried you. Don't worry, as soon as I get done seeing the doctor we'll go back to the *Yorktown* and find Benny." Vincent said assuringly.

"Where's Fizgig?" JonJon asked in panic as he started looking around.

"He's back on the *Yorktown*, you'll see him in a few minutes." Vincent said, feeling that he was losing control of the situation.

"I can't lose him. He's all that's left. He's all I have..." JonJon said in a voice that abruptly broke into sobbing.

Vincent felt his way over to JonJon and pulled him into a hug.

"What happened to him?" Rory asked in a sympathetic voice.

"His whole family died down on the planet. Fizgig is his dog, it's all that JonJon has left of his old life." Vincent said as he held the sobbing boy to his chest.

"I will return shortly." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

After a moment, Vincent whispered, "Is he gone?"

"Yeah. He's up front with Uncle Chip." Rory whispered in return.

"I keep forgetting that Grandfather Sarek is here. He's so quiet." Vincent said as he rubbed JonJon's back gently.

"Shhh. Here he comes." Rory said with a smile.

"I have made arrangements to have the young man's companion animal transported to the *Enterprise*." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"Thank you Grandfather." Vincent said sincerely, then in a quieter voice, he asked, "Did you hear that JonJon?"

"Hear what?" JonJon asked in confusion.

"Ambassador Sarek fixed it so Fizgig would be transported to the *Enterprise*. You'll have him back in just a minute." Vincent said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Really?" JonJon asked hopefully and looked at Ambassador Sarek to receive a single nod.

"Thank you Ambassador." JonJon said shyly as he cuddled into Vincent's chest.

"To ease distress is logical." Ambassador Sarek said simply.

* * * * *

"We're inside the *Enterprise* now." Rory said seriously.

"I finally get to visit the *Enterprise* and I can't see her." Vincent said in a grumble.

"Well, with any luck, you'll be able to see her when you leave sickbay." Chip said as he walked from the front of the shuttle.

"Yeah." Vincent said then coaxed JonJon to stand.

"Where are we going?" JonJon asked in a fearful tone.

"To the sickbay." Vincent said seriously as he felt someone take his hand to guide him.

"You said Fizgig was going to be here, where is he?" JonJon asked as he looked around the shuttle in panic.

"Look out the window. There he is." Rory said quickly.

JonJon hurried to the window and yelped with delight as he saw Benny carrying Fizgig toward the shuttle.

Chip opened the door of the shuttle and was surprised to see JonJon dart past him to the boy that was approaching.

"Your friend is really a mess." Rory said to Vincent quietly.

"Yeah. I guess losing his family messed with his head." Vincent said carefully.

"Come Grandson." Ambassador Sarek said peacefully and guided Vincent to the door.

"There are two steps down." Sarek said calmly.

Vincent felt with his foot until he found the first step, then took the second step more easily.

"Do you require assistance Rory?" Ambassador Sarek asked calmly as he guided Vincent to stand aside.

"No thank you Grandfather. Uncle Chip has it." Rory said as Chip gently eased him down the steps.

* * * * *

"We brought you a patient Christine." Chip said as he pushed Rory into the sickbay.

"Oh, aren't you feeling well Rory?" Christine asked with concern.

"Not me, him." Rory said and motioned to Vincent who was holding on to Ambassador Sarek's arm.

"Oh, I see." Christine said with surprise.

"Do you have someone available who can take care of him?" Chip asked casually.

"Of course. Dr. McCoy is taking care of preparations for the critical care patients who will be transported from the *Yorktown*. While he's doing that, I can take care of this young man." Christine said gently.

"You're Dr. Chapel aren't you?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yes I am. And who are you?" Christine asked as she looked at Vincent carefully.

"I'm Vincent. I met you Wednesday night at Commander Dodds' house. I asked you about your electrolyte replacement therapy to help people who've been hit with high stun phasers." Vincent said seriously.

"Oh. What happened to you Vincent?" Christine said with wide eyes.

"The transporter made a little mistake." Vincent said with a small smile.

Christine's eyes got even wider.

"Vincent got into some radiation on the surface which caused a transporter malfunction when he tried to beam up through the storms and solar

radiation. Dr. Perry says he's okay underneath, he's just covered with lots of scabby skin." Benny said, hoping he was explaining it well.

"Oh, I see. Well that shouldn't be too much of a problem to fix, come with me to the biobed and I'll see exactly what needs to be done." Christine said as she took Vincent's hand and guided him to the nearest biobed.

"Um, Dr. Chapel, could you do something for me?" Vincent asked in a whisper.

"Sure, just name it." Christine whispered in return as she helped him up on the bed.

"Would you look at my friend JonJon to make sure he's okay? He's acting really funny and I think he might be bleeding on the back of his head. I'm really worried about him." Vincent said seriously.

"Which one is he? The blond or the brunette?" Christine asked in a whisper.

"The blond I guess. I've never seen him but Benny has brown hair. JonJon's the one holding the dog." Vincent said in thought.

"Lay still for a moment so I can get some good readings from the biobed and I'll talk to him." Christine said assuringly.

"Thanks." Vincent said with a small smile.

Christine walked across the room and said, "Excuse me, but are you JonJon?"

JonJon looked up at her and nodded cautiously.

"Do you think you could help me for just a minute?" Christine asked in a friendly voice.

"What can I do?" JonJon asked with surprise.

"I just need to be sure the other biobed is working properly before the people from your colony get here. If you wouldn't mind I'd like for you to lay down on it for a minute to see that it's working." Christine said with a gentle smile.

JonJon reluctantly nodded and started walking toward the bed.

"You'll need to leave the dog with your friend. Two bio-signs might confuse it." Christine said gently.

JonJon handed the dog to Benny then walked to the biobed and climbed on.

"Just lay still for a few seconds and we'll be done." Christine said, then turned on the bed.

After a moment of looking at the readings, Christine quickly grabbed a hypo spray and pressed it to JonJon's neck.

"What are you doing to him?" Benny asked in panic.

"Commander, I need Dr. McCoy, STAT." Christine said in a rush as she started gathering surgical instruments.

Chip nodded and ran to the doctor's office.

"What's wrong?" Benny asked in confusion.

"No time." Christine said as she began to lay the surgical instruments out on a tray.

"What is it Dr. Chapel?" McCoy said as he hurried into the room.

"See for yourself." Christine said and gestured to the readings on the biobed.

"Dear God! Hand me a scalpel and get ready to assist." McCoy said as he rushed to JonJon's side.

"What's wrong with him?" Benny asked in a small voice.

"Chip, get them out of here." McCoy said firmly.

"Come on Vincent. It looks like you're going to get to wait a little while longer." Chip said with resignation.

Vincent climbed off the biobed and held onto Chip's arm as he walked out of sickbay.

* * * * *

"Would it be okay if I go in the other room? I think Solak is in there." Rory asked quietly.

"I think that will be fine." Chip said as the group sat and waited to find out what was wrong with JonJon.

Rory nodded, then moved his wheelchair down the hall to the other sickbay door.

"Could you see anything to tell you what's wrong?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"No. I couldn't see enough of his readings to get a sense of what was going on." Chip said honestly.

Silence fell over the group as they waited and each thought their own thoughts.

* * * * *

"Vincent, Solak says that he can take care of you if you want." Rory said as he entered the hallway again.

"I want to be here when the doctors are done with JonJon." Vincent said quietly.

"Grandson. It is logical to assume that the opportunity to rectify your condition will lessen as the patients from the *Yorktown* are brought on board the *Enterprise*. You can wait just as effectively while having the procedure done and we will see that you are notified when there is any new information." Ambassador Sarek said firmly.

"Okay Grandfather. I guess that's logical." Vincent said in resignation and stood.

Benny looked at Vincent, then at the door to where JonJon was being operated on.

"I'll go with him. Come get us when you have news." Chip said seriously.

Benny nodded, then cuddled the dog in his arms.

* * * * *

"Please disrobe." Solak said without emotion.

"Now I know why crewmen wear jumpsuits, it seems like I've been spending half my day dressing and undressing." Vincent grumbled.

"Please lay on the bed and I will cover you to accommodate your modesty." Solak said in a professional tone.

Vincent climbed up on the bed with Chip's help, then felt a sheet being draped over his lower body.

Solak scanned Vincent carefully, then said, "A most curious condition. While I work, perhaps you could tell me how you came to be in this state."

Vincent thought about it, then finally said, "I got a pretty good dose of radiation, then transported up. I guess the transporter lost part of me and

when they put me back together, I ended up with too much skin or something."

"Fascinating." Solak said as he took a small pair of scissors and began to cut sections from the dead skin covering Vincent's left arm.

"Does it hurt?" Rory asked with concern.

"No. It feels kinda good when the scabby stuff is pulled off. It kinda feels like when you take off a pair of socks you've been wearing all day." Vincent said with relief.

"*Commander Dodds, please report to the bridge*." Sounded over the intercom.

"I'm on my way." Chip answered quickly into the nearest comm station, then said, "Just call the bridge if you need me for anything."

"Okay. Thank you for all your help Commander Dodds." Vincent said seriously.

"Anytime Crewman Winters." Chip said with a fond smile before leaving the room.

"Do you need anything Vincent?" Rory asked with concern.

"Yeah. Could you check to see if they've heard anything about JonJon yet?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I'll be right back." Rory said seriously and left the room.

* * * * *

Solak finally finished Vincent's arms, then decided that it was time to do the most difficult part of the job.

"I will need you to be very still during this part of the procedure. I am going to remove the covering from your face and would not want to cause you an injury." Solak said seriously.

"I understand." Vincent said as he tried to relax.

The sensation of the cold metal on his overly sensitive skin made Vincent want to flinch away, but the free feeling of each patch of uncovered skin was reward enough to keep him in his place.

Solak carefully began to take small snips as he worked his way along the edge of Vincent's eyebrow when Vincent had a sudden realization.

For the first time since he left the planet, he could see light.

Even though Vincent's eyes were closed, Solak had made enough of an opening to allow some light to get to his left eye.

After another moment of snipping, there was a little bit of a pulling sensation on Vincent's eyelid, then all of a sudden, his entire left eye was uncovered.

"Can I open my eye?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Proceed." Solak said calmly, then watched as Vincent opened his left eye and looked around.

"Hey. You're the guy from the shuttle in Orlando. I didn't realize that that's who you were." Vincent said as he looked at Solak.

"I will now proceed." Solak said calmly and started to work on Vincent's other eye.

"Nothing yet." Rory said as he maneuvered his wheelchair into the room.

"So they still don't know what's wrong?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No. Both the doctors are still in there." Rory said quietly.

Vincent felt the pulling sensation on his right eyelid, then could feel the covering of dead skin peel away.

"Thank you Dr. Solak. It's really tough not being able to see." Vincent said with relief.

Solak gave a half nod, half bow of acknowledgement of the statement, then went to work on removing the covering from Vincent's scalp.

"It will be necessary for me to cut your hair to remove the damaged tissue. It will be possible for me to stimulate your follicles to induce hair growth when the procedure is concluded, if that is desirable."

"Let me see how it looks when you're done. I usually wear it pretty short anyway so I may decide to keep it." Vincent said seriously.

"My apologies for interrupting, but the surgery has been completed." Ambassador Sarek said from the doorway.

"Can I go and find out what's wrong with JonJon and finish this when I get back?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"That would be acceptable. I will accompany you." Solak said calmly.

"Um... Could I have a gown or something?" Vincent asked as he looked under the sheet to find himself naked.

"Yes. Of course." Solak said and retrieved a gown from a nearby cabinet.

* * * * *

Vincent walked into the back hallway that connected main sickbay to the convalescent ward and found everyone waiting anxiously.

"You may proceed." Ambassador Sarek said peacefully.

"Your friend had a piece of metal, something like a nail, stuck in his head." Christine said frankly.

"How did that happen?" Benny asked in confusion.

"I don't know, but it was driven nearly three inches into his brain. If he had been human it would probably have killed him but since he's an android, it just caused a few malfunctions. That's probably why his behavior seemed strange."

"Is he going to die?" Benny asked quietly.

"No, I don't think there's any danger of that." Christine said gently.

"So he's going to be okay?" Vincent asked carefully, suspecting that she was holding something back.

"It's hard to say. A human who survived this kind of injury would develop new neural pathways around the damage but there is no way to know what will happen to an android. I couldn't find any record of an android being damaged in a similar manner in the data library."

"Can't you fix him, you know, repair the damage?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Dr. McCoy and I repaired as much as we could. What we couldn't repair, we disabled so he won't be generating random signals anymore. Anything more we could try to do would be just as likely to make matters worse." Christine said professionally.

"So what's going to happen to him now?" Benny asked quietly.

"Since the damage is not organic, he'll be free to go when he wakes up from the anesthetic. He'll just have a tender spot behind his left ear where we removed the piece of metal. It should heal quickly." Christine said slowly.

"But..." Vincent prompted.

"But it's impossible to predict how this damage will effect him in the long term. Given the area that was damaged, I can guess that it will have something to do with his emotional development but how severe or for how long, we'll just have to wait and see." Christine said helplessly.

"Is he going to need to be in a hospital or institution or something?" Benny asked carefully.

"No. Nothing like that. I think what he needs is to be with someone who will accept him as he is. Someone who can understand that he might not ever be able to develop further or reach a level of maturity to be able to fully take care of himself." Christine said quietly.

Benny nodded.

"You can go in and wait with him if you like." Christine said gently.

"Thank you Dr. Chapel." Benny said and stood.

"Solak, it looks like you've been busy. Would you mind if I help you finish up?" Christine asked as she looked at Vincent.

"That would be acceptable." Solak said calmly.

"I'll be right in there if you need me." Vincent said to Benny quietly.

"Okay. Thanks." Benny said as he walked toward the door, followed by Ambassador Sarek.

* * * * *

"This is really embarrassing." Vincent said as Solak and Dr. Chapel worked on removing the damaged skin from his lower torso.

Solak arched an eyebrow at the statement, then continued to work.

"Do you want me to leave?" Rory asked quietly.

"No. Thanks for staying with me. This is just embarrassing, but it's better having you here with me to keep my mind off it." Vincent said honestly.

"Just hold on for a few more minutes and we'll be finished." Christine said as she removed a large patch of skin.

Vincent nodded, then thought to ask, "Is JonJon really going to be okay?"

"Medically, I think he'll be fine. Emotionally... well, we'll just have to see what happens." Christine said in thought.

"Doctor, I mean Doctors, the first shuttle of critical care patients just landed in the shuttle bay." A medical assistant said as he rushed into the room.

"Notify Dr. McCoy and find out where he wants you to put them." Dr. Chapel said as she moved to Vincent's groin area to start removing a thin layer of skin.

"Um, be careful." Vincent said in a shaky voice.

"Don't worry Vincent, there's hardly any damaged skin in this area. It will just take a few seconds." Christine said as she worked.

Vincent gritted his teeth and tried to hold perfectly still as he felt the metal instruments moving across his highly sensitive skin.

"I believe it is nearing time to work on his back." Solak said as he stepped back to look over Vincent's entire body.

"I think you're right. And that shouldn't take nearly as long." Christine said as she peeled a film of dead skin away from Vincent's thigh.

"Turn over honey and we'll finish it off." Christine said gently.

Vincent quickly turned over and tried to relax.

"If you'll work on his head, I think I can get everything else." Dr. Chapel said as she looked at Vincent's back.

"Agreed." Solak said and began working on the thick skin covering Vincent's head.

"Just a few more minutes." Christine whispered as she began to remove a patch of dead skin on his shoulder blade.

* * * * *

"Where am I?" JonJon asked in confusion.

"You're in the sickbay on the *Enterprise*." Benny said as he rushed to JonJon's side.

"Am I sick?" JonJon asked in confusion.

"I guess when your house caved in, a nail got stuck in your head. The doctors took it out and you're going to be okay now." Benny said quietly.

JonJon felt the side of his head and said, "I feel funny."

"Does it hurt?" Benny asked with concern.

"No. It just feels weird." JonJon said as he sat up.

"Do you want to hold Fizgig?" Benny asked in a small voice.

JonJon smiled and nodded.

Benny handed the dog to JonJon and felt relief rush over him at the contented look on JonJon's face.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. I mean, my father..." JonJon trailed off with tears forming in his eyes.

"I'm going to move to the new colony and get a new place to live. If you wanted, you could go with me and live with me and my family." Benny said quietly.

JonJon looked at Benny with surprise.

"My family is all hurt really bad and won't be able to go to the new colony for months, maybe even years. I could really use your help to set up the new place." Benny said quietly.

"So I could live with you... and be like your brother?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"Only if you want to. You could stay on the *Enterprise* and go back to Earth to try and find a new family if that's what you wanted to do." Benny said carefully.

JonJon shook his head and said, "You took care of me when I was sad and afraid. If you really want me to live with you... I'd like to be your brother."

"Of course I want you, that's what I'm doing here." Benny said with a smile.

JonJon thought about it as he petted Fizgig in his lap, then said, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do next."

"I don't know either. I guess we'll figure it out together." Benny said with a peaceful smile.

JonJon looked up at Benny curiously, then gave a small smile in return.

"Let's go in the other room and see how Vincent's doing." Benny said as he offered his hand.

JonJon took the offered hand and worked his way down off the biobed.

"Oh, I see you're awake. If you'll hold still for a second, I want to scan you to make sure that you're okay." Dr. McCoy said as he hurried into the room.

"Who's that?" JonJon asked with a note of fear in his voice.

"He's one of the doctors on the *Enterprise*. He took the nail out of your head." Benny whispered.

Dr. McCoy picked up a medical tricorder and scanned JonJon quickly.

"It looks like you're doing just fine. Make sure to keep that wound clean for the next few days to prevent infection and you shouldn't have any problem." Dr. McCoy said as he looked at the scan results.

"Am I really okay?" JonJon asked quietly.

"Son, I'm going to be honest with you. There was some damage to your brain. But you're past the worst of it now and I think you're going to be fine." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

JonJon moved to Benny's side and hugged him with one arm.

"See that he gets something to eat. My scans show that he hasn't had much food in the past few days." Dr. McCoy said with a sympathetic look at JonJon.

"I will doctor." Benny said as he returned JonJon's hug.

"Doctor, the *Yorktown* patients are here." A medical assistant said as he pulled a gurney into the room.

"Now if you'll excuse me, it appears that I'm about to become very busy." Dr. McCoy said as he hurried to his patient.

"Come on, Vincent's in the next room." Benny said and urged JonJon to walk with him.

* * * * *

"I think a nice long sonic shower should be able to remove the little bits that are left." Christine said as she looked Vincent over.

"I concur." Solak said simply.

"Would you like for us to stimulate hair growth? Your hair is pretty short." Christine said cautiously.

"Can I see?" Vincent asked as he sat up.

"There's a mirror right over here." Christine said as she walked across the room.

"Where's my uniform?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"In the fresher, I'll get it." Christine said and moved to the small fresher unit.

Vincent pulled on the hospital gown, then made his way across the room and looked at himself in the mirror.

There was a peach-fuzz covering of hair on his head that allowed his scalp to show through.

"I kinda like it. I'll keep it like this." Vincent said as he was handed his uniform.

Christine considered for a moment, then said, "I think it suits you."

Vincent stepped into his uniform and pulled it up to his hips, then quickly removed the gown.

When he turned around, he was surprised to see that Benny, JonJon and Ambassador Sarek had entered the room.

"Nice butt." Benny said with a chuckle.

Vincent rolled his eyes at the statement, then started to laugh as he finished putting on his uniform.

"Who's that?" JonJon asked in confusion.

"That's Vincent. That's what he looks like under all that gross skin that was covering him." Benny said seriously.

JonJon thought about it for a moment, then said, "I got used to him being the other way."

Vincent walked to JonJon's other side and said, "I'm still the same person that I was before. Are you feeling okay?"

"I think so. I just feel a little funny." JonJon said in confusion.

"Chapel, I need you in here. You too Solak." McCoy's voice said over the intercom.

"Rory, I didn't want to ask you before with all the other stuff going on, but... have you made a decision about if I get to stay or not?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Not yet. I still need to talk to a few people before I decide anything for sure." Rory said carefully.

Vincent nodded, then turned to Sarek and asked, "Grandfather, have you decided anything about my *kahs'wan*?"

"Yes. However I will withhold announcing my decision until Rory has completed his investigation. I would not want to influence his decision." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"Is there anything else for us to do here?" Benny asked as he looked around.

"I don't think so. We should probably get back to the *Yorktown*." Vincent said in an uncertain tone.

"I would be honored if you would join me for the evening meal before you disembark." Ambassador Sarek said formally.

"Is that okay with you guys?" Vincent asked Benny and JonJon.

"Can Fizgig have something to eat too?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"I am certain that provisions can be made." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

* * * * *

"Do you think he's okay?" Darin asked with concern.

"I'm sure he's fine. Commander Dodds treats Vincent like one of his own kids. He won't let anything happen to him." Joe said with assurance.

"So you're not worried about him?" Darin asked carefully.

Joe chuckled and said, "I'm about to go out of my head with worry. But no amount of reason or logic will make that go away. I won't stop worrying until I'm able to hold him in my arms and know in my heart that he's okay."

"Good. I'm glad it's not just me." Darin said with a smile.

Darin looked at Joe with question as the hum of the ship's engines changed.

Joe immediately walked to the main console to see what was going on.

"It looks like we're just moving out of the solar system. We don't seem to be in any hurry." Connie said as he examined the readings.

"Good. All that radiation bombarding our shields was making me a little nervous." Joe said frankly.

"Why is that? You know better than anyone how stable our shields are. You should be the least worried person on the ship." Connie said seriously.

"The day that I trust the shields to completely protect us from everything is the day I need to move to another department. I'm good at what I do because I never feel safe, I'm always trying to figure out how many

different ways the shields might fail." Joe said as he watched the console carefully.

"I bet you sleep well at night." Connie said sarcastically.

"I sure do. Nervous exhaustion is a great sleep aid." Joe said with a chuckle.

Darin stood by silently watching and listening.

* * * * *

"I hope no one noticed how much I ate. I didn't even realize I was hungry until I started eating." Benny said as soon as the transporter beam cleared.

"I don't think anyone noticed. All four of us were pigging out... five if you count Fizgig." Vincent said, then noticed that Rad was the transporter operator.

"And besides that, Grandma Amanda kept on talking about how skinny we all were and was trying to get all of us to eat more." Rory said, then looked at the step down from the transporter chamber.

"Yeah, she even thought Fizgig was too thin." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"Why don't they put ramps on these things?" Rory asked in frustration at the step.

"Because most people who can't walk use anti-grav chairs." Vincent said seriously.

"Have you ever tried to steer one of those things? It's like riding on an air hockey puck. I'd wreck half the ship before I got where I was going." Rory said with irritation.

"I can help you down." Rad said as he walked to the transporter chamber.

"Thanks." Rory said to Rad with a small smile.

"Did you get Daddy Joe back okay?" Vincent asked hopefully as he watched Rad ease Rory down the step.

"I sure did. In fact, I bet he's in deflector control right now waiting for you." Rad said with a smile.

As soon as Rad had finished helping Rory, Vincent walked up to him and gave him a firm hug.

"Thanks for taking care of him... and for saving me." Vincent said sincerely.

"It was my pleasure, now you'd better get down to deflector control before Joe works himself into a tizzy worrying about you." Rad said with a smile as he returned the hug.

"Will you come down and visit us when your shift is over?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure thing. Expect me in about an hour." Rad said gently.

Vincent broke loose of the hug, then turned to the other boys and said, "Come on guys."

JonJon walked from Benny's side to stand before Rad and whispered, "Thank you."

Rad reached down and petted Fizgig in JonJon's arms as he said, "I'm just sorry I couldn't do more for you."

"You saved me three times today. So I know you did everything you could." JonJon said quietly.

"Three times?" Rad asked in confusion.

"Yeah, the first time you saved me was when you beamed me up from the planet. The second time was when you brought Fizgig back to me. And the third time was when you called Vincent and Benny to come and help me. If you hadn't done all those things, I'd probably be dead right now or wishing I was. But thanks to you I think I'm going to be okay." JonJon said quietly, then gave Rad a small smile.

Rad smiled at JonJon and said, "Well if there's anything else I can do for you, just call me. That smile made the whole day worth it."

JonJon nodded shyly, then walked to the others who were waiting by the door.

* * * * *

As the boys moved down the catwalk, Benny and Vincent were amazed by the fact that there were no colonists standing around.

"Where did they all go?" Vincent asked in wonder.

"To the *Enterprise* I guess, but it wasn't crowded over there either." Benny said as he looked around.

"Maybe they were all assigned quarters." JonJon said carefully.

As they approached the door to deflector control, it opened automatically.

* * * * *

Joe looked up from the main console at the sound of the door opening and saw the four boys enter the room.

After a glance to see that Connie was taking the console, Joe hurried across the room to pull Vincent into a one armed hug.

"How are you feeling?" Joe asked in a whisper.

"I feel great... well, except for needing a shower." Vincent said as he enjoyed the hug.

Joe closed his eyes and soaked in the feeling of relief and joy of knowing that Vincent was really safe.

"I talked to Lawrence today." Vincent said into Joe's chest.

"Oh really? What did he have to say?" Joe asked as he continued to hold Vincent tightly.

"He freaked out because I got hurt, but after that, he told me to tell you that he loves you and misses you." Vincent said seriously.

Joe chuckled and said, "We'll have to call him later and let him know that everything turned out for the best."

After a long moment of silence, Vincent whispered, "Daddy Joe."

"What is it son?" Joe whispered in return.

"Could we do this later, like, when the guys aren't watching?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

Joe smiled and released Vincent from the hug.

Vincent stepped back and looked around before asking, "Where did they go?"

As Connie was about to answer, a scream sounded from the supply room that drew everyone's attention.

Rory's wheelchair backed out of the supply room first.

He was quickly followed by Benny and JonJon who both looked terrified.

A moment later Lou stumbled out of the supply room wearing a sweat suit and a distinctly unhappy expression.

"What's wrong Lou?" Joe asked cautiously.

"I was laying there asleep then I felt someone watching me. When I opened my eyes, these three were staring at me." Lou said as she pointed at Benny, JonJon and Rory all in a row.

"We were just trying to give Vincent some privacy." Benny said in a frightened voice.

"Yeah. We weren't doing anything wrong." Rory said defensively.

"What's all the noise?" Channing asked as he stumbled out of the supply room, rubbing his eyes.

"It was just a misunderstanding... who are you?" Joe asked quietly.

"This is Channing, you saw him in sickbay yesterday. Benny and JonJon and me brought him here so he could rest." Vincent said seriously.

"Benny, JonJon and I." Joe corrected automatically.

"No. You weren't there. Just Benny and JonJon and me." Vincent said seriously.

Joe was about to explain what he meant when he saw the twinkle of mischief in Vincent's eyes.

"Do you mind if I use one of the terminals for a minute? I bet there's someone in Engineering freaking out trying to find out where I went." Channing asked quietly.

"Go ahead, you can use auxiliary station two by the door." Joe said and pointed.

After a moment of typing, Channing looked up with a smile and said, "Chance is down in the rec-hall helping to get the colonists settled in. I'm going to head down there and see if he found a place to sleep tonight."

"Are you going to be okay?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Yeah. I'll be fine. But if I have any problems, I'll come right back here." Channing said with a fond smile at Vincent.

"You'd better." Vincent said firmly.

Channing smiled and quickly rubbed Vincent's 'peach fuzz' hair as he passed.

"Have you heard anything about my family?" Benny asked as Channing walked out the door.

"Doctor Perry called to let you know that they're being transferred to the *Enterprise*, that's all." Connie said quietly from the main console.

Benny nodded that he heard.

"And who is this?" Joe asked with a smile at the boy holding a dog.

"This is JonJon and his dog, Fizgig." Benny said with a smile.

"It's nice to meet you JonJon, you too Fizgig." Joe said with a teasing grin.

"Hi." JonJon said shyly.

"Well, I guess while we're all here, I'll explain the sleeping arrangements for the next three or four weeks." Joe said carefully.

Glances flew around the room as everyone wondered what was going on.

"We've all been assigned to my quarters." Joe said frankly.

"But there's eight of us." Jimmy said in shock.

"He can count." Lou said dryly.

Joe turned to the main console and brought up a listing of cabin assignments, then said, "Actually, it's more like ten."

"Ten people. In your cabin." Lou said in confirmation.

"Just a second Lou and I'll explain." Joe said as he did a quick search of the cabin assignment list.

"Is that your dad?" JonJon asked Vincent in a whisper.

"That's my Daddy Joe. He's not my real father, but he loves me just the same as if he was." Vincent said happily.

JonJon smiled and nodded that he understood.

"Benny, your last name is Summers, right?" Joe asked from the console.

"Right." Benny said as he glanced to see what Joe was doing.

"What about JonJon?" Joe asked a moment later.

"Jonathan Daniels." JonJon said timidly.

Joe nodded as he keyed in the information.

"There, it's done. We're all assigned to my cabin until we reach the new colony." Joe said seriously.

"Spill it Joe. How's it going to work." Lou asked darkly.

"Basically, the guys get to sleep in the supply room and the ladies get to sleep in my quarters. We'll all use the lavatory in my quarters for showers and laundry." Joe said simply.

"Well, it sounds good to me except for the part about dividing us up by gender. I was thinking of something more along the lines of boy-girl-boy-girl..." Connie said playfully.

Lou turned slowly to look at Connie with an icy stare.

"On second thought, it works just fine like you said. Good thinking Joe." Connie said quickly.

Lou nodded firmly as she maintained her glare at him.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Joe asked as he looked around.

For a long moment there was silence, then Rory hesitantly said, "I need to have a private talk with you before I go back to the *Yorktown*."

Joe saw the serious look in Rory's eyes and hesitantly nodded.

The sound of the comm drew everyone's attention.

"Deflector Control." Connie answered seriously.

"*Ensign Cooper is to report to Captain Byrne's office immediately.*" The familiar voice said professionally.

Darin got a look of surprise, but quickly composed himself and left the room.

"He's on his way. What's up Debs?" Connie asked quietly.

"*I don't know, but whatever it is came directly from Starfleet*."

Chapter 11

Darin stepped off the turbo lift and could hear Commander M'Butu talking to someone in the office before him.

After a moment to collect his courage, Darin turned and walked down the short hallway into Captain Byrne's office.

"Ensign Cooper reporting as ordered sir." Darin said and was proud of the fact that he kept his voice calm and steady.

"At ease Ensign. Please have a seat." Captain Byrne said as he looked at Darin's black eye.

Darin carefully took a seat before the desk and waited.

"Ensign Cooper, by the order of Starfleet Command you are to return to Earth as soon as possible to face a Judicial Board of Inquiry." Captain Byrne said as he looked Darin in the eyes.

Darin was stunned by the statement, but quickly overcame his shock and asked, "May I know why?"

"You were promoted to the rank of Ensign for fraudulent reasons. It will be the purpose of the Judicial Board of Inquiry to investigate the events that lead you to your assignment to the *Yorktown* and to your promotion. If they find that your promotion was not justified, you will be stripped of your rank and summarily discharged from service in Starfleet." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Darin's mind raced over the statement, then something seemed to stand out over all the rest.

"You said that they will be reviewing what happened before I was promoted, does that mean that nothing I've done since my promotion will be taken into account?" Darin asked carefully.

"That is my understanding of the process." Captain Byrne said gravely.

"Then there is no reason for the review. I've never disputed the fact that my promotion was a mistake... a cruel joke that someone played on me." Darin drifted off darkly.

"Not just you Ensign Cooper. Six of your classmates were also targets of this ill-conceived scheme. I have been told that five of them have already returned to Earth to face the review board. The remaining one, a Miss Sayat-Ali, has resigned her commission so that she may remain at the Utopia Planetia shipyards as a consultant." Captain Byrne said carefully.

Darin thought for a moment, then said, "So my choices are to quit or be fired."

"Please understand that you aren't being accused of any wrongdoing. But Starfleet cannot allow you to continue with a rank that you have not rightfully earned." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"I do understand sir. Would it be possible for me to make a formal statement for the record?" Darin asked quietly.

Captain Byrne started the recording, then said, "You may proceed."

"This is the statement of Ensign Darin Cooper. I understand that I have been called to a Judicial Board of Inquiry to investigate the allegation that I received my rank by improper and fraudulent means. I would like to state for the record, that I had no prior knowledge of the events that lead to my promotion and was in no way responsible for what happened. But I also understand that I do not deserve to wear the rank that I have been assigned. So to correct that situation, I hereby resign my commission effective immediately. It is my hope that this will resolve the situation in regard to me. If there is any further need for inquiry into the matter, I will be available and cooperative. This ends my statement." Darin said carefully, then removed the rank insignia from his uniform and sat it gently on Captain Byrne's desk.

Captain Byrne stopped the recording and said, "Well said Mr. Cooper."

"Thank you Captain. May I have your permission to stay on the *Yorktown* for the trip to the new colony?" Darin asked apprehensively.

"Yes, of course. And I'll send this statement to Starfleet straight away so we can get a reply before the *Enterprise* leaves." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Thank you sir. It was an honor serving on your ship... for the day that it lasted." Darin finished with a pained smile.

"I have the feeling that you've made a few friends in your brief time on my ship." Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"Yes sir. In one day I feel closer to the people in deflector control than I do my own family." Darin said with an expression of worry.

"Then, if I may offer a suggestion..." Captain Byrne trailed off, waiting for a reaction.

Darin nodded his acceptance.

"...Talk to your friends about what has happened, especially those who have been in Starfleet for a while." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Darin looked at Captain Byrne inquisitively for a moment, then began to ask, "Does that mean..."

"Mr. Cooper. I have said all that I can on the matter. Please be assured that this matter may yet turn to your advantage. Now if you will excuse me..."

"Yes sir. Thank you." Darin said in deep thought as he stood.

Captain Byrne gave a serious nod, then turned his attention to the latest reports on his terminal.

Darin walked down the hallway, as he puzzled over what Captain Byrne might have meant.

* * * * *

"I have time now, will the hallway be private enough?" Joe asked with concern.

"Yes, that's fine." Rory said seriously.

Everyone watched as Joe and Rory left the room.

"Wow, I didn't know a little kid in a wheelchair could be so intimidating." Connie said as he looked at the closed door.

"Rory is here to decide if I can stay on the *Yorktown* or if I have to go back to Earth." Vincent said as he took a seat at the second auxiliary station.

"He can do that?" Connie asked cautiously.

"Yeah. He's my guardian... well, one of them. I guess the way it works is that all of Clan Short are my guardians. Clan Short decided that Daddy Joe could be my mentor and watch out for me while we're on the *Yorktown*. But since I got hurt, they may decide that it's too dangerous for me here and make me go back to Earth where I'll be safe."

"You mean Rory might make you go away?" JonJon asked with a tone of anger creeping into his voice.

"Please don't be mad at Rory. He's just going to do what he thinks is best to keep me safe." Vincent said quietly.

"Do you think he's going to send you away?" Susan asked gently.

"I don't know. I hope not. I really like it here." Vincent said as tears started welling up in his eyes.

"We like having you here too. Not only do you do a good job, but you make Joe happier than I've seen him in a long time." Connie said frankly.

Vincent felt a hand on his shoulder and slowly looked up.

Benny was standing beside him, offering his support.

A moment later JonJon was on his other side, gripping his other shoulder.

"I think that if Rory decides that it isn't safe here for me, I may not go back to Earth anyway." Vincent said quietly.

"The new colony?" Jimmy asked carefully.

Vincent turned and gave him a nod.

* * * * *

"What did you want to know?" Joe asked Rory cautiously.

"First I need to tell you that I'm here because Cory asked me to check on Vincent and find out why he was hurt. It's going to be up to me to decide if Vincent gets to stay here or has to go back to Earth." Rory said seriously.

"Okay. I guess I can understand that." Joe said in thought.

"I talked with Vincent and I understand why he was chosen to shut down the reactor. So I guess my biggest question for you is why you would even consider taking a nine year old kid with you on a starship. You know how dangerous it is out here. How could you do that to him?" Rory asked firmly.

Joe thought about the question for a moment, then responded, "Vincent is at a crossroads. He has to choose a path, and once he's on it, he will probably continue to follow that path into his adult life. If you look carefully at Vincent's life story so far, you'll see that he has every excuse to become a rebellious delinquent teenager. His father was abusive and trained him for years in how to hate, then in a final act of violence, Mr. Winters killed his wife and took away the only person who Vincent had ever been allowed to love. So with his parents both dead, Vincent was left alone, feeling isolated and confused. Not even considering the publicity about his father, I can't see any way that Vincent could have anything close to a happy life on Earth. A lot of kids have cracked under a lot less pressure than Vincent's had to face."

"Rory, I honestly can't think of a better place for him to be than here on the *Yorktown* with me. He's gaining self-confidence, he's learning a useful skill, he's forming good healthy relationships with a variety of people, and while he's doing all that, he's contributing to his community... the ship. He has a variety of strong role models to choose from here and he's learning discipline and respect." Joe said passionately.

"But what about the danger?" Rory asked quietly.

"There's danger no matter where you are. Something might happen to you when you leave your house to go to the grocery store. There are drive by shootings and hit and run accidents every day. That doesn't mean that you should never leave your house, it just means that you should look around you and be as safe as you can within reason." Joe said thoughtfully.

"Okay. Thank you Joe. I hadn't considered that thing about Vincent's past but I understand what you're saying." Rory said carefully.

"So does that mean Vincent can stay?" Joe asked quietly.

Rory shook his head and said, "I still have to talk to a few more people. Would you tell Vincent that I'll be back in a little while? I need to see if I can talk to Commander M'Butu right now."

"I'll tell him. Good luck with your talk." Joe said with a gentle smile.

Rory nodded, then turned his wheelchair and headed down the catwalk toward the turbo lifts.

* * * * *

As Rory approached the turbo lift, the door opened to reveal a man with short brown hair and a black eye that could officially be classified as a 'shiner'. Rory remembered that he was the one who had been called to talk to the Captain. Concern welled up in Rory as he noticed that the man seemed to be fighting back tears.

"Are you okay?" Rory asked hesitantly.

"Been better." Darin whispered as he fought to regain his emotional control.

"Is there anything I can do?" Rory offered weakly, not having any clue as to what the problem might be.

Darin gave a defeated chuckle before saying, "Not unless you know a senior Starfleet officer who would be willing to give me some career advice."

Rory thought about the statement and was about to answer when Darin continued, "Don't worry about it. I'll figure it out."

"No. Wait. Were you serious about needing to talk to a senior officer?" Rory asked quickly.

"Well, Captain Byrne hinted that someone who had been in Starfleet for a while might be able to... do something. I just resigned my commission and... I don't know what to do next." Darin said and felt another wave of emotion welling within him at the statement.

"Come with me." Rory said firmly.

"I need to change out of this uniform..." Darin said hesitantly.

"You can change later. I need for you to come with me to the *Enterprise*. I think I can help you." Rory said firmly.

Darin recognized something in Rory's voice and said, "You sounded just like Vincent when you said that. You're a friend of his, aren't you?"

Rory chuckled as he said, "Yeah, I'm also one of his legal guardians. Come on, we don't have a lot of time."

Darin nodded hesitantly and turned to follow Rory into the turbo lift.

"Transporter Room Two." Rory said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Darin and said, "My name is Rory."

"I'm Darin."

"Are you a friend of Vincent's?" Rory asked casually.

"Friend, co-worker, roommate, big brother... take your pick." Darin said with a stab of pain at the thought that he might have to leave his new family so soon after finding them.

Rory glanced at Darin and hesitantly asked, "Did you just say brother?"

Darin chuckled and said, "Yeah. Vincent and I have started calling each other 'big brother' and 'little brother'."

Rory shook his head and absently said, "I'll need to talk to grandfather about this."

"Is something wrong?" Darin asked with concern at Rory's contemplative expression.

After a moment of thought, Rory said, "No. It's nothing bad, I promise."

The lift stopped, and the pair exited as Darin asked, "Then what has you worried?"

Rory looked up at Darin and said, "I'm not worried, it's just... you'd just have to hear the Clan Short history to understand. When one of us claims someone as a brother it means something to the whole clan."

"Oh, we weren't trying to do anything like that. We were... I guess we were trying to put how we feel about each other into words... to kind of set the ground rules about how we're supposed to act... Does that make any sense?" Darin asked as he stopped by the transporter room door.

"Perfect sense. Come on. We have some people to talk to." Rory said as he led the way into the transporter room.

* * * * *

"What happened? Are you okay?" Rad asked with immediate concern when he saw Darin's black eye.

Darin looked at Rad curiously for a moment, then realized why he was asking, "Oh. It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

Rad walked to stand before Darin and gently reached up to trace the edge of the bruise with his fingertip.

Darin shuddered under the sensation of the gentle touch.

"You should still see a doctor about it, they can give you something for the swelling and the pain." Rad said quietly as he examined the black eye carefully.

Darin looked into Rad's eyes and quietly said, "I will, just as soon as I get back."

Rad reluctantly pulled his hand away and said, "Good, I'd hate to think of you in pain."

"Thanks." Darin whispered.

"Um, excuse me. But we really need to get to the *Enterprise*." Rory said reluctantly, not really wanting to interrupt the tender scene before him.

Rad looked down at Rory, then said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Sure. Let me help you up on the pad."

Darin automatically moved to Rory's other side and helped to lift him up the single step into the transport chamber.

"I'm going to beam you over to the cargo transporter instead of the personnel transporter if that's okay with you. There aren't any steps there." Rad said as he walked back to his console.

"Yeah, thanks. That'll help." Rory said as he prepared himself for transport.

Darin made eye contact with Rad and gave him a small smile just before the transporter energized.

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The cargo transporter operator looked up in surprise when Rory and Darin appeared on his transporter pad.

Rory noticed his expression and said, "It's easier for me to beam in here with the wheelchair."

The transporter technician nodded that he understood, then quickly turned his attention back to his work.

"Come on Darin. We don't have a lot of time." Rory said as he led the way to the turbo lift.

Darin hurried to keep up.

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"Main bridge." Rory said as they got on the lift.

"Who are we going to talk to?" Darin asked cautiously.

"I don't know yet. We'll see who's available." Rory said seriously.

A moment later the doors opened to reveal the main bridge of the *Enterprise*.

Darin looked around in wonder, not able to make himself believe that it was real. Being on the bridge of the *Enterprise* had always been a secret dream of his.

"Captain Kirk, is Commander Dodds or Captain Spock available to talk with me for a few minutes? It's a family matter." Rory asked seriously.

"As far as I know, both of them can spare a few minutes. Uhura, would you call Spock to the conference room?" Captain Kirk asked professionally.

"Yes sir." Uhura answered efficiently.

Chip stood as a lieutenant came over to take his place at the helm.

Darin glanced over at the communications console and was surprised to see a familiar face. One of his classmates from the academy was sitting at the secondary communications console.

"Would you also request that Ambassador Sarek join us if he is available." Rory asked seriously.

Uhura nodded at Rory and gave him a gentle smile.

Rory's serious mood gave way to Uhura's smile and he couldn't help but smile at her in return.

The young Lieutenant at the second communications console was looking at Darin with concern.

Darin noticed, then ducked his head and looked away. He felt a stab of humiliation and loss at the fact that he had just resigned his commission.

"Come on, we don't want to keep them waiting." Rory said firmly.

Darin broke out of his dark thoughts, and followed Rory back to the turbo lift where they were joined by Chip.

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Chip walked with Rory and a young man with a black eye off the turbo lift, then automatically cleared a place for Rory's wheelchair by the conference table.

A moment later Sarek and Spock entered the room and took their seats.

"So what's going on Rory?" Chip asked curiously.

"This is Darin... um, Cooper?" Rory strained to remember, having only heard it once.

Darin nodded.

"He needs to talk to a senior officer to get some advice." Rory said frankly.

Chip nodded, then asked, "I'll be glad to help however I can, but why did you request that father be present?"

"Because Vincent and Darin have claimed each other as brothers. I don't know for sure if that changes anything, but I thought Grandfather Sarek should be here in case it does." Rory said seriously.

Chip nodded that he understood.

"Okay Darin, we're here. The rest is up to you." Rory said and turned his full attention to Darin.

After a long moment of silence, Darin said, "I guess what it boils down to is that someone at the academy thought it would be really funny if some of us were promoted and assigned to jobs that we weren't capable of doing. When Starfleet found out what happened, they ordered all of us to Earth for a Judicial Board of Inquiry so they can decommission us and throw us out, because we didn't earn our rank honestly. Rather than go through all that, I decided to resign my commission. I mean, even though it wasn't my fault, I didn't deserve the promotion so there's no reason that I should try to hold on to my rank."

Chip nodded in thought.

"Logical." Sarek said without inflection.

"Could you explain how you became a brother to my nephew?" Spock asked calmly.

Darin looked at Spock in confusion.

"Vincent." Rory said in clarification.

Darin was surprised by the question, mainly because it seemed so far off topic, but quickly answered, "Vincent and I were assigned to share quarters... no, wait, that's not it. It started when we were welcomed aboard the ship, Vincent was the first one to talk to me like a person. He talked to me and really listened to what I was saying. I guess after that, I started to think of him as a friend and somewhere along the way I began to think of him as my little brother."

"Does Vincent also claim you as a brother?" Ambassador Sarek asked calmly.

"Yes. Just a little while ago after I transported up from the planet, he called me his big brother." Darin said in thought.

Chip looked at Sarek curiously and received a nod.

"Darin, can you tell me how you would like this to work out?" Chip asked seriously.

Darin looked at him blankly for a moment, then said, "I don't know. I guess since I resigned my commission... I'll either go to the new colony or back to Earth."

"No. You're not understanding my question. Ignore the commission and all of that for a minute and just tell me how you would like things to end up when everything else is resolved." Chip said firmly.

Darin thought for a moment, then carefully said, "Well, I think I'd like for things to be like they were before this whole mess about the academy blew up. I mean, I thought I was doing a pretty good job as an Ensign. I was really happy rooming with Vincent, and I love working in Deflector Control with Joe. For twenty-four hours, I was happier than I've been in my entire life."

"Mr. Cooper, may we have your permission to discuss this matter with others, including Starfleet Command and your former commanding officers on the *Yorktown*?" Spock asked seriously.

"Yes. If there's something you can do, that would be great." Darin said with hope.

"We won't know what's possible until we've talked to a few people, but I think we have enough to start with. Would you go down to the officer's lounge and wait while we discuss this?" Chip asked seriously.

"Yes, of course. Thank you for helping me." Darin said quickly as he stood.

"It is logical to aid one's family." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

Darin glanced at Ambassador Sarek with question for a moment, then turned and left the room.

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"Do you mind if I join you?" Someone asked, breaking Darin out of his thoughts.

Darin looked up to see his former classmate from the academy.

"Sure, have a seat." Darin said and offered a small smile.

"You're Darin Cooper aren't you?" The young Lieutenant asked cautiously.

"That's right, and you're Keith Wilson." Darin said carefully.

Keith nodded.

"How are you enjoying your first assignment?" Darin asked quietly.

"Are you kidding? It's the *Enterprise*!" Keith said with a glow of happiness.

Darin smiled and said, "I see what you mean. But I'd be just as happy with the *Yorktown*."

"I heard about what happened with the fake promotion." Keith said quietly.

Darin nodded.

"I'm sorry we never got to know each other back at the academy. I guess we traveled in different circles." Keith said weakly.

Darin chuckled and said, "I guess we did. You hung around with the other straight A students while I was on the fringes trying to find somewhere to fit in."

"Your eye looks pretty bad. Do you want to go to sickbay to have that looked at?" Keith asked as much with concern for Darin as a desire to change the subject.

"No, after the day I've had, it's the least of my worries." Darin said honestly.

"Is there anything I can do?" Keith asked quietly.

"You're doing it. It's good to have someone to talk to while I'm waiting to find out what's going to happen to me." Darin said quietly.

"Commander Dodds asked me to come down and sit with you. He didn't want you to have to wait by yourself." Keith admitted shyly.

Darin looked at Keith with surprise.

"I would have come down and talked to you anyway if I knew you were here, but I was on duty at my comm station." Keith said quickly.

Darin nodded and said, "I'll have to thank Commander Dodds for that. It's good to have someone to talk to."

"Darin, I know Commander Dodds well enough to tell you that he'll do whatever he can to help you." Keith said with assurance.

"So you knew him before you came on the *Enterprise*?" Darin asked with interest.

Keith looked around the room, then whispered, "If I tell you something, can you keep it a secret?"

Darin nodded seriously.

"Commander Dodds is my father." Keith whispered in a barely audible voice.

"Really? It must be great to have a Commander for a father." Darin said in wonder.

Keith shook his head.

"It isn't?" Darin asked cautiously.

"I'm afraid that no matter what I do, I'll always be compared to him and never be able to measure up. Besides that, people will think I have an unfair advantage and that he's helping me with my Starfleet career." Keith said quietly.

Darin thought for a moment, then said, "I guess I can understand that. But I saw how hard you worked at the academy. If anyone deserved to be assigned to the *Enterprise* straight out of the academy, it's you."

"Thanks for saying so. I worked hard to get here. But I'm still afraid that if it gets out that Commander Dodds is my father there will be people who will be sure that I'm here because he arranged things for me." Keith said frankly.

"Thanks for telling me, I won't spread it around." Darin said quietly.

"Dad told me that you're part of the family. So I know I can trust you." Keith said with a small smile.

"I am? How?" Darin asked cautiously.

"He said that Vincent has claimed you as a brother. Vincent is my nephew, so that makes you a part of the family too... it's a Vulcan thing, just go with it." Keith finished with a smile.

Darin shook his head and said, "The Vulcan thing again. So let me see if I got this straight, Commander Dodds sons, your brothers, are members of the Vulcan Clan who adopted Vincent. So that makes all of them like his fathers and you like his uncle."

"Right, and now that you've claimed Vincent as a brother, I'm your uncle too." Keith said with a playful grin.

Darin thought about the statement for a moment, then smiled.

"I think I like the sound of that." Darin said happily.

Keith nodded that he did too.

After a moment of silence, Keith hesitantly asked, "What happened to your eye?"

"Someone hit me." Darin said automatically.

"Come on, I told you my big whopper of a secret. What happened?" Keith asked with concern.

"Okay, but you've got to promise not to tell anyone." Darin said reluctantly.

"I swear. What happened?" Keith said impatiently.

"Well, I was down on the pool deck looking for Vincent and couldn't find him anywhere." Darin said quietly.

"Yeah." Keith said in an urging tone.

"Then I called Deflector Control and found out that Vincent was up there." Darin said, even more slowly.

"And..." Keith prompted.

"And I accidentally stepped on someone's sore foot and they punched me in the eye." Darin said shyly.

"Okay, so what's the big secret?" Keith asked hesitantly.

Darin looked around to see that no one else was listening and whispered, "I think she was about thirteen years old."

Keith fought to control his laughter and whispered, "I'll never tell."

"Thanks." Darin said with a blush.

The sound of Uhura's voice interrupted any further conversation.

"*Lieutenant Wilson, Mr. Cooper, report to conference room one.*"

"I guess it's time to find out what the future holds for me." Darin said with resignation as he stood.

"Whatever it is, I'll be there to help you." Keith said with assurance.

"Thanks Uncle Keith." Darin said with a smile then walked toward the turbo lift.

* * * * *

"I feel really gross." Vincent said as he scratched an itchy spot under his arm.

"You can go up and shower if you want. You're still officially off duty until Dr. Perry clears you as fit for duty." Joe said seriously.

"I'll go when Darin gets back. I want to find out what's wrong." Vincent said with concern.

"Do you have any idea what the problem might be?" Connie asked curiously.

"Yeah. But I'd rather not say in case I'm wrong." Vincent said in deep thought.

"Well, whatever it is, I'm sure it will be fine. He's one of the better people we've had assigned to Deflector Control. He seems to have a natural talent." Susan said carefully.

"I think we're all agreed that whatever his problem is, we'll work together to resolve it." Joe said seriously.

"That's right. Darin is one of us, so we need to act like it." Jimmy said firmly.

Vincent smiled as he looked around the room and saw that everyone was in agreement.

* * * * *

"Are you ready for this?" Rory asked as soon as the transporter beam cleared.

"I guess so... what?" Darin said as he noticed that the entire cargo bay was filled with livestock.

"Try not to step in anything before you go to talk with the Captain." Rory said with a chuckle as he moved his wheelchair off the transporter pad.

"Yeah. That's all I'd need." Darin said as he followed closely behind Rory.

"While you're in talking to the captain, I need to talk to Commander M'Butu." Rory said as they waited for the turbo lift to arrive.

"Why do you need to speak to Commander M'Butu... I mean, if you don't mind me asking." Darin asked quietly.

"I've been asked by our Clan's patriarch to find out why Vincent was hurt. I'm talking to the people who were in charge of Vincent's well being to try and understand their reasons for letting him go into that reactor today." Rory said seriously.

"It's good that your Clan is watching out for Vincent like that. I mean, investigating why it happened instead of giving a knee-jerk reaction and automatically pulling him out of here." Darin said as the lift doors opened.

"Commander M'Butu's office." Rory said to the ceiling of the lift, then glanced at Darin and said, "Thanks for saying that Darin. I was starting to feel like the villain in all this."

Darin chuckled and said, "After what you just did for me, I couldn't think of you as anything but a hero."

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"Commander M'Butu, do you have a few minutes to talk with me?" Rory asked hesitantly from the doorway to Commander M'Butu's office.

"Yes, of course. Please come in." Commander M'Butu said with a friendly smile.

Rory carefully guided his wheelchair in front of Commander M'Butu's desk and thought about what he was going to say.

"I'm Commander Oliver M'Butu." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Oh, excuse me. It's nice to meet you, I'm Rory Teeter of Clan Short of Vulcan." Rory said shyly.

Commander M'Butu stood and leaned across his desk so he could shake Rory's hand.

"Since you're from Clan Short, can I assume that you're here about what happened to Crewman Winters today?" Commander M'Butu asked as he took his seat again.

"Yes. I'm talking to everyone involved in the decision to send him into the reactor to find out why it happened." Rory said seriously.

Commander M'Butu nodded and said, "You don't need to talk to anyone else. It was my decision to ask him to go into the reactor and I accept full responsibility for everything that happened as a result."

Rory looked at Commander M'Butu appraisingly for a moment, and noticed the pain in his eyes.

"I wish there had been another way..." Commander M'Butu added in almost a whisper.

"Will you tell me about it?" Rory asked in a more gentle voice.

"It was like the *Kobiashi Maru* scenario... that is to say, a no win situation. I had hundreds of colonists stranded on a planet being terrorized by killer storms. There was solar radiation so intense that it nearly made our transporters inoperative. Then to top it off, there was a damaged reactor leaking radiation and quickly approaching the critical level. I was searching through every possible solution to the problem, I was even contemplating

vaporizing the reactor from space with the *Yorktown's* phasers when I remembered Vincent." Commander M'Butu said distantly.

"At first I didn't even want to consider it, but... there just wasn't any other way. Even though he came through it safely, the sight of him with red blotchy skin and blisters on his face will haunt me until my dying day." Commander M'Butu said quietly.

"If you had to face the same decision again, would you do the same thing?" Rory asked quietly.

Commander M'Butu sat silently for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"Thank you for talking with me Commander." Rory said carefully.

"He faced death as bravely as anyone I've ever seen." Commander M'Butu said as he looked into Rory's eyes.

Rory nodded at the statement, then asked, "Do you think Vincent should be allowed to stay on the *Yorktown*?"

Commander M'Butu gave an ironic chuckle and said, "I don't know about that, but I can't think of anyplace else in the universe where he'll have so many people who respect and admire him. There are five hundred people on this ship who would fight to defend him with their lives... and that's not including the colonists."

"Thank you Commander." Rory said as he reversed his wheelchair.

"There's going to be a celebration in about ten minutes in the Recreation Hall. If you're about to give Vincent some bad news, could you hold it until after the ceremony? I think he's earned a little happiness after everything he's done." Commander M'Butu said honestly.

Rory nodded, then quietly asked, "May I use your comm to make a call?"

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"Captain, may I speak with you for a moment?" Darin asked from the doorway.

"Yes. Of course Mr. Cooper." Captain Byrne said as he looked up from his desk.

"The Starfleet JAG office has accepted my resignation and confirmed that my part in the incident is closed, so now I'm officially a civilian." Darin said carefully.

"Yes, I had a discussion with Captain Spock and Commander Dodds about the matter. Please continue." Captain Byrne said calmly.

"Sir, as a civilian, I'd like to formally request permission to join the crew of the *Yorktown* as a crewman and be assigned to Deflector Control." Darin said respectfully.

"I will take your request under advisement and get back to you shortly." Captain Byrne said formally.

"Thank you sir." Darin said as he stood a little straighter.

"Are you aware of the celebration that is being planned on both ships?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"No sir. I've been otherwise occupied." Darin said carefully.

"No matter. The *Enterprise* and the *Yorktown* will be having a celebration for the colonists and both crews before we part company. When the celebration begins, the Deflector Control team will be called to the stage. I believe it would be appropriate if you stood with them."

"Thank you sir, I'd like that." Darin said quietly.

"Then shall we go? It won't hurt to be a minute or two early." Captain Byrne asked as he stood.

"Yes sir." Darin said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Can I borrow Vincent for a few minutes?" Rory asked from the doorway.

"As long as you give him back when you're finished." Joe said, only half jokingly.

Vincent reluctantly stood and walked to join Rory at the door.

As the door closed, Joe quietly said, "I guess this is it."

"What do you think he's going to do?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"I don't know. Anyone with a drop of common sense would tell you that a starship is no place for a child... So I guess I'm praying that Rory doesn't have even one drop of common sense because I want Vincent to stay." Joe said quietly.

Connie chuckled as he said, "I never thought there would be a day when I'd pray for a child to be ignorant. But I'm with you Joe."

* * * * *

"Does this mean you've decided?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

Rory nodded.

"Well tell me! I'm about to go nuts!" Vincent exploded in frustration.

Rory chuckled at Vincent's expression and said, "You're cute when you're angry."

Vincent froze at the statement, then began to chuckle.

"That's better." Rory said with a smile, then whispered, "You can stay."

Vincent froze and quietly said, "Can you say that again? I want to be sure I heard it right."

"I said that you can stay. Even though I don't like that they put you in danger, I understand that they risked one life to save hundreds and that every person that I talked to would have taken your place if they could." Rory said seriously.

Vincent giggled as he said, "That's what it means to be in Starfleet. Check around when you get back to the *Enterprise* if you don't believe me. Everyone there would have done the same thing too. It's just what we do."

"I'm beginning to see what you mean." Rory said with a small smile.

Vincent hugged Rory tightly and said, "Thank you, I'll never be able to repay you for this."

Rory chuckled and said, "You don't need to thank me. I only did what was logical. I needed to be sure that this was the best place for you to be... and it is. Oh yeah, and I have a message for you."

"What's that?" Vincent asked as he released Rory from the hug.

"Uncle Chip wanted to know when I made a decision, so I called to tell him and Grandfather Sarek was there." Rory said with a smile.

Vincent fought to be still, nearly vibrating with anticipation.

"Grandfather told me to tell you that your ordeal met the conditions of the *kahs'wan* and your successful completion has already been recorded back on Vulcan." Rory said with a smile, already knowing what was going to happen next.

As expected, Vincent swooped in and pulled Rory into another joyful hug.

"I need to be leaving now, but I bet there's some people through that door who would be very interested to hear your news." Rory said with a smile.

"Don't you want to come in with me? I bet they'll want to thank you too." Vincent asked hopefully.

"That's alright. I really need to be going. Remember to keep in touch." Rory said as he started away.

"I will, and make sure you write to me and tell me how you like Vulcan. I want to hear all about it." Vincent said with excitement.

"I'll do that. Go on, I bet they're worried." Rory said as he continued down the catwalk.

Vincent watched Rory for a moment longer, then hurried back to deflector control.

* * * * *

Vincent stepped through the door and was confronted by everyone's expectant gazes.

He toyed with the idea of teasing them for a second, but when he saw the concern in Joe's eyes, he quietly said, "I can stay."

Everyone gave a cheer of joy at the news, and Joe ran to pull Vincent into a tight hug.

Benny and JonJon couldn't wait for their turns and hugged Joe and Vincent from each side.

Vincent and Joe automatically reached back and pulled Benny and JonJon in to make it a four-way hug.

"Did he tell you why he decided to let you stay here?" Connie asked with a smile at the scene.

"Yeah. He figured out that I'll be safe here." Vincent said happily as he enjoyed the four-way hug.

"What happened? Did I miss something?" Rad asked as he walked into the room.

"Vincent gets to stay." Joe said happily.

"Good. I'd hate to think I went through all that trouble to pull him out of the transporter just to have someone come along and take him away from us." Rad said with a teasing smile.

"Come over here, there's room for one more." Vincent said as he opened the hug to include Rad.

"Wait, what time is it?" Joe asked as he looked at the nearest terminal.

"Just a few minutes before 18:00, why?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Because Lou and Judy should be here..." Joe said when the door opened.

"...now." He finished with a smile.

* * * * *

"Where are we going?" Vincent asked in confusion as everyone in Deflector Control except Lou and Judy funneled out of the room.

"To the turbo lift." Joe said seriously.

Vincent glanced up at Joe with aggravation.

Joe smiled at the expression, but said nothing more.

"Recreation Deck." Connie said when the last of the group were finally on the lift.

"Do you know what's going on?" Vincent asked Benny in a whisper.

Benny shook his head.

Vincent glanced at JonJon and received another negative response.

"You're just too curious for your own good." Joe said with a chuckle.

"I bet you'd say the same thing to the cattle in the chute being led into the slaughterhouse." Vincent said firmly.

Joe chuckled at the statement and said, "I promise that we won't be going anywhere near a slaughterhouse."

The doors opened to reveal the entire recreation deck of the *Yorktown* packed with people.

"Right over here." Joe said and led his group to the stage at the front of the room.

Vincent noticed that there was a large view screen over the stage, and what appeared to be the *Enterprise's* rec hall was showing on it, and it was just as crowded with people.

When Vincent realized that they were going up on the stage he slowed down and said, "No. I'm not going to get up in front of people. I haven't even had a chance to shower today."

"Neither has anyone else. Now come on." Joe said insistently.

"No. I was just doing my job. I don't want this." Vincent said firmly as he planted his feet and refused to walk any further.

Joe glanced around at the rest of the Deflector Control crew, then knelt before Vincent to look him in the eyes.

"You did something very brave and special today. It's important for the colonists to be able to express their appreciation so they can focus on what's ahead of them rather than what they've lost. All you need to do is get up there and smile for a few minutes while we say nice things about you. After that you can be as timid and anti-social as you want and I won't say a single word about it. Vincent, it comes with the job. Sometimes you have to do things like this." Joe said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Okay. I guess I'll do it... But you should have told me first so I could get cleaned up. I feel nasty." Vincent said darkly.

Joe smiled and gave Vincent a quick hug as he said, "I didn't want to take the chance of spoiling the surprise."

Reluctantly, Vincent walked with the Deflector Control crew, Rad, Benny and JonJon onto the stage.

Vincent was happy to see that Darin was there too, he had been worried when Darin didn't return to Deflector Control after his meeting with the Captain.

"Everyone, may I have your attention." Captain Byrne called out to the crowded room as he stood behind a podium.

"It has been a tradition on the *Yorktown* for many years to have a mixer whenever the *Yorktown* leaves Earth to welcome the new members to the crew. This mixer will be unique by the fact that we will be able to include the members of the Kimber colony and the crew of the *Enterprise* in our celebration."

"It is also our tradition to grant promotions only when we are in dock so that the families of those being promoted may witness the ceremony. But I feel that it is appropriate to break with that tradition this once so all of you can be a part of this. Crewman Winters, please step forward." Captain Byrne said in a booming voice.

Vincent forced himself to take a single step forward on shaking legs.

"Cyril, I believe you had something to say?" Captain Byrne said, then stepped away from the podium.

Cyril walked forward and said, "Vincent, on behalf of the entire Kimber colony, I'd like to express our heartfelt appreciation for saving so many lives at the risk of your own. When we reach the new colony, you will be listed as our first citizen and you will always have a home with us."

A round of applause spread over the room, and Vincent could hear an equal amount of applause over the speakers, coming from the colonists aboard the *Enterprise*.

When the applause died down, Cyril turned to look at Vincent and said, "Thank you Vincent."

Vincent shyly nodded.

When Cyril had stepped away from the microphone, Captain Byrne stepped forward and said, "Commander Dodds, I believe you had something to say?"

Chip walked to the podium and said, "I was the one who had the honor of sponsoring Vincent in the mentoring program. I just wanted to come up here and say that I'm very proud of you Vincent, and if Captain Byrne ever gives you any trouble, we'll have a place for you on the *Enterprise*."

Captain Byrne gave Chip a severe look, but he couldn't maintain it for very long and broke into a smile.

"Now Crewman Winters, after careful consideration of your contribution to the well being of the Kimber colony, I have come to the following decision. In recognition of your heroic act of shutting down the damaged reactor, I am honored to grant you a field promotion to enlisted rank 2, Able Seaman." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Applause began to swell, but Captain Byrne raised his hands to quiet everyone.

After a moment for the crowd to settle, Captain Byrne said, "In recognition of your part in detecting a plot that threatened the safety of ships and star bases throughout the Federation as well as your part in saving a crewman's life in Engineering, I am further advancing your rank to that of enlisted rank 3, Petty Officer 2nd class. Step forward Petty Officer Winters and receive your rank insignia."

Vincent took another step forward and lifted his arm to allow Captain Byrne to attach the octagonal pin to the forearm of his uniform.

Applause swelled out of control on both ships as Vincent stood, not knowing what he was supposed to do next.

After a full minute of clapping, the sound started to die down.

"Thank you Crewman Winters. Crewman Walker, please step forward." Captain Byrne said and turned to see her surprised expression.

Susan hesitantly stepped forward, not having a clue as to why she was being singled out.

"Crewman Susan Walker, it has been brought to my attention that Crewman Winters would not have been able to achieve the things he did without your instruction and encouragement. So in recognition of your demonstration of leadership and training skills I am honored to grant you a field promotion to enlisted rank 4, Petty Officer 1st class. Please step forward Petty Officer Walker and receive your new rank insignia." Captain Byrne said with a smile at her shocked expression.

Susan stepped forward and watched as Captain Byrne removed her plain octagonal rank insignia and replaced it with an octagon with four braided sides.

After a moment of applause, Captain Byrne said, "Thank you Crewman Walker, and now to one final matter. Mr. Cooper, please step forward."

Darin hesitantly walked to stand before the captain.

"Due to a series of actions that were committed without Mr. Cooper's knowledge or consent, he was assigned to the *Yorktown* and promoted to the rank of Ensign for fraudulent reasons. When the facts came to light, Mr. Cooper resigned the rank that he had mistakenly received and expressed a desire to be allowed to remain on the *Yorktown* as a member of the crew. While investigating the matter, some interesting facts came to my attention. So without further adieu, Mr. Cooper, in recognition of the ingenuity you displayed in your creation of the 'Cooper Bridge' that saved many hundreds of lives today, I am honored to welcome you as a member of my crew. Further, in recognition of the display of leadership that you demonstrated in an incident involving Crewman Hartman and Crewman Tidwell in Engineering earlier today, I am restoring you to the rank of Ensign. A rank which I feel that you truly deserve. Please step forward Ensign Cooper and receive your rank insignia."

Darin took another step forward and watched as the captain pinned the triangular rank insignia on his uniform.

Applause rose up through both ships.

"Everyone, thank you for your attention. Please enjoy the celebration." Captain Byrne said happily.

A swell of cheering and applause rose up as music started playing.

* * * * *

Vincent stood in silence as he looked down at the rank insignia on his forearm.

"Petty Officer Winters. That sounds pretty cool." Benny said with a smile.

Vincent looked at Benny blankly, completely overwhelmed by what had just happened.

"That means he's the same rank as me now. Way to go Vincent." Jimmy said cheerfully.

Vincent looked at Jimmy with question, then a huge smile broke out on his face.

"Come on, lets get some food before all the good stuff is gone." JonJon said as he petted Fizgig in his arms.

"You go on. I want to talk to Daddy Joe for a minute." Vincent said absently.

Benny and JonJon hurried down off the stage and to the food tables where a wide variety of snack foods were laid out for everyone to enjoy.

"How are you doing Vincent?" Joe asked with a smile.

"It's... I can't believe it." Vincent said in wonder.

"Don't try. Just enjoy it. The reality will set in later." Joe said with a proud smile.

"I've never been this happy. I just wish my momma could have been here to see this." Vincent said quietly.

Joe pulled him into a gentle hug and said, "I know for a fact that your mother is watching out for you and is very proud of everything that you've achieved."

Vincent snuggled into the warm hug and decided not to question what Joe was saying. Joe had never lied to him about anything, so just this once he would accept that Joe knew what he was talking about and believe that his mother was here to see the proudest moment of his life.

Chapter 12

Vincent stared vacantly at the crowd as people milled around and were generally having a good time.

"You did that." Joe whispered as he hugged Vincent from behind.

"So did you." Vincent said as he craned his neck to look up at Joe.

"And so did everyone else on the *Yorktown*. This is why we're out here." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent nodded and turned his attention back to the crowd.

"Congratulations Vincent. I've never met anyone who scored two promotions at once like that." Brock said as he approached the pair on the stage.

"I didn't have any idea that I was going to get promoted at all. I've only been on board for one day." Vincent said with a smile.

Brock chuckled and said, "You keep this up and you'll be commanding the ship by the time we get to the new colony."

Vincent laughed at the idea and said, "I don't think I'll be ready for another promotion for a while. This one kind of wore me out."

"Well, if you're not too tired, some of us guys are going to have a poker game later tonight in the supply room. You guys would be welcomed to join us if you like." Brock said as he glanced at Joe.

"That sounds like fun, but I don't think so. I still have to go to sickbay and get checked out so I can work in the morning." Vincent said in a quieter voice.

"That's fine. We'll probably be having a poker game every night and you'll always be welcomed." Brock said happily.

"Would you mind if I bring some friends with me?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No problem. If they're your friends, I'm sure they'll fit in." Brock said with a smile.

"Okay, it sounds like fun. Maybe later this week." Vincent said happily.

"Like I said, you'll always be welcomed." Brock said, then noticed that Randy and Gary were trying to get his attention.

"Gotta go. The guys need me for something." Brock said quickly.

"Have fun." Vincent said with a warm smile and watched him go.

"I was afraid you would have problems making friends because of the age difference." Joe said seriously.

"I've already got more friends here than I ever had back on Earth." Vincent said honestly.

* * * * *

"Vincent, there's someone I'd like you to meet, you too Joe." Chip said with a grand smile and motioned for them to follow.

Vincent and Joe shared a glance at each other, then followed Chip off the stage and down into the crowd.

"He's right over here." Chip said loudly to be heard over the happily chattering people.

A moment later, they emerged from the crowd, about half-way down the length of the rec-hall.

"Vincent and Joe, I'd like you to meet a good friend of mine, this is Ellery." Chip said with a grand smile.

"Uncle Chip, please don't call me that. Everyone here calls me Channing." He said in a pained voice.

Joe and Vincent chuckled at Channing's embarrassed expression.

"Sorry Peanut, I wasn't trying to embarrass you." Chip said quietly.

"Oh God! Go ahead and call me Ellery if you want. Just don't get everyone started calling me... that." Channing said quickly.

"Don't worry, no one gets to call you 'that' but me." Chip said quietly, then turned to face Joe and Vincent again and said, "Vincent and Joe, I'd like for you to meet Channing."

"We met yesterday." Vincent said, trying to restrain his laughter.

"Yeah, when Vincent saved my life." Channing said hesitantly.

"He did? This is the first I'm hearing of it. And just what were you doing to cause your life to need saving?" Chip asked in a fatherly tone.

"I... um, I was testing a control circuit to see if it was good...." Channing said quietly.

Chip raised an eyebrow and waited for Channing to continue.

"And I guess I forgot to test to see that everything was powered down before I started digging around in there." Channing said in almost a whisper.

Chip shook his head in disappointment, then pulled Channing into a hug and said, "You've got to be more careful Peanut. You're very special to me and I don't want to see you hurt."

"I'll be careful. Everything was just so crazy yesterday with everyone from all shifts called to duty that I kind of got caught up in it." Channing said in a small voice.

"Do you remember what you're supposed to do when things get crazy like that?" Chip asked in a leading tone.

"Stop. Breathe. Center." Channing said quietly.

"Good. Then that's all I'm going to say about it... I won't even mention it to your grandmother. I'm glad you came through it safely." Chip said as he hugged Channing again.

"Only because Vincent was there. Dr. Perry said that if Vincent hadn't called for the med-team right away and told them what was wrong with me, I probably would have died. In fact, she said that I was technically dead for almost two minutes before they got to me and that if they'd been a few seconds later, they wouldn't have been able to bring me back." Channing said seriously.

"Are you sure you wouldn't be happier on the *Enterprise* where I can keep an eye on you?" Chip asked with concern.

"No thanks Uncle Chip. I just made a stupid mistake and I won't let it happen again." Channing said firmly.

"Besides, I'll be here to take care of him." Vincent said with an impish grin.

"Then I know he'll be safe." Chip said with a big smile.

Vincent noticed something in Channing's expression and quietly asked, "Are you feeling okay? You look like you're getting tired."

"I'm alright. But I should probably find a place to sit down." Channing said seriously at Vincent's concern.

"Why don't you come to sickbay with me? I'm going to see if Dr. Perry will release me for duty tomorrow, I think maybe she should look at you too. You shouldn't be getting tired so fast." Vincent said in a worried tone.

"I'll be fine. I just need to sit down for a while." Channing said insistently.

"Crewman Channing, report to sickbay. That's an order." Chip said firmly.

Channing looked into Chip's eyes, looking for something to tell him that Chip wasn't serious, finally Channing reluctantly said, "Yes sir."

"Daddy Joe, will you tell Benny and JonJon where I went?" Vincent asked quickly.

"I'll tell them." Joe said with a smile, then watched as Vincent walked away with Channing at his side.

"I worry about him." Chip said as he watched the pair walk away.

"Which one?" Joe asked quietly.

Chip looked at Joe consideringly for a moment, then said, "Good question. I suppose I have enough worry for two."

Joe smiled and nodded his agreement.

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"Sickbay." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Channing and said, "It sounds like you've known Commander Dodds for a long time."

"Yeah. Since I was a kid. He's friends with my family." Channing said quietly.

"He's really nice. I just met him Wednesday, but he's helped me a lot." Vincent said cheerfully.

"I just don't want him to be disappointed in me, I kind of look at him like a father." Channing said quietly.

The doors of the turbo lift opened and Vincent led the way out.

"He *is* proud of you. If he wasn't, he wouldn't have wanted me and Daddy Joe to meet you." Vincent said simply.

Channing thought about the words as they walked into the sickbay.

"Oh, I see you came back. Five minutes later and you would have missed me." Dr. Perry said as she walked around the room checking on her patients.

"You're black." Vincent said in astonishment.

Dr. Perry looked at Vincent with surprise.

"I'm sorry Dr. Perry. I shouldn't have said that." Vincent stammered, then quickly said, "Channing and I just came to get checked out and see if we're fit for duty."

Dr. Perry walked to Vincent's side and said, "That's okay Vincent." Then she leaned in to whisper, "Black isn't a bad word."

Vincent giggled and said, "Okay. I was just surprised because I was blind when I met you. I guess I thought you looked... um... different."

Dr. Perry smiled and said, "Come over here and lay down, then tell me what you thought I looked like. You too, come on."

Vincent and Channing went to the beds and laid down.

"Well, I kind of imagined that you looked like Dr. Chapel from the *Enterprise*, except with red hair like my Grandma Mona's." Vincent said as she scanned him with the tricorder.

"Oh, well Christine is a very beautiful woman, so I'm not at all bothered if you thought I looked like her." Dr. Perry said as she looked at the readings.

"Yeah, and she's really nice too. She's one of the doctors that helped get rid of the scabby skin." Vincent said as he watched her expression carefully.

"You know, when I found out that they were bringing a nine year old boy on the ship as a crewman, I thought it had to be a joke." Dr. Perry said as she scanned Vincent again.

"No joke. Here I am." Vincent said simply.

Dr. Perry shook her head and said, "I don't like what I'm seeing here."

"What is it? Is something wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Maybe. It might just be a side effect of your transporter incident and all the other excitement you've had today. I'm going to declare you fit for duty on the provision that you come back next week so I can check you again." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Is there something wrong with me?" Vincent asked slowly.

Dr. Perry smiled and said, "Ask me again next week and I'll have an answer for you."

Vincent sat up and nodded.

"And now for you Crewman Channing..." Dr. Perry said and started to scan him.

She made a few 'tsk tsk' sounds as she shook her head.

"You've pushed yourself too hard and now you're paying the price. Have you been assigned quarters?" Dr. Perry asked quietly.

"Some of us are going to be bunking in the observation lounge on Deck J in the Dorsal section." Channing said hesitantly.

"As lovely as that sounds, I'm afraid that at least for the next three days you are going to be confined to bed rest, and for that you will need a bed, not a sleeping bag." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"But..." Channing began to say.

"The other choice is for you to stay here for the next three days." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Yes Doctor." Channing said reluctantly.

"Good, give me a second." Dr. Perry said, then walked into her office.

"I'm sorry you're not going to get to go with everyone else. I didn't mean to cause you trouble. I was just afraid if you stayed up too long you might make yourself sicker." Vincent said with concern.

Channing saw the remorse in Vincent's eyes and gave him a gentle smile.

"Thanks for looking out for me Vincent. I'm a little disappointed because I won't be able to go with the guys, but you're right, I've got to do what's best so I can get well." Channing said reluctantly.

"Me and JonJon and Benny will make sure you don't get too bored while you're stuck in bed." Vincent said seriously.

Channing smiled and said, "It sounds like it's going to be an interesting three days."

"Well Crewman Channing, it appears you will be able to sleep in your observation lounge after all." Dr. Perry said as she walked back into the room.

Channing smiled at the statement.

"I contacted security, since they have been assigning quarters, and have been informed that there are no more quarters available. So it seems that your choices are to stay here or for us to set up a cot in your observation lounge." Dr. Perry said frankly.

"I'll take the lounge." Channing said with a smile.

"I thought you might. I've already asked that a cot be delivered to the observation lounge for you." Dr. Perry said with a wisp of a grin.

"Now here are my instructions for you for the next three days. Rest. Relax. Stay in bed. I can make arrangements to have your meals delivered to you if you would like." Dr. Perry finished carefully.

"Benny and JonJon could take care of that if you want. I bet they'd like to be able to do something to help out." Vincent said quickly.

"Very well. Someone will stop in to check on you from time to time, and if I find out that you're not following my instructions, I'll confine you to sickbay and order complete bed rest. And let me warn you, I have the coldest bedpans in all of Starfleet." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"I'll follow your instructions, I promise." Channing said quietly.

Dr. Perry nodded and said, "Good. Then I'll see you again in three days."

Channing nodded, then got up to leave.

"Crewman Winters." Ensign T'Lani said as Vincent stood at Channing's side.

"Yes?" Vincent said as he turned.

"You must contact Ambassador Sarek before the *Enterprise* departs." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"Oh, okay. Thank you Ensign T'Lani." Vincent said with a smile.

Ensign T'Lani gave a single nod, then returned to her duties.

"I can call him from the observation lounge." Vincent said as he walked with Channing out of Sickbay.

"You don't have to bother with me, I can get there by myself." Channing said seriously.

"I don't mind, besides, I want to see where you'll be staying." Vincent said with a smile.

"It's nice. It's one of my favorite places on the ship because most people forget it's there." Channing said as they entered the lift, then he said, "Deck J, Dorsal."

"Yeah, I guess most people think of Deck J being one of the lower decks of the saucer and they forget that there's another Deck J that's part of the dorsal that connects the saucer to the drive section." Vincent said seriously.

"Wow, you really know the layout." Channing said with a smile.

"I've been studying the deck plans for years, but this is the first time I'm actually going to see it." Vincent said with excitement.

The turbo lift doors opened to reveal a small room.

"It's over here." Channing said and led Vincent into the Observation Lounge.

"Hi Neil. How are you doing?" Channing asked happily when he saw the security officer setting up a cot.

"I'm doing great. I'm going off shift just as soon as I get this thing set up." Neil said as he unfolded the cot.

"How do you like my place?" Channing asked as he made a sweeping gesture to indicate the whole room.

"Nice. Great view. I'm going to be bunking in a cargo hold... at least it's not the one with the farm animals." Neil quickly added.

Channing chuckled and said, "I'm glad to hear it. Well, if you have trouble sleeping in your cargo hold, just come up here. As far as I know there are only three of us assigned to this observation lounge."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind. But I'm so tired right now that I think I could fall asleep standing up." Neil said honestly.

"I thought we were all going to have to do that from the way it was looking on the pool deck." Channing said frankly.

"You and me both. I'm glad it all worked out... Hey, aren't you Crewman Winters?" Neil asked suddenly.

"Yeah. We met down on the pool deck." Vincent said shyly.

"Congratulations on the promotion. I heard about the stuff you did today. Way to go." Neil said with a friendly smile.

"Thanks." Vincent said shyly.

"Well, I've got to get going. Have a good night Channing. You look like you could use some rest." Neil said casually.

"Yeah, you too. And remember what I said, we've got an open spot here if you need a place." Channing said with a smile.

"I'll remember." Neil said, then left the room.

A moment of silence fell over the room as Channing and Vincent looked out at the stars.

"It's really pretty." Vincent whispered.

"Yeah. Just wait till you see it while we're moving." Channing said distantly.

Vincent shook himself out of his wandering thoughts and said, "I need to call Grandfather Sarek."

"The comm's right over there." Channing said and pointed.

Vincent walked to the comm panel and pressed the main communications button.

"*Communications*." The voice answered professionally.

"Can you open a diplomatic channel to Ambassador Sarek on the *Enterprise*?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"*Just a moment*." The communications worker said quickly.

Vincent looked over and saw that Channing was laying out his sleeping bag on the cot.

"*This is Ambassador Sarek*."

"Grandfather Sarek, I was told that you needed me to call you before the *Enterprise* left." Vincent said seriously.

There was a moment of silence, then Ambassador Sarek said, "*I made no such request*."

"Ensign T'Lani said that I needed to contact you." Vincent said in confusion.

"*T'Lani of the house of Sukaan?*" Ambassador Sarek asked cautiously.

"Yes, the daughter of Sufaal." Vincent said quickly.

"*I see. I was not going to discuss this matter with you until I had time to consider all the implications.*" Ambassador Sarek said carefully.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"*It is simply a Vulcan tradition that the people of Earth tend to think of as... unrealistic.*" Ambassador Sarek said in a measured tone.

"Will you tell me?" Vincent asked quietly.

"*Within one hour of officially recording your successful completion of the kahs'wan, I was contacted by T'Seela, the matriarch of the house of Sukaan about the possibility of arranging a marriage.*" Ambassador Sarek said simply.

"A marriage... to me?" Vincent finished with a squeak.

"*Correct*." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"Wait. I think I remember this... you and T'Seela would figure out if this marriage was a logical pairing and if you both agree that it is, then... I'm married... I mean, just like that... but then later, like when I'm something like twenty one, we would have the official ceremony and that's when we would start living together... right?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"*Correct. That is the tradition. But Humans use criteria other than logic to determine the suitability of a prospective mate. Therefore, it would be illogical to arrange a marriage in the traditional manner.*" Sarek said thoughtfully.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then asked, "What if the Human really liked the Vulcan, then would it be logical?"

There was a long moment of silence, then Ambassador Sarek said, "*Possibly.*"

"Is it okay if I know who T'Seela wants me to marry?" Vincent asked carefully.

"*It is permitted.*" Ambassador Sarek said slowly.

"Is it Ensign T'Lani?" Vincent asked, even more quietly.

"*That is correct.*" Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Grandfather. I like Ensign T'Lani, she's smart and pretty and she's been really nice to me. If you figure out that our pairing is logical, I would really like to do this."

"*You must understand that Vulcans do not have divorce. Our marriages continue until death.*" Ambassador Sarek said slowly.

"Grandfather, I saw how my parents lived in a Human marriage. At dinner tonight I saw how you and Grandma Amanda live in a Vulcan marriage. If that's what a logical pairing of a Vulcan and Human is like, then I want what you have." Vincent said seriously.

"*Vincent, you honor the house of Surak and the traditions of Vulcan by doing this. I will contact T'Seela and begin the discussion of the logic of the proposed union. I will contact you when we have reached consensus.*" Ambassador Sarek said peacefully.

"I'll be waiting for the call. Live long and prosper, Grandfather." Vincent said with a smile.

"*Peace and long life, Grandson.*" Sarek responded calmly.

Vincent turned off the comm, then turned to find Channing fast asleep.

Quietly, Vincent left the observation lounge deep in thought.

* * * * *

"Where's Vincent?" Benny asked as he and JonJon ran to Joe's side.

"He went to the Sickbay to see if he's allowed to return to duty." Joe said with a smile at the boys.

"Is he coming back here when he's done?" Benny asked seriously.

"I don't know, he didn't say." Joe said frankly.

"Maybe you can help us. Fizgig is starting to squirm around a lot and JonJon thinks that maybe he needs to... um... you know... use the bathroom." Benny said reluctantly.

"Oh, I guess we'd better find a way to deal with that. Is Fizgig paper trained?" Joe asked carefully.

"Yeah. We were just starting to try and get him to go outside when the storms started up. Dad decided to wait until after the storms stopped before we tried again." JonJon said and a note of sadness crept into his voice.

"Then why don't we go to the quartermaster's office for a few supplies? Then we can take Fizgig down to Deflector Control and fix a place for him to do his business." Joe said with a smile.

"Thank you Daddy Joe... Um, I mean Lieutenant Bowers." JonJon corrected shyly.

"You had it right the first time." Joe said with a smile and gestured toward the nearest turbo lift.

* * * * *

Vincent was still lost in thought when he walked into Deflector Control.

"Congratulations Vincent. We saw the whole thing on the monitor." Lou said with a big smile and pointed at the screen which was still showing the celebration in the rec-hall.

"Thanks." Vincent said happily and walked over to her to show off his new rank insignia‡.

"Come over here and look at this Judy." Lou said with delight.

"Oh, look at that, now we're a matched set." Judy said as she held out her forearm to display her identical rank insignia.

"Cool!" Vincent said with a smile.

"What are you doing here? I thought you'd be enjoying the party." Lou asked curiously.

"I'm waiting on a call from my Grandfather, and besides, I'm really tired and I'd like to sit somewhere quiet for a little bit." Vincent said shyly.

"I can certainly understand that. If you'll log in on one of the auxiliary stations, your message will be routed to you automatically." Lou said casually.

"Oh, thanks Lou. I didn't know that." Vincent said happily and hurried to auxiliary station two.

Lou and Judy went back to their work, both wearing smiles at Vincent's obvious happiness.

After a long silence in the room, Vincent curiously asked, "What's a bar mitzvah?"

Lou and Judy looked at each other with surprise at the unusual question, but Judy finally answered, "It's a Jewish ceremony that celebrates a boy becoming a man. I don't really know too much about it."

Vincent nodded and said, "Thanks, that's what I needed to know... what does 'Mazal Tov' mean?"

"I think it's Yiddish or Hebrew. It means congratulations... what are you reading?" Lou asked curiously.

Vincent smiled and said, "There's this place back on Earth that my Clan set up called 'Camp Little Eagle'. The whole place is filled with other guys like me who've been adopted by the Clan. A guy named Uri sent me an electronic Bar Mizvah card and I didn't know what those words meant. Now I understand."

"A whole camp of kids like you?" Lou asked hesitantly.

Vincent nodded and said, "Yeah. They're all my brothers."

Lou looked at Judy and absently said, "They could change the universe."

Judy nodded her agreement.

As Vincent opened the next message, another window opened to signal an incoming video transmission.

Vincent accepted the transmission and smiled when he saw who it was.

"Hi Grandma Amanda." Vincent said happily.

"*Hello Vincent. Sarek tells me that you've decided to accept a traditional Vulcan arranged marriage*." Amanda said seriously.

"Yeah, I did." Vincent said shyly.

"*Vincent, this is a very serious step that will effect the rest of your life. You should consider it carefully.*" Amanda said with concern.

"I know it is Grandma, but I think I really need to do this." Vincent said in a considering tone.

"*How do you mean?*" Amanda asked carefully.

"I don't want to grow up to be like my momma and my dad were. I'm afraid that when I get old enough to want to start dating and stuff that, I'll make a big mess like they did and end up married to someone I don't really like. I'd probably be really unhappy and maybe even end up hurting my kids. If Grandfather Sarek says that it would be logical for me and T'Lani to be married, then maybe we can be happy. She's really smart and nice and pretty and she's already helped me a lot by helping me to look at stuff logically. I think I need someone to help me do that because I don't always remember to." Vincent said in deep thought.

"*And what would you do for her?*" Amanda asked carefully.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I'd try to do the stuff to make her proud of me so she'd be proud to be my wife. I'd try to help her do the stuff she wants to do so she can be proud of herself and I can be proud to be her husband. And I think that I would love her... I think maybe I do a little bit already."

There was a long minute of silence as Amanda considered the statement.

"Do you think I'm making a mistake?" Vincent asked quietly.

Amanda smiled gently and shook her head.

"*No Vincent, I think you've made one of the most important decisions that anyone can make. I know that Sarek is pleased that one of his grandchildren is following the traditional ways and allowing him to perform one of the most sacred duties the leader of a Vulcan family can perform*." Amanda said peacefully.

"It's kinda scary, but it feels good too... It's like, I feel like I'll never have to be alone again. Daddy Joe and the Clan and my friends will be there too, but... I don't know, T'Lani and I will be... beside each other, walking on the same path, going the same place. I won't be just me, I'll be part of us too... I'm sorry if I'm messing this all up. I'm not good at talking about feelings and junk like that." Vincent finished in frustration.

"*No, my grandson, you're doing just fine. I think your vision of the future is beautiful. I've known peace and fulfillment for many years walking the path beside your grandfather and it is my wish for you to enjoy the same with your wife*." Amanda said gently.

"Thank you Grandma Amanda." Vincent said quietly.

"*I'm going to go now. I need to talk to your Grandfather to give him my 'Human' perspective about your marriage*." Amanda said with a warm smile.

"Bye Grandma. I love you." Vincent said gently.

"I love you too, my grandson. Peace and long life." Amanda said peacefully, then ended the transmission.

* * * * *

"Let's hurry up guys, I think he's about to blow." Joe said as he rushed into Deflector Control with an armload of supplies.

Benny and JonJon came in next and quickly followed Joe into the supply room.

Vincent noticed movement and saw Lou silently summoning him to come to her.

Quickly, Vincent crossed the room and waited expectantly.

In a whisper, Lou asked, "Did I just hear you right? Are you getting married?"

Vincent looked from Lou to Judy, then nodded cautiously.

"You haven't told Joe about this yet, have you?" Lou asked carefully.

Vincent shook his head slowly.

"Tell him. Now." Lou said firmly.

"But he's probably going to say that I'm too young or something like that and I don't want to fight with him." Vincent said in a small voice.

"If you tell him now, he may be a little bit upset. But if you tell him after it's all over and you left him completely out of it, he'll be hurt forever. Tell him." Lou said seriously.

Vincent nodded and hurried toward the storage area.

As he reached the edge of the partition, Vincent turned and said, "Thanks Lou."

Lou smiled and nodded, then made a quick shooing motion.

* * * * *

"Daddy Joe, I need to talk to you." Vincent said as he walked around the partition.

"Oh, um, yeah. JonJon, will you make sure Fizgig doesn't... miss it, or overflow it or anything." Joe said as he watched the dog inspecting the improvised litter box.

JonJon nodded at Joe, then turned his full attention back to Fizgig.

"Come on." Vincent said urgently.

"I'm coming." Joe said hesitantly, becoming concerned.

Vincent led him out the door into the hallway outside Deflector Control.

Joe's concern turned to full worry when he saw the tension in Vincent's expression.

"Um, Daddy Joe, I need to tell you something and I, um, don't know what you're going to think about it." Vincent said reluctantly.

Joe took a step forward and pulled Vincent into a firm hug.

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it will be just fine. Go ahead and tell me." Joe said soothingly.

"I... um. Okay, I don't know if you know this, but I kind of asked Grandfather Sarek if he could count the stuff I did down on the planet today as my *kahs'wan*." Vincent said carefully.

"I don't know what that is." Joe said hesitantly.

"It just means that because I did something really scary and didn't run away like a little kid, that by Vulcan law I am considered an adult." Vincent said seriously.

"Oh, I remember reading about that at the academy. So did he accept it?" Joe asked curiously.

Vincent nodded.

"Oh Vincent, that's nothing to be worried about. That's great!" Joe said as he hugged Vincent happily.

"That's not it." Vincent said slowly.

"Oh... Go ahead." Joe said and released Vincent from the hug.

"Well, when Grandfather recorded that I was an adult, the head of another family asked him if they could arrange a marriage for me." Vincent said quietly.

"You've got to be kidding. You're nine!" Joe said abruptly.

"Vulcan families usually arrange marriages for their kids. Some of them younger than me." Vincent said quietly.

"Ambassador Sarek didn't do it did he? I mean, I'm sure he's realized that you're Human and that you wouldn't want a marriage arranged for you like that... You should call Cory and tell him. He can explain it..." Joe said quickly.

"I told Grandfather that I want to do it." Vincent said, and a small tremble of fear could be heard in his voice.

Joe froze for an instant and stared at Vincent in disbelief.

"Daddy Joe, this is like the *kahs'wan*. It's something I needed to do by myself. If I asked you or anyone else about it you might have talked me out of it and then I'd blame you. Or if you tried to talk me out of it and then I did it anyway, then you'd be mad and maybe even yell at me and stuff... I'm sorry if this makes you mad at me. I really didn't want that." Vincent said as tears welled up in his eyes.

Joe looked into Vincent's worried eyes and said, "When I married your mother, I did it without my parents' approval. When I finally told them what I'd done, they were very angry with me and said things that made me feel like an irresponsible child. I love you Vincent and I think I understand why you felt that you had to do this on your own."

"Even though I passed my *kahs'wan*, you're still my Daddy Joe and I still need you." Vincent said seriously.

Joe gave an ironic chuckle and pulled Vincent into a gentle hug as he said, "Oh Vincent, what am I going to do with you?"

"Love me and hug me a lot?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"It was a rhetorical question, but... yeah. That's what I'm going to do with you." Joe said with contentment.

"I need to get back inside, Grandfather will be calling me soon to let me know if I'm married or not." Vincent said quietly.

"Do you really want to do this?" Joe asked with concern.

"Yeah Daddy Joe. I really do." Vincent said seriously.

"Then I'm happy for you." Joe said peacefully.

Vincent leapt on Joe and hugged him as tight as possible as he said, "Thank you Daddy Joe. I was so scared that you'd be mad at me for doing something grown up without talking to you about it first."

"Will you try to do something for me?" Joe asked quietly.

"Sure, anything you want." Vincent said, bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"So far today you've gotten two promotions, saved hundreds of lives, been declared an adult and now you're waiting to find out if you're married. Do you think you could tone it down a notch or two? I don't think I could handle every day being like this." Joe said with a hint of desperation in his voice.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Okay Daddy Joe, I promise that I won't do anything else for a while... if I can help it."

"Close enough." Joe said, then put a casual arm around Vincent's shoulder and guided him back to the Deflector Control room door.

* * * * *

As the pair walked into Deflector Control, Vincent abruptly stopped.

"Is something wrong?" Joe asked with concern.

"I just thought of something that I need to do right now." Vincent said seriously.

"Then I guess you'd better go and do it. I have a feeling that time is running out." Joe said quietly.

Vincent nodded and rushed out the door.

Judy walked to Joe's side and said, "I think he knows what he's doing."

"How can he? He's only nine." Joe said as he turned slowly to look at her.

"I have the feeling that Vincent can see things more clearly than a lot of adults. His perception of the world isn't clouded by hormones and obligations and all the other things that cause the rest of us to make stupid mistakes. I think he has a decent chance of making it work." Judy said speculatively.

Joe thought about the words for a moment, then said, "I suppose you're right. I just want to protect him from what's going to happen if it doesn't turn out the way he expects."

"You and every other parent in the universe since the beginning of time." Judy said frankly.

"Thanks for putting it into perspective for me Judy. I guess I'll have to trust him and hope for the best." Joe said quietly.

"We'll all be hoping right along with you." Judy said gently, then walked to station one to do a status check.

* * * * *

Vincent walked into Sickbay and spotted T'Lani immediately.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Vincent asked as he rushed to her side.

"Proceed." T'Lani said calmly.

"How old are you?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Twenty two. But Vulcans age differently from Humans, when you achieve the age of twenty one, I will appear to be of a comparable age." Ensign T'Lani said very precisely.

"I figured that part out for myself, the reason I'm asking is because I want to know why your family hasn't arranged a marriage for you before now. I mean, are you marrying me because there isn't anyone else?" Vincent asked seriously.

T'Lani considered the question for a moment, then responded, "You are the first prospective mate who exhibits the personality traits that would be a compliment to my own. I believe we are uniquely suited to each other. From a Human perspective, the pairing may seem unconventional. However, given the circumstance of our differing life cycles, I believe that this course of action is quite logical."

Vincent nodded and said, "Thank you Ensign T'Lani. I just needed to be sure that you were doing this because you wanted to and not because you didn't have any other choice."

"I am gratified by your concern. Be assured that it is my desire to become your wife and enjoy a mutually fulfilling future together." T'Lani said seriously.

"Okay. That's all I wanted to know. I'd better get back to deflector control and wait for Grandfather Sarek's call." Vincent said happily.

"May I also ask a question?" T'Lani asked calmly.

"Sure. Anything you want." Vincent said quickly.

"I have concerns about the differences between Vulcans and Humans. These things could become a source of conflict in our future relationship. I would be interested to know your thoughts on the matter." T'Lani said slowly.

Vincent thought about it for a minute before answering, "As long as you don't try to make me act like a Vulcan, I won't try to make you act like a Human. I think as long as we don't try to change each other, everything will be fine."

T'Lani considered the words, then carefully said, "I concur."

"I've got to go now. I'll talk to you later." Vincent said, immediately back to his full excitement.

T'Lani gave a single nod, then watched as Vincent rushed out of the room.

* * * * *

"Did Grandfather Sarek call yet?" Vincent asked as he ran into Deflector Control.

"Not yet. I would have paged you if he had." Joe said gently.

"Thanks. I just had to talk to... Um, someone..." Vincent trailed off uncertainly.

"It's okay Vincent. You don't have to tell me who it is if you don't want to." Joe said quietly.

Vincent looked at Joe with a flash of panic and said, "It's not that I don't want to, it's just that I don't want to tell you right now in case it doesn't happen because then you might act funny around her."

"Her? Well that narrows it down some." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent looked at Joe curiously, then chuckled.

"Um... Daddy Joe, could you... um... help?" Benny called from beside the partition.

"Uh oh. That doesn't sound good." Joe said as he gave Vincent one more quick hug before leaving.

"How are you holding up?" Lou asked gently.

"I'm kinda scared." Vincent said honestly.

"You'd be nuts if you weren't." Judy said gently.

"Either nuts or Vulcan." Lou added with a grin.

"Hey, no Vulcan jokes." Vincent said in mock offense.

The door to Deflector Control opened to reveal Connie, Susan, Jimmy and Darin.

"It's about time!" Lou groused.

"Hey. There's still plenty of party left, it's just getting warmed up. Besides, it's not my fault that someone needs to stay at the station." Connie said as he took Lou's place at the console.

"Yeah. See? They've just started dancing." Jimmy said and pointed at the monitor still displaying the events in the rec-hall.

"What do you say Judy? Do you feel like dancing?" Lou asked with a smile.

Judy glanced at Vincent, then said, "I'd really like to be here when Vincent gets his call."

Lou thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah. Me too."

"What's going on little brother?" Darin asked curiously.

Vincent's only response was to walk to Darin and give him a firm hug.

Darin looked around, then quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just really need a hug." Vincent said quietly.

Darin returned the hug and looked around at the other people in the room with concern.

Lou and Judy exchanged a look, but remained silent.

"Make sure you let Fizgig know that he did a good thing. He needs to know that that's the place for him to do his business." Joe said over his shoulder as he walked around the partition.

"He's a good dog. I think he understands now. He was just confused at first." JonJon said as he followed Joe into the room with Fizgig in his arms.

Benny walked into the room next, then looked around the room with confusion at the serious mood.

"Still waiting?" Joe asked as he walked to Darin and Vincent's sides.

"Yeah." Vincent said in a small voice.

"Do you want to tell everyone?" Joe asked quietly.

"The answer might still be no, so I don't want everyone to get excited about it." Vincent said carefully.

"But if you tell them and the answer is 'no' then they'll be able to help you deal with it." Joe said quietly.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah, I guess so."

Before Vincent could go any further, the beep of an incoming message came from auxiliary station two.

"I think that's probably for you." Joe said in nearly a whisper.

Vincent nodded and reluctantly released Darin to answer the call.

"What's going on?" Benny asked with concern.

"Just watch." Joe said in a whisper.

Vincent reluctantly accepted the transmission and waited.

"*Greetings Grandson.*" Sarek said without inflection.

"Greetings Grandfather." Vincent said apprehensively.

"*It has been determined that the marriage of Vincent Winters of the House of Surak and T'Lani of the House of Sukaan is a logical pairing. The union is to be consummated when Vincent Winters has attained his twenty first year.*" Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"Thank you Grandfather." Vincent said past his shock at the declaration.

"*It is my hope your union will be productive and fruitful. Live long and prosper, Grandson.*"

"Live long and prosper, Grandfather." Vincent said, still feeling nothing but shock.

Joe reached around Vincent to disconnect the transmission.

"That sounded like Vincent just got married." Benny said cautiously.

"He did." Lou said frankly.

"What? I mean, how? I mean, you're nine." Darin said in confusion.

"Vulcans do it a little differently." Joe said quietly as he watched Vincent with concern.

"He said yes." Vincent said in wonder.

"That's right Champ. You are now a married man." Joe said gently.

"No way. I mean, out of all of us, the nine year old is the only one that's married? That's just not right." Jimmy said disbelievingly.

"For once I agree with you." Lou said in a firm voice.

Jimmy stopped, stunned by the fact that Lou agreed with him about anything.

Lou turned to Judy and said, "I've loved you for years, but I've never felt like it was time for us to take that final step. Now I think it is. So while we're here with all our friends I want to ask you, Judy, will you marry me?"

Judy's eyes went wide with surprise, but as soon as the words fully registered, she nodded vigorously.

Everyone gathered around Lou and Judy to offer their congratulations.

After the excitement had calmed down, Joe looked around the room and asked, "Anyone else?"

Jimmy looked at Susan with question.

"No." Susan said firmly.

Jimmy looked down to the floor and nodded.

"But I wouldn't be against a date or two... If that's something you'd be interested in." Susan said gently.

Jimmy looked up suddenly and said, "Yeah. Let's do that."

"Jimmy, you have a way with words." Susan said with a tender smile.

"Well, if that's everyone..." Joe began to say.

"Not quite." Connie said to the group.

Everyone turned their attention to Connie.

"You know I've been seeing a girl on Earth from my home village for a couple years now, right?" Connie said reluctantly.

A few of the people around the room nodded.

"Well, right before we left Earth I asked Melina if she would marry me. She said yes." Connie said shyly.

"Really?" Joe asked in shock.

"Yeah. Debbie is the only one who knows. I told her on the shuttle." Connie said quietly.

"Why did you wait so long to tell us. This is wonderful news." Joe said and pulled Connie into a firm hug.

"I waited because... I'm going to request a transfer to a planetary posting." Connie said reluctantly.

"Oh." Joe said quietly as he carefully released Connie.

"You're leaving us?" Susan asked with disbelief.

"Yeah Suze, I am. I know some people can make a long distance marriage work, but I don't think Melina and I could... and I don't want to. I want to go back to Greece and live a normal life and raise a family." Connie said with a hint of desperation in his voice.

After a long moment of silence, Joe said, "Good for you. I'm glad you understand what's most important."

"Yeah. Judy and I will probably be roaming the universe for a few more years, but it won't be too long before I think we'll be doing the same thing... well, except for going to Greece... I'm thinking of something more tropical." Lou said peacefully.

"When are you going to transfer?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"Not for a while. It might be as long as a year. Melina has four sisters and a ton of aunts who will want to help plan the wedding. We've decided not to set a date until we can get them all to agree that we have enough time to get everything done so we can do it right." Connie said carefully.

"Then you probably won't be leaving anytime soon." Susan said with a smirk.

"That's what I thought. I wouldn't be surprised if they try to get the Pope himself to officiate." Connie said with a chuckle.

"It's too early for me to make any marriage plans, but I've met a special woman that I'm really serious about. So don't be surprised if I have an announcement of my own sometime soon." Joe said with a smile.

"Are you going to marry Grandma Mona?" Vincent asked suddenly.

"Like I said, it's too soon to be talking marriage, but... I haven't felt like this about anyone since your mother. It could happen." Joe said with a smile.

"Hey Vincent, when do we get to meet your fiancée?" Jimmy asked with a smile.

"Wife. They're married now." Joe said seriously.

Jimmy shrugged and said, "Okay, when do we get to meet your wife?"

"Right now... well, if she can leave sickbay and if she wants to." Vincent added quickly.

"Go on. I'd really like to meet her." Joe said with a smile.

"I'll be right back." Vincent said happily and dashed out of the room.

* * * * *

"Ensign T'Lani, do you have time to talk?" Vincent asked as he rushed into Sickbay.

"Of course husband." T'Lani said as she looked over a data padd.

"I just wondered if you have time to come down to Deflector Control and meet the people I work with. They'd all like to meet you." Vincent said happily.

"Yes. My shift reports will be completed momentarily, then I will be available to accompany you." T'Lani said seriously.

"Is there anyone here you want me to meet?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Not at this time. My coworkers have gone to enjoy the festivities on the recreation deck. I have had little interaction with those on duty at this time." T'Lani said as she focused on her reports.

"Oh. I guess we can do it later. I just want to be sure to meet all your friends." Vincent said with cheer.

"I will introduce you at the first opportunity... My reports are complete." T'Lani said and turned off her data padd.

"Cool. I know everyone is going to like you. They're all really great." Vincent bubbled.

T'Lani gestured toward the Sickbay door to indicate that she was ready to go.

Vincent fell into step beside her as they left the Sickbay.

"What will your reaction be if your friends do not find me to be acceptable?" T'Lani asked curiously.

Vincent thought about the question for a moment as they entered the turbo lift, then muttered, "Deflector Control" to the ceiling of the lift.

Once the lift started moving, Vincent said, "If they don't like you, then I guess I won't want to be around them as much."

"Please do not allow the circumstance of our marriage to disrupt your other relationships. It would be illogical to isolate yourself from others for the fact of our union." T'Lani said carefully.

Vincent shook his head and said, "You are my wife. That means you come first. If someone want's to mess with that, then I don't need them around me. My real friends will accept you *because* you're my wife. Then when they get to know you, they'll like you because of who you are."

"You honor me husband. What you say is logical." T'Lani said as the lift doors opened.

* * * * *

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet my wife, Ensign T'Lani daughter of Sufaal of the House of Sukaan of Vulcan." Vincent said proudly.

"It's nice to meet you Ensign T'Lani, I'm Joe Bowers, Vincent's surrogate father and mentor. Welcome to the family." Joe said happily.

"A pleasure." T'Lani said as she gave a respectful bow of her head.

"And this is my big brother Darin." Vincent said with excitement as he ran to Darin's side.

"It's um... nice... how old are you?" Darin finished abruptly.

"Twenty two. However, when my husband reaches the age of twenty one, my appearance will be virtually the same." T'Lani said frankly.

"Yeah, and by the time I'm sixty, I'll probably look a lot older than her." Vincent added with a smile.

"Let's all relax and let Vincent introduce Ensign T'Lani around. This is starting to feel way too formal for my liking." Joe said seriously.

"The friends and family of my husband are welcomed to forego my title and simply address me as T'Lani." She said calmly.

"T'Lani it is." Joe said happily, then said, "I see that you're in medical. Are you a nurse?"

"I have the requisite studies and certifications to function as a nurse. However, when I have completed my tour of duty on the *Yorktown*, it is my intention to complete my final year of medical training and become licensed as a doctor, then serve my residency on board a Starfleet vessel." T'Lani said seriously.

"That's impressive. From what I understand, there's quite a bit of competition to be a doctor on a starship." Joe said in thought.

"Yes, that is why I accepted the posting on the *Yorktown* when it came available. Previous experience on a Starfleet vessel should prove advantageous when my medical training is complete." T'Lani said frankly.

"I see what you mean. The rank and experience you've already achieved should make your career path in Starfleet a lot easier." Joe said speculatively.

"It seems the logical course." T'Lani said in agreement.

"So are you planning to be the Chief Medical Officer on a Starship someday?" Darin asked curiously.

"That is one possibility, though I believe a position at Starfleet Medical would be equally satisfying." T'Lani said calmly.

"That would be quite an achievement too. Only the best of the best get appointed to Starfleet Medical." Joe said with a considering nod.

"I know that T'Lani will make it if that's what she wants to do." Vincent said firmly.

"I think you're right. Her decisions so far have proven that she knows how to get things done." Joe said with a smile.

Darin looked from Vincent to T'Lani and nodded his agreement.

"I want to introduce T'Lani to everyone before people start leaving." Vincent said quickly.

Joe nodded and smiled as Vincent hurried away with T'Lani at his side.

"As weird as it sounds, I think they're perfect for each other." Darin said distantly.

"I know what you mean. A few hours ago I couldn't have imagined Vincent with a wife. Within a few minutes of seeing them together, I can't imagine him without her." Joe said frankly.

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Vincent guided T'Lani to the main Deflector Control console and said, "T'Lani, this is Connie."

"It's nice to meet you T'Lani. Vincent's done a lot of things that impressed me today, but finding a woman as beautiful as you to marry beats everything else by a long shot." Connie said with a grin.

T'Lani considered the statement for a moment, then said, "Our union is based on our psychological and behavioral compatibility. My physical appearance was not a determining factor in the decision of our family elders to arrange our marriage."

"Really? You mean that they still would have married you two if you'd been as ugly as a Tarkalian wildebeest?" Connie asked hesitantly.

"That is correct." T'Lani said frankly.

"Then Vincent, that means you have *got* to be one of the luckiest people I've ever met." Connie said seriously.

Vincent looked up at T'Lani and smiled as he said, "Yeah, I think so too."

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"T'Lani, I'd like you to meet Lou and Judy. They're going to get married." Vincent said happily.

"It is a pleasure to meet you and may I offer my congratulations on your impending nuptials." T'Lani said formally.

"Thank you. It's nice to meet you too. When I heard Vincent talking to his grandmother about how he felt about marrying you, it made me stop and

think about what I wanted for my own future." Lou said, then smiled at Judy warmly.

"It is gratifying to know that my husband's thoughts on the matter were favorable to the point of being inspirational." T'Lani said carefully.

"He helped put things in perspective for me." Judy said timidly.

"I believe that is a natural talent that he possesses." T'Lani said simply.

* * * * *

"Hey Jimmy, come over here." Vincent called as he walked with T'Lani toward Susan.

Jimmy hurried away from station two to be introduced.

"Jimmy and Susan, this is my wife T'Lani." Vincent said proudly.

"It's wonderful to meet you. I think you have quite a husband." Susan said with a warm glance at Vincent.

"I concur." T'Lani said calmly.

"I couldn't believe it when Ambassador Sarek said that you two were married. I mean, wow. Just like that." Jimmy said with excitement.

"Once it was established that we, as a prospective couple were compatible, there was no logical reason for delay." T'Lani said simply.

"How do they decide if two people are compatible?" Susan asked curiously.

"The family elders review the psychological profiles of the persons in question, then review the achievements of each to establish behavioral patterns. If the resulting composite profiles compliment each other, then the union is seen to be logical and the marriage is confirmed." T'Lani said in an instructive tone.

"Where did they get a psychological profile of Vincent?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"I had to do a whole bunch of tests and stuff before I left Earth. I guess that was part of it." Vincent said seriously.

"The psychological profile is a prerequisite for Starfleet service." T'Lani stated impassively.

"I guess without emotions to muck everything up, using the psychological profiles would be the best way to do it." Susan said carefully.

"Yeah, but what if the two people don't like each other?" Jimmy asked hesitantly.

"If the individuals in question trust in the judgment of their family elders, then they will attempt to look past any preconceived notions they might have adopted toward their prospective mate and accept a bonding that will ensure their union. The biological imperative of *pon'farr* makes it something of a necessity." T'Lani said frankly.

"But I've heard about challenges to an arranged marriage... how does that work?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Such a thing is a disgrace to the family elders and to both houses involved. It is a flagrant display of emotionalism over logic." T'Lani said firmly with a trace of disgust.

"Yeah. It would be like me saying to Grandfather Sarek that his decision wasn't logical and that I don't trust him." Vincent said seriously.

"Also, a marriage in defiance of logic would most likely result in a disharmonious and nonproductive union." T'Lani added carefully.

"Wow. You two really think alike. That's so cool." Jimmy said with a smile.

"A perfect match." Susan said with a chuckle.

T'Lani looked down at Vincent and said, "Our union is logical."

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"T'Lani, I'd like you to meet my friends Benny and JonJon. Oh yeah, and Fizgig, JonJon's dog." Vincent added quickly.

"A pleasure to meet you." T'Lani said carefully, then added, "JonJon, you are an artificial life form are you not?"

JonJon was surprised by the blunt question and hesitantly nodded.

"There was a time when I considered the creation of artificial life forms to be illogical. But I have since come to realize that androids add to the diversity that defines humanity. It is good for my husband to have such a friend." T'Lani said seriously.

"Thank you." JonJon said shyly.

"Um, how did you know that he was an android?" Benny asked cautiously.

"As part of my medical training I have become familiar with the physical characteristics of all commercially produced androids. It is necessary to be

able to identify an android by sight so proper care can be given in an emergency situation. JonJon is a M.A.R.C. model android with the optional upgrade characteristics." T'Lani said professionally.

"Optional upgrade? What's that?" Benny asked curiously.

"No. Please don't... Um, I mean, I'll tell you later." JonJon said quickly as he flushed with embarrassment.

T'Lani gave JonJon a single nod to confirm that she would not explain further.

* * * * *

"***All hands, prepare for departure in fifteen minutes***." Sounded over the comm.

"I guess it's about that time." Joe said as he looked around the room.

"Are you guys going to be okay tonight? You didn't get any sleep." Connie asked Lou with concern.

"We slept earlier in the day. We'll be fine." Lou said seriously.

"That's good, but if you start having trouble, just call me. Remember, I owe you one." Connie said with a smile.

"You owe me more than one, but I'm sure we'll be fine." Lou said with a grin.

"I must return to Sickbay to ensure that everything is secured before departure." T'Lani said seriously.

"Thank you for coming down to meet my friends. It was really great getting to spend time with you." Vincent said gently.

"Tomorrow when your duties permit, perhaps you could come to Sickbay and meet my coworkers." T'Lani said more quietly.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Vincent said with a smile.

T'Lani brought her hand to the side of Vincent's face and gently stroked his cheek with her thumb as she said, "I will see you tomorrow my husband."

Vincent looked up at T'Lani with love shining in his eyes and said, "Until tomorrow my wife."

Silence filled the room as T'Lani walked out the door.

"Damn! That's some powerful stuff." Connie said, breaking the introspective mood that had fallen over the room.

"Connie, you're one class act." Lou said with a chuckle.

"Well everyone, as soon as we're underway, what do you say we call it a night? I don't think I'm up to any more surprises." Joe said with a smile as he walked to the main console.

"Sounds good to me. It's been some kind of day." Darin said with a smile.

"Tomorrow will be too. We'll all be writing our reports about everything that happened today." Joe said with a smile.

A collective groan filled the room.

"There goes the *Enterprise*." Connie said as he watched his console carefully.

"At warp five. I wonder what the rush is?" Joe said curiously.

Everyone turned as the door to Deflector Control opened to admit an Andorian wearing a Starfleet uniform†.

Silence fell over the room as the Andorian looked around for a moment, then walked to face Joe by the main control panel.

Finally, in a firm voice the Andorian said, "Ensign Thaelan reporting for duty sir."

Chapter 13

"Excuse me Ensign Thaelan. This is the first I've heard about this." Joe said hesitantly.

There was a beep from the main console and Connie quickly checked to see what it was.

"We've just received Ensign Thaelan's orders." Connie said seriously.

Joe read over the orders quickly, then said, "I see. You are approved to work the main deflector console. That'll be a big help."

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said rigidly.

"At ease Ensign. I'm Lieutenant Joseph Bowers, you're welcomed to call me Joe. You can stow your gear in the storage room over there if you like. We'll be bunking in there until the colonists are delivered to their new home." Joe said as he pointed.

Ensign Thaelan sat his rucksack on the floor beside him and stood at attention again.

"We'll keep the duty schedules pretty much like they are for the moment. Ensign Thaelan can take the lead on alpha shift. Darin can be his second and Vincent can be his third. Connie, Susan and Jimmy can take beta shift and Lou and Judy can have gamma. We'll run it that way for a while until our new people are comfortable with their positions. If anyone starts feeling like they need a day off, come and talk to me and we'll work something out." Joe said in thought.

"I've logged Ensign Thaelan's cabin assignment." Connie said seriously.

"Thanks Connie. Ensign Thaelan, this is Ensign Constantine Agropos, we call him Connie. He's my second in command in here so if you have any questions or concerns when I'm not around, he'll be the one to ask." Joe said formally.

Connie looked at Ensign Thaelan expectantly, ready to exchange a greeting or shake hands. Ensign Thaelan's only acknowledgement to Joe's introduction was a disinterested glance.

Joe gestured for Ensign Thaelan to walk with him and led him to Susan.

"At station one we have Crewman Susan Walker. She's qualified on all the positions except the main console and is one of the best troubleshooters we have." Joe said with a smile at Susan.

Once again, Ensign Thaelan didn't do more than spare a glance at her.

"At station two we have Crewman Anthony James Tullis, we call him Jimmy. He's relatively new and has been operating as general help and doing minor repairs for quite a while. Even though he hasn't been tested on all positions yet, he has the knowledge and experience to serve as your second if the need arises." Joe said seriously.

Jimmy smiled at the statement.

"Sitting at station three is Crewman Judy Wills. She's been with us for quite a while and she's fully qualified to work second position and has performed as Lou's second since she arrived." Joe said with a smile at her.

"Sitting at the first auxiliary station is Ensign Lourdes DeGama, we call her Lou. She works the main on gamma shift and has been here the longest after Connie. If you're having any difficulty, Lou should be able to answer any question you have." Joe said, then gave her a quick smile.

"At the second auxiliary station is Crewman Vincent Winters. He just joined us yesterday and is learning the stations. He serves as general help and is learning the basic maintenance. Vincent will be working on your shift, so part of your job will be to contribute to his training. " Joe said, then gestured for Ensign Thaelan to walk with him to the trio standing by the storage lockers.

"The Ensign with the black eye is Ensign Darin Cooper. He'll be serving as your second. Darin just joined us yesterday, but he is fully qualified on all but the main position and has proven to be innovative and level headed in a crisis. What he lacks is practical experience, so it will also be part of your job to guide him and help him until he learns all the ins and outs of deflector control." Joe said seriously.

"Next we have Benny and JonJon, they are from the Kimber colony and will be staying with us until we reach the new colony. They're both responsible young men so I doubt that you'll have any problem with them." Joe said with a smile at the boys.

Ensign Thaelan glanced at the boys, then turned his attention to Joe.

"The men will be sleeping in the supply room and the women will be sleeping in quarters. We will all use the bathing and laundry facilities in the quarters located on deck E section C2 room 2." Joe said seriously.

"Deck E?" Ensign Thaelan asked hesitantly.

"On the *Yorktown* we tend to refer to the decks by letters rather than numbers. The turbo lift's control system will recognize the command

whether you say deck E or deck 5 so it shouldn't be much of a problem for you." Joe said seriously.

Ensign Thaelan nodded his understanding.

"Now that you've been introduced to everyone, do you have any questions for me?" Joe asked curiously.

"Not a question, more of an observation." Ensign Thaelan said in a slow voice that barely contained his hostility.

"I know that the official reason I was transferred from the *Enterprise* was because the *Yorktown* was about to embark on a long voyage and was short a key person in deflector control. But the reason *I* was chosen for this assignment is because I refuse to be silent about the duplicitous nature of Starfleet. To all the worlds of the Federation they preach about equality when in reality it is a military force of Humans with a few token representatives from other worlds who are displayed as proof of their equal representation. The people of Andor were founding members of the Federation and yet we are treated as if we are some sort of oddity because we do not appear Human." Ensign Thaelan said vehemently.

"I see... Do you think that you are capable of behaving in a civil manner toward your coworkers?" Joe asked seriously.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said coldly.

"Will you be willing to instruct Crewman Winters in his duties and follow up to see that he understands your instructions?" Joe asked without any emotion in his tone.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said again.

"Will you assist Ensign Cooper to become familiar with his duties and instruct him how to help you train Crewman Winters?" Joe asked without inflection.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"Good. Then there is just one more thing for me to say. I don't agree with your opinion of Starfleet. But since I enjoy having an intelligent discussion with someone who has an opinion different from my own, I think we might both enjoy a discussion of politics and Starfleet policy after our duty shift sometime. However, I'm going to ask that you not dwell on the subject while we're on duty. It could easily cause tempers to rise, which is distracting from our purpose for being here." Joe said as he looked into Ensign Thaelan's eyes.

"I understand Lieutenant Bowers." Ensign Thaelan said in his cold voice.

A beeping from the main console drew Joe's attention.

"Good. Ensign Thaelan, please take the main console. It sounds like we're about to get underway." Joe said and stood aside.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said hesitantly and walked to take the seat at main deflector control.

"Ensign Cooper and Crewman Winters are now at your command. Everyone else, please stand away from the work stations." Joe said firmly.

Vincent quickly signed off auxiliary station two, then hurried to stand by station three.

"Ensign Cooper, go to station one and give me a power status report. Crewman Winters, go to station three and give me a control console status report." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

Darin and Vincent took their stations and began running the requested status checks.

"Power systems nominal, primary field generator at maximum." Darin said professionally.

"All consoles functioning normally." Vincent said carefully.

"Ensign Cooper, bring the secondary field generator up to full power. Crewman Winters, move to station two and give me a system status report." Ensign Thaelan said forcefully as he started to work the controls.

Joe, Connie and Lou watched the unconventional way Ensign Thaelan was setting up the main deflector field properties.

"All systems show as operational." Vincent said quickly.

"Crewman Winters, put secondary control systems on active standby." Ensign Thaelan said in a voice between anger and panic.

Lou and Connie exchanged a look at the strange order.

Vincent quickly worked the controls, then said, "Secondary systems are active and standing by."

A moment later the hum of the main deflector could be heard as well as felt throughout the room.

"Primary deflector status?" Ensign Thaelan called seriously.

"Operating within normal parameters." Darin said as he watched the readings carefully.

"Primary control system status?" Ensign Thaelan demanded as he tuned the field harmonics to optimum efficiency.

"All primary control systems show normal function." Vincent said as he looked over the board.

"Secondary control system status?" Ensign Thaelan barked out abruptly.

"Secondary control systems all functioning normally." Vincent said quickly as he looked over the entire board again.

The hum of the ships engines could be felt as the ship quickly approached warp speed.

Joe watched Ensign Thaelan carefully and noticed that he had his fingers poised, ready to switch over to the secondary systems at the first sign of any trouble.

Once the ship had made the transition into warp, Ensign Thaelan slowly withdrew his hand from the system transfer controls.

"Ensign Cooper, power down the secondary field generator. Crewman Winters, switch secondary control systems to inactive standby." Ensign Thaelan said firmly as he made some adjustments to the field harmonics.

"Secondary field generator power reduced and in standby mode." Darin said carefully.

"Secondary control systems inactive and standing by." Vincent said next.

"Ensign Cooper, run a status check on the primary power system. Crewman Winters, run level two diagnostics on all primary first-level control systems." Ensign Thaelan barked out harshly.

"Ensign Thaelan, Lou is going to relieve you now. Would you come out into the hall to speak with me?" Joe asked seriously.

Ensign Thaelan was surprised by the order, but quickly said, "Yes sir."

When Ensign Thaelan stood, Lou quickly took his place at the main console.

Feeling the stares of everyone in the room on him, Ensign Thaelan followed Joe out the door.

* * * * *

"Do you think Joe's chewing him out for yelling like that?" Jimmy asked cautiously.

"Knowing Joe... no. He's probably out there telling him to tone it down a notch or two." Connie said frankly.

Vincent giggled at the statement.

"What's so funny?" Darin asked curiously.

"Daddy Joe said those exact same words to me just a little bit ago." Vincent said with a smile.

"What do you think about this new guy?" Jimmy asked as he looked around the room.

"Personally, I think he's a prick." Lou said casually as she adjusted the main deflector control console back to it's normal settings.

"And we all know how you hate those." Connie quipped.

Vincent broke into laughter at the statement.

"Well, you made a nine year old laugh... that must mean your humor is getting more sophisticated." Lou said over her shoulder.

"Do you think he's going to yell at me and Fizgig like that?" JonJon asked quietly.

Silence fell over the room at the serious question.

"We won't let him scream at you JonJon. We all like you and no one is allowed to scream at you." Connie said warmly.

"That's right. You're one of us so you've got all of us on your side." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Wait. We shouldn't be picking sides." Vincent said as he stood from station two, then continued, "This isn't right. Yeah, he's a prick, but that doesn't mean that he can't be one of us."

"Vincent, you can't change people..." Lou began to say.

"No, but he can change himself if he really wants to. But he won't want to if we're treating him like he doesn't belong here." Vincent said seriously.

Connie shook his head and said, "If he screams at JonJon or Benny..."

"...or Fizgig." JonJon added quickly.

Connie nodded and said, "...or Fizgig, then all bets are off. I don't care what kind of problem he's got. If he takes it out on one of the kids, then I'll personally go to the Captain and see about getting him put off the ship at the next M-class world we pass. That is, if I don't punch him out first."

Vincent shook his head and said, "I don't want him to scream at anyone either, but wouldn't it be better to try and help him fit in here instead of trying to get him thrown out?"

"You and Darin are the ones who are going to have to work with him. So if you can get him to adjust his attitude, then I'll be willing to give him another chance. Otherwise, I'm taking this to the top." Connie said firmly.

"And maybe the guys could go somewhere while you're on duty so you won't have to worry about Thaelan going off on them." Jimmy said speculatively.

Vincent nodded, then looked at Benny and JonJon with surprise.

"I forgot that Dr. Perry ordered Channing to stay in bed for the next three days. If you guys wouldn't mind, I was wondering if you could go over and keep him company and bring him food and stuff so he doesn't get too bored. I mean, he needs someone to take care of him while he's sick and I thought you guys might want to help him out."

Benny looked at JonJon with question and shrugged.

"Can Fizgig go too?" JonJon asked quietly.

"Yeah. I bet Fizgig will be all kinds of help keeping Channing from being bored." Vincent said happily.

"Okay. It sounds like fun. Let's go figure out what we're going to do. Three days is a lot of time." JonJon said with growing excitement and rushed into the storage room.

Benny smiled at Vincent with admiration and said, "Thanks for thinking of us Vincent."

Vincent nodded and watched as Benny walked into the supply room to join JonJon.

"You win." Connie said in resignation.

Vincent looked at Connie with question.

"I'll give him a chance and give you time to get him turned around." Connie said without enthusiasm.

"Yeah. Work your magic, little man." Lou said with a smile.

Vincent giggled at Lou's name for him.

All conversation stopped as the doors opened.

* * * * *

"At ease Ensign." Joe said seriously.

Ensign Thaelan remained at attention.

"That was your first time wasn't it?" Joe asked as he leaned against the wall casually.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said reluctantly.

"I thought so. The simulator does a good job of preparing you for every possible scenario but one; the routine departure where nothing goes wrong. Your service record shows that you have served in Deflector Control on three ships in the past year and a half, not counting the *Enterprise* where you've served a day and a half. Do you know why you haven't been operating the main?" Joe asked curiously.

"Prejudice." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

Joe considered for a moment, then said, "I can't say for sure that prejudice wasn't a factor at some point, but I think it was your attitude that caused the problem." Joe said frankly.

"My attitude does not effect my ability to perform my duties. To deny me the opportunity to use my skills and advance my career because I refuse to be silent about the injustices I witness is a form of oppression of the highest order." Ensign Thaelan said in an increasing voice.

"I disagree." Joe said calmly.

"How can you disagree when the evidence clearly shows that I have been routinely scheduled to work the stations beneath my ability and shifted from ship to ship like a piece of cargo?" Ensign Thaelan asked desperately.

"After what I saw in there, I have no doubt about your technical skills or abilities. What concerns me is your ability to lead and train people that you openly despise." Joe said as he looked Ensign Thaelan in the eyes.

Ensign Thaelan froze at the statement, so Joe continued, "I believe the reason that you weren't scheduled to operate the main console is because no one thought you had the social skills that are necessary to build a cohesive team. No one wants to follow the orders of a tyrant who barks orders at them all day long. And I believe that none of your former

commanding officers wanted to put their people through the ordeal of being subject to your authority."

"But I follow the code of conduct exactly..." Ensign Thaelan said distantly.

"Those codes are in place as limits, that's the extreme that you are not permitted to pass. To function as a team, it's necessary to build mutual respect and understanding. Your current command style will only cause animosity and resentment." Joe said seriously.

"Lieutenant Bowers, would it be possible for you to... help me?" Ensign Thaelan asked reluctantly.

"I could. But I won't." Joe said frankly.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with surprise.

"I can't tell you how to behave, that's a very personal and individual thing. Your behavior is something that's your own responsibility to determine. I may offer some suggestions along the way and you'll be free to accept them or reject them as you see fit, but it's going to be up to you to become something more than a petty dictator on a power trip. You're starting out with a clean slate here. Darin and Vincent are going to be your team. They're both brand new and need to be trained in the best way to do their jobs, not just what's in the textbook but also what an officer with a year and a half of experience doing their jobs has learned along the way." Joe said seriously.

"So you're still going to let me run the main?" Ensign Thaelan asked carefully.

"Not just run the main, but command your crew. I'll be working your shift until you've become a little more comfortable in your position, but it will be up to you to make your group a team." Joe said seriously.

"No one has ever said these things to me before." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"I suspect that they felt it was easier to move you to someone else's duty shift or to someone else's ship rather than confront your attitude and be accused of bigotry." Joe said frankly.

"Thank you for being honest with me Lieutenant Bowers." Ensign Thaelan said as he straightened his posture.

"Your welcome. And I have one piece of advice to offer before we go back in... that is, if you're interested." Joe said in a more casual voice.

"Yes sir, I am." Ensign Thaelan said quickly.

"You know how others have made you feel just for the fact that you're an Andorian?" Joe asked cautiously.

Ensign Thaelan nodded hesitantly.

"My advice is to try to avoid making your coworkers feel the same way just because they *aren't* Andorians." Joe said seriously.

"I'll try. I'm not really used to considering the feelings of others." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Oh really?" Joe said with a smirk.

Ensign Thaelan hesitantly nodded.

"Sorry. That's something called sarcasm. I get the sense that once you get used to it, you'll be good at it." Joe said with a smile.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with confusion.

"Spend some time with Vincent and you'll figure it out in no time." Joe said, then gestured toward the door.

Ensign Thaelan squared his shoulders, then followed Joe into Deflector Control.

* * * * *

"So what are you guys talking about?" Joe asked as he walked in with Ensign Thaelan following a step behind.

"Ensign Thaelan." Vincent said seriously.

"What about him?" Joe asked cautiously.

"We were just trying to decide if we want to keep him or not." Vincent said as he looked Joe in the eyes and silently urged him to play along.

"And what did you decide?" Joe asked slowly.

"We decided that he's a keeper. He knows his stuff on the console, that's the hard part. So now we just need to get him to lighten up some and everything will be fine." Vincent said with a smile.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Vincent with shock.

"What do you think Ensign? Do you want to be one of us or would you rather do everything all by yourself and scream when you want something?" Vincent asked seriously.

Ensign Thaelan thought about the question for a moment, then said, "I think I would like to try being one of you... I'm just not sure how to do that."

"Don't worry, we'll all help you. Especially me and Darin." Vincent said with a smile.

"That's right. Us new guys need to stick together." Darin said firmly.

"And I'll be there to answer any questions any of you guys have." Joe said happily, amazed at the way Vincent handled the situation.

"Lou, can you think of any way to help Ensign Thaelan?" Vincent asked as he ran to her side.

After a glance of irritation at Vincent, Lou hesitantly said, "I suppose that after everyone settles in tonight, I could walk him through the controls to show him how we do things."

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with question.

Joe thought for a moment, then said, "Ensign Thaelan, your way of setting the controls was fine, but it wouldn't hurt for you to see another way of doing it. As long as it works, I don't mind which method you use."

Ensign Thaelan nodded, then turned to Lou and said, "Thank you Ensign DeGama, your instruction will be appreciated."

Lou glanced at Ensign Thaelan's tight, formal posture, then muttered, "Um... yeah. Sure."

"Connie, what can you do to help Ensign Thaelan?" Vincent asked with enthusiasm.

"I can welcome Ensign Thaelan to the team." Connie said seriously as he walked to Ensign Thaelan and offered his hand to shake.

Ensign Thaelan hesitantly accepted the offered hand and shook it with a firm grip.

"If you have any problems with anything, just feel free to ask." Connie said with an amused smile.

"Should the need arise, I will remember your offer." Ensign Thaelan said slowly.

"Does anyone else have any ideas about how we can help Ensign Thaelan to fit in?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"I could introduce him to my friends. I bet they'd like to meet him." Jimmy said with a happy smile.

"You'd better watch out Ensign Thaelan, Jimmy's friends are a hyper bunch. They'll try to talk your ears off." Susan said with a teasing smile at Jimmy.

Jimmy started to object, but after a moment of thought, he nodded his agreement.

"I would be honored to meet your friends." Ensign Thaelan said cautiously.

"Cool! After all that stuff Ensign Thaelan will probably be fitting in here better than I am." Vincent said happily.

A chuckle spread through the room at the statement.

"I think it's time to start getting ready for bed. Why don't we let the boys go up and get showered first, then we can take our turns." Joe said seriously.

"I'll go get the guys." Vincent said quickly and rushed into the supply room.

Ensign Thaelan watched Vincent leave the room then asked, "Is that the child who was promoted during the ceremony earlier today?"

"That's right, so were Susan and Darin." Connie said proudly.

"The children on Andor aren't given such responsibilities. It is believed that childhood is the time to acquire knowledge and skills for use later in life." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"Daddy Joe, we need to stop by the quartermaster's office for clothes for the guys before we shower." Vincent said as he hurried out of the storage room with Benny and JonJon following close behind.

"Good idea champ. When you get to the cabin, the pass code is 1717. Just don't take too long up there. We all need to take a turn at the shower." Joe said seriously.

"We'll be quick." Vincent said with a cheerful smile and hurried to the door.

Joe turned his attention back to Ensign Thaelan and said, "It's the same way on Earth, but if there were an Andorian child who had a special gift for art or music, would he be encouraged to develop it or would it be put off until he was an adult?"

"The child would be encouraged to develop the gift." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"That's why Vincent is here. He has a gift. I can't say exactly what it is, but since he's been on the *Yorktown*, he's made some significant contributions. He's thriving in this environment and we're all helping to guide him in the most productive direction." Joe said contemplatively.

"Thank you, I understand." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"If you would like, you can stow your gear in the supply room then go and get something to eat or explore the ship." Joe said casually.

"I had a meal before leaving the *Enterprise* and I am familiar with the constitution class of starship." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

Joe smiled at the statement and said, "I was just trying to say that you're off duty and have free time to do whatever you would like. You are welcomed to stay here if you want. We won't be doing much of anything until the boys get back."

"If you would allow it, I would like to review some personal correspondence." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Sure, you can use one of the auxiliary stations." Joe said with a smile.

"Thank you Lieutenant Bowers." Ensign Thaelan said respectfully.

"You're welcomed to call me Joe." He said and noticed discomfort in Ensign Thaelan's expression.

"...whenever you're ready." Joe added, more quietly.

Ensign Thaelan nodded, then went to auxiliary station one and signed in.

"You know, that's not a bad idea. I need to see if Melina sent me anything." Connie said with a grin.

"Does this mean you two are going to be exchanging intergalactic love notes for the next year?" Joe asked in a teasing voice.

"Jealous?" Connie asked with a raised eyebrow.

Joe made a show of thinking about it for a minute before answering, "Maybe a little."

"Thought so." Connie said, then went to auxiliary station two to sign in.

* * * * *

"Thaelan, do you want to see a picture of my fiancée?" Connie asked quietly.

Ensign Thaelan turned and saw a picture displayed on Connie's station.

"I normally do not find Human characteristics to be attractive, but your fiancée is a very handsome woman." Ensign Thaelan said in a considering voice.

Connie considered the statement for a moment before responding, "Yeah, she is, isn't she."

Ensign Thaelan opened a file and brought up a picture on his screen.

"This is my wife." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

Connie looked at the picture of a smiling Andorian woman with long flowing white hair and said, "She's really beautiful."

"She died nearly five years ago. That is why I left Andor." Ensign Thaelan said distantly.

Connie glanced at Thaelan's pained expression and said, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"She died from a complication with her pregnancy. Neither she nor our child survived." Ensign Thaelan said in a low voice.

"I guess some things are the same no matter what world you're from." Connie said gently.

Thaelan looked at Connie with question.

"I have a brother back on Earth who went through exactly the same thing. I saw how it destroyed his life... it's been almost ten years now and he still hasn't gotten completely past it. He just seems to be wandering aimlessly through his days, not really caring about anything." Connie said quietly.

"That's easy to do when everything you care about has been taken away." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"I guess so. But it seems like such a waste. Nicky was always such a friendly guy, always so happy. Now it's like the light went out in his eyes. It hurts to see him like he is now." Connie said as he looked back to his console.

"My family has made the same comment toward me. It made my decision to enter Starfleet easier. At least they won't have to suffer with me." Ensign Thaelan said distantly.

"It doesn't work that way." Connie said as he turned to face Thaelan again.

Thaelan looked at Connie with question.

"I'm just as worried about Nicky out here as I would be living in the same house with him... maybe even more. At least if I were there I could be sure that he was taking care of himself." Connie said seriously.

"Perhaps you're right. My decision to enter Starfleet was more about getting away from the reminders of my previous life than helping those around me." Ensign Thaelan said consideringly.

"Yeah. Well, I think that's okay. Sometimes you have to consider other people's feelings, but other times it's important to consider your own and do what you need to do to heal yourself." Connie said frankly.

Ensign Thaelan nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

The door to deflector control opened to reveal Rad wearing a big smile.

"Hey Rad, what's up?" Joe asked happily.

"I've been talking with Chief Morgan since the ceremony... where's Vincent? I need to congratulate him." Rad said quickly.

"Up taking his shower. What were you two talking about?" Joe asked with a smile at Rad's excitement.

"We've been talking about the new transporter retrieval method. Joe, I'm really excited about this." Rad said enthusiastically.

"Funny, it doesn't show." Joe said with a grin.

"That was sarcasm, right?" Ensign Thaelan asked from the auxiliary station.

"That's right. You're getting it." Joe said with a smile, then continued, "Ensign Thaelan, I'd like you to meet Ensign Rayne Radovanovich, we call him Rad. Rad, this is Ensign Thaelan. He transferred from the *Enterprise* and he'll be in charge of the alpha shift of Deflector Control." Joe said with a smile.

"Do you know Ensign Tabitha Brooks from the *Excelsior*?" Rad asked curiously.

"I am somewhat acquainted with her." Ensign Thaelan said hesitantly.

"I thought so. God, that woman hates you with a passion! I was stuck in a departure lounge with her for nearly three hours and all she could do is bitch about how horrible you were." Rad said with a chuckle.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with confusion.

Rad noticed Thaelan's expression and chuckled as he said, "Don't worry about it man. Tabby isn't happy unless she's bitching about something. If she ever had a day that she didn't have something to complain about she'd probably just self destruct. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that no one takes her seriously... it's nice to meet you."

"A pleasure?" Ensign Thaelan said uncertainly.

Rad laughed at the confusion in Ensign Thaelan's eyes.

"Rad is the essence of deportment and tact." Joe said with a smirk.

Ensign Thaelan considered the statement for a moment, then said, "More sarcasm, right?"

Joe chuckled and said, "Very good. You're getting it."

A beeping from the main console drew everyone's attention.

After a moment, Lou said, "I have a diplomatic transmission for Vincent."

"Call the cabin and see if he's there yet. If not, you'll need to page him." Joe said casually.

"Got it." Lou said seriously.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe curiously, hoping for an explanation.

"I'm sure it's someone from Vincent's clan." Joe said without concern.

"Clan? I didn't realize that Humans had clans." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"They usually don't. Let's see... after Vincent's parents died last week, he was adopted by a Vulcan clan which made him a citizen of Vulcan. Clan Short has been recognized by the Federation as a diplomatic entity, so any communication from them is automatically considered a diplomatic transmission." Joe said as efficiently as possible.

"It sounds like the child has known considerable pain in his short life." Ensign Thaelan said speculatively.

"You have no idea." Joe said frankly.

Rad looked at Joe with concern.

Joe glanced around to see that no one else was listening, then moved closer so only Rad, Connie and Thaelan could hear.

"I'm telling all of you about this so you can help me if Vincent has a problem." Joe said in prelude.

"The day I met Vincent, he had just come back from the hospital." Joe said quietly.

"What was wrong with him?" Rad asked with concern.

"His father had hit him and knocked him down. Vincent hit his head when he landed and received a concussion." Joe said, trying to control the emotion in his voice.

"Please tell me it was an accident." Rad said quietly.

Joe shook his head and said, "I've seen the bruises. The bastard punched Vincent hard enough that you could count the knuckles in each bruise."

Connie shook his head as tears started to well up in his eyes.

"Guys, I'm telling you this because I don't know what might cause Vincent to flash back on those abusive times of his life. He was physically and emotionally abused and that's got to leave some kind of a scar. If you notice him having trouble, help him through it the best you can and call for help from the rest of us if you need it." Joe said seriously.

"He always seems so happy, I had no idea." Connie said distantly.

"Earth held nothing but painful reminders for him. He is happy here. I just wanted to ask you guys to help me keep him that way." Joe said seriously.

"I understand why you would ask your friends to help you in this matter, but I fail to see why you would include me." Ensign Thaelan said curiously.

"Because you are going to be Vincent's commanding officer for the foreseeable future. You need to be aware of potential problems so you'll be prepared to deal with them if the need arises." Joe said carefully.

"Thank you Lieutenant Bowers, I understand." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"You can call him Joe." Rad said frankly.

"Whenever he's ready. There's no rush." Joe said with a smile at Rad.

"You just like someone calling you by your rank for a change don't you?" Rad asked with a grin.

Joe chuckled and said, "I actually prefer the more relaxed environment where we're all on a first name basis. But until Ensign Thaelan is comfortable with that, I don't mind being called lieutenant."

"Come off it Joe, you get a thrill every time someone calls you lieutenant." Rad said with a grin.

"Maybe a little bit, but let's wait and see if Lieutenant Radovanovich thinks it's as funny when it's his time." Joe said consideringly.

Rad's grin transformed into a full smile at the thought.

Connie started laughing and said, "From the look on his face, I think that Lieutenant Radovanovich might enjoy it a little too much."

Ensign Thaelan felt amusement bubbling up within him at the statement and was shocked to realize that he was smiling.

* * * * *

"Hurry and get it before they hang up." Benny said as the trio rushed into the cabin.

"Crewman Winters." Vincent said as he slammed the button to accept the transmission.

"Vincent, you have a diplomatic transmission." Lou said seriously.

"Thanks Lou." Vincent said as he took a seat at the desk.

"Do you want us to leave?" Benny asked from behind Vincent.

"I don't care if you stay, but you guys could get started on your showers while I'm doing this if you wanted." Vincent said casually as he logged in and accepted the diplomatic transmission.

"You go first." Benny said to JonJon with a smile.

JonJon nodded and went to the bathroom to start his shower.

"There you are Vincent. From as long as it took, I thought they'd lost you." Cory said in frustration.

"No, we were just leaving the quartermaster's office when you called. It took a few minutes to get to the cabin. What's up Cory?" Vincent asked casually.

"Vincent, speaking strictly as your guardian and someone who cares about you there's something I need to say." Cory said seriously.

"Okay." Vincent said hesitantly.

Cory nodded, then cleared his throat.

After a moment to collect his thoughts, Cory said, "ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR FREAKIN MIND!?"

Vincent's eyes went wide at the question.

"Sorry Vincent, I think it's hard coded into our DNA or something that when one of your kids runs off and gets married without telling you that you have to say that. Now that I've got that out of the way, maybe you could tell me how this happened." Cory said reasonably.

"T'Lani's family contacted Grandfather Sarek and wanted to arrange a marriage. When Grandfather told me about it, I said that I wanted to do it." Vincent said simply.

"Vincent, we're talking about the rest of your life here. What were you thinking?" Cory asked with his concern showing through his voice.

"I was thinking that I trust Grandfather Sarek to protect me and do what's best for me. I was thinking that T'Lani really wanted to marry me or she wouldn't have started all this. I was thinking that I want to be happy like you and Sean and like Grandfather Sarek and Grandma Amanda. I was thinking that now I'll have someone who will be there even if things don't always turn out the way I want them to. I was thinking that once I do this, I'll never have to worry about finding a girl that likes me and dating and all that other stuff that drives old guys like you crazy..."

"Hey! I'm not old." Cory said in offense.

"Whatever you say Dad." Vincent said with a roll of his eyes.

Cory shook his head and muttered, "Kids these days..."

Vincent smiled and said, "Today Grandfather Sarek said that I'm an adult. He wouldn't have done that unless he believed it was true. I didn't go to him and say, 'Grandfather, please find me someone to marry right now'. The head of another family called Grandfather Sarek and asked him if it would be logical for T'Lani and I to get married."

"Okay, I get that." Cory said carefully as he considered the statement.

"Cory, when you became my guardian, you made me a Vulcan citizen. That means a whole lot more to me than a bunch of words on a piece of paper. I'm allowed to be a crewman on the *Yorktown* because I'm a Vulcan. I'm allowed to have you as my family because I'm a Vulcan. Everything good that's in my life right now can be traced back to when you made me a Vulcan citizen. I'm a part of Vulcan now and because of that, I'm going to trust in Grandfather Sarek and the old ways of Vulcan. If he says that T'Lani and I are a logical pair then I'll believe him."

Cory thought about Vincent's words and finally nodded.

"Does that mean you're okay with it?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sort of. I mean, I think I get what you're saying. I still don't know if this is a good idea, but I guess we'll find out together. Vincent, since you've been declared an adult and you are allowed to make choices for yourself, but would you please *try* to include me in your decisions? I'll always think of you as one of my kids and if you'll talk to me about things before you decide them, maybe I can give you a different point of view or just be there to tell you that you're making a good choice." Cory said imploringly.

"Yeah. I can do that." Vincent said quietly.

"Benny, can you come here for a minute?" JonJon called from the bathroom doorway.

Benny shook himself out of his thoughts and hurried to the bathroom.

"When are you going to tell Lawrence?" Cory asked quietly.

"Tomorrow. I want to do it when T'Lani is with me so he can meet her." Vincent said with a smile.

"He's going to freak out." Cory said with a chuckle.

"At least." Vincent said with a smile.

"I'm going to go now. Congratulations on... everything." Cory said peacefully.

"Thanks Cory. I'm sorry I didn't call you before, things got a little bit crazy for a while." Vincent said timidly.

"I can imagine. Do you want a little piece of advice from your Clan's patriarch?" Cory asked with a smile.

"Sure." Vincent said suspiciously.

"Make sure you're well rested and ready for one massive party when you get back to Earth. You have a lot of people who want to celebrate everything you've achieved today." Cory said with a smile.

"I'll try but I really don't like stuff like that." Vincent said carefully.

"Well, since you probably won't be back to Earth for at least two months, it'll give the guys some time to settle down about it. We're still going to have a party when you get back, but it won't be nearly as crazy as if you came home today." Cory said happily.

"Thanks Cory. Tell everybody thanks for all the great cards and messages. I haven't had a chance to read them all yet, there's about a hundred of them." Vincent said with a smile.

"Yeah. All the Clan members and everyone at Camp Little Eagle wanted to send you their own message so you'd know how many people care about what happens to you." Cory said seriously.

"I didn't know there were that many. I'll have to make sure to meet them all when I get back." Vincent said happily.

"Yeah, we'll do that at the party. It's getting late, I'd better be going. Good night Vincent." Cory said gently.

"Good night Cory." Vincent said peacefully and ended the transmission.

Benny walked out of the bathroom with a stunned expression and slowly blinking his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked with concern at Benny's apparent stupor.

"Um...Optional upgrade... characteristics." Benny responded in puzzlement.

Vincent looked at Benny with confusion and said, "What? Wait. On second thought, I don't want to know."

Chapter 14

JonJon walked to Vincent's side and watched for a minute as Vincent read one message after another.

"What are you doing?" JonJon asked quietly.

Vincent gave JonJon an incredulous look, then realized that JonJon just asked that because he didn't have any better way of starting a conversation.

Finally Vincent answered, "Reading messages from a lot of different people congratulating me about getting married and stuff."

"I'm really glad you got married. I think your wife is nice." JonJon said quietly.

Vincent glanced down and noticed that JonJon's gray coveralls had the pants legs rolled up to keep them from dragging the ground.

Vincent smiled as he said, "Thank you JonJon. I think so too. I never even thought about me getting married before today, but I'm really glad that it happened."

"I'll never get married." JonJon said in a whisper as he cuddled Fizgig in his arms.

"Why not?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Because I'm an android. I'll always be a kid. I'm never going to grow up and find someone who'll love me the way T'Lani loves you." JonJon said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Sure you will. I bet that someday you'll find a girl who'll think that having a husband who doesn't get older is the greatest thing ever." Vincent said as he stood to pull JonJon into a gentle hug.

"But she'll get older. She'll get old and die someday. Everyone I love will get old and die and I'll always be the same. Besides, it doesn't matter anyway. I'm not real. "JonJon said as a tear escaped.

Vincent pulled back, then brought his hand to JonJon's cheek and caught the tear on his fingertip.

"This tells me that you're real. A machine doesn't feel pain. A computer doesn't worry about being loved. I can tell that you love Fizgig and that you care about me and Benny. That proves to me that you're a real person." Vincent said carefully.

"I love you and Benny. You're my new family." JonJon said in a whisper.

"I love you too JonJon. You and Benny both. You're the best friends that I've ever had and even though I'm going to have to go away when the Yorktown leaves, I'll still be your friend forever." Vincent said seriously.

"Vincent, the shower's free." Benny said as he walked out of the bathroom wearing gray coveralls that hung on him like a sack. To top it off, the pants legs didn't quite reach his ankles.

Vincent smiled at the sight and said, "Thanks Benny. I really need a nice long shower."

"JonJon, did you see the jacuzzi tub in there?" Benny asked curiously.

JonJon nodded that he did.

"Would you like to give Fizgig a bath in there? I could help you." Benny offered with a gentle smile.

"Yeah. His fur is really dirty. I bet he'd feel a lot better if he was clean." JonJon said happily.

"Come on and help me find some shampoo or soap." Benny said with a smile as he turned to walk back into the bathroom.

Vincent signed off the terminal then stopped and sat for a moment, just enjoying the peace and quiet before getting up to take his shower.

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"Thaelan... is it okay if I call you Thaelan? I mean, I'll call you Ensign if you want me to." Jimmy asked excitedly.

"You may address me as Thaelan while we are not on duty if you wish." Ensign Thaelan said slowly.

"Cool. Susan and I are going down to the ship's store and I wondered if you wanted to go down there with us." Jimmy said hopefully.

"What are you intending to purchase?" Thaelan asked curiously.

"I don't know yet. I just wanted to see what they have to pass the time when we're off duty. Besides, I haven't checked out the new videos since we left Earth, maybe they have something we'd all like to see." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Thank you for the invitation but I believe I will remain here. Perhaps at a later time." Ensign Thaelan said cautiously.

"That's fine. Just let me know when, I'm always ready to go shopping." Jimmy said happily.

Ensign Thaelan nodded slowly.

"Are you ready to go Susan?" Jimmy asked, nearly bouncing with enthusiasm.

"You know, it's just not right. Women are supposed to be the ones to get excited about shopping." She said with a smile as she walked to Jimmy's side.

"And most of those women would be glad to find a man who would enjoy shopping with them." Connie said from auxiliary station one.

"Okay Connie, you got me there." Susan said with a smile, then noticed Jimmy's urging expression and said, "Don't worry, I'm ready. Let's go."

Jimmy gave a glowing smile and preceded Susan out the door.

"How are you doing Ensign Thaelan? Do you need to get away from this bunch yet?" Joe asked casually as he approached.

Ensign Thaelan thought about the question for a moment, then said, "No. Although I am not accustomed to being included in this... casual behavior, I don't find it unpleasant."

Joe smiled at the statement and said, "Please try to remember that we aren't expecting you to be anyone but yourself. Just because we act casually doesn't mean that we expect you to do the same. Do what makes you comfortable and we'll interact with you on your terms."

Ensign Thaelan thought carefully about the words for a moment, then said, "Thank you Lieutenant Bowers, I will remember that. I didn't realize that my discomfort was so evident that you could determine it's source."

"Don't worry about it, you hid it well. I just tried to imagine how I would feel in your situation. I had a similar feeling the first time I visited Vulcan." Joe said frankly.

"Did you try to adopt their mannerisms?" Ensign Thaelan asked curiously.

"Not really. I was just a little more emotionally controlled than I usually am... you know, out of respect. I'm too emotional to even consider trying to act like a Vulcan." Joe finished with a smile.

"We appear to have that trait in common. I am not good at hiding my emotions." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

Joe gave Ensign Thaelan an incredulous look.

Ensign Thaelan studied the expression for a moment, then suddenly said, "Ah, I see. Sarcasm without words."

* * * * *

"That felt good." Vincent said as he stepped out of the sonic shower.

"Yeah, I think I had a pound of mud on me." Benny said as he focused on holding Fizgig in place while JonJon worked the shampoo into his fur.

"Are you guys going to need any help?" Vincent asked as he pulled on his underwear.

"No. We're just about done washing him. Then we'll just have to rinse him." Benny said seriously.

"He's being a really good dog." JonJon said proudly as he slowly scrubbed Fizgig.

"While you're finishing up I'll get our clothes out of the laundry fresher and get ready to go. I don't want everyone else to have to wait too long." Vincent said as he pulled on a pair of faded blue jeans.

"That sounds like a good idea. Do you think there's any way we could find a brush for Fizgig? When he dries, we're going to need to brush out his fur." Benny asked as he kept his attention on the dog.

"They should have one down at the ship's store. I can go and get one while you guys finish up." Vincent said as he pulled on a red T-shirt.

"Thanks. It will take us a few minutes to get him dry. Just make sure it's a really stiff brush, his fur is really thick." Benny said in thought.

Vincent put on his socks and boots, then started pulling the clean laundry out of the fresher.

"You look just like a normal kid dressed like that." Benny said with a smile.

Vincent glanced at Benny, then said, "I am a normal kid."

Benny chuckled and said, "You know what I mean. When you're wearing the uniform you look like a crewman. Dressed like this you look like a regular person."

Vincent shook his head in amusement and said, "I am a regular person. Being a crewman doesn't make me different from anyone else. It's just my job."

"It's more than a job. It's part of who you are. I don't care what you say, you're different from me and JonJon. You've got something that we don't have and it's because you're a crewman." Benny said seriously.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay. Maybe you're right but when I'm off duty I still feel like just another kid... Do you guys need anything else from the store while I'm down there?"

"I can't think of anything. The quartermaster gave us most of the stuff we'll need. But if you find anything like a chew toy or a treat for Fizgig, that would be nice." Benny said in thought.

"I don't know if they'll have anything like that, but I'll look. I'll be back in a few minutes." Vincent said with a smile as he carried their clean clothes out the bathroom door.

"You really like him, don't you?" JonJon asked seriously.

Benny looked at JonJon with surprise.

"I'm mean, like more than a friend." JonJon added more quietly.

Benny thought about it for a moment, then said, "I do, but not the way you're thinking. I admire him. Vincent's doing the things I've only dreamed about. I don't want to be *with* him. I want to be *like* him."

JonJon smiled at the statement and said, "I think you are like him."

Benny looked at JonJon with question.

"You gave me and Fizgig a home when we were all alone. You made me your brother. In every way that's important, you *are* like Vincent." JonJon said honestly.

Benny smiled at the statement and said, "If my hands weren't full of wet soapy dog right now I'd give you a big hug."

"Then let's rinse him off so you can." JonJon said happily.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent, did you feel like doing some shopping too?" Susan asked as she noticed him enter the ship's store.

"I needed to get a brush for Fizgig. What are you guys doing up here?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"Jimmy wanted to see if we picked up any good movies when we were in dock... but they must have moved them, we can't find them anywhere."

Susan said as she glanced over to see Jimmy working his way through the store aisle by aisle.

"Why don't you just ask?" Vincent asked simply.

"The clerk's been busy since we came in." Susan said frankly.

Vincent walked to the checkout counter and said, "Excuse me. Could you tell me where the movies are?"

The clerk glanced at Vincent, then said, "We've pulled them all to the back. Starting tomorrow, we're going to be showing the entire movie library on the big screen in the rec-hall. Ship's services will be posting a list of show times as soon as they have it all set up. After each movie is shown, they'll be put back out so you can buy them if you want."

"Okay, thanks. Sorry to interrupt." Vincent said quickly as he hurried back to Susan.

"He said..." Vincent began to say.

"I heard him. That sounds like a really good idea. I think that will make the next few weeks pass a little bit faster for the colonists. All of us will enjoy it." Susan said happily.

"Enjoy what?" Jimmy asked as he approached.

"They're going to be showing all the movies on the big screen in the rec-hall so everyone can enjoy them." Susan said with a smile.

"Cool. What do you say Susan? Would you like to go out for dinner and a movie with me before our shift tomorrow?" Jimmy asked with anticipation.

Susan considered the offer for a moment, then said, "If you can find a movie that we'll both enjoy, I think I'd like that very much."

"Then it's a date... It is, isn't it? A date, I mean." Jimmy asked hopefully.

Susan chuckled at Jimmy's hopeful expression and said, "Yes Jimmy. It's a date."

"Awesome. I hope someone thought about having popcorn and sodas for the movie." Jimmy said with a big smile.

"I'm sure they will." Susan said tenderly.

Vincent started looking around the store and spotted a small display of pet supplies.

As he started walking away, Jimmy asked, "What did you find?"

"Some stuff for Fizgig." Vincent said as he looked at the selection.

"Cool. I never noticed that stuff there before. What do you want to get him?" Jimmy asked as he looked over the selection.

"Um... All of it. I mean, one of everything. He doesn't have anything at all right now." Vincent said, then opened one of the small bins to look at a squeaky chew toy in the shape of a pork chop.

"Vincent, you might want to think twice about anything with a squeaker or a bell. We're all going to be in close quarters for the next three or four weeks..." Susan said reluctantly.

Vincent nodded and put the chew toy back into the bin.

"Why don't we just get him one of the rawhide bones for now, then when he's finished with that you can come down and get him something else?" Jimmy asked casually.

"Yeah. That sounds good... Oh, how am I going to pay for it? My wallet was in the uniform I left back in the tunnel at the colony. It had my Starfleet ID and credit card and everything..." Vincent trailed off in thought.

"Please allow me to take care of it." A voice answered from behind the trio.

Vincent turned and smiled when he saw Cyril and a young man he hadn't met watching them.

"Oh, okay. Thank you Cyril." Vincent said happily.

"Vincent, this is my boyfriend, Roger. Roger, this is the young man I was telling you about, Vincent Winters." Cyril said in a loving voice.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Vincent. Cyril has been going on all day about how brave you are." Roger said quietly.

"It's nice to meet you too Roger. These are my friends Susan and Jimmy from Deflector Control." Vincent said with a note of shyness in his voice.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both." Susan said seriously.

Jimmy nodded his agreement.

"Now Vincent, did I hear you say that you lost your wallet in the tunnels under the colony?" Cyril asked gently.

"Yeah. I didn't even think about it until just now." Vincent said shyly.

"Go ahead and get whatever you want and we'll take care of it for you." Cyril said warmly.

"Thank you, I just came down here to get a few things for JonJon's dog." Vincent said as he opened a bin and pulled out a stiffly bristled brush.

"How is JonJon handling the loss?" Cyril asked quietly.

"He's hurting a lot, but Benny and I are trying to keep him busy with other stuff so he doesn't think about it all the time." Vincent said seriously as he took a rawhide bone out of another bin.

"That's good of you. I'm glad JonJon has someone he can depend on in this difficult time." Cyril said quietly.

"JonJon has everyone in Deflector Control watching out for him." Susan said seriously.

"Yeah, we kind of adopted JonJon and Benny when they showed up with Vincent. They'll be staying with us until we reach the new colony." Jimmy added with a smile.

"I'm glad to hear that. If either of them needs anything at all, contact me and I'll see to it." Cyril said firmly.

"Okay, I will." Vincent said happily as he looked at Cyril expectantly.

"Do you have any more shopping that you'd like to do?" Cyril asked gently.

"No. This is it. The guys are waiting on me." Vincent said simply.

"Well, we mustn't keep them waiting." Cyril said with a warm smile and led the way to the checkout counter.

* * * * *

"Do you think they got lost?" Connie asked as he looked at the door.

"I'll give them five more minutes, then I'll call to see how they're doing." Joe said seriously.

"I don't think Vincent will let them get sidetracked. He's really responsible... a lot more responsible than I am." Darin trailed off shyly.

Rad chuckled at the statement and said, "We'll see. You get three teenage boys together and responsibility can fly out the nearest airlock."

Just then the boys walked into deflector control. JonJon had Fizgig wrapped in a heavy towel.

"You three look like you're about ten pounds lighter. I bet you feel better." Joe said with a smile.

"Yeah, I was feeling really gross." Vincent said shyly.

"Well, it's getting time to turn in for the night. Do you guys have anything else you need to do before bed?" Joe asked gently.

"We need to brush Fizgig so his fur doesn't get all tangled." JonJon said seriously.

"Well then, I guess you'd better get to it." Joe said with a smile at Fizgig's snout sticking out of the large towel.

JonJon smiled and carried Fizgig into the supply room.

"Well Darin, do you want to go next?" Joe asked casually.

"Sure. I just need to get my things." Darin said and walked to the supply room.

Rad had a loving smile on his face as he watched Darin walk away.

"You're interested in him, aren't you?" Joe asked curiously.

Rad looked at Joe with surprise, then said, "Yeah. That's not a problem is it?"

"Not at all. From the way he looks at you, I think he's interested too." Joe said happily.

"He's just so timid, I don't want to scare him away." Rad said with concern.

"I think Darin is a lot stronger than he appears. I get the feeling that he's just timid because everything is so unfamiliar here." Joe said introspectively.

"I guess that could be it." Rad said, then smiled when Darin walked out of the supply room with a small duffel bag.

"Do you mind if I go with you? I need a shower too." Rad said happily.

Darin looked at Rad with complete shock.

"Way to be subtle Rad." Joe said with a chuckle.

"What I meant to say is that I'll walk out with you, not that I want to shower with you... I mean, not that I *don't* want to..." Rad trailed off helplessly.

"Darin. Rad likes you and would like to accompany you to the turbo lift. Would that be alright with you?" Joe asked as he tried to restrain his chuckles.

Darin looked from Rad to Joe, then back to Rad again before shyly nodding.

"Go on you two." Joe said with a smile.

Rad gave Darin a gentle smile, then started walking toward the door.

A moment later Darin was following a step behind.

After Darin and Rad had left, Ensign Thaelan cautiously asked, "You encourage same-gender relationships among your crew?"

Joe turned to face Thaelan and noticed his puzzled expression.

"I just encourage everyone to find someone who makes them happy. I think Rad and Darin can do that for each other." Joe said, then noticed movement out of the corner of his eye.

"What's up sport?" Joe asked with a smile as he held out his arm to invite Vincent into a hug.

"I just wanted to come out and say goodnight. I'm really tired so I'm going to go to bed now." Vincent said as he hugged Joe from the side.

"You have a good sleep. I'll be in after I've had my shower." Joe said as he hugged Vincent gently.

"Thanks for letting me be here with you. I love it here on the Yorktown." Vincent said from the hug.

"Everyone is glad that you're here. Now go on and get to sleep. I love you." Joe said as he gave Vincent one final squeeze of the hug.

"I love you too Daddy Joe." Vincent said happily, then hurried back into the supply room.

Ensign Thaelan stared at the doorway of the supply room for a moment, then quietly said, "Lieutenant Bowers, you are a fortunate man to have such a remarkable son."

Joe smiled at the statement and said, "I agree. But I think we're all fortunate to have Vincent here. It's like he brings a feeling of wonder and joy to this place. I think working with Vincent will make our duties a pleasure rather than a job."

Ensign Thaelan considered the words for a moment, then said, "I was offered no choice in my assignment to this ship. I had the sense that I was being discarded at the first opportunity. Since I have come to know you and your crew, I believe that this assignment will provide many rewards."

"Come back here." JonJon said in a loud whisper, catching both men's attention.

Ensign Thaelan looked down to see a scraggly wet animal sniffing his foot.

"Fizgig!" JonJon whispered harshly, still crouched in the doorway.

"You may come and retrieve your rodent if you wish. I promise that I will not harm you." Ensign Thaelan said when he noticed JonJon's hesitant expression.

JonJon looked up at Ensign Thaelan and firmly said, "Fizgig's not a rodent. He's a Shih-Tzu."

Ensign Thaelan looked down at the wet animal and quietly said, "That would have been my second guess."

Joe smiled at the dry tone of Ensign Thaelan's voice, then reached down and picked up the wet animal.

"Don't Andorian children frequently have small animals as pets? In fact, I seem to remember hearing that hamsters are becoming very popular on Andor." Joe said as he petted Fizgig gently.

"That is correct." Ensign Thaelan said and held out his hands for the dog.

Joe handed Fizgig to Thaelan and smiled.

Ensign Thaelan petted Fizgig for a moment, then walked to the supply room doorway and handed him back to JonJon.

"He seems to be a fine animal, very evenly tempered." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"He doesn't like to be called an animal. His name is Fizgig." JonJon said seriously.

"Of course." Ensign Thaelan said, then turned his attention to Fizgig and said, "Fizgig, please forgive me if I frightened you earlier today. I was angry and did not behave as well as I should have."

As Ensign Thaelan petted the dog in JonJon's arms, Fizgig turned and began to lick his hand.

"Fizgig forgives you." JonJon said with a smile.

"That is good. I will try to behave properly in the future so I won't have to ask his forgiveness again." Ensign Thaelan said quietly as he continued to pet the dog.

"It's okay Ensign Thaelan. I know how it is to be different from everyone around you. The trick is to ignore that and try and look at how we're all the same." JonJon said with a smile.

Ensign Thaelan looked at JonJon curiously.

"I'm an android, so I know how it feels to be the different one when everyone around you is Human." JonJon said seriously.

Ensign Thaelan looked at JonJon with surprise for a moment, then said, "Perhaps the two of us can help each other understand these Humans."

"The three of us." JonJon said seriously, then leaned close to Ensign Thaelan and whispered, "Fizgig isn't Human either."

Ensign Thaelan smiled and said, "Of course. When the others start acting 'typically Human' the three of us can help each other through the experience."

"That would be nice... I've got to finish brushing Fizgig before he gets all tangled." JonJon finished quickly.

"I will return to Lieutenant Bowers now. I still have much to learn about fitting in here." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

JonJon nodded, then hurried into the supply room.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you Darin. I really wasn't trying to do that." Rad said as they walked slowly down the catwalk.

"That's alright. I was just caught off guard." Darin said quietly.

Rad stopped and looked into Darin's eyes as he said, "Darin, I don't want you to feel pressured into anything."

"I don't. I'm just... a little surprised." Darin said slowly.

"But you're not against the idea... you know, of us maybe becoming a couple?" Rad asked in a hesitant voice.

Darin smiled at Rad's hopeful expression and said, "No, I'm not against the idea at all."

Rad let out a relieved gust of breath and said, "I'm so glad you said that."

Darin smiled at Rad nervously and said, "I'm a little worried because I've never done anything like this before."

"You've never been with a man before?" Rad asked gently as he looked into Darin's eyes.

"Not exactly. Before I went to the academy I had a friend and we... did stuff. But I knew him all my life and... I don't know, it was just different." Darin said with a note of confusion in his voice.

"I think I understand. It sounds like it's the emotional side of things that you're not sure about." Rad said quietly.

"I guess so. I mean, I want it, I'm just scared that I'll mess it up. I don't know what to do." Darin said desperately.

"To be honest, I don't know either. I'm not sure anyone does because it's different for each couple." Rad said thoughtfully.

Darin nodded distantly.

Rad thought for a moment, then began, "Darin, I'm very attracted to you physically. I think you're one of the most handsome men that I've seen in a long time."

Darin's eyes went wide at the statement, no one had ever said such a thing to him before.

Then Darin abruptly said, "Me too... I mean you."

Rad smiled at the bumbling statement, then quietly said, "After I got past the initial attraction, I got to know you a little and realized that you're incredibly gentle and kind."

Darin watched Rad's expression cautiously, reluctant to believe that Rad really wanted him.

"I'm really sorry if me saying that is intimidating to you. I just want you to know what I'm feeling so there won't be any misunderstanding." Rad said gently.

"It's not intimidating, just surprising." Darin said quietly.

After a moment of consideration, Darin continued, "I like that you're strong and outspoken. I admire that."

"I'm glad it doesn't put you off. I grew up in a large family and... I guess I'm a little more expressive than most people." Rad said thoughtfully.

"I guess what frightens me is that my father is something like you. He's forceful and sure of himself. The difference is that he always tried to

dominate me. I always felt like he was trying to control me." Darin said distantly.

"I never want to make you feel like that." Rad said with concern.

"You don't. With you I don't have the feeling that you're trying to take control from me. You can be strong without making me feel weak." Darin said carefully.

"Did you ever stand up to your father?" Rad asked gently.

Darin hesitantly nodded and said, "When I entered the academy. He was completely against it. He said that I would be a failure and disgrace the Hargrove family name."

"I thought your last name was Cooper." Rad said slowly.

"On my birth certificate my last name is Hargrove-Cooper. When I entered the academy, I asked that they just call me Cooper. I didn't want to be associated with him anyway, I wanted to make my own way." Darin said shyly.

"I think you have a lot more strength than you know. It's easy to be assertive when you're sure of yourself, but to stand up to the biggest authority figure in your life to follow your dream... that takes a lot of courage." Rad said with admiration.

Darin blushed at the praise.

"What would you like to happen between us now?" Rad asked quietly.

"I don't know... I mean, I've never even been on a real date before so I don't know what to do." Darin said helplessly.

"Then that sounds like the perfect place to start. How would you feel about having dinner with me tomorrow after our shifts?" Rad asked hopefully.

"That sounds great." Darin said with a delighted smile.

"I'll stop by Deflector Control at 19:00 to pick you up." Rad said happily.

"I'll be ready." Darin said with a grand smile.

"Then it's a date! Come on, we'd better get moving so the rest of your team can get a chance at the shower tonight." Rad said as he started walking again.

"Oh yeah." Darin said quickly and hurried to Rad's side.

* * * * *

"It looks like you made a new friend." Joe said as Ensign Thaelan walked to his side.

"Yes. It appears that I have." Ensign Thaelan said cautiously.

"Is something wrong?" Joe asked with concern at Ensign Thaelan's pensive expression.

"No, not at all. I am just surprised by the feeling of inclusion that I am experiencing since I have arrived." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"I'm glad. Not everyone who is assigned to this department feels included. We've had a few new people request a transfer to a more 'military' posting." Joe said frankly.

"I can't imagine why someone would wish to avoid this atmosphere of unity." Ensign Thaelan said as he looked Joe in the eyes.

"I can't say that I understand it either. But I suppose it's not for everyone." Joe finished with a shrug.

The doors opened and silence fell over the room.

"Captain on the deck." Joe said firmly.

Everyone in the room stood to attention.

"As you were." Captain Byrne said seriously as he walked into the room.

Captain Byrne walked to stand before Joe and Ensign Thaelan and said, "Ensign Thaelan, I just wanted to come down and welcome you personally to the Yorktown."

"Thank you sir." Ensign Thaelan said, still at attention.

"At ease Ensign." Captain Byrne said calmly.

"Captain, that is 'at ease' for him." Joe said with a small smile.

"Oh, I see. Ensign Thaelan, my first officer, Commander M'Butu has brought a concern to my attention that I would like to discuss with you." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said in a forced military voice.

"We can step outside if you would prefer to discuss this matter privately." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"No thank you sir. I would not object to Lieutenant Bowers or the other members of Deflector Control being included in this conversation." Ensign Thaelan said frankly.

"As you like. By the nature of your orders and the comments attached to your file, Commander M'Butu came to the conclusion that you were assigned to the Yorktown under protest. If that is the case, I would like to know what we can do to accommodate you for the duration of your assignment with us." Captain Byrne said seriously.

After a moment to consider his words, Ensign Thaelan carefully said, "When I was given my new orders I did object to this assignment. I felt that I was being transferred from the Enterprise without being given a fair chance to demonstrate my abilities and prove my worth."

"I can see how that would be frustrating. I can assure you that you will be given the opportunity to work to your full potential while you are onboard my ship." Captain Byrne said in a measured tone.

"Thank you sir. Lieutenant Bowers allowed me to take control of the main console when we got underway and has already assigned me a shift to lead and a crew. I am quite content with my assigned duties." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"I'm glad to hear that. I was given to understand that you would object to any posting that required you to work with a group of Humans. Do you believe that you will have difficulty working in this environment?" Captain Byrne asked frankly.

Ensign Thaelan was surprised by the blunt statement, but at the same time, appreciated the Captain's honesty.

"No sir. I came onboard with a certain attitude firmly in place. However Lieutenant Bowers provided counsel and insights into the matter that allowed me to see things from a different perspective. After that, Crewman Winters offered his assistance to help me integrate into the Deflector Control team." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"Very good. Then I will leave you to your duty. If you have any concerns that Lieutenant Bowers is unable to address, please feel free to come to either Commander M'Butu or myself. It is of the utmost importance to us that all members of the crew are given the proper encouragement to reach their full potential." Captain Byrne said professionally.

"Thank you sir. From what I have witnessed in the past few hours, Lieutenant Bowers shares your philosophy and actively seeks to make it so." Ensign Thaelan said formally.

"That's good to know. Welcome aboard Ensign Thaelan." Captain Byrne said seriously and extended his hand to shake.

Ensign Thaelan shook the offered hand, then watched as Captain Byrne left the room.

* * * * *

"Well, since the Captain brought it up, is there anything you can think of that I can do to help you in running your shift in the morning?" Joe asked as he turned to face Ensign Thaelan again.

"Nothing beyond what you have already done. If I have any problems, I will seek your assistance." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"Good. I was afraid that you might be reluctant to ask for help." Joe said with a smile.

Before Ensign Thaelan could respond, the door to Deflector Control opened to reveal Darin wearing a radiant smile.

"Good shower?" Joe asked with a chuckle.

Darin nodded happily, then walked into the supply room.

Joe chuckled at Darin's reaction, then said, "The shower is free, who's next?"

"I'll go. It won't take me long." Connie said as he stood.

Joe nodded.

"Thaelan, do you want to come with me? I'll show you where it is." Connie asked casually.

Ensign Thaelan was surprised by the offer and hesitantly said, "I believe I can find my way to the cabin..."

"Yeah, probably. But it's faster if we do it like this, and if you come with me we can talk along the way." Connie said frankly.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with question to receive a shrug in response.

After a moment to consider, Ensign Thaelan hesitantly said, "I will accompany you."

"Then grab your stuff and let's go." Connie said with a smile and walked to the supply room where his gear was stowed.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with question again.

"It's just another way for him to tell you that you're accepted here." Joe said quietly.

Ensign Thaelan nodded, then picked up his rucksack from beside the lockers.

* * * * *

"So what do you think Joe?" Lou asked after Ensign Thaelan and Connie had walked out the door.

"I think he might fit in." Joe said thoughtfully as he walked to her side.

Lou nodded as she turned her attention back to the main console.

"Do you think you're going to have a problem with him?" Joe asked curiously.

"Maybe. At first, his snotty attitude was really pissing me off but now... I don't know, I get the feeling that underneath there might be someone worth getting to know." Lou said speculatively.

"I think you're right. Most of the Andorians I've met have an attitude of... superiority..." Joe trailed off uncertainly.

"Yeah. That's it. It makes me want to just slap the blue right off him." Lou said firmly.

Joe turned when he heard Judy's chuckle come from station one.

"Resist the urge Lou. I think it's just a cultural thing that most Andorians learn as they're growing up. I don't know his story, but I just have the feeling that there's quite a bit more to him than we're seeing." Joe said speculatively.

"I suppose so. I guess I can look at this as my chance to really get to know someone from a different culture. I mean, that's one of the reason's we're out here isn't it?" Lou asked in thought.

Joe smiled at the question and said, "One of the most important reasons."

* * * * *

"What did you want to say to me that you could not say in front of the others?" Ensign Thaelan asked seriously as he and Connie walked toward the turbo lift.

"I just wanted some company..." Connie began to say when he was stopped by Thaelan's incredulous stare.

"You caught me." Connie said with a chuckle.

Ensign Thaelan raised an eyebrow and waited for an answer.

"Well, I was really wanting to work up to this..." Connie said in prelude as the lift doors opened.

"Deck 5 Section C2." Ensign Thaelan said as they walked onto the lift.

"You remember that I told you about my brother Nicky." Connie said hesitantly.

"Yes." Ensign Thaelan said patiently.

"Well, since you two went through basically the same thing, I was wondering if maybe you could help me to help him." Connie said with difficulty.

"What can I do to help?" Ensign Thaelan asked carefully as the doors to the lift opened.

Connie led Thaelan to the cabin door as he said, "I really don't know. But I'm out of ideas of what to do for him. He's not healing. He's not getting better."

Ensign Thaelan nodded his understanding as he and Connie walked into the room.

"I know I just met you, and I hate to ask you for a favor like this but I'm really worried about him." Connie said frankly.

"I don't know what I'll be able to do to help you, but I will try." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Thank you. Even if we can't come up with anything, thank you for trying." Connie said sincerely.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to use this terminal to compose a letter to my family while you shower." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"That's fine. I'll be done in a few minutes." Connie said and walked to the bathroom door.

Ensign Thaelan sat before the terminal, then waited a long silent moment before writing his letter.

* * * * *

"Joe, come look at this." Darin said in a whisper.

Joe walked to the edge of the partition where Darin was standing and glanced inside.

Vincent was fast asleep with a happy smile on his face.

"That's what I needed to see." Joe said peacefully.

Darin turned at a movement out of the corner of his eye and noticed that Benny and JonJon were also watching Vincent sleep.

"You guys had better think about getting to bed soon too." Darin said in a whisper.

"Yeah, we just finished brushing Fizgig. We're going to get ready now." Benny said quietly.

"Then come over here and give me a hug in case I don't see you again before you go to sleep." Joe said with a gentle smile.

JonJon happily walked to Joe to receive his hug as Benny followed a little more hesitantly.

Joe hugged JonJon tightly and said, "I'm really glad that you and Fizgig are here."

"Really?" JonJon asked in wonder.

Joe pulled back to look into JonJon's eyes and said, "Yes. Vincent has made quite a few new friends since he came on the Yorktown, but you and Benny are the only ones close to his own age. He can be a kid around you. I think he needs that."

JonJon smiled and said, "Thank you. I thought you just invited us to stay here because you felt sorry for us."

"No. I invited you to stay here because you're Vincent's friends, and now that I've had some time to get to know you, you're my friends too." Joe said gently.

JonJon smiled, then moved out of the way so Benny could get his hug.

Joe recognized the hesitance in Benny's expression and said, "Thank you for everything you did today Benny."

Benny looked at Joe with question.

"You were there for Vincent when I couldn't be. If there's ever anything I can do for you, all you have to do is ask." Joe said quietly.

"Vincent is a good person. I was happy to help him." Benny said with a gentle smile.

Joe slowly pulled Benny into a hug, ready to pull back at Benny's first sign of resistance.

After a long silent moment of hugging, Joe felt a tremble in Benny's body and realized that Benny was crying.

"It's okay Benny. Everything is going to be fine." Joe whispered soothingly.

Benny didn't respond except to tighten his hug until he was clutching Joe desperately.

"Go on Benny. Let it all out. I'm here for you." Joe whispered as he rubbed Benny's back.

Joe glanced over and noticed JonJon's look of concern.

In a slightly louder voice, Joe said, "After a day like you've had, it's okay to cry. Sometimes you just need to let it out so you can feel better."

JonJon picked up Fizgig and hesitantly walked to Joe's side.

Joe gave him a small nod to indicate that it was okay and held out one arm to include JonJon in the hug.

JonJon tucked in under Joe's arm and also began to silently cry.

"Everything is going to be fine. I'm here for you for as long as you need me." Joe whispered as he felt tears begin to form in his own eyes.

* * * * *

Beloved Mother,

I have been reassigned yet again, this time to the USS Yorktown. In less than one hour of my arrival, my new commanding officer assigned me a crew and allowed me to take control of the ship's main deflector console.

My new commanding officer spoke with me briefly and in just a few minutes was able to make me understand what you have been trying to explain to me for years. The bigotry and isolation that I have been enduring since I joined Starfleet isn't something that has been directed at me, but rather, is something that I have been carrying with me.

One of my new crewmates has also been able to give me some valuable

insights about dealing with my personal tragedy. I believe it is time for me to begin to heal.

Please tell my brothers and sisters that my period of mourning is coming to an end and that when I am next in a position to return to Andor, I will visit and we can have a feast to celebrate life.

In your response, please apprise me of Father's condition. In my attempt to distance myself from my painful memories I have also distanced myself from my family. Please accept my apologies for neglecting my responsibilities as your eldest son.

For several years all the light seemed to have been absent from my life, but at last the dawn of a new day has come.

Your loving and devoted son,

Thaelan

Chapter 15

Vincent opened his eyes and looked around curiously at his surroundings.

It took a moment for him to remember that he was sleeping in the supply room of Deflector Control.

He quietly got out of his sleeping bag and pulled on his T-shirt from the night before.

He moved quietly and was careful not to wake anyone else as he crept out of the room.

* * * * *

"Good morning Vincent, did you have a good sleep?" Lou asked pleasantly as she watched Vincent walk to the main console.

"Yeah. What time is it?" Vincent asked groggily.

"It's almost 04:45. There's still time for you to get some more sleep if you wanted to." Lou said gently.

"I went to sleep early enough that I think I'm done sleeping now. Where's Judy?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"We had a control circuit failure on one of the R cell nodes so she's switching it out. I guess that's going to be happening a lot until we can get back to Earth and get stocked up on good control circuits." Lou said casually.

"Oh yeah. I guess so." Vincent said as he came more awake.

"Since you're up, would you mind running a quick level two on the main console? I'm getting some strange readings here and I'd like to make sure that they're for real." Lou said as she looked at her board carefully.

"Yeah. It'll just take a second." Vincent said and walked to station three to run the diagnostic.

"If this isn't a problem with the sensor display, then you guys may be having an interesting day." Lou said speculatively.

"The level two diagnostic shows that the console is running fine, but I'm going to run a level three just to be safe." Vincent said as he keyed in the command.

"Thanks, I was going to suggest that." Lou said as she examined the readings more closely.

"While that's running, I'm going to go get dressed." Vincent said and walked to the supply room.

After a moment, Lou muttered, "Yeah. Fine."

* * * * *

Vincent walked out of the supply room wearing his uniform and walked directly to station three to check on the status of the diagnostic.

"It's not showing anything wrong so far. I'm going to run to the bathroom and I'll be right back." Vincent said quickly.

"Wait Vincent. Before you go could you wake up Joe, I think he needs to see this." Lou said in deep concentration.

"Yeah, I'll get him now." Vincent said as he started feeling concern at the tone of her voice.

* * * * *

"What's going on Lou?" Joe asked as he hurried to the main console.

Lou glanced up and smiled at the sight of Joe in his pajamas.

Before she could answer he saw the strange readings and asked, "Have you run a diagnostic to see that it's not a faulty sensor image?"

"Vincent has a level three running right now, but I'm beginning to think that it's for real." Lou said as she stared at the sensor data.

"I don't recall ever seeing readings like this before." Joe said as he examined the sensor data carefully.

"I think I have." Lou said quietly.

"Really? Where?" Joe asked curiously.

"Back in my Astrophysics class at the academy. These are the types of readings you would get from proto-matter." Lou said hesitantly.

"It's too soon to be jumping to a conclusion like that. This could be something as simple as a particulate matter build-up on the sensor array." Joe said cautiously.

"Or it could be the first recorded instance of naturally occurring proto-matter that anyone has ever seen." Lou said seriously.

"Is everything okay?" Vincent asked as he hurried back into deflector control.

"Everything is fine. Lou's just getting her hopes up about something that's probably just a hardware maintenance issue." Joe said, trying to hide his excitement at the prospect.

"You know... it could take hours to check every possible hardware cause for this reading... but it would just take a few minutes to rule out proto-matter." Lou said in a leading tone.

Joe thought about the statement for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"So you're going to do it?" Lou asked hopefully.

"Give me a minute to get dressed, then I'll go up to the bridge and try to convince whoever the duty officer is to come out of warp long enough to collect a sample." Joe said as a hopeful smile crept onto his face.

"Thanks Joe... This could really be it." Lou said with excitement.

"Try not to get your hopes up too much. Right now it's only a possibility." Joe said seriously, then walked to the supply room to change.

* * * * *

After Joe walked into the supply room, Vincent curiously asked, "So what's going on?"

"The area of space that we're traveling through is virgin territory..." Lou began to say, then trailed off when she noticed Vincent's wide eyed expression.

Lou fought down her chuckles as she said, "That just means that no Federation starship has taken this course through space before. The space beyond the Kimber colony is mostly virgin territory. We've done all kinds of detailed long range scans, but this is the first time we're actually traveling through this space.

"Oh, okay. I get it." Vincent said timidly at his original misunderstanding.

"Well, now I'm detecting some particulate matter impacting the shields that appears to have some characteristics of a theoretical substance called proto-matter." Lou said carefully.

"What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

Joe walked behind Vincent and pulled him into a gentle hug from behind and said, "Some scientists believe that proto-matter may be what the 'big

bang' exploded out into empty space and it was the catalyst that caused the formation of the universe."

"But so far it's all been just a theory. Some scientists have created something in a lab that they named proto-matter but it was unstable and didn't have the properties that would be necessary for the formation of the universe. But what I'm detecting on the sensors *could* be the real thing." Lou said as she looked at the readings again.

"I'd better go now so I can settle this before we're both lost on a flight of fancy." Joe said with a smile and gave Vincent one final squeeze.

"Let me know as soon as you find out." Lou said firmly.

"I will Lou, I promise." Joe said gently, then thought to ask, "Would you like to come with me Vincent?"

"Sure. That'd be great." Vincent said with a happy smile.

* * * * *

Joe and Vincent walked onto the bridge and directly to the command chair.

"Lieutenant Walking Bear, would it be possible for us to come out of warp long enough to collect some samples of the particulate matter that we're traveling through?" Joe asked hopefully.

"Can't you just beam a sample aboard?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked cautiously.

"Not this time. The transporter might corrupt the sample. We have to be very careful to avoid any possibility of contamination." Joe said seriously.

"What is it that you think you've found?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked curiously as he turned his full attention to Joe.

Joe looked around the room, then leaned close to whisper, "Proto-matter."

"Seriously?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked with astonishment.

"It's a possibility. But there's no way to know for sure without a sample." Joe said urgently.

Lieutenant Walking Bear thought for a moment, then said, "It may take me a few minutes to round up a shuttle pilot for you. Everyone got thrown off schedule with the evacuation efforts yesterday."

"Darin trained on helm and navigation. He could probably do it if you wanted. I know he'd want to help if he could." Vincent offered quickly.

Lieutenant Walking Bear looked at Vincent curiously.

"Crewman Winters is right. If you can bring us out of warp and have a shuttle prepped for us, we can provide a pilot." Joe said with a smile at Vincent.

"Then consider it done." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously, then looked at Vincent and said, "And it's a pleasure to meet you Crewman Winters, I've been hearing some good things about you."

"It's nice to meet you too." Vincent said shyly.

"Go wake up Darin while I get the sample containers that we'll need. I'll meet you two on the flight deck." Joe said seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said quickly, then hurried to the turbo lift.

"I know how the gossip on the ship can distort the truth of the things you hear. I've been hearing such fantastic things about him, I just have to ask. What is he really like to work with?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked carefully.

"He's still new and has quite a bit to learn. But he's picking up on things quickly and has a strong work ethic. I'd have to say that he's better than most of the new crewmen that have been assigned to me in the past few years." Joe said consideringly.

"It's hard to believe. At his age I was just beginning to look up at the stars and dream." Lieutenant Walking Bear said distantly.

"I know what you mean John. I think I was probably older than Vincent before I started stargazing... I'd better get down to sciences and get some level 5 containment jars for the samples. I wouldn't want to keep Vincent waiting." Joe said with a smile.

"You'd better hurry Joe. From what I've been hearing about him, he might just go do it without you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a teasing smile.

Joe chuckled and walked to the turbo lift.

As he stepped on the lift, he heard Lieutenant Walking Bear say, "Helm, prepare to take us out of warp..."

* * * * *

Joe walked to the shuttle craft pushing a cart with four carry-all containers.

"Let me help you with that." Darin said quickly as he rushed to Joe's side.

"No Darin. Vincent and I will get this. Go ahead and start your pre-flight. We need to get this done as quickly as possible so the *Yorktown* can get underway again." Joe said seriously.

Darin nodded and rushed to the shuttle craft.

"Take one side and lift it gently. These containers are fragile." Joe said as he locked the wheels of the cart.

Vincent took hold of one side and gently lifted the box off the cart, then walked backward to the steps of the shuttle craft.

"Gently. We don't need to rush this part." Joe said quietly.

Vincent slowly walked backward up the two steps, then turned once he was inside the shuttle so Joe could lead the way to where they were going to store it.

After a moment to maneuver the carry-all to the back of the shuttle, Joe finally said, "Good. Now we just need to do that three more times."

Vincent nodded and hurried off the shuttle to get the next container.

* * * * *

"Are you guys ready?" Darin asked over his shoulder.

"Go ahead Darin. While you're getting us into position, we're going to be prepping these containment jars." Joe said seriously.

"What do we need to do?" Vincent asked carefully.

"These containment jars are designed to hold a sample in a level 5 quarantine field. Anything that's put inside the jar will be completely isolated so that no light, heat, magnetic fields... not even gravity will be effecting it. What we need to do is make sure that all the properties of the force field are tuned to completely enforce the isolation. I'm going to set up the sample jars, then you can do the fine tuning." Joe said as he opened the first carry-all container.

"Me?" Vincent asked with a squeak.

Joe smiled at him and said, "It's just another force field. You know how to adjust field properties well enough to do this. Besides, Darin and I will be here to answer any questions you have and I can look it over when you're done if you're not sure."

"Um, yeah. If it has to be perfect, then it would be better if you'd look at it. Even if I was sure about what I was doing, that would probably be the smartest thing to do." Vincent said in thought.

Joe smiled at the statement and said, "That's a very good way of looking at it. Watch what I'm doing in case you have to prep a containment canister someday."

* * * * *

"We're outside the shield, what should I do now?" Darin asked cautiously.

"Contact Lou and find out where we need to go to collect a sample." Joe said seriously.

"Got it." Darin said, then opened the comm channel.

"Shuttle craft *Victoria* to *Yorktown* Deflector Control." Darin said professionally.

"*I'm here Darin. Turn to heading 322.4 mark 7, ahead 86.74 meters for your first sample*." Lou said seriously.

"With coordinates like that, you don't even need a pilot out here. You could pilot the shuttle by remote." Darin said with a smile as he maneuvered the shuttle to the proper trajectory and nudged the thruster to move them the short distance to the sample.

"*I could, but I don't think Joe would let me hog all the glory.*" Lou said playfully.

"Firing reverse thrusters. All forward momentum stopped." Darin said once he was in position.

"Vincent, how's the first sample container coming along?" Joe asked as he walked to the front of the shuttle.

"It'll just be a few seconds, then you can look at it." Vincent said in deep concentration as he made minute adjustments to the field properties.

"Lou, where is it?" Joe asked as he looked over Darin's shoulder at the scanners.

"*Z minus two meters.*" Lou said seriously.

"Ouch. You couldn't have brought us any closer could you?" Joe asked as he looked at the scanner carefully.

"*I could have, but I've never seen Darin pilot before. I wanted to leave a margin for error.*" Lou said frankly.

"How did I do?" Darin asked with a smile.

"*Let's just say that you'll be even closer to the next three samples.*" Lou said and a smile could be heard in her voice.

"Daddy Joe. Are you ready to check this?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Sure thing, Son, I'll be right there." Joe said and hurried to Vincent's side.

After a moment of close inspection, Joe finally said, "You set it up perfectly. If it gets out that you can prep a containment jar this well, sciences might try to steal you away from us."

"I won't go without a fight." Vincent said firmly, then broke into a smile.

"Help me move it to the collection airlock. As soon as we've got it secured, Darin will fire the maneuvering thrusters so we can collect the sample." Joe said with a smile.

* * * * *

"I'm evacuating the atmosphere from the collection container." Joe said in concentration.

"Containment and quarantine fields on standby." Vincent said as he double checked all the field properties.

"Sterilization complete and confirmed. Initiate containment field." Joe said seriously.

Vincent was surprised by the command, but immediately pressed the button to activate the containment field.

"Okay Darin. It's up to you now." Joe said into the air.

"I'm lined up on it. I've just got to tap... tap... angle the descent just a little bit..." Darin said in concentration as he maneuvered the shuttle craft into the perfect position.

"How close are we now?" Joe asked quickly.

"We're at point five meters." Darin said in concentration.

"Will you give me a countdown?" Joe asked as he put his finger on the airlock release.

"Point four five." Darin called out in an absent voice.

"Vincent, get ready to activate the quarantine field. We only get one chance at this." Joe said seriously.

"Point three five."

"I'm ready." Vincent said as he followed Joe's example and placed his finger on the activation button.

"Point two five." Darin said as he worked his controls.

"*Looking good flyboy.*" Lou's voice called out over the comm.

"Point one five."

"Point one."

"Point zero five."

"Get ready..." Joe said in concentration as he pushed the airlock control firmly.

A second later he pushed the control again as he said, "Activate."

There was a long moment of silence, until it was broken by Lou asking, "*Did you get it?*"

Joe picked up his tricorder and scanned the collection canister carefully before saying, "We got something."

"*What do you mean?*" Lou asked slowly.

"I mean that the tricorder can't identify what we've collected. That doesn't mean that it's proto-matter, but whatever it is, it's not something that the tricorder has been programmed to recognize." Joe said frankly.

"Are we ready to do another one?" Darin asked from his place at the front of the shuttle.

"Hold on, the quarantine field is reacting to the sample... give me a second to fine tune it." Vincent said in concentration.

"It's going to take us a few minutes to secure the sample jar and set up a new one. I guess you could be getting into position while we do that." Joe said as he started looking over the sample jar to make sure everything was secure.

"Do you have another one ready for me Lou?" Darin asked hopefully.

"*Heading 207.88, mark 293.1, ahead 366.42 meters.*" Lou said firmly.

"I'll take that as a yes." Joe said with a chuckle as he disconnected the sample container from the airlock.

* * * * *

"Would you look at this. We're back on board and we've still got nearly an hour to kill before our duty shift." Joe said happily.

"Do we have to unload the sample containers right now? I really wanted to do something with Benny and JonJon real quick before I have breakfast." Vincent said in a rush.

"No. I don't think anyone will mind if we leave the samples on the shuttle for the time being. I'm not sure which department of sciences should get custody of them anyway. Once we're on duty we can write a report for Commander M'Butu and he can decide what to do next." Joe said casually as he walked to the door of the shuttle.

"Won't someone mess with them while we're gone?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Not if we ask them not to..." Joe said as he stepped off the shuttle, then walked to the ensign who was in charge of the Gamma shift crew.

"Ensign Mahoney, we've just collected some very sensitive samples and left them on that shuttle. Would you please see that no one disturbs the shuttle until I can make some arrangements?" Joe asked professionally.

"Yes sir. I don't think that will be any problem. Do you want me to contact you in deflector control if we need to move the shuttle?" Ensign Mahoney asked calmly.

"That will be fine. If I'm not there, they'll know where to find me." Joe said seriously.

Ensign Mahoney nodded his understanding.

"Well Vincent, why don't you go do what you need to do and we'll meet you in the mess hall." Joe suggested casually.

"Okay. I'll be there as quick as I can." Vincent said happily and rushed ahead of them.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent. I was wondering where you went." Benny said with a contented smile as he sat up in his sleeping bag.

"If you guys will hurry up and get dressed, I want to take you up to where Channing is staying so you can take care of him... I mean, if you still want to." Vincent finished shyly.

"Oh yeah. I forgot. It'll just take me a minute." Benny said as he got out of his sleeping bag and walked to get his clothes.

"You said it was okay if Fizgig went with us, right?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Channing is a really friendly guy and I think he'll enjoy playing with Fizgig." Vincent said with a gentle smile.

JonJon smiled, then hopped up and began to get dressed.

"Are we going to have time to get something to eat before we go?" Benny asked as he was pulling on his shirt.

"I thought that you guys might want to check and see what Channing wanted to eat, and then you could get food for all of you and eat with him." Vincent said seriously.

"That sounds like a good idea. It'll be like a picnic." Benny said happily.

"Should I bring Fizgig's um..." JonJon trailed off and pointed at the litter box.

"Not right now. You can come back for it later if you want or bring Fizgig down here when he needs to use it." Vincent said seriously.

"Okay. Then I guess I'm ready." JonJon said as he picked Fizgig up and cuddled him gently.

"Let's go." Vincent said urgently and led the way out of the supply room.

* * * * *

"Shhh. I don't know if he's awake yet." Vincent whispered as he led the way into the room.

"Don't worry about it Vincent. We're all awake, we were just talking." Channing said with a smile.

"Channing, you already met Benny. This is our friend JonJon and his dog Fizgig." Vincent said as he motioned to them.

"Nice to meet you." Channing said with a smile, then said, "Guys, I'd like for you to meet Chance and Harmon, my roommates for the next few weeks."

"Hi." JonJon said and gave a little wave.

"I've got to go now so I can eat before I have to go to work." Vincent said seriously.

"Hold on Vincent. We'll go with you." Chance said quickly as he stood.

"You guys have fun today. I'll stop by after my shift." Vincent said with a smile.

Chance and Harmon straightened their uniforms as they waited for Vincent by the door.

"Have a good day Vincent. We'll be fine." Channing said happily.

* * * * *

Vincent approached Joe and Darin's table carrying his tray of food.

Joe saw him approaching and casually asked, "Did you get everything taken care of that you needed to?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to introduce Channing to JonJon and make sure they were going to be okay before I left." Vincent said as he took his seat.

"Oh, I forgot to ask last night. How is Channing?" Joe asked curiously.

"He's fine, he was just up too long yesterday. Dr. Perry said that he needs to rest for three days." Vincent said, then took a bite of his food.

"Is that the guy you went to visit in sickbay night before last?" Darin asked with interest.

"Yeah. He was also in the bed next to mine in sickbay yesterday." Vincent said casually.

"So you arranged for Benny and JonJon to take care of Channing while you're working?" Joe asked speculatively.

"Uh huh. I thought that that way they could be doing something that really matters instead of being bored all day with nothing to do."

"Good thinking. Guys, we'd better hurry up. It's just about that time." Joe said seriously.

"I'm almost finished." Vincent said quickly.

"Excuse me gentlemen, may I have a moment of your time?" A voice asked from behind Vincent.

He turned to see a familiar face and happily said, "Hi Neil. Would you like to join us?"

"Do you know everyone on this ship?" Joe asked Vincent with a smile.

"I'm working on it." Vincent said with a giggle.

"Are you Ensign Darin Cooper?" Neil asked Darin seriously.

"Yes. Why do you ask?" Darin replied cautiously.

"I've been ordered to 'discretely' ask the three of you to come to conference room one immediately." Neil said firmly.

"What's this about?" Joe asked curiously.

"I've been ordered to inform you that you are not to speculate on the reason for the meeting in my presence. I don't know and I don't need to know. Please proceed to the conference room without drawing undue attention." Neil said seriously.

"You heard the man. Let's go." Joe said as he stood and picked up his plate.

* * * * *

"Do I have time to swing by deflector control and arrange coverage for while we're gone?" Joe asked as he led the way to the cafeteria window to drop off his plate.

"No sir, I don't think you do." Neil said seriously.

"You were a lot more fun yesterday in the observation lounge when you were tired." Vincent said playfully as he looked up at Neil.

Neil broke into an involuntary smile and said, "I'm just acting this way so you guys will know that I'm serious."

"We know you mean it, so you can stop being growley now. I want to talk to the nice guy who helped me when I was on the pool deck and I couldn't see." Vincent said hopefully.

"Okay Vincent. Just for you." Neil said with fond amusement.

As the group approached the turbo lift, Neil stepped away and said, "This is as far as I go."

Darin looked at Joe with question, then reluctantly followed him onto the turbo lift.

"If whatever this is keeps me busy for a while, will you check to see that Channing is okay?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Neil smiled and said, "I'll check on him the first chance that I get."

* * * * *

Joe, Darin and Vincent walked into the conference room to find Lieutenant Walking Bear, Lou and Captain Byrne waiting for them.

"Gentlemen, please have a seat. We have an important matter to discuss." Captain Byrne said firmly.

Joe looked at Lou curiously and received a puzzled look in return.

Captain Byrne pressed his comm control and said, "Lieutenant Patterson, I need a priority one secure channel directed to Admiral Morrow at Starfleet Command."

"*Yes sir.*" Debbie said quickly.

"Captain..." Joe began to say but was stopped as Captain Byrne raised his hand.

"*Admiral Morrow for you sir.*" Debbie said professionally as the monitor came to life.

"*Leland, may I assume that this is somewhat urgent from the early hour and the need for a secure channel?*" Admiral Morrow asked as he sat back in his chair.

"Yes sir. Something happened this morning of which I thought you should be aware. We have not had any discussion of this matter so that you can be involved from the beginning." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"*Well, you certainly have my interest. What have you got for me?*" Admiral Morrow asked as he sat forward.

"It appears that my deflector control team may have come across some naturally occurring proto-matter." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"*Dear God! Who else knows about this?*" Admiral Morrow asked immediately.

Captain Byrne looked around the room, obviously waiting for an answer.

"I haven't discussed it with anyone outside this room." Joe said carefully.

"I told Judy, but I asked her not to tell anyone else until we were sure." Lou said quietly.

Captain Byrne pressed the comm button and said, "Lieutenant Simms."

"*Yes sir.*" Was the immediate answer.

"Crewman Judy Wills." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"*Right away sir.*" Lieutenant Simms said quickly, then the comm went silent.

"Anyone else?" Captain Byrne asked as he looked at Vincent and Darin.

"No sir. I didn't tell anyone." Vincent said shyly as Darin shook his head.

Captain Byrne looked at Lieutenant Walking Bear and received another negative response.

"*Very good. Now how sure are you?*" Admiral Morrow asked intensely.

Captain Byrne looked at Joe with question.

"We collected four samples of the... substance. The tricorder wasn't able to identify it." Joe said carefully.

"*Where is that tricorder?*" Admiral Morrow asked seriously.

"I left it on the shuttle craft with the samples." Joe said in a professional tone.

"*You left proto-matter sitting unattended in a shuttle bay?*" Admiral Morrow asked with disbelief.

"No sir, not exactly. I told Ensign Mahoney that we had some sensitive samples on the shuttle craft and asked him to call me if the shuttle needed to be moved. He assured me that no one would bother it." Joe said in a quieter voice.

The sound of the turbo lift doors opening caused all conversation to stop.

Judy hesitantly walked into the room and stood at attention.

"Crewman Wills, have you discussed the possible discovery of proto-matter with anyone outside this room?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

Judy glanced at Lou, then said, "No sir."

"Very good. Then please have a seat so we may continue." Captain Byrne said professionally.

There was a moment of silence that was finally broken by Admiral Morrow quietly asking, "*Given the sensitivity of proto-matter, how did you manage to collect samples.*"

"Ensign DeGama spotted the proto-matter with the *Yorktown's* sensors, then guided Ensign Cooper to where he needed to be. Once there, he used the maneuvering thrusters to slowly lower the shuttle until the sample airlock lined up with the proto-matter then dropped the shuttle over it." Joe said proudly.

"*That sounds like a very precise maneuver.*" Admiral Morrow said seriously.

"He's the best pilot in deflector control." Joe said with a proud smile.

"*How are the samples being stored?*"

"In level five sample containers with full containment and quarantine fields." Joe answered professionally.

Admiral Morrow keyed something into the console in front of him, then hesitantly asked, "*Do you happen to know the frequency of the quarantine field that you're using?*"

"108.11 cycles per millisecond." Vincent answered immediately.

There was a long moment of silence before Admiral Morrow asked, "*Please confirm, did you say 108.11 cycles?*"

"Yes sir." Vincent said firmly.

"*Could you tell me how you arrived at that precise modulation?*" Admiral Morrow asked slowly.

"Once we had the sample contained, I tuned the quarantine field to prevent any particle leakage." Vincent said cautiously.

Admiral Morrow shook his head and began to chuckle.

Vincent looked at Joe with puzzlement and received a shrug in response.

"*According to the theoretical research on the subject, true proto-matter could only be contained in a quarantine field modulated at precisely 108.11 cycles per millisecond. I believe that this is all the evidence I need to proceed with this matter. Leland, shortly you will be receiving rendezvous coordinates, when you reach the coordinates you will transfer the proto-matter samples to the Enterprise so the samples can be transported to Earth.*" Admiral Morrow said firmly.

Captain Byrne nodded his understanding of the instructions.

"*Your people need to understand the gravity of the situation so I am authorizing you to brief them on Project Genesis and the related facts concerning the Mutara Nebula. Their security clearances should be adjusted accordingly.*" Admiral Morrow said seriously.

"Yes sir." Captain Byrne said immediately.

"*I think it would be prudent if one member of this group were reassigned to serve as an escort for the proto-matter all the way back to Earth. I believe that only someone who knows all the facts could appreciate the*

importance of keeping the proto-matter safe and I would like to limit the number of people brought in on this." Admiral Morrow said firmly.

Captain Byrne nodded his agreement.

"*All of you, this matter is highly classified. Once you have been briefed, you are not to discuss this matter with anyone outside this group. The dissemination of this information in any form would constitute an act of high treason punishable by a life sentence on a prison planet. I believe you will understand the need for secrecy when your briefing has concluded.*" Admiral Morrow said gravely.

A moment of silence fell over the room until it was broken by Admiral Morrow saying, "*Captain Byrne, the safe transport of the proto-matter is your first priority. You have in your possession the most valuable substance in the universe. You are hereby authorized to use any and all means necessary to safeguard it's transport and prevent it falling into the wrong hands. Am I understood?*"

"Yes sir. I understand." Captain Byrne said in a somewhat reluctant voice.

"*I'm going to brief the Enterprise command staff, then you'll be contacted with the rendezvous coordinates.*" Admiral Morrow said seriously.

"Yes sir, we'll be standing by for your message." Captain Byrne said with distraction.

"*Starfleet Command out*." Admiral Morrow said firmly.

"*Yorktown,* out." Captain Byrne said in a hollow voice, then disconnected the transmission.

Vincent looked at Captain Byrne with concern.

"I believe Admiral Morrow adequately expressed the seriousness of the situation, so now I will tell you the rest of the story." Captain Byrne said reluctantly.

"Perhaps some of you know or have heard of Dr. Carol Marcus." Captain Byrne asked in prelude.

"I met her once when we did a supply run to the Regula One station., but I don't know much about her." Joe said quietly.

"I've read a few of her published reports. It was a little too theoretical for my taste." Lou said with a shrug.

"Dr. Marcus undertook a project for the Federation code named Project Genesis. The essence of the project is that a device that Dr. Marcus and her

team developed could be introduced into a dead world and the 'Genesis Effect' would transform a lifeless planet into a living world complete with atmosphere, water, even plant and animal life which would develop at an accelerated rate." Captain Byrne said in concentration.

"That sounds wonderful. What am I missing?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked slowly.

"If the Genesis Device were detonated on a planet where life already existed, the Genesis Effect would destroy every living thing on that world... within minutes." Captain Byrne finished reluctantly.

A long moment of silence fell over the room as everyone digested the statement.

Finally Captain Byrne added, "The key to the Genesis Device was proto-matter."

"Excuse me. You said 'was'... does that mean that Dr. Marcus actually built the device?" Lou asked suddenly.

"Yes." Captain Byrne said simply.

"Admiral Morrow mentioned the Mutara Nebula... it wasn't consumed by a black hole the way the official reports said, was it? Dr. Marcus detonated the Genesis Device and the Genesis Effect consumed the entire nebula." Joe said in a speculative voice as he figured it out.

"The Genesis Device was stolen from Dr. Marcus and detonated by someone else, but the rest of what you said was spot on." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Dear God! It was powerful enough to consume an entire nebula? No wonder Admiral Morrow is scared to death of it." Lou said in wonder.

"The nebular matter was drawn together by the Genesis Effect and formed a planet. But the artificially created proto-matter that was the basis of the device was, by it's very nature, unstable. The Genesis planet was born and lived for only a few short months before it finally decayed and became nothing more than an unremarkable rock in space." Captain Byrne finished quietly.

"But with naturally occurring proto-matter they could construct a Genesis Device that would result in a stable and habitable planet." Lieutenant Walking Bear said speculatively.

"That is the assumption that we're working under. An examination of the samples that you collected would prove or disprove that theory." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Captain Byrne, I don't understand exactly what the Admiral meant when he said 'any and all means'." Vincent said slowly, feeling that it was the key to the Captain's suddenly somber mood.

"That was the Admiral's way of saying that you and I and this entire ship are expendable. We will be sacrificed to protect the proto-matter or we will destroy it and ourselves to prevent the proto-matter from falling into the wrong hands, should the need arise." Captain Byrne said in a toneless voice.

"Oh. Um... wow." Vincent said quietly.

Joe smiled at Vincent's reaction, then turned back to the captain.

"So, do I have any volunteers to accompany the proto-matter back to Earth?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Captain, if I may, I would like that honor." Lieutenant Walking Bear said firmly.

"Very well Lieutenant Walking Bear, the protection of the proto-matter is now your personal responsibility." Captain Byrne said decisively.

"Captain, may I suggest that we leave the proto-matter on the shuttle craft so that when the Enterprise arrives, it won't have to be shifted unnecessarily." Joe said carefully.

"That sounds like a sensible idea. Lieutenant Walking Bear can stay on the shuttle and I'll post security to the area to prevent the possibility of anyone trying to gain entry." Captain Byrne said firmly.

"Would it be okay if the rest of us were allowed to go on the shuttle too? I mean, so we could take Lieutenant Walking Bear food or bring him stuff from his cabin if he needs it?" Vincent asked quietly.

After a moment of consideration, Captain Byrne nodded and said, "I'll make sure that security knows that you are allowed entry."

"Captain, I'm sorry I didn't bring this matter to you earlier. I thought the proto-matter would be a significant discovery to the scientific community, but I didn't consider that it might have a practical purpose." Lieutenant Walking Bear said repentantly.

"No need to be sorry. You had no way of knowing. The information about Project Genesis is only known by the higher ups at Starfleet and a few select ships captains." Captain Byrne said sincerely.

"Thank you sir." Lieutenant Walking Bear said quietly.

"I believe the next order of business should be for each of you to compose a report detailing your involvement in this matter. Include sensor readings wherever possible to corroborate your statements. Write the reports on secure data padds and deliver them to Lieutenant Walking Bear on the shuttle so they can be transported with the sample containers. No record of this event is to be made in official or personal logs. Do you understand?" Captain Byrne finished forcefully.

"Yes sir." Was the collective response.

"Then you are all dismissed." Captain Byrne said professionally.

Everyone stood and walked immediately to the turbo lift.

Once inside, Joe said, "Deflector Control."

"Hanger bay." Lieutenant Walking Bear said next.

"Lieutenant Walking Bear?" Vincent asked quietly.

Lieutenant Walking Bear looked at him with question.

"If you need anything like food or whatever, you can call me in deflector control and I'll get it for you... since it's kind of our fault that you're going to be stuck on the shuttle." Vincent finished shyly.

"Please don't feel responsible for this Crewman Winters. I have a sense that the Great Spirit has a hand in what's happening here. That is why I was so quick to volunteer for this duty. But I will keep your kind offer in mind and call you if I need anything." Lieutenant Walking Bear said gently.

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment, then asked, "Would you mind telling me about the Great Spirit... I mean later, after our reports are done?"

"I will be happy to answer whatever questions you have. So when you visit, be sure to bring your questions with you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a smile.

"You'd better watch out what you're asking John. One of Vincent's questions sparked an investigation that spread through the entire Federation." Joe said with a teasing smile at Vincent.

"That is good. The proper question carries more power than a hundred answers." Lieutenant Walking Bear said sagely.

The doors to the turbo lift opened and Joe said, "It looks like it's time for us to get to work."

"There you are!" Jimmy said in a frustrated voice.

"Observant, isn't he?" Lou said dryly.

Joe smiled at the statement, then said, "Ensign Thaelan, I'm sorry for having to do this to you on your first full day with us, but would you mind running the majority of this shift alone? We'll be here if you need anything, but we all need to work on our reports."

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with surprise for a moment, then said, "I will not mind at all. I will do my best not to interrupt your work."

"No Ensign Thaelan. Even though these reports need to be done, deflector control comes first. If you need anything, one of us will take care of it for you." Joe said firmly.

"I understand. If there is a need I will inform you immediately." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"That'll work. Everyone else, it's time to get to work." Joe said to the group.

"What *exactly* do we need to do?" Jimmy asked carefully.

"What *you* need to do is write a detailed report about your contribution to the 'Cooper Bridge'. All of us have our own reports to write and when everyone is finished, we can work to compile them." Joe said seriously.

"Are you serious? That's going to take forever." Jimmy said irritably.

"Just do it Jimmy. Vincent has more reports to write than you do and you don't hear him complaining." Joe said frankly.

Jimmy glanced over at Vincent and said, "Bosses pet."

"Whiner." Vincent said quickly in response, then stuck out his tongue.

"Jimmy, you're off duty. You can do it later if you want, but just remember... It has to be done." Joe finished firmly.

Jimmy thought for a moment, then said, "I'll do it now. I want to get it done so I'll have time to take Susan to a movie in the rec hall before our shift."

"That sounds nice. Do you know what movie you'll be seeing?" Joe asked curiously.

"Well, I don't really pay much attention to movies, but when I was looking at the list I found a romantic comedy that Susan and I might both like." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Oh? What's it called?" Joe asked curiously.

"Jiggley." Jimmy said with a grin.

"A romantic comedy called 'Jiggley'?" Joe asked with confusion.

"Yeah. It looks like kind of a chick flick, but maybe there will be enough funny parts so I'll enjoy it too." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Oh, well I hope you two have fun. Have you asked her yet?" Joe asked casually.

"I asked her to go to dinner and a movie but I haven't told her which one yet. In fact, I think I'm going to go and see if I can arrange something special for dinner..." Jimmy said with increasing excitement.

"Go ahead, just remember that you have reports to write." Joe said with a friendly smile.

Jimmy hopped up and ran for the door.

As soon as the door had closed, Darin said, "That movie has been called one of the worst movies ever made. A few of the reviews that I've read compared watching it to having food poisoning."

"Why didn't you warn him?" Joe asked curiously.

"Because he was being mean to Vincent." Darin said frankly.

Joe considered for a moment, then said, "Works for me. But I've honestly never heard of a movie called 'Jiggley'."

Darin smiled and quietly said, "It's pronounced 'Gigli'."

Chapter 16

"I don't know where to start." Vincent said as he looked at the blank padd in his hand.

"Let me show you a trick. I think you'll like this." Darin said as he walked to Vincent's side.

Vincent smiled and held the padd out so Darin could access it easily.

"I'm going to import a template for you. It's just something I came up with at the academy to help me with reports." Darin said as he tried to access his personal files.

"Hold on, the built in security won't let me import the file, I'll sign in on my padd and send it to you." Darin said and went back to his chair.

"What does the template do?" Vincent asked curiously as he waited to receive the file.

"It just asks you questions. I tried to make it as interactive as possible, but there are still a few quirks to work out. It should be just what you need to help you get started." Darin said, then looked up from his padd and said, "You should have it now."

"Okay. What do I do?" Vincent asked as he opened the file.

"All you have to do is answer the questions. Talk to it like you're visiting with a friend. When you're finished, you should have most of your report written and you'll just have to 'fine tune' it." Darin said seriously.

After a few minutes of Vincent typing and reading, he looked up from his padd and hesitantly asked, "Um, Darin. Why did the padd just call me 'honey'?"

"I wanted it to be friendly. What do you think?" Darin asked with a smile.

"Well, it's either really friendly or really creepy. I'm not sure which yet." Vincent said as he keyed in his answer to the next question.

"If you have any suggestions on how I can improve it, just let me know." Darin said casually.

After a moment of reading and typing, Vincent said, "It's asking me questions like someone who's trying to get to know me."

"That's the whole point. Instead of filling in blanks that say 'NAME:_____ RANK:_____' and so on, and then trying to figure out what to say in that big empty space in the middle, you have a conversation with the padd and

it asks you a bunch of questions about why you have to write a report. You end up saying just about the same thing, but it feels like you're talking to a friend instead of doing paperwork." Darin said without looking up from his padd.

"Okay. I guess I can understand that, but it just called me 'babycakes'." Vincent said hesitantly.

"It must like you." Darin said with a smile.

"Would you mind if I tried it too? It sounds like fun." Jimmy asked hopefully.

Darin looked at Jimmy with surprise for a moment, then said, "Sure. Crewman Tullis, right?"

"Yeah." Jimmy said with a smile.

Darin keyed in a few commands, then transmitted the template to Jimmy.

Vincent giggled as he filled in an answer on his report.

"What's so funny?" Jimmy asked curiously as he opened the template.

"I was filling in the stuff that happened and the padd broke in and asked me if I was feeling okay now, you know, like it really cared." Vincent said with a smile.

"It's just trying to find out your current medical status for the report. Is it being too friendly? I can change the parameters so it's not quite so casual." Darin said seriously

"No, it's fine. I really like it this way. I have a whole bunch of reports to write and I think this is going to make them fun." Vincent said with excitement.

"Darin, your program just called me a butthead." Jimmy said in astonishment.

"How did you get it to do that?" Darin asked as he stood and walked to Jimmy's side.

"I don't know. I was just answering the questions and it started going off on me. Look at this." Jimmy said as he held out the padd.

Darin read it for a moment then said, "I copied the basic personality template from the archive at the academy. I don't know why it's reacting to you that way."

After a few seconds of going through the options menu, Darin handed the padd back to Jimmy and said, "Go ahead and try it now. I've reset the personality matrix to neutral."

"Thanks." Jimmy said quietly as he started keying in information again.

After a moment, Darin asked, "Is it acting better?"

"Yeah. It's not exactly being friendly, but at least it's stopped calling me names." Jimmy said as he concentrated on his work.

"Good. If you have any other problems with it, just let me know. It's still a work in progress." Darin said as he took his seat again.

As Darin took his seat, Vincent looked at him curiously.

Darin got a mischievous smile on his face and gave Vincent a conspiratorial wink.

Vincent fought to keep his giggles to himself as he went back to work.

* * * * *

As Vincent was filling in the details of what happened earlier that day, he noticed that he was having trouble focusing his eyes. He blinked a few times to try and clear his vision.

Darin jerked as he felt himself starting to drift into sleep and vaguely noticed a ringing in his ears.

Without thought, Darin's recent Starfleet training kicked in and he reached under station three where he had been working on his report and pulled out the emergency breather unit that was stored there.

As he was pulling the breather unit onto his face, he noticed Ensign Thaelan slump over on the main control panel.

"Everybody! Get breathers on! Something's happened to our air." Darin called out in a muffled voice through the breather.

Vincent turned his chair at the sound, then his eyes rolled back as he fell unconscious.

Darin jumped up from his chair and ran to Vincent.

"Hang on little brother. You're going to be fine." Darin said as he pulled a breather out from under auxiliary station two and carefully put it on Vincent.

As soon as Darin was sure the breather unit was functioning properly, he looked around to see that everyone else was unconscious.

"Sorry Joe, I'll be right back." Darin whispered as he ran to the main console to help Ensign Thaelan.

"Wake up Thaelan. You've got to run the main." Darin said as he tried to fit the straps of the breather around Thaelan's head without injuring his antennae.

"What happened?" Vincent asked in a groggy, muffled voice.

"I think we lost atmosphere. Help Joe." Darin said as he moved to station one to help Connie.

"What... what do I do?" Vincent asked helplessly.

"There's an emergency breather unit under each station, watch what I'm doing." Darin said as he pulled out the breather unit, then eased Connie back in his chair so he could put the breather on him.

"Okay." Vincent said as he started to work.

"When you're done with Joe, take care of Jimmy. I'm going to call for help." Darin said as he pressed the comm button on station one.

The only response was a discordant beep.

Darin tried again with the same result.

"This console is down." Darin said and rushed to the main console where Ensign Thaelan looked like he was waking up.

Ensign Thaelan's body jerked once and he fell out of his chair.

Darin knelt by his side and gently slapped his cheek, trying to wake him up.

Ensign Thaelan's body suddenly went rigid, then he started jerking uncontrollably.

"He's having a seizure! Vincent, call for a med team!" Darin said as he moved around to Ensign Thaelan's head and held the sides of it firmly.

After a moment Vincent said, "All the consoles are locked up. I can't do anything."

"Then go get help!" Darin screamed as he continued to hold Thaelan's head.

Vincent ran to the door and nearly ran face first into it when it didn't open.

Darin noticed that Thaelan was looking at him with wide, frightened eyes as his body jerked and thrashed uncontrollably.

"I think there's something in the air that's caused you to have a seizure. You're breathing clean air now so it should pass in a few minutes. I'm protecting your antennae so you can just let the seizure happen until it works out of your system. I won't let anything happen to you." Darin said quietly in an assuring voice.

"The door's locked. I can't get out." Vincent said with a note of panic in his voice.

Darin glanced down in time to see a wet spot forming on Thaelan's uniform pants.

"Vincent, get me a blanket for Thaelan." Darin called out forcefully.

Thaelan continued to look at Darin with fear.

"Here." Vincent said as he ran to Darin's side carrying a sleeping bag.

"Go see if you can wake up Joe. He'll know what to do." Darin said as he quickly spread the sleeping bag over Thaelan's lower body.

Darin leaned close to Thaelan's ear and quietly said, "Everything will be fine. Vincent didn't see and I'll never tell."

Vincent ran to Joe's side and started to shake him to try and wake him up.

Joe slowly opened his eyes and looked at Vincent with confusion.

Vincent hugged Joe tightly and said, "Something is wrong with the air and Ensign Thaelan is sick or something and all the computers are locked up and now the door won't open."

Joe looked around the room groggily, then whispered, "Communicator."

Before Vincent could acknowledge the statement, the door opened to reveal a man wearing a hooded cloak.

"Hide!" Joe gasped and pulled Vincent behind him.

Vincent ducked down and curled himself under the console.

The intruder looked around the room quickly, then walked to Darin.

"You. Hargrove. Come with me." The intruder said in a low muffled voice as he pointed a weapon at Darin.

Darin looked at the intruder in shock as he continued to hold Thaelan's head and said, "I can't."

Joe forced himself up from the chair and made a dash to try and subdue the intruder.

As soon as Joe had stepped away from the console, Vincent darted to the door to find it locked again, then grabbed one of the communicators from the rack by the door and ran into the supply room.

The intruder saw movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see Joe coming at him.

* * * * *

"Security. We need help in deflector control!" Vincent said into the communicator as he huddled between two storage bins in the supply room.

The sound of a weapon firing sent a chill up Vincent's spine.

"*Security has been dispatched. Please advise of your situation.*" A professional voice asked calmly.

"Someone has done something to our air and locked up our computers and... and now someone is in here and I just heard a phaser fire." Vincent said in a trembling voice.

The sound of an alert klaxon could be heard and Vincent heard Debbie's voice on the intercom saying, "***Security to Deflector Control. This is not a drill. Intruder Alert. Reports of weapons fire and compromised atmosphere. Security to Deflector Control***."

"*Crewman Winters, is that you?*" The voice on the communicator asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Please help us. Ensign Thaelan is having a seizure or something and Connie and Jimmy are passed out and Daddy Joe or Darin might be dead." Vincent said as he felt tears falling down his cheeks.

"*Vincent, this is Lieutenant Simms. Where are you? Are you some place safe?*" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"I don't know how safe it is here. I hid in the supply room so I could call for help." Vincent said in a trembling voice.

"*You did exactly the right thing. Just stay where you are and remain silent. The security team is just outside Deflector Control.*" Lieutenant Simms said assuringly.

"You need to check on Lou and Judy and Lieutenant Walking Bear. They may need help too." Vincent said quickly.

"*Do you know where they are?*" Lieutenant Simms asked calmly.

"Lou and Judy should be in Daddy Joe's quarters. Um... that's on deck E section C2 room 2." Vincent finished in a rush.

"*I'll have a team check on them.*" Lieutenant Simms said with assurance.

"Lieutenant Walking Bear should be on the shuttle craft Victoria in the hanger bay, there should already be some security people there." Vincent said as he tried to think clearly.

"*They're checking on him now... Crewman Winters. Security has gained entry to Deflector Control and it's safe for you to come out now.*" Lieutenant Simms said assuringly.

"Okay. Thank you for talking to me." Vincent said as he crawled out from between the storage containers.

"*I'll be down to talk with you in person in just a moment. Take care of yourself.*" Lieutenant Simms said warmly.

"Okay." Vincent said as he wiped his eyes and cautiously walked to the door.

* * * * *

As Vincent walked into the main room of Deflector Control he saw Joe sprawled on the floor with one of the security team knelt by his side, examining him.

"How is he?" Vincent asked as he ran to Joe's other side.

"Alive. You'll need a doctor to tell you any more than that." The security officer said in a muffled voice through his breather unit.

Vincent looked quickly around, then saw the med team walking into the room.

"If he wakes up will you call me?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Are you Crewman Winters?" The security officer asked slowly.

"Yeah, and this is my Daddy Joe." Vincent said as he looked down at Joe again.

"If he wakes up, I'll call you right away. I promise." The security officer said in a tender voice.

"Thanks." Vincent said, then stood.

After a quick look around the room, Vincent walked to T'Lani's side as she scanned Ensign Thaelan.

"Husband, I am gratified to see that you are well." T'Lani said calmly as she looked at the medical tricorder's readings.

Vincent looked around and said, "I'm glad you're here. How is Ensign Thaelan?"

"His body is overcoming the effects of a foreign substance introduced into the air supply. If you will excuse me, I must speak to Dr. Raul." T'Lani said seriously.

"I'll wait for you here." Vincent said as he watched her walk away.

Vincent slowly knelt by Ensign Thaelan's side and said, "I'm sorry I couldn't do more to help you."

Ensign Thaelan struggled to ask, "You called help?"

"Yeah. I hid in the store room and called them on the communicator." Vincent said, feeling ashamed by his cowardly act of hiding.

"You did good." Ensign Thaelan said with effort.

"But when that guy came in, I... I wanted to be able to do something to stop him... I couldn't do anything." Vincent said quietly.

"You. Did. Good." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"Okay." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Ensign Thaelan, Dr. Raul will be here shortly to assess your condition and administer medication to ease your symptoms." T'Lani said seriously.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you." Vincent said in a quiet voice that could barely be heard through the breather unit.

T'Lani reached down to place her hand on the side of Vincent's face and caressed his cheek with her thumb.

Vincent smiled at the gesture, then placed his hand over hers.

"I must attend to Ensign Thaelan. Perhaps we could share a meal after our duty shifts have concluded." T'Lani said quietly.

"That sounds nice. Just call me here when you go off duty." Vincent said with a happy smile.

T'Lani nodded her agreement, then turned her attention back to Ensign Thaelan.

* * * * *

Vincent walked to Darin and pulled him into a tight hug.

Darin returned the hug firmly as he felt at least a small portion of his tension release.

"What happened?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Whoever that was that shot Joe, pointed his weapon at me and told me to go with him. But before he could do anything else the alert sounded and he ran off." Darin said as a tremble ran through his body at the memory.

"I took a communicator into the supply room and called for help." Vincent said quietly, still feeling that he had behaved cowardly.

Darin picked up on something in the tone of Vincent's voice and firmly said, "I would either be laying there beside Joe or been taken by that guy if it hadn't been for you."

He then knelt to be on Vincent's eye level and said, "You did exactly the right thing."

"Thanks Darin." Vincent said and pulled him into another hug.

"Gentlemen, may I please speak with you for a moment?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he walked into the room.

"Yes sir." Darin said as he stood and came to attention.

"At ease Ensign Cooper." Lieutenant Simms said in a neutral tone.

"Did you catch him?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Not yet Crewman Winters. That's why I need to ask you both some questions. From the look of it, you two will be the only ones who might have any answers." Lieutenant Simms said as he looked around.

Vincent looked around the room, then quickly said, "No one's watching the main!"

"It's okay. Chief Morgan is watching it for the moment and Ensign DeGama and Crewman Wills are on their way to the bridge." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

Vincent smiled with relief.

"Do either of you have any idea of who went to all this trouble to break in here and what he was looking for?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

Before Vincent could say anything, Darin quickly asked, "Have you checked on Lieutenant Walking Bear?"

"Yes. He's fine. You're the fourth person to ask me. Does what happened here have something to do with him?" Lieutenant Simms asked cautiously.

Vincent and Darin shared a look before Darin finally said, "It might. I really don't know for sure."

"Ensign Cooper, Ensign Thaelan wishes to speak with you." T'Lani said seriously.

Darin gave Lieutenant Simms a questioning look.

"Crewman Winters and I can talk while you're doing that." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"Thank you sir." Darin said and ran to see what Ensign Thaelan wanted.

* * * * *

"So Vincent, what can you tell me about what happened here?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"Well, we were all working on our reports while Ensign Thaelan was running the main console. I guess my eyes started going all funny and my ears started making this weird squealy sound. Darin... I mean Ensign Cooper said something about the air being wrong or bad or something. Then the next thing I know, I'm wearing a mask and Darin is over at the main console putting a mask on Ensign Thaelan." Vincent said in thought.

"Do you recall any kind of odor or maybe a strange taste in your mouth when you woke up?" Lieutenant Simms asked slowly.

"Yeah. It was really weird. When I woke up I thought I tasted almonds." Vincent said as he concentrated on the vague memory.

"What can you tell me about the intruder? Did you get a good look at him?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

Vincent closed his eyes for a moment, then said, "No. He was wearing a cape thing with a hood. I couldn't see his face at all. But he was a little bit taller than Daddy Joe and kind of big, like big with muscles, not fat."

"Do you have any idea what the intruder was after?" Lieutenant Simms asked cautiously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Well, at first I thought he was after... um... something that I can't talk about. But he didn't say anything about that. The only thing he asked for when he was in here was Darin. He wanted Darin to go with him."

"Can you remember *exactly* what he said?" Lieutenant Simms asked slowly.

"I don't know. I was still feeling kind of dopey from whatever I was breathing. I think he called Darin 'Harvey' or something like that. I can't really remember that part too good." Vincent said as he struggled with his memory.

"That's fine Crewman Winters. Ensign Cooper may remember the exact wording of what he said. How are you feeling now?" Lieutenant Simms asked with concern.

"Me? I'm fine. But I'll feel a whole lot better when I know Daddy Joe and everyone else is going to be okay." Vincent said seriously.

"Dr. Raul, how is Lieutenant Bowers doing?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he turned and led Vincent to Joe's side.

"As far as I can tell, he was hit with a low yield disruptor. We can take care of the damage in sickbay, but he'll just have to sleep off the rest of the effect." Dr. Raul said as he looked at his tricorder.

"But that doesn't make sense. A disruptor of any yield should have triggered the ship's internal sensors." Lieutenant Simms said, obviously thinking out loud.

"I don't know anything about that, but this...", Dr. Raul paused as he pulled open Joe's jacket and pulled up his shirt to reveal a large red welt on his chest, "...is a disruptor burn."

Lieutenant Simms pulled out his communicator and said, "I need a team to investigate the contamination of Deflector Control's air supply, a team to trace the computer access that disabled Deflector Control's consoles and a team to do a level three sweep of internal sensors to determine how an energy weapon was able to be fired on this ship without raising an alarm."

"Do you want me to pull the team from the shuttle bay to aid in the investigation?" The security officer asked cautiously.

"No. Call all shifts to duty until we can get some answers. In fact, double the detail in the shuttle bay." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"All shifts, yes sir." The security officer said quickly.

"One more thing, enact security protocol Bravo. Preliminary evidence indicates that security may have been infiltrated." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"Yes... yes sir." The security officer responded with surprise.

* * * * *

"May I speak privately with Ensign Cooper?" Ensign Thaelan asked in a whisper.

"Of course. But do not exert yourself. Your body has had to deal with significant stress." T'Lani said firmly.

"I will remain still. Thank you." Ensign Thaelan said, then watched her walk away.

"What did you need to tell me?" Darin asked quietly.

"I wish to express my appreciation for your actions earlier. The substance that was tainting the atmosphere caused me to experience a feeling of disorientation. Your assurances eased my mind and your action of holding me so I did not injure my antennae gave me a feeling of security that helped me endure the experience of the seizure. I will not forget this act of kindness and will some day find a way to repay you." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"We're a team Thaelan. We help each other to help the team." Darin said gently.

"I understand, but to hide the evidence of my... loss of control. And the fact that you thought to protect me in the manner you did is still much appreciated. Had my antennae been injured during the seizure I might have been incapacitated for several days." Ensign Thaelan said reluctantly.

"I know. I also know that it's a sensitive subject that you would rather not talk about. I'm just glad that I was able to help. I'd better get back to the Lieutenant to answer some questions." Darin said as he glanced away.

"Before you go, I also had a question for you." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Sure, what is it?" Darin asked as he leaned in closer.

"Did I understand correctly when I heard the Vulcan nurse refer to Crewman Winters as her husband?" Ensign Thaelan asked slowly.

"That's right. T'Lani is Vincent's wife. I think they're good for each other." Darin said with a warm smile.

"The child is full of surprises." Ensign Thaelan said as he glanced over to see Vincent at Joe's side.

"You don't know the half of it. Remind me later and I'll tell you how he asked one question that sent a security alert through the entire Federation." Darin said with an amused smile.

"I didn't realize the honor I was receiving by being assigned to lead your crew." Ensign Thaelan said as he looked Darin in the eyes.

"I'm glad you think so. As our leader, anything we do also reflects on you." Darin said with a smile.

"I will try to live up to the challenge." Ensign Thaelan said peacefully.

* * * * *

"Jimmy!" Susan called as she ran into the room.

Lieutenant Simms raised his phaser automatically at the abrupt entry.

"It's okay, she's his girlfriend... well almost." Vincent said quickly.

Lieutenant Simms reluctantly lowered his phaser and watched as Susan looked around the room with tears in her eyes.

"You'd better put on a breather until we're sure that the air in here is clean." Lieutenant Simms said to Susan quietly.

Susan walked to the supply locker and pulled out a breather unit.

"I'm sorry sir, she rushed past us." A security officer said as he walked into the room.

"If you can't adequately secure this room then call for reinforcements." Lieutenant Simms said harshly.

"Yes sir." The young ensign said quietly.

"Get back to your post." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"Yes sir." The ensign said quickly and hurried out of the room.

"Susan was just worried about Jimmy, I know she didn't mean to get anyone in trouble." Vincent said quietly.

"That isn't the point. My people are posted to keep anyone from getting in until we figure out exactly what happened here. What you just saw was a breach of security that could have cost someone their life if it had been our intruder returning." Lieutenant Simms said with concern.

"I just hate to see anyone get into trouble like that." Vincent said in thought.

"I know, I don't like yelling at my staff. But the fact of the matter is that if I let something like that slide, someone could die. You don't get second chances in life and death situations." Lieutenant Simms said reasonably.

"I understand. If you yell at him when something like this happens and no one got hurt, then he's more likely to do the right thing when it really does matter." Vincent said carefully.

Lieutenant Simms smiled and said, "Exactly. Now if you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to talk to Ensign Cooper and see what he can tell me about the incident."

Vincent nodded and watched as Lieutenant Simms walked away.

* * * * *

"Please excuse me Ensign Cooper, but I have some questions to ask you and time may be a factor." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"That's fine Lieutenant. Do we need to speak privately?" Darin asked as he stood from Thaelan's side.

"No, that won't be necessary. I just need to know what happened from your point of view." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I was working on my reports when I started feeling sleepy and heard a strange ringing in my ears. All of a sudden I remembered the emergency training from the academy and I pulled on a breather unit. When I looked around I saw that Ensign Thaelan was falling onto the console. I tried to warn everyone, but they were already falling asleep. I saw Vincent, I mean Crewman Winters, when he passed out so I put a breather on him first. Next I ran to Thaelan because he was running the main and he needed to be awake." Darin said in careful thought.

"Why did you put the breather on Crewman Winters first?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"Because he's my little brother I guess... I didn't really decide who I'd help first, I just did it." Darin said uncertainly.

"Go on." Lieutenant Simms said in thought.

"So while I was putting the breather on Ensign Thaelan, Vincent started waking up. I told him what to do and he put the breathers on Lieutenant Bowers and Crewman Tullis." Darin said in slow concentration.

"Go ahead." Lieutenant Simms said in a leading tone.

"I don't know, um... I tried to call for help and station one was inoperative. Then Ensign Thaelan fell out of his chair and started having convulsions. I went to help him and told Vincent to call for help." Darin said, then looked down at Ensign Thaelan who was listening intently.

"Vincent figured out that all the consoles were locked up and started to try to wake Joe up so I told him to ask Joe what to do. The next thing I knew, someone was walking into the room and he had a weapon of some kind. It looked something like a phaser, but it wasn't standard issue." Darin said carefully.

"Could you see his face?" Lieutenant Simms asked quietly.

"No. He was wearing a hood and his face was covered with a gas mask." Darin said in distant thought.

"A gas mask, not a breather?" Lieutenant Simms confirmed.

"That's right. A gas mask, the full face kind." Darin said carefully.

"Then what?" Lieutenant Simms asked slowly.

"Then he wanted me to go with him." Darin said distantly.

"Can you remember his exact words?" Lieutenant Simms asked in nearly a whisper.

Darin closed his eyes and carefully said, "He said, 'You. Hargrove. Come with me'."

"Hargrove?" Lieutenant Simms asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, that's my father's last name. I've been using my mother's maiden name since I entered Starfleet. My legal name is Hargrove-Cooper." Darin said, just realizing how strange it was that the intruder called him Hargrove.

"Who else knows your father's last name?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"I don't know. Anyone who looked at my personnel file would see it. But the only person I've told since I've been on the *Yorktown* is Rad." Darin said thoughtfully.

"Rad? As in Ensign Radovanovich from transporter control?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I mentioned to Ensign Radovanovich that my father's name was Hargrove last night. I haven't told anyone else... the subject just hasn't come up." Darin said in thought.

"Excuse me Lieutenant, we need to transport Ensign Thaelan to sickbay." Ensign T'Lani said as she led a crewman with a gurney to Ensign Thaelan's side.

Lieutenant Simms looked around quickly, then opened his communicator and said, "I need five security officers to Deflector Control for escort duty. And please ask Ensign Rayne Radovanovich to come to security as soon as possible to have a talk with me."

Darin looked at Lieutenant Simms curiously while Ensign T'Lani looked on impassively.

Rather than answer Darin's questioning gaze, Lieutenant Simms walked to the center of the room.

"Everyone, please wait a moment for a security escort before you leave." Lieutenant Simms said to everyone as he looked around.

There were several curious looks, but no one asked why.

"Dr. Raul, can you give me a preliminary report?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he walked to his side.

"It appears to have been an anesthetic gas. By all indications, they should awake soon." Dr. Raul said seriously as he examined Connie.

Vincent put an arm around Susan's waist and said, "Daddy Joe and I both woke up when we started breathing clean air again. So I know that Jimmy's going to be okay."

"Then why hasn't Jimmy woken up yet?" Susan asked as she hugged Vincent with one arm.

"I think because he was breathing the bad air longer than I was. He breathed more of it so he'll be asleep longer." Vincent said carefully.

"The young crewman is right. Also, Crewman Tullis and Ensign Agropos were nearer the ventilation duct so they probably received a more concentrated dose of the anesthetic gas. Excuse me, it appears that our security escorts are here so we're going to transport our patients to the sickbay now." Dr. Raul said seriously.

"Can I come with you?" Susan asked quietly.

Dr. Raul considered for a moment, then said, "Of course. His condition isn't such that he should need to be isolated."

"Why do we need security?" Susan asked as she looked at Lieutenant Simms with confusion.

"This is just a precaution for your own safety. As soon as I have a better idea of what I'm dealing with, I'll relax the restriction if it's possible." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

Susan nodded, then glanced at the group of security officers entering the room.

Vincent went to Joe's side and waited to leave with him when Lieutenant Simms said, "Ensign Cooper and Crewman Winters, would you stay behind so we can try to make some sense of why this happened?"

Darin reluctantly stepped away from Thaelan's side and said, "Yes sir."

Vincent took a step back from Joe's side as the medical assistants wheeled him out of the room.

* * * * *

"Report, Lieutenant." Captain Byrne said firmly as he walked into Deflector Control.

"What appears to have been anesthezine gas was introduced into the air supply of Deflector Control. All the computer systems were disabled and the door control was overridden. An intruder entered Deflector Control and was subsequently encouraged to leave when the security alert was announced." Lieutenant Simms said in a professional voice.

"Do you have any idea of what the intruder was after?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"Given the preliminary evidence, I would have to conclude that the intention of the intruder was to abduct Ensign Cooper." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

Captain Byrne considered for a moment, then said, "Have you developed any theory as to a motive?"

"Without investigation, the only plausible theory is that Ensign Cooper would be either 'convinced' to disclose information about your meeting this morning or would be used as a hostage to gain access to whatever is being protected." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I regret that it is necessary to withhold certain information from you." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"I understand sir, I'm simply stating that at this point, I can't think of any other motive that anyone would have to abduct a Deflector Control ensign." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

"Begin your investigation. I want to be updated immediately about any findings. Make this investigation your top priority." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Of course sir." Lieutenant Simms said slowly, wondering why the captain would think that he would do otherwise.

* * * * *

"I don't suppose you can tell me anything about what happened in the meeting this morning?" Lieutenant Simms asked absently as he thought about how to proceed.

Before Darin could answer, Vincent quickly said, "I can tell you that Captain Byrne thinks that this is so important that he won't even tell Commander M'Butu what it is."

Lieutenant Simms nodded and said, "I won't ask anymore. It's just frustrating to be searching for answers and know that there is information being withheld."

"We can't tell you anything about what the meeting was about, but since we know what it is, maybe it will help if we're around." Darin said carefully.

"I suppose so. It's better than taking the chance of overlooking something significant just because I was left out of the loop." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Just believe me when I say that you don't want to be in this loop." Darin said with a worried look.

Lieutenant Simms looked at Darin with question.

"Yeah. It could end up dumping us on a prison planet for the rest of our lives." Vincent added seriously.

Lieutenant Simms nodded as he realized that they were serious.

"Let's go to my office to get this investigation rolling. My teams should be reporting in soon." Lieutenant Simms said decisively.

Darin put a hand on Vincent's shoulder and said, "We need to collect these padds and either take them with us or to the shuttle."

"Oh yeah." Vincent said immediately and hurried to grab the padd he had been working on.

"Help me remember to ask Lou for hers when we see her again." Darin said as he picked up the padd he had been working on.

"Yeah. Maybe we should ask her now." Vincent said as he picked up the padd Joe had been working on.

"I believe she took a data padd to the Victoria before she went to the bridge." Lieutenant Simms said as he watched them carefully.

"Thanks, then do you mind if we go down there now too? After that we can go to your office." Vincent asked hopefully.

"From the sound of it, I think going to the shuttle bay is a good idea." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"I think we have everything. Let's go." Darin said as he looked around.

Lieutenant Simms looked around the room one last time, then said, "I think we can leave the breathers here."

"Good. That thing was rubbing me on my neck." Vincent said as he took off the mask.

"It's better than having to go to sickbay." Darin said frankly as he also took off his mask.

"Been there, done that." Vincent said with a smile as he walked toward the door.

Lieutenant Simms discretely held up two fingers to let his people know that two security officers needed to accompany them.

* * * * *

"Vincent, it's good to see that you're alright. I heard the intruder alert, then Lou came by but didn't know much about what was going on." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with concern.

"Someone tried to take Darin... Ensign Cooper, I mean." Vincent quickly amended.

"Your pilot, I remember." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a concerned glance at Darin.

"Whoever it was... He... he shot... Daddy Joe." Vincent said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Would you guys mind if I talk to Vincent alone for a minute?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked quietly.

"We'll be right outside the shuttle." Lieutenant Simms said reluctantly.

"Yeah. You know where to find us if you need us Little Brother." Darin said with a forced smile, then followed Lieutenant Simms off the shuttle.

After a moment to gain control of his emotions again, Vincent looked at Lieutenant Walking Bear with question.

"It's your choice whether the events today lead to a bright and wonderful future or into a future of desolation and destruction." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

Vincent felt fear at the statement and was about to respond when he saw the anticipation in Lieutenant Walking Bear's eyes.

After a moment to think about the statement, Vincent carefully said, "I had the same choice yesterday. And if I survive today, I'll have the same choice tomorrow."

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled brightly and said, "It took three years for my grandfather to teach me that. You got it without any prompting from me. Very good. Did you bring any questions with you?"

"I brought a lot of them... but I think you just answered most of them before I could ask. I guess the biggest one I've got right now is why did Daddy Joe have to get hurt?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"You have a bigger question, this one is just a part of it." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then nodded and asked, "Why do bad things have to happen?"

"That's a very big question and it has quite a few answers. I have a feeling that you know most of those answers already, even if you haven't ever said them out loud." Lieutenant Walking Bear said quietly.

Vincent nodded again and said, "Sometimes because people choose selfish things. Sometimes it's just because things happen, like flipping a coin... And I think that sometimes there's a reason for things, but we're usually too close to see what the reason is."

"I think you're right. Sometimes the Great Spirit allows things to happen that seem horribly unfair, but in reality he is working to put things in a certain order for the benefit of all his children." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"Then how do you know when you're supposed to do something and when you're just supposed to let it happen?" Vincent asked in thought.

"Now that's a question that carries some power. I can only tell you what I do, perhaps that will be enough." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

Vincent nodded and waited expectantly.

"When I have the feeling that the Great Spirit may be at work, I try to watch what is happening very carefully to determine how I might move things in the most favorable direction." Lieutenant Walking Bear said carefully.

"I don't understand. Like how?" Vincent asked curiously.

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled and said, "Like when proto-matter is discovered on my shift, then a Crewman asks me about my personal beliefs."

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment, then asked, "So what am I supposed to do?"

"Do what you believe is right. Follow your own moral compass as to what's right and wrong and don't let anyone else dictate what you 'should' believe." Lieutenant Walking Bear said firmly.

Vincent looked at Lieutenant Walking Bear speculatively for a long, silent moment, then said, "You know what's about to happen, don't you?"

Lieutenant Walking Bear shook his head, then said, "It doesn't work that way. I just know when I'm being drawn toward a specific action. When you asked me what you were supposed to do, that's the first thing that came to my mind. I have no more knowledge about the future than you do, but I can watch for omens and follow my instincts."

"Thank you Lieutenant Walking Bear, I understand." Vincent said as he turned.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Why are you surprised?" Vincent asked with a chuckle.

"It just seems quite a lot to take on faith." Lieutenant Walking Bear said frankly.

Vincent giggled and said, "I'm a kid. After believing in stuff like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, this is no big deal."

"Just remember to listen to your heart." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"I will. I need to go now. Lieutenant Simms has to try and figure out what just happened."

"Tell me all about how things went when we meet again." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a smile.

"I will if you will." Vincent said with a cheeky grin.

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled and watched as Vincent left the shuttle.

* * * * *

"Did you two come up with anything about who might be behind the attack?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"No, we didn't really talk about that." Vincent said as he followed Lieutenant Simms onto the turbo lift.

"Is everything okay?" Darin asked with concern.

"Yeah. I think it is." Vincent said in slow concentration.

Lieutenant Simms led the way off the turbo lift and toward his office when his communicator suddenly sounded.

"Simms." He said immediately into the communicator.

"I think someone is trying to override the transporter lockout." A voice said in a rush.

"RUN!" Lieutenant Simms said and took off running down the hall.

A moment later he said, "Get in that holding cell and I'll activate the transport inhibiter."

Darin ran into the cell and watched as the force field was put in place.

An alarm sounded from the control console.

"We just barely got him in there in time. Whoever is doing this is trying to lock onto him now." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"How would they know which one of us is Darin?" Vincent asked as he looked at the readings.

"Good question. All I can think is that he must have been painted." Lieutenant Simms said as he tried to trace the transporter signal back to it's origin.

"Painted? What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

"It just means that someone took Ensign Cooper's transporter trace file and used it as search criteria. I don't know exactly how the term 'painted' came into use, but I suppose it's like having a painting to compare with every person that you scan." Lieutenant Simms said as he continued to search.

"Rad would know how to do that." Vincent said in thought.

"Probably, but he should be waiting in my office to speak with me." Lieutenant Simms said absently, then abruptly said into the comm, "Computer, security override authorization Simms Beta Four. Transporter room two, Isolation protocol. Disable transporter. Erect force field containment."

Vincent watched with wide eyes as Lieutenant Simms worked the controls of his console.

"Isolation protocol confirmed." Was the toneless response from the computer.

"I need a security team to transporter room two. Don't enter until I arrive." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

Vincent watched the proceedings with question.

"Ensign Cooper, I'm going to ask you to remain in the holding cell until I can confirm that we have your would-be kidnapper in custody." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Yes sir." Darin said from behind the force field.

As Lieutenant Simms walked toward the door, Vincent hurried to follow.

"Crewman Winters, it would be best if you stayed here with Ensign Cooper. I don't know what we're going to find down there and it might not be safe for you." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I know about some stuff that you don't. If this has anything to do with that then you may need me." Vincent said firmly.

"I'll just have to take your word on that Crewman." Lieutenant Simms said reluctantly, then looked at the two security escorts and said, "Don't lower those shields for anything. Keep your weapons handy and be on the alert for any sign of attack."

Both security officers immediately stood a little straighter and simultaneously each put a hand on his phaser.

"Let's go." Lieutenant Simms said as he walked out the door.

* * * * *

"Report, Ensign?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he approached the door to transporter room two.

"No attempt has been made to breach the containment field." The security officer said seriously.

Lieutenant Simms pressed the button on the comm panel and said, "Computer, security override authorization Simms Beta Four. Release the door and lower the shields on transporter room two."

"Vincent, stay here for a minute." Lieutenant Simms said firmly, then walked through the door.

After a long moment of waiting, Vincent finally saw Lieutenant Simms walk out of the transporter room carrying a small device.

"Someone was controlling the transporter by remote." Lieutenant Simms said distantly.

"Let's check on Darin." Vincent said in a rush.

"Hold on." Lieutenant Simms said, then opened his communicator and said, "Ensign Margoles, what is the status of our guest?"

There was a long moment of silence.

Lieutenant Simms expression turned to one of panic as he ran to the nearest turbo lift with Vincent following close behind.

* * * * *

Vincent felt a chill run through his body at the sight of two unconscious security officers laying in the floor.

He ran to the holding cell to find the shields deactivated and the cell standing empty.

Chapter 17

"Vincent, would you go in there and see if Ensign Radovanovich is waiting for us?" Lieutenant Simms asked quickly as he ran to the first unconscious security officer.

After trying unsuccessfully to open the door, Vincent said, "It's locked."

"Medical team to Main Security." Lieutenant Simms said quickly into the comm, then ran to Vincent's side.

"Only one of my security people would know this locking code." Lieutenant Simms said as he quickly unlocked the door.

"What happened?" Rad asked as soon as the door opened.

Vincent quickly hugged Rad and quietly asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I was just waiting to talk with Lieutenant Simms and someone locked me in." Rad said as he enjoyed the hug.

"How long have you been here?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"Maybe fifteen minutes. I thought I heard you guys in here a few minutes ago, but no one came in to talk to me. Then I thought I heard weapons fire, but when I tried to look, the door was locked." Rad said uneasily.

"Someone took Darin." Vincent said as he continued to hold Rad tightly.

"Just a second." Lieutenant Simms said firmly and started keying in commands on the main console.

After a moment of carefully watching the display, he said, "There. I got him."

Vincent and Rad ran to Lieutenant Simms side.

"Captain Byrne, we've discovered the identity of our kidnapper." Lieutenant Simms said quickly into the comm.

"*Proceed.*" The captain said with interest.

"It is Security Ensign Matthew Gianni. When I ordered a Bravo protocol, all the surveillance cameras were activated. I have video evidence of Ensign Gianni stunning the security guards on duty and abducting Ensign Cooper." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"*Do you have any idea where they might have gone?*" Captain Byrne asked slowly.

"No sir. But since the abduction of Ensign Cooper seems to have been his primary goal, my guess would be that his next move will be to try and get off the ship." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"*Agreed. Get to work on it. I want Ensign Cooper found. This has gone too far.*" Captain Byrne said with a tone of menace.

"I agree captain. Consider it done." Lieutenant Simms said as a vow.

Vincent looked up at the sound of a ship wide announcement, "***All hands. Security Ensign Matthew Gianni is to be considered armed and dangerous. Please remain in your quarters or at your duty stations and report any contact immediately.***"

"If I can go back to the transporter room, I can scan the ship and I may be able to locate Ensign Cooper that way." Rad said hopefully.

"You painted him?" Lieutenant Simms asked cautiously.

"Yes sir, while he was down at the Kimber colony. He's new and I didn't want to take the chance that if something happened unexpectedly that he would be stuck there." Rad said in a pained voice.

"Did anyone else know that you painted him?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"I think I mentioned it when I was having dinner in the engineering mess... oh my God. Matt was there." Rad said in realization.

"He has the skills, he had the opportunity, now if we only had a motive we might be able to do something to get ahead of him." Lieutenant Simms said in frustration.

"Go see if you can find anything with your transporter scanners. I'm going to start coordinating a deck by deck search." Lieutenant Simms said as the med team came into the room.

"Do you need me to do anything?" Vincent asked seriously as he watched Rad hurry out of the room.

"The best thing you could do right now to help me is to go to the bridge and keep yourself safe. Hold on..." He said before running out of the room.

Less than a minute later Lieutenant Simms came back in followed by a stout woman with a look of ferocity in her eyes.

"Ensign Barnhill will be your personal escort until everything is resolved. Now you should stay with her until we have this all sorted out." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said seriously.

* * * * *

"Ensign Barnhill, can I go tell my friends that I'm okay? If they heard the intruder alert then they'll be worried about me." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Where are your friends?" Ensign Barnhill asked firmly.

"They're on deck J in the dorsal observation lounge." Vincent said quickly.

"Let's go." Ensign Barnhill said and stepped into the lift.

"Deck J, Dorsal." She said firmly into the air.

"Do you really need to have your phaser out like that?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Yes. I do." She said without looking at Vincent.

* * * * *

As the doors to the lift opened, Vincent hurried out and said, "I'm just going to let the guys know what's going on. You can wait here if you want."

"No. I'm your escort." Ensign Barnhill said as she walked to his side.

"IT'S A TRAP!" sounded from the observation lounge, just before the sound of a weapon firing.

Vincent recognized the voice as Benny's then could hear JonJon crying.

Ensign Barnhill opened her communicator and said, "Deck J, Dorsal Lounge. Weapon's fire."

"Who's out there?" Ensign Gianni called hesitantly from just inside the doorway.

"Get behind me." Ensign Barnhill said in an angry whisper as she trained her phaser on the door.

"No. He'll get us like this. I'll distract him. You get ready to shoot him." Vincent whispered as he walked on shaking legs toward the door.

"Come back here!" Ensign Barnhill whispered loudly and tried to grab hold of Vincent before he got away.

Vincent took a deep breath, then let out the loudest, shrillest scream that he could possibly manage as he ran into the observation lounge.

"WHERE IS MY BROTHER!?" Vincent screamed in his most childish voice.

"I'm here. I'm fine." Darin said quietly from the other side of the observation lounge.

"Yeah, calm down kid, he's fine. Is anyone with you?" Ensign Gianni asked absently as he kept his disruptor pointed at the door.

Vincent saw Channing holding Benny's unconscious body and Darin trying to comfort JonJon who was sobbing uncontrollably.

"YOU HURT MY BEST FRIEND YOU BIG MEANIE!" Vincent screamed and gave Ensign Gianni the hardest kick in the shin that he could manage.

"Ouch! You little..." Ensign Gianni said as he automatically raised his injured leg and reached down to soothe it.

Vincent balled up his fist and put every bit of his nine year old strength behind the uppercut to the security officer's jaw.

The punch was hard enough to throw Ensign Gianni the rest of the way off balance and he fell over and landed on his butt.

"Hold it right there Matt. Drop your weapon." Ensign Barnhill said as she walked into the room.

Matt dropped his disruptor and reached up to caress his jaw.

"Good work Ensign Barnhill." Lieutenant Simms said as he hurried into the room, leading two other security officers.

"You can thank Crewman Winters. He's the one who distracted Matt long enough for me to get in here." Ensign Barnhill said with a small smile at Vincent.

"I should have known." Lieutenant Simms said with a chuckle as he watched his men taking Matt into custody.

Vincent walked to the comm panel and quickly said, "Sickbay, can you send someone to Deck J in the dorsal section? My friend Benny was hit by a disruptor blast."

"*Your wife heard you and is on her way... By the way, congratulations.*"

Vincent considered the voice for a moment, then asked, "Dr. Perry?"

"*That's right. And you need to come to sickbay as soon as possible. There is a Lieutenant who won't be able to get proper rest until he can see for himself that you're not hurt.*" Dr. Perry said in a gentle voice.

"If Lieutenant Simms doesn't need me to do anything right now, I'll go down with Benny." Vincent said seriously.

"I'm just going to need you to write a report." Lieutenant Simms said as he waited for Vincent to finish.

"You and everyone else." Vincent said with exasperation.

Just as the security officers were leading Matt out of the room, he stumbled and landed flat on his face.

"Watch out, it may be a trick." Lieutenant Simms warned as he trained his phaser on the fallen man.

Ensign Barnhill cautiously placed her fingers on his throat and said, "I don't think so. He's dead."

"How?" Lieutenant Simms said in confusion, then suddenly said, "Get him to sickbay immediately. He's probably poisoned himself to keep from being questioned."

The lift door opened to reveal T'Lani and two medical assistants with a gurney.

"Help him. I think he may have poisoned himself." Lieutenant Simms said quickly.

T'Lani opened her tricorder and scanned Matt carefully, then said, "There is nothing to be done. He has ingested a lethal dose of cyanide."

"So much for getting some answers about why all this happened." Lieutenant Simms said with regret.

"Perhaps there is a way that I may be of assistance." T'Lani said as she placed a hand on the side of Ensign Gianni's face.

"What can you... a mind meld?" Lieutenant Simms asked with astonishment.

"His body has failed, but there is still a flicker of activity in his mind... it may be possible for me to retrieve some useful information..." T'Lani said in concentration.

After a moment, she quietly said, "...He is gone." as she slowly withdrew her hand.

"Were you able to get anything useful?" Lieutenant Simms asked hopefully.

"I have retrieved some fragments. I believe what I have retrieved should be disclosed in a more secure environment." T'Lani said seriously.

"I'll go with you to sickbay. As soon as your duties permit I'd like to discuss it with you" Lieutenant Simms said thoughtfully.

"Did you see anything bad?" Vincent asked from T'Lani's side.

T'Lani looked down at Vincent, then put a hand on the side of his face as she said, "Nothing of consequence Husband."

Vincent put his hand over hers and snuggled against it for a moment, then said, "I don't think I'll be able to have dinner with you tonight. I just have too many reports to write."

"I too will have additional duties. Perhaps tomorrow." T'Lani said softly.

"Yeah. Just let me know when." Vincent said with a gentle smile.

"We're ready." One of the medical assistants said as he began to pull the gurney out of the room.

"Before you go, will you look at Benny to see if he's going to be okay? He got stunned." Vincent asked quickly.

T'Lani took out her medical tricorder again and ran a quick scan.

After a moment of looking over the readings she said, "I will return shortly for your friend. Do not be concerned, he is simply in a mild state of neural shock and will recover in a short time."

"Thanks T'Lani. I'll wait here for you to come back." Vincent said with a small smile.

* * * * *

"Is Benny going to be okay?" JonJon asked from Darin's lap with tears streaking down his cheeks.

"Yeah. T'Lani said that he just needs a little bit of rest to get better." Vincent said with assurance.

"You did a good job taking that guy down. I thought that punch was going to knock him out." Darin said quietly as he continued to hug JonJon.

Vincent smiled at the praise and said, "If I didn't do something, we were going to be stuck outside the room until that guy came out and shot us both."

"You have a pretty good screaming voice. It made the hair on my neck stand on end." Channing said as he held Benny gently.

"That guy said he was going to take Darin away. He said that his friends would be here any minute." JonJon said with a tremble of fear.

"Did he say who his friends were?" Vincent asked suddenly.

"N... no. He just said that they'd be here any minute and that they'd take him and Darin back to Earth." JonJon said fearfully.

Vincent hopped up and ran to the comm station.

"Crewman Winters to the Captain." Vincent said in a rush.

"*Go ahead Crewman.*" Captain Byrne answered immediately.

"JonJon says that Ensign Gianni was waiting on another ship to pick him up and that they should be here any minute."

"*Understood. Anything else?*" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"No sir. But if I find out any more I'll let you know."

"*Good work Crewman. Do you have security there?*"

Vincent glanced around the room, then looked outside the observation bay before answering, "No sir. I think they all went to sickbay."

"*Crewman, I want you to escort Ensign Cooper to security and get him inside the containment cell.*"

"Yes sir." Vincent said in his most military voice.

"*Now Crewman!*" Captain Byrne said abruptly, then disconnected the transmission.

"Come on Darin. We've got to hurry." Vincent said quickly.

"Where?" Darin asked as he shifted JonJon off his lap.

"To security. I'll tell you about it on the way." Vincent said as he ran for the turbo lift.

"Hold on, I'm coming." Darin said quickly.

* * * * *

"So what's this all about?" Darin asked as the lift took them to main security.

"I don't know all of it, but someone is still after you and if Ensign Gianni sent them that painting thing of you, then they might be able to beam you

off the ship." Vincent said impatiently as he waited for the lift doors to open.

"The shields should be able to prevent anything like that." Darin said in thought.

"Yeah, and the internal sensors should be able to detect a disruptor being fired." Vincent said firmly as the doors opened.

Darin thought about the words as he followed Vincent.

"Come on!" Vincent said as he hurried into main security.

"Vinc...." Could be heard as Darin was enveloped in shimmering sparkles.

Vincent ran to the nearest comm station and screamed, "Captain! Someone's got Darin! They're transporting him now!"

"*Hold on Crewman Winters, Ensign Radovanovich has a transporter lock on him as well. They won't get him that easily.*" Captain Byrne said firmly.

Darin seemed to be struggling inside the transporter beam as the two transporters played tug-of-war with his molecules.

A column of shimmering light appeared about two feet away from Darin.

Vincent looked around and spotted a phaser laying on one of the desks.

He checked to see what power level the phaser was set to, then fired a long, sustained blast of phased energy into the second transporter beam.

The beam abruptly stopped and left an unconscious person laying in the floor.

Darin's transporter beam also abruptly stopped and he fell to his knees.

"Come on Darin. You're too big for me to carry. You've got to get to the holding cell before they can try to transport you again."

"Help me." Darin whispered as he held an arm out to Vincent.

Darin forced himself to crawl as Vincent pulled him by the arm.

As soon as they were inside the containment cell, Vincent quickly said, "That's good enough. I'll turn it on."

"What's going on here?" Ensign Barnhill asked as she rushed into the room.

"They tried to beam Darin out. Can you turn on the thing that stops transporters? I can't find it here." Vincent asked franticly.

"Yes, this is it." Ensign Barnhill said as she activated the transport inhibitor.

"And whoever that is, tried to transport in here while the transporters were fighting over Darin." Vincent said and pointed to the motionless person in the floor.

Ensign Barnhill ran to the body and turned it over carefully.

"I used high stun. I didn't kill him, did I?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. No, you didn't kill him." Ensign Barnhill said as she rushed to the main console and pressed the comm.

"Lieutenant Simms to Main Security immediately." Ensign Barnhill said firmly.

"Did I do something wrong?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Hardly." Ensign Barnhill said with a chuckle.

"Then what is it?" Vincent asked with confusion.

"What is it Ensign?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he rushed into the room.

"It seems that Crewman Winters subdued an intruder who was trying to beam aboard the ship." Ensign Barnhill said frankly as she gestured toward the intruder with her phaser.

Lieutenant Simms looked down at the intruder, then up at Vincent with question.

"He tried to beam in while they were fighting over Darin. I shot the phaser into the transporter beam then both transporters stopped... Um, then I helped Darin into the holding cell so he wouldn't get transported again." Vincent said in a diminishing voice.

"Good work Crewman. Ensign Barnhill, call for a med team, then get our uninvited guest into a holding cell." Lieutenant Simms said firmly, then went to the comm station.

"Lieutenant Simms to Captain Byrne." Lieutenant Simms said professionally.

"*Report Lieutenant*." Captain Byrne said shortly.

"Ensign Cooper is in the holding cell where he is safe from any further transport attempts. And apparently during the struggle for Ensign Cooper, an intruder tried to board the ship by transporting in close proximity to the excessive transporter activity to mask his signal. He was subdued by Crewman Winters."

"*Crewman Winters subdued an intruder single handed?*" Captain Byrne asked in confirmation.

"It's not that hard when you have a phaser on high stun and the intruder is still in the transporter beam." Vincent interjected.

"*I see. However you did it, good work Crewman.*" Captain Byrne said firmly.

"We will begin interrogation as soon as the prisoner becomes conscious." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"*Perhaps we can finally get some answers.*" Captain Byrne said in a considering voice.

"We can hope." Lieutenant Simms said as he watched the intruder carefully.

* * * * *

"Please have a seat everyone." Captain Byrne said firmly.

Vincent quietly took his seat between Darin and T'Lani.

"Lieutenant Simms, you are aware that we have a ship in the area that can evade our sensors and penetrate our shields. Are you certain that Ensign Cooper won't be transported out of this meeting?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Yes sir. Ensign Cooper has been outfitted with a portable transport inhibitor. He's perfectly safe." Lieutenant Simms said with assurance.

"Ensign DeGama and Crewman Wills found the transmitter that was broadcasting our shield frequency. They can't penetrate our shields anymore." Chief Morgan said seriously.

Vincent took hold of Darin's arm and gave it a quick squeeze to convey his happiness that Darin was safe.

"Does anyone here have any clue as to a motive for the attempted abduction of Ensign Cooper?" Captain Byrne asked frankly.

"I have information that may lead us to discover the motive." T'Lani said without inflection.

"I asked Ensign T'Lani to join us since she was able to mind meld with Ensign Gianni as he was dying." Lieutenant Simms said quickly.

"Which would probably invalidate the use of this information as evidence." Captain Byrne said with a questioning look at T'Lani.

"That is correct sir. There was insufficient time to cross reference and verify the information. It would be inadmissible in a court of law." T'Lani said calmly.

"Everyone, please keep that in mind. What information did you find?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Ensign Gianni had an allegiance with an old Earth crime family long before he entered Starfleet or came aboard the *Yorktown*. Earlier today he received a message instructing him to kidnap Ensign Cooper then call for a ship to transport him to Earth." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"I see. Do you know if the stealth ship belongs to the crime family?" Lieutenant Simms asked cautiously.

"Unknown. But Ensign Gianni sent them the information to allow them to penetrate our shields and locate Ensign Cooper." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"Do you know why the crime family wanted Ensign Cooper?" Captain Byrne asked carefully.

"No sir. Ensign Gianni was simply following his orders. He was given no explanation."

"So, what was Ensign Gianni doing on this ship in the first place? He's been here for nearly two years." Lieutenant Simms asked in thought.

"He was a sleeper. He was to function normally until there was a need for his service. Had his initial plan succeeded, he would have entered Deflector Control while all the personnel were unconscious, then called the stealth ship to transport Ensign Cooper out before anyone was aware of a problem." Ensign T'Lani said carefully.

"Why would anyone go to such lengths to abduct a Deflector Control ensign?" Captain Byrne asked as he looked around the table.

"For ransom?" Dr. Perry asked speculatively.

"Hargrove." Lieutenant Simms said in realization.

Everyone looked at him with question.

"Ensign Cooper, you said that your father's last name was Hargrove, would you be any relation to someone in Hargrove Industries?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"Yes. Hargrove Industries is my dad's company." Darin said in a small voice.

"They're also the company implicated in the recent control circuit mess. The majority of the upper management of Hargrove industries is under indictment, however, Mr. Hargrove himself seems to have evaded any legal problems thus far." Chief Morgan offered in slow thought.

"He may not be in trouble with the law, but perhaps he has business partners who aren't very happy with him at the moment." Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"So they could be trying to kidnap his son to get him to make good on some deal that they made." Lieutenant Simms said as he glanced at Darin.

"I guess it could be that, but I doubt that Dad would give two dollars to get me back." Darin said weakly.

"Don't be so sure Ensign Cooper. Parents don't always express their emotions obviously, but that doesn't mean that they don't have them." Captain Byrne said, saying with his tone that he had some personal experience with that situation.

Darin nodded uncertainly.

"Dr. Perry, what is the status of our guest?" Captain Byrne asked, obviously wanting to change the subject.

"He's suffering a moderate phaser burn to much of his upper body, it's more uncomfortable than anything. Besides that, he's just a bit subdued and not altogether cooperative. I also removed a neural toxin packet that was hidden under his skin before he had a chance to commit suicide." Dr. Perry said frankly.

"Lieutenant Simms, I assume that you haven't had an opportunity to speak with our guest." The Captain asked seriously.

"No sir. Dr. Perry finished with him right before the meeting." Lieutenant Simms said reluctantly.

"Then would you bring him in so we may speak?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Simms responded in surprise.

"Perhaps we can get the remainder of the information we require by simply asking." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Simms said quickly.

Vincent reached beside him and placed his hand over T'Lani's on the conference table.

Captain Byrne noticed the gesture and smiled.

"I suppose now is as good a time as any to offer my congratulations on your marriage." Captain Byrne said with a smile.

"Thank you sir." Both Vincent and T'Lani said in matching respectful tones.

"I realize that by Vulcan tradition that the official ceremony won't occur for many years, but if you would like to mark the occasion in some way, you would find me receptive to the idea." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "There's just one thing I would like."

"If it is something within my ability to provide, you will have it." Captain Byrne said with a fond smile at the couple.

Vincent turned to T'Lani and took her hand into his.

"T'Lani, it's kind of an old Earth custom that when two people get married, one of them, usually the wife, changes her name so that they'll both have the same last name. Since you don't really have a last name, I'd like for you to have mine if you want it." Vincent said hopefully.

T'Lani looked at Vincent for a moment as she thought about what he was asking.

"I mean, you don't have to. I'll still love you and want to be your husband and I won't even be mad if you don't want to... But I just figured that when we have kids, it'll be good if their parents both have the same last name..." Vincent finished shyly.

"I would be honored to accept your family name, my husband. However, I would like to continue to be addressed as Ensign T'Lani while on duty if that is acceptable." T'Lani said seriously.

"That's great. That way when I become an Ensign too, people won't get all confused by us having the same name." Vincent said happily.

"If you would like, I can make those arrangements after the meeting." Captain Byrne said with a tender smile.

"Yes. Thank you Captain." T'Lani said peacefully.

* * * * *

The door opened to reveal Lieutenant Simms and two other security officers escorting the prisoner.

"Please remove the restraints so he may sit comfortably." Captain Byrne said in a firm, neutral tone.

Lieutenant Simms looked at Captain Byrne with question for a moment, then reluctantly removed the restraints from the prisoner's hands.

"Please sit down so we may begin." Captain Byrne said frankly.

The man looked around the table and his gaze stopped on T'Lani for a moment, then fixed on Darin.

"Please have a seat. We have much to discuss." Captain Byrne said in a more urging tone.

"What if I don't want to discuss whatever you're wanting to talk about?" The man asked coldly.

"That is your choice of course, but I have a feeling that you will want to hear what I have to say." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"And what is that?" The prisoner asked suspiciously.

"It seems to me that your superiors are very interested in obtaining Ensign Cooper. Of course the welfare of all my crewmembers is of the utmost importance to me and I would never allow that to happen. But perhaps if I were to speak to your superiors we could come to some sort of an arrangement that would be mutually satisfying." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Me and my ship don't work directly for the people you'd want to talk to. We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time and decided to take up this contract. We're just supposed to pick up and drop off. That's the only stake we have in all this." The prisoner said cautiously.

"I see. So what seemed on the surface to be a simple way to make some easy money ended up getting you captured and your ship at odds with a Federation starship." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"Yeah. The only reason we didn't cut and run earlier is because we accepted the contract and felt honor bound to deliver the goods." The prisoner said as he sat straighter in his chair.

"That being the case, perhaps if I were to speak with the captain of your vessel, we could resolve this entire situation peacefully and you could be on your way.

"You would let me go?" The prisoner asked cautiously.

"Regardless of your intention when you transported aboard, the fact is that you didn't have an opportunity to commit any crime. I suppose we might have grounds to prosecute you under Federation law for trespassing, but I see no purpose in pursuing that avenue." Captain Byrne said honestly.

"Thank you." The prisoner said reluctantly.

"Your welcome. If you would be so kind as to contact your captain, perhaps we can also come to terms and have you on your way?" Captain Byrne said with a smile.

The man considered the words and reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"There is a comm panel by your left hand. You can make the call from there." Captain Byrne said as he looked the man in the eyes.

After keying in the frequency of his ship, he quietly said, "This is Korrigon, the captain of the *Yorktown* has a proposition to make that may interest you."

"*I have nothing to say to you. You failed in your mission and then betrayed us to your captors.*" A vague shadowed female shape said with disgust from the view screen.

"I was attacked during transport and my poison was taken away." Korrigon tried to explain.

"*Captain, I believe you had something to say?*" The woman said casually, dutifully ignoring Korrigon's words.

"Yes. As I understand your situation, you have nothing to gain by pursuing this matter any further. We've disabled the transmitter that revealed our shield frequencies and we've adjusted our sensors to compensate for your stealth technology. There is no way for you to complete your contract, so you should be on your way." Captain Byrne said reasonably.

"*It appears that you're correct. And just so you know, I thought this was a bad idea from the beginning. Kidnapping is a cowardly way of doing business.*" The woman said coldly.

"I agree. If you will give us the coordinates, we will return your man to you so you can be on your way." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"*Don't bother. Getting rid of him is the only good thing to come out of this whole mess.*" The woman said coldly, then cut off the transmission.

"Your captain seems to be less than sympathetic to your situation." Captain Byrne said to his stunned prisoner.

"That was... my wife." Korrigon said quietly.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Captain Byrne said with a note of sympathy.

The sound of an incoming message stopped further conversation.

"*Captain, the stealth ship has left the system at maximum impulse*." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Understood, continue sensor sweeps in case they decide to change their minds." Captain Byrne said firmly.

"*Aye sir.*" Commander M'Butu said and ended the transmission.

"Captain, if you will return my poison to me, I will relieve you of the burden of my presence." Korrigon said bravely as he assumed a straighter posture.

"Nonsense. Allow me to make some inquiries on your behalf and If all goes as I expect, you will be welcomed to start a new home in a new colony that we will be establishing in a few short weeks. You'll be able to start a fresh life and perhaps even be able to find a new wife." Captain Byrne said with a smile.

Korrigon looked around the room with confusion.

"I have a lot of friends who are starting new lives. If you need any help, just ask." Vincent said with a smile.

"I feel as if I know you." Korrigon said as he looked carefully at Vincent.

"Um... I'm the one who shot you when you tried to transport in. But if you'll promise to not try to hurt my brother or take him away, I'll help you however I can." Vincent finished with a smile.

"Your brother?" Korrigon asked cautiously, then saw that Vincent was indicating Darin.

"Well, I guess you all just saw that I'm not wanted back on my ship. I have no reason to want to harm you or your family." Korrigon said, then winced with pain.

"Come with me Korrigon and I'll get you something to soothe that burn." Dr. Perry said as she stood.

"Just a moment." Captain Byrne said forcefully.

Dr. Perry and Korrigon turned to look at the Captain with question.

"Korrigon, for the time being I am going to require you to have a security escort. I hope this won't be a problem for you." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"No, not at all Captain. You are being more than generous." Korrigon said quietly.

"Good. Now go and get that phaser burn taken care of. And remember to drink a lot of fluids, that helps with the soreness." Captain Byrne finished with a friendly smile.

"Thank you sir. I will." Korrigon said shyly, then walked to Dr. Perry's side.

"If there's nothing else, the meeting is dismissed." Captain Byrne said as he stood.

"Hang on Dr. Perry. I want to go down to sickbay with you to check on Daddy Joe and Benny." Vincent said quickly.

"I'll go too." Darin said quietly as he walked to Vincent's side.

* * * * *

As Vincent walked into sickbay, he noticed that nearly every bed in the convalescent ward was filled.

Vincent finally spotted Joe and ran to him. As he pulled him into a tight hug, he said, "I'm glad you're alright."

"I'm glad that you're okay too Vincent. You too Darin." Joe said tiredly.

"I had my doubts for a few minutes, but Vincent rescued me." Darin said gently.

"That's my boy." Joe said with a tender smile and rubbed Vincent's 'peach fuzz' hair.

"Benny is the one who really saved Darin. If it wasn't for him, I would have walked right into the observation lounge and been shot." Vincent said seriously.

"Yeah, that was one of the bravest things I've ever seen." Darin agreed as he glanced over to the next bed to see Benny sleeping peacefully with Channing and JonJon watching over him.

"Crewman Winters, may I have a moment of your time?" Dr. Perry asked seriously as she walked to his side.

"Um, yeah. Sure." Vincent said uncertainly.

Dr. Perry motioned for Vincent to follow her into the next room.

"Are you really going to be okay? You look awfully tired." Darin asked with concern.

"I'm going to be fine, but it may take me a while to sleep this one off. I don't remember the last time I felt this drained." Joe said honestly.

"Don't worry about a thing. We'll make sure that everything is taken care of." Darin said with assurance.

"Connie is in charge until I'm fit for duty." Joe said seriously.

Darin looked two beds over at Connie who was sleeping.

"I don't think he's in any shape to be in charge at the moment." Darin said honestly.

"Maybe not at the moment, but I have a feeling that he'll be back on his feet before I am." Joe said quietly.

"How bad is it?" Darin asked with renewed concern.

"I've been pushing myself since we left Earth. When the ceiling caved in on me at the Kimber colony I suffered some mild radiation burns and was banged up quite a bit. I've been in pain, but I've just tried to ignore it. If I had started off at full strength, I could probably recover from this inside a day, but Dr. Perry thinks that it may take three to five days before I'm ready to go on duty again. And considering the way I'm feeling right now, I agree with her." Joe said quietly.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Darin asked gently.

"Just take care of Vincent. As long as I know that you're watching out for him, I'll be able to relax and concentrate on healing." Joe said with a contented smile.

"I will Joe, I promise." Darin said as a vow.

"You're supposed to be laying down." JonJon said firmly.

Darin and Joe both turned to see JonJon looking disapprovingly at Channing.

"You'd better do what he says Channing. He's got a Shih-Tzu and he knows how to use it." Joe said with a teasing smile.

Channing laughed at the statement and walked to the nearest unoccupied bed to lay down.

Dr. Perry walked back into the room then stopped to look at Channing with question.

"I'm feeling fine. I just wanted to be here to see that Benny is going to be alright and JonJon reminded me that I should be laying down." Channing rushed to explain.

Dr. Perry considered for a moment, then said, "I'll consider this proof that he's taking good care of you."

JonJon smiled with pride at the statement.

"Ensign Cooper, could I have a few minutes of your time?" Dr. Perry asked seriously.

"Is something wrong?" Darin asked cautiously.

"No, just go into my office with Crewman Winters and wait for me. I'll be there in just a minute." Dr. Perry said seriously.

Darin gave Joe a questioning look before hesitantly walking away.

* * * * *

Vincent looked up as Darin walked into Dr. Perry's office.

"What's going on?" Darin asked curiously.

"I don't know. Dr. Perry had me get on a biobed and took a lot of readings, then asked me to come in here." Vincent said apprehensively.

"Don't worry little brother. Whatever it is, we'll get through it together." Darin said as he sat beside Vincent and gave him a gentle hug.

"She seemed worried when she scanned me last night. I think maybe there's something really wrong with me." Vincent said from the hug.

"She'll tell us in just a minute. Just hang on for a little bit longer." Darin said in a soothing voice as his worry increased.

Vincent nodded into Darin's chest and continued to hug him tightly.

* * * * *

"Ensign Thaelan, I'm happy to say that you are fit for duty." Dr. Raul said with a smile.

"Thank you. The medication you administered seems to have counteracted all the effects of the foreign substance I inhaled." Ensign Thaelan said as he sat on the edge of his bed.

"Yes. Anesthezine has an unfortunate effect on Andorian physiology, but the effect is easily countered. The effect isn't as severe in Humans, but the treatment isn't as effective." Dr. Raul said as he indicated Jimmy and Connie still fast asleep.

"How long will it be until they recover?" Ensign Thaelan asked with concern.

"A few hours. I could wake them up now, but their thought processes and coordination would be impaired to the point that they wouldn't be fit for duty. It's best to let them sleep it off." Dr. Raul said seriously.

"Thank you Doctor. May I have my uniform?" Ensign Thaelan asked as he looked around.

"Oh yes. I'll get it for you." Dr. Raul said quickly and walked away.

Thaelan walked to Joe's bedside and said, "Lieutenant Bowers, I've been declared fit for duty."

Joe smiled and said, "I'm really glad to hear that. If you'll hold on for a few minutes, we'll wait for Darin and Vincent to finish their meeting with Dr. Perry, then the three of you can relieve Lou and Judy."

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said formally, then in a quieter tone he asked, "Are you going to be well?"

"Eventually. But I may be down for a few days." Joe said in a tired voice.

"Please let me know if there is anything I can do to aid your recovery." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Just watch out for Vincent and Darin. They're both new and need someone with experience to guide them." Joe said gently.

"I am honored that you trust me with that responsibility." Thaelan said honestly.

"I do Thaelan. But if you need any advice about anything at all, I'll be here." Joe said seriously.

"I have come to respect your opinion and value your advice. If I have any questions, I promise that I will come to you." Thaelan said as he looked Joe in the eyes.

"Then I won't worry." Joe said with a smile, then glanced at the door that Vincent and Darin had walked through.

Thaelan followed his gaze and said, "Don't worry about them Joe. I'm sure they'll be fine."

Joe looked at Thaelan with surprise and cautiously said, "You called me Joe."

Thaelan thought for a moment, then slowly nodded.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting gentlemen, I just wanted to see that everyone was being attended to before I sat down with you." Dr. Perry said as she walked to her desk.

"What's wrong with me?" Vincent blurted out.

"Not a thing Crewman Winters." Dr. Perry said with assurance, then noticed the nearly panicked expression on Vincent's face.

After a moment to consider, Dr. Perry continued, "I suppose I can see how you could come to the conclusion that there is a serious problem from the way I asked you to come in here. But please believe me when I say that there is absolutely nothing wrong with you and you have no reason to be concerned."

Vincent wanted to believe her, but felt the tension coiled within him, waiting to deal with whatever she was about to tell him.

"I suppose I'll get right to it then. In over thirty years of medical practice, I've never had the opportunity to say this to a crewman before. Congratulations Crewman Winters, you are entering puberty." Dr. Perry said with a tender smile.

"Do what?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I became concerned yesterday evening when I saw the variation in your readings from when I first examined you. I had planned to wait a week to give your blood chemistry a chance to stabilize before coming to any conclusions, but the readings I took of you just now confirmed that you are definitely in the first stages of puberty." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Why did you bring us in here to tell us that?" Darin asked curiously.

"I brought Crewman Winters in here because he might not want the status of his sexual development to be common knowledge among his coworkers. I

brought you in, Ensign Cooper, because when I asked Crewman Winters who he would like to be here with him for this discussion, he chose you." Dr. Perry said frankly.

"Oh." Darin said quietly, then looked at Vincent with question.

Vincent nodded and said, "Daddy Joe looks like he needs his rest. I thought that my big brother could handle this one."

Darin smiled and gave Vincent a quick one armed hug.

"Good. Now Crewman Winters, you are beginning some very drastic hormonal changes in your body. It's important for you to know what to expect so you understand that what you are going through is normal." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Isn't he a little young to be starting... this?" Darin asked with difficulty.

"That was my initial reaction, but I did some investigation and found that the normal age for a boy to start puberty is between nine and a half and eleven years of age. And studies indicate that a sudden increase of stress can 'jumpstart' puberty in a child who is on the threshold." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"I think Vincent qualifies on all counts." Darin said frankly.

"Crewman Winters... Vincent, the main reason I wanted you to have someone here when I told you this is because I'm going to ask Ensign Cooper to help you through the changes you're about to face." Dr. Perry said carefully.

"Can you just tell me what's going to happen?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Well, first your testes will begin to increase in size and begin to descend." Dr. Perry said clinically.

"My wha... Oh jeeze." Vincent said and buried his face into Darin's shoulder as he blushed all the way down to his toes.

Dr. Perry smiled at the reaction and continued, "At the same time or soon thereafter, your penis will begin to lengthen and increase in size."

Vincent continued to hold Darin tightly and kept his face buried.

"The second stage..." Dr. Perry began to say.

"Do you think we could just deal with the first stage for now? I think Vincent needs a little time to deal with this before he's ready for more." Darin said honestly as he rubbed Vincent's back.

Dr. Perry considered for a moment, then said, "I suppose that we can postpone the next part of the talk for a bit if Vincent will make me a promise."

After a long silent moment, Vincent hesitantly pulled back from Darin's chest and glanced at Dr. Perry.

"Vincent, Ensign Cooper has gone through these very same changes not too long ago. If you'll promise to go to him about any concern you have, no matter how small it may seem, then I'll save the rest of our talk for a later time." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"What kind of changes?" Vincent asked hesitantly, pretty sure that he didn't want to know.

"Let's see, you may start having unusually vivid dreams that make you feel strange. Or perhaps you'll have a question about how to deal with body odor..."

"I'm going to stink?" Vincent interrupted.

"It's possible. Strange things can happen when you have a drastic change in your hormonal balance or body chemistry. That's why you need to talk to Ensign Cooper about these things. If it's something he also faced when he went through puberty, then he can tell you how to get through it. If it's something he didn't experience, either he or you can come to me and ask for my advice." Dr. Perry finished with accomplishment.

There was a long moment of silence, then Vincent hesitantly said, "There was one thing I kind of wanted to know."

"What would that be?" Dr. Perry asked professionally.

"I was just kind of wondering when I'm, uh, gonna get... you know, hair... um, down there." Vincent finished in a mumble.

"You're entering stage one now, there's no specific timetable for such things, but the beginning of stage two is characterized by a change of texture and coloration of the scrotum and a sparse amount of pubic hair at the base of the penis. A matter of months most likely." Dr. Perry finished consideringly.

"Oh, um... thanks." Vincent said as he felt his face redden and fought the urge to hide in Darin's shoulder again.

"Don't worry little brother. If you'll just keep me posted, I'll let you know if the stuff that's happening is normal and what to expect next." Darin said quietly.

"That's what I had hoped. Then, unless you have any other questions, I believe that we're done here." Dr. Perry said with a warm smile.

"Um, no. No more questions. Thanks for, you know, not telling me in front of everyone." Vincent said shyly.

"I wouldn't do that to you Vincent. I know that this is a very personal thing and I would never embarrass you like that. I wouldn't have asked that you invite Ensign Cooper to be here, except that I feel that he will be able to give you more valuable insights into what you are about to experience than I can." Dr. Perry said as she stood and walked to the door.

Vincent stood with Darin at his side and said, "Daddy Joe is gonna flip when I tell him."

"Just make sure I'm close by when you do, in case the shock is too much for him." Dr. Perry said with a smile as she led the way out of the door.

Chapter 18

As Vincent and Darin left Dr. Perry's office, T'Lani walked immediately to Vincent's side.

"Are you well Husband?" T'Lani asked as she placed her hand on the side of his face.

Vincent smiled at the gesture and said, "Yeah, I'm fine. Dr. Perry just told me that I, um, well... just started puberty."

T'Lani froze at the words for an instant and seemed to be lost in thought.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked with immediate concern.

"No. I was simply concerned for your well being." T'Lani answered slowly.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "There's something else. Please tell me."

T'Lani arched an eyebrow at Vincent, then quietly said, "When the Captain asked if there were any type of ceremony that we would like, I did not respond. My silence could be taken as a negative response when the truth of the matter is otherwise."

Vincent thought about the words for a moment, then asked, "So does that mean that there is a ceremony that you would like to have?"

"When our family elders discussed our marriage, they decided to postpone our bonding ceremony in deference to your age and human physiology." T'Lani said quietly.

"Our bonding ceremony?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yes. Normally, when the family elders perform a union such as ours, there is a bonding ceremony to ensure the union. But our elders were reluctant to allow such a bonding in this instance due to your prepubescent state. They were concerned that the bonding could have adverse consequences." T'Lani said carefully.

"Wait. The bonding is a Vulcan telepathic thing. Right?" Darin asked cautiously.

"It is more. There is a telepathic element by which we will each carry a part of the other. There is also the cultural significance that the bonding ensures our unity." T'Lani said thoughtfully.

"So does that mean we're not really married?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"No. Our elders have concluded that we are married. That is sufficient." T'Lani said firmly.

"But without that ceremony, it means that we're not married like the other people on Vulcan because we don't have a bond." Vincent said speculatively.

T'Lani looked at Vincent with surprise at his interpretation.

"And since I started puberty, there isn't any reason we can't have the bonding ceremony now... Is there?" Vincent asked before she could answer.

"The ceremony must be conducted by a senior member of one of our families. Since we are traveling away from Earth and Vulcan, it will likely be weeks, perhaps months, before we could have the opportunity." T'Lani said seriously.

Vincent felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Darin's expectant expression.

"I bet if you talked to the Captain, he could arrange it when... you know." Darin said quietly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then looked back to T'Lani and said, "I can't promise that I can make it happen, but if you want to do it, I can talk to the Captain and maybe we can find a way to have the ceremony sooner."

T'Lani looked at Vincent curiously, then glanced at Darin speculatively.

"T'Lani, you are a Vulcan by birth. I am a Vulcan by choice. I understand why our family elders were willing to make an exception, but our marriage is too important to be done half-way. I'll do whatever I can to fix it so we can have our bonding ceremony as soon as possible." Vincent said firmly.

"You honor me, my husband." T'Lani said quietly.

"Actually, I'm kind of glad that it worked out this way." Vincent said with a speculative smile.

"Why's that?" Darin asked curiously.

"Because now we get to have a ceremony. I grew up thinking that getting married was a certain thing. Then when Grandfather said that we were married, just like that, I guess I felt like... there was something missing." Vincent said in thought, then turned to T'Lani and hurried to say, "I don't mean that I don't feel married to you."

"I understand, my husband. I too had a preconceived idea of how my wedding would one day be. I had no reason to believe that it could be otherwise." T'Lani said peacefully.

"Don't worry you two. We'll find a way to work this out." Darin said gently.

Vincent nodded his agreement.

"Dr. Perry is attempting to gain my attention. I must go." T'Lani said as she caressed Vincent's cheek again.

"I'll tell you as soon as I have things worked out so we can have our ceremony." Vincent said quietly.

"Be well, my husband." She said tenderly as she caressed his cheek with her thumb.

Vincent put his hand over hers and snuggled into it for a moment then said, "Be well, my wife."

* * * * *

"Is everything alright champ?" Joe asked with concern as Vincent and Darin walked into the room.

"Yeah. It's fine." Vincent answered with a gentle smile.

Vincent walked to Joe's bedside and noticed that Thaelan was watching, unsure if he should step away to give them privacy.

Vincent crooked his finger for Thaelan to come close.

When he was sure that Joe and Thaelan were listening, Vincent shyly said, "Dr. Perry just told me that I'm starting puberty."

Thaelan's eyes went wide at the statement as Joe broke into a tender smile.

Joe reached out to pull Vincent into a gentle hug as he said, "That's wonderful. If you need to talk about anything I'll always have time to listen."

Vincent returned the hug and said, "Thanks Daddy Joe. Darin said he'd help me too so I know everything is going to be fine."

Joe looked up at Darin and gave a grateful smile.

After another minute of hugging, Joe quietly asked, "Did you get to finish your report?"

"Almost. I've got most of it written but I still need to go through it and make sure it's good enough for Starfleet." Vincent said as he stood from the hug.

"I don't know how long it's going to be before the rendezvous so you should probably get that finished." Joe said gently.

"Do you need to finish yours?" Vincent asked quietly.

"No. I was just proofreading when everything went crazy. I'm sure it's fine." Joe said peacefully.

"Well, mine is close to being done, but I might need help to make sure it's good enough." Vincent said seriously and looked up at Darin with question.

"We can go take care of it now." Darin said softly.

"Thaelan, if you'll go to Deflector control and make sure everything is running properly, Vincent and Darin have some reports that need to be completed right away. As soon as they return to deflector control, you can relieve Lou and Judy so they can get some rest." Joe said seriously.

"Yes sir. I would like the opportunity to verify that the sabotaged systems have been restored to working order." Thaelan said formally.

"We shouldn't be gone too long." Vincent said to Thaelan with assurance.

"If this is a report for Starfleet Command, take the time you need to do it correctly." Thaelan said seriously.

"Okay." Vincent said with a smile.

"I guess we'd better go." Darin said slowly, not wanting to leave Joe alone.

"I'll be fine. Go on." Joe said gently.

As Vincent took a step away from Joe's bedside, he noticed JonJon standing beside Benny's bed.

"JonJon, would you do something for me?" Vincent asked as he walked to JonJon's side.

"Yeah. What can I do?" JonJon asked quietly.

"When Benny wakes up, would you tell him 'Thank You' and that I'll be up to visit with him as soon as I get off duty?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"I will. He's really going to be okay isn't he?" JonJon asked quietly.

Vincent pulled him into a quick hug and said, "He's going to be just fine. But if you need to hear it from someone else, you can ask Dr. Perry or T'Lani. They'll both tell you the same thing."

"Okay. I will." JonJon said quietly.

"Don't forget to take Fizgig down to use his box. I wouldn't want him to get in trouble for doing his stuff in here." Vincent said quietly.

JonJon looked down at the dog in his arms and said, "I don't want to leave Benny."

"Come here." Vincent said and guided JonJon to Joe's bedside.

"Daddy Joe, will you watch out for Benny while JonJon takes Fizgig to the bathroom and gets him food and water?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure. I tell you what JonJon, Thaelan is going down to deflector control right now. If you go with him, I can call him if anything at all happens." Joe said seriously.

"Okay. Thanks Daddy Joe." JonJon said shyly.

"Give me a hug." Joe said as he reached out an arm to JonJon.

After a moment of hesitation, JonJon leaned over the bed and was pulled into a firm hug.

Vincent looked at Thaelan, hoping he wouldn't mind taking JonJon with him.

"Do not be concerned Crewman Winters. I will attend to your friend." Thaelan said quietly.

"Thanks Thaelan. I'd better get going now so I can get back to work." Vincent said quickly.

Thaelan gave a small smile and a nod of agreement.

* * * * *

"Hello Crewman Winters, it's good to see you again." Lieutenant Walking Bear said casually.

"Hi Lieutenant. This is Darin, um, Ensign Cooper. I don't think you got to meet him before." Vincent said uncertainly.

"I saw him in the meeting. It's nice to meet you Ensign Cooper." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a gentle smile and extended his hand to shake.

Darin shook the offered hand and said, "It's nice to meet you too."

"I'm assuming that you two aren't here for a social call." Lieutenant Walking Bear said speculatively.

"Not this time. We need to finish our reports." Vincent said quietly.

"The padds you brought me are right over there by the storage containers." Lieutenant Walking Bear said as he gestured to the back of the shuttle.

"Thanks. Darin, do you have time to help me now or do you have stuff to do on your own?" Vincent asked seriously.

"I just have to do a proofread. It will only take a minute, I can do it after I've helped you." Darin said with a gentle smile.

"Is Joe going to be okay?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked cautiously.

"He's going to be fine. He just needs some rest." Darin answered assuringly.

"He's a good man. I'm glad he's going to be alright." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with relief.

"Would you look at what I've got done so far and tell me what I need to do next?" Vincent asked as he handed his padd to Darin.

"Sure." Darin said with a smile and began to read.

* * * * *

"JonJon, could you tell me what happened to your friend? In all the excitement of the day, I didn't hear." Thaelan asked casually as they walked toward the turbo lift.

"Yeah. Channing is sick and needs to stay in bed so Benny and I were helping him to not be too bored. Anyway, this kidnapper guy comes in with Vincent's brother and is being really mean to him. He had a phaser and made us all sit still while he called his friends to come and get him and Vincent's brother." JonJon said in thought.

"Deflector Control." Ensign Thaelan said to the ceiling of the lift, then looked at JonJon with question to prompt him to continue.

"Well, we heard the turbo lift door open and the kidnapper guy was about to go out and shoot whoever was out there. So Benny screamed that it was a trap and then the bad guy... shot him." JonJon said as tears welled up in his eyes.

Thaelan automatically pulled JonJon to his side into a gentle hug.

"But then Vincent came in and he was screaming really loud and acting like a little kid. He kicked the guy then punched him hard enough to knock him over." JonJon said from Thaelan's side.

"Which he never would have been able to do if not for your friend Benny." Thaelan said gently.

JonJon nodded into Thaelan's side, then said, "Then security came and were about to take the bad guy away when he just dropped over dead."

"I did hear about that part when I was in sickbay. Ensign Gianni... the bad guy, had an artificial tooth that was filled with poison. When he knew he had been captured, he broke the tooth and swallowed the poison." Ensign Thaelan said as he walked off the turbo lift, still holding JonJon at his side.

"Vincent says that Benny is going to be okay. I'm just so worried about him. I've lost my whole family. I don't want to lose Benny too." JonJon said as tears began to form in his eyes again.

Thaelan stopped and turned JonJon to face him.

"Sometimes bad things happen and there is nothing you can do to prevent that. Worrying about what might happen and being afraid to lose someone you love can prevent you from risking your heart and loving anyone else." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

JonJon nodded hesitantly.

"Don't make my mistake JonJon. Enjoy the time you have with the people you love and try not to focus on the things you can't change. Let them know that you love them so you'll always have memories of happiness to carry with you, no matter what adventures the universe throws in your life path." Thaelan said intensely.

JonJon thought about the words, then quietly said, "I'll remember that. I mean, I'm still scared of losing Benny and Vincent. But what you said is right. I need to let them know I love them and enjoy them while I have them. So a hundred years from now I can look back at the fun times I had with my best friends."

Thaelan nodded and draped an arm around JonJon's shoulders as they continued toward deflector control.

* * * * *

"It looks good Vincent. I made a few small changes for grammar, but besides that, I think you just need to read it over to make sure it says everything you want it to say, then finalize it." Darin said seriously.

"Thanks Darin. If you hadn't let me use your template I'd never be able to get this thing finished."

"I'm sure you would have eventually been able to finish it, but it probably would have taken a little longer." Darin said with a smile as he read over his own report one more time.

"And been really boring." Vincent said frankly.

Vincent read his report carefully, then finalized it and put his electronic signature on the file.

"Did you need us to bring you anything Lieutenant Walking Bear? You must be hungry by now." Vincent asked as he put his padd on the stack with the others.

"No. Thank you Crewman Winters. I asked the security personnel to bring me something to eat earlier. I'm fine." Lieutenant Walking Bear said peacefully.

"Well, just call me if you need anything at all. I think I'm just going to be working on reports all day, so I won't mind taking a break for a while to bring you something." Vincent said seriously.

"I'll call if I need anything. I promise." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a fond smile.

"Mine's finished, are you ready to go?" Darin asked as he put his padd on top of Vincent's.

"Yeah. Do you think anyone would mind if we stopped to talk to the Captain for a minute, then maybe stopped by the mess hall and got something to eat before we go to deflector control?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"I think it will be okay as long as we don't take too long." Darin said with a smile.

"We'll come back and see you after our shift if you're still here." Vincent said quickly as he walked toward the shuttle door.

"I'll look forward to it." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Captain Byrne, do you have a minute to talk with me?" Vincent asked from the doorway to the captain's office.

"Yes. Of course Crewman Winters, Ensign Cooper, do come in and have a seat. What can I do for you today?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Well, I guess it's pretty simple. When T'Lani and I got married, our family elders decided that I was too young to bond with her because I'm Human and I hadn't um, entered puberty yet." Vincent said uncomfortably.

"I don't have enough of an understanding of Vulcan bonding to know why that is, but I'm sure your family elders had their reasons." Captain Byrne said in a considering voice.

"Yeah. Well, you see... it's like this... I just... um..." Vincent trailed off.

"Dr. Perry just told him that he has officially entered puberty." Darin added quietly.

Vincent nodded, and hurried to continue, "So that means that we could have the bonding ceremony now. But one of our family elders has to perform the ceremony."

"And we were thinking that since we'll be meeting up with the *Enterprise* soon, that maybe there would be some way that we could arrange it so Vincent and T'Lani could have their bonding ceremony before the *Enterprise* leaves." Darin said seriously.

"I see. Have you discussed this plan of yours with Ambassador Sarek?" Captain Byrne asked quietly.

"No sir. We haven't talked to anyone about it. I just told T'Lani that I was going to try to work something out." Vincent said quickly.

Captain Byrne nodded, then said, "Crewman Winters, what you're asking may not be possible. The proto-matter must be delivered to Earth with all due haste. I will make some inquiries and see if there is some way that we might be able to make an accommodation."

"Thank you sir. If we can't do it today, then we'll just have to wait till we get back to Vulcan. That's not so bad." Vincent said seriously.

"A very good attitude Crewman. Logical." Captain Byrne finished with a grin.

"Yes sir. Thank you." Vincent said with a smile.

"Crewman, Ensign, you are dismissed." Captain Byrne said with a fond smile.

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"Please wait while I make sure that the atmosphere is suitable for us." Ensign Thaelan said as he pressed in a sequence of commands in the panel by the deflector control room door.

"Do you think something might be wrong with the air?" JonJon asked hesitantly.

"No. But the bad man you were telling me about, he was down here earlier and he put something in our air to make us all sleepy. I just want to make sure that it's all gone." Thaelan said as he looked at the small digital display.

"So is that why everyone is in sickbay?" JonJon asked as he clutched Fizgig tighter to his chest.

"That's right. But everyone is going to be fine after they get some rest." Thaelan said with assurance as he opened the door.

"Is it safe?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"Yes. Completely safe. I need to make sure everything is operating correctly while you are attending to Fizgig." Thaelan said seriously.

"Thanks Thaelan. I feel a lot better knowing that you're here." JonJon said with a smile.

Thaelan thought about the statement, then finally said, "You are the first person in a very long time to say such a thing to me. Thank you JonJon, and I am glad you are here too."

JonJon smiled as he carried Fizgig into the supply room to attend to his needs.

* * * * *

"Hi Thaelan, did you have a chance to get anything to eat before you came back here?" Darin asked as he entered deflector control.

"No. It did not occur to me to do so." Thaelan said as he moved from station two to station one.

"Good. Vincent brought you something." Darin said with a smile.

Thaelan looked up in surprise as Vincent carried a small boxed lunch to him.

"I didn't know what kind of food you liked so I brought you a roast beef sandwich." Vincent said shyly.

"I have become accustomed to Human food. I'm sure I will enjoy it. Thank you Vincent." Thaelan said with a small smile.

"No problem. Is everything okay?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"Yes. All systems appear to be operating normally. We can relieve Ensign DeGama now." Thaelan said as he walked to the main console.

"I don't think Lou will mind waiting a minute or two more so you can have your lunch." Darin said quietly.

Thaelan looked at the boxed lunch in his hands and quietly said, "I believe you are right. I will contact her when I have finished this."

"While you're doing that we'll run a quick status check on all the systems and sub-systems." Darin said, then glanced at Vincent with question.

Vincent nodded and walked to the third console to begin working.

Thaelan ate his lunch and watched as 'his' crew efficiently went through the status checks.

"Darin, would you look at this?" Vincent said as he looked at a reading on station two.

Darin walked to his side and read for a moment before saying, "Either the R7 battery backup lost 2/3 of it's charge or the control circuit is giving false readings."

"Do you want me to go look at it?" Vincent asked seriously.

"You haven't worked with the R cells yet have you?" Darin asked in concentration.

"No, Susan and I just worked with the conduits." Vincent said as he looked up at Darin.

"Then I'll go take care of it. You need to stay here in case Ensign Thaelan needs anything when he takes the main." Darin said seriously.

"Do you think you can show me how to work on the R cells later so I can do it next time?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Darin smiled and said, "Sure. Just remind me and we'll go down together and I'll show you around."

Vincent nodded and said, "I'll remember."

"Ensign Thaelan, we're showing a fault in one of the R cells. I need to go down and check it out." Darin said as he turned.

Thaelan thought about the statement and said, "Take a communicator with you and keep an open channel. Working on R cells is very different from working on any other system in deflector control."

"Yes sir." Darin said as he walked to the locker to get his tool kit, then grabbed a communicator.

"I have number eight." Darin said as he waited by the door.

Thaelan turned to the main and keyed in his instructions.

"Your communicator is now tied into the main comm." Thaelan said seriously.

Darin nodded, then said, "Vincent, would you run a bypass of R7 and let me know when it's offline."

"Yeah. I'm on it." Vincent said and hurried to station one.

"I'll be right back." Darin said and walked out the door.

After a moment of keying in the new power configuration, Vincent initiated the program, then hurried to station two to run a diagnostic on the cell to verify that it was unpowered.

"*Is it switched over?*" Darin asked over the comm.

"Hold on. I just want to make sure it did what I told it to." Vincent said with concentration.

"Ensign Cooper. Be sure to ground yourself and use full static protection while working on the R cell." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"*I'm getting my static band on now.*" Darin said seriously.

Thaelan sat the remains of his lunch aside, then pressed the dedicated comm line to the bridge and said, "Ensign DeGama, this is Ensign Thaelan. I am ready to relieve you and assume control."

After a moment, Lou's tired voice could barely be heard saying, "*It's good to hear your voice Thaelan. It's been a very long night. You should have control now. I stand relieved.*"

"Acknowledged." Thaelan said as he accepted control from the bridge station.

"Wow. She really sounded tired." Vincent said with concern.

"We will be sure to allow her and Crewman Wills sufficient time to rest before they return to duty." Ensign Thaelan said with assurance.

"*This control circuit is fried. I think I'm going to need to replace the entire housing. I wouldn't trust these connections.*" Darin's voice said over the comm.

"Acknowledged. I will forward a request to supply for the necessary items. They should be waiting for you when you arrive." Thaelan said as he began to type on his panel.

"I never thought of that." Vincent said with a smile.

"It increases maintenance efficiency when you have a dispatcher to do such things." Thaelan said seriously.

The doors of deflector control opened to admit Chief Morgan looking unusually serious.

Vincent and Thaelan automatically stood to attention.

"As you were. I just heard about Joe and came down to get a status report." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"All systems show normal function. We have a maintenance issue with the R7 cell, but Ensign Cooper is working to resolve it now." Ensign Thaelan said professionally.

"Very good. Crewman Winters, do you know how to run a primary system status check?" Chief Morgan asked as he walked to stand beside station two.

"Yes sir." Vincent said as he started the level two diagnostic.

"Very good." Chief Morgan said as he watched Vincent work.

After a moment of looking over the board, Vincent said, "All systems showing normal function. Would you like a secondary system check while I'm here?"

"No thank you Crewman. I just wanted to be sure that you had been trained on the essential systems to support Ensign Thaelan should the need arise." Chief Morgan said warmly.

"Both Crewman Winters and Ensign Cooper have demonstrated their understanding of the basic systems. I have no doubt in their abilities." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"That's good to know." Chief Morgan said with a smile.

"*Vincent, would you run a quick status check on the R cell switches before I try changing out this housing?*" Darin called over the comm.

"Yeah. Hang on." Vincent said as he pulled up the sub-system display and started a status check on every switch that connected to R7.

Chief Morgan watch as Vincent efficiently worked the console.

"The I-14 switch indicator isn't working. Let me check the console status real quick. It'll just take a second." Vincent said and hurried to station three.

After a moment of looking at the readings, Vincent called into the air, "I can't tell if it's good or bad so you need to change it out."

"*You'll need to divert power from the E-7 and E-10 conduits before I can change it.*" Darin said seriously.

"E-7 and E-11." Vincent corrected automatically as he walked to station one.

Darin chuckled and said, "*I just wanted to make sure you were paying attention. Would you see if there is an inter-connector to R-8? I don't think there is, but I'd like to be sure.*"

"Um, yeah. Just a second." Vincent said as he reprogrammed the power configuration.

"I'll get that for you Crewman Winters." Chief Morgan said as he walked to station two and brought up the system controls.

"There is no interconnection between R-7 and R-8 Ensign Cooper." Chief Morgan called out into the air.

After a moment, Darin answered, "*Thank you Chief Morgan.*"

Vincent pressed the key to activate the new configuration and said, "It should be unpowered now. But make sure you check it out first."

"*I will Vincent. I've had more than enough excitement already today. The last thing I need is to get my hair straightened.*" Darin said in a playful voice.

"Chief Morgan, would you look at this wave pattern?" Ensign Thaelan asked from the main console.

Chief Morgan walked to Ensign Thaelan's side and looked at the readings carefully.

"Curious. Can you bring up a visual?" Chief Morgan asked cautiously.

Ensign Thaelan switched to visual mode on the main screen.

"Nothing visible." Chief Morgan said in thought.

"Perhaps I should do an overlay of particle movement." Ensign Thaelan said speculatively.

"It's worth a try, do it." Chief Morgan said with interest.

"There it is... but what is it?" Ensign Thaelan said as he looked carefully at the readings.

"The dense particulate matter is emitting enough electro-magnetic radiation to mask it." Chief Morgan said quickly, then hit the comm and said, "Main bridge, we are detecting a dark matter cluster at heading 004 mark 3 at a distance of 22,000 kilometers."

"*Scanners don't detect anything*." A voice said cautiously.

Chief Morgan quickly transferred the overlay image to the bridge.

"*Thank you Chief. We have it, we're changing course*." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"I'll get to work on a sensor modification to nullify the effect of the EM particulate matter." Chief Morgan said with relief.

"*Thank you Chief. It appears that we were running through a mine field without even knowing it*." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"I'll let you know when the sensor modification is ready. Morgan out." Chief Morgan said firmly.

"*M'Butu out*." Commander M'Butu said and closed the transmission.

"Do you need assistance with the modification?" Ensign Thaelan asked seriously.

"No thank you Ensign. It will be a simple matter to negate the EM effect now that we are aware of it. Good job of detecting it though. How did you realize that something was hidden out there?" Chief Morgan asked curiously.

"I like to watch the eddies and currents of the particulate matter that we're passing through. I noticed a disruption in the particle flow which normally indicates a solid mass in the stream, but there was nothing there." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"It's good to see that the academy isn't training all the instincts out of the next generation. Trust those instincts and you'll move on to great things, mark my words." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said with a smile of pride.

"I'm going to work on those sensor mods now. Call me in main Engineering if you need anything before Joe comes back to duty." Chief Morgan said as he walked toward the door.

"Yes sir. I will." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

Chief Morgan gave a nod that he heard before walking out the door.

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"*Well now you did it Thaelan*." Darin's voice said from the comm.

"What is that Ensign Cooper?" Thaelan asked curiously.

"*By spotting that dark matter before we ran into it, you've probably saved a few hundred lives. What do you say Vincent? Is he officially one of us now?*" Darin asked with an obvious smile in his voice.

"Not yet." Vincent said in thought.

There was a beeping that drew Thaelan's attention away from the casual conversation.

"Deflector control." Thaelan said quickly.

"*Ensign Thaelan, I'll need you to write an incident report detailing how you spotted the dark matter. I'd like to be able to present it to the Captain to help explain the need for the sensor modifications*." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Yes sir. Right away." Ensign Thaelan said formally.

"*Now* he's officially one of us." Vincent said with a cheeky grin.

Ensign Thaelan looked up at the sound of Darin's laughter.

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters?" Thaelan asked as he muted the comm, so Darin couldn't hear.

"Yes?" Vincent replied as he turned in his chair.

"This morning, when the intruder tried to abduct, Ensign.... your brother..." Thaelan said with difficulty.

"Yes?" Vincent said in a quieter voice.

"It appeared that you regretted not being able to do more to defend him and yourself." Thaelan said carefully.

"Yeah. Everyone says I did the right thing, but I really felt like a little kid because there wasn't anything I could do if he tried to hurt Darin." Vincent said quietly.

Ensign Thaelan nodded at the response, then said, "Among my people, it is the father's responsibility to teach his children to defend themselves. I realize that Lieutenant Bowers has taken up many of the duties of being your father. But if you have no objection, I could do this for you."

Vincent recognized the seriousness of what Thaelan was offering and said, "I would like that Thaelan. I want to learn as much as you're willing to teach me."

Thaelan smiled at the serious response and said, "When our schedules have become more stable, we could set aside a time each day to train."

"Do you like to get up early or are you someone who likes to sleep until the last minute?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I am typically an early riser." Thaelan said casually.

"Me too. If you want, we can get up a little bit early and have our training before we go on duty. Darin likes to sleep until the last minute, so we can train, take our showers, then wake up Darin and go to breakfast." Vincent said in thought.

Thaelan nodded and said, "That would work very well for me. Some physical activity before work helps me to be more focused."

Vincent giggled, then noticed Thaelan's curious look directed at him.

"It's just hard for me to imagine you being *more* focused." Vincent said with a chuckle.

Thaelan smiled at the statement, then turned off the mute on the comm system.

* * * * *

"Is the diagnostic done yet?" Darin asked as he walked back into Deflector Control.

"The level two showed it being fine, but I'm running a level three on R-7 and all the connected systems before we bring it back up." Vincent said seriously.

"Good. I'll go ahead and fill out the maintenance report if you guys want." Darin said as he put away his tool kit.

"Yes. And send a copy to Environmental Control since their backup systems are also connected to the R cells." Thaelan said seriously.

"Will do." Darin said as he started on his report.

"Now that Darin is back, I should probably start working on my reports. I've got a bunch of them that I have to get done today." Vincent said hesitantly.

"What reports do you have to write, if I may ask?" Thaelan asked curiously.

"Um, I have to write the one about finding the modified control circuit, one about helping Channing when he got shocked, then the one about what happened when I went into the reactor, I guess I'll have to do another one about what happened in the transporter, even though I don't have much to tell in that one, then... is that it?" Vincent asked as he turned to look at Darin.

"Lieutenant Simms asked you to write one too." Darin said with a look of apology.

"Oh yeah, I forgot that one." Vincent said distantly.

"Then you should sign in at one of the auxiliary stations and allow Ensign Cooper and I to attend to deflector control. We will call on you if we have need of your assistance." Thaelan said seriously.

"Okay. Thank you Ensign Thaelan. Darin, could you give me another copy of the template. I left the other one on the secure padd." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure, I'll have it to you in just a second." Darin said with a smile.

"Ensign Cooper, do you have a significant number of reports to work on today?" Thaelan asked cautiously.

"Just about the kidnapping and the Cooper Bridge." Darin said in thought.

"Then perhaps when our shift is over we could work on our reports together. I also have to write a report about the intruder, then another about the dark matter detection." Thaelan asked cautiously.

"That sounds good... But, I'm supposed to go on a date with Rad at 19:00, as long as it's before or after that, then yeah." Darin said carefully.

"Since we don't know when Ensign Agropos and Crewman Tullis will be fit for duty, I don't think it will be possible to set a more definite time." Thaelan said in thought.

"The way things seem to work around here, we should probably get used to that." Darin said with a smile.

Thaelan nodded his agreement, then turned at a giggle from Vincent.

"The template just called me 'Honey Muffin'." Vincent said with a chuckle.

Darin smiled at Vincent's enjoyment of his program, then turned and began to run systems checks.

* * * * *

"Hey guys, does anyone need a break?" Susan asked as she walked into deflector control.

Darin looked up from his work and thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"I think we're fine." Vincent said as he looked around.

"I don't know what procedure you use on this ship when the person at the main console needs to... visit the lavatory." Ensign Thaelan said reluctantly.

Susan smiled and said, "You just look over everything to see that it's working normally, then get me to watch it while you're gone. I'm not qualified to run the main, but I know enough to keep an eye on it for the two minutes that you'll be gone."

"Would you mind watching for me now? I won't be long." Ensign Thaelan asked hopefully.

"Go ahead. I've got it." Susan said with a smile.

Ensign Thaelan nodded gratefully, then hurried out of the room.

As soon as he was gone, Susan said, "He seems to have mellowed out a lot."

"Yeah, I like working with him." Vincent said, then went back to working on his report.

Darin nodded his agreement and said, "Even if Joe hadn't put him in charge of our shift, I think I'd like to hang around with him. He's interesting and he's really good at his job."

Susan slowly nodded in thought.

"Any word on when Connie and Jimmy will be fit for duty?" Darin asked casually.

"Oh yeah. They're both awake now and Joe told them to relieve you guys at 18:00. And if you guys wouldn't mind coming in at 06:00 then Lou and Judy will have the day off and we'll go back on our normal schedule starting with beta shift tomorrow. Joe thinks Lou and Judy need a little extra time off after the really long day they've had." Susan said frankly.

"Sounds good to me." Vincent said absently.

"Well, I'm not an early bird like you Vincent. Someone will probably have to wake me up." Darin said seriously.

"I'll make sure you're up in time. What are brother's for?" Vincent said as he looked away from his report.

"Thank you Crewman Walker." Ensign Thaelan said as he hurried back into the room.

"No problem, and you can call me Susan if you want." Susan said gently.

"Yes, of course. Thank you Susan. Please let me know if I can ever return the favor." Thaelan said respectfully.

"I'll do that. Well, if you guys don't need anything, I'm going to go check on the guys and I'll see you at 18:00." Susan said cheerfully.

"Okay, see you then." Darin said with a warm smile.

Vincent turned and gave her a little wave.

Susan smiled at the gesture and left the room.

* * * * *

"Thaelan, you won't have a problem coming in at 06:00 tomorrow will you?" Darin asked casually.

"No, that won't be any problem at all." Thaelan said seriously.

"Joe want's Lou and Judy to have the night off since they basically pulled a double. The Beta shift will work 18:00 to 06:00 and then we'll work until 16:00 tomorrow." Darin said in thought.

"That would be satisfactory." Thaelan said carefully.

A beeping on Vincent's console drew everyone's attention.

"This is Crewman Winters." Vincent answered cautiously.

"*Vincent Winters?*" The early middle aged man asked pleasantly.

"Yes." Vincent said hesitantly.

"*I'm Mr. Chilton from the Federation's tutoring center. Your name was submitted to us for enrollment in a subspace classroom.*" The man said seriously.

"Yeah, but I thought they were going to wait until next week to set it up so I could have a chance to get used to living here." Vincent said cautiously.

The man smiled and said, "*Yes, the new class that we're organizing won't be starting until next week, I just needed to tell you about the way the classes will be structured before we begin.*"

"Oh, okay." Vincent said hesitantly.

"*The application said that it would be preferable for you to have limited class time and submit completed academic assignments at your own pace. Our classes are formed into study groups so you can develop your group problem solving skills. To be part of a team, you will need to attend the classes when they are offered.*" Mr. Chilton said seriously.

"That may be difficult for me. I have a job and I can work on my assignments on my days off. My commanding officers will work around my school schedule, but I'd rather not have to take a bunch of time away from work if I don't have to." Vincent said honestly.

"*Oh... I wasn't aware before I called that you were a crewman. I had just assumed that you were the child of a Starfleet officer that needed tutoring while traveling with his family so he could maintain his academic standing.*" Mr. Chilton said in a neutral tone.

"I'm a Petty Officer, Second Class. I'm assigned to Deflector Control on the *USS Yorktown*. But I'm also nine, so I still need to be in school." Vincent said seriously.

"*I see. How well do you think you'll be able to focus on your academic studies while maintaining a work schedule?*" Mr. Chilton asked cautiously.

"I won't know until I try." Vincent said honestly.

Mr. Chilton shook his head and said, "*I need to speak to your parents about this. This is unacceptable. A child of your age needs to focus on his academic studies.*"

"Mr. Chilton, if you want to talk to my parents, you'll need to get an Ouija board. Besides, I am an adult by Vulcan law and I'm allowed to make my own decisions. If you can't accept my decisions, I'll make other arrangements for my education." Vincent said firmly.

"*That might be best. We want our students to make their education a priority.*" Mr. Chilton said coldly.

"You want to make everything in my life revolve around your schedule. That's not going to happen. Getting an education is very important to me... but you are not. Winters out." Vincent said, then slammed the comm button on his console.

"Gee Vincent, I'm guessing you didn't like your new teacher, huh?" Darin asked hesitantly.

"Oh, that wasn't a teacher. *That* was a principal." Vincent said frankly, then took a slow deep breath to try and calm his temper.

"And I suspect from your tone that he is not the first principal you've met." Thaelan said speculatively.

"Oh no. I've talked to a few principals, they were all jerk wads like this one... I need to get this taken care of before he can call Cory or Daddy Joe." Vincent said as he pressed the comm on his terminal.

"*Communications*." Debbie said seriously.

"Hi Debbie, could you get me a connection to Vulcan High Command?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"*Sure, it'll just take a second*." Debbie said casually.

"*Vulcan High Command, How may I direct your call?*" A young Vulcan man asked in precise English.

"I am Crewman Vincent Winters, Son of Clan Short of the House of Surak of Vulcan. I'm not sure who I need to speak to. I'm a Vulcan citizen serving as a Crewman on a Starfleet vessel. The Federation tutoring center is not willing to work around my duty schedule and I was hoping that there might be a Vulcan school that I could attend by subspace that would be willing to work with me." Vincent said firmly.

"*Allow me a moment to make some inquiries. Please hold*." The man said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then the Vulcan High Command logo filled the screen.

"Wow, you're going right to the top." Darin said cautiously.

"It'll probably be faster than starting at the bottom." Vincent said simply.

A moment later the young man appeared on the screen again.

"*I will direct your call to Saakmal, the Secretary of Education. I have apprised him of your situation.*" The young Vulcan man said efficiently.

"Thank you." Vincent said in a toneless voice, then watched as the screen changed.

"*I am Saakmal. You wish to make accommodations for your education?*" The middle aged Vulcan man asked seriously.

"Yes sir. I am an active duty crewman serving on a Starfleet vessel. I would like to arrange to take my school classes during my off duty hours, if that's possible." Vincent said calmly.

"*Petty Officer Winters, I have accessed your personal file and found the record of your academic progress thus far.*" Saakmal said seriously.

Vincent waited, knowing that he wasn't expected to respond.

"*It appears from your files that you have the requisite understanding to begin your studies in our third standard course of study. You will be given access to your academic materials via subspace and can work at your own pace. Your Starfleet service will satisfy several of your course requirements, thus easing your workload to a manageable level.*" Saakmal said slowly.

Vincent nodded his understanding.

"*Your file indicates that you speak eight Earth languages as well as Formal Vulcan and Vulcan Standard, is this correct?*" Saakmal asked carefully.

"Yes sir." Vincent said respectfully.

"*That would satisfy the language requirement for the third standard course, but if you have an interest, there is a language course being offered for the first time that you may find rewarding. It would require you to attend classes via subspace so you can hear and speak the language in a real-time setting. The class is provided at non-standard times so that those who require scheduling flexibility may attend.*" Saakmal said seriously.

"It sounds perfect for me. What is the language?" Vincent asked seriously.

"*Conversational Klingon.*" Saakmal said without expression.

"I would like to take the class." Vincent said, trying to contain his enthusiasm.

"*Very well Petty Officer Winters. You are officially enrolled in classes to begin at your convenience. A schedule of available times for you to attend*

your Conversational Klingon class via subspace will be forwarded to you. You have been officially enrolled at the Vulcan Academy of Science." Saakmal said formally.

"Thank you Saakmal. Live long and prosper." Vincent said respectfully.

"*Peace and Long Life, Petty Officer Winters.*" Saakmal said reverently.

A moment after the screen went blank, Vincent turned to see Darin and Thaelan looking at him curiously.

"What?" Vincent asked self consciously.

"You just enrolled for school by talking to the Secretary of Education." Darin said slowly.

"Yeah, so? He's just a secretary... they're usually a lot nicer than the principals they work for." Vincent said hesitantly.

"No, you misunderstand. He is not A secretary. He is THE secretary. Saakmal is the Secretary of Education. He's in charge of ALL education on Vulcan. His office coordinates every school and every college on the planet." Thaelan said seriously.

"Oh... kewl." Vincent finished with a happy smile.

Darin shook his head and said, "Only my little brother could get enrolled in school by talking to the Secretary of Education himself."

"How are your reports coming Crewman Winters?" Thaelan asked in a casual voice.

"Oh, um. Okay I guess. I've finished two of them, but I'm about to start on the one about the reactor and that's probably going to take some time." Vincent said reluctantly.

"If you would like, you could take a break for a few minutes before starting the next report." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"Yeah. I need to get a drink and maybe a snack. Can I get you guys anything?" Vincent asked as he signed off his terminal.

"I'm fine." Darin said as he looked over his console.

"I too am well, but thank you for the offer." Thaelan said with a smile.

"Okay, I won't be gone long." Vincent said and hurried out of the room.

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"Ensign Cooper, I just wanted to say again that I am grateful for your help this morning." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"You'd do the same for me wouldn't you?" Darin asked as he turned in his chair.

"Yes. I would." Thaelan said firmly.

"Then don't worry about it. I would have done the same thing for anyone on our team... even Jimmy." Darin finished with a grin.

"You do not like Crewman Tullis?" Thaelan asked cautiously.

"I like him fine. It's just fun to tease him." Darin said with a smile.

Thaelan quirked an eyebrow at the statement.

"I wouldn't ever do anything to really upset him, but it's fun to do stuff to aggravate him. The funniest thing is that he doesn't even realize that I'm doing it on purpose." Darin said with a smile.

"I don't think I will ever understand Humans." Thaelan said distantly.

"Well, I am one and I probably won't either. But if you'll ask about what's confusing you, I'll explain as much as I know." Darin said honestly.

"There was one thing. I get the sense that Crewman Winters was the one who led everyone else to want to... include me. I don't understand his motivation." Thaelan said honestly.

"I don't know either. But if you really want to know, ask him. Vincent isn't shy about saying what he thinks and feels." Darin said frankly.

Thaelan thought about the statement, then slowly nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent, how are you doing?" Chance asked as he saw Vincent approaching.

"Great. I've just been writing a bunch of reports and I'm taking a quick break before I have to get back to it." Vincent said happily.

"Channing told me how you clocked that security guy. You're just full of surprises." Chance said with a smile.

Vincent chuckled at the statement and said, "I'm not the only one. I just did what I had to do because there was no other choice. Benny called for help and got shot. That took a lot more guts than I have."

"From the way Channing tells it, Benny thinks the same thing about the way you went into that reactor." Chance said frankly.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay. I guess maybe we're both kinda brave. But if people don't stop talking about it pretty soon our heads are going to get too big to fit through the doors."

Chance chuckled at the statement.

"Excuse me, would you guys like some cookies? We just got them out of the oven." A crewman asked as he walked around the serving line with a basket of chocolate chip cookies.

"Yeah. That sounds great!" Vincent said happily.

The crewman handed Vincent a napkin and held the basket out to him.

"Do you want some milk?" Chance asked as he also took some cookies.

"Yuck, no. I can't stand milk." Vincent said with a crinkled nose.

"You're a weird kid." Chance said with a smile.

"What are you going to have?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Coffee." Chance said simply.

"I think I'll have some too." Vincent said consideringly.

"It might stunt your growth." Chance said with a teasing smile.

Vincent chuckled at the statement and said, "I'll take my chances."

* * * * *

"I know you said you didn't want anything, but they just made some cookies." Vincent said as he walked into deflector control.

"Thanks Vincent, that sounds good." Darin said with a smile.

"I brought you some coffee to go with it. I brought you some too Thaelan." Vincent said happily.

"Thank you Vincent. That was very kind." Thaelan said quietly.

"I was in the neighborhood." Vincent said with a smile as he walked back to the console where he had been working.

After a long moment of silence, Thaelan quietly said, "Vincent, I appreciate all that you've done to make me feel included here, but I'm curious to know

why you went to such lengths to help me when I behaved so badly toward you."

Vincent looked up from the report template for a moment to think, then said, "Because I used to be a lot like you."

Thaelan looked at Vincent curiously.

"I was mean to people and really angry all the time and I was really really alone. When you walked in here... I saw you being how I used to be. Daddy Joe made me feel like I belonged somewhere and that someone cared about me and I guess I wanted to do that for you." Vincent said in deep concentration.

"I see. So you sought to provide the type of comfort that you had been lacking earlier in your life." Thaelan said speculatively.

"Yeah. Since I know what it feels like to be that way, I thought I'd try to help you so you didn't have to feel that way if you didn't want to." Vincent said seriously.

"I remember you saying that you didn't want to change Thaelan, you wanted to give him a reason to want to change himself." Darin said in realization.

"I thank you for that Vincent. I have been in a very dark place in my life for far too long." Thaelan said in a low voice.

"Yeah. Been there, done that. I guess that most people think that people will automatically like them... Jimmy's like that. People like you and me, we kind of just expect that people don't like us until they prove us wrong. At least that's how I used to be. Anyway, now we're on the other side of all that and we can help other people when we see them drowning in it." Vincent said frankly.

"I don't know if I can." Thaelan said in thought.

"You already did." Vincent said with a smile.

"I did?" Thaelan asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I took Daddy Joe and JonJon some cookies in sickbay before I came here. JonJon told me about how nice you were to him. You weren't just nice to him, you made him feel like he's not alone. Like he's got someone that he can go to who really understands him." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"I feel the same toward him." Thaelan said in a whisper.

Vincent giggled at the statement.

"What is funny?" Thaelan asked cautiously.

"When you came here you were angry at life, now you're living it. Having someone you love and who loves you in return is being alive." Vincent said happily.

Thaelan thought about the words for a moment, then said, "You have uncommon wisdom."

"Yeah, but so do you. I think going through all that stuff that we did that made us angry and then getting to the other side of it made us wiser." Vincent said with a grin.

"Perhaps so."

Chapter 19

"Hey guys, did we miss anything?" Connie asked with a smile as he walked into Deflector Control.

"Just the usual, how are you feeling?" Darin asked with a happy smile.

"Well rested. I heard that you're the one who got breathers on everyone. Thanks for taking care of us." Connie said as he walked to the main control panel and casually looked it over.

Jimmy walked into the room looking a bit subdued.

Vincent hopped up from auxiliary station two and pulled Jimmy into a quick hug.

Jimmy looked down at him in surprise.

"I'm glad that you're okay Jimmy. I was worried about you." Vincent said honestly.

After a moment for the words to sink in, Jimmy smiled and said, "Thanks Vincent. I'm glad everyone is okay."

"Hey, where's mine?" Connie asked in playful mock-offense.

"Darin, I'm not done here, would you mind?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"I've got it." Darin said happily and gave Connie a quick hug.

"I'm glad you're okay. We were all worried about you." Darin said quietly.

Connie accepted the brief hug and smiled.

Susan walked into the room and asked, "So are you guys ready to call it a day?"

Vincent finally released Jimmy from the hug and said, "Yeah. Everything is running fine. You should have an easy night."

"What's the shield status Thaelan?" Connie asked as he walked to Thaelan's side.

"All systems are nominal. I have no variations to report. You may assume control of the main at your convenience." Thaelan said professionally.

Connie stopped at one of the system status panels and said, "This looks good, but why do you have the field harmonics tuned to this band? We normally use a lower EM setting."

"The particulate matter that we're traveling through emits a weak electromagnetic signal. I tuned the shields to a higher frequency to negate the possibility that a random confluence of the electromagnetic signals might be able to penetrate the shields." Thaelan said seriously.

"I suppose that could happen. It's better to be safe. Thank you Ensign Thaelan, I have control." Connie said seriously.

"I stand relieved. Have a good evening and call me if there is any way I can be of assistance." Thaelan said as he stood.

"I'll do that Thaelan. Enjoy your off time. Did you hear about the schedule for tomorrow?" Connie asked as he glanced back at Thaelan.

"Yes. We will relieve you at 06:00." Thaelan said seriously.

"Good. From the look of things, it should be a fairly uneventful evening." Connie said as he ran a quick series of system checks.

"We can only hope." Thaelan said cautiously.

"Thaelan, I've grabbed us some padds so we can work on our reports while we get some dinner." Darin said as he walked out of the supply room.

"Thank you Darin. Vincent, will you be joining us to work on reports?" Thaelan asked casually.

"Um, no. I've been working on reports all day. I really need to give it a rest for a few minutes. I'm going to check on Daddy Joe and Benny right now." Vincent said as he signed off the auxiliary station.

"Unngh. Reports." Jimmy said with a groan.

"Call me and I'll help you if you need me to." Vincent said seriously.

Jimmy looked at Vincent with surprise.

"I've been working on reports all day and I think I'm getting pretty good at them. I wouldn't mind helping you." Vincent said honestly.

"No. That's okay. I'm sure I can do them... I just won't enjoy it." Jimmy said quietly.

"Such is the nature of duty." Thaelan said sagely.

Vincent glanced at Thaelan and nodded his agreement.

"Why don't you guys get out of here. I bet you're ready for a change of scenery." Susan said with a smile.

"Okay. We'll be back later to see if you guys need anything." Vincent said happily.

"We'll be fine, you don't need to do that." Susan said with a warm smile.

"Um, we sleep here. So it won't be a problem, honest." Vincent said frankly.

Susan chuckled and said, "Good point."

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent." Benny said happily when he saw Vincent walk into the room.

"Hi Benny. You look like you're feeling a lot better." Vincent said as he hurried to Benny's bedside to give him a gentle hug.

"Yeah. JonJon has been taking really good care of me and Channing moved over to the bed next to mine when the security guy who was there was released and T'Lani has been making sure that I wasn't in any pain and even brought me a bowl of ice cream." Benny rambled with uncharacteristic energy.

"How long will it be before you can get out of bed?" Vincent asked with a smile at Benny's cheery state.

"Well, Dr. Perry says that I'm going to be completely fine but wants me to stay here tonight in case I have any pain from the burn." Benny said, then reached under the blanket to pull up his gown to show off his burn.

Vincent looked at the burn for a moment, then said, "It looks kind of like a rabbit."

"JonJon thinks so too. I think it looks more like a cartoon mouse." Benny said with a smile.

"So you're feeling okay?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Oh yeah. Everyone has been really great about seeing that I'm not in pain. It's kind of weird to have so many people fussing over me." Benny said as he put down his gown.

Vincent glanced over at the next bed and saw that Joe was fast asleep.

"He's fine. He just needs his rest." Benny said more quietly.

Vincent nodded that he heard.

"He's been talking with me all afternoon. I promise Vincent, he's really fine." Benny said more seriously.

Vincent turned back to face Benny and said, "Even though I'm sorry you got hurt, I'm glad that you're here with Daddy Joe so he won't have to be alone while he's here."

"If I wasn't hurt, I'd be here anyway to watch after him. He's my Daddy Joe too now." Benny said with a gentle smile.

"Mine too." JonJon said firmly.

"How are you doing JonJon?" Vincent asked as he moved to give JonJon a hug from the side.

"I'm fine. Fizgig has been really good all day, but I think I need to take him down to use his box again and maybe somewhere so he can run around for a while." JonJon said as he looked at the dog in his arms.

"Well, there's this place on the ship that's kind of like a park, it's a garden. It's down on the pool deck. I bet he'd like to run around there." Vincent said quietly.

"I don't want to leave Benny alone." JonJon said as he glanced at Benny.

"I'm fine. You were here to take care of me while I was hurt. Now I just need to rest for a while to get better. Go take care of Fizgig then come back and tell me all about it." Benny said happily.

"Are you sure? I don't want you to be alone." JonJon said with concern.

"JonJon, this is the least alone I've felt in my entire life. I know you and Vincent are here if I need you..." Benny said happily.

JonJon opened his mouth to say something, but Benny continued before he could say it.

"... and Fizgig too." Benny finished with a smile.

Vincent giggled at the statement and nodded his agreement.

"Besides, I think I could use a little bit of alone time to think about things. Go take care of Fizgig and I'll be here waiting when you're done." Benny said peacefully.

"Are you sure?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"Completely sure." Benny said with a smile.

JonJon reluctantly nodded, then slowly carried Fizgig to the sickbay door.

After the door had closed, Benny turned back to see Vincent looking at him with concern.

"I'm really fine." Benny said seriously.

"You probably saved my life today." Vincent said as he looked Benny in the eyes.

"I did?" Benny asked hesitantly.

"I was the one who got off the turbo lift on the J deck. You screamed that it was a trap, then Ensign Gianni shot you." Vincent said seriously.

Benny nodded, then said, "I was afraid it was you. I remember you saying that you'd check on us."

"You saved me Benny. Because of you, I didn't get hurt or captured." Vincent said seriously.

"Then it was worth it." Benny said with a peaceful smile.

Vincent returned the smile and was happy that Benny was at peace with everything that happened.

"Is there anything you need right now?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Well, yeah. But it's going to sound kind of weird." Benny said frankly.

"You're not going to ask me to give you a sponge bath or something like that are you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Benny chuckled and said, "No. I wouldn't do that to you."

Vincent waited to find out what he could do for Benny.

"I don't know if you ever saw that security guy, but he's the one who helped us on the pool deck." Benny said as he pointed across the room.

Vincent looked over and saw who Benny was talking about.

"Yeah. That's Neil. I saw him this morning." Vincent said seriously.

"I've been watching him for a while now. I mean, not staring at him, but... he's really worried about something." Benny said with concern.

"Do you know what?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No. But it must be pretty bad. Every now and then another security guy will come in and give him a break, then he'll come back in here looking more worried than before." Benny said seriously.

"I'll talk to him when JonJon gets back." Vincent said decisively.

"I was serious when I told JonJon that I could use some alone time. If you could take care of Neil it would really make me feel better." Benny said as he looked into Vincent's eyes to convey his sincerity.

"Okay, but you call me if you need me." Vincent said firmly.

"Count on it." Benny said with a contented smile.

* * * * *

"How is Korrigon?" Vincent asked as he approached Neil.

After a glance at his prisoner, Neil responded, "He's going to be fine. He's been asleep most of the day, from the pain medication I think. He, um... has a burn."

Vincent smiled at the statement and said, "A phaser burn, I know. I'm the one who shot him."

Neil looked at Vincent with surprise and said, "I was just told to watch him. Lieutenant Simms isn't really in a mood to be giving out details right now."

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked curiously.

"What do you mean?" Neil asked as a facade of unconcern came over his face.

Vincent giggled and said, "Nice try, but I already saw that you're worried about something. If you tell me, maybe it's something I can help with."

Neil glanced at his prisoner again, then said, "I don't think there's anything you can do to help with this. I'm just worried about Lieutenant Simms."

"What's wrong with him?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I think he sees just about everything that's happened since we left Earth as a failure of his security department. The modified control circuits, the chaos of the evacuation of the Kimber colony and now finding out that Matt was a spy and everything else that happened because of it..." Neil trailed off, unsure of how to voice his concerns.

"Are you afraid that he's going to quit?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I think that's a very real possibility. He's good at his job, he's done his best and not only wasn't it good enough, but if the rumors are true, the only reason Matt wasn't able to get away with his plan was because of you, Ensign Cooper and that kid in the bed over there." Neil said as he glanced at Benny who was watching them.

"That kid's name is Benny and he's worried about you." Vincent said quietly.

"He is?" Neil asked with surprise.

"Yeah. He saw how worried you are and wanted me to find out what's wrong." Vincent said simply.

"Why?" Neil asked with confusion.

"I guess because you were nice to us on the pool deck. That kind of makes you our friend and we worry about our friends." Vincent said frankly.

"Oh. Well, that's what I'm worried about. Like I said, I don't think there's anything you can do to help." Neil said with concern.

"Maybe not. But I can try. I doubt that I could make things worse." Vincent said in consideration.

Neil nodded his agreement.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I've got to make a quick sub-space call, then I'll talk to him."

"It looks like you have a plan." Neil said speculatively.

"Not yet, but that's why I need to make the call." Vincent said with a smile and hurried away.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Simms, can I talk to you for a minute?" Vincent asked from the doorway to his office.

"Is it important? I'm kind of busy at the moment." Lieutenant Simms said with distraction.

"I think this will only take a minute or two." Vincent said carefully.

Lieutenant Simms looked up from his terminal and asked, "What can I do for you Crewman? Is this about your report?"

"Um, no. I'm almost done with that. Is there any way we could talk to each other like people instead of like Lieutenant to Crewman?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Lieutenant Simms considered for a moment, then said, "We can do that. For the next few minutes we will disregard rank. Have a seat and tell me what's on your mind."

"What do you do when you do your best and it isn't good enough?" Vincent asked seriously.

"You're new. I don't think anyone expects you to know everything yet." Lieutenant Simms said thoughtfully.

"No, it's not that. It's more like, trouble seems to be following me around. Wherever I go there's another disaster." Vincent said carefully.

"I don't think that's the case. Several incidents have come up since we've left Earth and you seem to have been involved in most of them in one way or another. Things happen that way sometimes." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"So these things just happened and I was there? It's not my fault?" Vincent asked slowly.

"No. I've read the reports. Unless you're talking about some kind of bad karma or something like that I don't see any evidence that you're the cause of anything that's happened." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

"Are you?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Am I what?" Lieutenant Simms asked in confusion.

"Are you the cause of all this? Or is it like you said, a series of things just happened?" Vincent asked firmly.

"That's different Vincent. It's my job to make sure that this ship is kept safe from malicious attacks. Since we've left Earth we've had one security failure after another... and the worst part is, I've followed procedure all along the way. I've checked and rechecked and I can't find where I've made an error in my judgment... That being the case, it could happen again." Lieutenant Simms said distantly, working out his own thoughts more than talking to Vincent.

"So you followed procedure and did what you were supposed to do and everything still went wrong?" Vincent confirmed.

"That's right." Lieutenant Simms said as he looked down into Vincent's eyes.

"Then maybe that's your problem." Vincent said carefully.

"I don't follow." Lieutenant Simms said cautiously.

"The procedures. The guys who rigged the control circuits knew about the procedures so they knew what you would and wouldn't check. That let them work around security and get their stuff on the ship. Ensign Gianni knew the procedures and was able to figure out ways to disable the shields

and mess with the internal sensors. I think it's like football, the other team has your playbook. If you're thinking about leaving, you're not solving the problem, you're just giving it to someone else." Vincent said seriously.

Lieutenant Simms thought about it for a moment then slowly nodded his head.

"You've got a guy down in Sickbay who could probably give you some ideas about where you need to make changes." Vincent said carefully.

"Korrigon?" Lieutenant Simms asked incredulously.

"Yeah. I bet he knows all kinds of ways to work around Starfleet security. And from the way he was acting in the meeting, I bet all you'd have to do is ask him and he'd help you." Vincent said speculatively.

Lieutenant Simms nodded slowly in thought.

"I think my two minutes are up. Thanks for talking to me." Vincent said as he stood.

Lieutenant Simms nodded and said, "Thank you Vincent. You've given me some things to think about. You're a pretty smart kid."

"Well, I need to be honest about something. I didn't come up with all that stuff on my own. Before I came in here to talk to you I made a call and got some advice." Vincent said shyly.

"From who, if you don't mind me asking." Lieutenant Simms asked curiously.

"From my Uncle Brady." Vincent said with a smile.

"Brady Thompson?" Lieutenant Simms asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. Before I came on the *Yorktown* he said that I could call him if I ever needed anything." Vincent said and finished with a dismissive shrug.

"Vincent, you were smart enough to ask for help when you didn't know how to identify a problem for yourself. I think that's a skill that will serve you well in the future and one that I may need to consider using more often." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I hope it helped. I've got to go to the shuttle bay now. I'll have your report done before the end of the night." Vincent said as he walked for the door.

"I'll be looking forward to it." Lieutenant Simms said with a smile as he watched Vincent leave the room.

* * * * *

Vincent walked onto the shuttle and noticed that Lieutenant Walking Bear was sitting in the pilot's seat with his eyes closed.

As Vincent was about to leave, Lieutenant Walking Bear opened his eyes and said, "I'm glad you came to visit again."

"If you're sleeping I can come back later." Vincent said quietly.

"No. I was just resting for a few minutes. Have a seat and tell me what questions you brought with you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said peacefully.

"I wanted to know if you would tell me about the Great Spirit." Vincent said as he took the copilot's seat.

"Tell me what you already know." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"I don't think anyone's ever told me anything about him before." Vincent said in thought.

"Perhaps not. But don't tell me what you know here..." Lieutenant Walking Bear said as he placed his fingertips on Vincent's temple.

"...Tell me what you know here." He continued and placed his hand over Vincent's heart.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I guess that the Great Spirit is everywhere. Part of you and me and this shuttle and even the dust that we're traveling through."

"So you think that the Great Spirit is all matter?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked in a leading tone.

Vincent considered the words, then said, "No. Not just matter. The Great Spirit is also the movement of the stars and the colors of light."

"So matter and energy then..." Lieutenant Walking Bear said more quietly.

Vincent shook his head and said, "Probably more than that. The Great Spirit would probably be everything that has already happened and is happening and... I guess what will happen..."

"...Might happen." Lieutenant Walking Bear said carefully.

Vincent looked at him in question.

"The Great Spirit is all those things, but he is also a force of will that exists in all possible futures. It is by his guidance that we grow into something better than we currently are." Lieutenant Walking Bear said calmly.

"I still don't know what I should do. I mean, how I can know when I'm helping the Great Spirit or when I'm working against him." Vincent said seriously.

Lieutenant Walking Bear looked down at Vincent's leg for an instant, then reached into his shirt and pulled out a small leather pouch on a necklace.

"Do you know what this is?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked quietly.

"Rawhide leather?" Vincent asked curiously.

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled at the response and said, "Yes, it is that. But it's more. This is my medicine bag. Do you know what that means?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Not really. I've heard of a medicine bag before, but I never really thought about what it is."

"This carries my personal totems." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"What's a totem? Is that like the poles that I've seen in books?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Something like that. A totem is something that holds a special spiritual power. It can be an oddly shaped stone or a strand of someone's hair. The person who holds the totem is the only one who knows the power that it possesses." Lieutenant Walking Bear said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"So how do you get a totem?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"They are provided to you. Only you can recognize the power of a totem and it's power is just for you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said firmly.

"But how will I know when I find one?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Tell me Vincent, do you have something in your pocket right now? Something that you carry for luck?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah, I have..." Vincent began to say but was interrupted.

"I don't need to know what it is. That's your totem and it's power is yours. Keep it with you and when you need to draw on the strength that it provides, it will be there for you. As you continue your spiritual walk, you will find other totems and may get a pouch like this to store them in so you'll always have them with you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said softly.

"I think I understand... But how did you know I had one?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Instincts and omens. I carry my medicine bag all the time and generally don't give it a thought. While I was talking to you, I felt it. I noticed it's presence. That prompted me to discuss totems with you. Make sure you carry your totem because it is there for a reason." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"I will." Vincent said in thought.

"And a time may come when someone else needs the strength of your totem. Don't be afraid to give it away. When the Great Spirit is leading you to do such a thing, you end up gaining much more than you give away." Lieutenant Walking Bear said distantly.

Vincent studied Lieutenant Walking Bear's expression for a moment, then quietly asked, "Have you ever done that?"

Lieutenant Walking Bear seemed surprised by the question, then quietly answered, "No, I have never been blessed in that way."

Vincent nodded and stood.

"I have a feeling that it will be quite a while before we see each other again Crewman Winters." Lieutenant Walking Bear said as he stood.

"Yeah. I feel that too. But I know you'll be there when I have more questions." Vincent said peacefully.

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled and said, "I am honored with the blessing of being one of your guides on your spiritual path."

"I think the Great Spirit is honoring us both." Vincent said, then on impulse said, "Dif-tor heh smusma - Lieutenant Walking Bear."

"Peace and Long Life - Crewman Winters." Lieutenant Walking Bear said reverently.

Vincent gave a small smile, then walked out of the shuttle.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent, how are you doing?" A familiar voice called from behind him.

Vincent turned from his dinner to see Brock, Gary and Randy approaching from the serving line.

"I'm fine. Would you guys like to sit with me?" Vincent asked happily.

"Yeah, thanks. How are things going?" Randy asked as he sat his tray on the table.

"Pretty good. I'm just having dinner before I get back to working on my reports." Vincent said with a happy smile.

"I've been hearing some stuff about you today and wanted to know how much is true." Gary asked quickly.

"What have you heard?" Vincent asked with a smile, then took a bite of his grilled cheese sandwich.

"Okay, true or false. Did you capture an intruder all by yourself?" Gary asked with an expectant smile.

Vincent thought about the question and finally answered, "True."

"Cool. I heard that you shot him with a phaser when he was trying to beam aboard." Brock said as he leaned forward with interest.

"Yeah. That's it. He was beaming in, there was a phaser laying out on the desk beside me, I made sure it wasn't set to kill, then shot him." Vincent said seriously.

"Wow. I've been on the ship over a year and never had anything like that happen to me." Gary said in wonder.

"Beginners luck." Vincent said with a smile.

"True or false. Did you hit the security guy who took hostages so hard that you knocked him out?" Randy asked with a grand smile.

"False." Vincent said seriously, then continued, "I hit him in the jaw and knocked him over, but he wasn't knocked out."

"Close enough." Brock said happily.

"Yeah." Gary interjected.

"Okay, my turn. True or false. Did you really get married?" Brock asked curiously.

"True." Vincent said with a big happy smile.

"Come on. Give. What happened?" Randy asked with excitement.

"My Vulcan grandfather arranged my marriage. It's a Vulcan tradition." Vincent said, trying to keep his smile restrained.

"But you wanted to, didn't you?" Randy asked with concern.

"Oh yeah. But I think that because I'm Human, grandfather wouldn't have arranged the marriage unless I wanted him to. It just wouldn't be logical." Vincent said in thought.

"Okay, it's my turn again. True or false..." Gary began to say, but was interrupted by the public address speakers.

"***Crewman Vincent Winters, report to sickbay. Crewman Vincent Winters, report to sickbay.***" A female voice said tonelessly.

"We'll have to save the rest for later. I've got stuff to do." Vincent said as he stood and started to gather his dishes onto his tray.

"We'll take care of it. Go on." Randy said with a smile.

"Okay, thanks. I'll talk to you guys later." Vincent said, then hurried away.

"Five bucks says that he's about to have another adventure." Brock said seriously.

"No bet. I think that's a given... you know, suddenly I think I'm not feeling quite right. I think I need to go to sickbay... you know. Just to be safe." Randy said speculatively.

"Yeah, me too... I bet it's this roast beef." Gary said with a playful smile.

"Well, someone needs to go with you two to make sure you get there okay." Brock said with a chuckle.

"Let's hurry before we miss seeing him in action." Randy said quickly as he picked up the remains of his dinner.

The other two quickly followed suit and were soon rushing to the nearest turbo lift.

* * * * *

Vincent walked to Dr. Perry and seriously said, "Crewman Winters reporting as ordered."

"At ease Crewman. It wasn't me who called you. If you'll go into my office, Ensign Collins is waiting for you." Dr. Perry said with a smile.

"Thank you Doctor." Vincent said seriously, then walked to Dr. Perry's office as he tried to remember who Ensign Collins was.

As he walked in the door of the office he smiled as he recognized her. Ensign Collins was the woman who had sat with him and his Daddy Joe on the trip from San Francisco to TerraMain.

"It's nice to see you again Ensign Collins." Vincent said happily.

"Please Vincent, call me Dani. I'm not conducting Starfleet business right now." She said warmly.

"Oh, okay Dani. Why did you need me here?" Vincent asked curiously.

"To take some measurements of you." She said as she pulled out a tricorder.

"What kind of measurements?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Well, if all goes as planned, you're going to be attending a ceremony in a few hours and you'll need ceremonial Vulcan wedding clothes." Ensign Collins said with a smile.

"Really? Captain Byrne was able to figure out a way to do it?" Vincent asked happily.

"Hold still or you're going to look like your wearing a potato sack at your wedding." She said sternly, then in a more pleasant voice she said, "Yes. Captain Byrne explained that you and your wife didn't get to have a key part of your wedding ceremony, so the *Enterprise* and the *Yorktown* are both being diverted from their courses to meet up so you two can have your bonding ceremony... isn't that just the most romantic thing ever?"

Vincent thought about the statement, then smiled as he realized that his bonding ceremony was giving a public reason for the two ships to meet up.

"I'm finished. I'd love to stay here and ask you about a million questions, but I've got to hurry and get T'Lani's measurements if I'm going to have your wedding clothes done before the ceremony." Dani said with excitement as she rushed out of the room.

* * * * *

Vincent walked out of Dr. Perry's office to find Randy, Brock and Gary looking at him expectantly.

"We kind of figured that you were about to have another adventure and thought maybe that if we were here, we could be part of it." Randy said shyly.

Vincent giggled at the statement, then said, "The Captain is just trying to work it out so T'Lani and I can have a bonding ceremony. We didn't get to have one when we got married."

The three men looked at each other and almost seemed to be speaking telepathically.

"Husband, are you well?" T'Lani asked as she approached him.

"I'm fine. Did Ensign Collins get your measurements?" Vincent asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes, though she did not explain the purpose. She seemed to be in quite a hurry." T'Lani said seriously.

"She's going to make our clothes for our bonding ceremony." Vincent said with a smile.

"You have made arrangements for a ceremony?" T'Lani asked with surprise.

"I talked to the Captain and he's working on it. Since Ensign Collins is taking our measurements, it looks like it's probably going to happen." Vincent said happily.

T'Lani reconfirmed her emotional control and said, "It pleases me that you have done this husband."

"It pleases me to do this for you, my wife." Vincent said, then took her hand and placed it on his cheek and held it there.

T'Lani caressed his cheek for a moment with her thumb, then noticed the three men shyly watching them.

Vincent followed her gaze and said, "T'Lani, these are my friends from Engineering Supply, Gary, Randy and Brock. Guys, this is my wife, Ensign T'Lani.

"Wow." Randy said in wonder as he looked at the beautiful Vulcan woman.

The other two snickered at his reaction, then Gary said, "It's nice to meet you Ensign T'Lani. Vincent has been our friend since we first met him, so now that you're married, that includes you too."

"If my husband claims you as his friends, then it is logical for me to do likewise." T'Lani said formally.

"So you two are about to have some kind of wedding ceremony?" Randy asked quickly.

"The bonding ceremony is traditionally a component part of the Vulcan wedding." T'Lani said carefully.

"Cool. Then, if you don't have anything else planned, we could throw together a bachelor party." Gary said happily.

"I'm not a bachelor." Vincent said firmly.

Gary rolled his eyes, then said, "Okay, call it whatever you want, it's just a little celebration before your bonding ceremony."

Vincent looked at T'Lani and asked, "Is it acceptable?"

T'Lani considered for a moment, then said, "There is no Vulcan equivalent for this tradition, but perhaps it fulfills some Human need to receive the acceptance of one's peers before the impending ceremony."

"Okay guys. But you've got to promise, no drinking, no strippers, no porn." Vincent said firmly.

"Where would we get those things?" Gary asked innocently.

"That wasn't a promise." Vincent said firmly.

"Very observant, husband." T'Lani said with approval.

"Yeah. We promise. It'll be a nice party and we won't do anything that your wife would disapprove of." Gary said reluctantly.

"Okay." Vincent said with relief.

"Be well husband. Thank you for making the arrangements for our bonding." T'Lani said quietly as she caressed his cheek again.

"I don't know what the bond will feel like, but I don't think it's possible to love you more than I already do. Be well, my wife." Vincent said as he put his hand over hers and snuggled against her palm for a moment.

"We seriously need to find some girlfriends." Gary said at the touching sight.

"At least." Randy said with a note of longing in his voice.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent, congratulations!" Rad said as he and Darin walked into the cargo bay that was filled with music and happily chattering people.

"Hi guys!" Vincent said happily.

"We were going to go get something to eat and heard about a 'married-bachelor' party and decided to check it out." Rad said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. The supply guys came up with this. Are you guys hungry? They've got snacks over there by the cargo transporter." Vincent said happily.

"Sounds good." Rad said and was about to go when the music changed to something with a hard pounding beat.

"What do you say Darin? Want to dance?" Rad asked with a smile.

"I don't really know how." Darin said shyly.

"Just move to the music. Come on." Rad said and guided Darin out into the middle of the room.

A few other people followed their example and moved as couples to start dancing to the music.

Vincent hurried over to Gary, Randy and Brock who were watching everyone with happy smiles.

"Come on guys, let's dance." Vincent said happily.

"Vincent, we're not..." Randy said uncomfortably.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "I'm not talking about close dancing. But there's more guys than girls here and I want to have some fun."

"Care to dance?" Gary asked Brock and extended his elbow in a gentlemanly manner.

"You dork." Brock said and took hold of the elbow to drag Gary out to the dance floor.

"Let's do it." Randy said with a smile and followed Vincent to begin dancing.

Rad saw that Vincent was dancing and smiled with delight.

He even stopped dancing long enough to show Darin.

The party went into full swing after that as more and more people arrived and were caught up in the uninhibited atmosphere.

* * * * *

"***Crewman Winters and Ensign Cooper, report to conference room one***." Interrupted the music in the cargo bay.

Randy quickly moved to the computer console and stopped the music then called out, "It looks like it's time for our guest of honor to go and have his bonding ceremony. Come on everyone and let's send him off with a cheer!"

"Hip Hip HOORAY!"

"Hip Hip HOORAY!!"

The sounds of the cheers could still be heard in the distance as Vincent and Darin boarded the turbo lift.

"That was the best party I've ever been to." Darin said as effervescent bubbles of laughter welled up within him.

"Conference room one." Vincent said with a smile, then looked at Darin and said, "It's the first real party that I've ever been to, but I can't even imagine a better one."

"You were dancing like you've been doing it all your life." Darin said with a glorious smile.

"You were looking pretty good too. You and Rad look really good together." Vincent said happily.

"Thanks. Your approval means a lot to me Little Brother." Darin said peacefully.

As the doors to the turbo lift opened, Vincent said, "You've got it, Big Brother."

* * * * *

Vincent and Darin walked into the conference room to find Captain Byrne and Captain Spock waiting for them.

"I can't say that I understand all that is about to happen because, quite frankly, very few Humans have ever been witness to this ceremony. But Captain Spock is here to prepare Crewman Winters for what is to come." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Nephew, it will be necessary for me to awaken the Plak Tow within you." Spock said reverently.

"Um, I'm all sweaty and stuff. Should I go shower before we start?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"That will not be necessary Nephew. Your mate will be instinctively drawn to your natural scent. Proceeding as you are will only enhance the effectiveness of the coming ceremony." Spock said carefully.

Vincent nodded that he understood.

"Be at ease Nephew. There is no need for apprehension." Spock said as he slowly raised his hand to the side of Vincent's face.

Vincent smiled and said, "I think I'd worry if it was anyone else but I trust you Captain Spock."

Spock slightly inclined his head in acknowledgement of the statement, then in a trance-like voice he whispered, "My mind to your mind... My thoughts to your thoughts..."

* * * * *

"Are you okay Vincent?" Darin asked as the turbo lift left the conference room.

"Yeah. I can feel it though." Vincent said carefully.

"What's it like?" Darin asked quietly.

"It's like my blood's on fire. It's like every cell in my body knows what I have to do." Vincent said in concentration.

"What do you have to do?" Darin asked cautiously.

"Join with my wife. Become one. That's the only thing that will keep the fire from consuming me from within." Vincent said in a distant voice as the turbo lift doors opened.

"You don't sound like yourself. Did Captain Spock give you those words?" Darin asked as he led the way to Deflector Control.

"He gave me understanding of what is happening to me and what is to come." Vincent said in a measured tone.

"Well, just so you know, you sound really Vulcan right now." Darin said with concern.

"Don't worry Big Brother, trust that our family won't let anything bad happen." Vincent said and glanced up at Darin with an assuring smile.

"Okay. I think I can do that." Darin said with a smile and led the way into Deflector Control.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent! It seems like every time I turn around you're getting married." Connie said happily.

"Who told you?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Well, let's see... Rad, Joe, Thaelan, Debbie, Benny, JonJon, Lieutenant Simms, Ensign Collins..." Susan said absently.

"Everyone knows?" Vincent asked in wonder.

"Well, I think there might be a hermit on the far side of Mizar who hasn't heard yet, but I'm sure he'll be filled in before the end of the day." Connie said with a smile.

"Word of the party probably spread. Let's get you dressed, they're waiting on us." Darin said seriously.

"Oh, um, yeah." Vincent said with distraction then turned to walk into the supply room where he knew his wedding clothes would be waiting for him.

"Congratulations." Jimmy called to Vincent's back as he walked into the supply room.

"Thanks."

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"*I have a diplomatic message for Crewman Winters.*" A voice called over the comm professionally.

"He's in the next room. Put it through to deflector control auxiliary two if you would." Connie said quickly.

Jimmy jumped up from his station and ran to the supply room doorway.

"Vincent, you have a diplomatic message." Jimmy said quickly.

"Thanks Jimmy." Vincent said absently as he walked to the auxiliary station.

"*Hi Vincent, I just thought after all the stuff that happened yesterday that I'd check to see how you're doing. Has everything calmed down?*" Cory asked happily.

"A security guy tried to gas all of us, then he shot my Daddy Joe, kidnapped my brother Darin, shot my friend Benny and I hit him and knocked him over and now he's dead and then this other guy tried to beam onto our ship and I stunned him with a phaser and Mr. Chilton from the Federation tutoring center was a dickweed so I enrolled at the Vulcan Academy of Science and right now I've got the Vulcan Blood Fever so I'm going to go get bonded. Gotta go. Bye." Vincent finished gruffly, then slammed the comm button to disconnect the transmission.

"Winters out." Vincent mumbled absently as he walked for the door.

"He's going to have to replay that a dozen times before he can begin to make any kind of sense of it." Darin said as he hurried to follow.

"They're waiting on us. Let's go." Vincent said as sweat was starting to form on his forehead and upper lip.

"Um, yeah." Darin said cautiously and followed Vincent down the catwalk.

* * * * *

"Are you feeling alright. You look kind of flushed." Darin said as he led Vincent off the turbo lift.

"I'm... the fire... it's growing." Vincent said in a gruff voice.

"Captain Spock is right there by the shuttle. He'll know what to do." Darin said as he started walking faster.

As they got closer to the shuttle, Darin quickly said, "I think something is wrong with Vincent."

"Nephew, please trust that this is the proper way. Vincent must experience the Blood Fever to fully accept the bonding." Spock said seriously and extended his arm to indicate for them to enter the shuttle.

Vincent seemed not to notice the gesture, so Darin gently guided Vincent to walk.

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"Is he supposed to be sweating like that?" Darin asked in a whisper.

"Yes Nephew. His body is generating the scent that his mate will imprint upon." Spock said seriously.

Joe looked at Spock with question, and finally said, "It sounds so... animal."

"Mating is one of the most primal urges of any species. It is logical that our mating rituals recognize and accommodate this fact." Spock said calmly.

"Why isn't T'Lani going down with us?" Darin asked carefully.

"The separation is necessary at this point of the Blood Fever so my nephew will be in the proper state of mind when he participates in the ceremony." Spock said calmly.

"Is this... Plak Tow the reason that the family elders were worried about Vincent bonding before he reached puberty?" Darin asked speculatively.

"That is correct. The consequences of awakening the Blood Fever in a prepubescent Human could have adverse and life long consequences to his psyche. The increased hormone production and resulting change in body chemistry associated with puberty will allow Vincent to endure the Plak Tow without lasting effect." Spock said seriously.

Joe and Darin both watched Vincent sitting quietly with a look of intense concentration as sweat beaded on his face.

* * * * *

"I thought we were going to the *Enterprise*." Darin said as he stepped out of the shuttle onto the sandy ground.

"Father found this location to be acceptable for our purposes." Spock said as he emerged from the shuttle.

Joe guided Vincent out of the shuttle, steering him by the shoulders.

"Are you well enough to be out of sickbay?" Darin asked Joe in a whisper.

"I'd be here on two broken legs to attend Vincent's wedding." Joe said seriously.

"You didn't answer me." Darin said as he looked Joe in the eyes.

"I'm fine. As soon as the ceremony is over I'm going back to sickbay. Dr. Perry approved me being here." Joe said sincerely.

"Okay. I'm glad you're going to be here for this. I wouldn't want to miss it either." Darin said with a smile.

A moment later several columns of light appeared revealing Ambassador Sarek, Captain Kirk, Captain Byrne, Commander Dodds, Lieutenant Keith Wilson and Rory.

"Follow." Ambassador Sarek said and led the way to an outcropping of rocks some twenty meters away.

"Is it really okay for us to be here for this?" Darin asked Joe in a whisper as they guided Vincent between them.

"It is permitted." Vincent replied in a neutral tone. "The male's closest friends and family are permitted to attend this ceremony."

"You're sounding even more Vulcan now Little Brother. Are you really alright?" Darin asked with concern.

"Yes. But I must prepare myself mentally. We will begin soon." Vincent said as the group emerged into a wide clearing surrounded by rocks.

"Captain Spock, can you tell us more about this ceremony?" Joe asked as he surveyed the area.

"It is a ceremony that is deeply rooted in Vulcan tradition." Spock replied solemnly as Vincent walked over to look at a large metal disc that was suspended from a tubular frame.

"It was the best Scotty could come up with on such short notice." Chip said as he noticed Vincent's careful inspection.

"It will be sufficient." Spock said seriously.

Vincent took the hammer that had been hanging on the side of the frame and struck the gong with all his might, causing it to go off.

Within minutes, the wedding party, led by Sarek's wife, the Lady Amanda walked into the clearing.

T'Lani followed next, dressed in traditional Vulcan wedding attire. Accompanying T'Lani was Dr. Perry, Dr. Raul and Nurse Young.

Once the Lady Amanda was in place, she turned her attention to Vincent and asked, "Are thee prepared, young one?"

Spock whispered to Joe and Darin, "As matriarch of the house of Surak, Mother is performing the ancient rite in the traditional fashion as is her proper place."

Vincent, looking at T'Lani with a deep and intense desire in his eyes, strained to keep his emotions in check. The Blood Fever was running rampant inside him, causing him to sweat profusely. "I am, Ko'mekh-il (Grandmother). My eyes are flame. My heart is flame."

"Come forward, Vincent," the Lady Amanda instructed. Vincent slowly walked over to her and knelt in front of her. Amanda looked to her husband and waited as he walked to her side.

"Being Human, Mother is unable to perform the telepathic aspects of the bonding, so father is doing this in her stead. She will conduct the ceremony, but he will perform the bonding. The balance seems somehow symbolic." Spock finished speculatively.

Sarek placed his left hand on Vincent's pressure points, initiating a mind meld.

Amanda then turned and said, "T'Lani, come forward."

T'Lani walked to where Ambassador Sarek and the Lady Amanda were standing side by side and knelt in front of them, beside Vincent.

Sarek placed his right hand on T'Lani's pressure points and initiated a mind meld.

Amanda then looked down on the couple in front of her and said, "Face one another, my children."

Vincent and T'Lani turned to face each other.

Sarek released his melds on the pair as the Lady Amanda reverently said, "T'Lani, bond with thy mate. Make him one with you."

T'Lani placed her right hand on the pressure points on the left side of Vincent's face.

Within seconds, T'Lani was whispering, "My mind to your mind, my heart to your heart, my love to your love."

Vincent instinctively placed his right hand on the pressure points on the left side of T'Lani's face and repeated what T'Lani had said. "My mind to your mind, my heart to your heart, my love to your love."

The couple remained in their trance for several minutes with their eyes closed.

Once they broke the meld with each other, Vincent and T'Lani turned to face his grandmother and said, "It is done, Ko'mekh-il."

Vincent whispered in a distant voice, "I can feel T'Lani in the back of my mind, a warmth I've never felt before. One of contentment and love. I feel the love she has for me."

The Lady Amanda turned and gently asked, "And you, T'Lani?"

T'Lani looked up at Amanda, with her eyes also glazed over, and quietly said, "I feel the warmth. I feel Vincent in my mind as though he had always been there. I feel the love he has for me as well."

Ambassador Sarek returned his hands to the pressure points on the couple as Amanda looked to the assembled crowd and announced, "Vincent and T'Lani have bonded and are one with each other. The Blood Fever that possessed Vincent has passed."

Once Sarek broke his second meld with them, Vincent and T'Lani faced each other again, their lips joining in a long, tender kiss.

After many silent minutes, Vincent and T'Lani finally stood as one and walked to the gathered friends and family.

"Thank you Grandfather Sarek and Grandma Amanda for bestowing this honor on me and my wife." Vincent said reverently.

"We wish to thank Captain Kirk and Captain Byrne for allowing us the opportunity to be bonded. There are no words to adequately express our appreciation." T'Lani said honestly.

"We also want to thank our Vulcan family, Captain Spock, Commander Dodds and Lieutenant Wilson, for being here to show your support of our marriage." Vincent said sincerely.

"I wish to thank Rory Teeter who is here to represent my husband's Clan. You grant us a great honor with your presence." T'Lani said as she looked Rory in the eyes.

"I want to thank my Human family, Daddy Joe and Darin for being here to see me get married. And don't worry I still love you both." Vincent finished with an impish grin.

"And I wish to say to my co-workers and friends, Dr. Perry, Dr. Raul and Nurse Young. You, my Human family have adequately served in the place of my Vulcan family who could not be present. You have done me a great service... Thank you." T'Lani said as she looked each in the eyes as she said their names.

Vincent took firm hold of T'Lani's hand and said, "Thank you. All of you who have attended. It is our sincere wish that each and every one of you have the opportunity to know the love and peace that we have found today. We love you all... now let's go home."

Chapter 20

In the week and a half since leaving Earth, things on the *Yorktown* had finally fallen into a familiar routine.

Each morning Vincent would wake early and go to the gym to train in hand-to-hand combat with Thaelan. After a good physical workout, both would enjoy a leisurely breakfast with Joe and Darin before their duty shift. Vincent would work half the day at his duty station, then after lunch he would move to an auxiliary station to work on his lessons for school. The only excitement that occurred is when Joe thought that Vincent had started choking during his lessons. It turned out that Vincent was just trying to perfect the 'K'Agh' sound for his conversational Klingon class.

After work each day Vincent would spend some time with Benny, JonJon and Channing either in the J Deck observation lounge or in the Rec Hall watching people. Even though Channing had been certified as fit for duty, he continued to spend his off duty time with the boys, enjoying it as much as they did.

Vincent and T'Lani would have dinner together each evening after her duty shift ended, then they would spend an hour or so together either meditating while joined in their bond or quietly talking in one of the many observation lounges on the ship.

Each night Joe would check on Vincent after he had fallen asleep and find him snuggled into his pillow with a contented smile.

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After a series of warm up stretches and one time through the standard fighting stances, Thaelan motioned for Vincent to walk with him to the other side of the gym.

"Thus far you have been practicing different techniques and stances. Today you will have an enemy to fight." Thaelan said seriously.

"I'm going to fight you?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

"No. There will come a point when we will spar to develop your timing and fighting technique. But for now, *this* will be your enemy." Thaelan said as he indicated a heavy workout bag.

"He does look kinda mean." Vincent said with a smile.

"This bag is your enemy. He has offended you personally and besmirched your family name." Thaelan said intensely.

"Um, Thaelan. My family's name was smirched up pretty bad before this bag ever showed up." Vincent said honestly.

"Very well, then he has insulted your Daddy Joe." Thaelan said seriously.

Vincent got a determined look in his eyes and moved to attack.

"Ha CHA." Vincent screamed as he punched with the heel of his hand the way Thaelan had taught him.

"You have the proper intent, but you need to focus your attack deeper. You are not trying to slap your enemy, your target is inside. Try again, but this time focus your attack a few centimeters inside your target." Thaelan said patiently.

"Okay, but you need to get me started again... What did he say about Daddy Joe?" Vincent asked as he held his focus on the bag in front of him.

"This miserable training bag said that your Daddy Joe was an undisciplined officer and unworthy to be in Starfleet." Thaelan said grimly.

"Ha CHA!" Vincent screamed as he attacked the bag again. After he had impacted the bag with the heel of his right hand, Vincent followed through with an uppercut with his left hand.

Thaelan nodded his approval and watched carefully so he could offer suggestions.

Vincent's eyes narrowed and he gritted his teeth as he began to lose himself in the experience.

Thaelan watched silently as Vincent continued to hit the work out bag with more and more intensity.

"Vincent..." Thaelan said hesitantly as he noticed the fury in Vincent's expression.

Sweat started running into Vincent's eyes as he pounded the bag faster and harder.

"Vincent, the training bag is sorry and has taken back everything he said about Joe. You need to stop now." Thaelan said with concern.

A series of growls emanated from Vincent as he put the force of his entire body behind the punches.

"Crewman Winters. Stop!" Thaelan said forcefully.

Vincent suddenly stopped and looked at Thaelan with wild eyes as he was shaking with his rage.

"Breathe Vincent. Draw calm and peace into yourself with each breath." Thaelan said slowly.

Vincent had his hands clenched at his sides as his body stood rigid.

"Vincent. Calm yourself." Thaelan said quietly.

A confused look came over Vincent's face, then his eyes started to well up with tears.

Thaelan didn't understand exactly what was happening in Vincent's mind, but he recognized emotional pain when he saw it.

Without thought, Thaelan stepped forward and pulled Vincent into a comforting hug.

Vincent started crying and buried his face into Thaelan's chest.

Thaelan put his hand on the back of Vincent's head and quietly said, "I think this exercise has awakened some forgotten pain within you. It is good to let it out. You don't need to keep it inside."

Vincent heard the words and nodded as he continued to cry.

"If you want to talk about your pain, I am here to listen. I swear to you that nothing you say will go any further." Thaelan said in a whisper.

"I saw... I was thinking about my dad... not Daddy Joe. My real dad... I saw him and... and..." Vincent said before erupting into a fresh wave of tears.

Thaelan closed his eyes in pain as he remembered Joe telling him that Vincent had been physically and emotionally abused by his biological father.

"Vincent. This is a safe place to let out your pain. I will help you. We will continue to do these exercises until you have worked out all the hurt and pain that you carry... And I will be here to listen whenever you need me." Thaelan finished quietly.

"Thank you Thaelan." Vincent said as he began to regain control.

"You saw my pain when we met and sought to ease it. Now it is only right that I do the same for you." Thaelan said gently.

"I don't even know what that was... I just... I wanted to hurt it. I wanted to make the bag feel pain." Vincent said in confusion as he tried to identify what he had been feeling.

"Vincent. Every starship carries a staff of mental health professionals..." Thaelan began to say.

"You think I'm crazy?" Vincent asked as he pulled away.

"No. Not crazy. But I think that this... rage that you carry has a source. Our training is allowing you to release your feelings in a physical manner, and I believe that this is a good thing. But I also think you should consider seeking advice about how to deal with what is at the core of what you are feeling." Thaelan said carefully.

"I... What if I just stop training? I mean, if I don't train, then that won't happen again, right?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Vincent, I believe that keeping this bottled up within you would be the worst thing that you could possibly do because it will allow the rage to grow inside you and get stronger... until one day something may trigger this feeling again and it could end up being too powerful for you to control." Thaelan said seriously.

Vincent nodded slowly.

"You have the opportunity to deal with this while it is still relatively minor. Please consider carefully and do the wise thing." Thaelan said imploringly.

"You're not going to make me?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No Vincent. This decision must be yours. I will offer my advice, but in the end, I will abide by whatever decision you make." Thaelan said seriously.

Vincent slowly nodded, then said, "Thank you Thaelan. I really don't want to do it... but I guess being an adult isn't always about what you want. Sometimes it's about what you need."

Thaelan smiled at the statement and said, "If only more adults came to that realization, the universe would be a much more peaceful place."

Vincent smiled at the statement, then looked at the clock to see how much time they had left.

Thaelan followed his gaze and said, "I think we've done enough for today."

"When I go to talk to someone about this will you go with me?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"I had assumed that you would want Joe to go with you." Thaelan said as he started walking toward the shower room.

"I don't want to hurt him..." Vincent said quietly, then hurried to say, "I don't want to hurt you either, but I don't think it will hurt you as bad as it would Daddy Joe or Darin."

Thaelan smiled at the statement, then said, "I understand what you mean and I agree with your reasoning. If your counselor will allow it, I would be honored to go through this experience with you."

"Thank you Thaelan. I'm sorry if I'm being a little kid by not wanting to do this alone." Vincent said shyly.

Thaelan smiled and said, "Asking for the support of ones friends and family is not a sign of immaturity, quite the reverse."

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment then smiled.

"Unless you want to watch me disrobe, I suggest you move to another cubicle." Thaelan said as he began to take off his shirt.

Vincent looked around and realized that he was in the changing area of the shower room.

"Um. No thanks Thaelan. I'm sure you've got a nice butt and everything..." Vincent trailed off as he walked away.

Thaelan smiled at the statement, then got to the business of changing out of his workout clothes.

* * * * *

"Did you two have a good workout this morning?" Joe asked as he approached the table with a tray of food.

Vincent looked at Thaelan with question, not knowing how he should respond to that.

"Vincent has progressed to the next level of his training." Thaelan said calmly.

"Way to go Champ." Joe said with a smile of pride at Vincent.

"Hey guys." A friendly voice said from nearby.

"Hi Channing, how are you guys doing this morning?" Darin asked happily as he watched Channing placing a tray of food on the next table.

"I'm fine but the guys are a little bit down." Channing said as he glanced back at Benny and JonJon taking their places at the table.

"What's wrong?" Joe asked with concern.

"Well, since it looks like we have about three more weeks till we reach the new colony, the governors of the colony decided that the kids need to be in school." Channing said with a shrug.

"You don't have to go to school do you JonJon?" Vincent asked slowly.

"No. But Benny's going to be in school and Channing's going to be at work. There's nothing for me and Fizgig to do all day." JonJon said frankly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Let me check on some stuff and maybe I can come up with something for you."

"Like what?" Channing asked curiously.

"I don't know for sure, but I bet I'll find something. I have an idea." Vincent said with a smile.

"Uh oh. When my little brother has an idea, we're all in trouble." Darin said in a teasing voice.

"Watch it. I know where you sleep." Vincent said with menace.

Darin blushed as Joe looked at him inquiringly.

Vincent looked back and forth between the two, trying to figure out what was going on.

"I kind of spent the night with Rad." Darin said shyly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "How did you 'kind of' spend the night with Rad?"

"Darin came back to deflector control about half an hour before you got up for your training." Joe said with a mischievous smile.

"I'm sorry if I woke you up. I was trying to be quiet." Darin said shyly.

"Don't worry about it, you didn't wake me. Lou told me about it when I got up." Joe said with a smile.

"So did you guys, um... Do it?" Vincent asked uncomfortably.

"What do you and T'Lani do when you're alone?" Darin asked seriously.

Vincent looked at Darin with surprise at the question.

"Rad and I stayed up late talking and lost track of time. But when something physical does happen between us, I would rather it be just between the two of us." Darin said gently.

"I'm sorry Darin. I didn't mean to be nosey. It's just that I really like Rad and... I guess I want to know how things are going. I promise I won't ask again." Vincent finished quietly.

"That's fine little brother. I tell you what, right now Rad and I are dating each other exclusively. If and when the day comes that we choose to make a more formal commitment, you'll be the first person to know." Darin finished with a smile.

"That'd be great." Vincent finished happily.

"Where is Rad this morning?" Channing asked curiously from the next table.

"Chief Morgan wanted to talk to him before his shift this morning. They're having breakfast in the Engineering conference room." Darin said irritably.

"Don't worry Darin. You'll get to see him after work." Vincent said with a sympathetic smile, understanding how much Darin wanted to spend every off-duty moment with Rad.

"Guys. It's almost that time." Joe said as he gathered his breakfast dishes.

"Already?" Vincent asked irritably.

"What's wrong? You're usually eager to get to work in the morning." Joe asked with concern.

"I just feel... I don't know... kind of achy. I think maybe I worked out too hard." Vincent said as he considered how he was feeling.

"Then why don't you go on up to sickbay for a quick scan before you take your station this morning?" Joe asked quietly.

"It doesn't really hurt or anything, it's just... there." Vincent said slowly.

"Crewman Winters. Report to sickbay." Joe said firmly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said reluctantly.

"I'll go with you Vincent." JonJon said as he gathered his dishes.

"Okay... Where's Fizgig?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"I took him to the observation lounge with me this morning and he fell asleep. He was sleeping so good when it was time to go to breakfast that I didn't want to wake him. We could go check on him on the way to sickbay if that's okay." JonJon asked hopefully as they stood.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Vincent said with a smile as he carried his dishes away from the table.

* * * * *

"Husband, are you well?" T'Lani asked when she saw Vincent and JonJon walk into the sickbay.

"I think so, I think I just worked out a little bit too hard this morning. My joints are kinda achy." Vincent said as he looked into her eyes.

"Please lie down on a biobed so I may take some preliminary readings." T'Lani said seriously.

Vincent climbed onto the biobed and waited as T'Lani initiated the scans.

T'Lani looked at the readings carefully, then said, "I will return shortly."

Vincent nodded, then watched as she left the room.

"Does it hurt a lot?" JonJon asked quietly.

"No, it's kind of like the way you feel a few hours after you've skinned your knee. It doesn't really hurt that bad, but you can still feel that it's there." Vincent said consideringly.

"What do we have here?" Dr. Raul asked as he walked into the room.

"I think I might have worked out too hard this morning. I'm feeling a little achy." Vincent said quietly.

Dr. Raul looked at the readings carefully, then at T'Lani who was approaching with a data padd.

"Here is the chart." She said quietly.

"I see." Dr. Raul said, then began to work the controls on the head of the biobed.

"What's wrong with me?" Vincent asked carefully.

"Just give me a moment and I'll be able to tell you for sure." Dr. Raul said in concentration.

JonJon moved from Vincent's side to get a better view of the biobed's readings.

"You did a good job spotting this T'Lani. I would have been inclined to accept your husband's explanation about the workout." Dr. Raul said in thought.

"What is it?" Vincent asked as he turned to see the monitor for himself.

"Crewman Winters. I would suggest that you make arrangements to get some new uniforms made soon. It appears that you are beginning a growth spurt." Dr. Raul said with a smile as he pulled a hypospray out of the bedside cabinet.

"I'm getting taller?" Vincent asked with confusion.

"Exactly right. I'm going to give you a very mild pain reliever that should help with the discomfort and a vitamin supplement to compensate for what is being used by the tissue building that is going on in your body." Dr. Raul said professionally as he pressed the hypospray into Vincent's neck.

"Don't be concerned if you find that you have an increased appetite for the next few weeks. Your body simply needs building materials." Dr. Raul said professionally.

"Okay. Thank you Doctor." Vincent said as he sat up on the biobed.

"I'm making a note in your file. If you have need of further pain medication, all you need to do is come to sickbay and ask for it. The nurse on duty will be able to get it for you." Dr. Raul said seriously.

"Thank you Dr. Raul. I need to get to work now." Vincent said as he realized that the achy sensation in his joints had stopped.

"Just come and see us if anything else concerns you. That's what we're here for." Dr. Raul said with a kind smile.

Vincent hopped down off the bed and walked to T'Lani.

"I'll see you tonight." Vincent said as he took her hand into his.

"At the conclusion of your duties, come to sickbay and we can assess your condition and administer more vitamins and medication if it is warranted." T'Lani said quietly.

"As you say, my Wife." Vincent said happily.

After a moment of holding T'Lani's hand and looking into her eyes, Vincent reluctantly let go and left to begin his day at work.

* * * * *

"So what's the verdict?" Joe asked curiously as Vincent and JonJon walked into Deflector Control.

"Growth spurt." Vincent said timidly.

"Oh. I guess we'd better look into getting you a new supply of uniforms." Joe said carefully.

"Yeah. That's what Dr. Raul suggested." Vincent said as he took his seat at station three.

"So what are you going to do today JonJon?" Joe asked casually.

"I don't know. With Vincent at work and Benny at school, there's not much for me to do." JonJon said as he cuddled Fizgig to his chest.

Vincent started typing on his station and drew the attention of everyone in the room.

When he had finished keying in his message and sent it off, he turned to see all eyes in the room focused on him.

"I kinda had an idea for JonJon, but it's not something I can really talk about." Vincent said shyly.

"Can you give me a hint?" JonJon asked carefully.

"Nope. You're just going to have to trust me." Vincent said with a smile as he started going through his system checks.

"I do trust you Vincent... but I still want to know." JonJon said impatiently.

"I'm showing a green board on all consoles. I'm beginning a subsystem diagnostic." Vincent said as he worked the controls of his station.

"Acknowledged." Thaelan said from the main console.

Vincent nodded, then saw the icon of an incoming text message on his screen.

After a moment to get all his diagnostics started, Vincent opened the message window, then began to smile.

"What is it?" JonJon asked hopefully.

"Well, I thought that since you don't need to go to school, that maybe you could get a job." Vincent said with a mischievous smile.

"A job? Doing what?" JonJon asked hesitantly.

"I don't know yet, but Cyril is going to meet you up on the recreation deck to talk about getting a job that you can do while everyone else is busy... and he said that you can bring Fizgig with you." Vincent finished with accomplishment.

"Really? Okay. I'll go see what he can figure out for me." JonJon said happily.

"Let me know what you come up with." Vincent said with a smile.

JonJon gave Vincent a quick nod, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

The hum of the engines abruptly changed as everyone looked around.

"***All hands, battle stations. This is not a drill. Battle stations***." Came over the comm.

After a moment, Connie and Jimmy hurried out of the supply room, adjusting their uniforms.

"Alpha, deflector control. Beta, Engineering. Gamma, Auxiliary Bridge. I'm on the main bridge, lets go." Joe said quickly.

"I've got one." Joe said as he grabbed a communicator on his way out the door.

Vincent and Darin hurried to their stations and began to assess the status of the shields.

Jimmy ran to the lockers and grabbed two tool cases.

Connie walked to the rack of communicators by the door and said, "Beta's got 2, 3 and 4."

A moment later Judy rushed into the room and grabbed a tool case.

She ran to the communicator rack then called out, "Gamma, 5 and 6." as she ran out the door.

The hum of the engines changed again and the 'red alert' klaxon sounded.

The level of tension in the room increased as everyone ran through their system checks.

The moment of intense concentration was broken by Debbie's voice on the intercom saying, "***All Hands. Brace for impact***."

"Hold on!" Ensign Thaelan called as he took hold of the main console.

Just as Darin and Vincent were taking firm hold of the consoles in front of them, the ship was rocked by a jolt.

A second jolt shook the room, then a beeping sounded at the main console.

Ensign Thaelan hit the comm and quickly said, "Go ahead."

"*The engineering console just went completely dead.*" Connie said quickly.

"Standby Ensign Agropos. Crewman Winters, perform a diagnostic of the Engineering console." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said quickly as he moved to station three.

Vincent grabbed the counter as the ship rocked again, then started running a level 2 diagnostic on the Engineering console's systems.

The room was jolted again, then Vincent heard a 'pft, pft, pft' sound and looked around.

"We just launched photon torpedoes." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

There was a beeping from console one that distracted Vincent for a moment as he waited for the status check to complete.

"I'm showing a failure of the E1 power conduit, I'm bypassing." Darin said professionally.

Vincent looked down at his console and quickly said, "Engineering console shows a primary power feed interruption just inside the console... It's physical."

"Ensign Agropos, we are reading a primary power feed interruption in your console. Crewman Winters suggests that you plug the console in and try again." Thaelan said in a teasing voice.

"*We'll do that*." Connie said quickly.

Suddenly there was a shrill sound that filled the room, then multiple 'pft' sounds.

"Phasers and photon torpedoes." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"*Have Vincent look at it now.*" Susan said quickly over the comm.

Vincent immediately initiated another level 2 diagnostic.

"Vincent?" Connie called out.

After a moment of waiting, Vincent happily said, "Engineering station shows as fully operational."

"Crewman Winters confirms that your console is fully operational." Ensign Thaelan said seriously as he worked the controls.

"I think it's over." Darin said as he looked around.

Vincent listened for a moment and realized that it had become quiet again.

"So what happened?" Vincent asked carefully.

"There were six enemy ships. One appears to be disabled, the others have fled. Beyond that, you know as much as I do. I am certain that by this time tomorrow the entire crew will know what happened. Humans are notorious gossips." Ensign Thaelan said with a teasing smile.

Vincent smiled at the statement and said in his most logical voice, "As a Vulcan citizen, I must agree."

"Hey you two. No fair teaming up against me!" Darin said playfully as he worked the station one controls.

Ensign Thaelan smiled as he kept a close watch on his console.

"So who do you think attacked us? I mean, who could it be in this section of space?" Vincent asked curiously.

"A chance encounter with pirates would seem to be the most likely answer. The nearest inhabited system is Okuda and it's nearly two days away at maximum warp." Ensign Thaelan said consideringly.

"So you think that someone was just in the wrong place at the wrong time when we happened by?" Darin asked curiously.

"I cannot say. I was simply speculating on the most likely opponent in this area of space." Ensign Thaelan said casually, then in a more serious tone asked, "What is the status of the E1 power conduit?"

"From the look of these readings, I'd guess that the conduit has been physically severed." Darin said in concentration.

Ensign Thaelan thought for a moment, then pressed the direct link to the Engineering console.

"Ensign Agropos, could you spare Crewman Tullis to visually inspect the E1 power conduit? Our readings indicate physical damage." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"*He's already on his way.*" Connie said seriously.

"Keep me posted. Thaelan out." Ensign Thaelan said firmly, then disconnected the transmission.

Before Ensign Thaelan could ask, Darin called out, "Power systems are stable. Field strength optimum."

"All systems and sub-systems show normal function." Vincent called from station two.

Ensign Thaelan smiled at the efficiency of 'his' team.

"*Tullis to Thaelan.*" Sounded over the main comm.

"Go ahead." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"*There was a control failure in one of the torpedo launchers. Fortunately the torpedo only tore apart one of the launch tubes and some conduits. It didn't detonate.*" Jimmy said with relief.

"Understood. What is the damage to the E1 conduit?" Ensign Thaelan asked seriously.

"*There's not enough left to repair. It's a total loss. We'll need to have it replaced when we're in dock.*" Jimmy said frankly.

"Understood. Compose a damage assessment report for Lieutenant Bowers immediately. Thaelan out." Ensign Thaelan said firmly, then disconnected the transmission.

"Jimmy didn't make the news. He just reported it." Darin said in a concerned voice.

Ensign Thaelan thought about the words for a moment then quietly said, "I get caught up in the moment and forget courtesy. It is more difficult than it appears."

"Just remember to tell Jimmy that you're sorry next time you see him and I'm sure he'll understand." Darin said seriously.

"I will do so at the first opportunity." Ensign Thaelan said as he looked over his console.

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"*Ensign Thaelan, report.*" Joe's voice said firmly over the intercom.

"The E1 power conduit has been severed. We have bypassed it. All other systems operating normally." Ensign Thaelan said efficiently.

"*Acknowledged. When the captain stands down the red alert, I want all deflector control personnel to remain at battle stations until further notice.*" Joe said seriously.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"*Bowers out*." Joe said abruptly, then discontinued the transmission.

"Status?" Ensign Thaelan called out absently.

"Power distribution to the deflector is stable. E1 is bypassed. I show all standby circuits operating normally." Darin said carefully.

"It looks like a few things got knocked loose in the sub-sub-systems, but nothing that will effect performance. The field generators are working at optimum and the deflector dish shows no damage." Vincent said as he looked over the readings on his console.

"Console status?" Ensign Thaelan asked carefully.

Vincent hurried to the third station and glanced at it before saying, "All the consoles read as operational. The bridge station is showing a slight heat build-up, but it's not at a dangerous level. It always runs a little bit hot because the circuitry is packed in there so tight."

* * * * *

"So what's happening now?" Vincent asked into the silence that had fallen over the room.

"Nothing. My guess is that the Captain is calling for the surrender of the disabled ship." Thaelan said as he looked at his readings carefully.

"Do you think they're going to try to attack us again?" Darin asked quietly.

"I doubt it. My readings indicate that the ship is severely damaged... in fact, I don't think we're the ones who caused the damage." Thaelan said carefully.

"What do you mean?" Darin asked curiously as he stood from station one.

"Remain at your station Ensign. There are still five other ships unaccounted for." Thaelan said firmly.

Darin immediately sat back in his seat and said, "Yes sir."

"I was just assuming that all six ships were our enemies during the battle, but the damage of the ship before us is inconsistent with Federation weapons. Perhaps they are asking for political asylum." Thaelan said speculatively.

"Have we sent any repair teams or medical teams over to them?" Vincent asked in thought.

"No. I don't see any indication that we are offering any type of assistance." Thaelan said distantly.

"So we're not helping them or fighting them... what could that mean?" Vincent asked slowly.

"A plague ship?" Darin asked suddenly.

Thaelan thought about the question for a moment, then said, "That would be a possible explanation to fit the circumstances. But we can't jump to that conclusion. To know the answer for sure, we will just have to wait."

"And it's possible that we'll never know the answer." Vincent said in thought.

"Why do you say that?" Thaelan asked curiously.

"Because sometimes things happen that are classified and either no reason is given or stories are made up to cover up the truth." Vincent said darkly.

Darin thought about the proto-matter incident and nodded that he understood.

"You are correct Vincent. There are times when the truth is withheld to protect the greater good." Thaelan said slowly.

"I guess all we're going to be able to do right now is stay at our stations and wait." Vincent said with resignation.

"And be as prepared as we possibly can for another attack." Thaelan added seriously.

Vincent and Darin both began running their system checks with renewed commitment.

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A beeping sound surprised Ensign Thaelan and he quickly switched over to the main comm unit.

"Deflector control." Ensign Thaelan said formally.

"*Please have Crewman Winters go to briefing room one*." Joe said in a serious voice.

"Right away sir." Ensign Thaelan said with surprise.

Vincent looked at Darin with concern.

"Go on. You'll be fine." Darin said with a smile of assurance.

Vincent reluctantly nodded and got up from his seat.

He walked to the supply locker and grabbed a small handful of couplers before heading for the door.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Darin with question.

"I can't explain why, but he thinks they're lucky." Darin said with a shrug.

Ensign Thaelan glanced at the door again, then went back to monitoring the main console.

Chapter 21

Vincent stepped into the briefing room and noticed that the Captain was the only person there.

"Crewman Winters reporting as ordered sir." Vincent said as he stood at attention.

"At ease crewman. Please have a seat." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Vincent took the seat to the Captain's right.

Captain Byrne considered his words carefully before saying, "The Okudai are a relatively peaceful people. They are not members of the Federation, but they have maintained a non-aggression pact with us for many years. We received a distress call from the Okudai transport ship '*Dorsa*'... it was in desperate need of assistance. We were able to dispatch her attackers, but not before their ship sustained significant damage."

Vincent watched the captain with interest, trying to guess at why he was being told all this.

"The *Dorsa* was being attacked because they were transporting 'The Holy One', the Okudai's highest religious leader. As I understand the Okudai traditions, when 'The Holy One' returns to Okuda Prime after being away for longer than one sidereal year, he has the authority to depose the political leader and call for a free election." The captain said seriously.

"Um, I'm sorry, but I don't know what a sidereal year is." Vincent said shyly.

"It's simply a year measured by the traditional method as opposed to a Starfleet standard year. In this instance it would mean one complete revolution of Okuda Prime around it's sun which is approximately fifteen months by our method of measuring time." Captain Byrne said carefully.

Vincent nodded that he understood.

"The captain of the *Dorsa* has asked that we bring 'The Holy One' aboard the *Yorktown* because the *Dorsa* is no longer safe." Captain Byrne said in thought.

"Excuse me Captain, may I ask a question?" Vincent asked carefully.

"Go ahead crewman." Captain Byrne said in thought.

"What were the O'Cooties doing so far from their world? I mean, if we're over two days away." Vincent asked carefully.

"It's pronounced Okudai, and that is a very intelligent question. When the ship was originally attacked, they were within their own system. They were set upon by some three dozen ships in an ambush. The *Dorsa* had no hope of defeating so many in direct combat, so they fled. Their attackers have been driving them away from Okuda Prime which is why they are so far from their world now. Apparently the ship has been trying to outrun it's attackers for two days at maximum warp and has managed to outrun all but five of them before we received their distress call." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Vincent nodded.

"They have requested that one member of our crew be assigned to act as a cultural guide while 'The Holy One' is amongst us. If you would be willing Crewman Winters, I would like that guide to be you." Captain Byrne finished carefully.

Vincent looked at the Captain with surprise.

Captain Byrne saw Vincent's surprised expression and added, "By our measure of time, 'The Holy One' is ten years old. His high priest suggested that one of an equal or lesser age would not be psychologically threatening to him."

Vincent nodded, then said, "I understand. It would be my honor to be a guide."

"Very well then. Crewman Winters, for the duration of the stay of 'The Holy One' amongst us, you will be assigned to be his personal guide. Remember that you will be representing not only the *Yorktown* in this matter, but also Starfleet and the entire United Federation of Planets."

"I understand sir." Vincent said as he sat straighter in his chair.

"Very good. Commander M'Butu and Lieutenant Simms will be taking a travel pod to visit the *Dorsa*. The Okudai are aware that we have transporters but believe that transporters might somehow taint or pollute 'The Holy One'." Captain Byrne said seriously as he stood.

Vincent nodded his understanding as he walked to Captain Byrne's side.

"Report to the flight deck. The others await you." Captain Byrne said as he led the way to the turbo lift.

Vincent smiled and said, "Yes sir."

* * * * *

"It's hard to believe that there's anyone still alive on that ship." Lieutenant Simms said as he looked at the extent of the damage through the view port.

"Scans show that over half their ship is hard vacuum. They must have lost a good share of their crew." Commander M'Butu said as he stared at the horrific sight.

Vincent couldn't find any words as he surveyed the damage to the alien ship.

He knew that for as long as he lived, the horrible image would be burned into his mind.

* * * * *

"*Dorsa*, this is the *Yorktown*'s travel pod requesting permission to dock." Ensign Smith said seriously.

"*Our automated docking system is not functioning, but you are clear to dock at our uppermost hatch.*" A staticky voice said in frustration.

"Confirmed." Ensign Smith said intently.

"Rotating 180 degrees on the Y axis." Ensign Marin said in concentration.

After a moment, Ensign Smith said, "I have visual alignment on the docking clamps."

"Slow and steady... that's got it." Ensign Marin said in a voice of accomplishment.

"We don't get to do that every day." Ensign Smith said with a smile.

"Not since the academy, and that was a simulator... Docking complete. Magnetic seal is confirmed. I show acceptable atmosphere... barely." Ensign Marin said with concern.

"Docking complete." Ensign Smith said into the intercom.

Commander M'Butu looked at Lieutenant Simms and Vincent seriously before saying, "Gentlemen, remember this is their most holy and respected leader. No fart jokes."

Vincent's eyes went wide at the statement then he broke into laughter.

"Good. I thought you were being too serious. You need to be respectful, but also be yourself... we wouldn't want 'The Holy One' to think that Humans don't have a sense of humor."

Vincent nodded as he joined Commander M'Butu and Lieutenant Simms at the door.

* * * * *

Commander M'Butu stepped through the hatch first and was immediately concerned by what he saw.

He could see the bodies of two of the ship's crew on the floor just a few feet from the hatch and there were people working frantically on equipment, obviously fighting for their lives. The air was difficult to breathe and stank of ozone.

When Vincent stepped through the hatch, the first thing that caught his attention was that these people looked fully human. There was no characteristic that he could see that would make him suspect that they were of any other species. For some reason he had expected them to appear 'alien' to him.

"Please come with me. 'The Holy One' must judge you to be acceptable before he will go with you." An elderly man said in a nearly hysterical voice.

Commander M'Butu motioned for his team to follow.

"'Holy One' may I present the representatives of the Federation ship that came to our rescue?" The elderly man asked into something that appeared to be a comm unit by a closed door.

"*Yes. Please show them in.*" A young voice said calmly.

* * * * *

The door opened to reveal a bright room filled with elegant furnishings and beautiful murals painted on all the walls. The air in the room was fresh and clean which was a definite contrast to the harsh fumes that they had been breathing in the hall outside.

There was a small boy with fair skin and long jet black hair sitting on a small couch. He was wearing a flowing robe made of multiple nearly transparent layers.

The first thing Vincent thought of when he saw the boy is that the robe looked like one of his mom's nightgowns.

"'Holy One, may I present..." The elderly man began to say, but was stopped as the ten year old boy raised his hand.

"No you may not. Oluf, you are dismissed." The boy said firmly.

"But 'Holy One'..." the elderly man began to say.

"Will you defy me? Oluf, you are dismissed." The boy said firmly.

"Yes 'Holy One'." The elderly man said quietly, then withdrew from the room.

After the door had closed, 'The Holy One' looked at the three before him and quietly asked, "Why are you willing to offer to protect me?"

"Because your Captain said that you are very important to your people and he can't promise that you'll remain safe here." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

"What do you expect in exchange for the protection you offer?" The boy asked cautiously.

"Perhaps the good will of your people at some future time." Commander M'Butu said carefully.

The boy considered the words, then said, "I am not a political leader, but I do have some influence in our government. I will promise to use what influence I have to promote the good will you seek... provided that I am returned to my people."

"Thank you 'Holy One'." Commander M'Butu said reverently.

The boy considered the response for a moment, then said, "I feel that you speak honestly. I approve of you. Let us leave quickly so the people of this ship can attend to their own safety and well-being. Their concern for me has cost them dearly."

"We're docked at the airlock just down the hall." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Come then. Every minute that I remain here only causes more hardship for them." The boy said as he walked toward the door.

* * * * *

As soon as the door opened, the elderly priest appeared and said, "I have arranged for your belongings to be loaded onto their transport. It will just take a matter of minutes."

"No. It is thanks to you and everyone on this ship that I continue to have my life. I need nothing more. I will leave immediately with these people who have agreed to keep me safe. It is my wish that you focus on the well being of the ship's crew now." The boy said firmly.

The priest led the way to the airlock and began to step through when the boy said, "I am going alone."

"'Holy One', please reconsider. I cannot allow you to go with these strangers without any protection. Please 'Holy One', allow someone to accompany you." The priest begged.

'The Holy One' looked around and spotted a member of the crew who had one arm hanging useless at his side and was working one handed, trying to get a panel opened on the wall.

"Him. He can accompany me. No other." The boy said firmly.

"Yes 'Holy One', thank you." The priest said and ran quickly to the young man.

"Let's hurry before he thinks of something else." The boy said as he stepped through the hatch.

Commander M'Butu, Lieutenant Simms and Vincent quickly followed.

* * * * *

"The High Priest Oluf said that I was to protect you..." The injured young man said as he hesitantly walked onto the shuttle.

"Yes. Please be seated. We are leaving." The boy said firmly.

"Yes 'Holy One'." The man said and sat down in the nearest chair.

Commander M'Butu closed the hatch, then pressed the comm button by the door and said, "Ensign Marin, we're ready to leave."

"*Yes sir.*" Was the immediate response.

"Please excuse my abrupt behavior... my high priest takes his duties very seriously." The boy said in a low voice.

"I understand that it was necessary." Commander M'Butu said formally.

Vincent looked on with concern at the man beside 'The Holy One' as he cradled his injured arm.

There was a slight sensation of movement as the shuttle broke away from the Okudai ship.

"I am Commander Oliver M'Butu, this is Lieutenant Wayland Simms and Crewman Vincent Winters." Commander M'Butu said formally.

"I do not understand the meaning fully. Is Lieutenant a title or a name?" The Holy One asked carefully.

"It is my rank. It simply says that I have the training and experience to lead those of a lesser rank than myself." Lieutenant Simms said carefully.

"I understand. I am unfamiliar with such things... Crewman Winters, may I presume that your rank is the least due to your age?" The Holy One asked in thought.

"Yes, my rank is the least. But I'm new to the crew of the *Yorktown*. If I work hard and learn my lessons, then I'll get a higher rank. Age is just a number. I already outrank some of the people back on our ship." Vincent said seriously.

"May I assume that your presence here is at the request of my priest?" The Holy One asked as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Yes. He thought it would be good to have someone close to your age to explain how we do things." Vincent said and finished with a smile.

"If he had not requested your presence, what duty would you be performing now?" The young boy asked seriously.

"I'd be working in Deflector Control." Vincent said simply.

The Holy One shook his head and said, "That has no meaning to me. I do not understand starship operations."

Vincent looked out the view port, then pointed and said, "Do you see that round thing on the front of the drive section under the saucer?"

The Holy One looked where Vincent was pointing, then nodded.

"That's the deflector dish. It puts out an energy field that keeps rocks and dust from hitting the ship as we move through space." Vincent said as he sat back in his seat.

"And you are the one who is given the duty to operate that device?" The Holy One asked in surprise.

"I'm part of the team that makes sure it's working right." Vincent said proudly.

"That is a very important duty." The Holy One said thoughtfully.

"Captain Byrne says that every member of his crew has a purpose. All of our duties are important because we depend on each other." Vincent said carefully.

"It sounds like a harmonious arrangement." The Holy One said in consideration.

"Yeah, it is." Vincent said happily.

"It is one of my duties to see that the members of the crew are working in harmony. If there is a problem of some sort, then I make adjustments in schedules or personnel to restore the peace." Commander M'Butu said carefully.

The Holy One thought about the statement carefully, then said, "I see the importance of your function. What is your function Lieutenant Simms?"

"I'm in charge of security. I help keep the peace by enforcing the rules that we all live by." Lieutenant Simms said in thought.

Ensign Marin walked through the travel pod and opened the hatch.

"That was a smooth docking Ensign, I didn't even feel it." Commander M'Butu said with a smile as he stood.

"Thank you sir." Ensign Marin said proudly.

"If you'll follow me, I'll take you to meet the Captain." Commander M'Butu said as he stood by the travel pod's door.

The Holy One stood and walked toward the door.

Vincent quickly stood and hurried to his side.

"Right this way." Commander M'Butu said as he led the way to the turbo lift.

"Briefing room one." Commander M'Butu said when they were all aboard.

The Holy One jerked when he felt the turbo lift move.

"It just takes us where we want to go on the ship." Vincent said quietly.

When the lift changed to horizontal movement, The Holy One flinched again.

"Don't worry. We're almost there." Vincent said with concern at The Holy One's reaction.

The boy looked curiously at Vincent, then broke into a smile as he said, "I am not worried. This is fun."

Vincent returned the smile and said, "Yeah, it is."

* * * * *

The turbo lift doors opened to reveal the Captain standing, waiting to greet them.

Commander M'Butu stood forward and said, "Captain Leland Byrne, may I introduce The Holy One of the Okudai."

"It is an honor to meet you 'Holy One'." Captain Byrne said sincerely.

"I thank you for helping my people in their effort to keep me safe." The Holy One said seriously.

"About that. Our sensors show that your ship is very seriously damaged but your captain will not accept our help." Captain Byrne said with concern.

"Do you have the capability to contact my ship? Perhaps I might be able to persuade him." The Holy One said carefully.

"Yes. You may use this view screen if you wish." Captain Byrne said as he walked across the room.

Commander M'Butu walked to the comm station by the door and pressed a button before saying, "Open a channel to the *Dorsa*. Put it through to briefing room one."

"*Yes sir.*" Was the immediate response.

"*'Holy One', it is good to see that you are well.*" The captain said with relief.

"Yes. I am well. Captain Marr, you have succeeded in keeping me safe. Now to complete your mission, you must conduct me safely to Okuda Prime. To do that you need a functioning ship and crew. I have judged these people to be sincere in their offer of aid. Please accept the help that these good people have offered so you may complete your mission." The Holy One said seriously.

"*It is forbidden to associate with outsiders... but if you, 'The Holy One', say it is acceptable to do so, then I will accept the offered help.*" The captain said humbly.

"I thank you for your loyalty and faith Captain Marr. Be expecting help to arrive shortly." The Holy One said carefully.

Captain Byrne pressed the button to end the transmission.

"I'll see to the repair and medical teams." Commander M'Butu said quickly.

Captain Byrne nodded, then turned his attention to The Holy One.

"I don't know how I will repay you for this generosity, but the universe has a way of making all things even. This act of kindness will return to you." The Holy One said in an introspective tone.

"It is my hope that you will feel welcomed and enjoy your time on my ship. We will make every effort to see to your comfort." Captain Byrne said reverently.

"Thank you Captain." The Holy One said calmly.

A sharp inhale of breath drew everyone's attention.

They all turned to see the crew member from the *Dorsa* holding his injured arm protectively and an obvious expression of pain on his face.

"Lieutenant, perhaps you could take this gentleman to sickbay?" Captain Byrne said professionally.

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Simms said immediately.

"I would like to go too." The Holy One said seriously.

"Are you injured?" Captain Byrne asked with concern.

"No. But I am interested to see the methods of your healers." The Holy One said serenely.

"Captain, I can take them to Sickbay if you want." Vincent offered quietly.

Captain Byrne looked at Vincent, then said, "Yes Crewman Winters, please escort our guests to the medical facility and see that they get a proper tour."

"Yes sir." Vincent said with a smile.

Vincent walked to the turbo lift, then stood aside to allow his guests to enter first.

* * * * *

"Sickbay." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift.

"Does this machine understand your spoken words, or is there a person who listens for someone to enter this device?" The Holy One asked curiously.

"It's a computer, a machine that understands certain words." Vincent said casually.

The Holy One looked at the injured crewman for a moment and got a distant look in his eyes.

When he seemed to come back to himself, he said, "Audge, son of Heliak, will you allow their healer to treat your injury?"

The injured man's eyes went wide and he seemed to pale, then hesitantly said, "If you wish me to 'Holy One'."

"I wish it. I want you to be healthy and without pain." The Holy One said firmly.

"Then I will be." Audge said as his pained expression changed to one of peace.

The lift doors opened and Vincent said, "It's right over here."

* * * * *

Vincent led the way into Sickbay and spotted T'Lani at the far side of the room.

"T'Lani, this is Audge, he's hurt. Where do you want him?" Vincent asked quickly.

"Have him lie down on the first biobed. I will notify Dr. Perry of his presence." T'Lani said quickly.

The Holy One watched as T'Lani left, then asked, "She is of a different species, is she not?"

Vincent turned his attention back to The Holy One and said, "Yes. She's from Vulcan."

"Oh yes, of course. I have heard of the Vulcan people but I have not previously had the opportunity to meet any... Please forgive me, we rarely have contact with people outside our own solar system." The Holy One said in thought.

"Dr. Perry is organizing medical teams to visit the Okudai ship. She will be here to assist you shortly." T'Lani said seriously.

"T'Lani, this is the Holy One of the Okudai and Audge, his protector. This is my wife, Ensign T'Lani." Vincent said in his most formal voice.

"A pleasure to meet you." T'Lani said as she started working the biobed's controls.

Vincent looked around, then said, "Holy One, if you would like, I could show you around sickbay while T'Lani and Dr. Perry are working on Audge."

"Yes, I would be interested to see your medical facility." The Holy One said in a considering voice.

"Audge, we'll be right back. I just want to show The Holy One the rest of the sickbay." Vincent said more quietly.

"'Holy One', I am supposed to remain with you to protect you." Audge said desperately.

"Stay and allow their healer to help you. Then you will be much better able to protect me should the need arise." The Holy One said firmly.

"As you say 'Holy One'." Audge said with resignation.

"Audge, we're just going through this door and down the hallway to the next room. We'll be right back." Vincent said as he pointed to a second door leading out of the sickbay.

"I will remain." Audge said, sounding slightly relieved by the assurance.

* * * * *

"The room we were just in is main sickbay. Dr. Perry's office is right there." Vincent said as they approached the window.

"It looks like she's busy talking to someone on her terminal right now, so I'll show you the convalescent ward first." Vincent said, then turned to walk toward the other door in the hall.

"I do not understand that word." The Holy One said carefully.

"I think convalescent means something like 'getting better'. If someone needs surgery or something serious like that, they do it in the sickbay. But after the surgery, they go to the convalescent ward so someone can take care of them until they're well enough to take care of themselves." Vincent said as he led the way into the convalescent ward.

"So many people can recover with one or two people to watch over them." The Holy One said speculatively as he looked around the room.

"That's right. My wife is one of the people who does that." Vincent said proudly.

"It is the custom of my people to wait until adulthood to choose a mate." The Holy One said quietly.

"Yeah, that's the way it is on Earth too. But I'm a Vulcan citizen, so my family elder chose my wife for me." Vincent said, then made a gesture back to the door they had just entered through.

The Holy One slowly followed Vincent back into the hallway and said, "I do not understand. You are one of the Earth people yet you claim to be a Vulcan."

"It's a really long story. Dr. Perry's gone so she's probably with Audge. Let's go back to the sickbay so you can see her work. I'll tell you about me later when we have more time, if that's okay?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yes. I would like that." The Holy One said with the beginning of a smile.

* * * * *

Audge smiled with relief at the sight of The Holy One and Vincent entering the room.

"How is he Dr. Perry?" Vincent asked as he led the way to Audge's bedside.

"Not too bad, all things considered. He has a compound fracture. It will need to be splinted for at least two days to properly align the fractures before I can try the knitter on him." Dr. Perry said professionally.

"Will he be able to leave sickbay when you're done with him?" Vincent asked in his mature voice.

"Yes. I'm going to give him some pain medication that might make him a little sleepy, but he'll be free to leave." Dr. Perry said with a fond smile at Vincent.

"What is that device?" The Holy One asked as he pointed to the head of the biobed.

"This is the scanning unit of the biobed. It has many functions, but basically it scans the person on the bed and attempts to detect anything abnormal." Dr. Perry said professionally.

"Would it be possible to see it in operation?" The Holy One asked curiously.

"Of course. Audge, if you will lay still for a moment, I'm going to do another scan." Dr. Perry said as she worked the controls.

After a moment, she pointed at the monitor and said, "Do you see that? The bed has detected the fractures in his arm."

She pointed at the scaled readings in the center of the unit and said, "These indicators show his breathing, heart rate and neural activity."

"Thank you Doctor. It is an impressive machine." The Holy One said in a considering voice as he looked at the biobed's readings carefully.

"It's one of many tools we have to evaluate and treat whatever illness or injury might affect us on our missions." Dr. Perry said professionally.

"Here is the splint you requested." T'Lani said as she walked into the room.

"Thank you T'Lani. Are you familiar with the procedure for splinting this type of fracture?" Dr. Perry asked, indicating the monitor.

"I am familiar with the procedure, however I have not had the opportunity to splint this type of fracture before." T'Lani said carefully.

"Go ahead and I'll observe." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Yes Doctor." T'Lani said as she stepped forward to put the splint on Audge's arm.

"Let's step back and give T'Lani room to work." Vincent said in a whisper.

The Holy One slowly took a step back to stand with Vincent by the next biobed.

"Do you think it would be possible for us to visit the place where you work?" The Holy One asked carefully.

"Yeah. That's where I wanted to take you next." Vincent said with a smile.

"*Dr. Perry, would you look at these scans and give me your opinion?*" A voice called from the terminal.

Dr. Perry walked to the terminal and looked at the scanner readings carefully.

"He's going to need surgery. The internal injuries are too severe to heal otherwise." Dr. Perry said gravely.

"*That was my conclusion as well, but their medical facilities don't have the support equipment that I would need to perform the surgery and the crew of the Dorsa refuse to leave their ship.*" Dr. Raul said quietly.

"I suppose you can't force someone to receive medical treatment, but make sure they know that if you don't perform the surgery within the hour, this patient will die." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Doctor. If you would like, perhaps I can convince them to accept medical attention." The Holy One said quietly.

"If there's anything you can do, please do it. I hate to see a life thrown away for no good reason." Dr. Perry said seriously.

The young boy nodded, then walked to stand before the terminal.

"This is 'The Holy One'. It is my wish for all those who require medical attention that is beyond our ability to provide to come to the *Yorktown* to receive medical care." He said firmly.

"*But the law...*" A voice said hesitantly.

"I AM THE LAW! It is my command that those who need medical attention receive it. Those who are fit to work, repair the ship so we may be underway as soon as possible." The Holy One said in a strong, authoritative voice.

"*Yes 'Holy One'. It will be as you say.*" The timid voice responded.

"*Dr. Perry, this patient isn't stable enough for transport. Can you send a shuttle for him?*" Dr. Raul asked hopefully.

"Yes. I'll send T'Lani with the shuttle so you won't have to leave your other patients." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"*Thank you. Raul out.*" He said with relief.

"Perry out." She said absently, then looked to see how T'Lani was doing.

"Very good. As soon as you have the arm immobilized, take a shuttle over to collect Dr. Raul's patient." Dr. Perry said professionally.

"Yes Doctor." T'Lani said as she worked a strap around the back of Audge's neck.

"If you'll excuse me gentlemen, I need to check in with the other medical teams to be sure that everything is going well." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Thank you for taking care of Audge." Vincent said with a smile.

"Yes, thank you. You are providing a great service to my people." The Holy One said reverently.

"Just let me know if there's anything else I can do." Dr. Perry said with a quick smile, then hurried to her office.

"Return to sickbay before you retire for the evening for additional pain medication." T'Lani said as she finished putting his splinted arm into a sling.

"I will, thank you." Audge said timidly.

"You are free to leave." T'Lani said as she stepped away.

"T'Lani." Vincent said quietly.

T'Lani stopped before her husband and gently caressed his cheek with her thumb.

"Be careful." Vincent whispered.

"I will take every precaution so I may return to you without delay." T'Lani said softly.

Vincent put his hand over hers, then turned to place a kiss in her palm.

"I must go." She whispered with regret.

"I know. I love you." Vincent said as he released her hand.

"I love you as well, my husband." T'Lani said quietly, then hurried out of the room.

"*This* is what a marriage should be." The Holy One said to Audge in a serious voice.

"I agree Holy One." Audge said with a tender smile.

Vincent turned away from the door that T'Lani had walked through and said, "Are you guys ready to see Deflector Control?"

"Yes. I would like that very much." The Holy One said with a look of admiration at Vincent.

* * * * *

"Ensign Thaelan, would you mind if I bring some new friends in and show them where I work?" Vincent asked from just inside the door.

"As long as your friends won't mind if I put you to work for a few minutes." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"Okay, but I've been assigned to escort these guys while they're on our ship." Vincent said as he walked slowly into the room.

"Understood. But, if in the course of your escort duty, you could do a systems check for me it would be much appreciated. Your brother was called to the bridge a few minutes ago and I don't know when he will return." Thaelan said as he kept his focus on the main deflector.

"Sure, I'll do that while I'm showing the guys what I do on the ship all day. But I thought you could run these checks on the main if you needed to." Vincent said casually as he walked to station one.

"It is possible to run system checks from the main, but it is not advisable when we are at battle stations. I have to be ready to react at a moment's notice." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"Got it. The deflector is operating at optimum efficiency. Primary field generator is functioning within normal parameters. Request permission to bring secondary field generator out of standby and up to full power." Vincent said as he worked the controls.

"For what purpose?" Ensign Thaelan asked curiously.

"I'd like to switch the secondary control systems to active and shunt them to the secondary field generator. By doing that I can run a level three on the entire secondary system at once instead of having to switch over each of the primary systems to do the checks." Vincent said as he turned to look at Thaelan.

"Go ahead Crewman Winters. I don't recall hearing of the diagnostic being done that way before, but I can't see any reason that it wouldn't be an efficient way of checking everything at one time." Ensign Thaelan said in a considering voice.

"Yeah. And if we do run into trouble while the diagnostic is running, you can switch over to the secondary system with one button." Vincent said with a smile as he brought the secondary field generator online.

"This is your job?" The Holy One asked quietly.

"Yeah. I'm still learning, but this is where I work. My brother Darin is usually here too, but he's doing something else right now." Vincent said as he moved to station two.

"This seems a complicated task for someone your age." The Holy One said quietly.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Being the Holy One seems like a complicated job to me. I guess when you're doing it, it doesn't seem as big and scary as when you watch someone else do it."

The Holy One smiled at the statement and said, "Perhaps you're right."

"Okay. Everything is showing green except for the E1 conduit. I've started a level three running on the entire secondary system. It will take a while to run, but if it comes back clean, we can switch over and check the whole primary system the same way." Vincent said with accomplishment.

"Thank you Crewman Winters. I feel better knowing that the backup systems are on active standby." Ensign Thaelan said honestly.

Vincent started a system check on all the consoles then said, "Ensign Thaelan, I'd like you to meet "The Holy One' of the Okudai and his protector, Audge."

Ensign Thaelan stood from the console and gave a respectful bow, then said, "It is an honor to meet you Holy One. I had the honor of meeting the Holy One named Austir when I was a child."

"You're the boy who traveled to Okuda Prime with the Andorian delegation?" The Holy One asked with surprise.

"Yes. I'm surprised that you know about that. It was hardly a noteworthy meeting." Thaelan said as he turned to glance at his console.

"Well, it was notable in that it was the last." The Holy One said frankly.

Thaelan nodded and said, "It is regrettable that our governments could not come to terms. I liked your people very much, especially Austir."

The Holy One smiled at Thaelan and said, "He was quite fond of you too. When we take on the responsibility of being 'The Holy One', we rarely use our given names. It is a sign of his admiration that he told you."

"I was not aware of the significance of his sharing his name with me. I only know that I spent many hours with Austir walking through the gardens and talking." Thaelan said distantly.

"Yes. The tranquility of the gardens was a welcomed relief after all the meetings." The Holy One said with a quiet smile.

Vincent looked at The Holy One carefully and said, "You have Austir's memories, don't you?"

The Holy One looked at Vincent with surprise.

"I can see that you remember Thaelan. It's not something you were told, you were there." Vincent said with certainty.

"Yes... I have Austir with me. I have all the Holy Ones who came before." The young boy said quietly, then glanced at Audge to see his reaction.

"Kewl." Vincent said with a smile, then looked at the station three console.

Audge looked at The Holy One with wide eyes of wonder.

"This is not something that is common knowledge and I would prefer that you do not repeat it." The Holy One said quietly.

"As you wish Holy One." Audge said reverently.

"I've got a green board on the console status and the level three is still running. Do you need me to do anything else right now?" Vincent asked as he looked at Thaelan expectantly.

"No. I can't think of anything at the moment." Thaelan said simply.

"Then I'm going to show The Holy One and Audge around some more." Vincent said as he walked to the door.

"Crewman Winters, it would please me if you and Ensign Thaelan would call me by my given name. Before I was given the honor of being 'The Holy One' I was called Tyce, son of Jessub." The Holy One said quietly.

"Thank you Tyce. And you can call me Vincent if you want to." Vincent said happily.

"Yes. That would please me." Tyce said gently.

"My true name is extremely complicated, but you may address me as Thaelan if you wish." Ensign Thaelan said reverently.

"I remember when you told Austir your full name. It took almost ten minutes." Tyce said with a chuckle.

"Are you guys ready to go?" Vincent asked as he walked toward the door.

"Yes, but I would like to return later." Tyce said with a fond smile at Thaelan.

Vincent nodded, then took a communicator from the rack by the door and said, "I've got number seven if you need anything. I'll come back before the diagnostic is finished."

"I will call you if there is a need before that time." Thaelan said, then turned back to his console.

Chapter 22

"You surprised me with your reaction when you realized that I carry the knowledge and experience of the former Holy Ones." Tyce said timidly.

"Well, I guess if I'd just been around Humans all the time I might think that it was really weird or something, but I've been studying about the things that Vulcans can do with memory transference and I understand how it works... well, basically." Vincent said as he led the way down the catwalk.

"Among my people it is very rare to find a person with the gift. It took Austir nearly ten years to find me. When I reach the age of eighty years I will begin the search for the next Holy One." Tyce said distantly.

"Wow. The memory transfer thing isn't a big deal to me, but you knowing what you'll be doing seventy or eighty years from now is a little freaky." Vincent said with a smile.

Tyce smiled at Vincent and said, "I agree."

"Would you guys like to get something to eat?" Vincent asked as he turned to face the pair.

"Yes. If it wouldn't be an imposition." Tyce said quietly.

"It's no problem at all. You've seen where I work, now I'll show you where I eat." Vincent said with a smile.

Tyce nodded his agreement and waited for Vincent to lead the way into the turbo lift.

"What about you Audge? Are you hungry?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"The rations should be saved for those who are operating the ship." Audge said quietly.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "You're the protector of the Holy One. Not only should that give you the right to eat, but I think you should be able to ask for seconds if you want."

Tyce smiled and said, "I agree with our host. If you are hungry, you should eat."

"If that is your wish Holy One." Audge said reverently.

After the trio boarded the turbo lift, Vincent said, "Engineer's Mess."

Tyce giggled at the sensation of the turbo lift moving.

Vincent smiled at his enjoyment.

When the doors opened, Vincent led the way toward the Engineer's Mess Hall.

"Audge, if you'll pick out the stuff you like, I'll carry your plate, then when we've got yours, I'll go back and get mine." Vincent said cheerfully.

"I couldn't ask you to do that for me." Audge said humbly.

"You didn't ask... and neither did I. You can't load a plate and carry it with one hand, so I'm doing this for you. Get over it." Vincent said sternly.

Audge nodded hesitantly.

Tyce giggled, then said, "I like the way you deal with people. It's very straightforward and honest."

"Yeah. Honesty. That's what I'm going for. If you'll grab a plate, you can choose whatever you like from the food they have made here. There are salads over in the cold case and drinks at the far end of this line." Vincent said as he picked up a tray and a plate.

Tyce picked up a tray and a plate to follow Vincent down the line.

"Audge, bring your good arm over here and pick out what you want to eat. Just put it on the plate." Vincent said as he stood aside.

Audge looked over the hot food selections, then hesitantly scooped some macaroni and cheese onto the plate.

"Yeah. I like macaroni and cheese too." Vincent said with a smile.

Audge smiled at the statement, then placed a country fried steak on his plate.

"Those things are breaded and look a lot bigger than they really are. If you're hungry, you'd better get two." Vincent said seriously.

"Thank you. I will." Audge said timidly and picked out a second steak.

"What is this?" Tyce asked from behind Vincent.

Vincent turned and said, "Those are stuffed pork chops. They're really good."

Tyce put one on his plate, then started looking at the other selections.

"Audge, that white gravy is for the steaks. It just makes them taste even better." Vincent said seriously.

"Should I get that too?" Tyce asked as he watched Audge ladle the gravy over the pair of steaks.

"Well, since you have a stuffed pork chop, you'll probably only want to get one. But yeah, I think you'll like it." Vincent said happily.

"Which vegetable would you recommend to go with this food?" Audge asked hesitantly.

Vincent looked over the selections, and said, "I think these green beans look pretty good. The corn on the cob looks good too, but you'd probably have a lot of trouble with that using one hand."

Audge pointed to the pan of green beans with question.

"Yeah, that's them. I think you'll like them." Vincent said with a smile.

"How do you have so much fresh food so far from home?" Tyce asked as he took a small spoon of each of the vegetables.

"Some of the food is kept in stasis coolers to keep it fresh. Other things are made in the protein processors." Vincent said as he moved Audge's tray to the next line of food.

"So you have a device that creates food?" Tyce asked with interest.

"Kind of. The computer has something like a recipe that it follows to take the protein and change it into regular food. It can make things like soups and sandwiches and probably that gravy really good. But there's some stuff it can't make so we carry that stuff with us." Vincent said as he watched Audge pick out three different types of dinner rolls.

"My people could do so much with this technology." Tyce said in thought.

"Hey Audge. Save some room for the salad." Vincent said with a smile.

Audge nearly ran to the next line to see what other selections were available to him.

"I'm guessing that you have a food shortage on your ship." Vincent said speculatively.

"I really don't know." Tyce said quietly.

Vincent sat Audge's tray on the salad line for Audge to add his selections.

"My priests have protected me from so much. I really don't know everything that was going on. I only know that many sacrificed their lives to keep me safe." Tyce said quietly.

"Then they must have thought you were worth it. I guess the best way to honor the ones who died to protect you is to prove that they were right." Vincent said seriously.

Tyce nodded his agreement, then smiled when he saw Audge's tray filled with food.

"We can come back and get more if you're still hungry." Vincent said as he lifted the tray.

Audge hurried to get a bowl of orange Jell-O before Vincent could move the tray away.

Vincent smiled at the move and led the way to an unoccupied table.

Vincent placed the tray on the table and asked, "What would you like to drink?"

Audge looked at him with question.

"I tell you what, I'll get you something and if you don't like it, you can have something else." Vincent said with a smile.

Audge hesitantly nodded.

"I will come with you. I did not get a drink." Tyce said as he placed his tray on the table.

"Okay". Vincent said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Hi Vincent, I thought you'd be working now." JonJon said as he approached the table.

"I've been assigned to show these guys around the ship while they're visiting with us. JonJon, this is 'The Holy One of the Okudai' and Audge, his protector. Guys, this is JonJon, one of my best friends." Vincent said happily.

"It is nice to meet you JonJon. Since Vincent claims you as his friend, you would be welcomed to join us if you like." Tyce said quietly.

JonJon looked at Vincent with question.

"Yeah, there's one open spot. Grab it." Vincent said happily.

"Thanks. I'll be right back." JonJon said quickly and hurried away.

"Is he a crewman like you?" Tyce asked with interest.

"No. JonJon and a bunch of other people on the ship right now are moving to a new colony." Vincent said seriously.

"What is the purpose of their colony?" Tyce asked curiously.

"I don't understand what you mean." Vincent said as he turned his full attention to Tyce.

"Among my people, colonies are established when there is a need to be away from the home world. Usually it has to do with a differing philosophy. The people in the new colony are free to live with their own 'different' philosophy while the home world maintains the old ways." Tyce said in thought.

"Oh. I guess that's a good way of doing it. What was your colony like?" Vincent asked casually.

"It's an old colony. My people are united by the belief that every citizen has the responsibility to participate in the government. When there is any decision that needs to be made, our entire colony is encouraged to vote on it." Tyce said quietly.

"That sounds like a lot of work. But I guess it would be good if everyone understood what was happening in their local government." Vincent said, then smiled as JonJon approached with a plate of food.

"I'm glad they have stuffed pork chops today. They're my favorite." JonJon said happily.

Tyce cut a piece of his pork chop and cautiously took a bite.

Vincent watched carefully, then smiled as he noticed Tyce's pleased expression.

"Aren't they good?" JonJon asked happily.

Tyce nodded, then cut another bite.

"So did you and Cyril come up with a job?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yeah. He said that he woke up this morning with so many things to do that he didn't know where to start. So if I want, I can be his assistant and help him keep organized and do stuff for him and things like that." JonJon said happily.

"That sounds great." Vincent said with a smile.

"Yeah. And he said that when we get to the new colony, that if he likes the job I'm doing and if I still like doing the job, then I can keep on working for him there." JonJon said with a peaceful smile.

"That's great." Vincent said with contentment.

"And he likes Fizgig and said that Fizgig can come to work with me." JonJon said with a big smile.

"That sounds perfect." Vincent said happily.

"Who is Fizgig?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"Oh, that's JonJon's dog." Vincent said as he turned his attention back to Tyce.

"Dog? I've heard the word but... it has no meaning to me." Tyce said to JonJon with regret.

"If you'll tell me where you'll be, I'll bring Fizgig to meet you." JonJon said peacefully.

"We'll be in Deflector Control at least for a little bit." Vincent said seriously.

JonJon nodded, then thought to ask, "So what were you guys talking about when I interrupted?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "The Holy One was just telling me about his colony. He said that it was founded because the people wanted to live differently than the people on the home world. Was Kimber anything like that?"

JonJon thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I guess so. Kimber was supposed to be like taking a step back from all the technology of Earth. We had stuff like the power station and our clinic was really good. But we didn't have a lot of video games or televisions or radios. I mean, we had terminals to get news and keep in touch with people back on Earth. But we raised animals and grew vegetables too... It was nice."

"It sounds nice." Tyce said with a gentle smile at JonJon.

"How are you doing Audge?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"I think I took too much." Audge said with a regretful look at his plate.

"If you're done, I'll get rid of your plates." Vincent said quietly.

"No. It would be wrong to waste this wonderful food. It was my own fault for being greedy." Audge said in an ashamed voice.

"It won't get wasted. Leftover food is deconstructed and returned to the protein stores." Vincent said seriously.

"So the food that he did not finish will be used to create other food for someone else later?" Tyce asked in wonder.

"That's right. We're on a starship so we have to be careful about wasting stuff like food and water." Vincent said seriously.

"My people could benefit so much from this technology." Tyce said absently.

"Then why don't they?" Vincent asked curiously.

Tyce looked at Vincent for a moment, then said, "Because we do not want to lose our culture. We do not want to become blended with the other worlds of the Federation and lose our identity as a people."

Vincent looked Tyce in the eyes and said, "Then I guess that I'm an example of what you don't want to happen to your people."

"No, I didn't mean you..." Tyce said quickly.

"I'm a Human who was adopted by a Vulcan Clan and married a Vulcan woman. Vulcan is my home even though I wasn't born there. My kids will be Vulcans by law, but they will be half Human." Vincent said simply.

"I'm sorry Vincent. I didn't mean to offend you." Tyce said quietly.

"I'm not offended, but I don't think I agree with what you believe." Vincent said carefully.

"It is not proper to speak in such a way to 'The Holy One'." Audge said in a tone of warning.

"Really?" Vincent asked as he looked at Tyce.

"Among my people, it is forbidden." Tyce said hesitantly.

"Then how do you have discussions or settle disagreements?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I decide what is right. There is no further need for discussion and everyone agrees." Tyce said frankly.

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment, then asked, "So, if your priests lie to you to 'protect' you from the truth and you don't allow anyone to tell you their side of the story, how can you make good decisions?"

"I don't understand what you are asking." Tyce said slowly.

"If you're the one who decides what is right, you need to have all the facts to make a good decision. But it sounds like the important facts are being kept from you." Vincent said in thought.

Tyce considered the statement for a moment, then slowly said, "There is some truth to what you are saying."

Vincent's eyes became distant as he said, "I bet that way way back in the past, the Holy Ones lived with the people and understood their problems and what they needed."

Tyce looked at Vincent with surprise at the statement.

An alert klaxon sounded, immediately stopping all conversation in the mess hall.

"***Battle stations. All hands. Battle stations.***" Sounded over the comm.

"Come on guys. Just leave your plates. We need to get to Deflector Control." Vincent said as he stood.

"I'm going to get Fizgig in the observation lounge." JonJon said quickly.

"Good idea. It might get scary and it's best if he's not alone." Vincent said as he hurried toward the nearest turbo lift.

* * * * *

The various people on the lift called out many different decks.

"Deflector Control." Vincent called out, followed by JonJon's "Deck J, Dorsal."

"Do you believe we are in danger?" Tyce asked quietly from Vincent's side.

"No. But Thaelan might need my help if Darin isn't back." Vincent said quickly.

As soon as the lift doors opened, Vincent said, "Come on guys."

Vincent, Tyce and Audge hurried down the catwalk to the door to Deflector Control.

* * * * *

"Where do you need me?" Vincent asked as he hurried into the room.

He was relieved to see that Darin was already sitting at station one.

"Take station two." Thaelan said immediately.

"You guys can sit there if you want." Vincent said as he pointed to the auxiliary stations.

"It appears that the enemy ships have returned to finish what they started. We have moved to block them from firing on the *Dorsa*." Thaelan said gravely as he watched his readout carefully.

"How many are there?" Vincent asked as he worked his controls.

"Three. They're maneuvering to get into position." Thaelan answered as he watched his screens carefully.

A beeping from the main console drew everyone's attention as Thaelan examined his readouts.

"We are attempting to extend our shields to protect the *Dorsa*." Thaelan said in a voice of deep concentration.

"They're not going to hold up very long like that." Darin said as he ran through his systems checks.

"The secondary system is still active and ready to switch over at your command." Vincent said as he verified his readings.

"Lieutenant Bowers has assumed control of the main and is aware of the secondary system status." Thaelan said as he watched the board carefully.

"What are the ships doing?" Darin asked with concern.

"The ships have positioned themselves in such a manner that we cannot block them from firing on the *Dorsa*." Thaelan said with a note of panic in his voice.

"What do they want Tyce?" Vincent asked quickly.

"Me. Dead." Tyce answered honestly.

"But why? Why are they willing to stand against a Federation starship to kill you? What will they gain if you're dead?" Vincent asked firmly.

"***All hands. Brace for impact***." Sounded over the comm.

"Hold on." Vincent said, then noticed that Audge was having difficulty holding on to the counter before him with one hand.

Vincent ran to Audge's side and held him tightly as he gripped the counter firmly.

The ship rocked with the impact of weapon's fire.

"Tyce! What do they want?" Vincent asked fiercely.

"They want Okuda to join the Federation." Tyce answered reluctantly.

Vincent looked at Tyce with disbelief, then tightened his grip on Audge when the ship was jolted again.

"Can't we talk with them? Isn't there some way to end this without anyone else dying?" Vincent asked desperately.

"I can't! Austir declared that the people of Okuda would not join the Federation. He was right. Within a dozen generations we would become little more than a forgotten culture. I must defend my people's right to exist." Tyce said imploringly.

"I think I understand." Vincent said in a speculative voice.

"You do?" Tyce asked with surprise.

"Yes. I think I do. Like I told you, I am a Vulcan. Even though I am of the Human species, I am a Vulcan citizen. I survived the Ordeal of Maturity to be declared an adult by Vulcan law. I had my marriage arranged by my family elder just like it's been done for thousands of years. I have a telepathic bond with my wife because it's part of Vulcan tradition. I respect the ancient ways of Vulcan and live by them. If I found out that there was a group trying to get rid of the ancient ways of Vulcan, I would fight to defend them because, in my heart, I am a son of Vulcan." Vincent said firmly, then looked up at the sound of phasers firing.

"Without our traditions, my people will lose faith in themselves. Without that faith, our civilization will lose it's identity. How can you deny your own culture to take on the culture of another race?" Tyce asked in confusion.

"Because it's my *choice*. Given the choice, some of the Okudai might decide to explore other cultures and adopt their ways, but some would hold to the ancient ways because they believe they are worth preserving. If you take away that choice, then is it really faith?" Vincent asked seriously.

"One of our attackers has been disabled." Thaelan called out as he kept his focus on the main.

"Tyce. You can end this. You don't have to agree with them, but I bet that if you would agree to let them speak and really listen to what they have to say, you might be able to work something out... I don't know, maybe start a colony on the edge of your system where the citizens are allowed to have contact with outsiders." Vincent said quickly.

"Will you take me to the captain?" Tyce asked in thought.

"I'll race you to the turbo lift." Vincent said as he released Audge.

Tyce stood and began to walk toward the door.

"Will you guys be okay without me for a few minutes?" Vincent thought to ask as he released his hold on Audge and helped him to stand.

"You will do more good by ending this fight than you would by helping here." Thaelan said firmly.

"We'll be back soon." Vincent said as he hurried out the door.

* * * * *

"Captain, may I bring 'The Holy One' on the bridge to speak with you?" Vincent asked from the door of the lift.

"Yes, of course, but we are a bit busy at the moment." Captain Byrne said in concentration.

"If you will open a transmission to the lead vessel, perhaps I can end this." Tyce said as he walked confidently onto the bridge.

"Lieutenant Patterson, open a channel." Captain Byrne said immediately.

"*Stay out of this Federation vessel. This is an internal affair of the Okudai people.*" A shadowed man said in an angry voice.

"I am not on the ship you are attacking. You will gain nothing by the destruction of the *Dorsa*." Tyce said as he faced the screen.

"*YOU'RE ON THE FEDERATION VESSEL!?*" The man screamed with disbelief.

"Correct. My hosts have suggested that if we speak, we might be able to come to terms." Tyce said seriously.

"*This is a trick! There's no way 'The Holy One' would associate with outsiders or talk with those who disagree with him.*" The man said suspiciously.

"That has been the tradition. But it has been brought to my attention that without dialogue, there cannot be true agreement. If you will cease your hostilities and select a representative to speak for you, we can meet and possibly come to some sort of agreement." Tyce said calmly.

"*I don't trust you.*" The man said cautiously.

Vincent leaned close to Tyce's side and whispered, "If they don't trust you, maybe they'll trust Captain Byrne."

"I am sorry to hear that. I may be your adversary, but I haven't given you reason to mistrust my word. I suppose it doesn't matter... Will you trust the captain of this Federation vessel?" Tyce asked seriously.

The man considered for a moment, then said, "*I will*."

"Captain, if this gentleman will agree to a cease fire, will you also?" Tyce asked calmly.

"Yes. Of course." Captain Byrne said immediately.

"*Thank you Captain. Please relay instructions to my people and we will make every effort to behave in a reasonable manner.*" The man said respectfully.

"This is my first officer, Commander M'Butu. He will coordinate the arrangements with your people. I look forward to meeting you in person momentarily." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"*As do I. Treifa out*." The man said with a gentlemanly bow before the screen went blank.

Tyce's eyes went wide when he heard the name.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I can't believe I didn't recognize him... This man, Treifa, nearly twenty years ago he was a priest to Austir. There was a time when they were friends." Tyce said uncomfortably.

"Maybe you can be again. If you'll listen when he talks, maybe he'll be willing to do the same." Vincent said hopefully.

"Holy One, the arrangements have been made. If you'll follow me, we'll go down to the transporter room to meet our guest." Commander M'Butu said as he gestured toward the turbolift.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Vincent asked in a whisper.

"Yes. I'm counting on you to remind me to really listen during this negotiation. I'm out of practice." Tyce said with a smile.

"Audge and I will make sure to keep you on the right track." Vincent said with a smile at Audge.

Audge's eyebrows went up in surprise for a moment, then he nodded his agreement.

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As Vincent walked into transporter room two, he noticed that Rad was on duty.

"This is another one of my friends, his name is Rad." Vincent said happily.

"Nice to meet you. Cool nightgown." Rad said with a playful smile.

"Um, Rad. This is 'The Holy One' of the Okudai. He's their most respected holy leader." Vincent said cautiously.

"Oh..." Rad said hesitantly, then smiled and said, "Well, it's still nice to meet you."

"I like you. You're funny." Tyce said with a genuine smile.

Rad looked down at his console and said, "If we're all ready, the *Mingot* is signaling ready to transport."

"Energize." Commander M'Butu said formally.

The sparkle of three transporter beams appeared in the chamber.

"Captain, I'm detecting concealed weapons on two of the subjects transporting in." Rad said with concern.

"Can you bring the third out of transport and hold the other two?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Yes sir." Rad said, then keyed in the commands on his console.

A single man resolved into being on the center transporter pad.

After a moment to look around, Treifa asked, "What is the meaning of this?"

"These men are carrying concealed weapons. We can either bring them out of the transporter and disarm them or send them back. What is your preference?" Captain Byrne asked without accusation.

"Bring them out and I'll tell them to leave their weapons here. Will that be acceptable?" Treifa asked seriously.

"Ensign Radovanovich, please disable their weapons and have security join us before you bring them out of the beam." Captain Byrne said simply.

"I give you my word Captain." Treifa said firmly.

"You have attempted to bring concealed weapons onto my ship. Please forgive me if your word doesn't inspire my complete trust." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Treifa reluctantly nodded at the statement.

Two security officers walked into the room and stood at attention.

"You already met Lieutenant Simms, that's Ensign Barnhill. She acts tough but she's really nice." Vincent whispered to Tyce at his side.

"These gentlemen have concealed weapons. Their weapons have been deactivated, but they may still pose a threat." Captain Byrne said to the two security officers.

Treifa moved aside as the two officers approached the transport chamber.

"Here they come." Rad said as he completed the transport.

When the transporter beams cleared, both men surveyed the room.

When they spotted Tyce, they simultaneously raised their weapons and pulled the triggers.

Audge and Vincent moved as one to step in front of Tyce to shield him with their own bodies.

"Treifa, you're welcomed to come with us to talk or you may return to your ship. Those two are not invited to stay." Captain Byrne said and turned to walk out of the room.

"You can't go with him! He's the oppressor of our people!" One of the men called out as Ensign Barnhill blocked him from walking out of the transport chamber.

Rad quickly initiated the force field around the transport chamber and contained the two men.

"You heard the Captain. Send them back." Commander M'Butu said with a look of disappointment at the men.

Rad nodded, then worked the controls to establish contact with the *Mingot* to link with their transporter.

"Treifa, I am Tyce." Tyce said firmly as they walked out of the transporter room.

After a hesitant moment, Treifa said, "Your predecessor would only allow me to address him as 'Holy One'.

"Austir was quite old and set in his ways. I am still young enough to be flexible... to a point." Tyce said carefully.

"Does that mean that you're willing to let the people of Okuda join the Federation?" Treifa asked hopefully.

"Conference room one." Captain Byrne said when everyone was on the lift.

"I am not quite that flexible. But my hosts aboard this ship have suggested that there might be a possibility for negotiation between us. If you can also be flexible, we might be able to find some common ground." Tyce said carefully.

The lift doors opened and Captain Byrne stepped out.

"If you will please take your seats we may begin this process." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Tyce took a seat. A moment later Vincent and Audge were sitting on either side of him.

Captain Byrne took his seat at the head of the table and waited as Commander M'Butu and Treifa walked around the table to sit opposite Tyce.

"Treifa, please tell me what you wish to gain by having the people of Okuda join the Federation." Tyce said firmly.

"Advanced methods of food production, medical advances, new technology... basically, a future for our children." Treifa said seriously.

"The future I want for our children is one of knowing who they are as a people. I want the children of Okuda to be proud of who they are and be able to trust in the traditions that have served our people for a thousand years." Tyce said carefully.

"There is little consolation to know that you come from a proud, old people when your belly is empty. It's of little comfort to a child to know that he is of pure blood when he's watching his mother die from a disease that the Federation has been able to cure for a hundred years. The traditions that served our people a thousand years ago in our ascendance provided a perfect way of life... a thousand years ago. Today, the governing class has all the wealth and power and the common man has nothing. You worry about preserving our traditions for the next generation, but there may not be a next generation if the social issues that are plaguing the working class aren't addressed." Treifa said passionately.

"Is it really that bad?" Tyce asked with concern.

"Yes. Well, not everyplace, not yet. But the poverty is spreading as greed and corruption overtake the governing class." Treifa said seriously.

Captain Byrne quietly said, "Treifa, I'm sorry to tell you that the Federation will be of little help in this circumstance."

Treifa looked at Captain Byrne with question.

"It sounds like what you have is a fundamental problem in your government. Membership in the Federation might be able to give some superficial aid to your people for a short time. But if the government is corrupt, then whatever help we offer will eventually be absorbed by corruption and it wouldn't surprise me to find that your people end up worse off than when they started." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Which is why we need to overthrow the government and start off with a new system." Treifa said firmly.

"Then you're trading one set of problems for another. Don't you remember your history Treifa? When we overthrew the feudal lords to become a democratic society, we treated our elected leaders like royalty and within two generations were in the same state that we had started in." Tyce said seriously.

"Perhaps it's not the system of government that is at fault, but the leaders that you've chosen?" Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"When I return to Okuda Prime, I have the authority to call for free elections. We can change the government from top to bottom if I call for it." Tyce said frankly.

"But who will replace them? You're just trading one group of corrupt politicians for another." Treifa said in defeat.

"Why don't you run for election Treifa?" Vincent asked curiously.

"There's no way I could be elected. The politicians spend millions to spread their lies and convince people to vote for them. The only reason I have ships is because the politicians don't want the 'Holy One' to stir things up." Treifa said seriously.

"So it *was* Malif's people who set this up?" Tyce asked in confirmation.

"Not really. Malif is just a pawn. The people who are really in charge run both political parties. No matter who wins, they still come out on top. If you were killed, then their puppets could petition to join the Federation so their masters could increase their power base beyond our system." Treifa said gravely.

Tyce shook his head as he said, "I had no idea it had gotten so bad."

"How could you know? You live in your grand tower with your priests to protect you from the ugly truths. The sad thing is that the people really are devoted to you. They love and trust you and are convinced that your every word is the law." Treifa said imploringly.

"I'm beginning to see that. I'm just not sure how to change things." Tyce said speculatively.

"Are you allowed to tell your people who you would like them to vote for?" Vincent asked quietly.

Tyce and Treifa looked at each other for a moment, then Tyce said, "Six hundred years ago a Holy One endorsed a candidate for the presidency. That president was elected in eleven consecutive free elections, and the last time he didn't even run for the office, the people wrote him in and elected him by popular mandate. It was decided at that time that the Holy One should refrain from endorsing any candidate. It subverts the purpose of an election by influencing the will of the people."

"But if the will of the people is to have a fair and working government, then aren't you just guiding them in the right direction to get what they really want?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Crewman Winters, we are here to arbitrate, not influence." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"No Commander. He's right. If there were ever a time when I should use my position as Holy One to help my people, this is it." Tyce said seriously.

"I think I agree with you... but what about the Federation?" Treifa asked hesitantly.

"Crewman Winters had a thought about that... why don't you tell him Vincent?" Tyce said with a smile.

"Um... yeah. I was just thinking that since you guys already set up colonies for people who want to live differently from the people on your home planet. Why don't you set up a colony that is allowed to deal with the Federation? That way you can see how it works and if it causes any problems before you decide if you want to join the Federation for real." Vincent said cautiously.

Treifa thought about the suggestion for a moment, then said, "It sounds like a reasonable compromise. If I could get the Holy One's endorsement on the idea I know I could get my people to go along with it. They'll be climbing all over each other to join the colony."

"I'm afraid that won't work." Tyce said seriously.

"Why not?" Treifa asked cautiously.

"Because, if we can come up with a plan to make this work, I expect you and your people to be running for every public office that they can possibly fill. With a little hard work and my endorsement, every one of them should be able to be elected... Well, except for those two who tried to shoot me. I don't think I want to endorse them." Tyce finished with a smile.

"Don't worry about them. They are willing to fight and die for the benefit of our people. Once they see that you're really trying to provide a better future for us instead of trying to keep us in the stone age, they'll be your most devoted followers." Treifa said with conviction.

"Perhaps. But I'll still feel better knowing that Audge is by my side to protect me." Tyce said with a smile.

Audge looked at Tyce with surprise.

"This trip has shown me that I don't need someone to protect me from the truth, but I do need someone to protect me. Audge, if you'll be willing to serve, I would be happy if you would consent to be my personal security guard from now on." Tyce said with a smile.

"I would be honored 'Holy One'." Audge said reverently.

"Good. Then your first duty as my personal security guard is to call me by my name. I don't like the idea of being called 'Holy One' in my own home for the next eighty or so years." Tyce said with a smile.

"Yes, of course Tyce." Audge said shyly.

"Very well then. It appears that everything has been resolved." Captain Byrne said happily.

"Not quite everything. I think this may take a good deal of explaining on my part before 'The Holy One' will be safe among my companions. But it does sound like a good beginning." Treifa finished with a hopeful smile at Tyce.

"And the *Dorsa* is far from being ready for the trip back to Okuda Prime." Commander M'Butu said reluctantly.

"Mere details. The most challenging part has been accomplished. We've sat down and come to an understanding. All the rest of it is just means to accomplish what has been decided here today." Captain Byrne said happily.

"I think I agree with you Captain." Treifa said with a smile.

"As do I." Tyce said happily.

"Treifa, I understand that you will need to return to your ship and discuss what has been said here with some others. Perhaps you would care to invite one or two others to join us for a meal this evening so they can see for themselves that everyone is in agreement." Captain Byrne asked hopefully.

"I would be honored to attend. And I will notify my guests to leave their weapons behind this time." Treifa said with a barely contained smile.

"I believe that would make the evening run much more smoothly." Captain Byrne said with a considering look.

"We could also invite Captain Marr." Commander M'Butu said speculatively.

Captain Byrne nodded his agreement, then asked, "Is there anyone you would care to invite Holy One?"

"Yes. My High Priest Oluf. Although you shouldn't expect him to be very good company. He's about to find out that his job description has drastically changed." Tyce said with a smile.

"And of course Crewman Winters will be attending as your cultural liaison." Captain Byrne said with a fond smile at Vincent.

"Thank you Captain. Although I did not agree with my priest's request for Crewman Winters to be my guide, Vincent has been a great help to me. Thank you for assigning him to accompany me while I am visiting your ship."

Vincent smiled happily at the praise.

"Captain, would it also be possible for Ensign Thaelan to join us for dinner? I believe it would be fitting for him to be present since he was a member of the last Federation delegation to visit Okuda Prime." Tyce said in careful thought.

"I was not aware of that. Yes, it sounds fitting that Ensign Thaelan should be invited to join us." Captain Byrne said happily.

Chapter 23

The group escorted Treifa to the transporter room and watched as he left the ship.

Once he was gone, Vincent casually asked, "Tyce, would you and Audge like to take a shower and have your clothes cleaned before the dinner?"

Tyce considered for a moment, then said, "We did not bring other clothing and would not wish to be an imposition."

Vincent smiled and said, "The fresher doesn't take very long to work. It should be finished by the time you're done showering. Or if you'd like to change into other clothes, I bet mine would fit you and Audge could probably borrow something from Darin."

Tyce looked down at his diaphanous robes for a moment, then said, "Since I have received the honor of being 'The Holy One' I have only worn the official robes of my position. If you are sincere in your offer, I believe I would like to borrow some of your clothing."

Vincent smiled at the formal statement, then looked at Audge and asked, "How about you, would you like to get a shower and change into some other clothes?"

Audge timidly nodded that he would.

"Alright, let's go to Deflector Control' to get you something to wear, then we'll go to Daddy Joe's cabin and get showered. I'm pretty sure that Lou and Judy are still on the Auxiliary Bridge so there won't be anyone there." Vincent said as he led the way to the turbo lift.

"Vincent, I appreciate your courtesy. I realize that you were ordered to accompany us during our time on your ship. But to offer the use of your own clothing goes beyond that duty. Thank you." Tyce said quietly.

"Deflector Control." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Tyce and said, "Friends share stuff. You and Audge are both my friends and it wouldn't matter if you two were crewmen on your ship, I'd be doing exactly the same thing."

Tyce smiled and said, "I have no doubt in the truth of your words."

The turbo lift doors opened, as Audge said, "Thank you for including me in your declaration of friendship. I do not understand why it is so, but I know that you are sincere."

Vincent led the way to Deflector Control as he said, "Boy, you guys sure are serious about this stuff."

Tyce nodded at the statement as the trio walked into Deflector Control.

* * * * *

"Hey Darin, would you mind if we borrow some of your clothes for Audge? His stuff is a little torn up from the battle." Vincent asked casually.

"Help yourself. My bag is in the storage bin just inside the door. My name is on the tag on the handle." Darin said as he glanced away from his console for a moment.

"Thanks." Vincent said happily as he turned to lead the way into the supply room.

"Vincent, aren't you going to introduce me?" Joe asked from beside Thaelan at the main console.

Vincent giggled, then said, "Daddy Joe, this is 'The Holy One' of the Okudai and his protector, Audge. Guys, this is Lieutenant Joe Bowers, he's kinda like my father."

"A pleasure, you must be very proud of Vincent." Tyce said reverently as he bowed slightly to Joe.

"A little more every day. It's a pleasure to meet both of you." Joe said as he respectfully returned the bow.

"The guys need to get cleaned up before dinner. I'm just going to get them some clothes, then we're going up to the cabin to use the shower." Vincent said quickly.

"I think that if you check with Commander M'Butu, you'll find that he's arranged for our guests to have their own quarters while they're staying with us." Joe said seriously.

"Oh. Um, okay. I didn't think of that." Vincent sputtered.

Joe chuckled, then said, "Why don't you get their clothes together while I find out where their cabin is?"

"Thanks Daddy Joe. We'll be right back." Vincent said happily and hurried into the supply room.

Tyce and Audge followed more slowly, both enjoying the scene of family caring before them.

* * * * *

After finding some casual pants and a pull over knit shirt for Audge, Vincent began to look through his own things.

"What do you think of these?" Vincent asked as he pulled out a pair of black slacks and a mint green button up shirt for Tyce's inspection.

Tyce smiled and said, "They will be fine."

Vincent folded the clothes, then sat them on top of a storage bin so he could gather under garments to go with them.

Tyce slowly walked closer to Vincent and quietly whispered, "Vincent?"

As Vincent turned at the sound, Tyce closed the distance between them and pulled Vincent into a firm hug.

Vincent smiled at the action and responded by putting his arms around Tyce.

After a moment of hugging, Tyce moved in and gave Vincent a full kiss on the mouth while his hands drifted down to Vincent's ass.

In a heartbeat, ice flowed through Vincent's veins and he broke out of the embrace.

Tyce looked at Vincent with confusion at the move.

"You... you tried to..." Vincent said in an increasing voice as rage began to fill his eyes.

Audge moved to Tyce's side in a protective gesture.

"I do not understand. We are friends." Tyce said with confusion as he took a step toward Vincent.

"Stay away from me..." Vincent said in a barely contained scream.

"Is something wrong?" Joe asked as he hurried into the supply room.

"He kissed me." Vincent said in a growl as he pointed.

Joe walked to Vincent's side and gently put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" Vincent warned as he staggered a few steps back.

"Did I do something improper?" Tyce asked quietly.

"I don't know. As soon as we can get Vincent calmed down, we'll sort this out." Joe said in thought.

Vincent saw the look of confusion in Tyce's eyes, the look of warning in Audge's and the concern in Joe's.

It was Joe's concern for him that finally broke the rage and Vincent closed his eyes and took in a trembling breath as he tried to regain control.

"Okay. I think he's past it now. Would you tell me what happened?" Joe asked quietly.

"Vincent has stated that he is my friend. I simply wished to give physical expression to our emotional closeness." Tyce said reasonably.

"But I'm married." Vincent snapped.

"I am male." Tyce responded quietly.

Vincent looked at Tyce with confusion as Joe said, "We don't have much information about the customs of your people. Could you explain why you being male makes a difference?"

Tyce thought for a moment, then said, "Vincent is married to a woman. She is his mate and the only one to satisfy his chi. But to maintain balance he must also satisfy his ieb. I sought to express my friendship for Vincent and help to satisfy his ieb."

"My what?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"I think we need to define some terms here Holy One. What is chi?" Joe asked carefully.

"Chi is the love for the opposing gender." Tyce said carefully.

"So that means ieb is the love for ones own gender." Joe said quietly.

"Correct. To have both satisfied brings balance and harmony to ones life." Tyce said seriously.

"Stop! Don't go in there!" was heard from Deflector Control.

T'Lani walked into the room with a phaser raised.

"Husband. I sensed an attack upon you. Do you require assistance?" T'Lani asked as she held the phaser before her.

Vincent was in shock for a moment, then quickly said, "No. I'm fine. Tyce just... I mean, the Holy One..."

"The people of Okuda have a different philosophy about marriage and relationships. The Holy One was trying to express his feelings of friendship in a very normal and natural way for him, but by our standards, it seemed to Vincent that he was being attacked." Joe said carefully.

"Is this correct Husband?" T'Lani asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I guess on Okuda, married people have sex with their friends or something." Vincent said as he walked to T'Lani's side.

T'Lani lowered her phaser, then pulled Vincent into a one armed hug.

Tyce felt like he needed to explain and said, "Every person has the chi and the ieb. They are the forces that draw us to form relationships with those around us. When a person marries, they dedicate their chi or ieb to their partner. But the opposing force must also be satisfied or it will bring disruption and eventual ruin to the relationship."

"So if a man gets married to a woman, he's supposed to have sex with other men?" Joe asked carefully.

"Only with his closest friends or his wife's brother if that is more convenient." Tyce said seriously.

"I see. Well, we do it differently. When a man marries a woman, he takes a vow to be only with her for the rest of his life." Joe said in an informative tone.

"But how can this be? The imbalance would cause chaos." Tyce said speculatively.

"I don't understand what you mean." Joe said cautiously.

"To satisfy only the chi leaves the ieb to grow and become an increasing distraction. Making such a vow would cause even the thought of satisfying the ieb to be coupled to guilt. And if the ieb were indulged, then the marriage vow would be broken. I can see no good coming from this arrangement." Tyce said darkly.

Joe considered the statement for a moment, then said, "You have to understand that we have different cultural customs. Over a period of millennia our people have built definitions of what it means to be married and committed in a relationship. Logically, I can see what you're saying, but I know that if I were married, I would still believe I was being unfaithful to my wife if I had sex with anyone else."

Tyce considered the words carefully, then quietly said, "Since meeting your people I have felt that the people of Okuda were primitive and backward in

comparison. Upon learning of this... attitude that you have regarding relationships, I feel that, at least in some way, we are more advanced."

Joe smiled at the statement as he said, "I think you may be right about that. Not every advancement of a civilization is an invention. Sometimes it's a philosophy."

"This may significantly change my people's view of the Federation." Tyce said in thought.

"How so?" Joe asked curiously.

"For my people to know that they would be among people who do not balance their chi and their ieb will be disconcerting to many. Some will refuse any contact based on that fact alone." Tyce said in a distant voice.

"I don't understand why." Joe said carefully.

Tyce looked Joe in the eyes and said, "It is a common belief among my people that a person who does not live in harmony is mentally unstable."

"They would think that we're all insane?" Joe asked cautiously.

"Not necessarily insane, but suffering from the stress of being imbalanced. The results of that stress could be aggressive behavior, territorialism... and in the most extreme cases, rape and murder." Tyce said seriously.

Joe's eyes went wide at the statement, then he glanced at Vincent who was still at T'Lani's side.

"My apologies Lieutenant Bowers. It is not my intent to make you feel that I believe these things of you." Tyce said quietly.

Joe turned his attention back to Tyce and smiled as he said, "I wasn't offended. Besides, I'm balanced, I'm not getting any chi or ieb."

Audge laughed at the statement, then quickly tried to hide it.

Tyce glanced at him with a fond smile, then said, "I think that means you aren't the only one."

"Holy One, would you mind very much if I asked Vincent's brother, Darin, to escort you to your cabin so you can get your showers? I have something that I would like to discuss with Vincent for a moment." Joe asked hopefully.

"That would be fine. Should we return here after our showers?" Tyce asked curiously.

"That sounds like a very good idea." Joe said with a smile.

"Um, wait." Vincent said hesitantly, then looked at T'Lani with indecision.

T'Lani nodded to him to continue.

Vincent stepped forward and looked Tyce in the eyes, then said, "I'm sorry I yelled at you like that. I really am your friend and I'm sorry if me doing that made it seem like I wasn't."

"I understand now Vincent, and your apology is accepted." Tyce said gently.

Vincent stepped forward and pulled Tyce into a gentle hug, then hesitantly started to kiss him.

Tyce responded just as gently and enjoyed the kiss.

When the kiss finally broke, Vincent looked into his eyes and said, "T'Lani said it was logical."

Tyce looked at T'Lani, then said, "Your wife is not only very protective of you, but also very wise."

Vincent smiled at the statement, then walked to stand before Audge.

"Come down here Audge, you're my friend too." Vincent said firmly.

Audge bent down a little so Vincent could pull him into a hug, then shared a brief kiss with him.

"This is a good sign for the future of all our people." Tyce said with a contented smile at Joe.

After releasing Audge from the hug, Vincent said, "Oops. I think I got too much ieb. I need to get some chi to keep everything balanced."

Tyce, Audge and Joe all smiled as Vincent hurried to T'Lani and hugged her tightly.

"Vincent, I'll be right back." Joe said, then led Tyce and Audge out of the room.

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Joe walked back into the supply room to find Vincent and T'Lani exactly as he had left them.

"Vincent, there's something that I think you need to know and now seems to be a good time to tell you." Joe said seriously.

"Would you prefer that I leave you alone for this discussion?" T'Lani asked calmly.

"No T'Lani. I think it would be best if you were here." Joe said as he considered what he was going to say.

"That probably means it's something really serious." Vincent said as he renewed his hug with T'Lani.

"Vincent. I learned some things about your father that... well, it just seems right that you should know now." Joe said hesitantly.

"My dad? What is it?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Did you ever wonder why your dad hated Lawrence so much?" Joe asked quietly.

"Not really. He hated Lawrence because he's gay." Vincent said honestly.

Joe shook his head slowly, not disagreeing with Vincent's answer, but trying to find another way to approach the subject.

"Lieutenant Bowers, would it not be best to simply say what you need to say, then answer whatever questions result?" T'Lani asked simply.

Joe's eyebrows went up in surprise at the suggestion, then he said, "Thank you T'Lani. That probably would work best. And please call me Joe while we're conducting family business."

"Of course." T'Lani said and inclined her head slightly in a show of respect.

"Well then. Vincent, your father was attracted to Lawrence. He couldn't express his feelings the way he wanted to so he expressed them as hate." Joe said frankly.

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment, then asked, "You're telling me this because of the chi ieb thing, aren't you?"

"That's what made me think about telling you now." Joe said honestly.

Vincent nodded as he thought.

"Please allow me to verify my understanding. Vincent's biological father was sexually attracted to Vincent's brother, your son Lawrence. Since his marriage vows forbade any expression of his sexual desire, he instead abused the child?" T'Lani asked slowly.

"Well, yes and no. I think Winters had other same-sex urges before he fixated on Lawrence. And not only his marriage vows, but probably his upbringing contributed to the way things worked out. He might have even been sexually abused himself at some point." Joe said carefully.

"Wait. Wait. You're saying that my dad was hot for Lawrence. But because he couldn't have sex with him, he hurt him instead?" Vincent asked seriously.

"No, I'm saying that because of the way he was raised and the things he believed, that he couldn't admit to himself that he had sexual feelings for any other male. He was taught to hate gay people, and when he started having latent homosexual urges, he didn't have any healthy way of dealing with them. So eventually his frustration and hatred developed into his abuse of Lawrence." Joe said in thought.

"Huh?" Vincent asked in quiet confusion.

"Vincent, it's a very difficult concept to explain and I don't even know if I understand it all. I just felt that I should tell you this now so you could deal with it in the context of the chi and the ieb. I can't think of a better way to explain what was probably going through your father's mind." Joe said frankly.

"I will help Vincent to process this new information." T'Lani said seriously.

"Thank you T'Lani, but considering what Vincent just did, I think he understands. Even if it isn't entirely on a conscious level." Joe said with a smile at Vincent.

"What did I do?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Joe squatted down to look Vincent in the eyes and said, "You overcame a lifetime of conditioning that was meant to make you hate anyone who was different from you. Without any encouragement from me, you made the choice to forgive the Holy One for the misunderstanding and put your friendship with him first. I'm so proud of you Vincent."

Vincent took a step forward and pulled Joe into a firm hug.

"My husband has chosen well to place his trust in you." T'Lani said frankly.

Joe gave Vincent one final squeeze of the hug, then stood and said, "I'd have to say the same thing about his choosing to marry you."

T'Lani inclined her head in acceptance of the compliment.

"I think I'll leave you two alone for a few minutes. I left Thaelan running Deflector Control by himself." Joe said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks for telling me all that stuff, I love you." Vincent said as he walked to T'Lani's side.

"I love you to Champ." Joe said, then walked out the door.

* * * * *

As Darin, Tyce and Audge walked down the catwalk, Darin quietly asked, "When I take you to your cabin would you like me to wait for you to finish or would you rather that I left you alone? Oh... or you could call me and I could come back if that's what you want."

"If you have other duties to perform we could call when we are finished if you will instruct us in the use of your comm devices." Tyce said calmly.

"Oh no. I don't have any other duties right now. I just wanted you to be comfortable." Darin said in a rush then stepped forward as the turbo lift doors opened.

Tyce smiled at Darin's flustered nature and said, "I think it would be good to get to know the brother of my friend Vincent."

"Deck D." Darin said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Tyce and said, "Thank you Holy One. So far all of Vincent's friends have turned out to be really good people."

"Please call me Tyce, and this is Audge." Tyce said gently.

"Oh, thank you Tyce. It's nice to meet you both. I'm Darin." he said, somewhat shyly.

"Darin, I am curious to know something about your culture." Tyce said slowly.

"Sure. Ask me anything you want." Darin said with a warm smile.

"Vincent is a child, yet he has the responsibilities and respect of an adult. I am curious to know if it is true of others of your people or if Vincent is somehow unique." Tyce said carefully.

Darin chuckled as they stepped off the lift, then gestured to a door a few feet away.

Tyce and Audge followed Darin for the few steps to the doorway, then into the cabin.

"Commander M'Butu wanted to know if you would prefer for Audge to have separate quarters or if you would rather have him in here with you." Darin said seriously as they entered into a comfortable living area.

"I would prefer to have him share quarters with me. I feel safe with him nearby." Tyce said as he looked around.

Darin led the way into the bedroom and said, "Then I'll have another bed brought in before tonight."

"I would not be opposed to sharing this bed with Audge. There is more than enough room." Tyce said seriously.

"Well, I'll have another bed brought in anyway. You two can decide if you want to use it or not." Darin said with a grin.

Tyce smiled at the statement as he nodded his agreement.

"The shower and laundry fresher are in here." Darin said as he walked into the bathroom.

"Audge, would you go first so I may have some time to speak with Darin?" Tyce asked simply.

"Yes Holy... Tyce. But I may have difficulty with..." Audge trailed off as he looked at his cast.

"Oh, I can help you with that." Darin said quickly.

Audge hesitantly nodded. Before he knew what was happening, Darin was helping him to remove his shirt.

"If you'll just hold still, I'll pull the sleeve over your cast." Darin said in concentration.

"Thank you Darin. You are most kind." Audge said quietly.

Darin smiled as he worked the tight material over the cast.

"There. Do you think you'll need help with anything else?" Darin asked curiously.

Audge looked down at himself, then said, "I don't think so."

"Well, if you have any problem at all, we'll be in the living room. Just call for me and I'll come in and help you." Darin said with assurance.

"Thank you. I will." Audge said with a genuine smile.

Tyce gave Audge a quick, fond smile, then walked with Darin out of the room.

* * * * *

"Let's see. You wanted to know if Vincent is unique." Darin said as he led the way through the bedroom and into the living area.

"I get the sense that he is unique in many ways, but I am curious to know if others of his age have made similar achievements." Tyce said carefully.

Darin gestured for Tyce to sit with him on the couches in the living area, then said, "If you would have asked me a few weeks ago I would have said no. But since I've met Vincent, I've learned about some things that I wouldn't have believed before."

"What things?" Tyce asked curiously as he shifted to be comfortable on the couch.

"Well, let's see. I guess it starts with Vincent's official title. He is Crewman Vincent Winters, Son of Clan Short of the House of Surak of Vulcan." Darin said carefully.

"He has mentioned that he has adopted the Vulcan culture as his own, though I do not understand why it is so." Tyce said seriously.

"I don't understand everything about that either. I'll do my best to tell you his story from the start, at least as much as I know of it." Darin said, then looked to Tyce for approval.

After receiving it, Darin continued, "Vincent's parents died recently. That's when he met Joe, his half-brother's father."

"Half-brother?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yes. Vincent and Lawrence had the same mother, but different fathers. Vincent and Joe aren't related by blood, but... well, that doesn't matter. Joe is Vincent's dad no matter how you look at it." Darin finished with a smile.

Tyce nodded that he agreed.

"Well anyway, I guess Joe and Vincent talked to some people, some pretty high ranking people, and they came up with the plan for Vincent to be adopted by Clan Short..."

"Excuse me, but what is Clan Short?" Tyce asked curiously.

Darin smiled, then said, "That's what I wondered. I did a little research and found out that it's a Vulcan sub-clan of the house of Surak. Clan Short was formed for the purpose of helping abused and neglected children. The strange thing is that Clan Short is made up of children."

"Children like Vincent?" Tyce asked curiously.

"That's right. According to the stories that I've read, the members of Clan Short have done things that could only be classified as miracles if anyone

else had done them. They've rescued children from some of the most horrible and disgusting things that you could ever imagine. They have the support of Vulcan, Starfleet and the Federation. In fact, it's thanks to them that the Federation's Safe Haven Act has been implemented on nearly every world in the United Federation of Planets." Darin finished happily.

"Excuse me, what is the Safe Haven Act?" Tyce asked curiously.

"It's a piece of legislation that basically says that if a child is in danger, certain people have the authority to step in and protect the child even if other laws might normally prevent it. By using the Safe Haven Act, Clan Short can rescue a child in trouble and take him to a safe place where he'll never be hurt again. His family, the courts or even the government officials can't override the protection of Safe Haven." Darin said firmly.

"Would it be possible for me to see a copy of the Safe Haven Act. I would like to review it and see if it would be of benefit to my people." Tyce said carefully.

"Sure, I'll make sure you get a copy. Anyway, back to Vincent. When we left Earth on this mission, we received a distress call from the Kimber IV colony. They had a reactor that was leaking radiation and about to go critical. Vincent was the only one small enough to fit through the tunnels to get to the reactor. Well, he did that and saved a few hundred lives. I don't really understand a lot about Vulcan traditions, but since Vincent did something so brave, by Vulcan law he earned his adulthood. So even though he's still a child, legally he's an adult." Darin said carefully.

"I would like to hear more of this incident." Tyce said slowly.

"Well, I doubt that Vincent will talk to you about it too much, but if you ask Joe, I'm sure he'll tell you whatever you want to know." Darin said with a smile.

"He is a proud father, and rightfully so." Tyce said with a grin.

"Okay, so Vincent's an adult. Um, I guess the next thing was his promotion. Because of all the lives he saved and some other stuff that he did, he was promoted by two ranks, so now he's a Petty Officer second class. I'd guess that he outranks around two hundred people on this ship."

"I didn't realize that he had that much authority." Tyce said with surprise.

"Well, it's different for the enlisted ranks. Officers actually have the authority, Vincent's rank is more of a sign to those around him that he is competent in his job and that he is trusted by the officers to give instruction in his area of expertise. Although he would technically outrank

a new crewman who just boarded the ship, chances are that he would be working along side that crewman and offering advice. But it's still quite an achievement."

"Vincent explained that his family elders chose his wife for him. How do you feel about that custom?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Well, it worked out fine for Vincent. But I'm not sure that the elders of every family could do as good a job as Grandfather Sarek did. I could see myself having difficulty giving up that control over something so important in my life, but at the same time, I think that I would probably trust Grandfather Sarek's judgment better than my own." Darin said carefully.

"Excuse me, but I am having difficulty." Audge said as just his eyes peeked around the edge of the bedroom door.

"Please excuse me Tyce. I'll be right back. "Darin said courteously and walked to the bedroom door.

* * * * *

"Is everything alright?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yes. Audge was able to get undressed, but then he didn't know how to use the laundry fresher or the sonic shower. When you go in, I'll show you how to use everything before you get started." Darin said calmly.

"These quarters are quite comfortable. Do you have accommodations like this?" Tyce asked curiously.

Darin chuckled, then said, "Not quite. These are senior officer's quarters. I'm sleeping in the supply room of Deflector Control right now. But once we've delivered the colonists to their new home, Vincent and I will be sharing a cabin that is smaller than this living room."

"I see. Are the accommodations you share uncomfortably small?" Tyce asked with concern.

"Actually no. I was surprised at how small they were when I first arrived on board. But after staying there one night I was comfortable. I think sharing the room with Vincent made that possible. Rather than just being a place to sleep, it's the room I share with my brother." Darin said peacefully.

"Joe also refers to you as Vincent's brother, yet from the story you have told me about him, I suspect that it is an honorary title and not a circumstance of his birth." Tyce said carefully.

"That's right. Vincent and I met for the first time when we came on board. We were assigned to share quarters. I was an only child and always wanted a brother. Vincent was raised with his older brother Lawrence. When we found ourselves together in this new situation, we quickly became friends and before long, became as close as brothers. Joe has accepted me as another son, just like he did for Vincent." Darin said with a happy smile.

"In the days before I became the Holy One, I too wanted a brother. I was like you, an only child. But now that I am the Holy One, it is not possible for me to have such a relationship." Tyce said with regret.

"Why not?" Darin asked curiously.

"Because my duties preclude me from forming such relationships." Tyce said quietly.

"I bet that Audge would be your brother. He obviously admires you. I think that you could have the same type of relationship with him that I have with Vincent if that's what you both wanted." Darin said with a gentle smile.

Tyce shook his head and said, "Audge sees me as the Holy One, just as all my people do. I don't think there is any way that he could see beyond my title... such is my destiny."

"Only if you let it be." Darin said with certainty.

Tyce looked at him curiously.

"When I was assigned to the *Yorktown*, it was a mistake... well, actually it was a cruel joke. When I realized what happened I felt a lot like you do now. I felt like it was already a foregone conclusion that I would be decommissioned and sent back to Earth. But Vincent helped me and encouraged me so I didn't accept what I thought was fate. He kept me moving toward the outcome I wanted. Now I'm here. I'm a full ensign, not by accident or as part of a joke, but because I proved my abilities. Vincent has helped me understand a lot of things, but one of the most important things I've learned is that you're only doomed to your fate when you don't fight against it." Darin said passionately.

Tyce thought about the words for a moment, then smiled as he said, "The tone of your voice was very much like Vincent's when you said that. I can see that you really are brothers."

Darin giggled and said, "You aren't the first person to tell me that."

"Excuse me, do you think you could help me get this shirt on?" Audge asked from the bedroom doorway.

"Sure. I'll be right there." Darin said happily and hurried to Audge's side.

Tyce remained seated and watched through the bedroom door as Darin and Audge worked together to get the sleeve of the shirt over his cast.

* * * * *

"T'Lani has to get back to work." Vincent said with regret as he walked away from the supply room.

"How are you doing Champ?" Joe asked quietly from station one.

"I'm fine. Thanks for letting us have a few minutes alone. T'Lani helped explain some of what you were talking about." Vincent said as he walked slowly to Joe's side.

"Come here." Joe said warmly and pulled Vincent into a hug.

"Oh jeeze. I just got my chi and my ieb balanced." Vincent whined playfully.

Joe snuggled Vincent against his side, then said, "As I understand the concepts of chi and ieb, they are the forces of sexual attraction that people feel. What I feel for you is nothing like that. I'm sure if you ask the Holy One, he will explain the feeling a father has for his son isn't an example of ieb."

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "I know that. I was just playing. Why do you have to be so serious about this stuff?"

"I guess it's because I want to be sure that you understand as many things as possible to prevent a repeat of what happened this afternoon with the Holy One." Joe said frankly.

Vincent reluctantly nodded, then said, "He really freaked me out when he did that. It was like..."

"Like what?" Joe asked curiously.

"Um... This morning when Thaelan and I were working out, something happened." Vincent said slowly.

"Something?" Joe asked cautiously, concerned by Vincent's tone.

"Yeah. I um... got mad. I mean... I don't know how to explain it really..." Vincent trailed off helplessly.

"Vincent was consumed by rage." Thaelan said from the main console.

Joe and Vincent both turned to Thaelan with surprise.

"Andorians have excellent hearing. As I was saying, when Vincent began today's exercise, he became enraged and temporarily lost the ability to reason." Thaelan said seriously.

"Is that right?" Joe asked as he looked at Vincent with concern.

"Yeah. And I kinda got the same feeling when Tyce kissed me." Vincent said in a small voice.

"If I had known that, I wouldn't have told you about your father today. I'm sorry Vincent." Joe said as he renewed his hug.

"It's okay. I'm glad you told me that stuff. But what I wanted to tell you is that I'm um, going to ask to talk to a counselor about it so maybe we can figure out how to keep it from happening some more." Vincent said uncertainly.

"I think that's an excellent idea. If you want, I can make those arrangements for you." Joe said quietly.

"No. I'll take care of it myself when we get Tyce back to his home. I don't know when I'll have time to see a counselor while he's on the ship." Vincent said as he turned to look Joe in the eyes.

"You've got it Champ. Just let me know if there's anything that I can do to help you." Joe said with a gentle smile.

"I think I'll be able to handle it. Thaelan says that it's not a really big problem yet, so if I go to the counselor and ask for help I should be able to take care of it." Vincent said with a smile.

"I think he's right. Just remember that you don't have to do it all by yourself. If you ever need to talk or just need a hug, you've got your whole family that you can depend on." Joe said warmly.

"I'll remember." Vincent said happily and hugged tightly to Joe's side.

"While the Holy One is getting his shower, would you like to run some status checks on two and three for me?" Joe asked casually from the hug.

"Sure." Vincent said gently, then moved to station two.

* * * * *

Darin walked into the living room to find Audge looking around curiously.

"I showed Tyce how to operate the sonic shower controls and how to start the fresher." Darin said casually as he took his seat.

"Thank you for attending to us. Your people have been very kind." Audge said quietly.

Darin smiled and said, "I'm just glad to be able to do something to help."

Audge nodded his understanding of the feeling.

"You look worried. Do you want to talk about it?" Darin asked with concern.

"You would have no more influence over the situation than I do." Audge said distantly.

"I may not be able to do anything to change whatever it is, but talking about it might make you feel better." Darin said casually.

Audge looked into Darin's eyes and said, "I am not worthy of the position I have been given."

Darin chuckled at the statement.

Audge looked at him curiously.

Darin smiled and tried to explain, "While you were showering, I was just telling Tyce that I wasn't worthy of the position that I was given when I came onto the *Yorktown*."

Audge seemed surprised by the statement.

"Audge. Sometimes in life you work hard and are rewarded in exactly the way that you expect. But other times opportunities are presented to you. When that happens, you have the choice to either reject those opportunities because you feel you don't deserve them, or you can accept them and do your best to live up to the challenges you have been given." Darin said carefully.

"But I have been the least of the followers of 'The Holy One'. I have not been educated by the priesthood. I have never been in a position to give a proper tribute or serve in any meaningful way. So many have devoted their lives to his service and deserve the opportunity that I have been given." Audge said quietly.

"Audge. Sometimes things just happen. Sometimes it a horrible accident and sometimes it's your dream job being handed to you. It's not your fault, you have no control over it, you don't deserve it and it still just happens. But what you do have control of is how you deal with it." Darin said firmly.

Audge nodded slowly in thought.

"And if you're interested in my opinion, I think I can explain why you are actually more qualified than most to be Tyce's protector." Darin said cautiously.

Audge looked at Darin with surprise, then quickly nodded.

"I'm guessing that Tyce has been surrounded by priests since he became 'The Holy One' right?" Darin asked cautiously.

"I assume so. I only saw him for the first time today." Audge said quietly.

"Then why didn't he choose them to come here with him?" Darin asked curiously.

"I do not know. The high priest, Oluf, told me that I was to protect 'The Holy One'. He did not offer a reason." Audge said slowly.

"I think it's because Tyce doesn't need the high priest of 'The Holy One' or the most devoted follower of 'The Holy One' to be with him constantly. Being 'The Holy One' is his job. But when 'The Holy One' has come to the end of his duties for the day, Tyce needs someone who will be there for him. You're the best person to do that." Darin said seriously.

"I am?" Audge asked cautiously.

"Yes. You're coming to him as a regular person, not someone who was groomed to serve 'The Holy One'. If you choose to, you can relate to Tyce and give him someone that he can depend on when he's not doing his job. You are in a position to keep that sweet gentle person named Tyce from becoming lost in his responsibilities and duties." Darin said with passion.

"How is it that you know this?" Audge asked in wonder.

Darin smiled and said, "Because what I'm saying that you can be to Tyce is something like what I try to be for Vincent."

Audge stared past Darin in thought at the statement.

"He needs you Audge. He needs a real person in his life to keep him anchored. You can perform a very important function... provided that you don't talk yourself out of it because you feel unworthy." Darin added quietly.

The sound of movement from the bedroom caused both men to look up.

"If you say that the shower device cleaned me, I will believe you. But I much prefer a shower that uses water." Tyce said as he walked into the living area wearing a light green button up shirt and black slacks.

"There's a Jacuzzi tub in there too. After your dinner you could go in and soak in the water if you like. In fact, it's big enough for two." Darin said with a glance at Audge.

"I think that I would like to try that. Thank you Darin." Tyce said with a smile.

"Yes. If I can keep my cast from getting wet, I too would like to try it." Audge said cautiously, feeling that he might be overstepping his bounds.

Tyce looked at Audge with surprise for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Let's plan on doing that after dinner then. I'm sure Vincent wouldn't mind some time to do things by himself this evening."

"Most likely he will spend that time with his wife. They take an hour or so after their duty shifts each night to spend together." Darin said warmly.

"A very good arrangement. It is the foundation of a lasting union." Tyce said sagely.

"I guess since you're both finished, we should get back down to Deflector Control so you guys can go to dinner." Darin said frankly.

"Before we do that, would it be possible to contact the *Dorsa* so that I may speak to my high priest, Oluf?" Tyce asked seriously.

"Of course. If you'll have a seat at the desk, there is a comm unit that you can use. Just press the main comm button and tell whoever is on duty who you want to speak with and they'll take care of it for you." Darin said instructively.

"Thank you Darin. It will be helpful to be able to establish communications on my own." Tyce said as he moved to the desk.

After pressing the main comm button, the screen came to life to show an attractive woman.

"*Communications*." The woman said professionally.

"This is 'The Holy One' of the Okudai. Could you contact the *Dorsa* and connect me with the high priest Oluf?" Tyce asked carefully.

"Of course Holy One. I will have him for you in just a moment." The communications worker said respectfully, then the screen went dark.

Tyce smiled with accomplishment at being able to make the call without any complications, then turned his attention back to the console screen as it came back on.

"'Holy One'. It is so good to see that you are well. I was becoming concerned." Oluf said in relief.

"I am quite well Oluf. There is a dinner planned this evening and I have asked that you be invited to attend. Please arrange to transport to this ship and meet with me at your earliest convenience so I may speak with you about some new developments before the dinner." Tyce said calmly.

"Of course Holy One... may I also bring your formal robes?" Oluf asked as he looked at the unusual shirt that Tyce was wearing.

"No. but you may bring one or two of my regular robes. I will be wearing this clothing to the dinner. I will explain when you arrive." Tyce said carefully.

"As you say, Holy One." Oluf said as he bowed reverently.

"One other thing." Tyce said quickly before Oluf disconnected the transmission.

"Yes?" Oluf asked quickly.

"Please arrange for additional clothing to be provided for Audge, the man who came with me to protect me. I'm sure if you ask Captain Marr, he can find where Audge's clothing is stored." Tyce said, then glanced away from the screen to give Audge a quick smile.

"I will see to it 'Holy One'. I will join you as soon as I am able." Oluf said in an almost panicked voice.

"I will be in Deflector Control when you arrive." Tyce said seriously.

"Deflector Control. I will remember." Oluf said quickly.

"I will see you soon. Good bye Oluf." Tyce said with a gentle smile.

"Good bye 'Holy One'." Oluf said and bowed respectfully.

Tyce cautiously pressed the comm button again and the screen went dark.

"You handled that like you've been doing it all your life." Darin said with a smile.

"Although your Federation technology is different from ours, it operates fundamentally the same way. We had better go or Oluf will be in Deflector Control before we are." Tyce said with a grin.

"Tyce." Audge said cautiously.

Tyce turned to look at Audge with question.

"Your hair is somewhat disheveled. Would you like me to help you with it before we go?" Audge asked cautiously as he looked at Tyce's long flowing black hair.

"Yes, thank you. I've become accustomed to someone doing it for me and forgot." Tyce said timidly.

"The things you need should be in the top drawer of the dresser in the bedroom." Darin said quickly.

"You can come with us if you like." Tyce said as he walked toward the bedroom.

"No. Thank you. I think I'll let Audge handle this himself." Darin said with a smile at the pair.

* * * * *

"'Holy One'!" Oluf said in relief as he rushed into Deflector Control carrying a bundle of clothing.

"It is good to see you Oluf. Lieutenant Bowers, would you mind if I made use of your storage room to speak with Oluf privately for a moment?" Tyce asked casually.

"You're welcomed to use the storage room if you like. But I'm sure you could use one of the conference rooms where you would be more comfortable." Joe said quickly.

"There is no need. What I have to say won't take that long." Tyce said with a smile, then turned to Oluf and said, "Oluf, please come this way."

Audge watched cautiously, not knowing if he should stay or go. A glance from Tyce told him all he needed to know and he quickly followed the pair into the storage room.

* * * * *

"'Holy One', it is improper for you to be in this... workplace. I was led to believe that you would be treated as a dignitary among these Federation people." Oluf said in despair.

"Oluf. I am here because I choose to be here." Tyce said simply.

"But 'The Holy One' should not be subject to the trivialities of starship operations. You should be surrounded only by the most important and influential of their people." Oluf said desperately.

"Oluf. I have been sequestered from our own people since I became the Holy One. Austir kept counsel with only the heads of church and government for most of his life. The result has been that 'The Holy One' has lost touch with the common man. I'm ashamed to say that I know more about the day to day life of a Federation citizen than I do of my own people. It is going to change, starting now." Tyce said firmly.

"But it isn't proper for 'The Holy..." Oluf began to say.

"Oluf. That was a statement. Not a question. I will start with you. Up to now, you have fulfilled your duties as you have understood them. You have served me well as you have sought to protect me from unpleasantness and helped me to maintain my dignified bearing despite my young age. As of now, your first duty to me is to tell me the complete and honest truth about what is happening with our government and our people." Tyce said seriously

'"Holy One', I don't understand what you mean." Oluf said in astonishment.

"Have you served in this way for so long that you've forgotten what the truth is?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"No. But I don't understand what you are asking of me." Oluf said, and a note of helplessness could be heard in his voice.

"I am asking you to stop protecting me from the information that you feel is too unpleasant for me to know. I cannot make good decisions for my followers if I do not have accurate information. If you are unable to be honest and truthful with me, I will find someone who is able." Tyce said as he looked Oluf in the eyes.

"Yes... yes 'Holy One'. I will see that you are provided complete information." Oluf said quietly.

"Good. When we return home, I want you to make arrangements for children near my age from each colony and province to be randomly selected and brought to the capitol city to meet with me." Tyce said seriously.

"That could take some months to arrange." Oluf said hesitantly.

"Not all at once. One or two a week will be fine. I would just like to spend some time talking with them so I can get to know them and learn about their lives. How can I help to provide for their needs if I don't know what they are." Tyce finished simply.

"But... but you are 'The Holy One'." Oluf said in a disillusioned voice.

Tyce saw what was happening and said, "Yes Oluf. I am the Holy One. You, better than anyone, should know the abilities that I possess. But I am not omniscient or omnipotent. I suppose that over the last few decades that fact has been forgotten. It's time for us, all of the church, to turn our focus on the needs of our followers."

After a moment, Oluf reluctantly nodded.

Tyce considered for a moment, then reluctantly said, "I can see that your having difficulty with this. I think I may be able to ease your mind about it."

Oluf looked at Tyce with question.

After a quiet moment of concentration, Tyce slowly spread his arms and tilted his head back slightly.

A shadowy form slowly emerged from Tyce's chest and approached Oluf, who was frozen in a mix of wonder and fear.

"Oluf, my dear friend. It is good to see that you are well." The shadow said in a whispery voice.

"'H... Holy One'?" Oluf asked in fear.

There was a faint chuckle from around the room.

Audge, who had been standing silently watching, looked around and saw at least a dozen indistinct shapes throughout the room.

"All of us have used that name." the shadow said in a barely audible voice.

"But it is me that you remember. I am he who was Austir."

"Austir." Oluf said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"You need not fear me, my dear friend. I am simply here to assure you that young Tyce is doing what must be done at this time. Just as in nature, there is a time for the young to be protected and confined to the nest, but when they have grown enough, it is time for them to go out into the world to begin their own lives." Austir said softly.

Oluf nodded reluctantly.

"I was the protective parent who kept all my children sheltered and safe. Tyce will be the one to prepare them to leave the nest. Please help him my friend. All the Holy Ones who have ever been are in agreement that it is time." Austir said hopefully.

"I will Holy One. I will." Oluf promised as his tears fell.

"Remember the orchard in the springtime Oluf. That day still lives in my heart." Austir said in a whisper, then began to walked toward Tyce who was watching the scene before him sadly.

"I will Holy One. I'll never forget." Oluf said in a quiet, distant voice.

Austir gave a brief smile, then was absorbed into Tyce. One by one, the others made their way to Tyce and were also absorbed.

Audge hurried to Tyce's side and looked at him with question and concern.

Tyce smiled at his concern, then turned his attention to Oluf.

"Do you see now Oluf? I carry them with me. They advise me and offer their different points of view. I'm not a child who wants to make changes just to see things change. I am 'The Holy One' and I am clearing the path for the new age."

Chapter 24

"Lieutenant Bowers, do you know how long it will be before the dinner will begin?" Tyce asked seriously as he walked with Oluf and Audge out of the supply room.

"Let me check." Joe said, then keyed in his query on the auxiliary console he had been working on.

After looking over the information, Joe said, "You have ten minutes before the people from the other ships are scheduled to transport over. The dinner will begin in just over half an hour."

Tyce nodded at the information then noticed Vincent sitting at station two looking at him cautiously.

"If you can spare Crewman Winters, we could proceed to the transporter room to await our guests." Tyce said formally.

"Vincent was just doing a few system checks for me. He's free to go whenever you're ready." Joe said with a gentle smile at Tyce.

Vincent quickly signed off his station, then walked to Tyce's side.

"Darin, I would like to thank you again for your assistance this afternoon. You were very helpful." Tyce said with formal regality.

"It was my pleasure Holy One. If I can do anything else to help, all you have to do is ask." Darin said gently.

Tyce gave a single nod, then walked toward the door.

Audge walked on his right and Vincent on his left.

Oluf watched the trio walking away for a moment, then hurried to follow.

* * * * *

"Um, Tyce. Is everything okay? You know, between us?" Vincent asked with concern.

Tyce looked at the hesitant expression in Vincent's eyes and smiled.

"I understand the cause of the misunderstanding earlier and have accepted your apology. If anything, my admiration for you has only increased." Tyce said and gave Vincent a quick, one armed hug as they continued to walk.

"Then would it be okay if we stop somewhere before we go to the transporter room? I need to let my friends know that I won't be hanging out

with them." Vincent said carefully as the group slowly walked down the catwalk toward the turbo lift.

"Did you have a prior commitment?" Tyce asked with concern.

"No. Not really. I usually hang around with Benny, JonJon and Channing when I go off duty until T'Lani finishes her shift. I just want to let them know what's going on." Vincent said with a smile.

"Oluf, would you go to the transporter room to wait for us? If representatives from the other ships arrive before we join you, would you greet them in my stead?" Tyce asked formally.

"Yes Holy One, it would be my honor to do so." Oluf said reverently.

As the trio boarded the lift, Vincent said, "Deck J, Dorsal and Transporter room one."

"Are you sure that your friends won't be upset that you won't be joining them? You have already spent the majority of your day with me, I would not be offended if you choose to spend some time with your friends." Tyce said quietly.

"They won't mind at all. Besides, I'd like to have dinner in the officer's mess hall. I haven't done that yet." Vincent said with a grin.

Tyce smiled at the expression, then the turbo lift doors opened.

"Oluf, when you get off the turbo lift turn left, turn right at the first hallway then just walk straight ahead and the transporter room will be the first door on your left." Vincent said as Tyce and Audge stepped off the lift.

"Thank you Crewman Winters." Oluf said quietly.

Vincent gave him a brief smile, then hurried off the lift.

* * * * *

Tyce, Vincent and Audge could hear singing coming from behind the closed doors on the other side of the room.

"Your friends sound very happy." Tyce said cautiously.

"They are. But usually not this happy, let's see what's going on." Vincent said as he walked in front of the group to open the door.

* * * * *

The singing abruptly stopped as the door to the dorsal observation lounge opened. Vincent was the first to walk in and was barely able to contain his laughter at what he saw.

Channing, Benny and JonJon were all sitting on Channing's cot wearing triangular white paper hats and each one had a little black mustache painted on.

"What are you..." Vincent began to ask, then shook his head and said, "Never mind. I really don't want to know."

Fizgig poked his head from behind JonJon to reveal that he was wearing a little paper hat and had the fur above his mouth painted black in a sort of mustache.

Tyce broke into laughter at the sight.

He was quickly joined by Vincent and Audge.

"We were just..." Channing began to say.

"It's okay Channing. I just wanted to let you guys know that I'm going to be having dinner with these guys in the officer's mess hall today. I didn't want you to be down here waiting on me to show up." Vincent said as he tried to get his chuckles under control.

"Oh. Thanks Vincent. Is this the Holy One that JonJon was telling us about?" Channing asked quietly as he tried to discretely take off the paper hat.

"Yep. And this is Audge, the guy who protects him." Vincent said as he gestured toward the man with a cast.

"Please do not worry. I think it is good that you are able to have such fanciful fun. We will be leaving now so you may continue." Tyce said with a peaceful smile.

"You don't have to go, you're welcomed to join us." Benny said quickly.

"They're having a formal dinner with some people from the other ships in a few minutes so we need to go. But maybe we'll be able to play with you guys some other time." Vincent said with a grin.

"Yeah. Okay." Channing said shyly.

Vincent chuckled at Channing's reaction, then said, "Come on guys. Let's get to the transporter room before anyone shows up."

Tyce nodded, then said, "It was a pleasure to meet all of you. I truly hope that we will have the chance to play before it is my time to leave."

"Yeah, that'd be great." Benny said with an honest smile.

Tyce nodded, then walked to follow Vincent and Audge out of the room.

* * * * *

"I like your friends Vincent. They remind me of how I was before I was given the honor of being the Holy One." Tyce said distantly.

"Yeah. They're great. After working all day, Benny and JonJon remind me how to be a kid. And I guess having Channing with us makes me feel like it's okay to be a Crewman and still act like a kid now and then." Vincent said introspectively.

Tyce thought about the statement, then quietly said, "I believe that if I were able to achieve such a friendship, it would improve my life greatly."

"You already have." Vincent said with a smile as he stepped onto the turbo lift.

Tyce looked at Vincent curiously.

"Transporter room one." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Tyce and said, "I'm your friend Tyce. Even after we get you home, you can always call to talk to me or even to just make a funny face at me if you want."

Tyce laughed at the thought, then said, "Yes. I believe I would like to do that."

"And I know that if you get the chance, Benny and JonJon will be your friends too. Once their colony is set up, you can talk to them every day if you want to." Vincent said seriously.

The turbo lift doors opened and Vincent led the way.

"I hope it is to be so." Tyce said distantly.

"Make it so." Vincent said as he turned at the first junction.

Tyce chuckled and said, "You make everything sound so simple and easily achieved."

"No. It's not always easy, but things are usually pretty simple if you can just forget about the things that don't matter and the things you can't change." Vincent said frankly, then stopped just short of a door.

Tyce looked at the door, then down at himself to see if the foreign clothes he was wearing were still neat.

"Please allow me." Audge said quietly.

Tyce turned to face him and allowed Audge to straighten his collar and fuss with his hair for a moment.

"Please allow me as well." Tyce said with a grin.

Audge looked at him with surprise, then held still as Tyce straightened his collar.

Vincent smiled at the scene, then when everyone was ready, he stepped toward the door and stood aside as it opened, allowing Tyce and Audge to precede him into the room.

* * * * *

"Welcome Holy One, our first guests have just signaled that they're ready for transport." Captain Byrne said formally.

"Thank you Captain. Please proceed." Tyce said calmly.

Captain Byrne gave a nod to the transporter technician, then the sound of the transporter filled the room.

When the shimmering sparkles had cleared, there was a man and a young boy, about Tyce and Vincent's age, standing beside him.

"Welcome to the Yorktown Captain Traiel. Would you introduce us to your companion?" Captain Byrne said with a friendly smile directed at the young boy.

"Thank you Captain, this is my son, Tyber." Traiel said seriously.

Tyce looked distantly at the pair for a moment, then took a step closer to Audge's side.

"It's nice to meet you Tyber, if you want, you can come over here and hang around with us." Vincent said with a quick smile.

Tyce held his formal expression as he considered what he should do.

Traiel smiled at Vincent's invitation, then put a hand on his son's shoulder and urged him to step out of the transporter chamber.

Tyber hesitantly walked toward Vincent and Tyce, then suddenly stopped when Vincent put out his hand in greeting.

"I'm Crewman Winters but you can call me Vincent if you want." Vincent said with a smile.

Tyber slowly took the hand, and had a look of intense concentration as he shook it.

His eyes went wide with surprise and relief as he looked into Vincent's eyes.

"It's nice to meet you." Tyber said formally as he telepathically said, //The Holy One is in danger. Get him away from Traiel.//

Without displaying any outward sign of receiving the message, Vincent released Tyber's hand and asked the Captain, "Do we have time to show Tyber around for a few minutes before the dinner begins?"

"The other guests will be arriving shortly. I'm sure that 'The Holy One' will want to be here to greet them." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"We won't be gone long and if they come before we get back Oluf can take care of greeting them... He would be honored." Vincent said with a grin at the elderly priest.

Captain Byrne looked curiously at Vincent, then finally said, "Given the serious discussion that will most likely accompany our dinner, a few minutes of relaxation might be of benefit. Please be brief."

"Yes sir. Thank you sir." Vincent said, then gestured to the door, urging Tyber and Tyce to accompany him.

Audge looked at Tyce with question but before he could respond, Vincent said, "Come on Audge, I think you'll like this too."

* * * * *

As soon as the door to transporter room one closed, Vincent's expression changed to complete seriousness as he said, "Come on. Let's go somewhere that we can talk privately."

Tyce kept close to Audge's side and made a point of keeping Audge between him and Tyber.

"Tyber, you aren't related to that man who claims to be your father. Traiel has a son named Tyber but you're not him... you aren't even of the Okudai people." Tyce said seriously.

Tyber's eyes went wide at the declaration and he asked, "How did you know?"

"I am the Holy One. I can see the lineage of all of my people." Tyce said firmly.

A look of resignation came over the boy's face, then he quietly said, "You're right. My real name is Lehman."

Silence fell over the group as they entered the turbo lift.

"Conference room one." Vincent said firmly.

"Please explain why you are here." Tyce said seriously as he stood with his shoulder touching Audge's side.

"I'm an assassin sent to kill 'The Holy One'." Lehman said in a low, quiet voice.

The doors to the turbo lift opened, and Vincent looked to be sure no one was in the room before saying, "Come on, we can talk in here."

The group stepped off the lift and Tyce never left Audge's side.

Once everyone was seated, Tyce quietly asked, "If you're here to kill me, why are you telling me this?"

"Because the man who claims to be my father is a ruthless man who must be stopped. He believes that he has given me no choice but to obey his commands." Lehman said seriously.

"What will he do to you if you don't do what he says?" Vincent asked quietly.

Lehman gave Vincent a dark look that said without words that the consequence would be death.

Turning his attention back to Tyce, Lehman said, "I was taken from my world and forced to undergo surgical changes at his command so I could hold your shape and become the Holy One." Lehman said with concern filling his voice.

"Hold my shape?" Tyce asked curiously.

Lehman looked Tyce in the eyes as his body began to reshape itself. Within a minute he was an exact duplicate of Tyce, he was even wearing the same mint green shirt.

"My people are known as Chameloids. We are shape shifters. I'm just a child, so normally I could not hold your shape for more than a few minutes, but Traiel did something to me. His doctors cut into me and did something to make it so that I could hold your shape for as long as I wanted to."

"What do you really look like?" Vincent asked in a gentle whisper.

Lehman glanced at Vincent, then changed into a blue skinned boy with blue/black hair and yellow eyes.

When Vincent noticed Lehman's frightened expression, he gave him a quick gentle smile that help put him at ease.

"I hadn't considered that they would go to such lengths to get rid of me." Tyce said distantly.

"What do you want to do?" Vincent asked as he turned his attention back to Tyce.

"I could have Traiel detained. But if he has the support of powerful people as I suspect he does, even I as the Holy One might have difficulty proving an accusation of conspiracy. We have only Lehman's testimony that Traiel has any ill will toward me. I doubt that the word of an alien child would be considered sufficient evidence to convict him of anything." Tyce said in distant thought.

"So we need to catch him doing something." Vincent said carefully.

"It will be difficult. Lehman, what does he believe you are doing right now?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Traiel constructed many scenarios so I could be alone with the Holy One for a moment. Gartain would cause a distraction and I would assume your shape while Traiel killed you and disposed of your body. Since Crewman Winters invited us to explore the ship, I'm sure Traiel is hoping that I've found a way to complete our mission." Lehman said uncomfortably.

"What if we make him think that you did?" Vincent asked carefully.

"I could return to the transporter room and allow Traiel to believe that I am Lehman in disguise." Tyce said speculatively.

Vincent nodded and said, "And Lehman would return to the transporter room, disguised as me. How will we explain that Tyber didn't come back?"

"The excuse we were planning to use is that due to the differences in ship's time, Tyber was tired and wanted to return to his ship." Lehman said as he looked at Tyce curiously.

"I see. Do you think you could take Vincent's shape?" Tyce asked in a voice of deep concentration.

"Yes, I can do that easily. But I know nothing of him or his people. To mimic his actions I would need to touch him." Lehman said shyly.

"Why?" Vincent asked curiously.

"My people are slightly telepathic. That is how I warned you of the danger to the Holy One. If I can touch you, I can take on your mannerisms and some of your basic knowledge." Lehman said seriously.

"So Lehman could pretend to be you while you get security and let them know what's going on." Tyce said carefully.

"Would you be willing to do that?" Vincent asked Lehman with concern.

"Yes. I'll do whatever I can to stop Traiel. He believes that he can command my actions and force me to obey him. But I would rather die than be his assassin." Lehman said darkly.

Vincent nodded that he understood.

"Holy One, when Traiel looks at you, make this sign with your fingers." Lehman said and demonstrated a simple hand gesture.

Tyce carefully made the gesture and looked at Lehman with question.

"That's right. That will be the signal to Traiel that I have taken your place. Here is a communication device that he will use to contact you later to give his instructions." Lehman said and handed a small communicator to Tyce.

"You'll need to stay close to me in case he contacts me. I won't know how to answer his questions if he asks anything." Tyce said with concern.

"I doubt that you'll have to worry about that. Traiel isn't one for asking questions, he tends to believe that he knows all and likes giving orders." Lehman said darkly.

"Audge, what we are about to do is dangerous, but I believe it is necessary. It may come to a point where you are my only protection." Tyce said as he looked up at Audge who was still at his side.

"I will protect you with my life." Audge said seriously.

"So will I." Lehman said quietly.

Tyce, Audge and Vincent looked at Lehman with question.

"I have been studying what the Holy One does for nearly a year so I could impersonate you when the time comes. Your people need you. You must survive." Lehman said firmly.

The sound of a communicator beep drew everyone's attention.

"Crewman Winters." Vincent said in a slightly surprised voice. He had completely forgotten that he was carrying his communicator.

"Vincent, you have a priority one transmission." Debbie said seriously.

"Okay, I'm in conference room one. Can you put it through?" Vincent asked cautiously, it seemed wrong for him to ask a lieutenant to do something like that for him, even if it was her job.

"Yes. And good luck." Debbie said in a voice filled with concern.

Vincent walked to the view screen expecting to see Cory or Commander Dodds, he was shocked when the image on the screen was Admiral Morrow.

Vincent stood at attention and waited for the admiral to speak.

"Crewman Winters... I have a sensitive matter of some urgency to speak with you about." Admiral Morrow said frankly as he looked at the people standing behind Vincent in the room.

"Yes sir. Admiral Morrow, this is 'The Holy One' of the Okudai, his protector Audge and an assassin who was sent to kill him, his name is Lehman." Vincent said seriously.

"Assassin? Well Crewman Winters, it seems that your time on the Yorktown continues to be interesting." Admiral Morrow said in a slightly puzzled voice.

"Yes sir." Vincent said with resignation.

"Is there anything I can do to help with your... situation before we begin to deal with my reason for contacting you?" Admiral Morrow asked carefully.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Um, well. Lehman is a shape shifter. He's supposed to kill the Holy One and take his place so some bad guys can control him and get him to do the stuff they want. We were thinking that if the Holy One pretended to be Lehman pretending to be the Holy One, then we could figure out everything that they're trying to do and maybe get enough evidence so that we can find out who all the bad guys are and arrest them."

"Without knowing more of the situation, it sounds like a reasonable plan, but it could also have it's dangers. Be sure that 'The Holy One' is outfitted with a transport inhibitor and has someone nearby to protect him at all times." Admiral Morrow said carefully.

"Yes sir. I'll take care of the inhibitor and Audge will be protecting Tyce... I mean, the Holy One." Vincent said seriously.

Admiral Morrow looked away for a moment, then said, "I'm afraid that you'll be attending to other matters Crewman Winters. In fact, you will be leaving the ship within minutes."

Vincent looked at the admiral with surprise.

"Excuse me Admiral, but I may be able to help." Lehman said shyly.

Admiral Morrow looked at the blue skinned boy curiously.

"Crewman Winters, if I may touch you I can absorb enough of your memories to function as you while you are absent." Lehman said quietly.

Vincent glanced at Lehman, then looked to the Admiral and said, "Admiral Morrow, I know it's a crime to impersonate Starfleet personnel, but can Lehman take my place while I'm on this mission? I don't want him to get into trouble, but he needs to be close to the Holy One and I think this is the best way he can do it."

"Yes. And given the nature of this other matter, it will be to our advantage if no one knows that you've left the ship. I give my word that your friend won't get in any trouble for impersonating you." Admiral Morrow said seriously, then glanced away again.

Lehman carefully placed his hand to the side of Vincent's face and closed his eyes. Within the space of a few seconds, Lehman transformed himself into an exact duplicate of Vincent, uniform and all.

When Lehman opened his eyes, he had an expression that was between pain and confusion.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"That was more difficult than it should have been." Lehman said as he slowly pulled his trembling hand away from Vincent's face.

"Are you alright?" Vincent asked as he looked at Lehman and it was like looking into a mirror.

"I'll be fine, it just took more effort and concentration than it should have. Don't worry, I've absorbed what I'll need to know to impersonate you..." Lehman trailed off with distraction.

Vincent turned back to the Admiral and asked, "What do I need to do?"

"I need to speak with you privately Crewman Winters." The Admiral said, then looked at the others.

"I need to take Tyce to security, then we need to get back to the transporter room. The Captain is waiting on us." Lehman said as he glanced at Tyce.

"Take care of yourself Vincent." Tyce said with concern for his friend.

"I will if you will." Vincent said with a smile.

Tyce nodded, then reluctantly led the way to the turbo lift.

Vincent watched as the trio left the room.

* * * * *

The door to transporter room one opened and Tyce walked in alone.

All attention turned to him and he felt that he should say something.

"I seem to have misplaced my escorts." Tyce said shyly.

When Traiel looked at him, Tyce quickly made the subtle hand gesture.

Traiel tried to hide his pleased smile.

"Well as you can see, Treifa and Captain Marr have already joined us. We are awaiting Captains Gartain and Treas." Captain Byrne said seriously.

The transporter room's doors opened again to admit Lehman and Audge.

"There you are! Where did you go?" Lehman asked in a demanding tone, doing his best to behave as Vincent would.

"You will address the Holy One with proper respect." Oluf said firmly.

"Alright, but you need to put a leash on him or something. And he lost Tyber." Lehman grumbled.

"Tyber was tired and returned to his ship. He said that they operate on a different ship's time cycle." Tyce said carefully, trying to exactly remember what Lehman had told him to say.

Traiel smiled at the statement and said, "Yes, our ship's time is set with the Dingovan colony so this is the middle of the night for us."

A beeping from the transporter console drew the Captain's attention, then he said, "I understand. It appears that Captains Gartain and Treas are ready to join us. So as soon as they have transported we can all go to the dining room."

Tyce gave a conspiratorial glance at Traiel, then smiled and nodded.

* * * * *

"A Vulcan scientist named Dr. Xon, will be joining you shortly. Go with him and he will explain everything that you need to do." Admiral Morrow said frankly.

"But how? And where am I going?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"Crewman Winters, please trust in my judgment and that of Starfleet in this matter. It would take far more time than we have to explain what needs to be done. Go with Dr. Xon, do what he says and return to the Yorktown when your mission is complete. Contact me personally the moment you return." Admiral Morrow said firmly.

"Yes sir. I will sir." Vincent said as he snapped to attention.

"Crewman Winters, would you accompany me?" An unfamiliar voice said.

Vincent jumped at the sound and turned to see a Vulcan man waiting for him without expression.

"Where... where did you come from?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

The Vulcan man raised an eyebrow, but didn't give a response to the question.

"Um yeah. Okay... I'll call you as soon as I get back Admiral. Winters out." Vincent said as he walked to the Vulcan man's side.

"Good luck Vincent. Morrow out." Admiral Morrow said in a voice of concern, then disconnected the transmission.

* * * * *

"Holy One, I need to go to Deflector Control to change." Lehman said in a whisper.

"Is something wrong?" Tyce asked with concern.

"I'm not sure. But I seem to be having difficulty altering my shape. I need to change into one of Crewman Winters' uniforms or I may be trapped in this clothed form." Lehman said carefully.

"I understand. Go and if anyone asks, I will say that I sent you to do something for me." Tyce said carefully.

Lehman nodded, then hurried out of the room.

The captains of the other two ships materialized in the transport chamber and looked around the room slowly.

"Welcome aboard Captain Treas, Captain Gartain. I am Captain Leland Byrne. If you'll come with me, we will proceed to the dining room where we can all be more comfortable." Captain Byrne said with practiced diplomacy.

"Is this the Holy One?" Captain Treas asked as she looked curiously at Tyce.

"I am the Holy One." Tyce said seriously as he looked her in the eyes.

"Before we begin, I just want to know one thing. Are you really going to listen to us or are you just doing this so we'll stop attacking you?" The woman asked intensely.

Tyce considered his answer carefully, weighing the need to be truthful with the need to keep the appearance of being an imposter.

"Captain Treas, the fact that your concerns were of such importance that you were willing to face the consequences of attacking 'The Holy One' has opened my eyes... and my ears. I will listen." Tyce said, then carefully glanced at Traiel with question.

Traiel gave an almost imperceptible nod of approval.

Captain Byrne smiled at Tyce's thoughtful response, then said, "If you will all follow me, I'll conduct you to the dining room."

* * * * *

Lehman was relieved to find the memories that he had borrowed from Vincent included a very detailed layout of the constitution class of starship.

He hurried to Deflector Control and was about to walk into the supply room when he was stopped.

"What are you doing down here? I thought you'd be in the dining room by now." Joe said seriously.

Lehman looked into Joe's eyes and saw the love and concern housed within.

An echo of Vincent's love for Joe welled inside Lehman and he had to fight the desire to run to Joe and hug him tightly.

Lehman concentrated and a wet spot appeared on the right side of his pants leg.

"I had a little accident." Lehman said shyly and turned so that Joe could see the spot.

"Then you'd better hurry and change. You won't want to miss out on the first course." Joe said with a gentle smile.

Lehman nodded at Joe, then ran into the supply room to change.

* * * * *

"I am Dr. Xon, please take my hand so I can conduct you through the portal." The Vulcan man said seriously.

Vincent hesitantly took the man's hand and was guided to walk into the wall of the conference room.

After some initial resistance, Vincent felt himself being pulled through the seemingly solid matter.

The sensation on his skin was like being pulled through strands of cotton or spider webs.

Everything was hazy, like walking through a dense fog.

Just as suddenly as the strange sensations began, they stopped.

Vincent and Dr. Xon were stepping onto sandy ground in a desolate clearing surrounded by rocks.

"Where are we?" Vincent asked as he looked behind him and saw the portal they had just stepped through.

"Where we are is a planet that has been named Gateway. But the more interesting question is 'when' are we. The answer to that question is, nearly fifty years in your future." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Oh crap."

Dr. Xon arched an eyebrow and asked, "What concerns you?"

"Time travel. You don't just go back and snatch someone out of the past because it sounds like fun. Something must be really seriously wrong if you brought me here." Vincent said with concern.

Dr. Xon nodded, then quietly said, "Ten days ago there was a time shift that altered the entire universe. People who I have known my whole life are now dead or never existed. The few who survive have no memory of me. In fact, my colleagues here on Gateway are the only people I have found who have any memory of me at all. I was here doing research on the Guardian

of Forever when the time shift occurred. This planet is shielded from alterations in the timeline. I believe that if I were to leave this planet in this time, I too would cease to exist."

"Okay. Since I'm here, does that mean I did something that messed up time?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"A series of factors contributed to a situation that resulted in the time displacement." Dr. Xon said seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Translation: Yes, I caused it."

"Not directly. As a consequence of a transporter accident in your recent past, I believe your quantum resonance frequency has been altered." Dr. Xon said carefully.

Vincent watched curiously as Dr. Xon began to scan him with an unfamiliar device.

"My what?"

Dr. Xon concentrated for a moment to try and put his explanation in the simplest terms, then said, "All matter in the universe resonates at the same quantum resonance frequency. Parallel and alternate dimensions each have a frequency that is distinctly their own. Normally an altered resonance frequency would not be a concern, the only effect might be an uncanny tendency to be in the wrong place at the wrong time since you are technically out of synchronization with the rest of the universe."

"Well, that explains a few things." Vincent said off-handedly.

"Unfortunately, something happened, or from your point on the timeline, will happen, that impacts the entire multi-verse." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Multi-verse?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"This universe and every parallel and alternate universe that is associated with it." Dr. Xon said in clarification.

"So what happened... will happen... whatever..." Vincent asked with frustration.

"To make conversation easier between us, I will use the future tense to explain events relative to your native point on the timeline." Dr. Xon said simply.

"Um, yeah. Okay."

"The prime materia timeline, the one from which all other timelines are spawned, is going to split into two." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"So? If I'm getting what you're saying, there are alternate timelines and universes all over the place. What's the big deal about this one?"

"The alternates and parallels are all shadows of the prime materia. Alternates do not spawn alternates, otherwise the exponential progression would be beyond imagining. At the timeline convergence point, all the alternate and parallel dimensional universes will merge back into the prime materia and become one. When all are joined, a critical mass will be achieved and the prime materia will split into two distinct timelines. They will be completely separate from that point on and have no effect on each other." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Okay. I think I get that. But where does my quantum thingy figure into all this?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

"Your quantum resonant frequency no longer associates you with the prime materia. If you enter the convergence point where the timelines split as you are, you will not emerge from the other side." Dr. Xon said frankly.

Vincent gulped as a chill ran up his spine.

"Your absence in the new timeline will cause an incongruity that cannot be reconciled, so to correct the loss of your... thread, let's call it, the forces that maintain balance in the multi-verse would trace back to your origin and erase your existence." Dr. Xon said firmly.

"So I won't just die, but I will have never been born?" Vincent asked carefully.

"That is correct. And nothing you have ever done in your life will have happened." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Wait. I saw this on a movie at Christmas last year, this guy wishes that he had never been born, then he gets to see how the world is different without him. Is this like that?" Vincent asked as he looked Dr. Xon in the eyes.

"I have seen the movie I believe you are referring to, it is called 'It's a Wonderful Life'. And this situation does have certain elements in common with the movie, however the resolution may be a bit more complicated."

"Okay, I think I understand. What do I have to do?" Vincent asked seriously.

* * * * *

Lehman tried to change himself to an unclothed form so he could put on one of Vincent's uniforms.

Sweat started to bead on his forehead as he concentrated harder on his objective, but his body wasn't changing.

Finally he gave up on making the change all at once and decided to do as he had done as a small child and change each part of his body individually.

He focused on his left foot first and watched as the boot slowly morphed into a human looking foot.

He stopped for a moment to catch his breath, then took in a deep inhale and held it as he focused his will on changing the other foot.

Lehman had to refer to Vincent's memory and self image to make the transition of the rest of his body.

The images were vague and Lehman ended up using what he had learned of Okudai physiology to fill in the gaps in his memory.

Each transformation seemed to take more effort than the one before.

When he had finally made the last of his 'clothing' vanish, he looked down at himself to be sure that he hadn't missed anything.

Lehman's gaze stopped on his hairless crotch and he thought about what the future might hold for him.

With the last bit of effort at his command, Lehman forced his genitals to alter to a state that was a few years more developed.

If whatever was wrong with him didn't get better, there was a chance that he could be stuck in this form. He felt that he might appreciate the more 'adult' equipment later.

After one last look, Lehman opened the storage locker where Vincent's clothes were stored and quickly started to dress.

As he pulled the boots on, he realized that he hadn't estimated the size of his feet correctly.

The boots were too tight and he could barely make them fit over his feet.

"Are you okay champ?" Joe asked as he looked around the corner.

Lehman was trying to alter the size of his feet to make them fit in the boots while he was pulling the second boot on, but he found that he had completely lost the ability to alter his shape.

"Oh, it looks like that growth spurt is kicking in. After your dinner you need to go to the quartermaster and see about getting larger boots." Joe said with a gentle smile.

Lehman looked at Joe with surprise at the suggestion, then smiled.

"Yeah. I will. Thanks." Lehman said as he stood.

"Come here." Joe said with a smile and opened his arms.

Lehman hesitantly walked into Joe's outstretched arms and was pulled into a warm hug.

"I'd really like it if you'd come and talk to me when you have some free time. I know that 'kid time' is supposed to be for you, but I think I'm needing some." Joe said as he hugged Lehman tightly.

"I will just as soon as I can. I promise." Lehman said as he tried to restrain his tears of joy at the wonderful feeling.

Lehman thought about his life in the foundling home on his home world and the past year as the property of Traiel. No one had ever shown him love like this.

He knew that this was intended for Vincent, but somehow it didn't matter. At this exact moment in time, someone loved him.

* * * * *

When the door to Deflector Control opened, Lehman nearly walked face first into Rad's chest.

He quickly stepped out of the way as Rad continued to walk without noticing him.

As soon as Rad was in the room, his gaze immediately turned to Darin.

"You're done awfully early." Darin said with surprise as he looked away from console one.

"I... Um... Yeah. The Chief said it was okay." Rad said in a semi-coherent voice.

Darin hopped up from his chair and ran to Rad's side.

"What's wrong? Come over here and sit down." Darin said as he guided Rad to sit at one of the auxiliary stations.

Joe walked out of the supply room in time to hear the question and hurried to Rad's other side.

"My little brother Tan... I just got a message from Earth... he's missing. He's been missing for two days." Rad said as tears filled his eyes.

Darin and Joe simultaneously pulled him into hugs from opposite sides.

"He didn't come home from school and... no one knows anything." Rad said as his tears freely fell.

Darin held Rad firmly, then said, "I know there's not much we can do to help all the way out here. But there *is* something."

Rad looked up at Darin with helplessness and confusion filling his expression.

Darin pulled one arm free of the hug and reached over to the auxiliary console.

"Communications." A voice responded immediately.

"This is Ensign Cooper, will you please open a diplomatic channel to Clan Short Headquarters?"

* * * * *

The group approached the turbo lift and it became evident that everyone wouldn't be able to fit.

"Captain Byrne, please take your other guests and make them comfortable. I will join you shortly." Tyce said seriously.

"Holy One, it is not proper..." Oluf began to say but was stopped with a glance.

"I have evaded Crewman Winters once today, I will show him the courtesy of waiting for him to return before joining you for dinner." Tyce said as he looked at the Captain again.

"I'll wait for the next one too." Treifa said, then looked at Tyce with question.

Tyce looked at him for a moment, then nodded his acceptance.

Once the turbo lift doors closed, Tyce looked Treifa in the eyes and asked, "Did you know that they were planning to kill me and replace me with a shape shifter?"

Treifa's eyes went wide at the question, then he quickly said, "No. I saw a few proposals about using shape shifters but none of them had a possibility of working."

Tyce looked deeply into Treifa's eyes, then turned to Audge and said, "He speaks the truth."

"Does this mean that an attempt was made on your life?" Oluf asked in shock.

"Yes Oluf. But Audge has performed his duties perfectly and would not have allowed it to happen. And it turns out that their assassin was not a willing participant in the scheme and is now helping me to uncover all who are responsible for this plot." Tyce said firmly.

"Traiel." Treifa said darkly.

"Yes. He was instrumental in this plan, but I suspect that he is merely a pawn. The resources needed to covertly smuggle a Chameloid from their home world and surgically alter him is far beyond what Traiel could finance." Tyce said seriously.

"Surgically alter?" Treifa said as the color washed out of him.

"Yes, that is what he said. What is it?" Tyce asked carefully.

"The surgery, I read about it in the proposal. Are you telling me that Traiel actually found a Chameloid child and did that to him?" Treifa asked with tears forming in his eyes.

"Yes. What is it? What's the surgery?" Tyce asked cautiously.

Treifa turned away and wiped his eyes, then quietly said, "For this to work they needed a Chameloid that was basically your size so they had to have a child. But a child can only hold a foreign shape for fifteen or twenty minutes at most. The surgery was to remove certain organs from the child's endocrine system and replace them with an adult's organs."

"So an adult Chameloid was sacrificed to make this plan work." Tyce said with pain.

"Yes, and there is a more than fifty percent chance that the child's body will reject the transplanted organs." Treifa said quietly.

The pained expression in Treifa's eyes told Tyce all he needed to know. Without asking, he knew what would happen if the organs were rejected.

The group turned as one when the turbo lift doors opened and Lehman was standing there in a fresh clean uniform.

Chapter 25

"Are you familiar with the properties of matter and anti-matter?" Dr. Xon asked slowly.

"Yeah, I read about that stuff when I was studying about starships." Vincent said carefully.

"Then you understand what would happen if a Crewman Vincent Winters from an anti-universe were to come in contact with you?" Dr. Xon asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah. When the exact same matter and anti-matter from the opposite universes touch each other they try to, um... mix or something and when they do it causes an explosion that destroys both universes." Vincent said in thought.

"Correct. I am using that theory as a basis for my plan to adjust your quantum signature." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"You're going to explode me?" Vincent asked hesitantly, sure that's not what he meant.

"No. When you make physical contact with your counterpart, your quantum signature should automatically attempt to adjust, much as it would with anti-matter. But since the variation is slight, the reaction should also be slight." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Should be..." Vincent parroted apprehensively.

"To my knowledge, nothing like this has ever been attempted before. There is no way to know what reaction will occur." Dr. Xon said reluctantly.

"Test it. Take a... ping pong ball or something from my universe and test it in the alternate universe." Vincent said reasonably.

Dr. Xon considered for a moment, then said, "That might be a reasonable way to proceed... if we had more time. Unfortunately, we do not have that luxury."

"Why not? If we're able to travel through time, we can go back as many times as we want until we get it right, can't we?" Vincent asked seriously.

"No. The ripple that erased your existence from my time is traveling backward toward the timeline split. Once it reaches that split you will no longer exist in any timeline and there will be no way of correcting your quantum signature. You will either be forced to live out your life here on Gateway with me, or if you are in your own time when the anti-time ripple arrives, you will simply cease to be." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Oh. Wow. That sucks. Um, okay. What now?" Vincent asked apprehensively.

"When the timeline was altered, I began to search for the cause. Once I established that it was due to your transporter accident, I began to work on ways to alter your quantum signature. I have targeted two alternate dimensions that have the best chance of restoring your signature to it's original frequency. We will travel to those alternate dimensions in your timeline and you must make physical contact with your alternate self. I will tell you when your signature has been sufficiently altered. Then, if all has gone to plan, you will return to your own time and dimension and the original timeline should be restored." Dr. Xon said thoughtfully.

"Um, this sounds really dangerous. Is there any other way to do this?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Not to my knowledge. Either we attempt to alter your quantum signature in the manner I have suggested, or we do not. Those are the choices before us." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Okay. Let's do it." Vincent said with determination as he turned to look at the large stone portal that they had emerged from.

Dr. Xon turned on his tricorder and began to make the necessary adjustments as he said, "Guardian of Forever, I seek your aid to restore the past."

"Such is my function. Such is my purpose. Ask your question so you may repair the fractured course of time." The Guardian said in a booming voice.

"Guardian of Forever, will you show me these temporal/spatial coordinates?" Dr. Xon asked seriously as he transmitted the coordinates to the Guardian.

"Look into the past that you may restore the future." The Guardian said as the portal began to show scenes in the swirling mist.

"Um, that's not the *Yorktown*." Vincent said as he pointed at the images speeding by before them.

"No. Your alternate self in this universe is not on the *Yorktown*, he is on Earth." Dr. Xon said as he put a hand on Vincent's shoulder and guided him to stand directly before the changing scenes in the mist.

"What am I... is he doing there?" Vincent asked curiously.

"We will know shortly. Prepare to step through." Dr. Xon said with intense concentration.

Vincent prepared himself and was ready to jump.

"Now."

* * * * *

"This is Clan Short." A young voice said professionally.

"Hi. I'm Ensign Darin Cooper from the USS *Yorktown*. I'm Vincent Winters' brother." Darin said hesitantly.

"Yeah. Keith told us all about you. I'm Jamie, what's up?"

"Well, I've got a friend named Rad and his little brother is missing. I was hoping that maybe since you're on Earth you might be able to do something to help him." Darin said hopefully.

"Yeah. Tell me what's going on and we'll do whatever we can." Jamie said seriously.

"I don't know too much. I got an email from my mom and I guess she was pretty torn up. I couldn't make sense of most of it." Rad said as he seemed to snap out of his stupor.

"Is there someone we can call to get more information?" Jamie asked reasonably.

Darin, Joe and Rad noticed someone walk up behind Jamie, then nudge him over in the chair. The boy was identical to him and wore the same serious expression.

"Yeah. We could call my house and ask my mom." Rad said quickly.

"Do they have a terminal?" Jamie asked hopefully.

"Yeah, they got one when I joined Starfleet. I'll send you the address." Rad said and keyed in the connection.

"Got it." Jamie said, then the screen split to show the other terminal.

"Hello?" A young man asked, and he had a very tired look in his eyes.

Rad got a slightly irritated expression, then hesitantly asked, "Is my mom around?"

"No. She's out talking to the neighbors in case anyone might have seen what happened to your brother." The man said quietly.

"Is anyone else there?" Rad asked seriously.

"Yeah. The twins are in their room. Hold on, I'll get them." The man said sadly, then walked away.

"Who was that?" Darin asked quietly.

"My mom's new husband." Rad said darkly.

"He looks like he's about our age." Darin said cautiously.

"He is, he was my best friend my whole life. But when I went to the academy, he started sleeping with my mother." Rad finished with disgust.

"Rayne? Is that you?" A young voice asked hopefully.

"Shayd? How are you doing?" Rad asked gently.

"I'm Shadoe. But Shayd is right here." The boy responded with a grin.

"Liar. I've always been able to tell you two apart. Can we talk?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Asshole's in the kitchen starting dinner." Shayd said seriously.

"What's really going on?" Rad asked firmly.

"Tan's missing." Shayd said carefully.

"Bullshit. If he was really missing you'd be out with Mom looking for him." Rad said as he looked his younger brother in the eyes.

Shayd and Shadoe exchanged a look, then Shadoe hesitantly nodded.

"He's with your dad." Shayd said in a whisper.

Rad shook his head and asked, "Why are you pretending that he's missing? You're worrying everyone to death."

"You don't know how it is around here. Numb-nuts is on this big power trip trying to prove that he's our dad and Tan couldn't handle it anymore. I wish we'd gone with him." Shayd finished in a low voice.

Shadoe nodded his agreement.

"Guys, this isn't right. I understand that things are bad..."

"You don't get it Rayne, things aren't just bad, they're totally fucked up!" Shayd exploded.

Rad was shocked by his brother's outburst and realized that he didn't really know what was going on.

After a moment to collect his emotions, Rad quietly said, "Tell me about it."

"Mom goes to work all day, then when she comes home she just eats and goes to bed. Shit-for-brains is always here watching us and trying to control everything we do. When I go to the bathroom I have to look over my shoulder because I feel like he's going to be right there. He's ALWAYS watching." Shayd said with an expression of frustration.

"Yeah. He doesn't let up. He always wants to know what we're doing and what we did at school and who we talked to and... hell, we can't even go over to anyone else's house because he wants to know what we'll be doing over there. He talks to their parents and gets a report about everything we did." Shadoe said desperately.

Rad nodded slowly, then reluctantly said, "Go get him. It's time to deal with this."

* * * * *

"Is everything okay?" Tyce asked with concern.

Lehman looked at Treifa, then hesitantly said, "It's fine."

"It's okay Lehman, Treifa knows what's going on. I trust him." Tyce said carefully.

Lehman nodded, then said, "I think something might be wrong with me. I was barely able to change myself and now I can't change at all."

Tyce looked at Treifa with question.

"Are you in any pain?" Treifa asked cautiously.

"No. I'm feeling a little tired, but besides that I'm fine." Lehman said honestly.

"Are you well enough to go to the dinner with us?" Tyce asked with concern.

"Yeah, I think so. Besides, I'm really hungry. Maybe I'm having trouble changing because I haven't eaten in about twenty hours." Lehman said in thought.

Treifa considered, then quietly said, "Let's hope that's the problem."

Tyce nodded his agreement, then said, "Then let's go have dinner."

Everyone boarded the turbo lift, then Lehman said, "Officer's mess hall."

* * * * *

Everyone in the room jumped as two strangers suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

A young Native American man stood forward and asked, "What's going on here?"

"I am Dr. Xon and I believe you know my companion." Dr. Xon said seriously.

The young man looked at Vincent with surprise, then turned in time to see someone race down the hallway.

"I'm Jerico Foote, I'm in charge of this cabin. What are you doing here and why is Vince wearing a Starfleet uniform?"

"It is quite a long story and we have limited time. Would it be possible for us to see my companion's counterpart?" Dr. Xon asked in a typical Vulcan emotionless voice.

"He's still in our room." A Chinese boy with a black mask covering half his face said as he emerged from the hallway.

"I need to know what's going on before I can consider allowing you to see him." Jerico said cautiously.

Before Dr. Xon could answer, Vincent said, "He's going to die unless I can touch him."

"Not good enough. I need to understand what's happening." Jerico said firmly, then glanced at a large teenager by the front door.

The boy gave a quick nod, then hurried out.

"I'm from an alternate universe. There was a transporter accident that kind of unhooked me from my timeline. If I touch the Vincent from this universe, I might be able to get hooked back to it. If I don't get it fixed, then me and all the other me's in all the other dimensions will die." Vincent said seriously.

"This isn't right. They don't belong here." A young boy with dark hair said as he stared at Vincent intently.

"I know Luke. I can sense the wrongness of it." Jerico said as he held his gaze on the pair.

"Perhaps that is because we are not native to this universe." Dr. Xon said reasonably.

"Come on, all I need to do is touch the other Vincent and then we'll leave." Vincent said imploringly.

"No. *Tell me why* you're here. *Tell me* the whole *truth*." Jerico said in a voice that seemed to echo.

Vincent felt a strange sensation wash over him and began to speak without wanting to.

"I think I'm here because my dad was a bad person. He hurt a lot of people and died trying to hurt even more. Ever since that happened, things have been going wrong around me and I've been the only one who can make them right. I think I'm paying for all the bad stuff he did. I'll probably keep on paying until something finally kills me. But if I don't touch the Vincent Winters from this dimension, then a lot of people will die or not be born and it will be all my fault." Vincent said seriously.

"The sins of the father..." Luke said in a whisper.

Jerico nodded, then quietly asked, "Dylan, will you get Vince and bring him in here?"

Just then the front door of the cabin opened and two security officers walked in followed by the teenager who had run out earlier.

"Please wait. I don't think they're a threat." Jerico said to the guards.

"I'm sorry, but we need to take unauthorized personnel to the security office and make a report. It's procedure." One of the officers said seriously.

"Everything is fine. It was just a mistake. *These people belong* here." Luke said in concentration and his voice seemed to echo the same as Jericho's had.

Vincent and Dr. Xon watched curiously as the security officers were both overcome with matching expressions of confusion.

"I'm sorry if we interrupted, we thought there was an intruder." One of the officers said apologetically.

"No need to apologize. It was just a misunderstanding. We're glad that you're here to keep us safe." Jerico said with a kind smile.

The guards nodded, then quietly left.

The large teenage boy looked at Jerico with confusion.

"Thanks for getting them Uri, but I think we need to deal with this ourselves." Jerico said, then noticed Dylan leading Vince out of their bedroom.

"What's wrong. Is it time for my meds already?" Vince asked in a sleepy voice as he rubbed his eyes.

"No Vince, you have some visitors." Jerico said gently and motioned to Vincent and Dr. Xon.

"You look like me." Vince said in sleepy confusion.

"Yeah. I guess so. Will you shake my hand?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Who are you?" Vince asked suspiciously.

"I'm Crewman Vincent Winters, Petty Officer second class from the USS *Yorktown*." Crewman Winters said proudly and held out his hand to shake.

"Wow. You're really a crewman? I always wanted to be in Starfleet. How'd you do that?" Vince asked with fascination but didn't make any move to shake the offered hand.

"It's a really long story. Will you please shake my hand now?"

"Why?" Vince asked suspiciously.

"Please, just shake my hand. Then I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

Vince cautiously took hold of his counterpart's hand and immediately felt a tingle run up his arm.

Dr. Xon opened his tricorder and scanned the pair.

"Please continue contact for 3.9 seconds." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Can you give me a countdown or something?" Vincent asked as he grasped Vince's hand firmly with both hands to keep him from pulling away.

Vince looked at his counterpart with fear and confusion as he felt an electrical sensation spreading through his entire body.

"It hurts." Luke said as he turned away.

"I know." Jerico said as he squinted his eyes at the sight.

"What's wrong?" Uri asked in confusion, all he could see was the two identical boys shaking hands.

"Their auras are changing... It's making me sick." Luke said as he clutched his stomach.

"It's against nature." Jerico said in a pained voice.

Dr. Xon watched his tricorder carefully as he said, "Perhaps so, but it needs to be done. Three... two... one."

Vincent let go of his counterpart and fought to catch his breath. His whole body was tingling and his legs felt weak.

"I'm... what did you do to me?" Vince asked in a fearful voice as he began to sway.

Two boys ran to his sides and helped him to the couch.

"Your quantum signature has been slightly altered." Dr. Xon said frankly.

"What? He's altered too? Does that mean he's unhooked now?" Vincent asked with concern.

"No. Not unhooked, just slightly out of synchronization. No harm will come to him from this experience." Dr. Xon said slowly.

"How sure are you?" Vincent asked seriously as he finally started feeling somewhat normal again.

"Reasonably. This is why I have had you maintain limited contact. You have slightly altered each other. Your contact in the next dimension will alter you further without causing damage to your counterpart." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Will you tell me about how you got to be a crewman now?" Vince asked hopefully from the couch.

"Sure." Vincent said with a smile as he walked to where Vince was sitting.

"We must proceed to our next destination." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"I have to answer his questions. That was the deal I made. I promise I won't take too long." Vincent said, then turned to Vince and continued, "The day my dad and mom died, I was in the hospital for... well, I was just in the hospital. My brother Lawrence came to the hospital with some guys from Clan Short and got me and took me to Commander Dodds' house. While I was there I met Captain Spock, Aunt Teri, David Gallagher and a lot of

other people. They all worked together to fix it so I could go into the mentoring program and become a crewman. What happened to you?"

"Um, well I went to the hospital... probably for the same reason as you. My brother never came and got me because my dad threw him out. I don't know where he is... Anyway, then the cops came and talked to me and then CPS was going to stick me in a group home somewhere, but the judge took me back to the little room behind the courtroom and talked to me about a lot of stuff. Then he sent me here." Vince said frankly.

"What about the medication? Are you sick?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Um, well. I was really sad and mad and... well, Dr. Dan said that I needed to take the medicine for a while so I can, like, get used to not feeling bad all the time. He's said I probably won't need any medicine at all by the end of the month." Vince said carefully.

"So how are you feeling now?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I dunno. I guess maybe I'm starting to feel better. I don't feel like crying all the time now, and everyone's been really nice. It's just so different here." Vince said reluctantly.

"If your life was anything like mine, different doesn't mean bad." Vincent said frankly.

Vince thought about the statement for a moment, then hesitantly nodded.

"Crewman Winters, we must be leaving." Dr. Xon said quietly.

"I've got to go. Just remember, different doesn't mean bad. That applies to all kinds of things." Vincent said as he walked to Dr. Xon's side.

"I'll remember. I'm glad I got to meet you." Vince said quietly.

"I'm glad too." Vincent said, then a thought came to him.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the couplers that he had grabbed before leaving deflector control.

"Here, this is for you." Vincent said and handed the coupler to his counterpart.

Vince looked at the coupler, then asked, "Is this really a coupler from your ship?"

"Yeah. I always keep a few extras with me. You can have this one for luck."

"Thanks. But I don't have anything to give you." Vince said with concern.

"It is time for us to go." Dr. Xon said quietly.

"Wait. I got something." Vince said and quickly reached for his back pocket.

"It's okay. You don't have to." Vincent said as he started walking back to Dr. Xon.

"No. Here, take it." Vince said as he jumped off the couch and ran to hand Vincent a picture.

"Thanks." Vincent said in a rush just as Dr. Xon pulled him through the wall.

* * * * *

"The twins said you wanted to talk to me. Do you have an idea of where D'Artagnan might be?" The young man said as he hurried to the terminal.

"He likes to be called Tan." Rad said firmly.

"Do you know where he is?"

"Brad, sit down and listen to me for a minute." Rad said seriously.

"You know something, don't you? Where is he?" Brad asked frantically.

"Brad, calm down. Where are the rest of the kids?" Rad asked carefully.

"The girls and MichaelAngelo are with your mom. The twins are here, probably in their room." Brad said with confusion at the question.

"It's more likely that they're listening at the door. Guys, get in here! I want you to hear this too." Rad said more loudly.

Shayd and Shadoe walked into the room wearing matching guilty expressions.

"Everyone, this is Jamie and... his brother I guess." Rad said uncertainly.

"Jacob. We're here to help if we can." Jacob said seriously.

"Cool. It's nice to meet you. We don't know any other twins. Well, guy twins." Shayd said with a smile at the boys.

Jamie and Jacob gave matching smiles in return.

"Brad, I think we caused all this." Rad said firmly, drawing everyone's attention.

"How?" Brad asked with confusion.

"Think about it. You always got along with all the kids until our fight started. Maybe if we can settle things between us, we can make things better for everyone." Rad said seriously.

"We can deal with that later. We've got to find Tan." Brad said desperately.

"He doesn't want to be found. And unless we can get a few things cleared up, he's not going to want to be found." Rad said quietly.

"He ran away?" Brad asked in disbelief.

"Yeah. And from what I've heard, I don't blame him." Rad said frankly.

Brad looked at his former friend with shock.

Rad shook his head, then said, "We'll get to that in a minute. Right now we need to get things settled between us."

"I married your mom. You hate me. I think that's about as settled as we're going to get it." Brad said with regret.

"I don't hate you... Okay, maybe I did for a little while, but not anymore."

Brad's eyes opened wide with surprise.

"Do you have any clue about why I was so upset?" Rad asked seriously.

"Because I married your mom." Brad said frankly.

Rad shook his head and said, "You really are dense, aren't you?"

"Yeah. That's what you've always told me." Brad said reluctantly.

"Guys, try to be grown up about what I'm about to say. You're old enough to hear this and I think you need to understand what's really been going on." Rad said to his brothers.

Shayd and Shadoe nodded in unison.

"Brad, we were best friends growing up and I really loved you." Rad said seriously.

"I loved you too Rayne." Brad said shyly.

"No Brad, I mean I really *loved* you. The problem is that I didn't understand my feelings and didn't tell you when I finally did figure it out." Rad said as he looked Brad in the eyes.

"Oh." Brad said in realization.

"Yeah. Oh... So when I heard from the guys that you and mom were, um... dating, I kind of freaked out. I mean, not only were there my feelings toward you but... think about the stuff we used to do." Rad said carefully.

Brad looked at the twins beside him and blushed.

Rad followed his gaze, then said, "Guys, we had sex. It's normal for friends to experiment to figure out how the equipment works."

Shayd and Shadoe both looked at Brad with matching expressions of horror.

"Friends and brothers." Jamie added from the split screen.

Shayd and Shadoe turned as one to look at Jamie and looked like they might combust from the redness of their faces.

"Busted." Jamie snickered.

Brad looked with shock from the screen to the twins and then to Rad.

"Come on Brad, we're all guys and we need to be able to talk about stuff like this." Rad said imploringly.

Brad reluctantly nodded.

"Anyway, that's why I was so mad. Just when I figured out that what I was feeling for you was really love, you hooked up with my mom." Rad said frankly.

Brad nodded again.

"I was mad. I said some pretty bad things to you, but nothing compared to what I said to the guys here. I didn't realize it at the time, but everything I was saying was being listened to and taken to heart. My feelings of hurt and betrayal were passed on to them." Rad said with regret.

"I see." Brad said quietly as he looked down.

"Oh, and you're not off the hook either. You've been doing your oblivious, control freak thing with the guys and that's been driving them crazy." Rad said seriously.

"I'm what?" Brad asked as he looked up to meet Rad's gaze again.

"From what I've been hearing, you're turning into your father. Do you remember how you used to bitch and moan about how he would try to control you and keep tabs on you every minute of your life?" Rad asked in a leading tone.

Brad reluctantly nodded.

"That's exactly what you've been doing to the guys. But it's even worse because you aren't their father. You're the guy who married their mother, and now you're trying to control them." Rad said frankly.

Brad thought about the words, then looked at the twins and said, "Rayne's right. I'm sorry guys, sometimes I'm oblivious."

Shayd quietly said, "Our real dad never wanted to spend time with us..."

Shadoe continued, "...so it was really weird for us when all of a sudden you were there, like, all the time."

"That's why Tan had to leave. He's older than the twins and he's starting to want to become more independent. Then all of a sudden, you're there suffocating him and trying to control him."

"I just wanted to protect them and be a part of their lives..." Brad said quietly.

"Guys, here's the part that I needed you in here for. Help me let Brad know what he can do to make things better." Rad said seriously.

"Back off." Shayd said immediately.

"Shay, I was thinking of something a little more constructive." Rad said, trying not to sound harsh.

"Give up on the dad thing. You're not our dad and you'll never be our dad." Shadoe said frankly.

"Shad, it'll be more helpful if you'll tell him what he *can* do instead of what he can't." Rad said in a leading tone.

The twins looked at each other for a moment, then Shayd quietly said, "I guess if you wanted, we could do stuff like we used to when Rayne still lived with us."

"Like what?" Brad asked cautiously.

"I don't know, like stay up late watching movies and camp out in the living room." Shayd said uncertainly.

"Or maybe go to a drag race or something." Shadoe added hesitantly.

"I'd like that." Brad said carefully, not wanting to disrupt the tentative peace between them.

"Good. I'll let you work that out. And when I get back to Earth maybe all us guys can go do something together." Rad said with a smile.

"Do you think we could borrow your dad's cabin by the lake?" Shayd asked hopefully.

"I bet you could. As soon as I know when I'll be back on Earth, I'll call you so you can set it up." Rad said with a smile.

Shayd nodded happily.

"But remember, we need to be left alone sometimes. It's really creepy to have you watching us all the time." Shadoe said seriously.

"Yeah. Give it a rest. The little kids might like all that attention but it's driving us nuts." Shayd added.

"I know how that feels. I'll try, but you may need to tell me when I'm doing it. I don't always realize it." Brad said hesitantly.

"Count on it." Shayd said firmly.

Brad nodded, then carefully asked, "What about Tan?"

"He's safe. I need to talk to him and see how he's doing. But if he decides that he doesn't want to come back are you going to be okay with it?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Yeah, I guess so. As long as I know he's okay." Brad said reluctantly.

"I'll call you back as soon as I know what's going on." Rad said more gently.

"Thanks Rayne. I'm sorry about... everything. I never meant to hurt you." Brad said quietly.

Rad sadly nodded and said, "I know."

* * * * *

When the lift doors opened, Captain Byrne stepped away from the group and said, "If I may have everyone's attention, I'll make introductions and then we can go to our table. Dinner will be served in just a few minutes."

Tyce glanced at Traiel, then glanced away quickly.

Lehman felt relief as he noticed the pleased expression on Traiel's face.

"I believe everyone knows the Holy One, on his left is his protector Audge and his high priest Oluf. On his right are Crewman Winters, his cultural liaison while he is amongst us and Ensign Thaelan, a member of the last Federation delegation to visit Okuda prime." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Next we have captains Marr, Treas, Gartain, Traiel and Treifa. If you will all follow me, we can have a seat and be comfortable while we get to know each other." Captain Byrne said hopefully.

As the group was walking toward the table, a crewman intercepted the captain and whispered in his ear.

Captain Byrne whispered to the Crewman, then said, "If you will all excuse me I will return in just a moment. I've instructed the staff to start serving the meal as soon as it's ready."

The crewman nodded then rushed to the kitchen while the Captain walked for the turbo lift.

"So Holy One, Treifa says that you're considering endorsing a proposal that a colony at the edge of our system be allowed to have contact with the Federation." Captain Gartain said casually.

"Yes. I am considering that option. I would be interested to know your feelings on the matter." Tyce said diplomatically.

"It sounds like a fine idea. Our first step out into the universe." Captain Gartain said happily.

"First steps tend to be unsteady and should be taken slowly. Thanks to my Federation hosts I've seen that not everything beyond our borders is more advanced." Tyce said seriously.

"In what way?" Captain Treas asked with interest.

"For example, they do not balance their chi with their ieb." Tyce said seriously.

All the Okudai captains looked at Tyce in shock as Oluf asked, "All of them are imbalanced?"

"That is my understanding. Ensign Thaelan, the people of Okuda balance their opposite sex and same sex desires to maintain balance in their psyche. Perhaps you know, do all Federation worlds believe in a monogamous life-long bond which forbids the opposing sexual contact?" Tyce asked curiously.

Thaelan thought about the question for a moment, then said, "I believe that monogamy is the prevalent belief on most Federation worlds, but most, perhaps all, societies have sub-cultures that would support alternative lifestyles that are more in line with your beliefs."

"Shocking." Captain Treas said with a disbelieving shake of her head.

"Disgusting." Captain Marr said in a growl.

"Please excuse my absence. Admiral Morrow asked that I pass on his best wishes to all of you and his hopes that this would be a productive meeting." Captain Byrne said and gave a meaningful glance toward Lehman.

"I had just mentioned an example of our differing philosophies. But perhaps it would be best if we begin to discuss the reason for our gathering." Tyce said formally.

"Are you planning to continue to fight to keep our society in the stone age?" Captain Treas asked before anyone else could speak.

Tyce thought about the question for a moment, then said, "No. I believe the time has come to reevaluate certain attitudes toward progress. But I cannot condone a plan that will disrupt our society to a point that will throw us into chaos."

"How about trade with the Federation?" Traiel asked seriously.

Rather than answer the question directly, Tyce turned to Captain Byrne and asked, "What do you think the Federation would think about opening trade negotiations with the Okudai?"

"Of course we would be in favor of it. But your people should carefully consider what they are willing to offer up for trade. It has happened on more than one occasion that governments have made promises that heavily burdened their people and depleted their resources." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"That is a reasonable concern. So it would be necessary to have people of integrity in the positions to make such decisions." Tyce said in thought.

"Good luck." Treifa said with a chuckle.

Thaelan looked at Treifa with surprise, then said, "Sarcasm is relatively unknown to my people. You appear to have this form of humor in common with Humans."

A chuckle spread around the table at the statement as waiters arrived with a small plate of salad for each person.

"You are vegetarians?" Treifa asked hesitantly.

"No. We simply have a salad course before the main course of our meal." Captain Byrne said gently.

"Do not worry Captain Treifa, I had the opportunity to sample their cuisine earlier in the Engineer's mess hall. Their tastes seem to be much like our own. I especially liked the stuffed pork chops." Tyce finished with a smile.

"You ate among the common workers of the ship?" Oluf asked in horror.

Tyce flashed a disapproving look at Oluf and said, "Yes. Why do you believe it is a dishonor for me to do so? Do you believe that I will be tainted by their sweat or somehow infected by their work ethic?"

Traiel smiled broadly at the statement before taking a bite of his salad.

"No Holy One, but you should be shown the proper respect of a visiting dignitary and treated to their finest offerings, not subjected to the rations of their common workers." Oluf explained carefully.

"Crewman Winters spent the day showing me where he works, eats and sleeps. Thanks to his willingness to share the details of his life, I have come to understand that the workers on this ship perform their duties with pride because they know that their contributions are appreciated by their captain. And the rations of the common workers that you speak of were as fine a meal as any that I've had and fit for any dignitary." Tyce said firmly.

"As you say Holy One." Oluf responded quietly.

"I'm pleased that you enjoyed your meal Holy One." Captain Byrne said, trying to divert attention from Oluf's discomfort.

"Yes Captain. Not only did I enjoy a good meal, but also good company. Crewman Winters introduced me to his friend JonJon who is one of a group of colonists who are traveling to establish a new colony." Tyce said seriously.

"What is the purpose?" Captain Treas asked with interest.

"As I understand it, their purpose is to reduce the impact of technology on their lives. They produce their own food and live close to the land, much like our Andarkan colony." Tyce said seriously, then smiled when he saw that Lehman had eaten all his salad.

The waiters returned to clear the salad plates, then replaced them with plates with filet mignon and rice pilaf.

"This is more what I expected." Treifa said with a smile.

"Yes. It looks very good." Captain Treas said approvingly.

Lehman took a bite of the meat and considered the taste carefully. After a moment to draw on Vincent's memories, he motioned to one of the waiters who was standing nearby.

"Could you get me some catsup please?" Lehman asked quietly.

"Catsup?" The waiter asked hesitantly.

"Yes. Please?" Lehman asked hopefully.

The waiter nodded, then walked out of the room.

"Is something wrong Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"No sir. I just asked for some catsup for my meat." Lehman said shyly.

"Catsup?" Treifa asked cautiously.

"Yes. As I understand, it is a condiment that is used to mask the flavor of food that is repugnant." Thaelan said seriously.

"Is there a problem?" The chef asked as he walked to the table.

"I just wanted some catsup for my meat." Lehman said quietly, wishing that he had never asked.

The chef looked at Lehman for a moment, then said, "I suppose a child wouldn't have the refined taste to appreciate my filet mignon."

"Is that what this is? I had filet mignon on the *Enterprise*... but it didn't taste like this." Lehman said, then shrank back a little when he noticed the anger in the man's eyes.

"Would you see that the crewman gets some catsup?" Captain Byrne asked as he tried to restrain a smile.

"I'll send someone down to the engineers mess hall to get your catsup. You'll have it in a moment." the chef said gruffly, then walked away.

When the chef was finally gone, Lehman quietly said, "I'm sorry about that, I didn't mean to make him mad. I just think this meat would taste better with catsup."

* * * * *

The pair emerged from the portal and landed on the sandy ground of Gateway.

Vincent lifted the picture his counterpart had given him to see what it was.

"What did he give you?" Dr. Xon asked curiously.

"A picture of him and all the guys in his cabin... They look kinda like a family." Vincent said as he looked at the group picture carefully.

"If we complete our task, he will have the opportunity to live long and prosper." Dr. Xon said formally.

"Yeah. I know. I just feel kinda bad because I've got such a good life and he has to be doped up to be able to put up with his." Vincent said quietly.

Dr. Xon stepped forward and put a hand on Vincent's shoulder before saying, "He is going through a difficult time. Such is the way of life. You have had difficulties and are stronger for having faced them. The tragedies he has endured are causing him to form new relationships that will serve him well in his later life."

Vincent thought about the statement, then nodded his agreement.

Dr. Xon released Vincent, then walked to a rack of equipment by the portal and selected a device.

"Please allow me to examine your quantum signature so I can adjust the time needed for the next contact." Dr. Xon said as he adjusted the instrument.

"Do you have any kids or anything Dr. Xon?" Vincent asked curiously as the Vulcan scientist scanned him.

"My apologies Crewman Winters, but I must refrain from answering any specific questions because I am part of the future. Any specific knowledge that you carry into the past with you could potentially pollute the timeline and cause a paradox." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Okay, I studied about paradoxes, I don't want to cause one of those. I just wanted to get to know you." Vincent said quietly.

"If all proceeds according to plan, we may have that opportunity one day." Dr. Xon said as he looked over his readings.

"What does it say?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"It confirms that your quantum resonant frequency has been altered by 0.04 cycles. Another such contact should be able to realign your quantum signature to that of your home universe and restore my timeline into being." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Okay. So where are we going this time?" Vincent asked cautiously.

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"Do you want us to sign off? It looks like you have things under control." Jamie said cautiously.

"Sure. Thanks for your help guys. I was afraid that Tan was really missing and we might have to go looking for him." Rad said honestly.

"I'm glad it worked out. If you need any other help, just call us." Jacob said sincerely.

"I'll do that." Rad said gratefully and watched as they disconnected.

"Do you want us to give you some privacy for this?" Darin asked quietly from Rad's side.

"I'd really rather have you guys here if you don't mind." Rad said as he glanced from Darin to Joe.

"We're here for as long as you need us." Joe said with a smile.

Rad nodded, then turned back to the terminal to initiate the call to his father.

"Radovanovich residence." A timid voice answered and the screen showed only an empty room.

"Tan, is that you?" Rad asked carefully.

"Rayne? How are you doing? Are you okay?" Tan asked with excitement as he moved in front of the screen.

"Yeah, at least I am now that I know you're alright." Rad said peacefully.

"Oh. Yeah." Tan said quietly.

"Where's dad?" Rad asked cautiously.

"He's out in the kitchen making dinner. Do you want me to get him?" Tan asked quietly.

"Not yet. I want to talk to you first and find out how you're doing." Rad said with concern.

"I'm fine. I'm sorry if I worried you. I just couldn't stay there anymore." Tan said shyly.

"I know. I talked to Shay and Shad. They filled me in." Rad said quietly.

"Are you mad at me?" Tan asked hesitantly.

"No. But I wish you would have called me and talked to me about it first. We might have found a way to do this that wouldn't make everyone think you'd been abducted." Rad said honestly.

Tan nodded with an expression of shame.

"What do you want to do next?" Rad asked gently.

"I really want to stay here. Your dad said that I could stay as long as I want and it's really nice here." Tan said as he looked at Rad with hope.

"If that's what you really want, we can probably make that happen." Rad said gently.

"Really? You think you could do that?" Tan asked hopefully.

"I think I could, but it may not be exactly the way you're wanting." Rad said slowly.

"How do you mean?" Tan asked cautiously.

"You can't leave things like this with Mom. It isn't right. You're going to need to go talk to her face to face and explain why you left and what you've decided to do next." Rad said firmly.

"Can't I just send her an email?" Tan asked hopefully.

"You could. But it would be the coward's way of doing it. You've already messed up by running away the way you did. Now it's time to do the right thing and face your decisions like a man." Rad said with certainty.

"I guess so. I just hate Brad so much. I don't even want to be in the same room with him." Tan said darkly.

"I had a long talk with him before I called you. I think I got through to him and worked some stuff out so it won't be as bad as it has been." Rad said quietly.

"So you think I should go back?" Tan asked cautiously.

Rad thought for a moment, then said, "No. Actually I think you should stay with my dad."

"Why?" Tan asked hesitantly.

"Because my dad's a really good decent man. I think the best thing you could possibly do right now is stay with him and learn what that means so you can grow into a good decent man that I can be proud to call my brother." Rad said seriously.

Tan nodded slowly at the statement.

"I've known Brad since I was a little kid and I know he isn't a bad person, he's just making a lot of mistakes while he's trying to figure out how to be a father." Rad said quietly.

"He sucks at it." Tan said darkly.

"Yeah. He does. He could probably use some help." Rad said frankly.

Tan looked at Rad with confusion.

"When he married Mom he got an instant family. I've made it a lot harder for him by talking bad about him to you and the twins. How long do you think it can keep up like this before he decides to bail out?" Rad asked seriously.

"And that would be a bad thing?" Tan asked sarcastically.

"Do you remember how you felt when your dad bailed out? Or Mike and Allie's dad? It hurt like hell. You don't want them to have to go through that again do you?" Rad asked imploringly.

"No. I guess not. Livvy and Jess really do love him." Tan said quietly.

"He's the only dad they've ever known. You don't have to like him Tan, but if you can try to support him and help him out when you're around the others, it might make everyone's lives a lot easier." Rad said seriously.

"I can try. Maybe if I don't have to live with him 24/7 I'll be able to put up with him when I visit." Tan said in thought.

"That's good. I'm going to try that too." Rad said with a smile.

"Thanks Rayne... Joe? Is that you back there?" Tan asked as he moved a little closer to the screen.

"Hi Tan. Yeah, it's me. How are you doing?" Joe asked quietly.

"Um, well, I guess you already know since you heard all that." Tan said shyly.

"Yeah. Your brother wanted us here for moral support." Joe said with a gentle smile at Tan.

"I'm glad you guys aren't mad at each other anymore. Rad was really miserable after you had your fight." Tan said honestly.

"So was I, but that's all in the past now." Joe said happily.

"That's right." Rad said, then motioned for Darin to come closer to the terminal screen.

"Tan, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend Darin." Rad said happily.

"It's nice to meet you Darin. How long have you known my brother?" Tan asked with a smile.

"Since I came on board the *Yorktown*... almost two weeks now." Darin said shyly.

"You'll have to tell me all about it when you guys come back to Earth. You are going to bring him to meet me in person when you get back, aren't you?" Tan asked hopefully.

Rad smiled, then turned to Darin and asked, "Would you like to spend our shore leave with me and my family in California?"

"Yeah. I think I'd like that." Darin said happily.

"Oh yeah, Tan. When I talked to Brad we kind of made plans for all us guys to go camping out at the cabin by the lake one weekend." Rad said cautiously.

"Brad wants to go camping with us?" Tan asked darkly.

"No. Actually the twins came up with the idea and we invited Brad along." Rad said seriously.

"Okay. I guess that's alright. Just as long as he didn't invite himself." Tan said reluctantly.

"Would you go ask dad if he can come talk to me for a minute? I just need to clear a few things through him before we can call everything settled." Rad said seriously.

"Yeah, I'll go get him now." Tan said quickly and rushed away from the terminal.

"I like your brother, he seems like a good kid." Darin said quietly.

"He really is. I hope my dad is willing to go along with this because I think it's the best thing for him." Rad said with concern.

* * * * *

"Your catsup." The waiter said as he placed a bowl of catsup beside Lehman.

"Thanks." Lehman whispered, then spooned a little bit of the catsup onto his meat.

Conversation around the table stopped as they watched Lehman take a small bite of his meat.

Lehman considered the flavor, then smiled.

He looked around the table and noticed everyone watching him.

"It really is better. Would you like to try some Holy One?" Lehman asked quietly as he scooted the bowl of catsup closer to Tyce's plate.

Tyce smiled at the offer and said, "Yes. I believe I would."

After a moment to spoon a small dab of catsup onto a piece of meat, Tyce carefully took a bite.

His eyes widened in surprise, then he said, "You should all try this. It is very good."

Over the course of the next few minutes, the bowl of catsup made it's way around the table and everyone had tried some.

Everyone, even the captain, was in agreement that the catsup added something to the flavor that made the filet mignon taste better.

"Holy One, when the time comes to begin trade negotiations with the Federation, will you endorse the action?" Treifa asked seriously.

Tyce considered the question carefully while he ate, then said, "I would consider endorsing trade between our people if certain conditions are met."

"What conditions?" Captain Treas asked cautiously.

"First, it would be necessary to have honest people to oversee the trade. I am concerned that the people given this responsibility will become corrupt and seek to line their own pockets at the expense of our people." Tyce said seriously.

"Perhaps representatives from each province could be appointed by the provincial governors to oversee the operation." Oluf said in thought.

Tyce shook his head and said, "I don't trust the governors and I am against the whole idea of appointees. I believe the people should be allowed to select one from each province by popular vote. The process may be slower, but it will reflect the trust and will of the people."

"I like that idea very much." Captain Treas said happily.

"What else?" Treifa asked cautiously.

"Once the representatives are chosen and trade is established, we need to make sure we put catsup on the list of things we want to import."

Smiles and chuckles went around the room at the statement.

Chapter 26

Vincent and Dr. Xon appeared out of thin air and found themselves standing in a park.

"Are we in the right place?" Vincent asked curiously.

Dr. Xon raised his tricorder to perform a brief scan, then said, "Yes. Your alternate self should be approximately twenty meters in that direction."

Vincent looked in the direction Dr. Xon indicated and froze in shock.

Dr. Xon looked curiously at Vincent, then said, "We must proceed."

"But... that's my mom." Vincent whispered.

Dr. Xon looked where Vincent was staring, then quietly said, "Events in this alternate universe appear to have unfolded much differently from yours. I did not have sufficient time to catalog the differences. I apologize for not anticipating this possibility."

Vincent looked at Dr. Xon curiously for a moment and was surprised to see true remorse in his eyes.

"It's okay. I know you didn't do it on purpose." Vincent said quietly as he slowly turned his gaze back to his mother.

Vincent continued to stare until he felt Dr. Xon's hand on his shoulder urging him to walk.

The woman noticed two people approaching and stopped fussing over the food she was putting out on the picnic table.

"Greetings." Dr. Xon said formally at the woman's inquisitive stare.

"Hello. That's a really great costume. My hus..." She said, then noticed Vincent.

Vincent stared at the alternate version of his mother, not knowing what he should say.

"Vinny? What did you do to your hair and who's your new friend?" Peggy asked cautiously.

"I... um, it's kind of a long story." Vincent stammered.

"Mom! Dad wants to know if you're ready for him to start the burgers or if we have time to try the kite?" Lawrence called as he ran up to the table.

When he saw Vincent and Dr. Xon he froze in his tracks.

He stared at Vincent for a moment, then looked behind him and saw his brother and father playing catch with a Frisbee.

Vincent followed his gaze and was astounded to see himself playing Frisbee and having fun in the park.

"Who are you?" Lawrence asked in wonder as he stared at Vincent again.

Vincent blinked, then said, "Crewman Vincent Winters."

"Larry, get your father over here." Peggy said in a flustered voice.

"Yeah." Lawrence said absently, then ran off at full speed.

"Mrs. Winters, we need to..." Dr. Xon began to say, but was interrupted.

"Silva." Peggy said firmly.

Dr. Xon raised an eyebrow in question.

"I divorced Victor about six years ago, I'm Peggy Silva now." She said seriously.

"Silva? Like principal Silva?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yes, Mitch and I have been married for almost four years." Peggy said with a peaceful smile.

"What is it Peggy?" Mr. Silva asked as he ran to Peggy's side with the boys following a step behind.

"You need to see this." Peggy said and motioned to Vincent and Dr. Xon.

Mitch looked at Vincent, then down at his youngest son who was now at his side.

"This might take a little explaining." Vincent said hesitantly, feeling the stares of everyone on him.

* * * * *

"Ray? How are you doing? Is everything alright?" Rad's father asked as he took a seat in front of the terminal.

"Can Tan hear us?" Rad asked cautiously.

"No, I left him chunking up the vegetables for our stew tonight. What's going on?" Rad's father asked with concern.

"Tan didn't come home from school a couple days ago. Everyone's been running around looking for him. They thought he'd been abducted." Rad said frankly.

"I'm sorry to hear that. He arrived here last night and it didn't occur to me to call and make sure they knew where he was."

Rad looked at his father cautiously for a moment, then said, "Dad, you're not very good at lying. You should really stick to the truth."

"Fine. He told me that he ran away and I promised that I wouldn't tell anyone he was here."

Rad nodded and said, "That's better. So how is he?"

Rad's father looked down in thought, then finally said, "Feeling alone in the world."

"Do you mind him being there?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Not at all. I've always liked Tan, he's a good kid."

Rad smiled and said, "I was thinking that, if you wanted to, we might work it out with Mom so Tan could stay there for a while."

"A while?" Rad's father asked cautiously.

"Like maybe until he's eighteen?" Rad asked hesitantly, closely watching his father's reaction.

"Why don't we just say that he can stay until he's ready to leave for college? I don't want him to get the feeling that I've marked the calendar and I'm waiting for the day to come when I can throw him out."

Rad let out a gust of breath in relief and said, "Yeah. That'd be great. If he tried to go back to Mom's, sooner or later something would happen to cause a blow up and he'd end up running away again... and this time we might not be able to find him."

"I think you're right."

"Besides, I think he needs a role model as much as a friend." Rad said quietly.

"I see what you mean. Your mom is a wonderful person, but she's not a shining example of how an adult should behave. And from what I hear, her boy-toy is just about worthless."

"Come on Dad, you know that Brad is trying. That's a lot more than I can say for Tan's father. I doubt that he's talked to Tan more than five times in the past ten years." Rad said with disgust.

Rad's father nodded sadly and said, "I guess you're right. I know that Brad is doing his best. He doesn't have a mean bone in his body... or a smart one."

Rad smiled and nodded, then said, "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you guys out."

"Stay here with me when you get back to Earth. It'll be good to spend some time with you and I think Tan needs more than one role model."

"Okay, I'll do that as long as you don't mind if I bring my new boyfriend. Dad, this is Darin. Darin, this is my dad, Drake Radovanovich." Rad said gently.

"It's nice to meet you Darin. Don't tell me Ray finally found someone crazy enough to put up with all his hijinks." Rad's father

"It's nice to meet you too. And it's possible that I am crazy enough for him... we'll just have to find out." Darin said with a fond smile at Rad.

"So Dad, is there anything else I can do to help you and Tan?"

Drake considered for a moment, then said, "Smooth things over with your mom. If you can manage that, I think everything else will be fine."

"I'm on it. Oh, and when I get back to Earth, do you think all us guys could have a get-away weekend at the cabin?" Rad asked hopefully.

"Sure, that sounds like a lot of fun. Count me in."

"I already invited Brad."

"Oh, then strike that part about fun. It sounds painful and awkward. You're welcomed to use the cabin, but I'll pass."

"Please think about coming with us Dad. You might be able to help Mom and all the kids out by giving Brad a few pointers. You know, now that you're older and wiser." Rad finished with a smile.

Rad's father thought for a moment, then quietly said, "I suppose I should. Otherwise I'll probably have Shayd and Shadoe living here in a few months."

"And Mike not too long after that." Rad said with a smile.

After a nod, Drake said, "Go work on your mom and let me know when everything's settled."

"You got it. I love you Dad." Rad said with a warm smile.

"I love you too Ray. Be safe."

* * * * *

"Perhaps once we've come to some sort of terms, you might stop blocking our communications long enough for me to let my priests know what's going on. I'm sure they're quite concerned by now." Tyce said casually as he looked at Treifa and Gartain.

"I was able to get a brief message through to the home world before the hostile ships returned." Oluf said cautiously.

Tyce looked at Oluf with surprise, then hesitantly asked, "What did you tell them?"

"I told them that a number of Okudai military ships had been pursuing us for days and that we suffered severe damage." Oluf said with caution at Tyce's expression.

"And..." Tyce prompted.

"...and that a Federation vessel came to our aid moments before we would have been destroyed." Oluf said cautiously.

Tyce thought for a moment, then quietly asked, "Who did you talk to?"

"The senior priest, Adelaide." Oluf said, and looked as if he were about ready to run and hide.

Tyce closed his eyes and hung his head as he concentrated on the situation.

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked in a whisper.

Tyce slowly raised his head, then turned to Lehman and quietly said, "Of all my priests, Adelaide has to be the most flighty and high strung."

After taking a deep breath to calm himself, Tyce turned to Oluf and slowly said, "At least they know that I am safe aboard the *Yorktown*."

"Our transmission was cut off before I could complete my report." Oluf said hesitantly.

Tyce nodded silently.

Looks flashed around the table as everyone tried to understand the implications of what had been said.

"So the news of attack has reached Okuda Prime. Knowing Adelaide, the video transmission of your report has probably been sent to every media center throughout the system." Tyce said in a considering voice.

"He wouldn't really do that would he? I mean, it would cause complete anarchy." Treifa asked cautiously.

"Given Adelaide's nature, I feel comfortable saying that by now every person in the Okudai system has probably seen Oluf's report at least once." Tyce said seriously.

"What are we going to do?" Traiel asked as he realized the gravity of the situation.

"Stop blocking communications. I need to talk to the home world if there is to be any chance of stopping this before it grows out of control." Tyce said firmly.

Gartain looked at Traiel with question and received a nod.

"I will need to contact my ship." Gartain said hesitantly.

"Of course." Captain Byrne said as he stood.

The captain walked to the wall and pressed a button which caused a panel to open and reveal a large view screen.

"We sometimes have conferences in here." the captain explained as he pressed the main comm button.

"Communications." Debbie said professionally.

Captain Byrne stepped aside so Gartain could speak.

"Would you please connect me with the first officer of the *Timmeraeon*?"

"Right away." Debbie said then the screen went blank.

A moment later a dark haired woman appeared on the screen, looking curious.

"It appears that the situation may have changed. Stop jamming communications and open a channel to Okuda Prime." Gartain said forcefully.

"Perhaps we should survey the situation before we have our talk." Tyce said in thought.

After a moment of thought, Gartain said, "Agreed. See if you can lock onto a news broadcast."

"Yes.... right away." The woman said quickly.

"Treela, will you relay the news transmission to us?" Gartain asked cautiously.

"Yes sir." The woman said quickly, then the screen changed to show Oluf talking in a panicked voice.

"You called that one." Lehman said as he walked to Tyce's side and looked at the screen carefully.

A commentator came onto the screen and said, "If you'll look in the background, you can see the damage and two bodies."

"Not good." Treas said absently as she watched the screen.

"We say again, the High Priest Oluf was unable to tell us of the condition of our Holy One before the transmission was jammed at it's source. All we know is that it was our own ships that caused this death and destruction you see in the background. From Oluf's brief statement it appears that an alien ship named '*Yorktown*' came to defend our Holy One from his own people!" The commentator said as his face began to turn red with fury.

"It's worse than I thought." Tyce said reluctantly.

"The colonies of Andarka, Kerova, Greater and Lesser Nistruum and Vennis have called back all officials from Okuda Prime and announced that they will no longer follow any orders given by the central government... or in the words of Governor Janke, 'The murderous bastards who attacked our beloved Holy One'." the commentator said seriously.

"The government won't allow..." Treifa began to say when the commentator continued, "President Malif has issued orders that military ships be dispatched to assume control of each of the named colonies, but as yet, no military ships have launched. Apparently, a significant number of our brave soldiers are having difficulty interpreting their oath of service to mean that they should turn their weapons on their own people whose only crime is showing support for the Holy One who is beloved to us all."

"I've seen enough." Tyce said as he turned away.

"Holy One, you need to let the people know that you're not injured before this degenerates into a revolution." Captain Treas said quickly.

"Why should I? You and your fellow captains chased me all the way out here with the intention of killing me. Perhaps I should ask for sanctuary in the Federation and let you and your friends sort this whole mess out." Tyce said darkly.

"That wouldn't be right. We need you in your proper place." Traiel said forcefully.

"And why should I concern myself with your needs?" Tyce asked in a considering voice, then walked to Audge's side as he continued, "Could it be because you believe that I'm not really the Holy One. Maybe you think I'm the shape shifter that you sent to kill me and take my place?"

Traiel looked at Tyce with disbelief.

"I'm not him Traiel. I was going to pretend with you a while longer in hopes that you would reveal who is pulling your strings. But I've since realized that it doesn't matter. You wanted a world without a Holy One. Now you've got one. I've discovered that I want to have a life that's my own. Let's just part company and make us both happy." Tyce said in a snarl.

"You can't!" Captain Gartain barked.

Tyce turned to Captain Byrne and asked, "Captain, do you think it would be possible for me to join JonJon's colony?"

"I'm sure they would be honored to have you." Captain Byrne said formally.

"Yes. And even if they aren't honored, at least they won't conspire to kill me." Tyce said seriously before turning to face the captains again.

Treifa took two steps forward, then knelt down on one knee before Tyce.

"I regret my part in the plot against you Holy One. Here, before everyone, I swear my loyalty to you. Please forgive me." Treifa said with his head bowed.

"Arise Treifa. You are forgiven." Tyce said gently.

Captain Treas stepped forward and also got down on one knee.

"I'm sorry Holy One. I thought I was helping to provide a better future for my grandchildren." she said in remorse.

"Arise Captain Treas, I can see the pain these decisions have caused you and know that your actions were taken out of love and concern, not malice or greed." Tyce said gently.

Captain Treas nodded as she slowly stood.

Captain Gartain began to step forward when Tyce held up his hand.

"I see no remorse in your soul. Only a desire to ally yourself with the other captains so you will not be held accountable in the coming days. Captains Gartain and Traiel, I would advise that you not return to the Okuda system.

If you do, you will not only stand accused of crimes against me, but also of crimes against Lehman, the Chameloid that you had surgically altered so he would be able to take my place. You have violated the highest laws of Okuda with this barbaric act and I will personally testify to assure that you are convicted for the pain you have caused." Tyce said in a voice that was nearly a growl.

"I... I didn't..." Captain Gartain began to protest.

"Save your lies. I have the ability to read your SOUL!" Tyce finished in a scream.

"Holy One." Oluf said and pointed at the view screen.

The image was of an explosion at the main gate of the presidential palace.

"Yes. Captain, could you possibly contact the main church on Okuda Prime. As nice as it would be to go to the new colony, these are my people and they need me." Tyce said with resignation.

"I would be honored to help however I can Holy One." Captain Byrne said reverently, then hit the main comm button.

* * * * *

"I don't understand what's going on here. Who are you?" Mr. Silva said cautiously.

"Um, I'm Crewman Vincent Winters, Petty Officer second class from the USS *Yorktown*." Vincent said shyly.

"No. I mean, who are you really?" Mr. Silva asked as he looked at Dr. Xon carefully.

"I don't know what you're asking. That's who I really am." Vincent said as he looked around at everyone staring at him.

"I am Dr. Xon, a Federation scientist." Dr. Xon said as he watched their examination of him.

"It's not a costume." Mr. Silva said as he cautiously reached out to touch one of Dr. Xon's ears.

"No sir. It is not." Dr. Xon said as he remained perfectly still.

"That's not possible. Star Trek is just a TV show." Peggy said carefully.

"Star Trek?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Yeah. It's this really cool show about people who travel through space and meet all kinds of really cool aliens and get into space battles and stuff like that." Vinny said quickly.

"Yeah. It's about the *Enterprise* and Captain Kirk." Lawrence said slowly as he stared at Vincent.

"So there's no Federation or Starfleet here?" Vincent asked in surprise.

"Just in the TV show." Vinny said frankly.

"What are you doing here?" Mr. Silva asked curiously as he took a step back out of Dr. Xon's personal space.

"Well, I think it might be really hard to explain. If you don't have Starfleet, then you probably don't know much about time travel." Vincent said carefully.

"Try me. I've been watching science fiction since I was Vinny's age." Mr. Silva said frankly.

Vincent looked up at Dr. Xon to explain.

"I have been studying a time portal called The Guardian of Forever on a distant planet..." Dr. Xon said slowly.

"The City on the Edge of Forever." Mr. Silva said with a nod.

"Pardon?" Dr. Xon asked curiously.

"Let's see, that's the one where Dr. McCoy accidentally injects himself with an overdose of cordriazine and beams down to the Guardian of Forever. A landing party follows him and after he steps through the guardian, the *Enterprise* disappears because he changed history. So Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock go back to try and stop him from doing whatever he did that changed the future." Mr. Silva said in concentration.

"Edith Keeler had to die." Vinny said slowly, straining his memory.

"I am astounded that you know of these facts. The existence of Gateway has been a well guarded secret in the Federation since Captain Kirk's discovery. The details of that encounter in the past are only available to the researchers." Dr. Xon said in surprise.

"Well, if you understand all that, then this shouldn't be too hard to explain." Vincent said, sounding relieved.

"Correct. Due to a transporter accident, Crewman Winters' quantum resonance signature was altered. This, in turn, caused Crewman Winters to

become disassociated with his own universe. The consequence of this disassociation would result in all the incarnations of Crewman Winters in all alternate universes to be removed from existence. With the assistance of the Guardian of Forever, we are traveling to select alternate universes so Crewman Winters can make physical contact with his alternate selves. The contact causes the quantum signatures to slightly realign and will, in theory, cause Crewman Winters to reassociate with his own dimension before a temporal/spatial convergence occurs." Dr. Xon said seriously.

After a long silent moment, Vinny said, "That made my head hurt."

"Mine too." Mr. Silva said as he put an arm around his son.

"If I can shake hands with your son for a couple seconds, we'll be done and you can get back to your picnic." Vincent said frankly.

"Is it going to hurt?" Vinny asked cautiously.

"No. It just tingles a little. You might feel funny for a few seconds afterward, but then it goes away." Vincent said with an assuring smile.

Vinny looked up at his dad with question.

"Do you have time to answer a few questions before you do that?" Mr. Silva asked cautiously.

Vincent turned to Dr. Xon and asked, "Do I?"

"We have eight point four nine minutes before the vortex will reopen." Dr. Xon said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then said, "Go ahead and ask me whatever you want to know."

* * * * *

"Tan?"

"No Mom. It's me." Rad said quietly.

"Brad said that you know where he is. How is he? Is he getting enough to eat?" She asked desperately.

"He's fine Mom. Is Brad around? I need to talk to you both." Rad said seriously.

"Something's wrong, I knew it. Is he in trouble? Is he in jail somewhere?" She asked with tears in her eyes.

"Mom. Get Brad and I'll tell you." Rad said firmly.

Rad's mother hopped up and ran into the next room.

"I really feel like I'm intruding on something private." Darin said quietly.

"I feel like I'm watching a soap opera." Joe said with a teasing smile at Rad.

Rad chuckled and said, "Thanks Joe. That put everything right back into perspective."

Darin looked curiously at Joe and smiled at the way he had just diffused the emotions of the situation.

"He's coming. Now where's Tan?"

"Mom. Tan's with my dad." Rad said firmly.

"How did he get there? Did your father come down and get him?" She asked in confusion.

"No. I don't know how he did it, but Dad said that Tan showed up there last night." Rad said seriously.

"Why didn't he call me? I've been worried sick!" She said in an increasing voice.

"He didn't call because Tan asked him not to. I'm pretty sure Dad felt that it was more important right then to let Tan know that he was somewhere safe and that he was with someone he could trust." Rad explained calmly.

"Rayne explained a few things to me and I think I understand why he left." Brad said quietly.

"Why?" She asked in a helpless voice.

"He left because he's growing up. I've been treating all the kids the same, like they're all four years old. He couldn't handle me watching over him every second and had to get away." Brad said quietly.

"You're not quite as dense as I thought." Rad said with a smile at his old friend.

"Yes I am, you're just really good at explaining things." Brad said shyly.

"You've given me a lifetime of practice." Rad said with a chuckle.

"So when is Tan coming home?"

Rad glanced away for a moment, then looked his mother in the eyes as he said, "I don't know if he will come home. I think maybe he'll be better off at my dad's for a while."

"He needs to be here with me. Drake isn't even his father." She said as tears started streaking down her cheeks again.

"No, he's not. But I think Brad explained the problem perfectly. Tan needs someone to relate to him as a teenager. He needs a father to help guide him into adulthood. No offense Brad, but with the feelings between you and Tan already, I don't think there's any way you could be that for him. Dad may not have been the best husband that ever was, but he's a great father." Rad finished firmly.

Janet reluctantly nodded her agreement.

"Do you think he'll come visit?" Brad asked as he held his wife gently at his side.

"I think he might if you invite him. It might not hurt if you let him know up front that you're not going to try to talk him into staying while he's there." Rad said seriously.

"I'll do that." Brad said in nearly a whisper.

"Dad also said that it would be okay if we borrow the cabin for a weekend. He might even join us if he's free." Rad said with a smile.

"Did he really say that? I got the feeling that he hated me almost as much as you did." Brad said hesitantly.

"He doesn't hate you. Hopefully he'll be able to tell you that for himself when we have our weekend." Rad said with a smile.

"Thanks for all your help Rayne." Janet said as she hugged Brad tightly to her side.

"No problem Mom. But next time, call me as soon as it happens. You don't need to be worrying like this." Rad said frankly.

"You have your own life now. You'll never find someone to settle down with if your crazy old mother is always calling about every little thing that goes wrong." She said frankly.

"You're not old." Rad said seriously, then after a second broke into a smile.

Everyone started to chuckle at the statement.

"And since you brought it up. Mom, Brad, this is my boyfriend Darin. Darin, this is my mom Janet Curry and her latest husband, Brad." Rad finished with a smile.

"It's nice to meet you Darin. And just wait until you get home Rayne, you're not so old that I can't put you over my knee." Janet said playfully.

"Mom! Not in front of my friends!" Rad said in a scandalized voice.

"Hi Joe! I didn't see you there." Janet said with a wave.

"Hi Janet. It's nice to see you again. How are things going?" Joe asked with a smile.

"You know me. Same ole, same ole." Janet said with a secretive smile.

"That's good... Wait! The last time you said that..." Joe began to say when Rad interrupted.

"Mom! You're not!" Rad said desperately.

"The doctor confirmed it Monday. Apparently I had one egg left and my little stud here found it." Janet said with a playful smile.

Rad looked up at Joe and said, "Eww. I was planning to eat later."

"Congratulations you two. I'm happy for you." Joe said with a smile.

"Thanks Joe." Janet said happily.

"Yeah. It really is great news. I'm happy for you both." Rad said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks Rayne. You don't even know how good it is to hear you say that." Janet said as she hugged her husband tightly.

"Well, we're on subspace so I'd better end it soon. Brad, would you do one thing for me before we get back to earth?" Rad asked hopefully.

"Sure, what is it?" Brad asked cautiously.

"The next time you and Mom are getting all romantic and stuff, just remember... I came outta that thing." Rad said with a smile.

Brad got a confused look, which slowly turned sour.

"Love you Mom. Bye." Rad said quickly and ended the transmission.

* * * * *

"Holy One! It's so good to see you! A middle aged priest said with relief.

"Hello Adelaide. Would you get Chaundra for me?" Tyce asked carefully.

"Are you well Holy One? Do you need assistance?" the priest asked frantically.

"Adelaide! Get Chaundra!" Tyce barked.

The priest froze for a moment, then ran out of the room.

"Is he going to get in trouble for sending that report to the media?" Lehman asked from Tyce's side.

Tyce smiled at Lehman's concern and said, "No. Adelaide was acting true to his nature. I can't help but believe that the forces that guide the events of the universe arranged for him to be the one to accept the transmission. There is more going on here than I originally thought."

An elderly woman walked before the screen and bowed reverently.

"Summoned, I come." She said in a quiet voice.

"Chaundra, favored of Austir, it is time to prepare the way for the new age." Tyce said formally.

"I recognized the signs. All is in readiness." Chaundra said, still looking down.

"Then connect me with Malif. It's time." Tyce said firmly.

* * * * *

"Have you ever seen the *Enterprise*?" Vinny asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I even got to eat dinner there once." Vincent said proudly.

"Did you get to meet Captain Kirk?" Mr. Silva asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I didn't really get to talk to him or anything, but I got to meet him." Vincent said with a smile.

"What about you Dr. Xon? Have you been on the *Enterprise* or met Captain Kirk?" Lawrence asked curiously.

"Unfortunately, I am unable to answer those questions. Crewman Winters and I are from the same dimension, but from different times. I cannot allow him to return to his own time and dimension with any specific knowledge of the future." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Otherwise you risk creating a temporal paradox." Mr. Silva said speculatively.

"Correct." Dr. Xon said and seemed to be impressed.

"So Crewman Winters..." Mr. Silva began to say.

"You can call me Vincent if you want." Vincent said quickly.

"Thank you Vincent. So what's it like being a crewman?" Mr. Silva asked curiously.

"Oh, it's great. I'm in a mentoring program so I can learn to be an officer and I work in deflector control." Vincent said happily.

"Oh wow. Do you get to work the deflector dish?" Vinny asked with excitement.

"Well, not really. The person who runs the main console really does that. But what I do is make sure that all the power systems and command systems and consoles are working right so whoever is running the main has everything they need." Vincent said with a smile.

"That must be so great! I wish I could live in space and go to different planets and meet all kinds of different aliens like you do." Vinny said in wonder.

Vincent took a step forward and looked his alternate self in the eyes as he said, "Even though it sounds like fun, traveling through space and all that stuff isn't half as good as being able to have a picnic with your family."

"What happened to your family Vincent?" Peggy asked with concern.

"My mom and dad died. But before they died we didn't do things like this. Not since I was a little kid." Vincent said as he glanced at the picnic table.

"Why not?" Mr. Silva asked quietly.

"Because we were all scared of my dad's moods. We tried to be quiet and keep away from him so we wouldn't make him mad. I didn't even know I was doing it back then, but we all just knew that we had to be quiet and not disagree with him or do anything that might set him off." Vincent said distantly.

"What a horrible way to live. Is that what would have happened if I stayed with Victor?" Peggy said as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Yeah, probably. I never lived any other way so I didn't know there was anything wrong with it until they died. Now that I'm living on the *Yorktown*, I'm happy just about all the time. Everyone is really nice and they all treat me like any other member of the crew." Vincent said happily.

"I'm very glad to hear that." Mr. Silva said as he put a comforting arm around his wife.

Vincent looked into Vinny's eyes again and said, "So do you see? I get to live on a starship and do all that stuff, but I don't have a mom to tuck me in at night or a dad to take me to the park and play with me. My brother has his own life and I probably get to see him more on a view screen than I do in real life. As good as my life is, you've got all the stuff that really matters."

"Okay. I won't wish it again." Vinny said quietly.

Vincent reached into his pocket and took out one of the couplers that he had been carrying.

"This is a coupler from my ship." Vincent said as he handed it to Vinny.

"Thanks. What does it do?" Vinny asked as he looked at the small metal device.

"It holds things together the way a nut and bolt does." Vincent said with a smile as he watched his other self happily.

"Thanks. It's really awesome." Vinny said with a big smile.

"Dr. Xon? Are you ready?" Vincent asked over his shoulder.

"Proceed." Dr. Xon said as he turned on his tricorder.

"Will you shake my hand?" Vincent asked gently.

"I'd rather have a hug." Vinny said shyly.

Vincent smiled and said, "Me too. Come on."

Vincent pulled Vinny into a firm hug and felt the electrical tingle spread through his body.

"It feels funny... kinda nice." Vinny said as he snuggled tighter into the hug.

Vincent giggled and said, "Yeah. I like it too."

"Three... two... one." Dr. Xon said formally.

Vincent reluctantly let go of his alternate self and smiled when he saw the peaceful look in his eyes.

"I guess we're going to have to go soon. I've got to go back to my own dimension." Vincent said quietly.

"It was a pleasure to meet you Vincent. Now that we know that Star Trek is being lived for real somewhere, we're going to watch it every time it's on. Maybe someday we'll even see you on there." Mr. Silva said with a smile.

Vincent looked up into the man's gentle eyes, then reached into his pocket and pulled out the last coupler he was carrying.

"Here. I'd like you to have this." Vincent said shyly.

"Thank you Vincent." Mr. Silva said with astonishment.

"Crewman Winters, it is nearing time to depart." Dr. Xon said firmly.

"Okay, I'm almost ready." Vincent said, then hurried to Lawrence.

"Do you know anyone named Deacon?" Vincent asked seriously.

"No. Why?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"I just know what happened in my dimension. If you find a guy named Deacon, be nice to him. He's a really good guy." Vincent said, then gave Lawrence a quick hug.

"Crewman Winters, we have fifty-five seconds." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Be right there." Vincent said as he hurried to stand before the alternate version of his mother.

"It was good to meet you Vincent." Peggy said with a peaceful smile.

"It was good to meet you too. I've only got a few seconds, but there's something I didn't get to do before my mom died and I wondered..." Vincent trailed off, not knowing how to ask.

"I understand. Go ahead." Peggy said gently.

"I love you mommy." Vincent said as he ran to her and gave her a tight hug.

"I love you too baby." Peggy said in a whisper as tears filled her eyes.

"Five... Four..." Dr. Xon said without emotion.

Vincent gave Peggy a quick kiss on the cheek, then ran to Dr. Xon's side.

"Bye!" Vincent said as he took Dr. Xon's hand.

As everyone said 'Goodbye' in unison, the world faded away from Vincent's sight.

* * * * *

"Do you think your brother is going to be alright there with your father?" Darin asked with concern.

"Yeah. My dad is great. He'll make sure that Tan gets put on the right track." Rad said as he stood.

"From the few times that I've talked to your father, I get the feeling that he's a very secure and self assured person." Joe said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I guess so. He always seems to be... on target. Like he knows where he's going and exactly what he has to do to get there. I stayed with him for almost a year before I entered the academy. He taught me a lot." Rad finished with a peaceful smile.

"I think I'd enjoy getting to know him." Darin said with a smile at Rad.

"That's good, because we're going to be staying with him while we're on shore leave." Rad said with a grin.

Darin noticed that Joe was looking around and quickly asked, "Joe, would you like to have dinner with us?"

"That's alright. I know you two don't get to spend a lot of time together." Joe said gently.

"C'mon Joe. It's not like we're inviting you to join us for sex. Just a conversation over meatloaf." Rad said with a roll of his eyes.

Joe smiled at the comment, then noticed a blush rising up Darin's face.

"And besides, this is one of the things we enjoy doing as a couple. We like to spend time with our friends." Rad said in an urging tone.

"Yeah, you're important in both our lives, so we want to spend time with you." Darin said seriously.

"Thanks guys. As long as you're sure I won't be intruding, I'd love to have dinner with you." Joe said warmly.

"Good. Come on, we'd better get him out of here before he can find another excuse." Rad said with a teasing smile.

Joe chuckled, then looked across the room at Connie and said, "Darin and I have our communicators if you need anything."

"Got it boss. Enjoy your dinner." Connie said with a quick smile, then turned his full attention back to the console.

After one last look around the room to see that everything was normal, Joe walked to follow Rad and Darin.

* * * * *

"Holy One, it's good to see that you are well." Malif said in a formal voice.

"Thank you. And rest assured that you *are* speaking to the Holy One, not the Chameloid that was sent to take my place." Tyce said firmly.

"Pity. I liked that plan. It would have made everything work out much more smoothly." Malif said without concern.

"Let's get down to business. I know that you sent the ships to hunt me down and kill me. But considering the media event that apparently just happened, perhaps there is a way we can set our dispute aside long enough to concentrate on what to do for the benefit of our people." Tyce said frankly.

Malif chuckled and said, "Media event? Don't worry about that. My soldiers have taken control of the media. The people will only know what I choose to tell them."

"The people already know that you sent ships to attack me. And when I return, I'm going to call for free elections. How can you possibly believe that events are working in your favor?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Because the people are mindless drones. Since I have control of the media, I can tell them what to believe. And as far as you returning, even with a Federation escort, you will never survive the trip back to Okuda Prime." Malif said with a cold smile.

Tyce looked at him cautiously, then quietly asked, "What have you done?"

"I've done what the Holy One's have been afraid to do. I've begun to form alliances outside the Okudai system. And as a symbol of our alliance, my new friends are going to send an armada of warships to destroy you." Malif said with a malicious grin.

Tyce thought for a moment, then looked at Malif with sudden realization.

"You can't mean that you've formed an alliance with the Gorn?" Tyce asked with dread.

"As a matter of fact, I have." Malif said proudly.

"You ignorant fool..." Tyce said as he shook his head.

"The Gorn will expand their empire to include us. We will become part of a force that can rival the Federation!" Malif said in triumph.

"Malif, you've allied yourself with devils. The Gorn won't include us in their empire, they will enslave us. All mammals are food to them, our people will become their cattle." Tyce said in panic.

"I have been assured that only a small portion of the population will be reserved as consumables and breeding stock... The outer colonies most likely. But the government is going to be given a fleet of Gorn warships to command so we can move out of this system and finally begin to expand our influence." Malif said happily.

"President! Stop!" A man said as he ran into the room.

"I'm on a private call. What is it?" Malif asked with irritation.

"It's not private. It's being transmitted all over the system." the man said breathlessly.

Malif looked at his screen and saw Tyce smiling back at him.

"How could you, I have control of the media centers..." Malif asked in shock.

"Every temple has it's own transmitter, we've just been waiting for this day." Tyce said seriously.

"Jam him, Gartain! Jam the signal!" Malif called in a scream.

"Since Dingovan is one of the outer colonies, I think that I will not." Gartain said in a growl, then turned away from the view screen.

"Traiel, stop him!" Malif said in a snarl.

"No. I have sealed my own fate, but to do this would condemn my son. That I will not do." Traiel said, then also turned away.

Tyce stood before the monitor and firmly said, "My people, you have seen and heard the truth for yourself. Just as with the cycles of nature, a season of cold and suffering precedes the dawn of a new age of growth and rebirth. I declare before you all, the new age has begun. It is time to rid ourselves of the greed and corruption that have plagued our society and brought despair to our people."

"Holy one!" Oluf said in shock.

"Silence!" Tyce barked, then continued to the view screen, "Soldiers of the old government, you will not be held to account for standing against your own people in this uncertain time, but now is the time for you to make your final choice. Will you be agents for the corruption and greed that have caused the suffering of your friends and families? Will you work to enslave

your own people so they can become the cattle of another race? Choose now."

"Holy one, do you know what you're saying?" Thaelan asked in shock.

Tyce nodded and continued, "People of Okuda! Hear me! RISE UP AND TAKE BACK OUR WORLD!"

Chapter 27

Vincent was only vaguely aware of landing on the sandy ground before the Guardian of Forever.

"Crewman Winters?" Dr. Xon asked cautiously.

Vincent gave no response as he stood staring into the Guardian's vortex while tears glided down his cheeks.

"Vincent?" Dr. Xon asked in a softer voice.

Vincent glanced at Dr. Xon with question as the tears continued to fall.

"I wish to offer my apologies for not anticipating the presence of your mother. Please understand that I did not do so intentionally." Dr. Xon said with concern.

"I know, it's okay. I just... when I went to my parents funeral the caskets were closed. I guess ever since then I felt like I didn't really get to say goodbye."

"So your tears are to express joy?" Dr. Xon asked uncertainly.

"Maybe some of my tears are happy. And I know some of them are sad, but I think some are just relieved to finally be able to say goodbye." Vincent said as he wiped his eyes.

"I understand. I am pleased that the experience of realigning your quantum signature had the side effect of providing closure to this painful emotional trauma."

Vincent considered the words for a moment, then said, "Yeah. That's exactly what happened. Seeing my mom in a place where she's happy kinda made some of the stuff that was hurting inside me feel better."

Dr. Xon walked to the rack of equipment and picked up his scanning device, then quirked one eyebrow at Vincent with question.

Vincent nodded that he was ready and waited to be scanned.

* * * * *

"Captain, there is a message for the Holy One from the *Nezratia*." Debbie's voice said seriously.

"*Nezratia*?" Tyce asked curiously as he looked around.

"That is my ship." Traiel said apprehensively.

"Please put it through." Tyce said as he turned his attention to the view screen.

"Holy One, I am Lomarr, son of Makiel. The crew of the *Nezratia* have heard your call to arms and taken the command staff and others loyal to Traiel into custody. Please forgive us Holy One, we were following our orders and did not know that you were aboard the *Dorsa* when we attacked. We thought we were defending our people from dissidents." Lomarr finished in a worried voice.

"Where is Tyber?" Traiel asked suddenly.

Lomarr looked at Traiel with disgust and said, "With the other traitors!"

"He wasn't any part of the plan. Please don't hurt him." Traiel said desperately.

Tyce looked at Traiel carefully for a moment, then said to the screen, "Lomarr, will you see that Traiel's son is transported to this ship?"

"Holy One?" Lomarr asked cautiously.

"Even though Traiel has committed heinous acts and broken the most sacred laws of our people, his son may be an innocent in all of this. Please have him transported so I may judge the proper course of action in regard to him." Tyce said firmly.

"Yes Holy One, right away." Lomarr said quickly and ended the transmission.

"Captain Byrne, we've just received a text message from the *Mangeon* saying that their crew is in mutiny." Debbie said quickly over the comm.

"I must return to my ship." Captain Treas said in panic.

"Please Captain, allow me to calm them first. Captain Byrne, may I speak to them?" Tyce asked with concern.

Captain Treas stopped and waited to see what was going to happen.

"Yes. Of course." Captain Byrne said, then pressed the comm button and said, "Please open a channel to the *Mangeon*."

"Yes sir, and there is an urgent call from the Okuda Central Ministry for the Holy One." Debbie said quickly.

Captain Byrne looked at Tyce with question.

"Please tell the ministry that I'll be with them in just a moment." Tyce said in a louder voice for Debbie to hear him over the comm.

"Yes Holy One." Debbie said quickly, then the screen changed to show a darkened room.

"Captain Treas, the crew are trying to take the ship. Holcoth is holding engineering and I still have control of the bridge. They've taken Mashal and Teik." The woman on the screen said in a desperate voice.

"If you can make a ship-wide announcement, perhaps we can resolve this matter." Tyce said calmly.

"Holy One?" The woman said as her eyes went wide.

"Please Tomie, patch us through to the entire ship so we can end this." Captain Treas said tenderly.

The woman, Tomie, gave Captain Treas a brief smile, then pressed some controls on the console before her.

"Attention all hands. The Holy One wants to make an announcement." Tomie said firmly, then glanced up hopefully.

"Crew of the *Mangeon*, this is 'The Holy One'." Tyce said in a booming voice.

"Captain Treas and I have discussed our concerns and found understanding between us. There is no need for you to take control of the ship. Captain Treas and I will be working toward a common goal, so if you will resume your duties, we will begin to forge the future together." Tyce said firmly, then looked at Captain Treas with question.

"Please release your prisoners and take your stations. None of you will be held to account for answering the call of the Holy One. Stand with me so we can provide him safe passage back to our home." Captain Treas said formally.

There was a moment of silence, then Tomie looked up with surprise at the screen.

"The fighting has stopped." She said in wonder.

"I will be transporting over right away. Get repair teams working on the most significant damage so we can be underway when we are needed." Captain Treas said seriously.

"Yes Captain." Tomie said with a serene smile.

Tyce looked at Captain Byrne and said, "Can you put me through to the ministry now?"

The Captain nodded and pressed a button on the comm panel to switch to another screen.

"Holy One, this is minister Falek of the Interior. Malif and his staff have been taken into custody and will be ready to stand trial when you arrive." The middle age man said with a look of worry in his eyes.

"Falek, stand down all military actions against our own people and prepare our defenses for a possible invasion. We need every ship that is space worthy launched and prepared to defend the Okudai system." Tyce said firmly.

The minister paled at the words and seemed uncertain of what to do.

"Malif has opened the door to some powerful enemies. His being deposed will not stop their acceptance of his invitation. Defend our people!" Tyce finished as he glared at the minister.

"Yes Holy One. Right away!" The minister said quickly.

"Holy One, if there is a need, perhaps I could petition the Federation to aid in your defense." Captain Byrne said cautiously.

Tyce thought for a moment, then shook his head and said, "There is one thing I can do to try to prevent this before we must call on outside help."

Everyone looked at Tyce with uncertainty, until Lehman said, "You're going to talk to them, aren't you? The Gorn?"

Tyce looked at Lehman with surprise at his observation, then hesitantly nodded.

* * * * *

"So what does it say? Is my quantum thingy all better?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"We have achieved a more precise correlation than I had anticipated. When the time shift occurs, you should have no difficulty." Dr. Xon said with accomplishment.

Vincent watched Dr. Xon's expression carefully.

"It is time for you to return to your own time and place in the universe Crewman Winters." Dr. Xon said as the emotion that had been showing fell away.

"Yeah. Um, can I see that tricorder for a second before I go?" Vincent asked and held out his hand.

Dr. Xon was surprised by the request, and hesitantly handed his tricorder to Vincent.

After a moment of looking over the main display screen, Vincent handed it back to him.

"What information were you seeking?" Dr. Xon asked curiously.

"It doesn't matter. What are you going to do after I leave? I mean, everything's fixed now, right?" Vincent asked curiously.

Dr. Xon thought about the question for a moment, then said, "When you return with your altered quantum signature, the universe should adjust back to it's original timeline. Once all is restored, I will continue my study of the Guardian of Forever. This event has shown the necessity of knowing how to restore time when damage has occurred to the past."

Vincent nodded, then looked at the gateway apprehensively.

Dr. Xon turned on his tricorder and began to make the necessary adjustments as he said, "Guardian of Forever, I seek your aid to restore the past."

"Such is my function. Such is my purpose. Ask the question that I may repair the fractured course of time." The Guardian said in a booming voice.

"Guardian of Forever, will you show me these temporal/spatial coordinates?" Dr. Xon asked seriously as he transmitted the coordinates to the Guardian.

"Look into the past that you may restore the future." The Guardian said as the portal began to show scenes in the mist.

"Prepare to step through Crewman Winters." Dr. Xon said as he watched the time flow carefully.

"Thank you Dr. Xon. I hope everything and everyone you remember comes back to you." Vincent said as he took his place before the portal.

"Go!" Dr. Xon said as the exact moment that he was looking for appeared in the mist.

Vincent stepped into the mist and seemed to be moving in slow motion as he traveled fifty years back through time.

* * * * *

Tyce turned when the doors opened and saw a familiar face.

The ten year old boy's black mop of hair was disheveled. He had a bruise on his cheek and a terrified look in his light brown eyes.

"Welcome Tyber, there is no need to be afraid." Tyce said gently.

Tyber saw his father and ran to pull him into a hug.

"There is something I must do to try to prevent a war, but once that is done I will speak with you." Tyce said gently, then walked to stand beside Captain Byrne.

"I must enter a specific subspace frequency to contact someone. Can you show me how?" Tyce asked Captain Byrne quietly.

"Of course Holy One. I will set the controls, then you can enter the frequency." Captain Byrne said in an equally quiet voice.

After a moment to set the comm unit to accept direct input of a frequency, Captain Byrne stood aside.

Tyce quickly keyed in a numerical sequence, then pressed the key to initiate the transmission.

There was a moment of silence, then a large reptile with mottled green/gray skin and solid black eyes filled the screen.

Tyce smiled and said, "J'Laad."

"J'Layiah?" The reptile asked uncertainly.

Everyone in the room looked at the screen in a mix of fear and awe.

"Yes Holy One, it's me." Tyce said firmly.

"You appear to have shed your skin again." J'Laad said with a note of amusement.

Tyce smiled at the statement and said, "Yes, if you want to look at it that way."

"It is good to see that you are well." J'Laad said more formally.

"Are you aware of the Gorn fleet approaching our space?" Tyce asked bluntly.

"I should say so! I travel with them." J'Laad said with amusement.

"What of our agreement?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"I was told that you had been dispatched. I attempted to contact you to verify this information, but received no reply. If you were dead, our agreement would have died with you." J'Laad said frankly.

"There was a plan to remove me from service. They attempted to dispatch me just after I had... shed my skin, so I was occupied with other matters and didn't see it coming. But thanks to the actions of some good and caring people, I'm happy to say that I survive." Tyce said and gave a fond glance at Captain Byrne.

"To attack when one is shedding is most dishonorable. It is good to see that you are well." J'Laad said with a serious nod.

"Then will you ask your fleet to return to your own space?" Tyce asked firmly.

"If you like, but it seems like such a waste since we have already made half the journey. Perhaps we could escort you back to your home world? It would also serve to protect you from any further plans to remove you from service." J'Laad said with a mischievous twinkle in his black, reptilian eyes.

Tyce thought for a moment, then said, "Perhaps. It has been generations since my people have seen the glory and majesty of the Gorn. Malif's willingness to form an alliance has proven that my people need to be reminded of just what lay beyond our borders."

J'Laad nodded with a mischievous smile.

"How far are you from my location?" Tyce asked in thought.

"At our current speed, we will join you in twelve hours. But we can be there in five if there is a need." J'Laad said seriously.

"No. Some of our ships have sustained damage and we could use the time for repairs. I will be expecting you to arrive in twelve hours." Tyce said in deep thought.

"Our sensors indicate that you are not on an Okudai ship. Is this correct?" J'Laad asked seriously.

"Yes. A Federation vessel came to my aid when my ship was attacked." Tyce said carefully.

"I trust that you will instruct the Federation creatures in the proper protocols before we arrive." J'Laad said in a leading tone.

"Yes Holy One. They have earned my trust, I will see that they behave properly." Tyce said formally.

"I look forward to our reunion Holy One. It has been far too long." J'Laad said with a peaceful smile.

"I agree. It will be good to see you again." Tyce said gently.

"Power and Might." J'Laad said firmly.

"Duty and Honor." Tyce said in response.

J'Laad nodded, then disconnected the transmission.

* * * * *

As Dr. Xon watched Vincent appear back in his own time, his attention was drawn away by the beeping communicator on his belt.

"Dr. Xon, you have a subspace transmission." A female voice said professionally.

"Thank you Dr. Lewis. Can you put it through to my communicator? I am nowhere near a terminal at the moment."

"He said you wouldn't be. I'm patching it through." Dr. Lewis said with a delighted chuckle in her voice.

"This is Dr. Xon."

"I'll never get used to you calling yourself that. You're just like your mother." A man's voice said with amusement.

"Dad? Is that you?" Dr. Xon asked with excitement.

"Who else would it be? I've been waiting for this exact day and time for fifty years so I could thank you for everything you did to help me, not just the quantum signature, but everything." The man said seriously.

"It was logical to do so." Dr. Xon said in his most reasonable voice.

"Joseph Xon Winters! You don't need to use your Vulcan routine with me. I know you better than that."

"Sorry Dad. I guess I fell into the habit over the past few hours. I'm so glad to hear your voice. I thought I'd lost you." Xon said with relief.

"That's better. Now you need to get your ass off that research planet and find yourself a woman and give me some grandkids!" Vincent said firmly.

"What?" Xon asked with confusion.

"I haven't said a word about you getting lost in your work because I knew that you had to so you could save the universe someday. Well you've done it! It's saved! Now go find yourself a nice woman... or man. Just find someone and make a happy life for yourself." Vincent said firmly.

"But my work..." Xon began to say.

"Your work is on a planet that exists outside the flow of time. I'm pretty sure it will still be there after you've taken some time for yourself. I bet you've got about thirty years of data that you could be compiling back here with your family and writing a bajillion papers that will make the scientific community go cross eyed. Joey, whether I'm nine or fifty-nine, I'm still your father and I love you. Come home." Vincent said seriously.

Xon wiped the tears out of his eyes and said, "You're right dad. Of course you always are. It's going to take me a few days to collect everything, but you can expect me to be home sometime next week."

"That's my boy." Vincent said happily.

"I love you dad, tell mom I love her too. Winters out." Xon said as tears streaked down his cheeks.

"She already knows, but I'll tell her. We love you too Joey, Winters out."

* * * * *

"I don't understand. You and the Gorn Holy One are friends?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Tyce smiled at Lehman and said, "Yes. Many races have Holy Ones who help to guide them. As I recall, the Chameloid Holy One is named Myscendria."

Lehman's eyes went wide at the name and he said, "The Reverend Mother Myscendria is a Holy One like you?"

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes. We have much to do. Come over here and help me to sort out what's going to happen to Tyber."

Lehman walked with Tyce to find Tyber still hugging his father desperately.

"Holy One, I never imagined that things could turn out this way. Please help me to provide a future for my son." Traiel said in a pained voice.

"Treifa, could you help me?" Tyce asked in thought.

Treifa hurried to Tyce's side and waited expectantly.

"Would you check on the status of the ships and see who is in control of them and when they will be prepared for the journey back to Okuda?" Tyce asked seriously.

"Yes Holy One." Treifa said quickly and hurried away.

"Gartain, come over here. We need to sort some things out." Tyce said seriously.

Captain Gartain looked at Tyce with indecision for a moment, but finally approached.

"Traiel and Gartain, you've sealed your fates. If you had just attacked me, it might be possible to forgive what you have done. But your mutilation of Lehman is beyond forgiveness. When you return to Okuda you will almost certainly be exiled for your crimes." Tyce said firmly.

"Holy One?" Lehman said quietly.

Tyce looked at him with question.

"You're safe and I'm still alive. What was done is finished. If it will make any difference, I will forgive them." Lehman said quietly.

Tyce smiled at the statement and pulled Lehman into a brief, one-armed hug.

"You are a good and honorable person Lehman. Your forgiveness does make a difference." Tyce said gently.

"So can you fix it so they won't be exiled?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"No. I don't think I can. You need to understand that it wasn't an error in judgment or a momentary lapse in reason that caused all this. It was a calculated plan born of greed. People like Traiel, Gartain and their allies have no place in our society. If they were allowed to remain among us, their true natures would eventually surface again to cause even more problems." Tyce said to Lehman, then turned to Traiel and Gartain and considered for a moment.

"If you return to Okuda and face trial, I believe that the outcome will almost certainly be exile on the third moon of Ikera." Tyce said seriously.

Traiel and Gartain both nodded their agreement.

"Lehman, since you were the one most hurt by them, what would you think if we gave them and their allies a ship and let them go on their way?" Tyce asked in a considering voice.

Lehman looked at Traiel and Gartain for a moment, then back at Tyce and nodded.

"Good. I believe that this will be the best thing for everyone involved. The only thing left to decide is what is to be done with Tyber." Tyce said seriously.

"I want him to go with me." Traiel said quickly.

"If that is his choice, then it will be so. But please consider carefully. If Tyber goes with you, he will be an exile from his own people. He will grow up knowing that he doesn't belong to any race or society. What he accomplishes in his life won't contribute to his community and when he dies, he probably won't be remembered." Tyce said frankly.

Traiel considered the words carefully, then said, "His mother died in childbirth. We don't have any close relatives. Who could take him? What else can I do?"

"If he chooses to, he could come with me." Tyce said seriously.

Tyber looked at Tyce with fear and uncertainty.

"Tyber would become a member of my household." Tyce said frankly.

"Like your servant?" Traiel asked cautiously.

"Like my brother." Tyce said seriously.

"I want to go with you." Tyber said to his father as he clutched onto him more tightly.

"I know. But the Holy One is right. If you came with me, chances are that you would have a short and unhappy future." Traiel said as he held his son tightly.

"I don't care. I don't want to leave you." Tyber said desperately.

"I know. But the fact of the matter is, if you came with me, it would hurt me every single day to know that you're suffering for the choices that I made. If you go with the Holy One, I can leave and know that you are in a safe place with people who will take good care of you." Traiel said as he pulled back to look in his son's eyes.

"Do you really want to leave me?" Tyber asked as his tears began to fall.

"No son. I want to hold you and keep you with me forever. But I've given up my right to have the things I want. The Holy One is being kind enough to give us a choice about what kind of opportunity you're going to have for

your future." Traiel said, trying to make his son see the importance of the choice before him.

"I... I'll go with the Holy One if that's what you really want." Tyber said in a shaky voice.

"Yes. That's what I really want. And there's one more thing." Traiel said as he looked deeply into his son's eyes.

Tyber looked at his father with question.

"I have brought shame to our family by being greedy and selfish. All I'm going to ask of you is to have lots of friends and become strong and smart. Live a good life and become a better man than I am. If you listen to the Holy One, I'm sure he'll tell you how to do that." Traiel said frankly.

"Okay. I will. I'll make you proud of me. I promise." Tyber said as tears filled his eyes again.

"Holy One. All our ships are at your command. All but the *Mangeon* have prisoners who have been identified as allies of Traiel or Gartain. We should be ready to be underway within eight hours." Treifa said seriously.

"Good. Get with the crew of the *Timmeraeon* and prepare their ship for an extended voyage. When it's ready, we will transport Captains Gartain and Traiel and all their allies onto that ship and allow them to go on their way." Tyce said seriously.

"Holy One?" Treifa asked in surprise.

"If they returned to Okuda, the best that they could hope for would be exile on a desolate moon at the edge of our system. It would be a closed off future without hope. At least this way, there is the possibility that they might find a new world and build a decent future for themselves. When they leave, my sincere hopes and best wishes will go with them." Tyce said honestly.

"I'll see to it." Treifa said with a peaceful smile.

"Thank you Holy One. It's better than we deserve." Traiel said quietly.

Captain Gartain looked at Traiel uncertainly.

"Tyber, please go with the Holy One now." Traiel said softly.

"I don't want to let you go. Please let me stay with you." Tyber said in a tearful voice.

"I'll see you again before I leave. Right now I have quite a few things to arrange if we're to have any hope of survival." Traiel said gently.

"You promise that I'll get to see you again before you go?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"I promise. I'll be back just as soon as I can." Traiel said seriously.

"Okay." Tyber said reluctantly as he let go of his father.

"I'll take good care of him." Tyce said quietly.

"Thank you Holy One. I never doubted it." Traiel said with a pained smile, then turned to Gartain and said, "Come on, we have a lot to do and very little time."

* * * * *

Vincent looked around the conference room for a moment, then slowly walked to the comm panel by the view screen.

He pressed the main comm button, then waited.

"Communications." The voice answered professionally.

"Can you connect me with Admiral Morrow at Starfleet Command on a secure channel?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Yes. I'll have him for you in just a moment." The communications worker said efficiently.

Vincent took a deep breath to brace himself, then watched as the Starfleet Logo filled the screen.

"Crewman Winters, can I assume that all went as planned?" Admiral Morrow asked cautiously.

"Yes sir. Dr. Xon believes that he has corrected my quantum signature and that his original timeline should be restored." Vincent said seriously.

"Good. Can I assume that you understand the seriousness of this matter and why it needs to remain classified?" Admiral Morrow asked as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Yes sir. I understand. I won't say where I went on subspace, but it's still classified fifty years from now." Vincent said seriously.

"Yes. You do understand. There is to be no report made of this event in official or personal logs. As far as history will ever know, this event did not occur." Admiral Morrow said, still holding Vincent's gaze.

"Yes sir." Vincent said professionally.

"Very well. As I understand the situation with your doppelgänger, they are having quite an interesting time in the officer's mess hall. Perhaps you should find some unobtrusive place to spend some time until their situation settles down and you can reveal your presence." Admiral Morrow said carefully.

"Yes sir. There's something that I think I need to do and this would be a good time to do it." Vincent said professionally.

"I'm glad that everything turned out well. Have a good evening Crewman Winters. Starfleet out." Admiral Morrow said, then closed the channel.

Vincent stared at the blank view screen for a moment, then looked at the ship's time.

Finally he came to a decision and started keying in instructions on the comm panel before him.

He knew it would have been faster to call communications and let them route the call for him. But Vincent felt that this was something that he needed to do by himself.

Finally he was connected with TerraMain's central communications complex and began to search the terminal directories, not knowing if the one he wanted even existed.

Vincent narrowed his search further and more precisely until he finally found what he was looking for.

After a deep breath to brace himself, Vincent pressed the final button to make the connection.

There was a long moment of silence, and Vincent began to wonder if maybe it was too late to be calling.

Finally the screen came to life and a hesitant voice said, "Hello? This is Mr. Silva."

* * * * *

"Um... Tyce? I'm starting to feel really shaky. I think something is wrong with me." Lehman said quietly.

"Audge can take you to sickbay." Tyce said immediately.

"No. He needs to stay here with you to protect you." Lehman said forcefully.

Tyce smiled at Lehman's protectiveness, then said, "Captain Byrne, is there someone who can accompany Lehman to the Sickbay? He isn't feeling well and I'm afraid he might not make it on his own."

The captain nodded, then summoned one of the waiters who had been standing by the door in case anyone needed anything.

"Please accompany this young man to the Sickbay." Captain Byrne said professionally.

"Yes sir." the waiter said immediately.

"Thank you sir." Lehman said in a quiet voice and followed the waiter out of the room.

"Dr. Perry will take good care of him." Captain Byrne said to Tyce with assurance.

"Thank you Captain. Even though I've only known him for a short time, I consider Lehman to be a trusted friend." Tyce said seriously.

The view screen came alive to show Falek looking extremely serious.

"What can I do for you Minister Falek?" Tyce asked calmly.

"Holy One, the counsel of governors has voted to allow me to assume the duties of president until an election can be scheduled. I have released control of the media centers, but thought that if you could make the announcement, it would have more meaning to the people than anything that I could say." Falek said seriously.

"Have you launched our military ships?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"Yes Holy One. Every space worthy ship that has any kind of weapons compliment has been launched. Each colony's force has been called to defend it's own world and the primary fleet is en route to take position at our border." Falek said firmly.

"Good. Make sure that all the ships are tied into one central communications frequency. I want to be able to address them all when I arrive." Tyce said carefully.

"I'll see that it's done." Falek said immediately.

"Good. If you'll activate the link to the media centers, I'll make the announcement." Tyce said calmly.

"Thank you Holy One." Falek said with relief, then keyed in the instruction on his console.

"People of Okuda. Malif and his co-conspirators have been taken into custody to await trial. The counsel of governors has elected Minister Falek to govern in his stead until free elections can be arranged to elect a new president. If Minister Falek would agree to it, I would like for Jessub, from the Mycien colony to be put in charge of the election preparations so we will be assured of an accurate vote. He has my complete trust." Tyce said carefully.

Falek looked surprised for a moment, then said, "Yes Holy One, I will see to it immediately."

Tyce smiled at his flustered state, then became serious again as he said, "People of Okuda, some evil and self-serving individuals orchestrated a plan to kill me so they could expand their influence outside our system and reap the benefits of associating with other species in the universe. Although their plan was born of greed and the allies they chose would have sought to enslave us, their underlying desire to grow beyond our borders is shared by many and is not necessarily bad."

Falek looked on with wide eyes of wonder, not having any idea of what the Holy One was going to say next.

"Not all of my attackers were evil. Some were people of good will who sought to improve all of your lives and believed the lies that they were told by Malif. One of these people is named Treifa. I judge him to be sincere in his desire to provide a better future for all of you and for our children. He has sworn his loyalty to me, but has proven through his actions that he will do whatever is necessary to improve the lives of you, his people. Therefore, I am giving my endorsement of Treifa for the office of president in the upcoming election." Tyce said, then motioned for Treifa to join him before the terminal.

"Thank you Holy One." Treifa said reverently.

"Further, I am endorsing Captain Treas of the *Mangeon* for candidacy for the office of Vice President. She has demonstrated not only her desire to improve the lives of our people, but her willingness to take action to make that desire a reality." Tyce said forcefully, then paused to allow everyone to consider his words.

"Change is frightening. And there will be many changes in the coming days. But if you all will listen to your hearts and do what is right, we can sweep the corruption out of our government and return our civilization to working order. When we have achieved that goal, we will begin to make plans to form alliances outside our system. To my left is Captain Byrne of the Federation starship *Yorktown*. When Malif's assassins were attacking me, Captain Byrne came to my aid and protected me. When the time comes that we are ready to form our first alliance, I will call upon the Federation to send the *Yorktown* to Okuda so we can begin negotiations." Tyce finished with a smile at Captain Byrne.

"Arm yourselves with knowledge. Seek truth before you make judgments. Take action when it is right to do so. And vote with your heart for the benefit of all our people. Thank you for your attention." Tyce said, then looked at Falek with question.

Falek blinked a few times, then stammered as he said, "Thank... thank you Holy One. I will do my best to serve our people well until the elections are held."

Tyce smiled at Minister Falek and nodded.

"People of Okuda, you have heard the words of the Holy One. Let us prepare ourselves, the time of change has come." Minister Falek said more assuredly.

Tyce reached over to the comm panel and turned off the screen.

"That was quite impressive Holy One." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Thank you Captain. I didn't think you would mind if I introduced you to my people." Tyce said with a mischievous smile.

"Not at all. I'm honored." Captain Byrne said honestly.

"Good. Now we have several things that need to be done in the next twelve hours. Treifa?" Tyce said as he looked around.

"Right here." Treifa said as he hurried away from the other captains.

"Will the *Dorsa* be ready to make the trip to Okuda in twelve hours?" Tyce asked seriously.

"Captain Marr assures me that it will be ready." Treifa said seriously.

"How about the *Timmeraeon*, will they have everything they need?" Tyce asked in thought.

"Supplies are going to be an issue. If Captain Byrne will help us identify some nearby worlds where they can collect resources, then we should be able to get them on their way before the Gorn ships arrive." Treifa said firmly.

"I'll have Commander M'Butu help you with that." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Thank you." Treifa said professionally.

"Good. And Captain Byrne, when the Gorn ships arrive it is very important that you do not scan them or attempt to make any contact with them. As long as you remain silent and just observe, they will not make any move against you." Tyce said firmly.

"Another Federation ship, the *Enterprise*, encountered the Gorn at Cestus III, that encounter did not go well." Captain Byrne said with concern.

"I heard something about that. You attempted to colonize inside their area of space." Tyce said frankly.

"We didn't know it was their space. We had never encountered their species before that meeting." Captain Byrne said cautiously.

"Oh, then I think it would be a good idea for us to provide you a chart to show you their boundaries so you can avoid another such misunderstanding." Tyce said consideringly.

"Yes. That sounds like a very good idea." Captain Byrne said frankly.

Tyce looked around, then noticed Tyber at his side looking lost and unsure of what to do.

"Tyber, would you go ask Captain Marr to come here?" Tyce asked gently.

"Yes Holy One." Tyber said in a whisper.

"I think it's going to take some time for him to be comfortable around you." Captain Byrne said with concern as he watched Tyber walk away.

"I agree. But it will be time well spent. I see great potential within him." Tyce said as he also watched Tyber.

* * * * *

"Hi Principal Silva, this is Vincent Winters." Vincent said shyly.

"Vincent? It's wonderful to hear from you. I heard about what happened to your family. Then you were withdrawn from school without explanation. I

didn't know where you went. How are you doing?" Principal Silva asked with concern.

"I'm fine. I just wanted to call to let you know that I'm okay. I mean, even though I was kind of a lot of trouble for you while I was there... I guess I always knew that you cared and stuff. So I wanted to let you know that everything turned out okay." Vincent said shyly.

Principal Silva smiled at the rambling statement, then quietly said, "I'm very glad to hear that. Your teacher and a few of your classmates have asked what happened to you."

"Really?" Vincent asked with surprise.

Principal Silva smiled and said, "Yes, really. Would you like me to pass a message on to them?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I don't know if anyone noticed, but I always liked Starfleet stuff."

Principal Silva chuckled as he said, "I think the UFP and Starfleet crests you drew on every notebook you ever owned might have tipped them off."

Vincent smiled at the fact that Principal Silva had noticed, then continued, "Just tell them that after my worst nightmare happened, my favorite dream came true."

"Would you care to go into more detail about that?" Principal Silva asked cautiously.

"If anyone wants to hear more, they can write to me and ask me. Just tell them to send the message to Petty Officer Vincent Winters on the USS *Yorktown*." Vincent finished with a proud smile, then backed away from the terminal a little to show off his crewman's uniform.

"Petty Officer?" Principal Silva asked in wonder.

Vincent smiled and nodded.

"Congratulations. Now I understand what you mean about your dream coming true." Principal Silva finally said.

"Yeah. And I'm taking classes over subspace at the Vulcan Academy of Science." Vincent added with pride.

"It appears that you've done very well for yourself Vincent... or should I call you Petty Officer Winters?" Principal Silva asked seriously.

"You can still call me Vincent. Only Starfleet people call me by my title." Vincent said gently.

"Okay Vincent. I'm very proud of everything you've accomplished. I had always hoped that you would get into Starfleet one day so you would have a productive direction for all your potential." Principal Silva said gently.

"Really?" Vincent asked with surprise.

Principal Silva chuckled and said, "Didn't you ever notice that you were put in advanced math and science classes even though your grades weren't quite high enough to qualify you?"

"Um. I kinda thought you were just being mean. Like, saying that I wasn't working hard enough or something." Vincent said reluctantly.

"I was trying to give you the tools that you would need later. Whether you wanted them or not." Principal Silva said while trying to restrain a smile.

"Well, you could'a told me. I would have worked a lot harder if you let me know that I was getting harder work so I could get into Starfleet." Vincent said indignantly.

"The moment I tried to push you in any direction, you would automatically turn the other way... Just to be difficult. So I decided to just put you in the classes and hope for the best." Principal Silva said frankly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Thanks."

"I just need to know one thing." Principal Silva said seriously.

"What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Are you happy?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I am. I always thought I'd like being in Starfleet, but now that I'm here, it's better than I ever imagined."

"Good. Then I'm happy for you. Think about stopping by and saying 'hi' to your old class next time you're on Earth." Principal Silva said warmly.

"Yeah. I'll do that. And if you wanted to write to me, it'd um... be okay." Vincent finished shyly.

"Yes. I think I would like to have a pen pal who travels among the stars." Principal Silva said peacefully.

"I've got to go. It's not good to tie up the subspace channels too long." Vincent said quietly.

"I understand. Be expecting a message from me sometime soon."

"I will. Goodbye Principal Silva." Vincent said with a smile.

"Goodbye Vincent." Principal Silva replied, then ended the transmission.

Vincent thought about the things that he needed to do, then slowly walked to the turbo lift.

When he entered, he glanced at the ceiling and said, "Counselor's office."

* * * * *

"Do you need me to stay?" The waiter asked Lehman gently.

"No, thank you. I'll be fine." Lehman said outside the Sickbay door.

"I'm Crewman Fields, just call me if you need anything." the young man said with concern.

"I will. Thank you." Lehman said with a smile, then walked to the door.

"Hello Vincent... you look worried. Is something wrong?" Dr. Perry asked with concern as she worked on one of the *Dorsa*'s crew members.

"Um, I'm not Vincent. It's kind of a long story. But when you have a minute, could you scan me. I'm not feeling right." Lehman asked as a wave of dizziness washed over him.

"Go over there and sit down. T'Lani should be right back. I'll get her to scan you." Dr. Perry said as she continued her delicate work.

Lehman slowly walked over and took a seat by the door to the back hallway.

The door to the hallway opened and T'Lani walked in carrying a medical tricorder.

"Hus... Who are you and where is my husband?" T'Lani asked firmly as she looked Lehman in the eyes.

"Um... I'm Lehman and Vincent is doing something for Admiral Morrow right now. I don't know exactly where he is." Lehman said cautiously.

"Why do you look like my husband." T'Lani asked seriously.

"I'm a shape shifter... can you please scan me? I'm not feeling well and it's getting worse." Lehman said as he suddenly felt very tired.

T'Lani raised her tricorder and began to scan him carefully.

"Your blood pressure seems to be extremely low, but I do not know what is normal for you." T'Lani said carefully.

"I think I'm going to pass out." Lehman said as he started breathing heavily.

"Dr. Perry. This patient appears to be going into respiratory arrest." T'Lani said quickly.

"The patient on the first biobed is stable. Get him moved out and put that kid on respiratory support." Dr. Perry said firmly as she continued to work on her patient.

"I need the patient on bed one relocated to the convalescent ward immediately." T'Lani said quickly into the comm panel by the door, then resumed her scans of Lehman.

"Can you determine a cause for his condition?" Dr. Perry asked quickly.

"It appears that his endocrine system is shutting down. Many of his organs have failed." T'Lani said as she tried to make sense of the readings.

"As soon as you get him on the biobed, run a complete blood workup." Dr. Perry said quickly.

T'Lani saw a pair of crewmen move the patient off the first biobed onto a gurney.

Without hesitation, T'Lani scooped Lehman up into her arms and carried him to the biobed.

"What does the biobed's diagnostic say?" Dr. Perry asked in concentration.

"It has identified the organs that have failed to be foreign bodies." T'Lani said with confusion.

"T'Lani, close up for me so I can have a look." Dr. Perry said as she laid her surgical instruments aside.

"Yes Doctor." T'Lani said seriously, then hurried to the other biobed.

Dr. Perry rushed to Lehman in time to see the heart monitor flat line.

"Not good." She said as she initiated the automatic cardiac stimulator in the biobed.

While it was attempting to revive Lehman, she loaded a syringe with adrenaline and injected it directly into his heart.

Dr. Perry watched carefully and waited for the adrenaline to take effect.

Lehman took in a desperate gasp of breath and tried to sit up on the bed.

"Relax, you're back." Dr. Perry said as she gently petted his short fuzzy hair.

Lehman looked at Dr. Perry with wide, terrified eyes.

"We're going to get you fixed right up. Just lay back and relax." Dr. Perry said as she looked carefully at his blood test results.

"I feel like... something is... laying on... my chest... Can't breathe." Lehman said in increasing panic.

"Here, let me help." Dr. Perry said, then adjusted the respiratory support settings.

Lehman rested back and started to breathe normally again.

"It looks like you've had some recent surgery, would you like to tell me about that?" Dr. Perry asked as she looked at his readings carefully.

"I don't know what they did. They knocked me out and cut me open and did stuff inside me... but I don't know what." Lehman said quietly.

"Who did this to you?" Dr. Perry asked as a fire of anger welled up inside her.

"Captain Traiel. But it's okay, he's already in trouble and going to be exiled for doing it." Lehman said weakly.

"Do you know why they did this to you?" Dr. Perry asked more quietly.

"I'm a Chameloid, a shape shifter. They did this so I could hold an alien shape for a long time." Lehman said in a whisper.

"Well, whatever they did is killing you. I have to remove those failed organs." Dr. Perry said quietly.

"Do whatever you have to. Just please help me. My life is finally starting to get good. I want to live." Lehman said in a trembling voice before falling asleep.

Chapter 28

"Um... Hello?" Vincent said cautiously as he walked into the unfamiliar room.

"Hi. Can I help you?" A pleasant young man asked in a casual tone.

"I, um, don't know. I need to talk to a counselor about some stuff. Am I in the right place?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"Yeah. Have a seat. I'm Tony." the young man said as he turned off his terminal and gave Vincent his full attention.

"Are you a counselor?" Vincent asked cautiously as he continued to stand. He expected a counselor to be older and more professional looking.

"That's how I'm listed on the crew roster. What's up?" Tony asked casually.

"Um, well. A few things I guess." Vincent said nervously.

"Why don't you have a seat and tell me what's bothering you." Tony said as he sat back in his chair and turned to face Vincent fully.

Vincent cautiously sat down, then said, "Well, I'm not sure about everything. I've kind of had a lot of stuff happen all of a sudden and I really don't know how I feel about all of it yet."

"Oh. I can probably help you with that. You're Crewman Winters aren't you?" Tony asked curiously.

"Yeah. How did you know?" Vincent asked suspiciously.

"Because I saw you get your promotion in the rec hall. It's an honor to meet you." Tony said with a friendly smile.

"Thanks." Vincent said shyly.

"Let's see... Feeling overwhelmed by a large number of changes in your life sounds like a reasonable reaction to me. It takes time to adjust to changes, even good ones." Tony said consideringly.

Vincent thought about the statement, then nodded his agreement.

"Do you feel like talking about any of those things now?" Tony asked casually.

"Not really. Everything just seemed to hit at once, but I think it's like what you just said, it's going to take time." Vincent said slowly.

"Well, if you feel like talking to someone to help you sort it all out, that's one of the things I'm here for." Tony said simply.

Vincent smiled and said, "I think that right now I just need some time to sit and think about stuff. But if I get hung up on anything I might ask for your help."

Tony nodded his agreement to the arrangement.

"Um, and there was kinda something else." Vincent said uncomfortably.

Tony looked at Vincent with question and waited.

"I've been having problems with getting mad. Sometimes things will happen that will make me go kinda crazy mad and I can't think right. I just wanted to see if maybe I could get some help before it happens and I hurt someone or get into trouble because of it." Vincent said in thought.

"I can think of a few things to try." Tony said casually.

"I wasn't wanting to get started on that right now. I'm assigned to escort the Holy One while he's on our ship. But I was thinking that after that, I could do... whatever it is that we can do to fix it." Vincent said uncertainly.

"Fair enough. The first thing I'd like for us to do is a medical work-up with an extensive neurological scan." Tony said seriously.

"I was just in Sickbay this morning. They said I was fine except that I'm having a growth spurt." Vincent finished shyly.

"That could mean that you're having hormonal surges that could effect your emotional stability. We'll have to take a look at that too." Tony said in thought.

"So it might be just because I'm going through puberty?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"That's one possibility. Or your hormonal balance might be exacerbating an existing condition. We won't know until we've done the scans." Tony said frankly.

Vincent smiled and said, "I thought maybe I was going nuts or something. I didn't even think it could be because I'm growing up."

Tony smiled at Vincent's relief and said, "Well, we're going to do a lot of tests, both physical and psychological to find out exactly what's going on with you. When we're finished, we should have a pretty good idea of what needs to be done to keep your moods even."

"Thanks Tony, I feel a whole lot better already. I was afraid that the same thing was wrong with me that made my dad get mean and hit my brother." Vincent said seriously.

"If your father had an abusive nature, then there's a possibility that what you're experiencing is how you learned to deal with anger or stress. Let's hold off on worrying about that one until the physical tests are completed." Tony finished with a smile.

"Okay. So what do I do now?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Well, let's see." Tony said and turned his terminal back on.

After a moment of keying in instructions and reading the results, he finally said, "There you are."

Vincent looked at him curiously and waited.

"I'm putting a request for the medical tests that I want into your file. The next time you have free time, stop by the Sickbay and get the doctor on duty to run the tests." Tony said frankly.

"Oh, okay. Then what?" Vincent asked with a small smile.

"Then, when your schedule has stabilized and you know when you'll be available for regular visits, come back to me and we'll go over the medical scans and if there's anything physically wrong, I'll tell you about it and we'll discuss your options." Tony said, then looked up from his terminal.

"Thank you Tony. When I came in here I thought you were going to have me laying down on a couch and talking to you about my mom and stuff." Vincent said honestly.

Tony chuckled and said, "Freudian analysis can help in some cases and I can't say that we won't do that at some point, but for now we'll just work on ruling out any physical cause for your mood swings."

"Um, okay. Sounds good to me." Vincent said happily.

"Well, that's all for now... unless you want to lay down and tell me about your mother?" Tony said with a smile.

Vincent giggled and said, "Maybe next time. I'm going down to Sickbay now."

"It was a pleasure to meet you Crewman Winters. Hopefully we'll get this taken care of without too much difficulty so you can get back to working your way up the chain of command." Tony said warmly as he leaned across his desk to offer his hand.

Vincent shook Tony's hand and said, "Thanks for being so nice. I was a little bit worried about doing this before, but now I feel like everything is going to be okay."

Tony smiled and nodded.

Vincent smiled in return, then walked out the office door.

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"T'Lani, are any of the medical teams back on the ship yet?" Dr. Perry asked quickly as she gathered surgical supplies.

"No Doctor." T'Lani said professionally.

"Then I'm going to need you to assist. I know you aren't a doctor yet, but we don't really have much choice. This boy's body has rejected these transplanted organs and if we don't hurry and get them out of there, he's not going to survive." Dr. Perry said frankly.

"I am ready to assist." T'Lani said calmly as she walked to Dr. Perry's side.

"Get Nurse Young in here. We'll need his help too." Dr. Perry said absently as she looked over Lehman's scans again.

"Right away." T'Lani said and walked briskly out of the room.

"Hang on little guy. You're going to get your chance to live." Dr. Perry said in a whisper as she continued to study the biobed's readouts.

* * * * *

"How are you at comparative xenobiology T'Lani?" Dr. Perry asked as she stopped and looked inside the incision.

"I am well versed in the subject." T'Lani said frankly.

"Good. Then take a look at this and tell me if you have any clue as to it's function." Dr. Perry said as she pointed to a small glandular organ.

T'Lani inspected the small organ visually, then pressed some controls on the biobed to do a detailed scan.

"The fibrous structure seems indicative of a filtration organ, but I cannot speculate as to it's function." T'Lani said carefully.

"Focus on the sack underneath." Dr. Perry said as she glanced at Lehman's vital signs.

"A neurochemical reservoir? I do not see the logic of this arrangement." T'Lani said in confusion.

"You think that's something, look at this one." Dr. Perry said as she pointed to another organ.

T'Lani adjusted the scanner to the indicated organ, then said, "The function of this organ would seem to be to attach neural triggering chemicals to hormonal secretions."

"It could take us years to figure out the functions of all these organs and this boy won't last another half an hour in this condition." Dr. Perry said gravely.

"What do you recommend that we do?" T'Lani asked with concern.

"From everything that I can see here, the majority of his other organs function much the same as a Human's. It's just his endocrine system and skin that are drastically different. If we were to use artificial organs designed for Humans, they should be able to sustain him in reasonable health." Dr. Perry said carefully.

T'Lani looked at the medical readings for a moment, then said, "If we do nothing. He will die. If we use the artificial organs as you suggest, he may die. Logically, the choice is clear."

"Thank you T'Lani. I was having a moral dilemma since, from a certain point of view, this could be considered a further mutilation." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"First, do no harm." T'Lani said without inflection.

"Right. Do you know what we're going to need from medical supply?" Dr. Perry asked with renewed conviction.

"Yes doctor. I will return shortly." T'Lani said quickly.

"Nurse Young, brace yourself. This is going to be a race." Dr. Perry said as she picked up a laser scalpel and started to work.

* * * * *

"T'Lani? What's going on?" Vincent asked as he walked into main sickbay.

"Husband, I am gratified to see that you are well." T'Lani said while keeping her concentration on the surgery before her.

"T'Lani, get that one there." Dr. Perry said intensely.

"Yes Doctor." T'Lani said as she carefully worked her way in beside Dr. Perry.

"Oh, I'm sorry, you're busy. I'll come back in a while." Vincent said quietly as he realized that he was interrupting surgery.

"No, actually you might be able to help us." Dr. Perry said suddenly as she looked up.

Vincent stopped and looked at her with question.

"Since this young man appears to be the same size and age as your husband, we could use Vincent's blood chemistry readings as norms for Lehman. It should allow us to get his levels balanced much faster than the trial and error method I was originally going to use. And considering the weakened state that this boy is in, he doesn't need the additional stress of a hormonal imbalance." Dr. Perry said quickly to T'Lani.

After a moment, T'Lani said, "Husband, you could assist us by getting on the second biobed."

"Um, sure." Vincent said cautiously, just understanding that it was Lehman who was being operated on.

After a moment to settle into place, Vincent said, "I'm ready."

"Nurse Young, order complete pituitary, thyroid and pineal output reports and have the results sent over here." Dr. Perry said firmly.

Vincent watched as Nurse Young worked the controls at the head of his biobed quickly.

"What's wrong with Lehman?" Vincent asked quietly.

"He's had a lot of organs transplanted and his body rejected them." Nurse Young whispered in return.

Vincent turned to watch the next bed with concern.

* * * * *

"I think everything is settled here for the moment. I would like to go check on Lehman now." Tyce said apprehensively.

"I only received word that Lehman was a Chameloid impersonating Crewman Winters with Starfleet Command's approval. I'm interested to know more." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"There's not much more to know. Lehman was brought onboard disguised as Tyber, then when we left the transporter room, he revealed who he really

was. Lehman disguised himself as Vincent so he could be near me and help me try to expose Traiel and whoever was working with him." Tyce said carefully.

"And the surgical changes that you mentioned earlier were performed on him? And that's why he's in Sickbay now?" Captain Byrne speculated.

"It is possible. I would like to go to sickbay to be sure that he is well." Tyce said with worry.

Captain Byrne nodded and said, "Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Tyce smiled and said, "I will Captain. Call me if you have need of me."

Captain Byrne nodded that he would.

"Oluf?" Tyce asked as he glanced to his right, knowing that Oluf would be within earshot.

"Yes Holy One, how may I serve you?" Oluf asked in a rush as he hurried to Tyce's side.

"I would like for you to remain here and keep abreast of events. If a situation arises that requires my attention, you may summon me. If you have need of anything, simply ask the Yorktown staff and they will see that your needs are met." Tyce said firmly.

"As you say, Holy One." Oluf said reverently as he bowed.

Tyce turned to his other side and gently said, "Tyber, would you like to go to Sickbay with me? There is someone that I'd like for you to meet."

Tyber looked at his father talking with a group of people, then hesitantly turned to follow Tyce to the door.

Tyce glanced to see that Audge was following them, then continued out of the room.

* * * * *

"How are you feeling Lehman?" Tyce asked as he walked into the sickbay.

"I'm Vincent." Vincent said quietly.

"Oh. Well it's good to see you again. Lehman wasn't feeling well and came to sickbay. Have you seen him?" Tyce asked as he looked around.

"He's over there. They've been doing surgery on him since I got here." Vincent said in a concerned whisper, then glanced at the next biobed where Dr. Perry and T'Lani were still working.

"I didn't realize that his condition was so serious. How is he?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"I think he's going to be fine." Dr. Perry said as she took a step away from the biobed.

"Really?" Vincent asked with relief.

"Well, we have reason to hope. The replacement organs that we used were designed for Humans, so there might be some side effects from using them on a person of another species but... everything seems to be functioning normally and his vital signs are stabilizing."

"Replacement organs?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yes. Several of his internal organs, mostly those associated with the endocrine system, were replaced with foreign organs. Those foreign organs were rejected by his body and died. Since we could only speculate on the purpose of some of those organs, there was no way we could mimic their functions. What we ended up doing was taking artificial organs designed for Humans and adapting them to function in his system." Dr. Perry said in a clinical tone.

"How long will it be before he wakes up?" Tyce asked with concern.

Dr. Perry looked at the readings on the head of the biobed, then said, "Hold on. T'Lani, come look at this."

Everyone was silent as Dr. Perry carefully lifted a gauze pad from the right side of Lehman's abdomen.

"This doesn't make any sense." Dr. Perry said in confusion.

T'Lani looked at the readings on the head of the biobed, then pressed in a series of commands to verify that the readings were correct.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked in a small voice, afraid of the answer.

"He's healed." Dr. Perry said as she adjusted the scanner of the biobed to focus on different areas.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Tyce asked in confusion.

"This boy has just had major surgery. He had over a dozen incisions and now there's not a mark on him." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Doctor, please look at this." T'Lani said as she indicated a detailed reading on the biobed's display.

"I don't understand. Why are they so worried if he's healed?" Tyce asked Vincent curiously.

"I think it's because they don't understand 'why' he's healing so fast. It's a Human thing to worry about what you don't understand, even when it's a good thing." Vincent finished with a relieved grin.

Tyce smiled at the statement, then turned his attention back to Lehman's bed.

"So the same process that allowed him to alter his physical form before is healing his physical damage now." Dr. Perry said speculatively.

"It appears that his body needed an adequate hormonal balance for the regeneration process to become active." T'Lani said in thought.

"So he's going to be alright?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yes. I think so. But I still don't know how alright he's going to be." Dr. Perry said slowly as she looked over the scans again.

"How do you mean?" Tyce asked curiously.

"His body has already healed the incisions that were made to implant the artificial organs. I suppose it's possible that he could spontaneously regenerate replacement organs for the ones that were removed." Dr. Perry said in thought.

"It is also possible that only his epidermal layer has the accelerated healing factor and that the replacement organs will continue to be needed." T'Lani said professionally.

Dr. Perry nodded her agreement, then said, "We'll need to keep a close watch on him for the next few hours to see what develops."

"When do you think he will awaken? I would like to assure him that all is well." Tyce said quietly.

"The anesthetic should wear off soon. He could wake at any time." Dr. Perry said as she looked Tyce in the eyes.

"Thanks for helping him Dr. Perry. When he's well enough to travel, I'm going to make sure that he gets a wonderful home." Tyce said sincerely.

"I'm afraid he's going to need to be somewhere that a Federation doctor can care for him. The artificial organs that I've implanted will need to be

maintained. He should be able to lead a normal life, but if any of his organs are somehow damaged, only a Federation doctor would have any hope of repairing or replacing them." Dr. Perry said as she glanced down at Lehman tenderly.

"I understand. What you have done is far beyond the capabilities of my people. Thank you for saving him." Tyce said as he followed her gaze to look at Lehman's face.

"If you really want to thank me, there's something you could do that would absolutely make my day." Dr. Perry said with a warm smile at Tyce.

"What is that Doctor?" Tyce asked with surprise.

"Go into the convalescent ward and talk to your injured people. They seem to feel as if they're doing something wrong by being here. I know it would lift their spirits tremendously if their Holy One would go in and talk with them." Dr. Perry said with a gentle smile.

"It would be an honor to talk with those brave people who fought to defend me." Tyce said warmly.

"I'm going to stay here in case Lehman wakes up." Vincent said quietly.

"When he does, tell him that I will return shortly and that I am concerned for his well being." Tyce said seriously.

"I'll tell him." Vincent said with a smile.

* * * * *

Lehman was beginning to thrash around and struggle in his sleep, then he started whispering, "No, don't..."

Vincent hurried to Lehman's side and said, "It's okay Lehman. You're safe."

Lehman opened his eyes and saw that Vincent was standing over him, holding his hand.

"I don't want to be him. I want to be you." Lehman said in a weak, tired voice.

T'Lani walked to the head of the biobed to check Lehman's readings.

"What?" Vincent asked quietly with concern.

"Him. Who I was before. No one loved him. I don't want to be him anymore. I want to be you." Lehman said semi-coherently.

Vincent smiled and said, "It's okay Lehman, you can be me if you want to."

Lehman looked into Vincent's eyes with hope and asked, "Really?"

"Sure. I love my life and I don't mind sharing it."

"But... What am I going to do now? You have Daddy Joe and Darin and I've got... no one." Lehman said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"What would you think about going to the new colony?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Lehman thought for a moment, then whispered, "By myself?"

Vincent smiled, then said, "T'Lani, would you call Benny and JonJon and ask them to come to sickbay?"

"Yes Husband." T'Lani responded immediately.

"What are you going to do?" Lehman asked weakly with concern.

Vincent squeezed Lehman's hand firmly and said, "I'm going to get you a family."

Lehman stared in wonder at the statement.

* * * * *

Tyce and Tyber walked down the hallway that led to the convalescent ward in silence with Audge following a step behind.

Just as they were about to enter the ward, Tyber quietly asked, "Do you really want me to stay with you?"

Tyce turned to look at Tyber and saw the concerned expression that he was wearing.

"Yes Tyber. I really do want you to stay with me." Tyce said with assurance.

"Why?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"Tyce?" Audge asked quietly from behind the pair.

Tyce turned to face him with a look of question.

"If you would like, I think I can answer Tyber's question." Audge said hesitantly.

Tyce was surprised by the offer, but nodded hopefully.

Audge turned to face Tyber and said, "When 'The Holy One' is in front of priests and politicians he has to be strong and be the leader. But when he's done with his duties, he's still a person just like you and me. Tyce needs people around him who treat him like a real person... like a friend. He's not just offering you a place to live. He's offering you a place in his family. I think he needs you as much as you need him."

Tyce was stunned by the statement, and was surprised to find that he was nodding in agreement.

Tyber looked from Audge to Tyce uncertainly.

"We're not trying to take the place of your father and we're not asking you to forget him or stop loving him. We're just trying to give you a home." Audge said gently.

"I've never really had a home. I've always lived on ships with my dad." Tyber said in a small voice.

"We'll do our best to make it comfortable for you." Tyce said quietly.

"Thank you Holy One." Tyber said shyly.

"No Tyber. You and Audge are my family. You can call me Tyce."

* * * * *

Benny walked into the room first, followed by JonJon who was carrying Fizgig in his arms.

Both stopped and stared in shock when they saw two Vincents, one on the bed and the other standing beside him, holding his hand..

"Guys, this is Lehman. He's kinda like my twin." Vincent said with an impish grin.

"Who is he?" Benny asked with concern.

"Do you want to tell them?" Vincent asked Lehman curiously.

Lehman thought for a moment, then said, "I'm a Chameloid; a shape shifter. Well, except that I can't change anymore... Anyway, some guys from Okuda took me from my home world. They wanted to kill 'The Holy One' so I could change myself to look like him and take his place. When I did that they were going to run the church of Okuda through me and pretty much take control of the entire government. After I came on this ship, I took Vincent's shape so I could help him and the Holy One catch the bad guys doing something wrong, but... I got stuck like this."

"And he's just had surgery and had to have a bunch of his organs replaced." Vincent added gently.

"Do you have a family back on your world that's worried about you?" Benny asked quietly.

Lehman shook his head and said, "There was a plague on my world a few years ago and both my parents died. I was in a foundling home after that... I can barely remember what my parents looked like now. Besides, since the bad guys did this to me, I can't change my shape anymore. I couldn't go back there if I wanted to. I'd be a freak."

Benny nodded in thought.

"And Lehman needs to be somewhere that he can see a Federation doctor. He wouldn't be able to stay on his home world if he did go back. I was thinking that if you guys wouldn't mind it too much, maybe Lehman could go to the new colony with you." Vincent said slowly.

Benny and JonJon looked at Vincent with shock. Even Fizgig looked a little surprised.

Vincent felt that he needed to explain, so he took Lehman's hand and held it firmly as he said, "When Rory came on the ship a few weeks ago to see if it was safe here for me, I got to thinking about what it would be like to go to the new colony and live with you guys. Even though I'm happy that I'm allowed to stay on the Yorktown, a part of me is disappointed that I wasn't able to go with you."

Benny and JonJon both nodded that they understood.

"Lehman has some of my memories and already said that he wants to have a life like mine." Vincent continued carefully.

"Well, you could just think of this like what would have happened if Rory had said 'no'. This way it's like I get to go live with you guys AND I get to stay on the Yorktown. It's like that thing about having your cake and eating it too." Vincent finished with a smile.

"So you want us to pretend that Lehman is you?" Benny asked Vincent slowly.

"No. Not really pretend. I'm just saying that you could try to accept him because he's the same as me. Let him have that place that you were going to let me have." Vincent said with difficulty.

"How do you feel about it Lehman?" Benny asked quietly.

"I don't know... I remember a little bit about you and JonJon from Vincent's memories, but if I do this I still won't have a family... I mean, like parents..." Lehman trailed off in a worried voice.

Vincent smiled and said, "You don't need to worry about that. I have a ton of fathers and uncles and brothers. I know that if I ask them, they'll all love you and worry about you the same as they do with me."

Lehman looked at Vincent with confusion.

"Daddy Joe, Thaelan and the whole Clan are like my fathers. Even though you'll be living at the new colony, you'll just be a subspace call away from all the help and advice that you'll ever need." Vincent said assuringly.

"And you'll have me and JonJon right there with you to watch out for you so you'll never have to be alone." Benny said quietly.

"And Fizgig." JonJon added shyly.

Lehman looked at the dog in JonJon's arms and smiled.

"I think living with you sounds like it might be nice." Lehman said as he reached a hand out to gently scratch Fizgig behind the ear.

Fizgig sniffed the hand, then turned and started to lick Lehman's palm.

JonJon watched with a smile and said, "Fizgig agrees."

* * * * *

As Tyce, Tyber and Audge walked into the convalescent ward they noticed that it was quiet and an atmosphere of despair permeated the room.

After a moment to look around, Tyce cautiously walked to the first bed.

There was a young woman sleeping soundly, but she seemed to have an expression of worry.

"Holy One?" A weak voice called uncertainly from the next bed.

Tyce looked over to see a middle aged man with a bandage covering the majority of his chest.

"Yes. I am the Holy One." Tyce said gently as he approached.

"Are you well Holy One? They didn't hurt you?" The man asked with concern.

Tyce smiled gently and said, "I am well thanks to you and your crew mates."

"Good." The man said with relief as he rested back.

"Tarmon, son of Markham, I wish to thank you for the sacrifices you made to ensure my safety. You and your fellow crew mates will be remembered as heroes among our people." Tyce said as he took Tarmon's hand and held it gently.

"Joining the crew of the *Dorsa* was my only chance to serve 'The Holy One'. All my training and everything else I've ever done in my life brought me to today. That's all I ever wanted." Tarmon said peacefully.

"Rest and become strong Tarmon. This is only the beginning." Tyce said with a smile.

Tarmon nodded slightly, then closed his eyes to sleep.

"Did my father cause this?" Tyber asked with tears in his eyes.

"Your father played his part in the events that led to today. But if he had not made the choices he did, another would have taken his place. I believe it was inevitable." Tyce said as he led the group to the next bed.

They stopped at the bed to find a young man with his eyes bandaged.

"Mykale, son of Jarisson, how are you feeling?" Tyce asked gently.

"Who is it? How do you know me?" the young man asked in fear as he turned his head toward Tyce's voice.

"I am the Holy One, and I know all my people." Tyce said with a pained expression at Mykale's fear.

"Are you really 'The Holy One'?" Mykale asked hesitantly.

"I am." Tyce responded quietly.

"Did they hurt you?" Mykale asked desperately.

"No. I was not injured." Tyce said with assurance.

"Then it was worth it." Mykale said with relief.

"Do you need anything to ease your recovery?" Tyce asked gently, sensing an underlying despair in the man.

"The doctors, they were able to save my life, but... but they couldn't save my eyes." Mykale said in a trembling voice.

"I'm so sorry." Tyce said as he held Mykale's hand firmly.

"No. It was a small price to pay for your safety. I would do exactly the same thing if I knew it would keep you safe. I just... I don't know what I'm going to do now..." Mykale trailed off in despair.

Tyce thought for a moment, then said, "If you would be willing, there is a service you could perform for which you are uniquely qualified."

"Anything Holy One. How can I serve you?" Mykale asked with hope.

"You and your crew mates have sacrificed much to protect me. Our world is entering a new age and many changes will occur in a short time. If you would be willing, I would like for you to have the responsibility for seeing that all the members of the *Dorsa's* crew are honored and remembered for their service and that those who survive are having their needs met." Tyce said gently.

"But I'm blind." Mykale said in a small voice.

"Then you will have someone to help you. But I am entrusting you alone with this duty. When we arrive at Okuda Prime, you will be given a room in my main temple and you will have priests to provide whatever assistance you may need to fulfill your duties." Tyce said, then turned to Tyber and continued, "Tyber, if you would like, you could be in charge of seeing to Mykale's needs."

Tyber looked at Tyce with surprise, then said, "But I'm just a kid."

Tyce smiled and said, "So am I. So are Vincent and Lehman. Being young doesn't prevent us from doing what must be done. If you're willing to see that Mykale has all the help that he needs, you can always come to me or Oluf and ask any question you might have."

Tyber thought for a moment as he looked at the bandaged young man on the bed, then said, "Thank you Holy... Tyce. I think I'd like to try."

Tyce smiled, then squeezed Mykale's hand gently and said, "Tyber has agreed to help you. Would you like to help me and your crew mates by doing this?"

"Yes Holy One. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity." Mykale said with a content smile.

"You earned this opportunity. Rest now and heal. Tyber will keep in contact with you and when you have recovered enough to assume your duties, he will see that you have all that you need."

"I'll begin as soon as possible." Mykale said seriously.

"Heal first. There is time." Tyce said gently, then laid Mykale's hand on the bed.

"As you say Holy One." Mykale said with a peaceful smile as he relaxed.

* * * * *

"It would be beneficial if you would sleep. Your readings indicate fatigue." T'Lani said seriously.

"Can I stay awake a little while longer? I want to be sure about what's going to happen next." Lehman asked with a puppy dog expression in his eyes.

T'Lani raised an eyebrow at the expression, then looked at Vincent in question.

Vincent leaned in to whisper, "It doesn't work on Vulcans."

"Oh." Lehman said shyly, then broke into a smile.

"Please conclude your business so you may rest." T'Lani said quietly, then took one last look at Lehman's readings before leaving the room.

Lehman noticed that Benny was standing silently with a distant look on his face.

"Is something wrong?" Lehman asked with concern.

Benny looked at Lehman as if just remembering that he was there.

"Oh. Um, no. I'm sorry Lehman. If Vincent says you're alright then it's fine with me if you come to the new colony with us." Benny said quickly.

Lehman looked at Benny consideringly, then up at Vincent with question.

"What's wrong Benny?" Vincent asked seriously.

Benny shook his head and said, "It's nothing."

Vincent and Lehman shared a look, then both turned their inquiring gazes on Benny.

After another moment of distant thought, Benny felt the identical stares boring into him.

"It's nothing." Benny said defensively.

Vincent and Lehman continued to stare at him in silence.

"Fine. Fine. I'll tell you." Benny finally said with resignation.

"It works a lot better with two of us." Vincent whispered with a smile at Lehman.

"I'm worried about my family. Okay? I haven't heard anything from them since the *Enterprise* left and I know that other people have already heard from their families. Being here in the sickbay again just kind of brought it back to me." Benny said with aggravation.

"Then let's call them." Vincent said simply.

"We can't do that." Benny said irritably.

"Sure we can... if I can call Starfleet Command you can call Starfleet Medical." Vincent said seriously.

"But we're not supposed to use subspace unless it's official business or an emergency." Benny said hesitantly, obviously wanting to do it.

"If your family are all this stubborn their doctors are probably going through hell." Vincent said as he walked to the nearest comm panel.

Lehman chuckled, then winced in pain.

"Don't make me laugh. It hurts." Lehman said with effort.

"See what you did?" Vincent said to Benny, then pressed the computer access to the comm system.

"It's going to be faster to do it this way." Vincent said seriously as he keyed in his search criteria.

Benny slowly walked to Vincent's side to see what he was doing.

"You Summers are like rabbits. Look at this." Vincent said as he pointed at the display screen full of people named Summers.

"That one, that's my dad." Benny said as he pointed at one of the names on the screen.

Vincent keyed in the proper ID, then waited for the call to be answered.

"Orlando Regional Medical Center." A woman answered professionally.

"We're calling to talk to Harold Summers. This is his son." Vincent said seriously and indicated Benny at his side.

"Let me see... He's listed to have no visitors, that would include calls... But give me a second, his primary care physician is right over there, I'll ask him." The nurse said and hurried away from the view screen.

A professional looking man who appeared to be in his mid thirties took a seat before the terminal and said, *"I'm Doctor Reynolds. What can I do for you gentlemen today?"*

"We called to see if we could talk to Harold Summers. But the nurse said he couldn't have any calls." Vincent said in a professional tone.

"That depends, is one of you two Benny?" Dr. Reynolds asked the two boys casually.

"I am." Benny said quickly.

"Then I'll let you speak to him. I've been trying to limit the interruptions to his sleep. He needs a lot of rest. But I'm sure that getting to talk with you will help him to sleep more soundly. Hold on. I'll be right back" Dr. Reynolds said seriously, then the hospital's logo filled the screen.

"I wonder why he's in Orlando. I thought he'd be in San Francisco." Benny said as he looked at the screen anxiously.

"Starfleet would send him wherever the best doctor was that could take care of him." Vincent said in thought.

A moment later the screen flashed on again and Benny was relieved to see his father looking back at him.

"How you doing Benny Boy?" Mr. Summers asked his son with a relieved smile.

Vincent smiled at the greeting, then walked back to his place at Lehman's side to give Benny some privacy.

"I'm doing fine Dad. We're about half-way to the new colony now." Benny said with tears of joy welling up in his eyes.

"So you're not having any problems? Everyone's treating you okay?" Mr. Summers asked with concern.

"Everything's great Dad, I promise. The Deflector Control team kind of adopted me and JonJon. We've been rooming with them and they've been taking really good care of us." Benny said, then noticed a tear falling down his cheek.

"I'm glad to hear it. On the way back to Earth I began to realize just how much I was asking of you by giving you all the responsibility." Mr. Summers said in a worried voice.

"It's okay Dad. If I have any kind of problem I've got lots of people who will help me. How are you and Mom and Callie?" Benny asked desperately.

"I think we're all going to be fine. Your sister was sent to Vulcan to see a specialist in bone reconstruction. Your mother is in the Starfleet medical facility in San Francisco and I'm here in Orlando so I can see a specialist about my spine." Mr. Summers said seriously.

"Will you let me know if you need anything?" Benny asked in a small voice.

"They're taking great care of us Benny Boy. You'd think we were royalty from the way they've been fussing over us. Just be sure to take care of yourself. We're all missing you like crazy." Mr. Summers finished with a sad smile.

"I miss all of you too. Tell Mom and Callie that I love them the next time you talk to them." Benny said quietly.

Lehman tugged on Vincent's arm to get his attention and got him to lean down.

"I'll tell them. The Doctor is saying that I need to try and get back to sleep now. Make sure you send me a letter and some pictures as soon as you get there." Mr. Summers said seriously.

"I will Dad. I promise." Benny said, just realizing that the tears were flowing down his cheeks.

"Don't hang up. I need to make a call too while you've got the connection." Vincent said as he rushed to Benny's side again.

"I love you Benny Boy." Mr. Summers said in a sleepy voice.

"I love you too Dad." Benny said quietly.

Vincent rekeyed the comm to terminate the connection to the hospital room, then keyed in another location.

"Clan Short." A voice said immediately.

"Hi Tommy, are Gabe or Adam around where I can talk to them?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Adam's right here. Hang on a second." Tommy said politely, then turned and screamed, *"**ADAM! YOU HAVE A CALL!**"*

Vincent chuckled to himself, and glanced back to see Lehman fighting to hold in his laughter.

"Oh, hey Vincent. What can I do for you?" Adam asked as he quickly took the seat that Tommy had vacated.

"I was just wondering if you could do me a favor." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure, what do you need?" Adam asked casually.

"I've got a friend named Benny from the Kimber colony and his family is all hurt and in different hospitals. I was just wondering if you guys could kind of send them like, flowers or something like that. You know, let them know that they've got people who care about them." Vincent said uncertainly.

"Care packages. Got it." Adam said with a smile.

"Yeah. That sounds good. Benny's last name is..." Vincent said before he was interrupted.

"Summers. His family are in Orlando, San Francisco and at the Vulcan Academy of Science Medical Center." Adam said with a smile.

"Wow. You're getting really good at doing searches. Cory must be keeping you guys in practice." Vincent said in an impressed voice.

"It wasn't that hard. When you said Kimber, that cut the possible matches to less than two thousand, and there was only one Benjamin who didn't return to Earth, his last name is Summers. From there it was a snap." Adam said, sounding proud of himself.

"Thanks Adam. I just wanted to be sure they knew that there was someone around who cared about them." Vincent said quietly.

"We'll check with their doctors and find out what they can have and what they might need. You know, like crossword puzzles and CDs. Stuff like that." Adam said happily.

"That sounds great. I appreciate this." Vincent said with a smile.

"Hey, it's just something we do." Adam said dismissively.

"I've gotta go now. Thanks again." Vincent said quickly.

"Anytime, Vincent." Adam said with a smile and closed the transmission.

Vincent turned and was surprised to find that JonJon was now at Lehman's side.

"Thanks for doing that Vincent. That was great." Benny said and gave Vincent a quick one armed hug.

"Then you should thank Lehman, it was his idea." Vincent said as he led Benny back to Lehman's bedside.

* * * * *

Tyce, Tyber and Audge walked to the next bed to find a serious man staring at them.

The man was around thirty with straight jet black hair and pale brown eyes that were almost amber.

From the way the blanket draped over him, it was obvious that he only had one leg and the bandaged stump on his right side was all that was left of his right arm.

Tyce stared at the man for a moment, then hesitantly said, "Jarkin, son of... Jarkin?"

A smile broke out on Jarkin's face at Tyce's confused look, then he said, "Yes Holy One. My father was killed in a farming accident a month before I was born, so I was given his name."

Tyce nodded that he understood, then asked, "How are you feeling Jarkin?"

"I am in no pain, but... I'm half a man now. I can't work my farm anymore or... anything. What good can I be like this?" Jarkin asked in a pained voice.

"I suspect that you have the ability to provide a much needed service to our people." Tyce said honestly.

Jarkin looked at Tyce curiously, prompting for more information.

"Please be assured Jarkin, you have a purpose and your injuries will not prevent you from carrying it out." Tyce said gently.

Jarkin slowly nodded, then quietly asked, "Would you answer a question for me?"

"Of course. What would you like to know?" Tyce asked casually, feeling an unusual kinship with this man.

"These people, the Humans, why do they look like us and speak our language?" Jarkin asked as he looked into Tyce's eyes.

Tyce glanced around the room, then moved closer to speak quietly.

"If I share this information with you, will you give me your vow not to repeat it?" Tyce asked quietly.

Jarkin's eyes went wide at the question and he quickly nodded.

"Many centuries ago, there was a sharp decline in the birth rate of our people, have you heard of that?" Tyce asked in a whisper.

"Yes. It was said to be the result of industrial pollutants." Jarkin said cautiously.

"Correct. And it is true that the pollution was the cause. But the situation was far more severe than you were led to believe. The industrial byproducts that were released into the environment caused genetic damage to our people for generations. More and more were born sterile until it became a significant threat to our very survival. Stopping the pollution did not remove the sterilizing agents from our environment. In fact, there are still traces of it to be found on Okuda Prime today." Tyce said carefully.

"So what happened?" Jarkin asked cautiously.

"The Holy One at that time secretly contacted a few trusted friends from other worlds for their assistance in preventing our extinction. One of them knew of the Humans, and so it was decided that some of these Humans would be relocated to Okuda to provide fresh genetic codes for our population and hopefully allow those who were still fertile to produce fertile young." Tyce said uneasily.

"Relocated, as in abducted?" Jarkin asked in a whisper.

Tyce nodded with regret and said, "At first just a few, but more over time. Two, maybe three thousand in all."

"But why doesn't our history show this?" Jarkin asked contemplatively.

"With the help of another race, who I would prefer not to name, we were able to alter the memories of the Humans that were brought to us... The abducted Humans were given false memories and led to believe that they were the survivors of the failed Mitigahl colony. They were given the knowledge of our language, but they also retained the memory of their original language. Within four generations, our people were speaking the Human language of English and the Okudai language of Gillikanese was nearly forgotten." Tyce said carefully.

"How could it spread so quickly?" Jarkin asked cautiously.

"Because nearly every Okudai today is descended from those Humans. Only one in ten thousand Okudai today has the original genetic code of our ancestors." Tyce said seriously.

"Is that why it takes you years to find a replacement?" Audge asked from Tyce's side.

Tyce looked at Audge with surprise.

"You need a person with that original genetic code to be the next Holy One." Audge said speculatively.

Tyce hesitantly nodded.

"So is that why the Holy Ones have fought so hard to keep us separated from the rest of the universe?" Jarkin asked cautiously.

Tyce nodded and said, "If there were an influx of new genetic sequences into our population, all the descendants of the Okudai founders would become blended with other species. Within a few generations the essence of Okuda would be lost."

"That's why you can see our lineage, isn't it?" Audge asked cautiously.

"Yes. You might call it a survival skill. I can only pass the knowledge and experience of the Holy Ones on to a person with that specific genetic sequence from the founders. It took ten years for Austir to find me." Tyce said quietly.

"Why are you telling me this?" Jarkin asked curiously.

"Because you asked." Tyce said slowly.

"Oh... I thought it might be... Am I descended from the founders?" Jarkin asked hesitantly.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes and no."

Jarkin looked at Tyce with confusion at the statement.

"Since it has been so many generations since the Human genetic material was introduced into our society and we haven't had any new influx of alien genetic material in the successive years, the original Okudai sequence is finally beginning to establish itself in those who have human ancestors. You Jarkin, son of Jarkin are one of those rare people. You carry the Human ancestry, as most of our people do, but you also have the dominant Okudai genetic sequence that defines us as a people. People like you are very rare Jarkin, and very important to our future." Tyce finished with a smile.

"But if we join the Federation, we stand to lose that genetic sequence because we'll end up mixing with Humans again." Audge said in thought.

"No. People like Jarkin and Tyber are our hope of surviving the new age. In our ancestors, the genetic sequence was recessive. In Jarkin and Tyber it is dominant. Three out of four of their children will carry the dominant trait and the remaining one will carry it recessively." Tyce said happily.

"I'm special?" Tyber asked with disbelief.

"Not just special Tyber. Essential. You and Jarkin and probably less than one thousand others out of all our people are our hope for the future. If you were to mate with a Human, a Vulcan, or even an Andorian, the chances are that your offspring would have the dominant genetic sequence that defines our people. Your children would probably even have the same dark hair and light eyes that you and Jarkin share. This is another sign that it's time for the new age of our people to begin." Tyce said gently.

"The New Age?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"Let's leave Jarkin to get his rest and I'll talk to you about that later." Tyce said gently.

Tyber looked at Jarkin and saw that he was fighting to stay awake.

"Jarkin, I'm going to be living with The Holy One when we get back to Okuda. If you need my help with anything, let me know. If we're the hope of Okuda, we need to take care of each other." Tyber said seriously.

"I'll let you know if I need anything. Please come back and visit if you find the time." Jarkin said quietly.

"I will." Tyber said gently, then reached down to pull up Jarkin's blanket a little and tuck him in.

"Do you see your purpose now Jarkin?" Tyce whispered as he smiled at Tyber's tender care.

"Yes Holy One, I understand. Thank you." Jarkin said, then closed his eyes.

The group stood silently for a moment and watched as Jarkin fell into a contented sleep, then moved to the next patient.

Chapter 29

"Vincent? Would you do something for me, please?" Lehman asked quietly.

"Sure, Lehman, what can I do?" Vincent asked as he hurried back to Lehman's side.

"Would you let me see some more of your memories of Benny and JonJon? I didn't get much more than their names the last time I touched your mind." Lehman asked shyly.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay. But it might be a little weird because I met JonJon when I was blind."

"I just want to know more about them if that's okay." Lehman said uncertainly.

Vincent picked up Lehman's hand and held it to the side of his face, then placed his other hand on the side of Lehman's face in the position for a mind meld.

"What are you doing?" Benny asked curiously.

"I just want to make it as easy for Lehman as I can." Vincent said quietly as he continued to hold Lehman's hand in position.

"Thank you, that did help. I'm done." Lehman said in a worried whisper.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked with concern as he placed Lehman's hand back on the bed.

"JonJon lost his whole family, then he had a nail in his head... in his brain. It just makes me feel bad to know that he was hurt so much." Lehman said quietly.

"Thank you for worrying for me Lehman, but I'm really fine now. I miss my family a lot, but being here with all of you is making it hurt less. As far as the nail, I'm an android and the nail only caused some minor damage to my hardware. I wasn't in any pain, I didn't even feel it." JonJon said with assurance.

"I'm glad you're not hurting." Lehman said in a whisper.

"Why don't you go to sleep now. You look like you really need it." Vincent said with concern.

"Yeah. I will. Thank you for finding me a family." Lehman said with an honest smile.

Vincent smiled in return and said, "I want to thank you too, Lehman. You're going to have the other future that I wanted for myself."

Lehman smiled with contentment as he fell asleep.

* * * * *

When Tyce, Tyber and Audge arrived at the next bed, they found a middle aged woman fast asleep. A significant portion of her body was covered with burns and she was wearing a mask to help her breathe.

"I'm sorry Tyce." Tyber said, as tears filled his eyes.

"For what?" Tyce asked curiously.

"For what my father did. If he caused all this suffering... Why are you letting him go?" Tyber asked as he looked at Tyce with tears running down his cheeks.

"Because Lehman asked me to." Tyce said frankly.

"I don't understand." Tyber said hesitantly.

"Tyber, your father made some unfortunate decisions. One of those decisions was to take a Chameloid child from his home world so he could assume my form and replace me." Tyce said seriously.

"The blue boy." Tyber said in a whisper.

Tyce looked at Tyber with question.

"While I was sleeping one night, I felt someone touch me. I woke up in time to see a blue boy leaving my room. I tried to tell myself it was a dream but..." Tyber trailed off in thought.

"I'm sure that was him. When he came on this ship with your father, he looked like you." Tyce said gently.

"So if he was trying to take your place, why are you doing what he asked?" Tyber asked slowly.

"Because he helped me. Some horrible things were done to him. They cut him open and did things inside him so that once he took my shape he would be able to stay that way." Tyce said seriously.

"My father did that?" Tyber asked as his tears started to fall again.

"I'm sorry Tyber. I wouldn't have talked to you about this until later, but you asked the questions and I believe that learning a truth, even a painful truth, is better than living in ignorance."

Tyber stood silently for a moment as his tears fell, then he quietly said, "I wish I could be mad at you and say that I know it's not true."

"I know." Tyce said, then gently put his arms around Tyber.

A moment later, Tyce was surprised to feel a hand grip his shoulder.

"You did the right thing Tyce." Audge said with assurance.

"Thank you." Tyce said as he felt his own tears threatening to fall.

"Tyber." Audge said seriously.

After a moment, Tyber looked up at Audge cautiously.

"Lehman forgave your father. Not only did he forgive him, he asked Tyce to keep him from being sent into Ikerian exile. I know learning these things hurts you, but please understand that Tyce and Lehman don't hold any animosity toward your father. They're just trying to do the right thing for everyone, even him." Audge said seriously.

Tyber thought about the words for a moment and put them together with what he remembered from when he arrived on the ship.

"Is the blue boy still here?" Tyber asked slowly.

"Yes. He's the one in the bed in the next room." Tyce said gently.

"Can we go back in and talk to him? I need to ask him something." Tyber said in thought.

"What do you need to know?" Tyce asked curiously.

Tyber thought for a moment to find the right words, then he said, "I want to ask him how he can forgive someone who hurt him the way my father did. I want to understand."

"I hope the answer that he gives you can bring you peace." Tyce said as he led the way to the door.

* * * * *

Tyce, Tyber and Audge walked into the main sickbay to see Benny, JonJon and Vincent surrounding Lehman's bed.

"It looks like Lehman is asleep. Come over here Tyber. I want to introduce you to everyone." Tyce said gently.

Tyber cautiously walked with Tyce to join the gathering around Lehman's bed.

"Vincent, I would like you to meet Tyber." Tyce said gently.

Tyber looked curiously at Vincent, then down at Lehman with confusion.

Tyce understood Tyber's confusion and decided to try a different approach.

"Tyber, son of Okuda, I would like you to meet Crewman Vincent Winters, son of Earth... and Vulcan." Tyce added in consideration.

"And Andor." Vincent added.

"Andor?" Benny asked curiously.

"Vincent, I understand your relation to Earth and Vulcan, but how are you a child of Andor?" Tyce asked carefully as an uneasy feeling washed over him.

"It's an Andorian tradition that a father teaches his children to defend themselves. When Thaelan started teaching me to fight, he kind of adopted me into his family. I did a little research on Andorian traditions and... well, me knowing his family style of fighting would qualify me to be his heir. Even though he doesn't call me his son, the things he's doing are what an Andorian father would do for his son." Vincent said shyly.

"A child of three worlds..." Tyce said distantly.

"What's wrong?" Audge asked from Tyce's side.

Tyce stood silently for a moment, then absently said, "Audge, would you summon Oluf? I need him."

"Right away." Audge said quickly and ran to the nearest comm to make the call.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"No. Not wrong, just... too soon." Tyce said carefully.

"Did something happen?" Lehman asked as he peeked open one eye.

"No Lehman, I'm sorry if I woke you." Tyce said gently.

"That's okay. I was only a little bit asleep anyway. I just woke the rest of the way up when I heard you guys sounding worried." Lehman said seriously.

"So what's wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Before I answer, I need to ask all of you some questions." Tyce said in thought.

"Ask us anything you want. We're all friends here." Vincent said as he looked around the group.

Tyber looked at Vincent with caution at the statement.

"Lehman. Please forgive me for asking, but you were orphaned by poverty, weren't you?" Tyce asked carefully.

"Yeah, I guess so. If my parents weren't so poor, they'd be alive right now. The medicine they needed to cure them from the plague was too expensive. How did you know?" Lehman asked slowly.

"Because he's the Holy One." Vincent said to Lehman with a teasing smile and a wink.

Lehman rolled his eyes at the statement, then looked back at Tyce who was still deep in thought.

"Benny, are your parents exceptionally wealthy?" Tyce asked slowly.

"Not even close. My dad is a botanist and my mom is a xenoarchiologist." Benny said hesitantly.

"Oluf will be here in a moment." Audge said as he hurried to Tyce's side.

Tyce absently nodded as he continued to think.

"What's bothering you Tyce?" Vincent asked with concern.

"It's like I have a puzzle, but the pieces won't fit together." Tyce said with frustration.

"What pieces of the puzzle are you missing?" JonJon asked timidly.

"The first one is the child of laughter and light, born of wealth and privilege." Tyce said absently.

"JonJon has blond hair, that's kind of golden and he's kind of funny... well, not at the moment but usually..." Benny offered weakly.

"I wasn't born, I was manufactured." JonJon said frankly.

"What was that?" Tyce asked with surprise.

"I'm an Android." JonJon said hesitantly.

Tyber and Audge looked at JonJon with surprise.

"The child ageless and unborn..." Tyce said distantly with a nod, as if he had expected the statement.

"Yeah. That sounds like JonJon." Vincent said hesitantly as he looked around the gathering.

The door opened and drew everyone's attention.

Oluf ran into the room and directly to Tyce with an expression of worry.

"When you packed Austir's belongings, did you bring the black ironwood box?" Tyce asked firmly.

"Yes Holy One. I was instructed to bring it whenever he would travel." Oluf said quietly.

"Please retrieve it from the *Dorsa* and bring it to me. I have need of it's contents." Tyce said firmly.

"Right away Holy One." Oluf said quickly, then rushed out of the room.

"Can you tell us what's going on?" Vincent asked seriously.

Tyce looked at Vincent and said, "No. I've probably said too much already."

Vincent looked carefully at Tyce and saw the concern in his eyes.

"Can you tell me... is it something bad?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Tyce considered for a moment, then said, "That's a judgment that you will have to make when the time comes. I think you will approve of the end result."

Vincent glanced down at Lehman and said, "That sounds like something that's gonna suck."

* * * * *

A moment of silence fell over the room until it was finally broken by Tyber asking, "Lehman, could I ask you a question?"

"Sure Tyber, come over here where I can see you better." Lehman said quietly.

"I just... I don't know how you could forgive my father when he did so much to hurt you and caused so much death and pain." Tyber said as he looked into Lehman's eyes.

Lehman saw the pain and confusion that Tyber was struggling with and said, "I could forgive him because you love him."

Tyber looked at Lehman with confusion.

"Back on your ship, I touched your mind so I could impersonate you. I could see your father through your memories of him and the love that you feel for him. Even though he hurt me and a lot of other people, I know that he has some good in his heart and should be given the chance to overcome his darker desires. I would have done anything to stop him from killing the Holy One, but once he was stopped, I didn't have any desire for revenge." Lehman said carefully.

"Tyber, my dad was a little bit like yours." Vincent said from Tyber's side.

Tyber looked at Vincent with surprise.

"He hurt a lot of people. He even killed a few. But he wasn't all bad... Well, maybe at the end he was... but when I was a little kid he was a good dad. I guess even though I could hate him and blame him for a lot of stuff, all that would do is make me feel bad inside. It makes it easier if I tell myself that I don't like who he was when he did those bad things, but I still love the dad who cared about me and loved me when I was little." Vincent said distantly.

"So I can still love my Dad without agreeing with what he did?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes Tyber. I think Vincent and Lehman have explained things very well. Your father obviously loves you very much and regrets that his choices have caused this outcome. You can choose to continue to love your father and forgive him for making bad decisions."

Tyber slowly nodded and said, "Thank you... all of you. After seeing everything that my dad caused to happen I felt like I was some kind of monster for still loving a person who could cause so much pain."

Lehman took hold of Tyber's hand as Vincent moved in to put an arm around him.

"It's okay Tyber. I know exactly how you feel and it's really okay to love him." Vincent said gently.

Lehman looked up into Tyber's eyes and nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"I am sorry for the delay 'Holy One', the contents of the storage area shifted during the battle..." Oluf rambled as he rushed into the room carrying a heavy black box.

"Please be calm Oluf, the Holy Ones past have carried that box with them for over a thousand years and never needed it's contents. I only wished to have it now as a precaution." Tyce said thoughtfully.

Oluf looked at Tyce curiously, but didn't ask.

"Lehman, I believe we should leave you so that you may rest. We will speak again before I leave." Tyce said gently.

"Thank you Tyce. I'd be really scared being helpless on an alien ship like this, but having you all here... I feel like everything is going to be okay." Lehman said with a weak smile.

"Lehman, if you wouldn't mind, Fizgig and I would like to stay here with you." JonJon said quietly.

After a moment, Lehman turned slightly and looked at JonJon with question.

"You're going to the new colony with us, that makes you part of our family. I've lost a lot of family and I'd feel better if I could be here to make sure that you're going to be okay." JonJon said shyly.

"Thanks." Lehman said with a small smile as he reached out to pet Fizgig.

JonJon responded by placing Fizgig on the side of the bed.

After a moment of sniffing around, Fizgig laid his head on Lehman's chest and settled into sleep.

Lehman smiled at the move and began to gently pet Fizgig as he closed his eyes.

* * * * *

"We should probably check back with the captains to see if anything else needs to be done." Tyce said quietly as he led the group away from Lehman's bed.

"When I left, they were coordinating preparations and repairs. Other than a few messages, there was nothing to concern you." Oluf said seriously.

"What messages?" Tyce asked as he led the way out of sickbay.

"Minister Falek wanted your approval to activate the planetary reserve troops to serve as ground defense if some of our enemies were to get past our armada." Oluf said professionally.

"What did you tell him?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"I told him that such preparation would be diligent. The planetary reserves of all our worlds will be waiting for the call to duty." Oluf said cautiously, not entirely sure what Tyce's reaction would be.

Tyce slowly nodded and said, "Yes. That will serve our purposes well. Were there any other messages?"

"Jessub from the Mycien colony called to ask for clarification of his duties. I told him that a list of his duties would be forthcoming." Oluf said carefully.

Tyce looked around the group who were all gathered around them and asked, "Vincent, where could I go to make a call to Okuda?"

"Well, I bet the conference room is probably being used right now. Maybe the engineering conference room?" Vincent finished uncertainly.

Tyce nodded and gestured toward the turbo lift before them.

Vincent led the way and the rest of the group followed.

Once everyone was aboard, Vincent said, "Deck P."

* * * * *

"You inquired of your duties in the upcoming election?" Tyce asked the view screen carefully.

"Yes Holy One. I wanted to be sure that there were no misunderstandings about your expectations." Jessub said reverently.

"My expectation is for you to facilitate a fair and transparent election. Take every reasonable step to ensure that no one can claim that the results are anything but accurate and representative of the wishes of our people." Tyce said firmly.

"Yes Holy One. But there are others with more experience who might be able to perform the job more efficiently." Jessub said hesitantly.

"Perhaps, but it is not your experience that qualifies you for this job. It's your honesty and your belief that every citizen should have a voice. You may recruit those with more experience to aid you in your duties, but use your own judgment to determine what is the best method to give our people a truly fair election."

"Yes Holy One. Thank you, I understand."

"And when your duties bring you to Okuda Prime, I would like you to stay with me at my home." Tyce continued without any show of emotion.

"Yes Holy One. Thank you." Jessub said hesitantly.

"I know what Austir said to you when I was chosen to be Holy One. And what he said was true to some degree. I am now the Holy One and all the people of Okuda are my family. But he was mistaken when he said that the person I was, your son, would be lost. I am still Tyce and I would like to visit with you and mother if she is available to accompany you." Tyce finished in a more gentle voice.

Jessub smiled and said, "As if there is anything in the universe that would be more important to her. She's been alternating between worry for you and grief over losing you."

"I've missed you both as well. I'll look forward to seeing you when I get back to Okuda." Tyce said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"I'll tell her right away. I bet she'll start cooking food to bring with us the moment I tell her." Jessub said with a tender smile.

Tyce laughed and said, "Just tell her not to make any of those crusty meat pies. I can't stand those things."

"Me either. I don't know why she keeps making them. I'll tell her but it may take a declaration from the Holy One himself to stop her."

"I'll do it if I have to. Stay in touch and let me know." Tyce said in a more gentle voice.

"I will. I'm glad to have my son back. I'm very proud of you Tyce. You're doing a great job." Jessub said quietly.

"Thank you Dad. I'm glad that I was able to retain myself after becoming the Holy One. I need to attend to other duties now. I love you." Tyce said as tears welled up in his eyes again.

"I love you too Tyce." Jessub said, and tears were also forming in his eyes.

The screen went blank and Tyce felt an arm come around him and pull him into a hug.

He didn't need to look up to know who it was.

"Thank you Audge." Tyce whispered as he returned the hug and fought to get his emotions under control.

* * * * *

"So what do we need to do next?" Vincent asked, directing his question to Oluf.

"They moved to a conference room before I was summoned to attend the Holy One. It would probably be best to see if there have been any developments." Oluf said thoughtfully.

Tyce released Audge from the hug and said, "I agree. We can attend to those matters, then retire for the evening."

"Do you think my father will be there?" Tyber asked quietly from behind Vincent.

"If he isn't, we'll find him for you." Tyce said with a smile of assurance.

Vincent led the group out into the hallway.

"If you guys don't mind, I have some stuff to do for school tomorrow." Benny said reluctantly.

"Homework?" Vincent asked with a smile at Benny.

Hesitantly, Benny nodded and said, "History."

Vincent chuckled and said, "It's funny, we're here *making* history by saving the Holy One and you have to leave us to study history."

"Yeah. Real funny." Benny said with a sour look that finally broke when confronted with Vincent's beaming smile.

When everyone was aboard the lift, Vincent said, "Conference room one."

"Deflector control." Benny said quietly from Vincent's side.

The silence in the lift was becoming uncomfortable, so Vincent casually asked, "How are you feeling Audge? Is your arm bothering you at all?"

Audge considered for a moment, then said, "No. If it weren't for the cast on my arm I wouldn't even know that I had been injured. Your healer's are quite skilled."

Vincent smiled at the formal answer, and said, "I'm glad you're not hurting, but if the pain medicine starts to wear off, just let me know and we'll get you some more."

The doors opened to reveal all the captains sitting around the conference table, talking at once.

Tyber hurried out of the turbo lift and ran to his father's side.

Vincent glanced at Benny and quietly asked, "Would you tell Daddy Joe that I'll probably be down in a few minutes?"

"Yeah. I'll tell him. See ya in a few." Benny said with a smile at his friend as the lift doors closed.

* * * * *

"How are you doing Tyber?" Traiel asked with concern, as he stood to pull his son into a hug.

"I'm okay. The Holy One and his friends have been really nice to me and helped me a lot." Tyber said as he held his father desperately.

"We've just about sorted everything out here. Commander M'Butu has provided us with the locations of some planets with natural resources we can use. With a little hard work and some good luck, we may be able to find a world that we can call our own." Traiel said gently.

"We would be better off staying here and joining forces with the Gorn." Gartain said firmly.

"Haven't you learned anything?" Traiel asked in a tired voice.

"The Gorn would not be interested in allowing you to join them. The only value our people have to the Gorn is as food." Tyce said frankly.

"So you say. I believe that if we were able to speak with the Gorn we might be able to convince them that we could be their allies." Gartain said as he turned his angry gaze on Tyce.

Audge and Vincent moved protectively closer to Tyce on either side with matching expressions of warning.

"You idiot! Tell me honestly Gartain, what would you think of a ship full of aliens who came to us in a position of inferiority and weakness, then asked to be our allies?" Traiel asked frankly, then waited for an answer.

Gartain stared at Traiel for a moment in thought, then turned away with an expression of shame.

Traiel turned his attention back to his son who was still hugging him and gently asked, "Now that you've had some time to think about things, do you think you're going to be okay staying with the Holy One?"

Tyber tried to get his emotions under control before saying, "Yes. The Holy One and his friends have helped me understand some things. They told me about some of the things you did..."

"I'm sorry Tyber." Traiel said in a pained voice.

"I know. They also helped me to understand that I can still love you even though you made some mistakes." Tyber said quietly.

Traiel gave a weak smile at the statement, then turned his attention to Tyce and said, "Thank you Holy One. I was worried that when Tyber learned about everything that I did he'd end up hating me."

"Hate is not something to carry, it is something to overcome." Tyce said quietly.

"I need to write that one down." Vincent whispered to Audge playfully.

Audge glanced at Vincent as he tried to contain his smile.

Tyce grinned at the whispered conversation between his friends.

"Tyber, I'll be leaving soon. All your clothes and things are still aboard the *Nezratia*, right where you left them. Captain Treas' first officer Tomie will be commanding the *Nezratia* now and she has promised that you'll be safe if you choose to return." Traiel said quietly.

"I'm going to miss you." Tyber said in a small child's voice.

"I'll miss you too. But if I can find a new home, maybe someday we might be able to be together again." Traiel said hopefully.

"I'd like that." Tyber said in a whisper.

"Good. Then I'll have something to work toward." Traiel said gently.

"Treifa, how are the preparations for departure coming along?" Tyce asked as he turned, trying to divert attention from Tyber and his father to give them the illusion of privacy.

"Very good. Crew members from the *Timmeraeon* have transported to the *Dorsa* so she will be fully manned for the return voyage. The most serious repairs are nearly completed. We should be able to be underway on schedule."

"Good. Could you also see that our injured aboard the *Yorktown* are made as comfortable as possible when they are returned to our ships? I would like to be sure that they are treated as heroes for the sacrifices that they have made." Tyce said carefully.

"Captain Treas thought of that and has already begun to convert one of her cargo bays into a care facility. Medical personnel from all ships will transport to the *Mangeon* before we depart so that our honored comrades will have the best possible care." Treifa said seriously.

"Thank you Treifa and be sure to convey my thanks to Captain Treas." Tyce said gently.

Treifa nodded his agreement.

"Holy One?" Tyber asked from his father's side.

Tyce turned to look at Tyber with question.

"Can we get a priest or someone to take care of Mykale? I'm worried that he'll start feeling helpless and sorry for himself if he's put in a big room with a lot of other people and can't do anything for himself." Tyber asked hopefully.

Tyce nodded, then turned to Oluf and said, "Will you see that someone is assigned to attend one of our injured men named Mykale? And be sure that Mykale knows that Tyber will be available to provide any further assistance that he may need."

"Yes Holy One, what did you want me to do with this?" Oluf asked as he indicated the black lockbox on the conference table beside him.

"I will be retiring for the evening shortly. You may bring it to my cabin." Tyce said gently.

"As you say Holy One. If you will excuse me, I will make arrangements for Mykale's attendant now and return shortly." Oluf said quickly.

"Yes, of course." Tyce said with a gentle smile and watched as Oluf left.

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters, could I speak with you for a moment?" Lieutenant Simms asked from Vincent's side.

Vincent was startled, but hid it quickly and stepped away to talk to Lieutenant Simms privately.

"I had an idea and thought I'd talk to you about it before doing anything." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"What is it?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"It's about Korrigon, I don't know how well he's going to fit in at the new colony." Lieutenant Simms said carefully.

"I haven't really talked to him much. What's wrong?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Well, I did as you suggested and over the past two weeks I've been going through our security procedures with him to find the holes. We've talked about things and I just get the feeling that he's not going to do well living among the colonists." Lieutenant Simms said in slow consideration.

"What's his problem?" Vincent asked with interest.

"Well, it just seems like he's not committed to improving his situation. It's sort of like he's going through the motions until something better comes along."

"So what was your idea?" Vincent asked slowly, thinking he might already know.

"Well, I was thinking that we might talk to everyone involved and if they all agree, he could be invited to join up with the Okudai exiles. I have a feeling that he might fit in better with them." Lieutenant Simms said in thought.

"What do you need me to do?" Vincent asked as he considered what Lieutenant Simms was saying.

"After reading your reports and talking with you, I've come to respect your opinion about things. You seem to have a unique point of view. I thought that you might see some reason that this is a bad idea, or if not, maybe you could help me talk to the people involved to get them to agree to it." Lieutenant Simms said carefully.

"I think it would be best if you talked to Commander M'Butu and the Captain about it, they'll probably trust your opinion more than mine about something like this. But I'll talk to the Holy One and Traiel to see if they would be willing to go along with it." Vincent said slowly.

"So you do think it's a good idea?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"I don't know about that, but either way, I think he should be given the chance to decide what's going to make him happy." Vincent said carefully.

Lieutenant Simms smiled and said, "Thank you Crewman Winters."

Vincent nodded, then glanced around the room to locate Tyce.

* * * * *

"You asked to see me?" Korrigon asked as he stepped off the turbo lift.

"Yes Korrigon, please come in." Commander M'Butu said casually.

Korrigon hesitantly walked in and realized that most of the people in the room were Okudai.

"Are you aware of what's going on with the Okudai ships?" Commander M'Butu asked seriously.

"Not really sir. I heard that they were here trying to kill a holy leader or something. But that's about it." Korrigon said hesitantly.

"For reasons that we don't need to go into right now, the people who were responsible for the plot to kill the Holy One are being given the Okudai ship *Timmeraeon* so that they can leave. They will be exiles from their own people, but they will be free to go on their way and hopefully make a decent future for themselves." Commander M'Butu said in a careful voice.

After a moment to think about the statement, Korrigon nodded his understanding.

"I've talked to Captain Byrne, Cyril Byrne, The Holy One, and Captain Traiel of the *Timmeraeon* about this and they've all agreed that you should be given the opportunity to join the crew of the *Timmeraeon* if you're interested." Commander M'Butu said cautiously, watching carefully for Korrigon's reaction.

"You want to send me into exile?" Korrigon asked in shock.

Lieutenant Simms stepped forward and said, "We're not sending you anywhere Korrigon. But when you came to us, you were left with little choice but to go with us to the new colony. Since this opportunity came along, we wanted to give you a choice and some control over your future."

Korrigon looked at Lieutenant Simms carefully, and realized that he was the one who orchestrated the entire event.

After a moment of thought, Korrigon quietly said, "Thank you for doing all of this Lieutenant Simms. You're right. Up to now I've been going along with what was happening because I felt like I didn't have any other choice. A part of me wants to leave on the *Timmeraeon* and go back to the kind of life that's familiar to me. But I think that since I do have a choice, I'd really like to continue on to the new colony and try for something different this time... something better."

"I think that's a good decision." Lieutenant Simms said with an honest smile.

"Yeah. I guess it'll make a difference because I'll know that I'm going because I want to, not because I have to." Korrigon said consideringly.

Lieutenant Simms glanced at Vincent with a smile of gratitude.

"Now that that's done, we should be on our way." Traiel said with resignation.

"Already?" Tyber asked from his side.

"Yes son. The *Timmeraeon* is ready to depart and we have a long way to go before we reach our first planet of resources. Every minute we wait here is another minute we will be without food and water as we try to get to our first stop." Traiel said gently.

"I understand." Tyber said as he tried to act bravely.

Traiel squatted down to hug Tyber and whispered into his ear, "As soon as we've found a place and built it up enough to call it a home, I'll find a way to get in touch with you and let you know."

Tyber smiled and hugged his father with all his might.

* * * * *

"Audge, are you about ready to retire for the evening?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yes, after a visit to the sickbay for more pain medication I will be ready." Audge said gently.

"Is it hurting you?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I'm just beginning to feel a slight ache, it's nothing to worry about." Audge said peacefully.

"Actually, I need to go to the sickbay too. I'm supposed to get checked out to see if I need another vitamin shot." Vincent said in a considering voice.

Tyber reluctantly walked away from his father and to Tyce's side.

"Do you want to go to the transporter room with your father?" Tyce asked gently as he pulled Tyber into a casual hug.

"No. We said what we needed to. Besides, he said he didn't want to beam over to his ship looking like he'd just been crying. It sends the wrong message to the crew." Tyber said as he returned the hug firmly.

Audge gripped Tyber's shoulder briefly in a show of support.

"Come on guys. Let's go." Vincent said from Tyber's other side.

"Oluf, come along and bring the box. We'll be retiring for the evening soon... Oh, and remind me before we leave sickbay to ask about a way to keep Audge's cast dry." Tyce said as the group walked toward the door.

"As you say, Holy One." Oluf said quickly as he grabbed the box from the conference table.

* * * * *

"How's he doing JonJon?" Vincent asked as he led the way into sickbay.

"T'Lani said that he's completely healed and that doing all that healing is probably what's making him so tired." JonJon said quietly.

"Do you need to take Fizgig down to use his box or anything while we're here?" Vincent asked as he watched Fizgig sleeping on Lehman's chest.

"No. He's fine for a while." JonJon said peacefully.

"Did Dr. Perry say when Lehman could leave sickbay?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yeah. She said that since he's healed, there's no real medical reason that he needs to be here now. But she said it was okay if I stayed here with him in case he has nightmares or something like that." JonJon said carefully.

"I guess that as soon as we get Audge taken care of, Lehman could come down to deflector control with us... well, unless you want to stay up here with him in sickbay tonight?" Vincent finished uncertainly.

"No. I think we would both be more comfortable in deflector control. As soon as you're ready to go, I'll wake Lehman and we can go with you." JonJon said consideringly.

* * * * *

"Vincent? How are you doing?" Joe asked with concern as Vincent walked into Deflector Control.

"I'm fine... why?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"You've been gone a long time. Thaelan was just starting to tell us about your dinner... something about catsup?" Joe said hesitantly.

"Oh, yeah. Um..." Vincent stammered uncomfortably when the door opened and JonJon walked in with Lehman who was wearing one of Vincent's uniforms.

"Actually, he was the one that went to dinner." Vincent said shyly and made a vague gesture in Lehman's direction.

Silence fell over the room as everyone looked from Vincent to Lehman and back.

"There's two of you." Jimmy said in amazement.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "We can't sneak anything past Jimmy."

"How..." Susan asked, as she looked at the surreal sight before her.

"Vincent?" Joe asked as he looked from one to the other.

"Um, that's me." Vincent said as he raised his hand.

"Lehman should lie down." JonJon said quietly.

"I need to do something first." Lehman said and walked to stand before Joe.

"My name is Lehman, and I was pretending to be Vincent when I came in to change clothes before dinner." Lehman said shyly.

"That was you?" Joe asked hesitantly, still unable to believe what he was seeing.

"Yeah. And I'm sorry I lied to you. If you'll forgive me, I promise that I'll never do it again." Lehman said seriously.

Joe looked carefully into Lehman's eyes and saw that he was really worried.

"Okay. You're forgiven." Joe said with a small smile and opened his arms.

Lehman smiled with relief and hugged Joe tightly.

"Okay Vincent. What happened?" Connie asked from the main.

"It's kind of a long story and Lehman needs to go to bed. I can tell you all about it later. The important thing is that Lehman is going to the new colony with Benny and JonJon." Vincent said firmly.

"And Fizgig." JonJon added with an expression of concern directed at Lehman.

"And Fizgig." Vincent said with a smile.

"Come on Lehman. I think it's our bedtime." JonJon said gently.

Lehman nodded with a gentle smile and walked to JonJon's side.

As they approached the partition to the storage room, they saw that Benny had been watching the whole time.

"Why didn't you warn them about Lehman?" JonJon asked, as he draped one arm around Lehman's shoulders.

"And miss seeing their reactions? No way." Benny said with a chuckle.

"Are you about to go to bed too Benny?" Lehman asked, and Benny heard the hopeful tone in his voice.

"Sure Lehman, I'll be ready in a minute. Save me a spot." Benny said gently.

Lehman happily nodded and walked with JonJon into the supply room.

* * * * *

Darin pressed the comm button by the cabin door and waited.

"Do you think it's too late for me to be visiting?" Darin asked with concern.

"It's not really that late. He should still be up." Rad said consideringly.

"Well, he is the Holy One. Don't holy types usually go to bed early?" Darin asked uncertainly.

"Like I would know." Rad said with a mischievous chuckle.

The door finally opened to reveal a nine or ten year old boy with black hair and very light brown eyes.

"I brought something for the Holy One. Is he here?" Darin asked cautiously.

"Yes. He and Audge are bathing right now, I kind of got the feeling that they might be in there for a while. Is it something I can give him or do you need to deliver it yourself?" The boy asked cautiously.

Darin smiled and said, "I can give it to you. It's just a copy of the Safe Haven Act that he asked about earlier today. Tell him Darin brought it by."

"Oh, okay. By the way, I'm Tyber." The boy said shyly as he accepted the data padd from Darin.

"It's nice to meet you Tyber, this is Rad." Darin said with a casual smile.

"It's nice to meet you both. I'll make sure he gets this as soon as he gets out of the bathing room." Tyber said seriously.

"There's no rush. Thanks." Darin said then glanced at Rad to see if he was ready to leave.

"I'm glad to help. Have a good evening." Tyber said, then retreated back into the cabin.

After the cabin door closed, Darin smiled brightly and said, "Way to go Holy One!"

* * * * *

"Please wake up Crewman Winters." a voice said gently.

Vincent felt a hand on his shoulder and slowly opened his eyes to see Oluf kneeling beside him.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked blearily.

"The Holy One has requested that you, the Chameloid and the Android attend him." Oluf said quietly, trying not to wake the others in the supply room.

"Their names are Lehman and JonJon. If you call them that again I'll start calling you the 'old Okudai priest'." Vincent said firmly.

Oluf reluctantly nodded and said, "My apologies Crewman Winters. I am not entirely familiar with the customs and formalities of your people."

Vincent looked into Oluf's eyes for a moment, then said, "That's okay Oluf. If you'll go out to deflector control and wait for us, I'll get Lehman and JonJon up."

Oluf stood and gave a courteous bow before leaving the room.

Vincent forced himself to get out of his sleeping bag, even though a part of him very much wanted to sleep for a few more hours.

* * * * *

"Lou, the Holy One wants to meet with us. Will you let everyone know if we're not back before they wake up?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure thing. Go have fun." Lou said with a smile.

"At 04:00? Yeah, I bet there's just tons of fun things to do right now." Vincent said sarcastically as he walked to the door where the others were waiting.

* * * * *

"What's going on?" Vincent asked cautiously as he followed Oluf into Tyce's cabin.

"The Gorn ships will be arriving soon. If you would all agree to it, I would like for you to accompany me over to the lead Gorn vessel to meet the Gorn Holy One." Tyce said frankly.

"Why?" Vincent asked suspiciously, feeling that Tyce wasn't telling them everything.

"I can't really say more. I just know that this is what needs to be done right now." Tyce said honestly.

Vincent reluctantly nodded his acceptance.

"Are you feeling up to this?" JonJon asked Lehman quietly, but everyone in the room clearly heard.

"Yeah. I'm fine now. I think I just needed a good sleep." Lehman said with an encouraging smile.

"Oluf, do you understand the protocols for meeting with the Gorn?" Tyce asked firmly.

"Yes Holy One." Oluf said reverently.

"Good. I need you to go to the bridge and arrange for a shuttle to transport us to the lead Gorn ship when it arrives..." Tyce said seriously.

"But Holy One, I should attend you at this meeting." Oluf said with concern.

"Normally that would be true, but not this time. Only these four may accompany me. When the Gorn ship arrives, instruct the *Yorktown*'s bridge crew on the protocols. The Gorn will be wary of a Federation vessel and any oversight could become a source of conflict. Oluf, there is no one else who can perform this duty better than you. I am depending on you." Tyce said as he stared deeply into Oluf's eyes.

"I understand." Oluf said with resignation.

"Go to their bridge now, time is short." Tyce said seriously.

"Yes Holy One." Oluf said with a bow, then retreated from the room.

"Audge, I would like for you to check on the patients that we met in the *Yorktown*'s sickbay. Make sure that they have everything they need and are comfortable." Tyce said carefully.

"It's my job to stay with you and protect you." Audge said quietly as he looked into Tyce's eyes.

Tyce nodded with regret and said, "That is true. But you can't come with us. Will you trust me?"

Audge smiled at the question and said, "Yes Tyce. I will always trust you. Do you need me to do anything else before I leave?"

"No. I'll contact you on the *Mangeon* with further instructions before we depart for Okuda." Tyce said seriously.

"I'll be waiting. Take care of yourself." Audge said as he looked into Tyce's eyes with concern.

Tyce smiled and said, "If I weren't completely sure that I would be safe, I would have you by my side."

Audge hesitantly nodded, then turned to leave.

"Would someone please bring the box? We need to be going." Tyce said as he looked at the group of four boys who had been watching silently.

"I'll get it." Tyber said quickly and walked to the table where Oluf had left the box the night before.

* * * * *

"Holy One, your priest said that you needed a shuttle." Commander M'Butu said as the group walked into the shuttle bay.

"Yes Commander. It is necessary for us to greet the Gorn Holy One personally when he arrives." Tyce said seriously.

Commander M'Butu looked at the collection of boys for a moment, then said, "I would be honored to pilot the shuttle if that is acceptable."

Tyce considered for a moment, then said, "I hope you will not take offense to this, but if you pilot for us, you will need to remain on the shuttle while we are aboard the Gorn ship."

"Just tell me what I need to do." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Tyce smiled and said, "When we leave the ship, you will receive an automated navigation signal. Allow the Gorn ship to assume control of the shuttle. That will be all until we are ready to depart."

"I understand. The preflight has already been done and the *Windsor* is ready to depart." Commander M'Butu said as he indicated the large shuttle.

"Let's go aboard and wait for the Gorn ships to arrive." Tyce said calmly and started walking toward the *Windsor.*

The rest of the group exchanged curious looks, but followed silently.

* * * * *

"Captain, sensors are picking up three... fifteen... thirty Gorn ships." Lieutenant Clark said as he felt numb shock wash over him at the sight.

"Discontinue the use of all sensors. They will perceive it as a violation of their ships." Oluf said firmly.

Lieutenant Clark looked at the Captain with question.

"Do it. Ensign Munroe, do a ship wide shutdown of all sensors and notify all departments that they are not to attempt any type of scan of the approaching vessels." Captain Byrne said firmly.

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Clark and Ensign Munroe said in unison.

"Please contact the shuttle to let them know that the Gorn ships are arriving." Oluf said as he watched the main view screen.

"Lieutenant Patterson?" Captain Byrne asked as he glanced at her.

"Yes sir." Debbie said quickly, then made the call.

"Oh my God!" Ensign Munroe gasped in astonishment as she saw the view screen fill with forty Gorn warships. Any one of them would be a match for the *Yorktown*.

"Do not hail or attempt any kind of contact with them. It would be seen as disrespectful." Oluf warned.

"Absolutely not." Debbie said, as she looked at the screen in wonder.

"The shuttlecraft *Windsor* has exited the shuttle bay." Ensign Munroe said with distraction.

"We are merely observers in these events. Remain here silently and the Gorn will contact us if there is any need for our participation." Oluf said seriously.

"Lieutenant Patterson, monitor all channels for any attempt at contact." Captain Byrne said over his shoulder at her.

"Yes sir." Debbie said and dragged her attention back to her communications panel.

* * * * *

"The Gorn ship has control of the shuttle." Commander M'Butu said through the shuttle's comm.

"Can you tell us what we're doing now?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Actually, I don't know much more than you do at this point. I'm going to introduce you to the Gorn Holy One, then we're going to see what happens next." Tyce said cautiously.

"Why us? I mean, why not Benny or Darin or Audge?" Vincent asked curiously.

Tyce smiled and said, "It's true that there is a reason that you four were chosen to accompany me, but I can't really explain further, in case I am mistaken."

"Does it have something to do with what's in the box?" JonJon asked carefully.

Tyce glanced at the black box that Tyber had put in the seat next to him.

"I brought the box for the same reason I brought the four of you." Tyce said carefully.

"It's like we're talking in circles around each other." Lehman said with a curious glance at Tyce.

"Dancing." Vincent said with a smile.

JonJon giggled at the statement and the feeling of tension in the room seemed to ease somewhat.

"We're entering the lead Gorn vessel." Commander M'Butu said over the comm.

"Tyber, you can leave the box here for now. We'll come back and get it if it's needed." Tyce said seriously.

Tyber nodded that he heard.

"I guess it's time to meet the Gorn." Vincent said reluctantly as he stood.

JonJon and Lehman stood more slowly and moved from their seats to join Vincent in the aisle.

"Do we need to do anything special like bow or anything like that?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"No. The Holy One will appreciate it if you show him respect in the manner of your own culture rather than try to conform to his." Tyce said as he led the way to the door.

"Let me get that for you Holy One." Commander M'Butu said as he walked around the group of boys and activated the main door of the shuttle.

"Thank you Commander. If all goes well, we will see you soon." Tyce said carefully.

"And if it doesn't go well?" Commander M'Butu asked cautiously.

Tyce looked into Commander M'Butu's eyes and revealed a little of the concern he was feeling.

"I see someone." Vincent said from the door of the shuttle.

"It's time." Tyce said as he walked past Vincent to lead the group.

* * * * *

"What is the meaning of bringing these creatures?" J'Laad asked sternly as he watched the group leaving the shuttle.

All the boys froze in place as they looked at the large reptilian creature with greenish gray mottled skin.

Tyce seemed to ignore the question as he said, "My people have just reached the precipice of the third age. Then a series of unlikely events brought me to meet this group who represent many different people."

"They all appear to be of your people." J'Laad said cautiously.

"Appearances can be deceiving." Tyce said, then motioned for Vincent to step forward.

"This is Crewman Vincent Winters of the Federation starship *Yorktown*. He has been adopted by fathers from three worlds." Tyce said in a leading tone.

J'Laad nodded slowly, apparently understanding the significance.

Tyce turned to indicate Lehman and said, "Lehman is a Chameloid, orphaned by poverty."

"It's too soon. My people have only just entered the third age." J'Laad said reluctantly.

"As have mine, and theirs." Tyce said frankly.

"Tyber is one of my people, his father was instrumental in the plot to remove me from service." Tyce said in an informative tone.

"Orphaned by treachery." J'Laad muttered as he looked at Tyber.

"And JonJon is an Android." Tyce said with a glance at JonJon.

"Immortal child." J'Laad said, barely even looking at JonJon.

"So what I need to know is if you happen to have the child of laughter and light with you?" Tyce asked frankly.

J'Laad stared at the silent group of boys for a moment, then reached beside him to brush his claw-like finger across a crystal embedded in the control panel. Soon he began to make sounds that were like gurgles and hisses to the boys untrained ears.

"I'm going to guess that means yes." Vincent said to Lehman who was now at his side.

J'Laad turned his attention to the boys and said, "You are welcomed here. Please come with me so you can be made comfortable."

"Tyber, would you get the box?" Tyce asked quietly.

Rather than answer, Tyber hurried to the shuttle.

J'Laad looked at Tyce curiously.

"We will be ready in a moment." Tyce said seriously.

J'Laad nodded cautiously, then opened a panel and took out a necklace with a large jewel on it.

Tyce nodded in approval as Tyber returned from the shuttle.

"You brought it?" J'Laad asked with surprise.

"Of course. I assume that you have yours as well." Tyce said frankly.

"I do... I suppose that whether we consider ourselves ready or not, it is time." J'Laad said with resignation as he led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

Vincent noticed that the lighting in the hallway seemed to be harsh and the humidity unusually high.

"This place reminds me of my home." Lehman said casually as they walked.

"How is that?" JonJon asked curiously.

"It is very moist where I am from, though not usually this hot." Lehman said in a considering voice.

"I guess it gets like this in Florida too sometimes." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Is that your home planet?" Tyber asked curiously.

Vincent smiled and said, "It's the place on my planet where I'm from. My planet has lots of different climates."

The group all fell silent as they passed two large reptilian creatures who seemed to be staring at them.

"I hope they're not thinking that we're dinner." Lehman said in a whisper.

J'Laad began to laugh from ahead of them and said, "Not to worry young Chameloid. If you are invited to a meal here it will be as a guest, not as an entrée."

"Thanks." Lehman said hesitantly, not feeling especially comforted.

J'Laad chuckled and gestured to a doorway.

Tyce led the way into the room and the group of boys followed close behind.

* * * * *

As the group entered, they all noticed a thin, golden skinned reptile looking at them from the other side of the room.

J'Laad walked across the room and placed the necklace over the golden reptile's head.

"This will allow you to speak their language." J'Laad said in a comforting voice.

The reptilian boy looked around the room with question and his gaze finally stopped on the group of boys looking back at him curiously.

Before anyone could say a word, the boy broke into uncontrollable laughter and exclaimed, "They *do* look like hairless monkeys!"

Vincent couldn't help but smile at the statement and began to laugh.

After the laughter had quieted, J'Laad said, "I would like all of you to meet..." Then a series of gurgles and hisses followed that were apparently the boy's name.

"Oh wow. Um, I don't think I could say that if I tried." Vincent said reluctantly.

He looked around to see that the others agreed.

"Could you say it again? Maybe we could come up with something close?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

The golden skinned Gorn seemed to be amused by the suggestion, but slowly began to pronounce his name in a series of gurgles, growls and hisses.

"That middle part sounded something like 'hrrskr', can we call you Oscar?" Vincent asked hopefully.

The boy considered for a moment, then said, "I like the sound of it, but before I agree, does it have a meaning?"

"Well, I'm sure it does, but I don't know what it is. It's just a name that sounds a little bit like your name." Vincent said carefully.

"We can consult the *Yorktown*'s computer if you want to know the meaning of the name." Tyce said carefully.

"No. I simply wanted to know if I was being given a name that was descriptive in some way." the Gorn boy said carefully.

"Oh, I get it. You wanted to know if we were calling you 'snake-face' or something." Vincent said casually.

Oscar looked at Vincent with question, obviously not understanding the reference.

"It doesn't matter. Oscar doesn't mean anything bad. I promise." Vincent said with a smile.

"I would like to introduce all of you to the heir to the third estate of the Gorn empire, Oscar." J'Laad said formally.

Vincent wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but felt that he should bow out of respect.

The rest of the boys followed Vincent's example and bowed respectfully to Oscar.

"Thank you." Oscar said with surprise at the polite and respectful gesture.

"Oscar, this is the Holy One of the Okudai people. It is proper to also address him as Holy One." J'Laad said seriously.

"Another Holy One? A mammal?" Oscar said in wonder.

Tyce smiled at the statement and said, "Yes Oscar. Many races have Holy Ones like yours. Those who don't, have people who serve the same function with our assistance."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Holy One." Oscar said respectfully.

"It's nice to meet you too Oscar. Let me introduce you quickly to the others so we can start this." Tyce said, then looked to see if Oscar was ready.

After a nod from Oscar, Tyce said, "The one in the uniform is Vincent, the one who looks like him is Lehman, the blond is JonJon and the one with long dark hair is Tyber."

"I will try to remember." Oscar said carefully.

"If you don't remember, you can always ask. We won't mind." Vincent said with assurance.

Oscar smiled and said, "Thank you. I have never spoken to mammals before. I thought you would be more... primitive."

Vincent giggled at the statement and said, "I kinda thought the same thing about you."

Oscar's eyes went wide with surprise at the statement, then a look of curiosity seemed to fill his expression.

"Did you have a question?" Vincent asked cautiously, hoping he was interpreting the expression correctly.

"Well yes. I have studied about sentient mammals, but there are certain things I wasn't sure about. I am curious to know... Do you really have nipples?"

"Yeah, do you want to see?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Oscar nodded quickly.

Vincent opened his jumpsuit uniform enough to expose one of his nipples.

"THAT'S SO DISGUSTING!" Oscar said in amazement, then started laughing himself silly.

Everyone watched as Oscar slowly fell to the floor, clutching his sides with laughter.

J'Laad looked to Tyce with question and received a nod in return.

After a moment for Oscar to get himself under control again, J'Laad said, "We believe that you five share a destiny."

All the boys turned their attention to J'Laad at the vague statement.

"The only way to know for sure is in that box." Tyce said as he indicated the box in the floor beside Tyber.

"What's in the box?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Perhaps nothing, perhaps many things. You'll have to open it to find out." Tyce said with concern evident in his voice.

"What exactly is going to happen when we open the box?" Vincent asked more carefully.

"I don't know." Tyce said, then noticed that J'Laad had moved to the door.

"No, wait! What are we supposed to do?" Vincent asked in a rush.

"Just open the box. After that, it's up to you." Tyce said, then followed J'Laad out the door.

* * * * *

"Who else has the feeling that this is really gonna suck?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"I thought it was just me." Oscar said as he walked to Vincent's side.

"The Holy Ones wouldn't do anything to put us in danger... would they?" Lehman asked uncertainly.

"Normally I'd say no. But from the look in Tyce's eyes... he's scared." Vincent said reluctantly.

"We could just not open the box, then tell him there was nothing in it." JonJon said quietly.

"You want to lie to a Holy One?" Oscar asked with surprise.

"No, we don't want to. But JonJon is just coming up with another possibility so we can all think about it. " Vincent said seriously.

Oscar nodded his acceptance of the reasoning.

"We're going to open it. We have to." Tyber said as a statement of fact.

Silence fell over the group for a moment, then Vincent quietly said, "I'll do it."

"Me too." Lehman said and held out his hand.

Vincent smiled and laid his hand on top of Lehman's.

"I'm with you." JonJon said as he looked at the two identical boys.

"An heir to the third estate of the Gorn empire wouldn't be worthy of his name if he were afraid of the unknown." Oscar said as he placed his claw-like hand over JonJon's.

Everyone looked at Tyber with question.

"I'm the one that said we have to." Tyber said with a smile and made the stack of hands complete.

Vincent looked around the group, then said, "Let's do this."

Everyone looked at each other with question for a moment, then Oscar and Vincent moved at the same time toward the box.

Vincent gave Oscar a quick smile then, as one, they opened the lid.

Chapter 30

There was a long moment of silence as the group of boys stared in disbelief.

"What does it mean?" Tyber finally whispered.

"Nothing." Oscar answered in an uncertain voice.

Vincent shook himself out of his stupor and glanced around the group as he said, "After all that build up, this was a real let down."

"But why would they bring us in here just to open an empty box?" Tyber asked in confusion.

"I really don't think they knew it was empty." Lehman said quietly.

"Well JonJon, I guess you called that one." Vincent said with a teasing smile at his friend.

"Android intuition." JonJon said with false bravado.

Vincent giggled at the statement, then said, "Let's go tell the Holy Ones that it was empty so maybe I can get back to the *Yorktown* in time to have some breakfast before I have to go to work."

"I'm hoping I can get some more sleep." Lehman said, honestly.

JonJon hugged Lehman to his side and guided him to start walking.

As the five boys approached the door, they dissolved into nothingness.

* * * * *

"Okay... Did anyone else see what I just saw?" Vincent asked as he tried to recover from a tingling sensation that seemed to be coursing through his entire body.

"If you saw the five of us walk to the door and vanish, then yes." Oscar said hesitantly.

"What does it mean?" Tyber asked in confusion.

"Maybe we should try to follow them. They may be duplicates of us, intent on taking our places." Oscar said speculatively, then started walking toward the door.

"No. I think I know what that was. You don't have to worry about it. We won't be seeing them again." Vincent said, as he carefully considered what he was feeling.

Oscar turned on him and asked, "What do you think it was?"

"I think... Actually, I'm pretty sure that what we just saw was a time split." Vincent said slowly.

"Time split? What's that?" Tyber asked curiously.

"It's kind of hard to explain, and I'm really not supposed to talk about most of what I know about it. But I've felt this feeling before, and it means that something just happened to our timeline. Since there were just two groups of us, I think what we saw was what would have happened to us if the box were empty." Vincent said in slow concentration.

"Very good." A man's voice said from behind the group.

The group turned as one to see a tall transparent man standing about six feet away.

His skin appeared to be thin and made of something like crinkled white paper and his eyes were sunken in, looking like they were solid black.

"Who are you?" Vincent asked before anyone else found their voice.

"I was known as Eliam. Now I am the keeper of this archive." The man said quietly, as he gestured toward the box which had a glowing sphere about four feet wide hovering above it.

The group turned and moved around so they could all easily see the glittery light.

"It's kind of pretty." Lehman offered shyly.

"As holograms go, it's alright. I wouldn't really brag on it." Vincent said with a shrug.

"I don't know for sure, but it looks like a model of the universe." Tyber said as he leaned in to get a better look.

"No. It isn't. It's hard to tell, as small as it is, but I'm not seeing any familiar formations." Oscar said in a considering voice.

Vincent looked more closely and tried to find the Milky Way, the formation he had the most familiarity with.

After another moment of inspecting the hologram, Vincent said, "Oscar is right. There's nothing here that I recognize."

"It's doing something." Lehman said, as he pointed toward the center.

All the boys watched in silence as one after another of the little lights started moving toward the center. As each one reached the central point, it winked out.

The boys watched silently as more and more little lights winked out.

"This is giving me the creeps. I feel like I'm watching the deaths of billions of people." JonJon finally said in a whisper.

Vincent looked back at Eliam with question, to find him watching the model with an expression of profound sorrow.

"It's horrible." Tyber said in a whisper, as tears began to well in his eyes.

"It's the natural cycle of death and rebirth in the universe." Eliam said in a resigned tone that didn't quite hide his sorrow.

"Rebirth? Everything is being destroyed. How is there rebirth after that?" Vincent asked as the central point started glowing.

Silence was the only answer as everyone was transfixed on the sight.

The model seemed to pick up speed and within a second, all of the tiny lights were drawn to spiral into the growing molten central point.

A moment after the last light disappeared, Lehman asked, "So is that it? The end of everything?"

"No. The beginning." Eliam said with certainty.

As soon as the words left his mouth, the swirling molten glob exploded.

All the boys scampered back as molten debris flew out in all directions and expanded to fill one end of the large room.

"It's the big bang." Vincent whispered in realization.

"I think what we're seeing is billions of years of progress in a matter of seconds." Oscar speculated as he looked around the room.

"Vincent, is that ours?" JonJon asked as he pointed.

Vincent moved to JonJon's side and looked where he was pointing.

"Maybe. But it's not right yet. We probably need to give it a few million years to settle down." Vincent said in thought.

Oscar walked to his side and watched as the molten globs of debris formed into recognizable patterns.

"So does this mean that before the universe was born that there was a whole other universe that was destroyed?" Tyber asked, curiously.

"That's what it looks like." Vincent said as he continued to watch the different star systems develop.

All the boys were startled when everything seemed to freeze in place.

"You reasoned that out well." Eliam said from behind them.

"Why are we here?" Oscar asked in a firm voice.

"Why are any of us here?" Eliam said with a gentle smile.

Vincent shook his head and said, "We're not going to do this. I didn't get enough sleep, I'm hungry and my joints are aching. Will you just tell us why we were all brought here so we can get started doing whatever it is you need us to do?"

Eliam seemed to be surprised by the statement, but his only answer was a casual bow and a gesture toward the conference table at the other side of the room.

When the last of the boys was seated, Eliam said, "What you just witnessed was an ending and a beginning."

"We figured that part out." Vincent said shortly.

JonJon put a hand on Vincent's arm to get his attention, then put a finger to his lips to silently say, 'shush'.

Vincent rolled his eyes, then turned his attention back to Eliam.

"What you saw happened, and will happen again." Eliam continued.

Vincent nodded and fought the urge to say, 'Well, duh!'.

"We are approaching the point of critical mass, when all matter will be drawn together again or will continue on to allow another cycle." Eliam said carefully.

Vincent thought about the words for a moment, then quietly said, "Okay. I get that. But I still don't see why we're here. What do we have to do with it?"

"The cycle of destruction and rebirth will continue until a civilization develops that is worthy of continued existence."

The boys looked around at each other, barely comprehending the scale of what he was saying.

"What do we have to do with it?" Vincent asked again.

"There are certain creatures in existence that have the ability to alter fate. Their presence and force of will can cause things that were predestined, to become otherwise." Eliam said carefully.

"You five are just beginning to find that power in yourselves and you will use those abilities to determine the ultimate fate of the universe." Eliam said, and Vincent noticed that he was more transparent than just a minute before.

"Okay. Are you saying that we five are some kind of super people?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Remind me to feed him before we go anywhere with him again." JonJon whispered to Lehman.

Lehman nodded his agreement.

"Super people? No... Each of you are members of your own species and not unlike others of your kind. But as each of you grow, you will begin to notice that if you invest your thought and caring into a project, the random factors will seem to align in your favor." Eliam said carefully.

"That sounds good, except... I don't grow." JonJon finished hesitantly.

Vincent glanced at JonJon, then turned to Eliam and nodded in agreement.

Eliam seemed to consider for a moment before saying, "Whether you are aware of it or not, it is necessary for what is to come. If you are one of the five, you grow."

"The nail." Lehman whispered.

JonJon looked at him curiously, not understanding what one thing had to do with the other.

"The doctors on the *Enterprise* said that it might effect your development." Vincent said cautiously.

"So my hardware was physically altered to allow me to fulfill this destiny? And I was drawn to be in this time and place? Did you kill my family?" JonJon asked darkly, as he glared at Eliam.

"No young one, not me. The force that guides the universe brought the five of you to meet in this time and place, and made sure that you had the ability to do what was asked of you." Eliam said cautiously and was now difficult to see.

"Okay guys. It looks like Eliam's nightlight is about to burn out, so let's see what we have to do before we're stuck sitting here talking to nothing." Vincent said firmly.

"Each of you will go and live your lives as you would have before, only now you will do so with the knowledge that you can make changes in destiny. Your presence and will can alter the predestined fates of people... or even worlds." Eliam said seriously.

"There's got to be more to it than that, or we wouldn't be here. Spill it." Vincent said firmly.

"Others have worked to put in place a network of people who can aid you in your efforts to alter the destiny of this universe. They would be put in place as respected figures of authority." Eliam said cautiously.

"The Holy Ones. Two of them are waiting for us to finish." Oscar said as he watched Eliam cautiously.

"Yes. Your Holy Ones will provide you access to places that you might not otherwise be permitted. They will alert you to situations where your unique abilities might be of benefit. They are resources for you to draw upon." Eliam said, and was now little more than an undefined glow.

"You said that we have to change the destiny of the universe. How do we do that?" Tyber asked quickly.

"You may be able to completely change the destiny of an entire planet by altering the destiny of just one man. Likewise the fate of the universe may be changed by altering the fate of just one planet. So it follows, that if you can change the fate of one pivotal being, the universe might be allowed to continue on to fulfill more of it's ultimate potential." Eliam said slowly.

"But how do we find that man?" Lehman asked, cautiously.

"You will be drawn to him. It is part of your nature to be drawn to the people who are instrumental in the formation of the future." Eliam said, as he turned his insubstantial face toward Lehman.

"Okay. So we find the guy who can change the future of a world, what then? What do we do?" JonJon asked as he squinted his eyes to try and see Eliam's facial features.

"Care. Become involved. Help him realize his dream. Your presence and your will for it to be so is all that is necessary for a destiny to be rewritten." Eliam said in a whisper of a voice.

"I can barely see you. Are you okay?" Lehman asked with concern.

"The abrupt time displacement provided me the energy to manifest before you, but as time flows away from it, I am fading." Eliam said with concern.

"What else do we need to know?" Vincent asked quickly.

"Only one more thing. A warning. The failure of the five in my time was due to their being universally known. They were made the supreme rulers of the five great empires because it was known by all that they had the ability to save our universe. When our universe reached it's critical mass and all matter began to return to it's origin, our societies fell into ruin and our civilizations collapsed. The five were unable to perform their duties and improve their empires because they... we became the focal points. Our ability to change the universe was lost because there were few factors that we, as emperors, did not control. There were not enough random factors to allow us to change anything of significance. Heed my warning, do not announce the true nature of your gifts or you face the possibility of losing this chance. If you fail in your duties, one of you may have to choose to give up his physical body to become the keeper of the archive and warn the next universe."

The last few words were little more than whispers in the empty air.

"Wow. That sucks." Vincent finally said.

Oscar nodded his agreement.

"I guess we should go tell the Holy Ones what happened so we can find out what to do next." JonJon said cautiously.

"I need to do one thing first." Vincent said as he walked to the box.

He carefully closed it, then turned and said, "Oscar."

Oscar looked at Vincent curiously.

Vincent pulled open the top of his jumpsuit enough to expose his right nipple.

Oscar let out a yelp of laughter, then turned away to try and get himself under control.

"I just thought things were getting a little too serious. Now I'm ready." Vincent said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Wait." Tyber said, before he reached the door.

Everyone stopped to look at him curiously.

"Before we go talk to the Holy Ones, I think we need to talk about what just happened." Tyber said with concern.

"What is there to talk about? The five of us were brought here to save the universe. The only choices we have are do it or don't. Does anyone want the universe to die?" Vincent asked seriously.

"No, but there has to be someone better than me to do this..." Tyber said in a hollow tone.

"Nope. You're here. That means that you're good enough." Vincent said simply.

"I believe the mammal is correct. We have been selected for this task by forces beyond our comprehending. Our very presence is all the evidence required to prove that we are worthy." Oscar said, then gave Vincent a teasing smile.

"Listen guys, my dad was an insane murderer who secretly wanted to pork my brother. If anyone should feel unworthy it's me. But we're gonna do this because there's no other choice. Besides that, I think 'Savior of the Universe' will look pretty good on a resume if I ever decide to leave Starfleet." Vincent finished with a cheeky grin.

"Okay Vincent. I guess you're right. I mean, if you think about it, nothing has really changed. Eliam said that we're just going to go and live our lives like before." Tyber said speculatively.

"Except that now we'll know that if we help someone, it might be that one person who will tip the balance and let the universe keep living." JonJon said in thought.

"Good. Then if we're all agreed, let's go. The sooner we meet with the Holy Ones, the sooner I can get something to eat. I'm starving." Vincent said, as he started toward the door.

"Does he always think with his stomach?" Oscar asked Tyber curiously as they followed.

"I don't know. I met him for the first time yesterday." Tyber said in thought.

"I see... What does it mean, 'to pork'?" Oscar asked more quietly.

Tyber looked at the other boys who had moved ahead and quietly said, "I was hoping you could tell me."

* * * * *

As the boys walked into the hallway, they stopped as a group to stare at the nearly seven foot tall Gorn who appeared to be waiting for them.

"Where are the Holy Ones?" Oscar asked in his growling and hissing language.

The rest of the boys shared glances of surprise that they understood what he was saying.

"They await your presence in the Lounging Hall." The large reptile answered.

Oscar considered for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "Our guests require food. Please see that a traditional feast is prepared that is in accordance with mammal eating habits. I will conduct our guests to the lounging hall."

"I will see to it, but... what do they eat?" The large reptile asked as he glanced at the group of boys watching him.

"I do not know. Have the cooks prepare a variety, and we will hope that none of the selections will be offensive." Oscar said carefully.

"I will notify the cooks immediately." The large reptile said, then hurried away.

Oscar looked at the group behind him and said in English, "Follow me, the Holy Ones are this way."

Vincent thought carefully about the pronunciation before saying in the Gorn language, "In the Lounging Hall?"

Oscar stopped suddenly and looked at Vincent with surprise.

"We could understand everything both of you just said." JonJon said quietly.

Oscar took off the crystal he had been wearing and asked, "You can now understand our language?"

Lehman nodded and said, "It sounded like a language that I learned to speak by telepathy. Not really familiar, but I understood the meaning clearly."

Oscar nodded absently, then started walking again.

"I wonder what else Eliam did to us without telling us?" Tyber asked speculatively.

Vincent took a deep breath, then let out a long, sustained shriek.

"You don't have to use that kind of language Vincent. We're guests here." JonJon said in a chastising tone.

"And you say my language is difficult to pronounce." Oscar said with a chuckle.

Vincent smiled at the statement.

"I understood what you said, but what language was that?" Tyber asked as the group approached a large double door.

"Eagle. I just figured that if Eliam taught all of us to speak Gorn, that he might have given all of us all of each other's languages." Vincent said casually.

"But Eagle? You speak Eagle?" JonJon asked in wonder.

Vincent nodded and said, "So do you now."

* * * * *

As the group walked into the large room, Oscar said, "This is where our crew can come to relax while off duty."

Vincent looked around the brightly lit room and immediately noticed the higher humidity.

"The rest of the crew have vacated the area so we may speak." J'Laad said from on top of a large platform at the center of the room.

Oscar continued to lead the way to the platform, then around the side to reveal a ramp that led up to the Holy Ones.

It was warmer and the light was even brighter on top of the platform. Vincent felt like he was back in Florida in the summertime.

"What was in the box?" Tyce asked from J'Laad's side.

Before Vincent could answer, Tyber said, "Everything that is."

Tyce seemed disturbed by the answer.

"...And has been." Lehman added in a small voice a moment later.

"I had almost hoped that they would see nothing." J'Laad said quietly.

"You're in the wrong timeline for that." Vincent said, before he could think better of it.

J'Laad and Tyce both looked at Vincent with matching expressions of surprise that were verging on panic.

"What happened? What about timelines?" Tyce asked firmly, sounding nothing like his usual, gentle self.

"I just... When we opened the box, I think the timeline split." Vincent said carefully.

"Why would you believe such an unlikely thing?" J'Laad asked slowly, obviously trying to appear calm.

A combination of the early hour, his empty stomach and a stranger than usual morning, even for him, sparked a fire of anger within Vincent.

"I know what it feels like okay? I'm not allowed to talk about how, but when we opened the box, it caused something to happen that affected time. All of us saw our alternate selves walking away from the box like they didn't see us. When we opened the box, time split into two different realities." Vincent said, as he tried to get control of his building rage.

"Vincent." Oscar said seriously.

Without thought, Vincent turned to Oscar with a full glare of anger burning in his eyes.

Oscar tugged on the sleeve of the robe he was wearing and caused the robe to fall open at the neck. As it opened it revealed one side of his smooth, golden chest. The pectoral muscle was nicely defined, but there was no trace of a nipple.

Vincent's anger dissipated in a burst of laughter.

After a moment for Vincent to calm down, J'Laad said, "Come and sit with us. We have some matters to discuss and I have something to give you."

All the boys made their way fully onto the platform and gathered in a semi circle in front of J'Laad and Tyce.

"Did the keeper of the archive reveal himself to you?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"If you mean, did we see Eliam, yeah." Vincent said carefully.

JonJon bumped against Vincent's shoulder and whispered, "I'm sure that's what he meant. He *is* the Holy One."

Vincent looked at JonJon with a smirk but didn't reply.

As J'Laad was about to speak, Oscar broke into a howl of laughter.

Everyone turned their attention to Oscar as he fell back on the floor.

"Reveal himself!" Oscar squeaked with delight.

"He's good for my ego." Vincent said quietly to JonJon.

"Just remember, you would have gotten the same response if you had shown him your nipple again." JonJon said sagely.

"Okay. I'm as funny as a nipple. I guess I can live with that." Vincent said with a smile at Oscar's laughter.

As Oscar's gales of laughter finally began to subside, J'Laad said, "If we may continue."

"I'm sorry Holy One, but the double meaning of the words used was quite..."

"I'm aware of the double meaning. I have known their language since before your birth." J'Laad said seriously.

Oscar finally settled back into his position sitting upright before J'Laad, then waited expectantly.

"Yes. Well... what was I saying?" J'Laad asked as he looked at Tyce with question.

"Holy One, we have a feast prepared when you and your guests are ready to dine." A small stout Gorn said from just inside the doorway.

"Yes. We will be down shortly." J'Laad said with confusion.

"The mammals did not have an opportunity to eat before they came to our ship. Apparently it is early in the morning by their ship's time." Oscar hurried to explain.

"So you asked the cooks to prepare a feast?" J'Laad asked carefully.

"Yes. It seemed the proper way." Oscar said seriously, then finished with a smile.

"It is good. Come, we will dine." J'Laad said as he stood and walked toward the ramp.

"Tyber, would you mind bringing the box?" Tyce asked quietly.

Tyber looked where J'Laad had been sitting to see another black box, nearly identical to the one they had opened.

"Oh no. The last one told us that we have to save the universe. I don't want to know what's in this one." Vincent said firmly.

Tyce chuckled and said, "It's just something to help you. Once we've had our meal, we'll explain everything."

* * * * *

When they were finally all down the ramp, they spotted a variety of platters of food sat in a decorative pattern near the base of the platform.

"I like dining traditionally." Oscar said happily as he walked between two platters and took a seat on the ground with his back against the base of the platform.

"There is no etiquette in traditional dining. Just sit and eat." J'Laad said as he moved slowly between the platters and took a seat as Oscar had done.

"Do we need to sit over there?" Tyber asked curiously.

J'Laad smiled as he said, "Yes. This tradition of our people was born of necessity. During the hottest part of the day, we would have a meal break in the shadows of the great pillars. Hundred's of people would be gathered, resting with their backs against the pillars and the feast spread out before them."

While J'Laad had been talking, everyone found places to sit with their backs to the base of the platform.

"Our people have lost so many things to innovation and technology. We have nearly lost the essence of what it means to be Gorn. But this tradition continues on, it reminds us of our origin, when our only tools were stone and wood." J'Laad said with a distant look of peace.

"You can eat. There is no ceremony, you simply take whatever food appeals to you." Oscar said as he picked up a clawful of something that looked deep fried.

"I don't know what most of these things are." JonJon said as he looked over the selection.

"Glurrah! Would you hand me some of that?" Lehman asked with excitement.

JonJon saw the cluster of lavender fruit that Lehman was pointing at and cautiously handed him a bunch.

"These are my favorite, we have these on my home world." Lehman said, and began to split open a finger sized lavender pod then sucked the contents out.

JonJon hesitantly took one and opened it carefully.

"You eat like a female." Oscar said with a chuckle.

JonJon took that as a challenge, and quickly sucked the contents of the pod into his mouth.

After a moment to get past the slimy texture, the flavor was sweet and pleasant.

"Hey Oscar, would you hand me some of that meat?" Vincent asked around a mouthful of something that tasted like carrots.

"Are you aware that the creature is warm blooded? I would not wish for you to eat something that would offend your morals." Oscar said carefully.

"Me and my morals both think that the meat looks like it would taste good." Vincent said, then bit into something he imagined should taste like an apple, but ended up being more of a radish.

Oscar selected a relatively large piece of meat and quietly said, "If you will pull it apart with me, it is considered to be a sign of friendship."

Vincent smiled and quickly grabbed onto the opposite side of the piece of meat.

"Do you want to do that?" JonJon asked Lehman curiously.

"No. I don't like Juppa rats, they give me gas." Lehman said, then leaned forward to grab another bunch of lavender fruit.

JonJon looked over to see Vincent and Oscar both enjoying their, now separate, pieces of meat.

After a moment of watching them happily eating, JonJon turned and asked, "Would you like to share a rat with me Tyber?"

* * * * *

J'Laad settled back after eating his fill and smiled at all the boys enjoying the food before them.

"I never imagined that there would be a day when people of so many different species would be gathered and sharing this most ancient tradition of my people. I suppose it's superstition, but I can't help but believe that this is a very good sign." J'Laad said with a peaceful smile.

Tyce watched for a moment longer before saying, "They don't see species. Look at them. They're just enjoying good food and good company. Why can't we all live this way?"

"If we fulfill our purpose this day, and set them on their course, then one day perhaps we will."

* * * * *

"Hey Oscar, do you have room for another rat?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Oscar looked at the last piece of meat on what had once been a full platter and considered for a moment.

Suddenly he let out a loud belch that seemed to echo through the room.

"Now I do." Oscar said happily and picked up the rat for Vincent to take the other end.

All the boys giggled and were finally beginning to slow their eating.

"I had not considered that the young of other species could consume so much food. I had somehow thought that our own young were unique in their ability to decimate a feast." J'Laad said as he surveyed the remains of what had once been an abundance of food.

Tyce wanted to answer, but his mouth was too full.

J'Laad noticed and broke into delighted laughter.

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"I have had centuries to prepare for this day, and yet now that it has arrived, nothing is going to plan." Tyce said quietly.

"Perhaps we should take them to the communications area so we may begin the process of notifying those involved." J'Laad said speculatively.

"I had wanted to tell them about their responsibilities, but..." Tyce trailed off as he looked down the line of boys leaning lazily against the base of the platform.

"The walk will do them good. And once they meet their Holy Ones, perhaps they will be reenergized." J'Laad said with a smile at the boys.

Tyce nodded and said in a louder voice, "If everyone is finished, we need to call a few people."

The puppy dog expressions in the boys' eyes nearly made Tyce relent, but he held fast to his determination and took a step away from the platform.

Slowly, the others stood to follow.

Tyce turned to say something but found that he didn't need to when Tyber automatically picked up the black box.

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"You know, when you invited us to eat with you, I was a little bit scared that we'd, well... um..." Vincent trailed off, uncertain of how to continue.

"Be eating people?" Oscar asked with a smile.

"Well, um, yeah." Vincent said shyly.

J'Laad allowed his steps to lag until he was walking with Vincent and Oscar.

"The Gorn are known for our tradition of eating our enemies when they are defeated, but I assure you that it is more symbolic than anything." J'Laad said seriously.

"So you don't really eat them?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Oh, we eat them, but not the entire army. The victorious general of the battle will have the honor of eating his defeated opponent, the heroes of the battle will be invited to the feast and the feast will be recorded and broadcast to all the troops so they may also join in the victory celebration."

Oscar nodded and said, "It is these broadcasts that have given our people the reputation that they have."

"And it is a reputation we do not seek to lose. It serves us well by making those who would attack us seriously consider the consequences of being defeated." J'Laad said carefully.

"There are some who are too stupid to realize that, Captain Gartain for example." Tyce said as he stopped at a door at the end of the hallway.

Vincent thought about what he had been told as the group walked into the room that J'Laad had opened for them.

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When the group were all in the room, Tyce gestured for Tyber to bring the box to him.

"Oscar, come forward." J'Laad said as he started working the jeweled control panel.

Hesitantly, Oscar stood forward and took his place at J'Laad's side.

The screen came on and a large, dark golden reptile filled the screen.

"Rhoskan." J'Laad said firmly.

"*Holy One*." Rhoskan responded as he gave a brief, respectful bow.

"Have you studied the ancient teachings of the Holy Ones past?" J'Laad asked carefully.

"*Yes Holy One, I have studied the ancient texts since I was a child.*" Rhoskan said respectfully.

"Good, then you remember what has been said of the greatest of our warriors, proud and noble being given the honor to stand above and beyond all estates." J'Laad said in a leading tone.

Rhoskan's eyes seemed to light up as he said, "*Yes Holy One. The Trach Manja, he will stand forward as the voice of all the estates of the Gorn empire*."

J'Laad gave a slight nod at Rhoskan's summary, then glanced at Tyce.

Vincent followed J'Laad's gaze and saw Tyce opening the black box.

He lifted something out and handed it to J'Laad.

"You will recognize this as the ancient symbol of the Trach Manja. I, the Holy One, do bestow the title of Trach Manja upon Oscar, heir of the third estate of the Gorn Empire." J'Laad said as he brought the necklace over Oscar's head.

Rhoskan stared in disbelief at the scene before him.

"Now Rhoskan, since your son has received this highest honor, I believe that you, as his father and as leader of the third estate, should also say something." J'Laad said firmly.

Rhoskan seemed to snap out of his trance, then said in a flustered voice, "*I Rhoskan, head of the third estate of the Gorn empire do hereby recognize Oscar, heir to the third estate to be an adult. May he choose his mate well and provide many offspring to faithfully serve the empire*."

Oscar bowed reverently to his father, but didn't say a word.

"I must instruct your son in his new duties. I will personally conduct Oscar to your home when the fleet returns." J'Laad said casually.

"*Thank you Holy One. We will have rooms prepared*." Rhoskan said as he bowed again.

J'Laad gave a slight bow, then disconnected the transmission.

"I'm glad that's over. I really do dislike all that formal nonsense." J'Laad said with relief.

"You're not done yet, we still have four to go." Tyce said with a smile.

"True, but the rest will behave properly without the formality." J'Laad said with a smile, obviously knowing he was right.

Tyce looked over the group of boys and said, "Tyber, I suppose we'd better do you next."

Tyber cautiously stepped forward.

"Tyber. For millennia Okuda has been silent in the universe. You are now their voice." Tyce said as he took a necklace and placed it over Tyber's head.

"What does that mean?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Before Tyce could answer, J'Laad said, "You are the voice of the worlds who wish to remain separate. You represent the wishes of the xenophobes and those with closed borders."

Tyce nodded and said, "Just the same way that Oscar speaks for those who believe that the strong should conquer the weak. Oscar is the voice of warriors."

Vincent turned in time to see Oscar's chest puff up a little at the statement.

"Who wants to be next? We have one for all of you." Tyce said as he looked at the other three.

Lehman reluctantly stepped away from JonJon's side and took his place before Tyce.

"Would you contact the Reverend Mother Myscendria? I still can't figure out how to work Gorn controls." Tyce said timidly.

J'Laad let out a sigh of long suffering as he programmed the communications console.

"*This is a secure channel. Please use another frequency.*" A computerized voice said firmly.

"This is J'Layiah." Tyce said firmly into the comm.

A moment later an elderly blue skinned woman appeared on the view screen.

"*J'Layiah? Is that really you?*" She asked hopefully.

"Yes. J'Leitha, you are looking well." Tyce said peacefully.

She giggled at the statement, then said, "Thank you for saying so, but I'm looking older than the hills. What can I do for you J'Layiah?"

Tyce motioned for J'Laad to come to his side.

"*J'Laad? No. It's too soon, my people have only just*..."

"...entered their third age. Ours too J'Leitha. Congratulations, one of your children was chosen." Tyce finished happily.

The Reverend Mother broke into a wide smile, her white teeth almost glowing out from her dark indigo skin.

"Lehman, come forward." Tyce said in a whisper.

"*Child, do not hide yourself. Show me your true face*." The Reverend Mother said gently.

Lehman's gaze fell to the floor as he said, "I'm sorry Reverend Mother, but the off-worlders who took me from our world did something to me... inside me, and now I can't change anymore."

"*I have heard of this procedure. But if you are locked in your current form, how is it that you are still alive?*" The Reverend Mother asked with concern.

"Have you heard of the Federation?" Tyce asked quietly.

"*Yes. I have heard the name, though their borders are too distant for us to have had contact*." The Reverend Mother said carefully.

"We are on the border of their space now. Their doctors were able to keep Lehman alive and replace his failed organs with artificial organs that mimic Human biology." Tyce said carefully.

"*I see*." She said quietly, then continued in a more relaxed voice, "*You say this child, Lehman, has been chosen?*"

"Yes. If you agree, Lehman will represent the Chameloid people as well as those who have no voice. He will represent the interests of slaves, the conquered, children and any others who cannot speak for themselves."

"*Child, tell me of your life, how did you come to be taken by off-worlders?*" The Reverend Mother asked gently.

"My parents died in the plague a few years ago, then I was put in the foundling home... some men came and bought me and took me to Okuda." Lehman finished with a shrug.

"*OFFWORLDERS BOUGHT one of my children!*" The Reverend Mother screeched.

"J'Leitha, will you accept Lehman as the voice of the Chameloid people and promise to be his guide and support in the coming years?" J'Laad asked firmly.

"*Yes. And Lehman, call me when you're ready and we'll have a long talk about what happened. I will swear to you that I will see to it that what happened to you will NEVER happen to another of my children.*" The Reverend Mother Myscendria said with icy venom.

Lehman nodded his agreement slowly.

"You may say the words and we will act as your hands." J'Laad said seriously.

The Reverend Mother seemed to calm, then said in a clear firm voice, "*I, the Reverend Mother Myscendria, do bestow the most ancient relic upon Lehman, my lost child.*"

Tyce placed a necklace around Lehman's neck then, on impulse, gave him a firm hug.

"*Child. Now that the time has come, the two of us can change our world.*" the Reverend Mother said in a distant voice.

"Not just the two of you. He'll have all of us." Vincent said as he walked to Lehman's side.

"Yes. We are one." Oscar said as he walked to Lehman's other side.

The Reverend Mother Myscendria's mouth fell open at the site of a Saurian and Human both vowing their allegiance to one of her children.

The tears started streaking down her cheeks as she stared at the unbelievable sight.

"It is a new age." Tyce said in a whisper.

She absently nodded at the statement.

"We still have two more to go. Do you want to watch?" Tyce asked gently.

"*Yes. Please.*" The Reverend Mother Myscendria said in an absent voice.

"JonJon. Do you want to be next?" Tyce asked curiously.

"I don't understand. I don't have a race or a species. I don't have a people." JonJon said quietly.

J'Laad chuckled at the statement and said, "You should have prepared him for this."

"I couldn't say anything in case I was wrong." Tyce said in an aggravated tone.

The screen came alive to show a rather common Human looking man wearing a strange necklace with '001' printed on it.

"Norman. Do you remember when I told you of the Holy Ones?" Tyce asked happily.

"*My memory functions have not been impaired. I'm sure I remember the conversation in more detail than you do.*" Norman said, almost sounding playful.

Tyce chuckled and said, "Then you remember what I said might happen one day, in the third age."

"*That five would rise from the dominant races to promote the advancement of all the peoples in the universe.*" Norman said casually.

"One of your people was chosen. This is JonJon, he is an Android." Tyce said happily.

"*An Android was selected to represent one fifth of the universe?*" Norman asked with actual surprise.

"He will represent all Androids, artificial intelligence and cybernetically enhanced species to protect their interests and rights." Tyce said firmly.

"*I would like to have the opportunity to interface with JonJon when time permits. Our people are facing something of a crisis.*" Norman said seriously.

Tyce and J'Laad shared a look of concern at the statement, but before either could think of what to say, JonJon quietly asked, "Who is he?"

"Norman is the leader of an Android civilization. You could consider it the Android home world." Tyce said quietly.

JonJon's eyes went wide as he looked at the screen with wonder.

"*JonJon, before I approve of your placement as our representative, would you please answer one question?*" Norman asked seriously.

"Sure, if I can." JonJon said cautiously.

Norman nodded, then asked, "*What is the greatest pain that one can feel?*"

"To know that you serve no purpose." JonJon said without hesitation.

"*I approve of your placement. Please contact me at your convenience.*" Norman said firmly, then disconnected the transmission.

"It works for me. Here you go JonJon." Tyce said as he placed a necklace over JonJon's head.

Oscar, Lehman and Tyber all pulled JonJon into a hug of congratulations as Vincent stepped forward.

"Do you want to do it?" Tyce asked carefully.

"I'm not doing it. You do it." J'Laad said as he backed away.

"How about we do 'odds and evens', wouldn't that be fair?" Tyce asked hopefully.

"I'm Gorn. I don't care about fair. I'm not doing it. I'll initiate the transmission, but I'm not talking to her." J'Laad said firmly.

Tyce hung his head in defeat, then muttered, "Do it."

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"Most ancient. Most Holy. We seek your counsel." Tyce said in a small voice.

"*Why doest thou seek my counsel.*" the ancient Vulcan woman asked in an icy firm voice.

"The third age has come and the five have emerged. One of your children has been chosen." Tyce said, trying to keep a tremor out of his voice.

"*Bring the child forward that I might see.*" she said coldly.

Vincent walked before the view screen and stood silently.

Before Tyce could introduce him, the Vulcan woman slowly said, "*Crewman Winters of the house of Surak. Doest thou seek my approval?*"

"No ma'am." Vincent said as he tried to remain calm.

The arch of one of her eyebrows was her only response.

"I am the child of three worlds. I am here. I am the one who was chosen to do this. There is no other." Vincent said in his most logical voice.

A long moment of silence fell over the room as J'Laad and Tyce looked at each other with question.

Finally the ancient woman said, "*Your statement is logical. I accept that this child is the voice of federations, unions and alliances. He will receive the benefit of my position that he may have access to the doors that remain locked to others.*"

Vincent bowed reverently to the view screen.

Tyce brought the last necklace to Vincent and placed it over his head.

"*Live long and prosper, Vincent Winters.*" the elderly Vulcan woman said in an almost peaceful tone.

"Peace and long life, T'Lar." Vincent said in his most respectful voice.

J'Laad disconnected the transmission, then seemed to wilt with relief.

"You did great Vincent. I've never been able to say anything to her that met with her approval." Tyce said with a relieved smile.

Before Vincent could answer, the group of boys swallowed him up in a hug.

* * * * *

"Our work here is done. It's time for us to begin our separate journeys." Tyce said to the group.

"Um, before we go. What are these?" Lehman asked as he held up his necklace.

"Just keep them with you and when you meet a new race of people, the necklace might open a door for you that would otherwise be closed." Tyce said carefully.

"But what are they?" Vincent asked as he examined the flat clear crystal on his necklace.

"These are the last physical remnants of the last universe. The stones each of you carry and the archive were kept safe by a race that have ascended beyond a physical form. When the new universe came into being and the new races began to emerge, they established the Holy Ones and provided them the insights to guide their people through the first age." J'Laad said distantly.

"So what each of you is wearing is something that predates all matter in this universe. Having these necklaces is proof that you are in league with forces beyond our understanding." Tyce said quietly.

All the boys looked at their necklaces with awe and wonder.

"Come now. This chapter is closed. It's time for us to get on with our adventure." Tyce said as he gestured toward the door.

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"Will there be any way for us to keep in touch?" Vincent asked with worry as he looked at Oscar.

"I will provide you the secure subspace frequencies to be able to stay in contact. And with the necklaces, you will even be able to visit." Tyce said with a smile.

"I'd like to see your home world Oscar." Vincent said with a smile.

"When you come to visit, we will have a feast that my people will be speaking of for centuries." Oscar said with a smile.

"Sounds good. If you ever come to Earth, I'll see if I can get Commander Dodds to have a cookout. I think you'd like his brisket." Vincent said with a slightly sad expression creeping into his voice.

"Please do not be sad. You will be in contact regularly. The five of you are one. You will never be without each other." J'Laad said reassuringly.

Vincent reluctantly nodded, then walked to Tyce's side.

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"The shuttle bay is right down here." Tyce said, as he started to walk.

"No. It's over there." JonJon said as he pointed.

"JonJon is right, Holy One. You should listen to the young ones or your reputation as 'all knowing' could suffer." J'Laad said with a giggle.

"I am all knowing, I just have a lousy sense of direction." Tyce said with a playful smile as he followed JonJon who was leading them to the shuttle bay.

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"I was beginning to get worried. Is everything okay?" Commander M'Butu asked with concern.

"Everything is fine, Commander. Would you take Tyber and me to the *Mangeon* so we can continue our journey. The Gorn fleet and the Okudai ships will be departing as soon as we are aboard." Tyce said seriously.

"Is there anything I need to do as far as protocol before leaving the ship?" Commander M'Butu asked carefully.

"Just use their automated system. When you have cleared the ship, you will be in control of the shuttle. Do not contact them by voice or use sensors." Tyce said as he relaxed back into his chair.

Commander M'Butu nodded, then went to the front of the shuttle to get them underway.

* * * * *

"Do you think we'll see each other again?" Vincent asked with concern.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes. I know we will. Your new duties will no doubt intersect with those of Tyber. The five of you will be drawn to the places in the universe where you can do the most good."

"I'm going to miss you both." Lehman said quietly.

"I know. But the restrictions on contact with outside races does not apply to Tyber anymore. You can call him whenever you like. You can call both of us." Tyce said gently.

"I'll do that." Vincent whispered as he felt that he was about to lose something very precious.

Commander M'Butu's voice on the intercom called, "*We will be docking with the Mangeon in approximately one minute*."

"What about your stuff? Don't you need to get your things off the *Yorktown*?" JonJon asked in a worried tone.

"No. Oluf would have taken care of that while we were aboard the Gorn ship. There's no putting off what has to be done. It's time." Tyce said, as the shuttle jolted slightly.

Commander M'Butu walked through the shuttle and pressed some controls at the back before opening the door.

Vincent realized that they didn't go into a shuttle bay but were docked at the side of the ship.

Lehman, JonJon and Vincent each took a turn hugging Tyber and wishing him well before allowing him to walk toward the back of the shuttle.

"Tyce." Vincent said as tears welled in his eyes.

"Come here." Tyce said and pulled Vincent into a hug.

Vincent felt that the hug somehow wasn't enough and moved to give Tyce a firm kiss.

The kiss was brief, but filled with meaning.

Finally the kiss broke and Vincent pulled back and looked into Tyce's eyes.

"You'd better get back to T'Lani so you can stay in balance." Tyce said with a teasing smile.

"And you'd better get back to Audge." Vincent said with a grin.

Tyce seemed surprised by the statement for a moment, but rather than dispute it, he simply nodded slowly.

"Call me with those frequencies. I don't want to miss a single day of talking to you." Vincent said firmly.

"I'll attend to it as soon as I'm settled into my new quarters." Tyce said with a gentle smile as he walked toward the back of the shuttle.

"Ready?" Tyce asked Tyber who had been waiting for him.

Tyber glanced back into the shuttle where all his new friends were watching.

Reluctantly, Tyber nodded.

"Let's see what new adventures the universe has in store for us." Tyce said with a smile as he put an arm around Tyber and guided him off the shuttle.

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Vincent was sitting silently, looking out the view port of the shuttle when all the Gorn and Okudai ships began to move in unison.

He watched as the entire fleet went into warp in one synchronized burst.

"It's like what Eliam said, this isn't an ending. It's a beginning." Lehman said quietly from Vincent's side.

"I know. But it still hurts." Vincent said as the tears he had been restraining began to fall.

Lehman considered what he should say to comfort Vincent, but finally concluded that any words would just get in the way.

Vincent felt Lehman's arm come around him and hold him gently as the tears blurred the vision of where his friends had departed.

Chapter 31

"Thanks Lehman," Vincent whispered as he finally was able to get his tears under control.

"Are you going to be alright?" JonJon asked him with concern.

"Yeah. I'll be fine. I guess I'm not very good at saying goodbye," Vincent said shyly.

"It's hard for all of us," JonJon said quietly.

Vincent looked over at JonJon to find the tears freely flowing down his cheeks.

"Come over here." Vincent said as he moved one of his arms to invite JonJon into the hug.

JonJon released his seat belt and joined the hug gratefully.

After a moment of the three-way hug, Vincent reluctantly said, "I don't think we should tell anyone about what happened on the Gorn ship."

As Lehman and JonJon thought about the statement, Vincent continued, "In my report I'm going to leave out Eliam and anything about the five of us being able to change the destiny of the universe."

"So what is it okay to talk about?" Lehman asked hesitantly.

"It'd probably be best not to talk about anything that happened on the Gorn ship too much. But if you have to talk about it, just talk about the meal and say that the Holy Ones gave us the necklaces." Vincent said in thought.

"I guess we can say that these things are like passports or something." Lehman said as he held up the crystal on his necklace.

Vincent smiled and said, "That's perfect. The Okudai and the Gorn had a prophecy and when the five of us got together, they gave us these passports so we can travel into each other's space."

JonJon nodded in thought and said, "That will explain how and why we can visit each other."

Movement caused Vincent to look up in time to see Commander M'Butu walk to the shuttle door.

"Is everything okay?" Commander M'Butu asked with concern at the sight of the boys huddled together.

"Yes sir. We just got a little bit sad when we saw our friends leave." Vincent said as he disentangled himself from Lehman and JonJon.

Commander M'Butu gave the boys a bittersweet smile, then said, "It's a part of life in Starfleet. You get to meet some of the most interesting and incredible people in the universe, but eventually your duties will carry you down different paths. I don't know how much it will help, but I can tell you from personal experience that true friendships last forever. Distance and time apart only makes your reunions that much sweeter."

Vincent smiled and said, "Thank you Commander. It does help."

JonJon and Lehman both nodded their agreement.

"Come on guys. We need to go to sickbay before we check in with the Captain." Commander M'Butu said as he opened the shuttle's door.

"Why?" Lehman asked curiously as he stood at JonJon's side.

"We haven't had previous contact with the Gorn, there's a slight possibility that they carry some sort of disease that's unfamiliar to us." Commander M'Butu said, then gestured for the boys to precede him off the shuttle.

"It's just standard procedure in a first contact situation. It's nothing to worry about." Vincent said assuringly.

Commander M'Butu recognized the concerned look on Lehman's face and said, "Crewman Winters is right. I've had to do this about a dozen times since I entered Starfleet and they've never found anything wrong. It only takes a few minutes and it would be foolish not to check."

Lehman considered the words, then gave a small smile to the commander that he understood.

* * * * *

"Gentlemen, I've been expecting you. Who wants to go first?" Dr. Perry asked with a cheery smile.

"Why don't we let Lehman and JonJon do it so they can get on with their day?" Commander M'Butu asked, as he glanced at Vincent.

Vincent nodded his agreement.

"Very well, would you two get on the biobeds? This should just take a minute. In fact, I'm glad to have the chance to check you over again Lehman. How are you feeling this morning?" Dr. Perry asked, as she moved to the head of his biobed.

"I'm fine except for feeling a little bit tired." Lehman said honestly.

"I can certainly understand that. With what your body has been through the past twenty-four hours, it's amazing that you're even out of bed." Dr. Perry said frankly.

Lehman nodded with concern and watched as she examined the scan results.

"Everything looks just fine here. The only thing I would even consider suggesting is that you get some more sleep." Dr. Perry said with a gentle smile.

Lehman broke into a big grin and said, "Well, if I have to."

Dr. Perry chuckled, then moved to JonJon's bed to check over his readings.

Lehman got down off the biobed and moved to Vincent's side.

Commander M'Butu put a hand on Vincent's shoulder to get his attention, then motioned toward the biobed that Lehman had just vacated.

"Well JonJon, you seem to be in excellent biological health and all your Android systems are functioning at or above specifications. But you might consider getting some more sleep too. " Dr. Perry said seriously.

JonJon thought for a moment, then said, "If I start to feel tired, I'll ask Cyril if I can stop work early today."

"That's all I'm asking." Dr. Perry said as she broke into a smile.

Dr. Perry turned to see Vincent in place on the biobed, then glanced over at Lehman with a grin.

"It's really me." Vincent said when he noticed her speculative look.

"I believe you. But I'm just beginning to realize the potential for mischief having you two looking so identical." Dr. Perry said as she ran her scans.

"Really? We wouldn't ever do anything like that." Vincent said as he looked up at her with big, puppy dog eyes.

Dr. Perry broke into a laugh and said, "If Starfleet doesn't work out for you, you might consider selling used cars. That expression was almost believable."

Vincent feigned confusion at the statement, but finally gave it up and broke into a smile.

"Crewman Winters. I don't like what I'm seeing here at all." Dr. Perry said as her mood turned completely serious.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked, as his smile fell away.

"Tell me, you're in pain right now, aren't you?" Dr. Perry asked as she looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Well, yeah. But it's not too bad. My joints are just a little bit achy." Vincent said dismissively.

Dr. Perry shook her head and said, "With your work, school and now this growth spurt, you're under too much stress. You need to take some time off."

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I can ask Daddy Joe... I mean, Lieutenant Bowers about getting a day or two off on the next schedule."

"You aren't understanding me Crewman. That wasn't a suggestion. That was an order. I'm declaring you unfit for duty. I want you to relax and get lots of rest. You are not to do any school work and I'm going to limit your computer access to no more than one hour per day." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"For how long?" Vincent asked with astonishment.

"Until further notice. When you come back in and your stress indicators have returned to acceptable levels, I'll let you return to duty." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Okay. But does using the comm and writing messages count in my computer time? I'd really like to call my brother and write to some friends." Vincent explained with a hopeful expression.

"I suppose that is a form of relaxation. But if I find out that you've been working or studying, I'll block your computer access completely." Dr. Perry warned as she pressed a hypospray to Vincent's neck.

"I promise that I won't work or study until you say it's okay." Vincent said as a vow.

"Now just stay there for a few minutes while I run some detailed scans that have been requested in your personnel file." Dr. Perry said as she began to key instructions into the head of the biobed.

Vincent rested back and closed his eyes as he considered all the things he needed to do.

"And now Commander, how are you doing today?" Dr. Perry asked as she turned to the other biobed.

* * * * *

"Vincent?" Lehman asked in a whisper.

Vincent opened his eyes and looked at Lehman with question.

"When we're done here, do you want to go and talk about..." Lehman paused and looked around at the other people in sickbay before continuing in a quieter voice, "...Stuff?"

Vincent smiled and said, "Why don't you go ahead and get some sleep first. When I'm done here, I'm going to need to make my report to the captain and it could take a while."

"No one is going to be in the dorsal observation lounge at this time of day. I know that Channing won't mind if you sleep in there and it will be quieter than trying to sleep in the supply room of deflector control." JonJon said quietly as he stepped to Lehman's side.

"Yeah. I'll do that." Lehman said, then turned to Vincent and continued, "Will you come and wake me up when you're ready to talk about stuff?"

"Okay. But I've got a few other things to do after I make my report. I'll come and get you in the dorsal lounge when I'm all done." Vincent said seriously.

"That sounds good." Lehman said with a happy smile.

JonJon looked at Lehman with question and received a nod before turning to leave.

Vincent smiled as he watched his friends walk out together.

* * * * *

"Husband, are you well?" T'Lani asked as she approached the side of his bed.

"Dr. Perry says that I'm showing signs of stress, so she's declared me unfit for duty." Vincent said quietly.

"If you would like, I can assist you in managing your stress level through our bond." T'Lani said impassively as she placed her hand on his cheek.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "Actually, there's some stuff that I'd really like to take care of today since I've got the time off. But if you want, we could have dinner, then take care of my stress together in a mind meld... would that work?"

T'Lani gave a small trace of a smile before saying, "Yes. In fact, it would be the preferable way so I may instruct you in stress management techniques rather than managing the stress for you."

Vincent smiled at her statement and said, "Then I'll be sure to be signed on to a terminal when you're about to get off work so you can call me."

"That is acceptable." T'Lani said as she caressed his cheek with her thumb.

Vincent placed his hand over hers and held it for a moment, enjoying the expression of affection from his wife.

* * * * *

"Report Commander." Captain Byrne said in a professional voice as he entered the room.

Vincent released T'Lani's hand and watched as she moved away to perform her duties.

"I was asked to remain on the shuttle when we arrived. Since I wasn't allowed to use my scanners aboard their ship, I believe Crewman Winters will have to file this report." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

Captain Byrne turned to Vincent and asked, "What do you have to report, Crewman Winters?"

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "I really need to give you my report someplace more private and we should probably be somewhere that we can call Admiral Morrow."

Captain Byrne looked around the sickbay at Commander M'Butu, Dr. Perry and T'Lani, then said, "Please come to my office as soon as Dr. Perry is finished with you."

"Captain, please be aware that I've declared Crewman Winters unfit for duty due to increasing signs of stress." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Are you saying that he is not sufficiently well to make a report?" Captain Byrne asked with surprise.

"No sir, I'm just saying that I want you to be aware of Crewman Winters' condition before you make any decisions as to what his duties will be, following his report." Dr. Perry said professionally.

Captain Byrne gave the doctor a brief smile and said, "Noted."

Dr. Perry glanced at the head of the biobed and said, "Your scan is complete Crewman Winters, you can go give your report now, but after that, you need to rest and relax. That's an order."

"Yes Doctor. I understand." Vincent said as he got off the biobed.

* * * * *

Captain Byrne, Commander M'Butu and Vincent stepped onto the turbo lift without a word.

When the lift doors closed, Captain Byrne said, "Captain's office."

Commander M'Butu looked at the captain with question and received a shake of the captain's head as a response.

"Main bridge." Commander M'Butu said reluctantly.

Vincent took a deep breath, and despite his words to the contrary earlier, reached out through his bond with T'Lani to help calm himself.

* * * * *

Captain Byrne led the way into his office and took a seat before saying, "At ease Crewman. Please have a seat."

"Thank you sir." Vincent said, as he took the offered seat before the captain's desk.

"Now will you tell me what happened on the Gorn ship that is of so much concern that you didn't want Commander M'Butu in the discussion?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

"Yes sir. I don't know if Admiral Morrow told you about what I was doing last night while you were at dinner with Lehman." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Not specifically. He just said that you were attending to a matter and would be indisposed for an indefinite period of time." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"This has something to do with that, and I'm not sure if I'm supposed to tell you about it." Vincent said reluctantly.

"I see. Well, Admiral Morrow has been kept abreast of the events regarding the Okudai and Gorn vessels, so I'm sure he would like to be included in this conversation." Captain Byrne said as he turned on his terminal.

Vincent nodded absently.

"Lieutenant Patterson, please establish a secure subspace channel directed to Admiral Morrow." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Yes sir." Debbie's voice said professionally.

A moment later, the captain smiled at the terminal before him.

"Leland, you seem to be having your share of excitement today. Do you have some new developments to share with me?" Admiral Morrow asked casually.

Captain Byrne turned the terminal on his desk, then adjusted the viewing angle so Admiral Morrow could see them both.

"Crewman Winters, we do seem to be seeing quite a lot of each other recently. May I assume that this has to do with your recent mission?" Admiral Morrow asked with a smile.

"Yes sir." Vincent said quietly.

"Crewman Winters believes that he may have information that you would prefer be classified." Captain Byrne said frankly.

Admiral Morrow seemed surprised, then looked at Vincent with question.

"When we went on the Gorn ship, the Holy One of the Okudai and the Gorn Holy One left us in a room and told us to open a box." Vincent said in concentration.

"When we opened the box, the time split happened." Vincent continued in a lower voice.

"Are you sure?" Admiral Morrow asked firmly as Captain Byrne looked between them with confusion.

"Yes sir. I could feel the same thing as when I was time traveling with Dr. Xon and then I saw five people who were exact duplicates of us walking away from the box. All of us saw it." Vincent said seriously.

"Who were the five?" Admiral Morrow asked in a voice that was all business.

"Me, JonJon from the Kimber colony, Lehman, the Chameloid you met last night, Tyber, one of the guys from Okuda and Oscar, a Gorn kid about my age." Vincent said in a slow steady voice.

"We never considered that the Gorn had technology advanced enough to alter time." Admiral Morrow said in a disturbed tone.

"It wasn't their technology sir. It was an ancient artifact. And now that the box has been opened, it can't be used again." Vincent said carefully.

"Did they tell you that?" Admiral Morrow asked slowly.

"No sir. But after the time shift was finished, the box was empty. Whatever was inside is either all used up or in a different timeline." Vincent said seriously.

"Good. The last thing we need is a hostile force on our border that has the capability to alter time." Admiral Morrow said in a tone that suggested that he was thinking out loud.

"I take it from what you've said, that you have some experience with time travel." Captain Byrne said slowly.

Vincent looked to Admiral Morrow with question.

"Leland, I'm sure you understand the dangers of polluting the timeline with knowledge of the future. I must insist that no record involving time travel or the time split be made." Admiral Morrow said firmly.

"Yes sir. Of course." Captain Byrne said in a calm voice.

"Good. The transporter mishap Crewman Winters endured some weeks ago seems to have had the side effect of altering his quantum resonant frequency. A visitor from the future was kind enough to come back and help correct the problem before the time split occurred. Otherwise, Crewman Winters would no longer exist." Admiral Morrow said frankly.

"And I would never have existed. It would have erased that I had ever been." Vincent added quietly.

"Thank you. I understand." Captain Byrne said calmly.

"Now Crewman Winters, what else do you have to report about your time on the Gorn vessel. We have little knowledge of their species and anything you observed may be of great importance." Admiral Morrow said seriously, effectively changing the subject.

"It was bright and humid on their ship. They don't all look alike, J'Laad, their Holy One, was dark greenish gray. Oscar was bright golden colored and his father was a darker color of gold." Vincent said carefully.

"Did you see anything of their technology?" Admiral Morrow asked curiously.

"Just a little bit. Their controls were all crystals. I don't even know how they could work or how they know which is which since nothing was labeled. The control panel in their shuttle bay looked like a box of jewels." Vincent said in thought.

"Do you know if they have transporter technology?" Admiral Morrow asked curiously.

"I don't know sir, but I would guess that they do." Vincent said carefully.

"Why do you say that?" Admiral Morrow asked hesitantly.

"Well, it's just because of something the Holy Ones were talking about while we were in the room. They kept talking about how all our races are just reaching the third age. I think that means that we all have about the same technology." Vincent said seriously.

Admiral Morrow looked off screen for a moment, then asked, "Is there anything else I need to know right away Crewman Winters?"

"Yes sir." Vincent said, then pulled the necklace out of the top of his uniform jumpsuit for the Admiral to see.

"The Holy Ones had some kind of prophecy about five kids from different worlds getting together. Because we opened the box and the time split happened, they believe that the five of us are special somehow and should be able to keep in touch with each other. We were given these passports before we left the Gorn ship." Vincent said carefully.

"Passports?" Admiral Morrow asked as he pressed some keys on his terminal.

"Yes sir. The Holy Ones said that the five of us will be able to go places that other people aren't welcomed if we have these with us." Vincent said cautiously.

"I don't understand. What is it exactly?" Admiral Morrow asked as he studied the necklace.

"This is something that can't be duplicated. There are only five of them. The five people who were chosen to carry them are allowed to cross closed borders and to go places that people who are considered 'outsiders' are forbidden." Vincent said seriously.

"Leland, will you please see that the 'passport' is scanned and send me the findings?" Admiral Morrow asked, then glanced off screen again.

"Yes sir." Captain Byrne said immediately.

"Anything else Crewman?" Admiral Morrow asked impatiently.

"No sir. I'll include the rest in my report... except the time stuff." Vincent finished with a smile.

"You're catching on Crewman. If you'll excuse me now, I have a somewhat urgent situation developing that I need to attend to." Admiral Morrow said quickly.

"Of course sir. *Yorktown* out." Captain Byrne said calmly.

"Starfleet out." Admiral Morrow said and abruptly cut off the transmission.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry sir, but I wasn't sure if Admiral Morrow wanted me to tell you about the time stuff." Vincent said quietly.

"Quite alright Crewman Winters. I believe you handled the situation correctly. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience on the Gorn ship before writing your report?" Captain Byrne asked professionally.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Yes. I just want to be sure to say that the Gorn that we talked to were nice to us. But I have a feeling that they could be a real threat if they ever decided that we were their enemy."

Captain Byrne thought about Vincent's words for a moment, then asked, "So they don't consider us an enemy?"

"No sir. I don't think they consider us at all. If they ever did 'officially' consider us, we would be at war." Vincent said in thought.

"Why do you say that?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

Vincent shook his head in frustration and said, "I don't know. It's just a feeling I have. The Gorn *have to* dominate and conquer anyone they encounter or die trying. As long as we don't 'officially' meet them, then we don't exist and they don't have to go to war with us."

"So that is why they refuse any attempts at communication." Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"Yeah. I think they know that they can't beat all the other races in the universe, but by keeping inside the borders of their own space, they can continue to be the supreme beings that they have always thought they were." Vincent said carefully.

"So they're trapped inside their borders by their own beliefs." Captain Byrne said quietly.

"Yes. At least until they have a reason to leave their borders. If the Federation tries to force the Gorn to officially recognize them... we just

saw forty of their ships. I don't think that's their entire fleet... not even close." Vincent finished in a worried tone.

Captain Byrne nodded and said, "Please include your speculations and insights in your report, then go down to sciences so the scans of your necklace can be included."

"Yes sir." Vincent said as he stood at attention.

"Dismissed." Captain Byrne said professionally.

* * * * *

Vincent walked into Deflector Control and took a seat at auxiliary station two.

"Hold it right there Champ. Dr. Perry says that you aren't allowed to work today." Joe said as he crossed the room.

"I know. But I have to fill out a report about what it was like on the Gorn ship before I can start my day off." Vincent said as he signed onto the terminal.

"What was it like?" Darin asked curiously.

"Like Florida... In the summer." Vincent said as he brought up Darin's report template from his personal file.

"But what were the Gorn like? How were they?" Darin asked curiously.

Vincent turned in his chair and considered for a moment before answering.

"Once you get past what they look like, I think they're really just like us." Vincent said honestly.

"Really?" Darin asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I mean, their traditions are way different than ours and I get the feeling that it wouldn't take much at all for them to go to war with just about anyone. But the regular people... they're like us. We met J'Laad, he's their Holy One and he's just like Tyce. We also met Oscar. He's a kid just like me. The only difference is that he's gold and has scales... and no nipples." Vincent finished with a chuckle.

"Wow. For some reason I thought they'd be really different from us." Darin said slowly.

"That's what I thought before I met them. But inside, where it counts, they're people just like us. They think and feel and dream about the same

kind of things that we do." Vincent said as he started answering the template's questions.

A long moment of silence filled the room until Joe quietly asked, "So what are you going to do with your time off?"

"Well, Lehman is taking a nap right now. I thought that after I finish my report, I could write a quick email to Lawrence, Rory and Ken, and Dylan. Oh, and probably my old principal too." Vincent added in thought.

"Your day off will be over by the time you're finished with all of those." Joe said with a chuckle.

Vincent smiled and said, "I'm going to write one email and carbon copy it to all of them. I just want to keep them up to date on what's going on. Getting to meet the Okudai Holy One would be enough reason to send a letter, but then I got to meet the Gorn Holy One and got to go onto a Gorn ship... Well, I just want to share it."

Joe chuckled and said, "That sounds like a good idea. Go ahead and work on your report and we'll leave you alone."

Vincent tilted his head at the statement, then got up from his chair.

"Can I talk to you for a few seconds first?" Vincent asked seriously.

Joe glanced at Thaelan, then said, "Sure. Is the hall okay?"

"Yeah." Vincent said as he walked to the door.

Joe gave an uncertain look to Thaelan and Darin before following Vincent into the hall.

* * * * *

"What's up Champ?" Joe asked curiously.

"Daddy Joe, I got to thinking about some stuff and I wanted to say that I'm sorry." Vincent said seriously.

"Sorry for what?" Joe asked curiously.

"It's because of you that I'm even allowed to be here on this ship. You said that you'd be responsible for me and train me to be an officer, and I know that if I ever need anything at all, that you'll be there to help me with it." Vincent said in thought.

"Yeah, so what's the problem?" Joe asked with concern.

"It's all one way. You give and give and all I seem to do is take," Vincent said in a diminishing voice.

Joe smiled as he stepped forward and pulled Vincent into a hug.

"It's not right. I should be doing stuff for you too." Vincent said, as he pulled away from Joe's side.

"Vincent. You give me so much, you just don't see it. You give me the chance to do something that matters. You give me the ability to pass on the things I've learned. I'm so proud of you and haven't felt anything but joy from having you here on the *Yorktown* with me." Joe said honestly.

"Really?" Vincent asked quietly as he allowed Joe to pull him back into the hug.

"Have I ever lied to you?" Joe asked seriously.

"No. You never have." Vincent said quietly into Joe's chest.

"Now the next thing I need for you to do is to get things sorted out so you can manage your work and school without stressing yourself out." Joe said, as he held Vincent gently.

"T'Lani is going to help me with that when she goes off shift today. I think I would've been okay if it weren't for the growth spurt. The aching joints and being hungry all the time is making everything else a bit harder." Vincent said quietly.

"That makes good sense to me, but I think having some days off now and then would also be a good thing, even if T'Lani's stress management techniques do help you." Joe said honestly.

"Will everyone else get days off too?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Joe smiled at the question and said, "As soon as you're fit for duty again, I'll start rotating the schedule so everyone can get a day off."

"Thanks, I just don't want to get days off when no one else does." Vincent said quietly.

"I understand." Joe said peacefully.

"Um, Daddy Joe?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Yes?" Joe responded as he hugged Vincent a little more tightly.

"Well, I think I've done pretty good at taking care of my Starfleet stuff and my school stuff. I was wondering if maybe it's time for me to start working on learning to be an officer?" Vincent asked as he looked up at Joe.

"You would pick the day that you've been declared unfit for duty to ask this, wouldn't you?" Joe asked with a chuckle.

"I guess that does seem funny, but I know I'm not stressed out because of work. I just didn't get a full night of sleep and the growth spurt is messing with me. I was hoping that after I'm fit for duty again, you could start teaching me the stuff I need to learn." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Well, whether you know it or not, you have been learning some of the most basic and important things. You're learning the job from the ground up, rather than learning the way that Darin did out of a textbook. When you move to your next assignment, you'll *know* what you're doing." Joe said passionately.

"Yeah, but I'm not learning about how to be a good leader." Vincent said with concern.

"Sure you are. If you want to know how to be a leader, look at all the leaders you have around you. Watch how they handle different issues and situations then adopt the things that you think work best." Joe said frankly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then finally nodded his agreement.

"But I think it's true that it's time for you to get a little more of the academic training that you will need to pass the officer's exam. As soon as you're approved to return to duty, come back and ask me about it and I'll give you your first assignment." Joe said seriously.

"Thanks Daddy Joe. I just want to make sure I'm doing everything that I need to so I can stay here with you." Vincent said with contentment.

"I'll do whatever I can to make sure you can stay wherever you want to be." Joe said quietly.

Vincent squeezed Joe a little tighter in their hug.

"Now I think you should probably get started on your report so you can start relaxing and enjoying your day off." Joe said with a gentle smile.

"Okay, But don't plan on me being off tomorrow. I'm going to make sure that I'm ready for work in the morning." Vincent said firmly.

"If you say you can do it, I have no choice but to believe you." Joe said, as he coaxed Vincent to walk back to the Deflector Control door.

* * * * *

"Vincent, you got a message while you were out there." Darin said over his shoulder.

Reluctantly, Vincent pulled away from Joe's side to look at auxiliary station two's display.

"It's from Tyce." Vincent said happily, as he sat down and accepted the message.

"That was quick. I don't think it's been an hour since you've seen him." Darin said with surprise.

"He said he'd send me contact information... Oh, wow. He thought of everything. I've got one here for Lehman and one for JonJon too." Vincent said as he looked over the message.

"So you plan to keep in touch?" Joe asked, as he slipped into the chair at auxiliary station one.

"Yeah, but he wants contact information for when I'm at home... I don't really have a home." Vincent said as he turned to face Joe.

"Quite a few of the crew keep apartments in San Francisco so they'll have a home address and a place to stay when the*Yorktown* stops at Earth for a while. I've never been able to justify the expense." Joe said frankly.

"I'll take care of this later. I need to get this report ready, then I need to go to sciences." Vincent said as he closed the message window.

"I'm sure Billy wouldn't mind it if you used his address as your home address." Joe said quietly.

"No. I wouldn't feel right doing that. Lawrence found his home, I need to find mine." Vincent said firmly.

"You and me both Champ." Joe said, then stood to go check on the main.

* * * * *

"Can I help you?" A slender young woman asked when Vincent walked into sciences.

"Yes. Captain Byrne ordered me to come down here so you could scan my necklace to include in my report." Vincent said seriously.

The woman blinked at Vincent stupidly for a moment, then rushed away.

"Don't mind Marie, she's not adjusting to being on the *Yorktown* very well. She's still scared to death to do anything that they didn't teach her at the academy." A young man said casually.

"Oh. Okay. Can you scan this so I can attach the scan to my report?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure. If you'll drop it in that dish on the table I'll run it through the microscanner. It should just take a few minutes." The young man said pleasantly.

Vincent reluctantly took off the necklace, then carefully placed it in the shallow clear plastic dish.

"I'm Reese. There's a chair right there if you'd like to sit down." The young man said as he placed the dish in the scanner.

"I'd like to watch if I can." Vincent said carefully.

"Sure. But there's not much to see. I'll just target... then focus..." Reese said slowly as he adjusted the scanning beam.

"...and activate the microscanner." He finished happily.

Vincent watched for a moment, then noticed Reese looking at him curiously.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Crewman Winters, you can call me Vincent if you want."

Reese chuckled and said, "I thought it was you. I was at the back of the crowd when you got your promotion so I didn't get a good look at you."

"Yeah. Well, there wasn't much to see. Here's me and here's the rank insignia." Vincent said as he held out his forearm.

Reese chuckled and said, "Well I'm honored to get a personal showing. Let's check to see how your necklace is doing."

Vincent walked with Reese around to the other side of the microscanner and looked at the display.

"Marie must have messed up the calibration. This can't be right." Reese said as he shut the scanner down.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Oh. It's nothing. I should have reset the machine to the default settings before I tried to use it. I'm sorry about wasting your time, it's going to take a few more minutes." Reese said as he keyed in a series of commands.

"Um. Okay, but if it comes up weird again, I want to keep the scan." Vincent said quietly.

Reese started the scanner again, then said, "Sure. But what's so special about your necklace?"

Vincent shrugged and asked, "Did you see those Gorn ships out there a while ago?"

"Yeah. I thought Marie was going to wet her pants when she saw them out the view port." Reese said with a smile.

"I got my necklace on one of those ships." Vincent said frankly.

Just as Reese was about to respond, results started filling the scanner's screen.

After a moment of looking over the readings, Reese shook his head and said, "There must be something wrong with this scanner. According to this, the crystal is made of an unidentified substance and is older than... anything."

Vincent watched as the results finally stopped scrolling and the 'Scan Complete' message came up on the screen

"Yep. Can you send the scan results to Crewman Winters in Deflector Control? Admiral Morrow is waiting on them." Vincent asked as he moved around the machine to retrieve his necklace.

"Wait. It's not a problem with the scanner is it? That thing is... What is that thing?"

"You're the guy with the scanner. You tell me." Vincent said with a smile as he walked toward the door.

"But..." Reese said as he looked up from his scan results with wide eyes.

"The Admiral is waiting." Vincent said before hurrying out the door.

* * * * *

Vincent walked into Deflector Control and went directly to the auxiliary station he was signed onto.

"Where's Daddy Joe?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"He's having a meeting with Commander M'Butu right now... probably about the days off. Did you get your report finished?" Darin asked as he walked to Vincent's side.

"Yeah. I'm just waiting on... there it is. I just have to attach these scanner results then I'm ready to send it off." Vincent said as he keyed in his instructions.

"Joe was saying that when you go back on duty, we're going to start rotating the schedule so we can each get a day off." Darin said happily.

"Maybe if you ask, Daddy Joe will schedule you to have a day off the same time as Rad." Vincent said speculatively as he took two data padds out from under the work station.

Darin chuckled and said, "He already thought of that. As soon as you go back on duty, he's going to check with Rad."

"That's great. I hope you have lots of fun." Vincent said as he downloaded some information onto the padds.

"Hey, aren't you supposed to be off duty for a while? Why are you taking data padds with you?" Darin asked suspiciously.

"This is the information Tyce sent for Lehman and JonJon. I don't know if JonJon has a computer account set up and I'm pretty sure that Lehman doesn't." Vincent said as he signed off his station.

"Oh. Okay. I just wanted to be sure you were really going to be getting some rest on your day off." Darin said cautiously.

Vincent smiled and said, "Yeah. I'm going to start doing that right now. I didn't get to have my workout this morning, so I'm going to do that, then I'll go wake up Lehman."

"I hope you have fun." Darin said as he moved back to station two.

"I think I will. I'm just going to get changed out of my uniform, then I'll be ready to go." Vincent said as he hurried out of the room.

"I am becoming fatigued watching his preparations for relaxation." Thaelan said absently from the main.

Darin chuckled and said, "When you're nine years old, relaxation is a whole different thing."

Thaelan considered for a moment before saying, "Perhaps you are right."

* * * * *

After going through his warm up stretches, Vincent began to go through the series of fighting stances that Thaelan had taught him.

The exercise that he was working on was to practice moving from one stance to each of the others with a smooth transition, so in a combat situation he could move fluidly and without hesitation.

Vincent pushed himself to move as quickly as he possibly could without sacrificing control of the precise movements.

After the first few stances, Vincent's mind began to wander as he thought over the events of the past few weeks.

His body moved automatically as his mind became clear and focused.

The random thoughts began to fall into place, like pieces of a puzzle.

Protomatter.

The Great Spirit.

The third age.

The time split.

The fate of the universe.

The ability to change destiny.

As his body continued going through the series of stances faster, pushing at the edge of his endurance, he pondered over the series of seemingly unrelated things, feeling that they had something in common.

Deep within himself he knew that all of it was somehow related and that if he could just find that common thread, it would all make sense and he would know what he needed to do.

He was vaguely aware of sweat dripping into his eyes, but dismissed it as unimportant as he continued to ponder the mystery before him.

* * * * *

"Excuse me?" A voice intruded on his thoughts.

Vincent held the stance that he was currently moving into and turned his head toward the voice.

"Are you alright?" A young man in his early twenties asked with concern.

"Sure. Why?" Vincent asked curiously as he slowly came out of his pose.

"You've been going through your exercise routine since before I arrived. I've already finished working out and you're still at it. I just wondered if you're okay." The young man said hesitantly.

Vincent looked at the time and was surprised to see that almost two hours had passed.

"Yeah. I'm fine. But thanks for checking. I've got some stuff I need to do and I lost track of time." Vincent said as he started doing his cool down stretches.

"No problem." The young man said with a small smile at the thanks, then walked away.

Vincent hurried through his cool down routine, then went to take a quick shower so he could get on with the rest of his day.

* * * * *

Vincent peeked in the door of the Dorsal Observation Lounge to find Lehman looking out the window at the stars passing them by.

"It's beautiful isn't it?" Vincent asked as he walked to Lehman's side.

"Yeah. When I was on Gartain's ship, I didn't think so. Every star that I saw passing by the window was just a sign of me getting further from my home." Lehman said distantly.

"Oh. I never thought of it like that." Vincent said quietly.

Lehman turned to face Vincent and smiled as he said, "Now each star we pass is taking me closer to my new home."

"Did you have a good sleep?" Vincent asked gently.

"Yeah. It was great. Did you get all your stuff done?" Lehman asked with a happy little smile.

"I just finished. I've sent off my report and I even got the contact information from Tyce... Here, this is yours." Vincent said as he fished a data padd out of his gym bag.

"What's this?" Lehman asked curiously as he accepted the padd.

"It has the contact frequencies so you can call Tyce and Tyber, or Oscar, or the Reverend Mother Myscendria." Vincent said happily.

"Wow. I didn't even think of that. This is great." Lehman said happily.

"Yeah. I've got one for JonJon too. Did you bring any other clothes with you?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"No. Why?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Because you look like you've been sleeping in those. If you want, we could go down to deflector control so you can change. Then we can go and see if JonJon is ready for lunch." Vincent said with a smile.

"Do you, um... have some more clothes like the ones you're wearing?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Vincent looked down at what he was wearing, then said, "Yeah. I think so. Do you want us to have lunch as identical twins?"

"It's okay if you don't want to. I just thought it'd be like, you know, having a brother." Lehman said, barely hiding a tone of need in his voice.

"Lehman, you are my brother. That's one of the things that happened to us while we were on the Gorn ship. All five of us are brothers now and always will be." Vincent said firmly as he pulled Lehman into a hug.

Lehman was silent for a moment, then he whispered, "Thanks."

"No prob. Now lets go down and get changed so we can freak some people out." Vincent said happily.

* * * * *

"Here you are." Vincent said as he walked into the cargo bay with Lehman following a step behind.

JonJon looked up from the stack of metal boxes he was working on and said, "Yeah. I didn't know I'd be working down here today. What's going on?"

"Well, Lehman and I are getting hungry and we decided to stop by and see if you were ready to eat yet." Vincent said happily.

JonJon considered for a moment, then said, "Yes. As long as you don't mind if I make a stop along the way."

"No problem. I don't think either of us have any other plans." Vincent said with a questioning look at Lehman.

Lehman shrugged and shook his head.

JonJon picked up one of the boxes he had been cataloging and started walking toward the door.

"What's that for?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Well, the way I understand it, when the *Yorktown* started beaming us up from the Kimber colony, someone got all the safety deposit boxes together and had them beamed up to the cargo bay. Cyril and I are going through the boxes and identifying who they belong to, then finding out where those people are." JonJon said casually.

"So did you find something interesting?" Lehman asked curiously.

"I don't know. They're all locked. We've just been cataloging them and finding out where the people are that they belong to. This one belonged to my father." JonJon said as he stepped onto the turbo lift.

"Recreation deck." JonJon said to the ceiling of the lift.

"So what's in the box?" Lehman asked quietly.

"I don't know yet. I'll have to get Cyril to unlock it for me." JonJon said frankly.

"Do you want us to leave you alone when you open it?" Vincent asked carefully.

JonJon smiled at the question and said, "No. I would really like for you two to be there with me. I think I'll probably be okay, but if it's something that really messes me up, I'll be glad to have my friends with me."

"We'll always be there with you." Lehman said with assurance.

* * * * *

"I was just about to call you. I don't know about you but I'm ready to take a break." Cyril said honestly.

"Me too. Vincent and Lehman just came to invite me to have lunch with them." JonJon said with a smile.

"What have you got there?" Cyril asked curiously.

"My father's safety deposit box. I was wondering if you could open it for me?" JonJon asked hopefully.

"Just a second." Cyril said, then started typing on his terminal.

"Let's see... Munroe Daniels... yes. Here it is..." Cyril mumbled as he worked.

"Oh, there's a surprise." Cyril said as he looked away from the screen.

"What?" JonJon asked with worry.

"It explicitly states in your father's will that in the event of his death, the safety deposit box was to be given to you." Cyril said uncertainly.

"So can you open it?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"Yes. Of course. Set it on the desk and I'll unlock it, then I'll leave you alone to examine the contents." Cyril said somberly.

"That's okay Cyril. I don't mind if you stay." JonJon said honestly as he placed the metal box before Cyril.

"Actually, Roger and I are going to meet for lunch, so I'd rather go unless you need me to be here." Cyril said frankly.

"No. I'll be fine. I just didn't want you to feel like I didn't trust you." JonJon said quietly.

"Right then. Here we go." Cyril said as he finally located the proper key.

After turning the lock, Cyril quietly left the room.

Vincent and Lehman moved to either side of JonJon and gave him identical hugs.

"We sure do spend a lot of time opening boxes, don't we?" Lehman asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah. I guess we do." Vincent said with a smile.

"Wish me luck." JonJon said with nervousness in his voice.

Vincent and Lehman both whispered, "Good luck." as JonJon opened the box.

Chapter 32

"What is it?" Lehman asked as he looked at the strange device in the safety deposit box.

"It's a memory storage module." JonJon said cautiously.

"It doesn't look like any kind of memory storage that I've seen before." Vincent said as he looked at the device curiously.

"It's for positronic memories. You see that cable? It plugs into my data port so I can access it." JonJon said nervously.

"So what's in it?" Lehman asked quietly.

"I have no idea. I've never seen it before and my father never mentioned having it." JonJon said with a dark look.

"Do you want to look at it now or save it for later?" Vincent asked cautiously.

JonJon thought for a moment, then said, "Waiting won't make it any easier. Besides, time moves a little differently inside my head. I could have a vision that lasts for days and it would only be a minute in real life."

"Okay. Do you need to be sitting down or anything?" Vincent asked with concern.

"It would probably be a good idea if I sat down since I don't know what this is. I might be disoriented when I come back." JonJon said carefully.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Lehman asked quietly as JonJon sat behind Cyril's desk.

"No. Just wait for a minute and I should be right back." JonJon said as he took the cord around to the back of his head to plug it in.

"You're sure this is safe?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Actually... no." JonJon said, then plugged it in.

* * * * *

JonJon looked around the black infinity that surrounded him and waited for the interactive memory to initiate.

"Hello Johnny, I'm sure you have many questions now. I'm here to help you." A voice said in the distance.

"Who are you?" JonJon asked as he turned and tried to determine where the voice was coming from.

"I'm a neural image of your first father." The man's voice said from just behind him.

JonJon turned quickly to see an elderly man with very kind eyes.

"I know you don't remember me, but I'm here to offer you some help. You can call me Jeffery."

"It's nice to meet you Jeffery." JonJon said uncertainly.

"If you're here with me, it means your loved one has passed away." Jeffery said sadly.

JonJon reluctantly nodded.

"I don't know how things are in the world now, but at the time I made this image of myself, androids were beginning to self terminate when their loved ones died." Jeffery said with a distant look in his gentle, soulful eyes.

JonJon whispered, "There aren't many of us left. I haven't seen another M.A.R.C. in... at least five years."

"You are my beloved eternal child and I couldn't leave you to that fate. So I found an android designer who was willing to create this storage unit for me. It's my best attempt to create an alternative to suicide for you; if you ever reach that point... I hope this can bring you some sort of peace. Come over here, Son," Jeffery said, as he hobbled over to a desk that hadn't been there a moment before.

"I'm sure you know that erasing long term memories from a positronic brain is nearly impossible. Something like that usually ends up being an all or nothing proposition. What I came up with is an alternative. I have a tapeworm program that can follow linking memories and block your access to them. It will be much like a human having amnesia, but the beautiful, wonderful person that you are won't be lost in the process." The elderly man said as he put his hand on two thick books laying on the desk.

"These are the memory files that are suppressed within you right now. If you open one of these books, those suppressed memories will be immediately restored." Jeffery said firmly, then he turned and put his hand on another book on the opposite side of the desk.

"This one is empty and waiting for you to fill it. If the pain of losing your loved one is too much for you to bear, you can leave your memories here with me, where they'll be safe." Jeffery said quietly.

JonJon considered the offer for a moment, then quietly said, "If you had offered me this yesterday, I think I might have accepted. But now I've found out that I have a purpose that goes way beyond the role of companion that I was originally programmed for."

"I'm so glad to hear that, Johnny." Jeffery said with a tender smile.

"I wish I could say that I was strong enough to regain the memories that are in those books, but I really don't think I am. At least, not yet. But I think that after I've had some more time to deal with the pain of losing my family, I may be able to come back and face my past." JonJon said in concentration.

"Then you are free to leave as you are and of course you can return whenever you wish. I will be here waiting for you when you need me." Jeffery said with a peaceful smile.

"Thank you for offering me a way to keep from hurting. I hope that someday soon I'll be able to come back and remember you."

"Son, if you know nothing else of me, please just remember and never doubt... you were always loved." The elderly man said as he faded from Jon-Jon's sight.

JonJon made the conscious effort to open his physical eyes so he could come out of the computer generated dream.

* * * * *

"Is everything okay?" Lehman asked curiously as JonJon's eyes opened.

"Yeah. This thing just answered a few questions for me, that I've been wondering about." JonJon said as he disconnected the cable from his data port.

"I hope it was something good." Vincent said slowly, not knowing how to interpret JonJon's expression.

"I'm not sure yet. I'll have to think about it." JonJon said honestly.

"Oh. It's one of those..." Lehman said with a roll of his eyes.

JonJon smiled at the action and said, "That's right Lehman. It's one of those."

"Hey. How did you know he was Lehman? We're identical." Vincent asked indignantly.

JonJon looked back and forth between the two identical boys before saying, "Android intuition."

* * * * *

Vincent led the way to the serving line and began to take something more than the standard size serving of each item.

"I can't believe how hungry I am." Vincent said as he worked his way down the line.

"Save some for the rest of us." A voice called out from behind the trio.

"Benny? What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in class right now?" JonJon asked curiously.

"You know all that school work I was doing last night?" Benny asked as he picked up a tray and a plate.

"Yeah. History." Vincent said slowly, not entirely certain he remembered correctly.

"Right. A really big report on the Ottoman Empire. So anyway, when the teacher picked up our reports, I was the only one who did it right. Everyone else either didn't do it or did a really bad job. So Mrs. De Luca said that I could have the rest of the day off while everyone else worked on their reports." Benny said frankly.

"That's great. Lehman and I are off the rest of the day too." Vincent said happily.

"Don't we need to talk about... stuff?" Lehman asked hesitantly.

Vincent scooted his tray up the serving line and selected two dinner rolls, then said, "Yeah. But I think Benny should be in on it."

"In on what?" Benny asked curiously.

"If the guys think it's a good idea, we'll tell you at the table." Vincent said seriously.

"Are you guys forming some kind of a club or something?" Benny asked with amusement.

"I guess you could say that, except we didn't get to choose the members." Vincent said as he poured himself a glass of water, then walked to the next serving line to get a salad.

When Benny arrived at the salad line, he asked, "Does this have something to do with what the Holy One was talking about in sickbay last night when he asked if my parents were rich?"

Vincent smiled and said, "Yeah. That's what it's about."

Benny nodded in thought as Vincent carried his heavily laden tray to an empty table.

* * * * *

When all the boys had been seated, Lehman cautiously said, "Eliam said that we aren't supposed to let anyone know."

"It's okay if you don't want to tell me what's going on. I can sit at another table while you talk about whatever you need to." Benny said quietly.

"No Benny. I think you need to know everything that's going on. That way you'll know how to help us if something comes up and we need to take care of it." Vincent said seriously, then turned to Lehman and said, "And Eliam said we shouldn't tell *everyone*."

Lehman thought about the words, then reluctantly nodded.

"Guys, I don't know any more about this than you do. I'm just going on my feelings here. What do you think?" Vincent asked seriously, then took a large bite of his food.

"I think you're right." JonJon said carefully.

Lehman seemed to come to a decision and finally nodded.

"Okay Benny. When Tyce took us to the Gorn ship it was because of some kind of old prophecy or something. We met the Gorn Holy One and we were given these necklaces that will identify us as... um, special." Vincent finished uncertainly.

"Trach Manja." Lehman said quietly.

"What?" Benny asked in confusion.

"That's the Gorn word for what we are. All it means is that if someone needs help, we have a good chance of being able to help them." Vincent said with difficulty.

"Yeah, it means we can make a difference." JonJon said in thought.

"But can't I make a difference?" Benny asked in confusion.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Of course you can Benny. In fact, I think since we're telling you this you may be able to make more of a difference than most people. Us having these necklaces makes it so other people will be willing to listen to us and accept our help. I really don't understand it all yet but that's the most important part."

"So why is it such a big secret?" Benny asked thoughtfully.

"Because if everyone knew about it, they'd try to use us to change things the way they wanted." JonJon said with certainty.

"How do you mean?" Benny asked curiously.

"Like with us meeting the Gorn. If people knew what it really meant to be a Trach Manja, they could try to get us to arrange things so the Gorn would... I don't know, open their borders or become part of the Federation or something." Vincent said with difficulty.

"Would that be such a bad thing?" Benny asked cautiously.

Vincent thought about the question, but before he could answer, Lehman said, "The Gorn are warriors. Maybe someday they'll choose to change, but until they're ready it would be really dangerous to try and force things to change."

"Yeah. That's a good way of putting it. Just because we *can* change things doesn't mean we always *should* change things." Vincent said seriously.

"Well, I don't entirely get everything that you're saying, but I think I understand enough." Benny said slowly.

"We don't understand it all yet either. But according to what Eliam said, we've got a chance to change the fate of the universe if we just pay attention and help out the people we find who need it." Vincent said carefully.

"Change the fate of the universe?" Benny asked with surprise.

"Yeah. That's the part we really need you not to tell people about. If everyone found out, then we'd probably lose the chance." Vincent said in a hesitant voice.

"I'm guessing that if the fate of the universe needs to be changed, then something really bad is going to happen." Benny said speculatively.

"Yeah. You could say that." Vincent said quietly.

"It's like the big bang gets unbanged." Lehman said frankly.

Benny looked at Lehman with confusion.

"Everything in the universe gets pulled back together into one big glob then explodes again so maybe the next universe will get things right." JonJon said darkly.

"When?" Benny asked with concern.

"Eliam didn't say exactly, but it's probably something like a few billion years. The thing is, something is going to happen pretty soon that will decide if the universe is going to continue or not." Vincent said carefully.

"Yeah, and if the answer is 'not', then everyone everywhere will know it when it happens." Lehman said distantly.

"And by that point it will be too late to do anything to stop it. Everyone in the whole universe will know that the end is coming. They'll know that nothing they create or care about will survive into the future." JonJon said as he stared at his plate of food.

"It would be kind of like being told that you have one year left to live. Everything in your life would change and you'd know that the end was coming. Every morning when you woke up, you'd know that you had one less day to live. Multiply that feeling times everyone in the universe..." Vincent trailed off sadly.

"It would be a future without hope. As the people of the universe realized that, chaos would erupt, civilizations would fall... the worst aspects of each species would be brought to the surface. I don't even want to imagine what life would be like." JonJon finished in a mutter.

"But you can change it, right?" Benny asked seriously.

"That's what Eliam said. All we have to do is find the right people to help and things will work out so that the universe can keep on going." Vincent said quietly.

"Who's Eliam?" Benny asked slowly.

"Well, that's kind of tough to explain..." Vincent began to say.

"It was something like a neural image. The real Eliam died along with his universe billions of years ago, but a recording of who he was and what he knew was kept safe so he could warn us and tell us what we need to do." JonJon said frankly.

"Eliam's ghost and the necklaces are all that survived from his universe." Lehman said quietly as he took out his necklace to look at it.

"Too weird..." Benny said with a shake of his head.

Vincent giggled and said, "You got that right Benny."

JonJon and Lehman shared a look, then nodded their agreement.

"Okay, so what do you need to do now?" Benny asked curiously.

"I think I'm set for the moment. All I have to do is my normal stuff... well, except that I've been declared unfit for duty and ordered not to work on school work... so I guess I really don't have anything to do." Vincent finished helplessly.

"I have to go back to work." JonJon said frankly.

"I'm going to need to get in touch with the Reverend Mother Myscendria. I just don't know if I should do it now or when I reach the new colony." Lehman said quietly.

"From the way she was talking, it could probably wait. It sounded to me like she was just wanting to get to know you and discuss what you two needed to do." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman slowly nodded his agreement.

"I think Norman is going to need me to talk to him before that." JonJon said in thought.

"I think so too." Vincent said seriously.

"Okay, who are Myscendria and Norman?" Benny asked in confusion.

"They're Holy Ones." Vincent said simply.

"The Reverend Mother Myscendria is the Chameloid Holy One." Lehman said seriously.

"And Norman seems to be the leader of a whole Android civilization. We won't know much more about that until JonJon talks to him." Vincent said frankly.

"I'll do that after work today. I got the feeling that Norman really needs me to help him with something." JonJon said quietly.

"Okay. Then it sounds like JonJon's got his day planned out. What about everyone else?" Vincent asked as he looked around the table.

Lehman got a speculative look, then asked, "Could you guys wait here for just a minute?"

"Sure." Vincent said, then watched as Lehman hurried away.

"Bathroom?" Benny asked speculatively.

"Idea." Vincent said with certainty.

Benny looked at Vincent with question.

"He has an idea of something we can do this afternoon, but he doesn't want to tell us in case it won't work. He's checking on it now." Vincent said seriously.

"How do you know that? Did you become telepathic while you were on the Gorn ship?" Benny asked curiously.

Vincent chuckled and said, "No. It's nothing like that. I just got an idea of what was going through his mind by the expressions on his face. I bet if you had an identical twin sitting here with us you could probably do the same thing."

Benny smiled and said, "I didn't think of it that way. It's strange, you two look and sound exactly alike, but I can tell you apart without even thinking about it."

"So can JonJon. Some of his Android intuition must have rubbed off on you." Vincent said with a smile.

"I'd better get going. We still have quite a few safety deposit boxes to go through." JonJon said as he gathered up his dishes.

"I really wish you could have the day off with us." Vincent said quietly.

"Yeah. Me too. But Cyril needs my help. It would be wrong for me to take time off while he has so much to do." JonJon said with regret.

Lehman rushed to the table and said, "Guys, I just checked the movie list and 'Chicken Run' is going to start in about fifteen minutes. What do you think?"

Vincent opened his mouth to offer an excuse as to why he couldn't go when he realized that he didn't have one.

He didn't have to work or study.

T'Lani would be working the rest of the day.

"I'm in." Vincent finally said.

"Me too." Benny said with a shrug.

"You guys have fun. I'll see you this afternoon." JonJon said as he picked up his tray.

"JonJon, before you go, will you do something for me?" Vincent asked quickly.

"What's that?" JonJon asked as he turned back toward the table.

"If Cyril asks you if you want to take the rest of the day off, will you tell him 'yes'?" Vincent asked seriously.

"What?" JonJon asked with confusion.

"Just promise me that if he asks, you'll say 'yes'." Vincent said firmly.

"Okay. He's never asked me before, but if for some reason he asks me today, I'll tell him 'yes'." JonJon said, then carried his dishes away.

"What was that about?" Benny asked curiously.

"Just a hunch." Vincent said with a shrug.

"Come on. There's got to be more to it than that." Benny said suspiciously.

"Well, things worked out today so you're out of classes and I'm off duty. It really wouldn't surprise me if things worked out so JonJon could be off work too. If things don't work out that way, then it's no big deal, but if they do, JonJon's already promised me that he'd say 'yes'." Vincent finished with a smile.

Benny considered the words for a moment, then said, "You made playing a hunch sound almost logical."

"Yeah. Are you just about finished?" Vincent asked curiously.

Benny looked down at his plate and said, "Yeah. Let's go so we can get good seats."

"It shouldn't be too crowded since school is in session. They're showing the movie again this evening and that's when it's probably going to be packed." Lehman said casually as he stood.

"Hold on Lehman. How do you know about all this stuff. You've only been on board for one day." Benny asked curiously.

"I've read Vincent's mind a couple of times now. I picked up a lot of things I wasn't looking for." Lehman said frankly as he waited for Benny to finish gathering his dishes.

"How do you feel about that?" Benny asked Vincent as he started walking toward the drop-off window.

"If I was worried about it, I wouldn't have let him read my mind. The only secrets I really have are about Starfleet. T'Lani already showed me how to protect that stuff. Lehman is welcomed to look at the rest of it if he wants to." Vincent said without concern.

"There are a few things I'm sure Vincent wouldn't want me talking about, but that's just because he doesn't want to be reminded of them." Lehman said honestly.

"Can we change the subject?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"See what I mean?" Lehman said with a teasing smile at Vincent.

"Yeah. And instead of changing the subject, how about we just let it drop and go enjoy the movie?" Benny asked hopefully.

"Works for me." Vincent said with a smile.

"No argument here, I'm the one who suggested the movie." Lehman said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"Do you guys have room for one more?"

All three boys looked up to see JonJon standing at the end of their row of seats.

"Sure JonJon, we saved you a seat." Benny said as he patted the seat next to him.

"Thanks." JonJon said shyly as he sat down.

"What happened? How did you end up getting the rest of the day off?" Benny asked curiously.

"Well, Roger and Cyril went to lunch and both decided that they needed a little time to be together. Cyril asked me if I wanted to take the rest of the day off or work on the safety deposit boxes and... well, if Vincent hadn't made me promise, I wouldn't be here right now." JonJon finished shyly.

"Then I'm glad he made you promise. I think we need a break. Let's enjoy it." Benny said with a smile at his friend.

The lights started dimming and the murmured conversations in the room began to quiet.

* * * * *

As the lights came up at the end of the movie, they revealed Lehman sprawled across his chair, collapsed in laughter.

The other boys were smiling, as they watched him trying to get control of himself.

"You liked that, huh?" Vincent finally asked.

"That... that was the funniest thing I've ever seen! We don't have anything like that on my world." Lehman said as he finally brought himself back to a sitting position.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. If you like, we can buy you a copy of the movie so you can watch it again whenever you want." Benny said happily.

"Yeah. It was so funny. I just can't believe how funny it was." Lehman said before breaking into laughter again.

"My brother liked that movie too." JonJon said with a bittersweet smile.

Benny's smile faded as he realized that JonJon was probably reliving a painful memory.

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

JonJon shook his head and said, "No. That's okay. It was a happy memory. I'll be fine."

Benny reluctantly nodded, but continued to watch JonJon carefully.

"Come on Lehman, let's go to the ship's store and see if they have the movie for sale yet." Vincent said happily, oblivious to what was going on with JonJon.

"Okay. I haven't had a chance to see the store." Lehman said as he finally was able to stand.

"What about you guys? Do you feel up to some shopping?" Vincent asked as he turned his attention to Benny and JonJon.

"Yeah... except I don't really have any money." Benny said quietly.

"Yes you do." JonJon said immediately.

Benny looked at JonJon with question.

"Do you have your ID?" JonJon asked seriously.

"Yeah. I think so." Benny said as he patted his pants pocket.

"Everything is worked out so all the colonists have access to their accounts. You have your own private account and you can also use your parents' account if you need to." JonJon said as he stepped out of the row of chairs.

"Oh. Thanks, I didn't know that." Benny said with surprise.

"You must not check your Kimber email account when you use the computer. We sent a notice to everyone." JonJon said frankly.

"I didn't even think about it. You mean all our email accounts are still active?" Benny said as he fell into step beside JonJon.

"Yeah. It's the easiest way for us to keep people up-to-date on what's going on. I guess you didn't hear about it because you've been staying with us in Deflector Control. I know Cyril made a few announcements about it down here on the recreation deck." JonJon said casually as they walked.

"I don't have an ID or money or anything like that. What should I do?" Lehman asked in thought.

JonJon stopped walking as he thought about the question.

"Does he need to talk to Cyril?" Vincent asked uncertainly.

JonJon considered for a moment, then said, "I don't know. If Lehman had been at Kimber, then I'd know just what he needed to do, but he isn't even a Federation citizen... I have no idea who he needs to talk to."

"I see what you mean. Maybe Daddy Joe would know what we should do." Vincent said slowly.

After a moment of thought, JonJon nodded and said, "He'd probably know better than any of us. Do you want to talk to him before or after the shopping?"

"Before. There's no telling what we'll have to do or how long it will take." Vincent said in thought.

"Sorry guys. If I knew it was going to be this much trouble I wouldn't have said anything." Lehman said quietly.

Benny put an arm around Lehman's shoulders and said, "It's no trouble. None of us have anything planned for the rest of the day and the ship's store will be there whenever we're ready for it."

JonJon smiled at the sight of Benny holding Lehman as they approached the turbo lift.

* * * * *

The lift doors opened to reveal Roger and Cyril, both looking relaxed and happy.

"Well hello. How are all of you doing today?" Cyril asked casually.

"Just fine. We were just about to go and try to find out what we should do to get Lehman an ID." JonJon said quickly, knowing that Cyril would probably know who they should talk to about it.

"I remember you telling me about him... my, you certainly are identical." Cyril said as he looked from Vincent to Lehman and back.

"I'm Lehman." Lehman said shyly as he raised his hand.

"It's very nice to meet you Lehman. JonJon has had nothing but nice things to say about you. My name is Cyril and this is Roger." Cyril said formally.

"It's nice to meet you. Vincent has told me about you... All good things." Lehman finished with a smile.

"Now let's see. You're a citizen of a world that has no treaty with the Federation. You have no formal relationship with anyone in the Federation and no documented identity. Is that about right?" Cyril asked in thought.

"Yeah. That's about it." Lehman said quietly.

"If you were a few years older, this would be less of an issue, but as things stand... I just don't know what we can do. Something like this could easily get bogged down in Federation courts for months or even years." Cyril said distantly.

"What about Safe Haven? I'm a member of Clan Short." Vincent said carefully.

Cyril hesitantly nodded and said, "Maybe. I'm not fully versed in all the nuances of the Safe Haven Act, but from what I know of it, you could probably justify it. The only problem I can foresee with that is the naming of a custodial guardian."

"I can take care of myself." Lehman said seriously.

"Maybe you can. But you shouldn't have to. You're too young to be left to fend for yourself." Cyril said frankly.

"I'll do it." JonJon said seriously.

"It has to be an adult." Cyril said with regret.

"I may look like I'm fourteen years old, but I'm actually older than you are. Unless you're going to tell me that there's some reason that an Android

can't adopt a child, there's no reason I can't be Lehman's father." JonJon said firmly.

Cyril considered for a moment, then shook his head.

"If Lehman's world had adopted Safe Haven, then it wouldn't be a problem. But things being as they are... it still looks like we're talking about a long, drawn out court case to determine Lehman's official status." Cyril said slowly.

"What if the Reverend Mother Myscendria said it was okay? Would that work?" Vincent asked thoughtfully.

"Who's that?" Roger asked curiously.

"The Reverend Mother Myscendria is my people's highest holy leader." Lehman said quietly.

Cyril shook his head and said, "Since your world doesn't have any formal status with the Federation it might end up making things more difficult."

"Wait, what about the Okudai?" Vincent asked seriously.

"What about them?" Cyril asked cautiously.

"What if JonJon adopted Lehman by Okudai law? Would that hold up in a Federation court?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Let me see... Okuda has a treaty with the Federation. So if Lehman were recognized as the legal child of JonJon by the Okudai government, the Federation would have to recognize it. The only problem with that is, how do we get the Okudai to recognize JonJon as Lehman's father?" Cyril asked slowly.

"If I can borrow your office for a little while to make a few subspace calls, I think I can arrange that." JonJon said seriously.

"Of course you can borrow it whenever you want. Do whatever you need to do." Cyril said with assurance.

"Are you okay with all of this Lehman?" Benny asked quietly from Lehman's side.

"Yeah. It's just... no one's wanted me for years and now all of a sudden you're doing all sorts of crazy stuff so you'll be able to keep me. It's a little hard for me to believe." Lehman said quietly.

"Believe it. If JonJon weren't trying to be your dad right now, I'd be filling out forms so I could be emancipated and declared an adult so I could adopt you myself." Benny said firmly.

"And I already thought about T'Lani and I adopting you, then naming Benny and JonJon as your guardians while we're in space." Vincent said quietly.

"Really?" Lehman asked with wide eyes.

Vincent nodded and said, "Even if you didn't look just like me, you're still my brother. That mean's that I'd do anything to protect you and give you the best future possible."

"If all else fails, Cyril and I could adopt you." Roger said quietly.

Cyril looked at Roger with surprise at the statement.

"You boys are a family and you need to be kept together. We'd be willing to adopt you, all of you, if that's what it would take." Roger said seriously.

Cyril's look of surprise turned to one of love as he said, "That's right. Let's go to my office right now and start making calls."

"But what about your day off?" JonJon asked with concern.

"We'll enjoy our day off a lot more when we know that we did everything in our power to give Lehman the best possible home." Roger said seriously.

Cyril nodded his agreement, then started walking toward his office.

* * * * *

"This is a secure channel reserved for the use of the Okudai Central Church." an automated voice said tonelessly.

"This is JonJon, I'm one of the Trach Manja." JonJon said, hoping that was enough of an identification.

A moment later the screen came on to reveal Tyber shirtless and out of breath. He also appeared to be blushing.

"Is everything okay Tyber?" JonJon asked with concern.

"Yeah. Fine. You just caught me while I was, um... taking a bath." Tyber said reluctantly as he glanced away from the screen.

A series of growls and hisses came from the background.

JonJon, Lehman and Vincent understood the Gorn language and recognized Oscar's voice, "If it is not an emergency, tell them you will call them back. It's getting cold without you."

Tyber's blush became brighter as he nervously asked, "What's going on guys?"

Vincent smiled as he said, "We needed to talk to Tyce. Is he around?"

"I'm sure he is in his suite of rooms. I'll connect you." Tyber said quickly, then the screen went blank.

"What's getting cold?" Lehman asked with a barely restrained smile.

"I don't know, maybe we should ask him next time we call." Vincent said with a chuckle.

The screen flashed back on to reveal Tyce looking peaceful and relaxed.

"It's good to see all of you again so soon. How are things going?" Tyce asked happily.

"Just fine. JonJon has something to ask you." Vincent said, then stepped away from the screen.

Tyce looked at JonJon with question then smiled at JonJon's timid expression.

"Lehman doesn't have a legal identity in the Federation. If he were an adult it wouldn't be a big problem, but since he's a child, it looks like it's going to be a really big deal for the courts to figure out who's going to take care of him. But if you could kind of declare that Lehman is my son, then the Federation would recognize it as legal and there wouldn't be any problem at all." JonJon rambled.

"No." Tyce said firmly.

JonJon blinked at Tyce with surprise.

"In matters of family law such as marriages, divorces, custody disputes and adoptions, the Church has the authority to make judgments and declarations. As the highest ranking member of the Church of Okuda, any declaration I would make could not be overridden by any governmental or church body." Tyce said seriously.

JonJon nodded hesitantly at the declaration.

"What you've just told me is that you want to adopt Lehman as a matter of convenience, to work around the legal process of the Federation. I can't

think of a worse reason for an adoption and I won't even consider it." Tyce said vehemently.

JonJon nodded, then quietly said, "You're right Tyce. It was wrong of me to even ask such a selfish thing."

Tyce smiled and said, "I'm not upset JonJon. I just wanted you to understand the seriousness of what you're asking."

"I really do understand. I'm asking that Lehman be made my legal son. I'm promising that I'll stand with him the rest of his life and support him however I can. I'm asking you to give Lehman a family so he doesn't have to face the future alone." JonJon said seriously.

"Well, why didn't you just say that? Lehman, what do you think about this?" Tyce asked with a smile.

"You were here when Benny and JonJon promised to watch out for me. So I've had time to think about what I want things to be like. The only thing I can think of that would be better than having JonJon as a father is having Benny and JonJon both as my fathers." Lehman said firmly.

Benny's eyes went wide at the statement.

"Okay. Benny, how do you feel about that?" Tyce asked with amusement.

"Well. I think having Lehman as a son would be great. But JonJon and I aren't... I mean, we never..." Benny trailed off with embarrassment.

Tyce giggled at Benny's expression and said, "I understand."

Benny relaxed slightly, but was still blushing wildly.

"How does this sound? JonJon and Benny can both be named as Lehman's parents. You three work that out however you want, just as long as you consider what's best for Lehman when you're making your decisions." Tyce asked simply.

"Thanks Tyce. That sounds great." Lehman said happily.

"So JonJon and I are Lehman's parents... what does that make us to each other?" Benny asked cautiously.

"Whatever you want to be. You two decide." Tyce said with a smile.

Benny nodded slowly.

Tyce looked away from the screen for a moment, then nodded and faced the screen again.

"Oluf needs Benny and JonJon's legal names." Tyce said with distraction.

"Benjamin David Summers." Benny said quietly.

"Jonathan Michael Daniels." JonJon said in a matching tone.

"Lehman, from what I've learned about Human customs, they usually have last names. Do you want to do something like that?" Tyce asked with a smile.

"Yeah. But... which name should I have?" Lehman asked as he looked from Benny to JonJon with concern.

"Daniels." Benny said seriously.

Lehman and JonJon both looked at Benny with question.

"I want JonJon to have the chance to pass on his family name." Benny said more quietly.

Lehman smiled, then looked at JonJon and asked, "Is that okay with you?"

"It's better than okay." JonJon said quietly, then looked at Benny and whispered, "Thanks."

"Oluf? Did you get all that?" Tyce asked over his shoulder.

A moment later he turned his attention back to the screen and said, "The official documents are being filed with the central ministry now. As soon as they're finalized, a copy will be sent to the Federation. From the way Oluf is talking to the ministry, I'd guess within five minutes. Lehman Benjamin Daniels is now legally the child of Benjamin Summers and Jonathan Daniels."

"Thank you Tyce. I really appreciate you doing this for us. By the time we could have sorted everything out in the Federation courts, Lehman would probably be old enough to have kids of his own." Vincent said with a smile.

"The Okudai government can be the same way at times. I was glad to help... once I knew you were doing it for the right reasons." Tyce finished with a smile.

"Would you do one more thing before you go?" Vincent asked quickly.

"What's that?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Next time you talk to Tyber, ask him what Oscar was worried about getting cold when we called." Vincent asked with a smile.

Tyce's eyes went wide with surprise, then he broke into a grin and said, "It would be my pleasure to ask."

* * * * *

"The Holy One wasn't exaggerating. I just queried the Federation network and received Lehman's official documentation. Congratulations Lehman Daniels, you officially exist." Cyril said happily.

"Now we need to get Lehman an ID. We'll need to go to ship's services for that." Vincent said in thought.

"Just a moment... if Lehman will stand still I'll capture an image." Cyril said carefully.

"That way you'll just have to go up and pick up your ID. They should have it ready before you get there." Vincent said happily.

"And then we go shopping?" Lehman asked curiously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. That is how all this started, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I just can't believe it. I've got two fathers." Lehman said in wonder.

"We'll try to be the best dads you could ever wish for." JonJon said as he pulled Lehman into a gentle hug.

Benny smiled at the sight and said, "For a little while today I was feeling kind of left out of things but now..."

"You'll never be left out Benny. You and JonJon will be friends forever, and now you have Lehman." Vincent said happily.

"But where does that leave you?" Benny asked with concern.

"Watching all my best friends become a family." Vincent said honestly.

Benny continued to look at Vincent, feeling that he should somehow be more a part of their plans.

"When we get to the colony, you're staying, I'm leaving. You know I've got Daddy Joe and Thaelan and Darin who will watch out for me. Now I know that you and JonJon are going to be taking care of Lehman. Trust me, it works." Vincent said with a smile.

"And the boys will always be able to come to us if they need anything." Roger said quietly.

Vincent smiled up at Roger, he had honestly forgotten that Roger and Cyril were still in the room.

"Roger's right. We'll always be there for you." Cyril said with a smile.

"Thank you Cyril, you too Roger. It'll be good to know that we have some extra help if we need it." JonJon said sincerely.

"Now didn't I hear Lehman say something about shopping?" Roger asked playfully.

"Right. Let's go get the ID so we can hit the ship's store." Vincent said with a smile.

Benny and JonJon moved at the same time from opposite sides to hug Lehman.

They shared an embarrassed look, then both proceeded.

The three of them walked out of the office arm in arm in arm.

* * * * *

"Lehman, you really need to go shopping with Jimmy." Vincent said frankly.

"Why?" Lehman asked with confusion.

"Because he enjoys shopping almost as much as you do." Vincent said with a smile.

"I never really got to go shopping before. It's not as much fun to go looking through the shops when you can't buy anything." Lehman said shyly.

"I didn't mean for that to sound like I'm not enjoying it. I just know that Jimmy loves to shop and he'd really have a good time shopping with you." Vincent said honestly.

"Okay. I don't know him that well yet, but if I get the chance I'll ask him." Lehman said carefully.

"Lehman, whenever you feel like shopping, I'll be happy to go with you." JonJon said seriously.

"Is that a dad thing?" Lehman asked curiously.

"No. A friend thing. It's fun to spend time with you when you're doing something you enjoy." JonJon said warmly.

"That goes for both of us." Benny added seriously.

"Well, I think we've just about looked at everything in the store. What are we going to do next?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I need to call Norman. I kind of forgot." JonJon said quietly.

"Let's do it now. I could use a break." Vincent said frankly.

"Why don't you guys do that and I'll help Lehman take his bags to Deflector Control." Benny said casually.

"Sounds like a plan. Do you want to use Cyril's office?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Sure. I don't think he'll mind." JonJon said speculatively.

"We'll meet you at Cyril's office when we're done." Benny said with a smile, then gathered the bags that JonJon had been carrying.

* * * * *

When JonJon placed the call, Vincent expected Norman to answer or at the very least to see a complete stranger. The last thing in the universe he expected to see was a familiar face.

"Commander Uhura?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"I am Nyota unit 14, Norman will be with you shortly." the woman said pleasantly.

"Why do you look like Commander Uhura?" Vincent asked cautiously.

The Android looked at Vincent curiously for a moment, then answered, "Lieutenant Uhura visited our world some time ago and expressed a desire to undergo neural transfer into a synthetic body that would not age. The necessary scans were taken and information was gathered to construct the body, but in the end, she foolishly chose not to have the procedure done. After her departure, we used the information to construct the Nyota series of Androids... Norman is ready to speak to you now."

The screen switched over to show Norman with a look of concern.

"Thank you for contacting me so quickly. My people are facing something of a crisis, and I am at a loss as to how to proceed." Norman said gravely.

"Tell me what's going on and we'll do whatever we can to help." JonJon said seriously.

"Do you have prior knowledge of our history?" Norman asked cautiously.

"No. I didn't know there were Androids anywhere except Earth." JonJon said frankly.

Norman nodded, then said, "The makers were from deep within the Andromeda galaxy. Before their sun went nova, they dispatched a series of vessels out into the universe to seek out a new home world and prepare it for their arrival. Unfortunately, the sun went nova much sooner than they expected. To my knowledge, none of the makers survived."

"We, the Android population, were constructed to make this K-type planet habitable for the makers. We have constructed pressure domes on the surface and have nearly completed the construction of several cities. As the end of construction approaches, we see no future. It is not enough for us to simply exist. We need a reason, a new purpose." Norman said thoughtfully.

"I understand. How long will it be before you have fulfilled your purpose?" JonJon asked carefully.

"Six months, fourteen days." Norman said with a note of dread under his words.

"We're on our way to establish a new colony. As soon as I'm settled, I'll contact you to get more information and I'll see what I can do." JonJon said seriously.

"So you believe you can discover a new purpose for us?" Norman asked hopefully.

"I think it's possible." JonJon said thoughtfully.

"Thank you JonJon. I had considered asking the organics for help, but previous dealings with their kind have made it difficult to trust their motives." Norman said darkly.

"Some of them are okay." JonJon said with a smile as he glanced back at Vincent.

"I hope that it will be possible for you to visit our world sometime soon. I would enjoy the opportunity to show it to you." Norman said in a gentler tone.

"I think I'd like that Norman. I should be back in contact within two weeks." JonJon said with a smile.

"Before you hang up, can I talk to Nyota Fourteen again?" Vincent asked quickly over JonJon's shoulder.

Norman seemed surprised by the request, but nodded his agreement.

"Let me in there for a second JonJon." Vincent said as he nudged JonJon out of the way.

JonJon watched as Vincent accessed the Starfleet personnel files, then quickly transferred one of the files to his local terminal.

"Norman said that you wished to speak with me?" Nyota 14 asked curiously.

"Yes. I just thought you'd like to see what Commander Uhura is like now." Vincent said as he pressed the control to upload the file he had just retrieved.

Nyota 14 stared at the image before her for a moment, then quietly said, "I see. She was not foolish to refuse the neural transfer. Commander Nyota Uhura has matured into a very lovely woman."

"I think so too. I just wanted you to know that just because Commander Uhura got older didn't mean she stopped being beautiful." Vincent said with a smile.

"Thank you. I will share this image with the others of my series. Ending transmission." Nyota 14 said absently, then the screen went blank.

Vincent chuckled, then noticed JonJon's thoughtful gaze.

"You're going to be able to help Norman, aren't you?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I hope so. It's an entire planet, an entire civilization." JonJon said in an overwhelmed voice.

"Remember what Eliam said, you just have to help one. Everything else will take care of itself." Vincent said seriously.

JonJon nodded in thought.

"Hey guys! We just ran into Chance and Channing. How would you like to go down to the pool for a while?" Lehman asked from the doorway with Fizgig in his arms.

Vincent smiled at Lehman's enthusiasm and said, "I think that sounds perfect."

JonJon looked at the other three boys in the room, then nodded peacefully.

Chapter 33

"Pool deck." JonJon called to the ceiling of the lift.

"Is Fizgig going to be okay?" Lehman asked with concern.

"He'll be fine. Everyone in Deflector Control is used to having him around and he always behaves himself." Vincent said with assurance.

"I just wish he could come with us." Lehman said quietly.

"I know. He'd probably have fun. But I don't think the other people at the pool would enjoy having him there. We'll just be sure to include him in whatever we do next." Vincent said seriously.

"I forgot my towel." Benny said with realization as the turbo lift doors opened.

"You can share mine." JonJon said without concern.

"Thanks JonJon." Benny said with a smile as he walked with the group into the pool area.

"Look at that. Chance and Channing are already in the pool." Lehman said as he pointed.

"You know how kids are, they just can't wait to play." Vincent said with a grin.

"Yeah, we'd better hurry and get in the pool to supervise them before they get into trouble." Lehman said with a chuckle.

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"I'll be glad when this growth spurt is over, my feet are killing me." Vincent said as he pulled off his boots.

"Vincent, I think maybe your feet are growing. When I first assumed your shape your boots barely fit me." Lehman said frankly.

"Oh... I guess that makes sense. Maybe I'll stop by the quartermaster's office after we're done swimming and I can see if they have anything in my size." Vincent said as he started undressing.

"That might be tough. You are kinda small." Benny said reluctantly, not wanting to sound insulting.

"Yeah. Well, I'll have to do something. I think Lehman's right. My feet probably aren't hurting because I'm growing, they're just hurting because

my shoes are too tight." Vincent said as he folded his pants and put them in a locker.

"I'll need some new shoes too. I just have the pair of boots that I borrowed from you and they don't fit me right either." Lehman said as he pulled down his underwear.

Vincent glanced at Lehman and froze as his eyes went wide.

Lehman picked up his swim trunks, then noticed that Vincent was staring at him.

"What?" Lehman asked hesitantly.

"Wow Lehman, you're really... um..." Vincent stammered.

"...Hung." Benny said cautiously.

Lehman looked down at himself, then smiled as he said, "Yeah. I didn't know how long I'd be stuck in this shape so I decided that I'd like to have an adult one... did I get it right?"

"Yeah. It just seems kinda strange because you're so small an it's so... big." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Too big?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Benny looked at Lehman critically for a moment, then said, "No. It's probably just right. It just seems big because the rest of you looks so young."

Lehman smiled at Benny's words, then pulled on his swim trunks.

Vincent reluctantly pulled down his underwear, feeling a little shy about it after seeing Lehman's more adult size.

"Well, from the look of it, It's not going to be too long before you catch up to Lehman." Benny said, then turned and closed his locker.

Vincent looked down at his naked body and said, "Whoa! When did that happen?"

"I guess your growth spurt didn't all go to your feet." Lehman said with a smile.

Vincent stared at himself in wonder. Even though his equipment was far from Lehman's 'adult' proportions, it had grown considerably since the last time he'd looked.

"That's just freaky." Vincent said absently.

"You really never noticed?" JonJon asked with surprise.

"No. I mean, I guess I just didn't think about checking." Vincent said as he hesitantly reached down to touch his penis.

"Would you like us to leave you alone so you can give it a test drive?" Benny asked with a teasing grin.

Vincent looked up at Benny with confusion, then realized what he was asking.

"No thanks. I was just surprised. Dr. Perry said that I'd be growing down there, I just didn't know it would be so quick." Vincent said as he hurried to pull on his swim trunks.

Benny considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. Come to think of it, it was like that for me too. One day I was getting ready to take a shower and... Hello! I'm a big boy now."

Vincent chuckled as he put his underwear into his locker and grabbed his towel.

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As the group was walking toward the pool, JonJon quietly said, "Lehman, you said that you didn't know how long you'd be stuck in this shape. Does that mean that you may not grow up?"

The group stopped at the edge of the pool and put their towels on some vacant lounge chairs while they awaited Lehman's response.

"I don't know." Lehman finally said.

"So there's a chance that you'll be stuck looking like a nine year old boy for the rest of your life?" Benny asked with concern.

"Yeah." Lehman said frankly.

"We need to talk to Dr. Perry about this. She should be able to figure it out." Vincent said seriously.

"Guys. This has been the best day of my life so far and I really don't want to take a chance of messing it up with bad news. Can we please not worry about it today and just have fun?" Lehman asked hopefully.

"Sure Lehman, but when you're ready to talk to her, I want to be there with you." Benny said seriously.

"Me too." JonJon said as he put a hand on Lehman's shoulder.

"You're not leaving me out." Vincent said with a cheeky grin.

"Okay. I'll make sure you're all there with me when I talk to Dr. Perry." Lehman said uncomfortably.

"Right then. Let's swim." Benny said with cheer and jumped into the water.

Multiple splashes followed as the other boys joined him.

* * * * *

Lehman noticed that JonJon was staying separate from everyone else and watching him with concern.

"What's wrong JonJon?" Lehman asked as he swam to JonJon's side.

"I'm sorry Lehman, I'm trying not to think about it but it really bothers me that you might not grow up." JonJon said honestly.

Lehman moved closer so he could hug JonJon and said, "When I was on my home world, I never really got to be a kid. Every day was a fight just to survive. If it turns out that I'm really trapped in this form then... I think I'll be okay. I'll just enjoy my new life and be the kid that I never got to be before."

"I'll do whatever I can to make your childhood as good as it can be, even if it lasts a hundred years." JonJon said as he returned the hug.

"If I was gonna be stuck as a kid, is there anyone in the universe who would be a better dad for me? I mean, fifty years from now, you'll still look exactly the same won't you?" Lehman asked frankly.

"Yes." JonJon said quietly, then continued, "And for the first time I may have a reason to be happy about that."

* * * * *

The sound of an alert klaxon interrupted the atmosphere of light-hearted play in the pool.

"It's a yellow alert." Vincent said as he swam for the ladder to exit the pool.

"Everyone, may I have your attention. Please leave the pool area and return to your cabins or duty stations." A voice announced over the public address system.

There wasn't a large crowd at the pool, but there were enough people that everyone entering the changing room at once was a tight fit.

"Go on and get changed, we'll wait until the crew are all done." Benny said as he stopped outside the changing room door.

"I'll meet you guys up in deflector control." Vincent said, then hurried in to change.

"Yeah. We'll be up there in a few minutes." Benny said loudly to be heard.

* * * * *

As Vincent rushed to the turbo lift carrying his socks and boots, he noticed that Chance and Channing were almost at his side.

"Thanks for inviting me for the pool party guys. It was a lot of fun." Vincent said before being crowded into the lift.

"Deflector control!" Vincent called out, hoping the computer would register his request among the clamor of voices.

"Main engineering and deflector control." Chance called into the air next.

"Thanks Chance." Vincent said with a smile.

"No problem. We're all on the same team." Chance said as he put a hand on Vincent's shoulder.

* * * * *

As Vincent rushed into deflector control, he automatically looked over console three, then moved to console two and began to check the systems.

"I think you have time to put your shoes on." Joe said with a fond smile.

"I just wanted to be sure everything was running right before I did that." Vincent said seriously.

The doors of deflector control opened to admit Connie, Susan and Jimmy.

"Wouldn't you know it, just as soon as I'm about to start eating, an alert sounds." Connie grumbled.

"Yeah. I was in the pool when it went off." Vincent said frankly and pointed at his socks and shoes on the floor beside him.

Lou and Judy walked into the room next.

"This had better be good. I've had ten minutes of sleep." Lou said darkly.

"Ouch. You win Lou." Connie said cautiously.

"Does anyone know what's going on?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"No clue. We've changed course and increased speed." Joe said frankly.

"Engineering. All departments. Prepare teams for assessment of a damaged vessel and possible retrieval." Chief Morgan's voice said over the comm.

"Connie, you're up." Joe said frankly.

"Sure, when it's something exciting like rescuing a colony you go, but when it's working on a stinky old junk ship that's probably been drifting for a hundred years, you send me." Connie said playfully.

"I said that the next one was yours. But if you don't want to..." Joe trailed off with a smile.

"I didn't say that. I'll lead the mission." Connie said quickly.

"Good. Thaelan, you'll get the next one." Joe said with a smile.

"Thank you. I'll look forward to it." Thaelan said respectfully, then turned his attention back to the main console.

"Suck up." Connie said flatly.

"We're coming into sensor range." Thaelan said in a completely professional voice.

"Good. Let's see what we'll be dealing with. Put it on the big screen." Joe said seriously.

Thaelan pressed the keys to switch the main screen's view and everyone looked carefully.

"Soyuz class?" Jimmy asked cautiously.

"No. Look at the shape of the nacelles. It's definitely Miranda class." Joe said seriously.

"From the hull damage I'd say that she's been adrift for quite a few years." Connie said speculatively.

"But I don't see anything like weapons damage. If the hull plating held, she might still be space worthy." Susan said carefully.

"Any idea of which ship it is? I can't make out any markings." Jimmy asked curiously.

"Do you see the roll bar above the nacelle pylons? It's one of the older primary configuration Mirandas, but something about the design seems off..." Connie said carefully.

"The majority of the Miranda class are primary configuration vessels. It's the most versatile design." Joe said frankly.

"Wait. Right there, zoom in on that section of the nacelle, I can almost make out something." Connie said in a rush as he pointed.

Thaelan carefully worked to enlarge the image, then provided some computer enhancement to make the image clearer.

"N... I think that's an X? And the last two numbers are 83 or 33... I can't make it out." Jimmy said carefully.

"You don't need to." Joe said as he stared at the image.

"Do you know which ship it is?" Susan asked curiously.

"Yes. This isn't A Miranda, it's THE *Miranda*, NX 1833. This is the prototype." Joe said in a disbelieving voice.

"It can't be. The *Miranda* was destroyed about six years ago along with the *Atlas*." Susan said seriously.

"You're thinking of her successor, the *USS Miranda*, registry NCC 1833. This is the prototype ship that was destroyed 22 years ago." Connie said as he looked at the image on the screen carefully.

"Presumed destroyed. I've read all about the first *Miranda*." Vincent said in a small voice.

"What can you tell us about her?" Joe asked softly.

"The *Miranda* left Alpha Centauri to deliver supplies to Rigel VII. About three weeks out they sent a message saying that they were going to be delayed. They were going off course to investigate something weird happening to a star in the Corona Australis system. That's the last anyone heard of them. When they didn't call back, another ship was sent to check on them, but all they found was a brand new neutron star where two stars had been before." Vincent said in thought.

"I have accessed the computer records of the incident and Vincent's information is correct. But there is an unusual notation about the neutron star. It has been proposed that RX J1856.5-3754 is too small to be a neutron star, and may therefore, in fact, be a quark star. Conditions in the area are too unstable and hazardous to allow a conclusive investigation. The scientific community have not reached consensus on how to classify it." Thaelan said in concentration.

"Maybe we'll find out some answers when we get on the ship. Thaelan, can you bring up deck plans so we can see what the deflector control systems are like?" Joe asked curiously.

"Yes, of course. Here they are." Thaelan said as he put the deck plans on the main screen in a split view.

"It looks like deflector control is forward of main engineering. But it's awfully small. Where are the generators and field coils?" Joe said as he looked at the plans carefully.

"They're under the floor of deflector control." Vincent said as he studied the plans before them.

"Why would they put them there?" Joe asked cautiously.

"In the prototype design, they put the things that don't need to be accessed that much into a small crawlspace between decks, like a mini-deck. It turned out to be a real problem so they did away with the sub-floor in the next Miranda design." Vincent said frankly.

"It sounds like you know quite a bit about the prototype *Miranda*." Joe said speculatively.

"I mostly know about how the prototype is different from the first generation Miranda class ships. It's interesting to see the changes they made." Vincent said casually.

"Do you happen to have that information where you can retrieve it? I don't think any of us are well versed in the prototype *Miranda*'s design." Joe asked seriously.

"Sure. It'll just take me a minute to find it." Vincent said and hurried to auxiliary station two.

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Connie leaned in close to Joe and asked, "Do you mind if I take him?"

"It's your call. But if he gets hurt, you'll answer to me." Joe said seriously.

"Don't worry Joe. I'll keep him safe and It'll be a good experience for him." Connie said with assurance.

"Okay, I've got it." Vincent said, then hurried back across the room to stand with the rest of the crew.

"Thank you Vincent. If you'll upload your information to a padd, the repair team will be able to refer to it." Joe said seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said quickly, then hurried back to auxiliary station two.

* * * * *

"Lou and Judy, go get some sleep. Connie, It's time to get your team together. I'll stay here and hold down the fort." Joe said with a smile.

"Right." Connie said with a grin at Joe, then looked around the group and said, "Thaelan, Suze, Darin and Vincent will be coming with me."

Jimmy looked at Connie with a flash of hurt and disbelief.

"Jimmy, take a good look at those deck plans while we're gone because the plan is for you to relieve Vincent in about four hours. Got it?" Connie asked seriously.

"Got it. I'll be ready." Jimmy said professionally.

"Everyone grab your tool bag and a communicator and let's go." Connie said enthusiastically.

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters. I'm glad to see that you're going to get an opportunity to do some field work." Chief Morgan said as he approached the Deflector Control team.

"Yes sir, I think I'm being included on the team because I've studied about the prototype *Miranda*, so I might be able to help." Vincent said cautiously.

"I'm glad to know that you have an interest in other ship designs." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Well, I actually haven't studied many designs other than the Constitution class. The only reason I know about the *Miranda* is because it's different from any other ship in Starfleet. From everything I read, the *Miranda* was one big flying mistake. It's like everything that you don't want to do when you're designing a Starship all put together and shot out into space." Vincent said frankly.

"When she launched, some of the crew lovingly referred to her as the 'death trap'." Chief Morgan said quietly.

Vincent nodded and said, "She had no redundant systems. You had to dismantle the floor to get to almost anything you needed to repair. She only had one impulse engine. If one thing went wrong, even a little thing, she'd be hanging dead in space for days until it was fixed."

"The captain was a personal friend of mine. He once told me that the crew always kept their EV suits handy because the environmental control systems were as iffy as the rest of the ship. But even with all her faults, the captain and crew of the *Miranda* were devoted to proving that it was basically a good design. History has proven them right. The Miranda class has turned out to be one of Starfleet's most versatile designs... after the Constitution class of course." Chief Morgan said with a smile, then noticed someone gesturing toward him, trying to get his attention.

"It looks like you're about to get a first hand look at the flying mistake." Chief Morgan said and hurried away.

"Do we have everything we're likely to need?" Connie asked his group.

"Vincent, did you remember to bring an extra wave modulator?" Susan asked seriously.

"I got it in my bag." Vincent said as he patted his tool bag gently.

"Everyone, may I have your attention." Chief Morgan called from the front of the hanger bay.

"The first team has just reported in. They've been able to activate the environmental control systems so we'll have light, heat, gravity and atmosphere. But they're suggesting that you should have your breather units on and ready to use at a moment's notice. I'm suggesting that having a flashlight and a communicator handy might also be a good idea." Chief Morgan said frankly.

"Now that that's been said, let's go over and see if we can wake up this grand old lady." Chief Morgan said with cheer, then walked to the first shuttle with purpose.

* * * * *

"Did they even have atmospheric shields back then?" Vincent asked as he waited for the shuttle to land on the *Miranda*.

"No. This is from back in the day when they had to close the doors and repressurize the entire hanger bay." Connie said with a smile.

"Talk about the stone age." Vincent said with a shake of his head.

Connie chuckled and said, "It's not quite the stone age, but we have learned a few tricks since back then."

"Are you nervous, Vincent? You seem to be fidgeting a lot." Darin asked with concern.

"No. I'm not nervous, my feet hurt and I'm trying not to think about it." Vincent said frankly.

"Oh, your growth spurt?" Darin asked quietly.

"Sort of. I need new boots. I feel like my toes are squished and jammed in my boots right now." Vincent said seriously.

Darin smiled and said, "I'll be sure to remind you about it when we get back to the *Yorktown*."

"If they keep hurting like this, you may need to carry me by the time we get back." Vincent said in an uncomfortable voice.

"We've landed. They're repressurizing the bay now." Connie said seriously.

"Does it take long?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Not long. Less than a minute, if everything is working right." Connie said in thought.

Vincent nodded, then remembered something and nudged Darin.

Darin looked at him with question.

"Remind me when we get back to the *Yorktown* that I've got something that I need to show you." Vincent said playfully.

"Something to show me? It's not a problem is it? Is it something big?" Darin asked with concern.

"Bigger than it used to be." Vincent said with a smile, then stood, as the door of the shuttle craft opened.

* * * * *

As Vincent stepped off the shuttle, he braced his tool bag with one hand and kept his other hand on the breather that was hanging around his neck.

"Team leaders, you have thirty minutes to assess the conditions of your departments, then report back to me in main engineering. We'll make a determination at that time if there's enough left of the old girl to salvage." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Vincent, since you're most familiar with the deck plans, why don't you lead the way." Connie said and gestured ahead of him.

After a glance around the group, Vincent nodded and started walking.

* * * * *

As the group entered the dimly lit hallway, they froze in place.

There were dead bodies laying in the hallway, looking as though they had just collapsed in an instant without any warning.

"Don't look at them. Keep going." Connie said in a whisper.

Vincent had already looked. The images of the frozen distant looks on the faces of the dead crew members were instantly burned into his memory.

They looked almost unreal, like wax figures. Yet at the same time they looked as if they might have been alive just a moment before.

"Vincent, we only have thirty minutes." Darin said as he placed a hand on Vincent's shoulder.

"Um, yeah. Sorry." Vincent said shyly, then began to walk.

Darin exchanged a concerned look with Thaelan before following Vincent down the hall.

* * * * *

"We'll need to go two decks down from here, then forward." Vincent said, then started climbing down a ladder.

As Darin followed Vincent down the ladder, Connie whispered to Thaelan and Susan, "Keep your eyes open. Something's wrong here. I mean, seriously wrong. I can feel it."

"You mean something besides the corpses lining the hallways?" Susan asked frankly.

"Yeah. I'm serious Suze, keep your eyes open and don't be afraid to call for a beam out if anything happens that worries you." Connie said seriously.

"Got it." Susan said quietly, then started climbing down the ladder.

"Human intuition?" Thaelan asked cautiously.

"Sure. If you want to call it that. Just stay alert." Connie said, then started climbing down the ladder.

Thaelan looked at the bodies in the still, silent hallway for a moment before climbing down.

* * * * *

"Here we are." Vincent said as he indicated a closed door.

"Please allow me." Thaelan said and opened an access panel beside the door.

He pulled the release lever to operate the door manually, then pulled out two magnetic handles.

Darin held out his hand and received one of the handles, then moved to the door and attached it.

Thaelan attached the other, then both men pulled the doors apart.

* * * * *

"At least there aren't any bodies in here." Darin said quietly as he shined his flashlight around the dark room.

"Here it is. This is the deflector control main, there's no other console for it anywhere else on the ship." Vincent said as he patted the dead main console.

"Talk about putting all your eggs in one basket." Susan said as she moved her flashlight around, trying to get a sense of where everything was in the small room.

"This is like a storage closet." Connie said frankly.

Darin finally found the panel he was looking for just inside the door and a moment later dim emergency lights came on.

"That's better. Thanks Darin." Connie said, then surveyed the room with a critical eye.

"If you wanted to look at the field coil, I'll need someone to help me lift a floor panel." Vincent said seriously.

"I can get that if you like." Thaelan offered quietly.

"No. Thaelan, check out the condition of the main console. Susan, dive into the command systems and see what you can find. Darin, help Vincent with the field coil, then check out the field generator. I'm going to start on the power systems and see if we can even power this antique mess." Connie said seriously.

"Let's do it." Darin said and started undoing the latches on the floor panel.

"I'll be glad when I get bigger so this isn't so hard." Vincent said as he struggled to get one of the latches to release.

In the time it took Vincent to open one latch, Darin had released the other three.

"Ready?" Darin asked.

"Yeah." Vincent said and took hold of the latch at the top of the floor panel.

Together they lifted the heavy panel, then set it out of the way.

"That looks like it's going to be a tight fit even for you." Darin said with concern.

"I think everything I have to check out is right here so I won't have to get down in there." Vincent said as he pulled out his tester unit.

"Do you need me to hand you tools?" Darin asked with a smile.

"That's okay. I've got it. The field generator is right there if you want to start checking it out." Vincent said as he pointed.

"Thanks little brother." Darin said and moved to the other end of the open floor panel to start testing the equipment.

* * * * *

"Guys, pack it in. Our time is almost up." Connie said seriously.

"I'm done. The generator is fused solid. It might be useful as an anchor, but it's worthless as a generator." Darin said as he sat up.

After being in an uncomfortable position for too long, rolling his neck and shoulders brought much relief.

"The field coil is shot too. Something caused the coil to break up. There probably isn't an unbroken piece over a few centimeters long in the whole thing." Vincent said as he turned off his tricorder and put it in his tool bag.

"Come on Vincent. Help me drop this floor panel back into place." Darin said as he moved from a sitting to a kneeling position on the floor.

"Yeah." Vincent said and moved to the opposite side of the panel.

"How you doing Suze?" Connie asked, curiously.

"I'm doing a lot better than these circuits. This thing is fried." Susan said as she backed out of the small access panel.

"I believe the main console is also beyond any hope of repair. All the things that should be separate have become fused and all those things that should be fused have become separated." Thaelan said, as he put his tools back into his bag.

"I don't think it matters anyway. The only way you'll be getting any power in here is if you carry it in a bucket. The conduits are all shot. There's not enough conductivity to carry a spark. It's like what Vincent was saying, the entire length of the conduit seems to have become segmented." Connie said as he walked toward the door.

* * * * *

"Well, if all our stuff is this bad, then there probably isn't much hope to salvage the ship." Vincent said speculatively as he walked with the group out of deflector control.

"There's really no way to tell what Starfleet will decide to do. I just hope they don't want us to tow it back to Earth." Connie said as he led the group down the hallway.

"Why not?" Darin asked curiously.

"Using a tractor beam and extending our shields to protect the *Miranda* all the way back to Earth would be a nightmare. It would take months and we'd be working almost constantly to keep the shields going." Connie said frankly.

"Ensign Agropos. Please wait." Thaelan said as they approached the ladder.

"What's wrong?" Connie asked with immediate concern at Thaelan's worried tone.

"Where are the bodies?"

* * * * *

Vincent looked around the dimly lit hallway and felt a chill crawl up his spine.

Connie opened his communicator and quickly said, "Deflector control team to Chief Morgan."

A burst of static was the only response.

"Deflector control away team to *Yorktown*. Please come in." Connie said in a more urgent voice.

Another burst of static sounded before Connie closed his communicator.

"You try Thaelan." Connie said firmly.

Thaelan opened his communicator and calmly said, "Ensign Thaelan to *Yorktown*, are you receiving me?"

Static popped and fizzled until Thaelan finally closed his communicator.

"We'll need to make our way to engineering. I'll lead. Thaelan, cover our rear. Engineering is one level up and two sections aft. Let's move." Connie said firmly.

* * * * *

As Vincent followed Susan up the ladder, he tried to call to T'Lani in his mind.

He could feel her presence, but there was some sort of barrier preventing him from making any kind of conscious contact.

As Vincent emerged on the next deck, he looked around to find that this deck also had no bodies lining the halls.

When Thaelan was off the ladder, Connie firmly said, "This way. Stay alert."

As the group began to slowly walk, Vincent noticed that his feet weren't hurting.

He slowed his pace and experimentally curled the toes of his right foot inside his boot.

"Don't worry little brother, we'll be in engineering soon." Darin said with assurance.

Vincent reached out through his bond to T'Lani again and found the same barrier, but now it seemed to be even stronger.

"Vincent? Are you alright?" Thaelan asked with concern.

"Yeah." Vincent said, then screamed, "Look out!"

Thaelan whirled and crouched into a defensive posture.

A woman in an old style Starfleet uniform was approaching Thaelan with a distant, unseeing look in her eyes.

"I don't know who you are but I suggest that you back away." Thaelan said seriously as he shifted his weight and prepared himself for an attack.

"Vincent, get over here and let Thaelan cover our escape." Connie said in a commanding tone.

After a moment of hesitation, Vincent turned and ran to join the others.

"Come on, it's just one more section." Connie said as he picked up his pace to a full run.

* * * * *

As the group turned the corner to approach main engineering, they stopped suddenly at the sight of a mob of people pounding and clawing at the door.

"Oh shit." Darin said in a shaky voice.

"I'll second that." Connie said as he motioned for the group to go back.

After a moment to think, Connie said, "Let's back track and get Thaelan, then circle around and try the aft door."

"Under would be faster than around." Vincent said quietly.

Connie considered for a moment, then said, "Right. Let's move."

* * * * *

"Thaelan? How are you?" Connie asked as he ran ahead of the group to where Thaelan was propped against a wall, standing over the unmoving body of the female crewman.

"Do not let their appearance mislead you. They are quite strong and more agile than you would expect." Thaelan said past heavy breathing.

"I'm just glad to see that you were up to the challenge." Connie said as he patted Thaelan on the shoulder.

"Of course. I am Andorian." Thaelan said as he forced himself to stand up straight.

"The main door to engineering is blocked by... them." Connie said as he motioned toward the woman on the floor.

"Zombies." Vincent said seriously.

"This isn't a video game Vincent. We can't jump to that conclusion." Connie said frankly.

"Excuse me Ensign Agropos, but as I understand the common usage of the word, 'zombie' refers to a reanimated corpse. This..." Thaelan said as he gestured downward, "...is a corpse. And I assure you that she was quite animated up until one minute ago."

"Fine. But just don't assume that you know anything about how they're going to behave or what their motives are because we're calling them zombies. Let's move." Connie said, then started walking.

"I'll take the rear until you catch your breath Thaelan." Darin said seriously.

"Are you familiar with hand-to-hand combat?" Thaelan asked as he started to walk.

"I took hand-to-hand at the academy. I wasn't at the top of my class or anything, but then again, I wasn't quite as motivated as I am now." Darin said with a smile as he followed the group.

"Thank you for guarding our rear, and be assured that if we are attacked from behind, I will be by your side." Thaelan said seriously.

"I never doubted it." Darin said with a quick smile at Thaelan, then looked behind them.

* * * * *

"Guys, you'd better move because we're about to have company." Darin called out.

As soon as Vincent was within reach, Connie plucked him off the ladder and said, "Hurry Thaelan."

In one quick move, Ensign Thaelan changed his grip on the ladder from the rungs to the outside support bars.

In less than a second he slid down the remainder of the ladder.

"Just waiting on you, Darin." Connie called urgently.

"Well, I'd hate to keep you waiting." Darin said in a rush, as he scurried down the ladder.

"Now aft three sections, then up one deck... right Vincent?" Connie asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. I think that's right." Vincent said with an apologetic look.

"So you're not all-knowing?" Connie asked with a grin as he led the group away.

"Nope. I've looked at the deck plans for this ship a few times, so I know basically where things are. That's about it." Vincent said honestly.

"Glad to hear it. I wouldn't want a know-it-all on my team anyway."

* * * * *

"There's a bunch of zombies heading this way." Darin said as he rushed to the group.

"I'm going to go up first. Wait until I give the okay before you start up the ladder." Connie said as he approached the top.

A moment later Connie called out, "All clear."

Susan hurried up the ladder next, closely followed by Vincent.

As Vincent emerged on the next deck, he looked around curiously.

"This doesn't make sense." Vincent said seriously.

"What's that?" Susan asked as she watched the ladder apprehensively.

"Why would they swarm the main entrance and leave this one unguarded?" Vincent asked cautiously as he looked at the closed door.

"Well, they don't seem to be very high on the intelligence scale." Susan said speculatively.

"Maybe not, or maybe that's what they're wanting us to believe. I feel like we're being herded." Vincent said frankly.

Connie considered the statement for a moment, then said, "It's possible, but we really don't have a lot of options here."

"I guess not." Vincent said with concern.

Connie opened the hand actuator panel and found that the manual release lever had been completely broken off.

"Maybe this is why they aren't guarding this entrance, they know we can't use it." Connie said speculatively.

"Ensign Cooper to Chief Morgan." Darin said into his communicator.

After a burst of static, Darin closed his communicator and said, "I thought maybe it might work since we're closer. If we can let them know we're out here they could open it from the inside."

"Good idea. Let's use plan B." Connie said as he used his communicator to start tapping on the heavy blast door.

"There's no way they're going to be able to hear you through that thick of a door." Darin said seriously.

"Normally you would be right. But without any engines or any of the other background noise that we're accustomed to, they might actually be able to hear it." Connie said as he continued his tapping.

Thaelan fished in his tool bag as he said, "Although you are attempting to communicate, I believe this might actually be a better tool for the job."

A moment later he presented Connie with a hex-decoupler.

"Thank you Ensign Thaelan. I think you're right." Connie said as he clipped his communicator back onto his belt, then started tapping with the handle of the decoupler.

"Come over here Vincent. I want to see if we can figure out some kind of a 'work around' on this door mechanism in case the Morse code doesn't work." Darin said from the panel by the door.

* * * * *

Everyone jumped at the sound of the metal blast doors beginning to open.

"They must have heard us." Connie said with relief.

"No, we were able to bypass the circuit and power the door with the spare power cells." Darin said from his kneeling position beside the door.

"Oh? Good work." Connie said with surprise.

"Hit it again Vincent." Darin said firmly.

Vincent carefully closed the circuit and watched with satisfaction as the door began to raise.

"Hold it there guys. I can fit through. Wait here and I'll go check it out." Connie said seriously.

Vincent opened the circuit and watched with concern as Connie squeezed under the barely open door.

"Be right back." Darin said as he stood and hurried to the door.

"He told us to wait." Thaelan said with warning.

"Then he can chew me out when we're all safe. I'm not letting him go in there alone." Darin said as he scooted through the opening.

* * * * *

Vincent had the feeling that something just wasn't right and began entering calculations on his tricorder.

When the results displayed, he shook his head and stood.

"Guys. Something is really wrong here." Vincent said seriously.

"Where did Vincent go?" Susan asked with surprise as she looked around.

"He was at the door controls just a moment ago." Thaelan said with surprise.

Vincent raised his hand and noticed that he seemed to be transparent.

"Nice try. But I've figured it out." Vincent called into the air.

"What do you think you've figured out?" A disembodied voice called from all around him.

"We're not really here. We're on the shuttle asleep and we're all dreaming this." Vincent said seriously.

"An interesting conclusion, but how sure are you?" The voice asked with a touch of humor.

"I'm sure enough to be talking to you. Now why don't you just tell me what you want from us because I'm not going to play your games anymore." Vincent called into the air.

"That's a pity, but the others are still willing to play." the voice said in a happy tone.

"Tell me what you want." Vincent said firmly.

"Just to play one last game. Don't be concerned. I swear to you that none of your people will be harmed." The voice said in a low, raspy voice that was much more serious.

"But why are you doing this? What are you getting out of it?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Look around you. By creating this fantasy of danger, the best traits of your people are being brought to the surface. They are creative, heroic, and truly living an adventure. To see this, brings me pleasure." The voice said distantly.

"You said this is the last game. What are you going to do next?" Vincent asked cautiously, already having an idea of what the answer would be.

"At the conclusion of this game, your captain will give the order to destroy the ship that he believes he sees before him. When he gives the order to fire, I will bring my entire being into this dimension so I can be destroyed." The voice said quietly.

"But why do you want to die?" Vincent asked with concern.

"To end the loneliness." The voice said quietly.

"What's your name?" Vincent asked gently.

"When I was young, others of my kind called me Brakkii. But I haven't seen others of my kind for millennia... perhaps I don't have a name anymore." Brakkii said slowly.

"Listen Brakkii. You're not making any sense. You don't have to be lonely. The *Yorktown* is stuffed with people." Vincent said seriously.

"But they are not my kind." Brakkii said quietly.

"So what? You enjoy watching people being brave and having adventures. You could come with us and be brave and have adventures with us. Instead of dying, you could start living." Vincent said seriously.

"I could live?" Brakkii asked with astonishment.

"That's right. I don't know what you really look like, but I bet we could find a way to work it out. I have lots of friends who will help me if I ask them to." Vincent said seriously.

"It just can't be that simple. Just 'choose' to live." Brakkii said slowly.

"Sometimes things really are that simple." Vincent said honestly.

"From what I gathered from your minds, you are leaving to establish a new colony, then you will be returning to your home world." Brakkii said slowly.

"Yeah. That's the plan." Vincent said with a smile, knowing that Brakkii was considering it.

"I will take the time to think about what you have said and by the time you return to this part of space I will have made my decision." Brakkii said simply.

"That sounds fair enough. I really hope you'll decide to go with us. I know you'll have lots of fun if you'll just give it a chance." Vincent said happily.

A blur seemed to form in the air before Vincent, then resolved into the transparent shape of a young teenage boy.

Vincent smiled and said, "It's nice to meet you Brakkii."

"It's nice to meet you too Vincent. Will you help me end this dream so your companions may return to your ship without being aware of the truth?" Brakkii asked hopefully.

"Sure, just tell me what I have to do." Vincent said with a smile.

* * * * *

While Vincent and Brakkii were talking, Connie and Darin had returned from main engineering and were beginning to search.

"If you need me to alter events, just find a way to let me know of your wishes. I will be listening." Brakkii said simply.

"Okay, I will." Vincent said, then noticed that the rest of his team were beginning to wander away to search for him.

"There you are! Are you alright? Where did you wander off to?" Susan asked as she ran to Vincent and pulled him into a tight hug.

"I was right here, but I'll explain that in a minute. We need to go into engineering and talk to Chief Morgan right now. I think I understand what's going on and what's about to happen." Vincent said as he pulled out of the hug.

"We were just waiting on you." Connie said with a relieved smile.

Vincent gave a quick smile in return, then moved through the low opening into engineering.

* * * * *

"Oh, I'm so glad to see that all of you are well. That means that all of our teams have survived." Chief Morgan said with relief.

"Yes sir. Crewman Winters has something to report that he thinks you should be aware of." Connie said quickly.

"What do you have to report Crewman?" Chief Morgan asked with interest.

"I just phased out of existence for a minute. I was standing in the hallway outside of engineering and all of a sudden no one could see or hear me anymore." Vincent said carefully.

"How strange." Chief Morgan said with a furrowed brow.

"Yeah. Well, it got me to thinking about how the *Miranda* could have disappeared halfway across the galaxy and reappeared here now without anyone seeing her. I think that whatever happened to this ship twenty two years ago is still kind of happening. Time and space and dimensions are all jumbled up here. The crew aren't really alive or dead, but are sort of stuck in between. And if I'm right, this ship is probably going to disappear again really soon and if we're on her, we'll either disappear with her or we'll be left hanging in empty space when she disappears." Vincent said quickly.

"Neither sounds like a preferred outcome. I suppose it's as good an explanation for what's happening as anything else we've been able to come

up with. But why were you phased when no one else was?" Chief Morgan asked seriously.

"I'm pretty sure it has something to do with my quantum resonance frequency being messed up. A phase shift would effect me differently from anyone else. Now we need to go, I don't think we have much time." Vincent said seriously.

"I'm going to need some help with Jared, he's been hurt." A man's voice said from the floor.

"What's wrong with him?" Vincent asked as he walked toward the man.

"I think his ankle is broken. We were attacked and he threw himself in front of me to protect me." The man said in a voice of admiration.

When Vincent looked into the man's eyes, he was surprised to find that it was someone he had met before.

"Can I look at it?" Vincent asked seriously as he looked into Crewman Hartman's eyes.

"Do you have medical training?" Crewman Hartman asked cautiously.

"Not really. But I know a little bit about ankles." Vincent said, hoping that Brakkii would help him.

"Go ahead." Crewman Hartman said cautiously as he watched Vincent's every move.

"Crewman Tidwell, is your first name Jared?" Vincent asked gently.

"Yes." Crewman Tidwell said in a pained voice.

"Jared, try to move your toes for me." Vincent said, then watched Jared's foot carefully.

"It hurts." Jared said through gritted teeth, but his toes moved.

"Good. Let me try something. If it works, it'll help and if it doesn't I don't think it will make it any worse." Vincent said as he moved down and placed his hands on Crewman Tidwell's foot and ankle.

"Is it going to hurt?" Jared asked in a timid voice.

"Maybe just for a second." Vincent said, then asked, "How did this happen anyway? Were you twisting your ankle when you were hit from the side?"

"Yea..." Jared began to answer when Vincent quickly twisted his foot.

"...eaaaaah!" Jared yelled, then suddenly stopped and looked down at his foot with wonder.

"Are you alright Jared?" Crewman Hartman asked with concern.

"Yeah. It doesn't hurt at all now." Jared said as he curled his toes and experimentally turned his ankle.

"You might need some help walking for a while. It'll probably be sore." Vincent said as he stood.

"What did you do?" Connie asked from behind Vincent with interest.

"His ankle was dislocated a little bit. It's happened to me twice so I know what it's like. I just moved it back to how it should be. As long as nothing broke and none of the ligaments are torn, he'll be fine." Vincent said, hoping that it was a good enough explanation.

"Well then, I suppose we should get moving." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Come on Jared, I'll help you." Crewman Hartman said as he helped Crewman Tidwell to stand.

"You're just full of surprises Vincent." Darin said with a smile from his side.

"I got banged up a lot when I was on Earth and I watched what the doctors did to fix me." Vincent said, hoping that he would never be called upon to repeat the action outside of a dream.

"I'm just glad you're alright. I was really scared when I thought we'd lost you." Darin said as he put an arm around Vincent's shoulders.

"Don't worry big brother. I don't plan on leaving you." Vincent said with a smile.

* * * * *

"It looks like this deck is clear." A security lieutenant said from the access to the deck above them.

Vincent watched as Crewman Hartman held on to Jared while he slowly made his way up the ladder.

"How would you like to have a little fun?" A voice whispered from behind Vincent.

He turned to see the transparent image of Brakkii standing, smiling at him.

Vincent discretely nodded.

"When everyone is on the next deck, I'm going to give you a chance to show off... It's just my way of thanking you." Brakkii said a little bit timidly.

Vincent thought about refusing, but the hopeful look in Brakkii's eyes made him consider otherwise.

Finally Vincent nodded that he agreed to the arrangement.

* * * * *

Vincent was looking around cautiously as the group walked down the hallway toward the hanger bay.

As he passed by a darkened doorway, an arm suddenly reached out to grab him.

Vincent's training kicked in and he automatically grabbed the arm, then ducked under it, twisting it as he went.

While continuing to hold the arm he kicked the man in the stomach, then brought his foot down to forcefully stomp on the instep of the zombie's foot.

With the zombie doubled over and off balance, Vincent continued to hold the arm and twisted some more. Using all his strength and momentum he was able to flip the zombie into the middle of the hallway.

"Leave him Vincent, he's down." Darin said quickly.

"Right." Vincent said, then ran to rejoin the group as they entered the shuttle bay.

* * * * *

As soon as the shuttle cleared the bay doors of the *Miranda*, Vincent was aware of the aching in his feet.

Experimentally he reached out through his bond and found T'Lani's consciousness, fully aware of his presence.

"You've got some pretty good moves there little brother." Darin said with a smile.

"I wouldn't have any moves at all if it weren't for what Thaelan taught me." Vincent said seriously.

"Although you still have much to learn, it is satisfying to see that you can apply my teachings in a real life situation. It is not always the case." Thaelan said frankly.

Vincent looked into Thaelan's eyes and despite the coolness of his words, a fire of pride could easily be seen in his eyes.

"It looks like we made it out in the nick of time." Connie said as he looked out the view port.

Everyone turned their attention to the blurry transparent image of the *Miranda*.

In less than a minute, they were left staring at empty space.

* * * * *

"It sounds like you had some kind of an adventure." Joe said with a smile.

"I promise that I won't complain again about a salvage operation not being exciting enough for me." Connie said with a chuckle.

"Well, you all know the routine. Reports." Joe said casually.

A collective groan filled the room.

"Do I have to do one too since I'm officially off duty?" Vincent asked quietly.

Joe considered for a moment, then said, "That's up to Connie. If he thinks that the rest of the team can cover it without you, that's good enough for me."

Vincent looked at Connie hopefully.

"I think we've got it covered. But if anyone has any questions about the phase shift thing, you may be asked to submit a report later." Connie said frankly.

"Okay. I just really need to go to the quartermaster's office to get some new boots. I can barely walk." Vincent said in a pained voice.

"Go on, and enjoy the rest of your day off." Connie said warmly.

Vincent nodded, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Captain? Would you have time to talk to me for a minute?" Vincent asked cautiously from just inside the captain's office door.

"Yes. Of course Crewman Winters. Please come in and have a seat." Captain Byrne said politely.

"Thank you Sir." Vincent said hesitantly as he took his seat.

"From the preliminary report I've received from Chief Morgan, I would venture to guess that you're here to talk to me about your quantum resonance frequency and the phase shift." Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"Not exactly sir. None of that really happened." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Would you please explain that Crewman?" Captain Byrne asked with surprise.

"Yes Sir." Vincent said, then paused to consider how he would explain what had just happened.

"Everything you just saw with the *Miranda* was an illusion. She was never really there." Vincent said carefully.

Captain Byrne's eyes went wide at the statement.

"What we just met was a creature that lives in a bunch of dimensions at once. He's highly telepathic and really lonely. When he saw us entering this section of space, he searched our minds and created the *Miranda* from a few people's memories." Vincent said slowly.

"But our sensor readings verified that the vessel before us was the *Miranda*." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Yes sir. The creature, his name is Brakkii, can create illusions that will fool sensors as easily as he can fool our senses. But what he couldn't do was actually create the ship. That's why when our shuttle seemed to enter the *Miranda*'s shuttle bay, he changed from illusion to dreams. Everyone on the away team was really asleep and dreaming while they thought they were on the ship." Vincent said frankly.

"I fail to see the purpose of luring a group of our people onto an illusionary ship. What did this creature hope to accomplish?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"He said it was because he wanted to have fun. It makes him happy to see people be brave and work as a team. He created the situation so he could watch us react. I suppose it's kind of like the same kind of charge I get from watching an action movie or playing an exciting video game." Vincent finished speculatively.

"I see. So this creature lured my people into a fantasy situation simply for his own gratification?" Captain Byrne asked darkly.

"Yeah. But he promised that no one was going to get hurt. He just wanted to play one last game before he died." Vincent said quietly.

"Died?" Captain Byrne asked as a prompt for more information.

"He's lonely. He hasn't seen any other creatures like him for thousands of years. When he saw us coming he decided to play one last game, then trick us into killing him." Vincent said seriously.

"Why did this creature choose to reveal himself to you?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"I don't think he really meant to, but I kind of figured out that something was wrong. My feet have been hurting for a couple days because my boots are too tight, but while I was dreaming they didn't hurt at all. When we couldn't contact the *Yorktown*, I tried to reach T'Lani through our bond, but she couldn't hear me. I could feel that she was there, but she wasn't aware that I was trying to contact her. What finally made me sure that it wasn't real was when Darin and I used our spare power cells to open the blast doors of engineering. After we did it and it worked, I realized that there's no way our batteries would be strong enough to power the motor to raise the blast doors. When I put the power equation into the tricorder, it said that it would work, but the numbers didn't add up. As soon as I knew for sure that it wasn't real, Brakkii pulled me out of everyone else's dream so I couldn't tell them." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"I would assume from the story that you've just told me that the creature, Brakkii, had second thoughts about ending his life." Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"Yes Sir. I talked to him and, I um... kind of invited him to come back to Earth with us." Vincent said reluctantly.

"You invited an alien being to accompany us back to Earth?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"Yes Sir. It just didn't make any sense for him to kill himself when he could have everything he wanted just by coming with us." Vincent said imploringly.

"From his actions thus far, I would guess that this creature could pose quite a threat to this ship." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Yeah. I guess he could, but if he decided that he wanted to be one of us, he could probably help a lot of people. He isn't bad. If he was, he could have killed all of us anytime he wanted to. He could have made us destroy the *Yorktown* and we never would have even known about it. But instead of doing that he gave the away team the chance to be heroes and have an adventure that they will probably still be talking about twenty years from now." Vincent said frankly.

Captain Byrne considered for a moment, then asked, "Where is he now?"

"Right where we left him. He's going to think about what he really wants to do, and if he decides that he wants to join us, he'll let us know when we come back from the new colony." Vincent said quietly.

"If he should contact you, tell him that I would like to speak with him." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Yes Sir. I'm sorry if I didn't handle this exactly 'by the book'. I tried to do what I thought was right." Vincent said apprehensively.

"That, Crewman Winters, is the difference between a crewman and an officer. As a crewman, it is your duty to follow your orders and allow your commanding officers to make such decisions." Captain Byrne said firmly.

"Yes Sir." Vincent said quietly.

"However, this circumstance was a bit out of the ordinary and I believe that you behaved appropriately. Please compose a detailed report of your time in the company of the creature and deliver it to me personally." Captain Byrne finished professionally.

"Yes Sir." Vincent said in a more assured voice.

"Once I have received your report, I will contact Admiral Morrow on a secure channel and explain the true nature of today's events. I believe he will agree that there is no need for anyone else to know that the events today were anything other than what they appeared to be." Captain Byrne said thoughtfully.

"Yes sir. I'll write the report for you right away." Vincent said seriously.

"Before you bring the report to me, make sure you stop by the quartermaster's office to get some new boots. I may have some questions about the details of your report and I would prefer that you be comfortable." Captain Byrne said warmly.

"Yes Sir." Vincent said with a smile.

Chapter 34

The *Yorktown* had been traveling for over a week through a particularly uninteresting part of space, working their way toward the Soleen-Avalla system.

In that time, Vincent had worked out a schedule that somehow accommodated work, school, officer's training, time with T'Lani and still left a little time for him to spend with Benny, JonJon and Lehman.

Dr. Perry examined Lehman, but declared that since much of his physiology was a mystery to her, that she wouldn't be able to make any determination about his aging until a little more time had passed.

The only things that might be worthy of note in recent weeks were Vincent's daily visits to sickbay for vitamins and pain medication and his nearly insatiable appetite.

Vincent and Lehman were no longer identical. The difference between them was slight, but it was noticeable since Vincent was getting taller. This, in turn, caused him to need new uniforms.

With the help of Ensign Collins and Crewman Monahan in ship's services, Vincent had a new set of uniforms custom made just for him.

The quartermaster's office was able to supply Vincent with a new set of boots that actually fit.

Vincent was just happy to know that male and female crewmen wore the same style of boots.

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters, report to conference room one." Debbie's voice said firmly over the Deflector Control's comm system.

Vincent looked up from station two, where he had been working, in time to see both Joe and Darin's concerned looks at him.

"One of these days, the captain is going to have to pick on one of you guys instead." Vincent said as he logged off his workstation.

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about." Joe said quietly, obviously not believing it.

"Well, at least this time we aren't in a space battle." Vincent said with resignation, as he patted his pants pocket to be sure that he had some couplers, then he walked to the door.

"Call if you need us for anything." Joe said with concern.

"Sure thing. I've got seven." Vincent said as he clipped a communicator to his belt, then walked out the door.

* * * * *

As Vincent walked into the conference room, he was surprised to see that Captain Byrne, Commander M'Butu, Lieutenant Simms and Cyril Byrne were all present and seemed to be waiting for him.

Vincent came to attention and said, "Crewman Winters, reporting as ordered, Sir."

"At ease Crewman." Captain Byrne said automatically, then turned to face the entire group and continued, "As I'm sure you all know, we are scheduled to arrive at the SA-14 colony site in approximately eighteen hours."

Vincent nodded that he was aware and there were similar reactions from the others.

"What is not common knowledge is that we are scheduled to have a meeting with a Soleen-Avalla ship in advance of our arrival at the colony." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Even though we have been in contact with the Soleen-Avalla for a number of years via subspace, this will, in fact, be the first time our people have actually met face to face. That being the case, this will be regarded as a 'first contact' situation." Captain Byrne said as he looked over the group before him.

"We literally know nothing of the Soleen-Avalla civilization. They seem almost xenophobic in their actions, refusing all requests for information. The fact that they offered us their colony was shocking enough, but now they have also agreed to meet with us in person and conduct us to the new colony. " Captain Byrne said professionally.

"We will be at the rendezvous coordinates shortly. Report to the bridge in one quarter of an hour, dress is formal. You are dismissed." Captain Byrne said firmly.

The others turned to leave as Vincent continued to stand.

"You had a question Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked simply.

"Yes sir. I understand why everyone else is going on this mission, but I want to be sure I understand why I'm going, so I'll be able to do what I'm expected to." Vincent said carefully.

Captain Byrne smiled at Vincent and said, "It was very conscientious of you to ask. Actually, there are two reasons that you are being included on this mission. The first and more important one being the necklace you received during your encounter with the Gorn. If it truly does open doors that would be closed to others, then it would be prudent to include you in the first contact delegation."

Vincent nodded his acceptance of the reasoning.

"The second reason is as a practical demonstration of the first contact protocols that you have been learning about in your officer's training. I would think that seeing the process first hand would be of more benefit in your education than reading any amount of material on the subject." Captain Byrne finished with a smile.

"Thank you sir, I understand. Is there anything special I should do, since I don't have a dress uniform?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Just change into a fresh uniform and make sure your boots and rank insignia are sufficiently shined." Captain Byrne said consideringly.

"Yes Sir." Vincent said formally.

"If there is nothing else, you are dismissed." Captain Byrne said in a semi-formal tone.

"Yes Sir. Thank you Sir." Vincent said, then turned to leave.

* * * * *

"What's up Champ?" Joe asked as Vincent walked into Deflector Control.

"Away detail." Vincent said, as he turned and walked into the supply room.

Joe shared a curious look with Darin, then tilted his head in the direction of the supply room to encourage Darin to go.

Darin nodded and hurried to the supply room doorway.

"An away detail to where? We're kind of in the middle of nowhere." Darin asked curiously as he watched Vincent taking off his boots.

"We're supposed to meet with a Soleen-Avalla ship in a little while and I'm going to be part of the delegation that meets them." Vincent said shyly.

"Why you?" Darin asked curiously.

"The captain said it would be good for me to learn about 'first contact' by doing it... even though I guess this will kinda be my second one." Vincent

said as he pulled a shining cloth out of his storage crate and worked to bring his boots up to full luster.

Darin shook his head and chuckled as he said, "Only my little brother..."

"I don't have much time. Could you help me?" Vincent asked as he kept his focus on his boots.

"Sure, what can I do?" Darin asked as he stepped into the supply room.

"Would you get my new uniform out of my storage crate and make sure that it isn't wrinkled and that the rank insignia is shiny? I want to be sure that I look okay." Vincent said in concentration.

Darin immediately went to the storage container that Vincent had been using as a locker and pulled out the neatly folded jumpsuit.

He carefully unfolded it and looked it over to see that it was presentable.

"It looks fine." Darin announced as he turned to look at Vincent.

"Thanks. I've only got a few minutes." Vincent said quickly as he set his boots aside then threw the shining cloth into the crate.

"I'll get it ready for you." Darin said as he began to open the front of the new jumpsuit.

"Here." Vincent said as he handed Darin his wallet and two couplers.

Darin smiled as he placed the items into the new uniform.

"What about the communicator?" Darin asked as he gestured toward the communicator still hanging on Vincent's belt.

"Would you mind putting it up for me? I'm pretty sure that no matter what happens, I won't be needing it." Vincent said as he handed the communicator to Darin.

"No problem." Darin said gently as he clipped the communicator onto his own belt.

Vincent quickly opened the front of the jumpsuit uniform he was wearing and stepped out of it.

Darin handed him the new uniform and said, "Just leave the other one and I'll take care of it."

"Thanks." Vincent said as he pulled the new jumpsuit on.

"Would you like some gel for your hair? It might look a little more formal." Darin asked consideringly.

"Yeah." Vincent said as he bent down to pull on his boots.

Darin hurried to his own storage crate and returned with a dab of styling gel in his hand.

"Just hold still for a second." Darin said as he rubbed his hands together.

As soon as Vincent had finished pulling on his boots, he stood before Darin and waited for him to apply the gel.

Darin smoothed his hands over Vincent's slightly shaggy hair a few times to get the styling gel evenly distributed.

"Now, just comb your hair and you'll be ready." Darin said as he took a step back to look.

Vincent reached into his crate and pulled out a comb, then quickly pulled it through his hair.

"How's that?" Vincent asked as he looked at Darin expectantly.

"It looks great. You should think about using gel all the time." Darin said with a smile.

"Okay. I've got to go now." Vincent said quickly.

"Go on." Darin said and held out his hand for the comb.

Vincent handed the comb to Darin, then hurried out of the supply room.

* * * * *

As Vincent stepped onto the main bridge, he noticed that Captain Byrne was the only one of their group present.

The last time he had seen the captain in a formal uniform was when the Holy One was welcomed aboard.

"Captain, I'm detecting a vessel entering this sector... it's just dropped out of high warp." Lieutenant Clark said cautiously.

"On screen." Captain Byrne said immediately.

After a moment, Lieutenant Clark said, "I'm sorry sir, this is the best I can do at this distance. It's still at the far side of the sector."

As the somewhat blurry image of the alien ship filled the screen, Vincent's eyes went wide.

"It's Gorn." Debbie gasped from her communications console.

"No." Lieutenant Clark said hesitantly.

All attention turned to Lieutenant Clark as he examined the readings on his console.

"There are similarities in design, but this ship is more advanced than the Gorn ships... A lot more." Lieutenant Clark said in concentration.

"Be that as it may, it's best to err on the side of caution. Discontinue all invasive scans and make no attempt at communication. Use tactical scanners only and be prepared to discontinue the tactical scans as soon as the ship enters visual range."

"Yes sir. But they've stopped moving." Lieutenant Clark said slowly.

"Captain, we're being hailed." Debbie said cautiously.

"On screen." Captain Byrne said seriously and turned to face the main view screen.

Vincent noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see that Commander M'Butu, Lieutenant Simms and Cyril had joined them.

"*Federation Starship Yorktown, are you prepared to receive our representative?*" A man's cold, professional voice asked.

Vincent looked at the view screen to find the image of a middle aged man. His appearance was human and his expression was nothing short of completely professional.

The captain stood a little straighter and said, "Yes. We will be honored to receive your representative. If you will send us rendezvous coordinates...."

The captain was interrupted by the appearance of a fountain of multi-colored sparkles that seemed to erupt from nowhere. Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the sparkles vanished leaving a fourteen or fifteen year old girl standing before them.

Vincent stared in wonder at the beautiful girl. She was small with delicate features and had large soulful eyes. Her long brown hair nearly reached her waist and she was wearing a thin shimmering robe that loosely draped over her slender frame.

"But they're all the way on the other side of the sector." Lieutenant Clark said in wonder as he looked at his console again.

"I am Jenn. I am the representative of the Soleen-Avalla sent to conduct you to the colony." The young girl said seriously.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Jenn. I am Captain Leland Byrne. May I introduce my first officer, Commander Oliver M'Butu, my Chief of Security, Lieutenant Wayland Simms, my son, Cyril Byrne, who also happens to be one of the leaders of the colony and Crewman Vincent Winters, son of Clan Short of the house of Surak of Vulcan." Captain Byrne said as he gestured to indicate each person in turn.

Jenn looked at each person who was introduced and gave a slight nod of acknowledgement, then her gaze fixed on Vincent.

After a moment she hesitantly asked, "Is he the one who entered the reactor?"

Captain Byrne seemed surprised by the question, but quickly answered, "I wasn't aware that you knew of that, but yes."

"We requested an accounting of the events that led to the evacuation of the colony. The report we received made mention of Crewman Winters' heroic act." Jenn said with a gentle smile, then turned to Vincent and said, "It is an honor to meet you Crewman Winters."

Vincent was stunned for a moment, but was somehow able to say, "It's an honor to meet you too."

Jenn smiled warmly at Vincent, then turned her attention back to Captain Byrne.

"I'm sure you've realized that the Soleen-Avalla are a very private people." Jenn said seriously.

"We've noticed." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"It is for that reason that I have been sent to you. My ship will depart and I will conduct you to the new colony. I will be able to answer any questions you might have." Jenn said as she looked the captain in the eyes.

"Oh. I see." Captain Byrne said slowly.

A movement against Vincent's chest drew his attention.

He reached his hand up before he realized that the feeling was the necklace he still wasn't accustomed to wearing.

Vincent remembered Lieutenant Walking Bear telling him about signs and omens, then reached into the neck of his jumpsuit and took the necklace out where it could be seen.

"Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked curiously as he noticed what Vincent was doing.

Jenn looked at Vincent and her eyes went wide.

"Trach Manja." She whispered.

Vincent nodded and watched as she raised her hand and moved toward him.

She stopped just short of touching the necklace and gasped, "It's authentic!"

A beeping from one of the consoles drew the captain's attention.

"The Soleen-Avalla ship is now approaching at full impulse." Lieutenant Clark called out in a tone of warning.

"Jenn, what is happening?" Captain Byrne asked quickly.

"My superiors must speak with the Trach Manja." Jenn said in a distracted voice.

"Are you saying that the people on your ship would like to speak with Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

Jenn tore her gaze from Vincent's necklace and said, "No, our leaders need to speak with the Trach Manja on our world."

"Because he wears that necklace?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"He is Trach Manja... Above all houses and castes." Jenn said urgently.

"Commander M'Butu?" Vincent asked quietly to his side.

"Yes?" Commander M'Butu responded in a whisper as he leaned down.

"Is there any way JonJon and Lehman could come up here? I think they need to be here for this." Vincent said carefully.

Commander M'Butu looked at Vincent curiously for a moment, then hurried across the room to Debbie.

"Would Crewman Winters be in any danger if he were to go with you?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously, obviously uncertain about letting Vincent go.

"No. My ship... my people, all my people would defend him with their lives. We have been waiting for centuries for the Trach Manja to arrive." Jenn said desperately.

"Perhaps if you could explain just what a 'Trach Manja' is and what he would be expected to do, I would be inclined to allow Crewman Winters to go with you." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"Captain?" Vincent asked uncertainly.

Captain Byrne turned to face Vincent with question.

"This is why you wanted me to meet the Soleen-Avalla. The door is open." Vincent said quietly.

Captain Byrne looked at Vincent for a moment, then turned at the sound of the turbo lift doors opening.

JonJon and Lehman looked around curiously, then noticed Vincent.

"Come here guys. We've got work to do." Vincent said as he gestured to them.

Jenn looked at Vincent curiously.

"Guys, this is Jenn. Jenn, this is JonJon and this is Lehman... they're Trach Manja too." Vincent said seriously.

Jenn looked at the two boys with disbelief.

"Come on guys. Whip'em out." Vincent said with a smile as he held up the pendant of his necklace.

Lehman reached into his shirt and pulled out his necklace as JonJon blushed wildly.

Vincent smiled at JonJon's embarrassment and said in a more gentle voice, "Sorry JonJon. Jenn just needs to see your necklace."

JonJon's blush subsided slightly as he reached into his shirt and brought out his necklace for Jenn to see.

"I don't understand... three?" she said in confusion.

"Actually, there are five of us. But only three of us are on this ship." Vincent said seriously.

"Five... Trach Manja..." Jenn said slowly.

"Yeah. But it would make sense for you to think there's only one since we're from five different species. Each species would probably only learn about their own." Vincent said speculatively.

Lehman looked from Vincent to Jenn then asked, "What do we need to do?"

"We're going with Jenn to the Soleen-Avalla home world to meet with their leaders. And even though I don't know exactly what we'll be doing, I'm pretty sure it's going to take all three of us to do it." Vincent said seriously.

Jenn looked at the three boys, then to Captain Byrne with question.

"If you will give me your promise that they will be returned to us safely, they may leave with you." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Jenn gave a relieved smile as she said, "Thank you Captain. Proceed toward the new colony and we will rejoin you before you arrive."

"We will await your return with anticipation." Captain Byrne said formally, with a slight note of apprehension under his words.

"Are you ready to go?" Jenn asked as she looked at the three boys.

Vincent patted his pocket, then said, "Yeah. I'm ready."

JonJon and Lehman shared a look, then nodded in unison.

The multi-colored fountain of sparkles enveloped Jenn and the three boys and a heartbeat later they were gone.

* * * * *

As soon as the alien transporter beam faded, Vincent looked around and said, "I thought so!"

Lehman and JonJon looked at Vincent with question.

"It's a Gorn ship. The light, the humidity... it's exactly the same." Vincent said with certainty.

"How do you know of the conditions on a Gorn ship?" Jenn asked cautiously.

"Because we've been on one." Vincent said simply.

Jenn seemed to be disturbed by the answer, but didn't ask anything further.

After a momentary distant look, Jenn said, "The captain wants to meet with you. He's right this way."

* * * * *

As Jenn walked ahead of the group of boys, Vincent turned to Lehman and quietly asked, "Telepath?"

"I don't think so. I don't sense any telepathy." Lehman said in concentration.

"A subcutaneous transmitter and receiver." JonJon said with certainty.

"Um, what does that mean?" Lehman asked slowly.

"It means she can hear and talk to the people in charge by using a device that's hidden inside her body." Vincent said, feeling disturbed by the thought.

"No. Well yes, that's what it means, but that's not exactly what I was talking about." JonJon said as he watched Jenn walking ahead of them.

"Then what?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Excuse me Jenn, may I ask you something?" JonJon asked as he started walking faster to catch up with her.

Jenn stopped to look at JonJon with question.

"You're an Android, aren't you?" JonJon asked speculatively.

Jenn seemed to be surprised by the question, but finally answered, "Yes. Did they do such a poor job of programming me that you could tell?"

JonJon smiled as he said, "No, your programming is great... maybe better than mine. There are just certain things that Androids can do that organics can't."

"Like what?" Jenn asked cautiously.

"When you walk, every step is exactly the same. It's simply a function of your programming and it makes perfect sense. For some reason, when the organics walk, no two steps are exactly the same. They shift their weight differently and the distance between their steps is varied." JonJon said informatively.

"So you're an Android too?" Jenn asked hesitantly.

"Yes. But do you want to know what's even better than that?" JonJon asked with a big smile.

"What?" Jenn asked cautiously.

"I'm also a Trach Manja." JonJon said seriously.

Jenn tilted her head slightly as she processed what that meant to her.

"So... even though we are artificially created beings, we have our own Trach Manja?" Jenn asked slowly.

"That's right. There are only five Trach Manja in all the universe and one of us is an Android." JonJon said proudly.

Jenn stared at JonJon for a moment, overwhelmed by this new information.

"Um, is the captain waiting on us?" Vincent asked quietly.

Jenn blinked, then said, "Yes. He's right this way."

Jenn started walking again and the three boys fell into line behind her.

"Jenn is really pretty isn't she?" Vincent asked JonJon quietly.

"Yeah." JonJon whispered as he watched her walking.

"And she's nice too." Lehman said, then gave Vincent a conspiratorial wink.

"Nice." JonJon agreed.

Vincent and Lehman smiled at each other as the group approached a large door.

* * * * *

Author's Note: {"..."} signifies text spoken in another language (translated for your convenience). MM

"It's a lounging hall." Vincent said happily.

"Do you think we'll get to have a traditional feast?" Lehman asked hopefully.

A large muscular Gorn stepped from behind the largest of the pedestals in the room and growled to Jenn in the Gorn language, {"Offer them my greetings and tell them that they are welcomed here."}

"The captain says..." Jenn began to say when Vincent interrupted.

{"Captain, we speak your language and are honored to meet you."} Vincent said in Gorn.

The captain and Jenn stared at Vincent with disbelief.

{"Thank you for inviting us aboard your ship. It is very comfortable."} JonJon said quietly.

The captain began to chuckle, then it became a deep, full laugh.

Vincent, Lehman and JonJon shared a look of question with each other at the strange reaction.

{"You will understand later. Come, let us relax during the uninteresting part of our journey."} The captain said as he started walking them around the back of the pillar.

"Do you think they have Juppa rats?" Vincent asked JonJon with a smile.

"Or glurrah?" Lehman asked in a giggle.

"Do you two always think with your stomachs?" JonJon asked, trying to restrain a smile.

Vincent and Lehman shared a considering look for a moment, then answered in unison, "Yeah."

* * * * *

{"Come and lounge with me."} The captain said as he sat on the floor, then laid back to bask in the artificial sunlight.

Vincent and Lehman immediately accepted his invitation as JonJon remained standing and looked at Jenn with question.

"Will you lounge with us?" JonJon asked hopefully.

Jenn looked at him with indecision for a moment, then said, "Since you speak the captain's language, there is no need for me to be here."

JonJon smiled at her warmly and said, "Maybe not, but you could still sit with us and tell us about yourself."

Jenn looked around and noticed that the captain was looking at her curiously.

"Yes, I would like that, but not here. I believe that Captain Rasch would like to talk with your friends." Jenn said shyly.

"I think they'd like to talk to him too. Where can we go?" JonJon asked gently.

"Let's go to that platform over there." Jenn said as she pointed.

"Lead the way." JonJon said as he looked deeply into her eyes.

* * * * *

"I never really thought about if JonJon was gay or straight before, but I guess now I know." Vincent said as he watched JonJon and Jenn slowly walk down the ramp.

{"It was our understanding that the Federation and the Gorn had only encountered each other one time and that it did not go well.") Captain Rasch said in a relaxed voice.

{"I really don't know anything about that."} Lehman said honestly.

{"I don't know much more than what you just said. But 'the Federation' didn't really meet the Gorn this last time, just us three and two others."} Vincent said frankly.

{"Then how did you come to learn our language?"} Captain Rasch asked with interest.

Vincent considered for a moment, and finally said, {"When we were on the Gorn ship we were given our necklaces. I'm not sure exactly how or why it happened, but after that we found out that we had learned each other's languages. Oscar spoke Gorn, so now we all do."}

{"Will you please relax. My questions aren't formal inquiries on behalf of my government, they are simply my curiosity about the races I've only observed by subspace video transmissions up to now."} Captain Rasch said lazily.

{"Okay. What else would you like to know?"} Vincent asked as he laid back and rested his head on his interlaced fingers.

{"There is one thing that I am curious about."} Captain Rasch said slowly.

{"What's that?"} Vincent asked as he became more comfortable under the bright light.

{"Nipples."}

* * * * *

"Is someone listening to everything we say right now?" JonJon asked curiously as he took a seat on the platform beside Jenn.

"No. While I was aboard your ship I was transmitting all my visual, auditory and scanning data. Once we returned to this ship I will only transmit that which I feel will be of interest to the elders." Jenn said carefully.

"So when you looked at our necklaces, you were scanning us?" JonJon asked curiously.

"Yes. I was created with a sophisticated scanning array should the need arise for me to gather information covertly." Jenn said timidly.

"Have you ever had to do that?" JonJon asked with concern.

"No. This was the first time I have ever left the Soleen-Avalla system." Jenn said as she looked bashfully into JonJon's eyes.

"Are there a lot of Androids on your world?" JonJon asked in a friendly tone.

"No. I am one of two that were created." Jenn said quietly.

"Really? Why only two?" JonJon asked curiously.

"When the Soleen became aware of the Mammal species venturing out into space, they constructed me to be a public face and voice for the Soleen, and later the Soleen-Avalla." Jenn said distantly.

"I guess that makes sense, but why did they create another one?" JonJon asked curiously.

"Because when they constructed me, they did so using the features that they believed Humans found attractive. Later they discovered that they made me too young and that Humans would not be able to accept me as an authoritative figure representing an entire planetary system." Jenn said quietly.

"So the other Android they constructed appears to be older?"

"Yes. His appearance is what the Earthers call, 'middle-aged'. His features are modeled after many political leaders and authority figures from the past decades." Jenn said darkly.

"Why does that make you sad?" JonJon asked curiously.

"Because he was able to fulfill the purpose I was created for." Jenn said distantly.

JonJon nodded as he whispered, "I understand."

"You do?" Jenn asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I too was created for a specific purpose, to be a companion. When my family died, my purpose died with them." JonJon said distantly.

"How do you endure?" Jenn asked in a pained voice.

"It was difficult, I contemplated searching for a way to end my existence, but with the help of my friends I finally found a new purpose, to be Trach Manja. And this purpose wasn't chosen for me, but was something that I freely accepted for myself." JonJon said as he looked deeply into Jenn's eyes.

"That's why I accepted the liaison position to the new colony... I had hoped..." Jenn trailed off with defeat.

"What's wrong?" JonJon asked curiously.

Jenn forced a smile onto her face as she said, "Nothing really. I thought I could be happy being the liaison between the Soleen-Avalla and the colony since it would be nearly the same as my original purpose but now..."

"What?" JonJon asked quietly.

"Well, now that looks like such an empty future. I mean, you'll be leaving to travel the universe on your starship fulfilling your purpose as Trach Manja and I'll be here, both literally and figuratively between two worlds." Jenn said darkly.

"Jenn, I think there's something that you're not understanding." JonJon said cautiously.

"What's that?" Jenn asked as unformed tears glittered in her eyes.

"I'm not leaving. I'm going to live at the new colony." JonJon whispered.

"One of the Trach Manja is going to be living at the new colony?" Jenn asked in wonder.

"No. Two of the Trach Manja are going to be living there." JonJon said with a smile.

"So I'll be able to see you again?" Jenn asked as her excitement grew.

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't." JonJon said gently.

Jenn smiled shyly at the statement as she looked deeply into JonJon's eyes.

* * * * *

After closing the top of his jumpsuit and waiting for Lehman's giggles to subside, Vincent relaxed back and waited for the captain's next question.

{"Tell me of your home. What is it like?"} Captain Rasch asked curiously.

{"Well, my world has quite a few different climate zones. But Florida, the place where I live, it's kinda like this in the summer. Hot and humid."} Vincent said casually.

{"Where I lived it usually didn't get this hot, but it was just as humid."} Lehman said as he turned onto his stomach, then rested his chin on his joined hands.

A tall and horribly thin man walked onto the platform and at first glance seemed to be wrapped in something like dirty gauze bandages. It took a moment for Vincent to get his eyes to focus on the man's white arms in the bright light, but finally he was able to focus and understand.

He was covered with feathers.

The man made a few chirps and squawks to the captain.

Vincent and Lehman froze as they realized that they both understood what he was saying.

{"The elders wish to inquire of the conditions of the Trach Manjai and if there are any arrangements that can be made so they will be comfortable when they arrive."}

Lehman looked at Vincent with question.

"I guess the plural of Trach Manja is Trach Manjai?" Vincent said uncertainly.

{"Tell them that the Trach Manjai are well and if I discover any needs, I will contact them immediately."} Captain Rasch responded in the Gorn language.

The young man let out a few clucks and a short squawk which both boys knew meant, {"I will tell them right away."}

"That wasn't Eagle was it?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head and said, "Not really. But I think it was close enough that we were able to understand it. Eagle isn't like other languages, it doesn't really have grammar or individual words. Each sound is it's own entire concept."

Lehman nodded in thought at the analysis.

{"I'm sorry if my first officer disturbed you."} Captain Rasch said carefully.

Vincent looked at the Captain and smiled as he said, {"He didn't upset us, we were just discussing his language."}

{"Yes. It seems ironic that our two species are physically unable to speak each other's languages. All our children are taught to understand both languages from a young age."} Captain Rasch said distantly.

{"Wow. That had to be tough. It's amazing that your two species have been able to get along with each other."} Vincent said seriously.

{"We haven't."} Captain Rasch said quietly.

Vincent looked at Captain Rasch with surprise.

{"A very long time ago..."} Captain Rasch began to say.

"Vincent! Look!" Lehman said with excitement as he pointed at the next platform.

Vincent sat up in time to see JonJon and Jenn gazing into each others eyes and apparently moments away from kissing.

"Way to go JonJon!" Vincent said with a smile.

{"This is good. Jenn has been sullen and withdrawn for far too long."} Captain Rasch said from Vincent's side.

{"I'm guessing that JonJon's going to be in a better mood too."} Vincent said with a chuckle.

JonJon and Jenn turned in unison to find everyone watching them.

"Busted!" Vincent called out, then broke into giggles.

JonJon blushed, then leaned in to listen when Jenn whispered something to him.

A moment later they were walking down the ramp off their platform.

* * * * *

{"We will be arriving at Soleena shortly. Come and I will show you the command center."} Captain Rasch said as he slowly stood.

{"We're there already? I thought it would take at least a day to get there."} Vincent said curiously.

{"Our technology is a little more advanced than what you are used to. Come along."} Captain Rasch said proudly as he started walking down the ramp.

Vincent and Lehman scrambled to their feet so they could join him.

* * * * *

"Jenn said that we're almost at their world." JonJon said quietly.

"Yeah, that was a lot faster than I thought it would be." Vincent said as he fell into step at JonJon's side.

{"Come and see my command center."} Captain Rasch said as he led the way through large double doors.

* * * * *

Vincent looked around the large open room and was confused by the lack of instrumentation.

There were a few panels around the edges of the room, but they were dark and no one was manning them.

The first officer chirped something quickly to the Captain to draw his attention.

The captain chuckled and said, {"Come over here so you can see our world."}

All three boys hurried to the captain's side and stared at the holographic solar system that appeared in the middle of the room.

{"The blue world is Soleena, that is our home."} Captain Rasch said happily.

{"Traffic has been cleared and we have been given priority approach status. Central AI requests permission to assume control."} The first officer chirped seriously.

{"Ship, interface with Central AI and confirm the flight plan."} Captain Rasch said firmly.

A moment later a disembodied voice said, {"The proposed flight plan is confirmed. Projecting course."}

All three boys watched as a transparent tube appeared in the holographic solar system.

{"Show me the atmospheric entry and landing points."} Captain Rasch said as he looked at the course carefully.

The hologram expanded and finally settled to show the tube running from the outer atmosphere to a point on the planet's surface.

{"Yes. Accept the flight plan and let Central AI have control."} Captain Rasch said seriously.

{"Central AI has assumed control. Arrival time will be nine minutes."} The ships AI said dispassionately.

{"Captain, if we have time I'd really like to see your deflector control department."} Vincent said quickly.

The captain smiled at Vincent, then said, {"Those functions are handled by the ship's AI and we actually have very little to do with it. If for some reason we had to run it manually, the control panel for that system is right over here."}

Vincent followed Captain Rasch to something that looked like a mosaic of broken glass embedded in the countertop.

{"I don't understand how you know which controls do which things."} Vincent said as he looked at the control panel carefully.

{"Perhaps you don't know how to read our language. All the controls are clearly marked."} Captain Rasch said seriously.

{"I don't see any markings."} Vincent said as he leaned in closer.

The first officer chirped which drew Vincent's attention.

{"His visual range might be more like mine."}

Vincent looked up into the feathered man's solid black eyes curiously.

The first officer lifted one of his taloned hands to just above the control panel and pressed a single button that Vincent hadn't noticed before.

A bluish/lavender light shone on the control panel and a series of markings could clearly be seen on all the small crystalline controls.

Vincent cleared his throat before saying in Eagle, {"Thank you. I can see them now."}

The first officer stumbled two steps back and seemed to be in shock.

{"Did I do something wrong?"} Vincent asked the captain in Gorn.

The captain gave a full, hearty laugh from deep in his chest before saying, "{No young mammal. You've just confirmed that you truly are Trach Manja. Above all classes and castes."}

The first officer seemed to have regained his composure and quietly chirped, {"I am Treep. I am honored to meet you."}

Vincent smiled at the reverent and respectful tone in Treep's voice.

{"It's nice to meet you too Treep."} Vincent said as gently as he could in Eagle.

{"Your language is so different... so musical."} Treep said slowly, apparently in awe.

{"On my planet, this language is the natural speech of the species Eagle. My brothers and I are the only Humans who speak it."} Vincent said carefully.

{"Eagle?"} Treep asked curiously, then looked upward and chirped, {"Ship, please display the Earth species 'Eagle'."}

A large holographic image of an American Bald Eagle appeared in the center of the room and began to slowly rotate.

{"She is beautiful... and you speak her language?"} Treep asked in fascination.

{"Yes. And I think that if you ever meet an Eagle, you could probably understand each other."} Vincent said with a smile at Treep's enjoyment.

{"We are approaching the Central Government Complex."} The Ship's voice said seriously in Gorn.

{"Come now. Jenn will take you to meet our leaders."} Captain Rasch said gently as he made a motion to the main door.

{"Could Treep come with us too?"} Vincent asked before thinking.

Captain Rasch smiled and said, {"Once we have landed Treep may join you."}

{"Central AI has transmitted coordinates for teleport."} The Ship's voice said seriously.

{"You may go now to talk with the Elders. Treep and I will join you as soon as the ship has landed and been secured."} Captain Rasch said professionally.

{"Thank you Captain."} Vincent said for the group of boys.

A fountain of multi-colored sparkles enveloped the boys and Jenn an instant later.

Chapter 35

{"Welcome."} An elderly Gorn woman said from behind a long table.

{"These are the elders of our world. Their wisdom guides our people in the most productive direction."} Jenn said respectfully as she indicated the four elders, two Gorn and two feathered, like Treep.

{"We have waited for many centuries for the arrival of the Trach Manja as was foretold in the ancient holy writings."} The elderly Gorn woman continued.

Vincent was about to respond when JonJon took a step forward and asked, {"Would you tell us about your history? We really don't know anything about how things are here."}

{"We had assumed that the Trach Manja would know."} an elderly Gorn man said from further down the table.

Lehman stepped to JonJon's side and said, {"We're just people, no different from any of you. We learn about things the same way you do."}

Vincent smiled at Lehman and nodded his agreement.

{"From your conversation earlier, it seems that you have already met the Gorn."} The elderly woman said slowly.

All three boys nodded.

{"As you have probably guessed, the Soleen were once part of the Gorn people. Our ancestors were the artists, poets and great thinkers of the Gorn civilization. The military leadership of the Gorn decided that such people were weak and should be purged from the gene pool so the successive generations of Gorn would be great warriors."} The elderly woman continued.

The Gorn man who had spoken earlier picked up the story, {"Our ancestors were gathered from all the worlds of the Gorn empire onto one planet, a desolate world on the edge of the Gorn territory. It was obvious that when all of the free thinking and pacifist influences were gathered, a mass execution would take place. Many starved to death in the years of the gathering... there was disease and much suffering..."}

When he seemed to drift away into thought, the elderly woman picked up the story telling, {"The new arrivals came less and less frequently and the people who had been gathered were certain that their group would either be annihilated from space or that they would be abandoned and left to starve."}

The man seemed to come back to himself and continued, {"One day, when all hope was nearly gone one of the largest ships in the Gorn fleet landed on the surface. Panic spread through the crowds of people because they believed that it signaled their end."}

{"When the landing was complete, the ramp extended and a single man stepped out. It was the Holy One."}

In a quiet voice the elderly woman said, {"Many of our ancestors rejected the state mandated religion and felt that the Holy One was a pawn of the military used to help control the masses."}

The elderly man nodded his agreement to her statement, then said, {"The Holy One gathered the leaders of our people and told them that he had been working on an alternative to the Gorn military's plans. He told us that the ship he arrived on was to be our transport out of the Gorn system. It was then he decreed that when our ancestors left Gorn space, they would no longer be considered Gorn, they would be the Soleen. He then gave their leader a book of the religious teachings of the Holy Ones past and a scroll. He instructed that the scroll be kept safe and not opened for five hundred years. The crew of the ship then emerged and joined the Holy One. He told our ancestors to take the ship and leave immediately, for even his influence in the government couldn't guarantee their safety."}

{"The technology of that time was primitive by our standards. The journey took years and the prospect of starvation was their constant companion. Many of our people died on the journey from disease and the lack of the basic necessities of life. Our ancestors also encountered many hostile beings and had to defend themselves. Years of enduring these experiences hardened their hearts."} The elderly woman said sadly.

{"By the time they arrived in this system the peaceful sophisticated people from the Gorn Empire had become little more than barbarians."} The elderly man said in an anguished voice.

Silence fell over the gathering for a moment, then the chirping of one of the feathered elders drew everyone's attention.

{"The Soleen came to our world and brought despair and destruction to our people. We were a simple and peaceful people with no technology. We didn't have a government or military. When the Soleen arrived they raped the land of its resources and brutally murdered thousands of our people. That went on for centuries. The Avalla retreated to the less hospitable regions of the planet to hide and try to survive."}

{"The Soleen of the time felt that there weren't enough resources to support both our people, so they devised a 'humane' solution."} The elderly Soleen woman said in a pained voice.

{"They gathered my people like cattle and took them to another world, a world not suited to our needs."} The Avalla elder said firmly.

After a moment to compose himself, he continued, {"They gathered my people and took them to a world which was too cold and too dry for my people to remain healthy."}

{"Many became sick and died because they couldn't adjust to the different climate."} The other Avalla elder added with a few quiet clucks.

One of the Soleen elders stood from the table and walked toward the opposite side of the room as the other Soleen elder said, {"The gathering was nearly complete. It was estimated that there were less than one thousand Avalla left on the entire planet. Then the most miraculous thing happened."}

{"The five hundredth anniversary of our expulsion from the Gorn Empire arrived. The anniversary had become our most celebrated holiday, but this anniversary was also the day that the scroll would be opened. The Soleen prepared for months for the celebration and the scroll opening ceremony was televised for all to see. It was our plan for this day to mark our new beginning. It was to be the last day of our struggle with the past and our first day of the harmonious future."}

{"This is a replica of the scroll. The original is located in a museum in the center of town."} The elderly Soleen man said as he presented the unrolled scroll to the boys.

Vincent looked at it carefully, then said, {"We can't read your language. What does it say?"}

{"The message was simple, just one sentence. 'Do not become that which you hate'."} The elder said quietly.

{"All our people, all of them, were witness to the opening of the scroll. And in that moment, all of our people were ashamed."} The elder Gorn woman said quietly.

{"That day was nearly two hundred years ago. We've been working since then to repair the damage to the planet and to integrate the Avalla into our society."} The elder man said quietly.

Vincent nodded in thought and was surprised to hear Lehman speak.

{"I understand all of that, but you didn't say anything about the Trach Manja. I got the feeling that you've been expecting us. Can you tell us about that?"}

{"The story of the Trach Manja is more ancient than the one we've just told. It is included in the teachings of the Holy Ones past. The references are varied and the language is ancient so some of the translated meanings are dubious. But the essence of it is that the Trach Manja, he who is above all houses and castes will come and usher our people into the new age."} The elder Soleen man said reverently.

{"Over the past two hundred years, we've worked very hard to repair the past damage to the environment and finally live in harmony with the ecosystem of the planet. We've eliminated poverty and hunger so that even those living in the least of our social castes can thrive and contribute to the common good."} The elder Soleen woman said passionately.

The elder Avalla woman chirped to add, {"And we have been keeping a watch on the stars, on our neighbors in the universe. We've been watching and debating the possibility of opening ourselves to the outer worlds and risking the fragile balance we've finally attained."}

{"Will you help us? Give us your guidance?"} The Soleen woman asked in nearly a whisper.

Before Vincent could even consider the answer, Lehman spoke up, {"No. At least not right now."}

Vincent turned to look at Lehman with surprise.

{"I'm sorry, but there's something we need to do first."} Lehman said quickly.

{"What is it that you must do?"} The Soleen elder woman asked curiously.

{"It's hard to explain, but there are some people we need to talk to. Before we can give any advice to you, we have to get advice from them."} Lehman said firmly.

After a series of growls, hisses, chirps and clucks from the table, everyone seemed to be in agreement.

{"We have waited centuries for this day, we can wait for you to do what must be done."} The elder Soleen woman said with a slight smile.

{"Thank you. We won't take any longer than we have to, I promise."} Lehman said seriously.

"Come on guys, we need to talk." Lehman said to the other boys as he turned toward the door.

Vincent noticed that Captain Rasch, Treep and Jenn were all standing by the door waiting for them.

"Them too?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Sure. I think we'll need their help." Lehman said as he led the way out of the room.

Vincent gestured to the trio to follow them.

* * * * *

"Okay Lehman, what was that all about? And when did you become the leader?" Vincent asked playfully.

"I don't know if you guys thought about it, but this is part of our... purpose." Lehman said with a glance at Captain Rasch, Treep and Jenn.

"I don't get it." JonJon said with confusion.

"Do you think anyone in that room was the person who will change the destiny of the planet?" Lehman asked frankly.

"Oh... Got it." JonJon said quietly.

"There are three of us, I think that probably means that there are at least three people we need to be finding and talking to." Lehman said seriously.

"Works for me... but where do we start?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Well, I know where I need to go. All I can say is follow your instincts and go where you feel you should be going." Lehman said with conviction.

"Okay, but what about these guys?" Vincent asked as he looked back at the trio from the ship who were patiently waiting.

"We don't know our way around here or anything about their customs. There are three of us and three of them... coincidence?" Lehman asked with wide eyes.

"You have a lot more faith in this stuff than I do, but you're probably right. I think Jenn and I need to go back to the ship and have a long talk." JonJon said frankly.

"I can't explain why, but there's something about Treep that makes me want to get to know more about him." Vincent said cautiously.

Lehman glanced out the window, then said, "Then I've got Captain Rasch. How about we meet back here at sunset to compare notes?"

"Yeah. It sounds like a plan." Vincent said with a smile.

JonJon nodded and seemed to be anxious to begin.

The three boys turned simultaneously and walked to their respective guides.

* * * * *

{"Treep, do you have time to go somewhere with me today?"} Vincent asked curiously in Eagle.

Happiness filled Treep's expression as he said, {"I am certain that no one would object if I were to accompany you."}

{"Good. Then let's go. I don't think we have a lot of time."} Vincent said quickly.

{"If you know where you need to go, I could arrange a teleportal for us."} Treep said seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then asked, {"If I weren't with you right now, where would you be going?"}

{"Assuming that I had no duties to perform on my ship, I would probably go to the house of my parents. That is where I live when I am not on the ship."} Treep said in a considering voice.

{"Do you think it would be okay if I went with you to your parents' house?"} Vincent asked slowly, not entirely sure that he was doing the right thing.

{"My parents would be honored to meet the Trach Manja."} Treep said with certainty.

{"Then lead the way."} Vincent said as he made a gesture to the door.

{"I can arrange a teleportal for us. It would be much faster."} Treep said slowly.

{"Is that how you would normally go to your parents' house?"} Vincent asked curiously.

{"No, I would normally walk to the nearest public teleportal station and teleport to the section of the city where my parents live."} Treep said cautiously.

{"Then let's do that. I'd like to see some of the city anyway."} Vincent said with a smile.

Treep nodded and began walking toward the door.

Vincent glanced back at the others before following.

* * * * *

JonJon walked to Jenn and immediately broke into a smile.

Jenn mirrored his smile as she looked deeply into his blue eyes.

"Do you think it would be any problem if we went back to the ship?" JonJon asked quietly.

"I don't think so. But since it is docked, I doubt that anyone will be there." Jenn said slowly.

JonJon smiled as he said, "That sounds perfect to me. It would give us a chance to have a good talk."

Jenn giggled then nodded her agreement.

JonJon noticed that Treep and Vincent were leaving the room.

"You'll have to lead the way. I have no idea how to get there from here." JonJon said frankly.

Jenn got a look of concentration on her face, then a fountain of sparkles erupted around them.

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{"I need to go that way."} Lehman said in concentration as he approached Captain Rasch.

{"Tell me where you need to go and I'll arrange a teleportal to take us there."} Captain Rasch said seriously.

Lehman thought for a moment, then said, {"No. We need to walk there. I might lose the link if we transport."}

Captain Rasch watched as Vincent and Treep walked out of the room.

A moment later JonJon and Jenn disappeared in a teleportal stream.

{"I need you to show me the way out of this building. I don't know how long this is going to take so I need to get started."} Lehman said urgently.

{"Right this way."} Captain Rasch said as he began walking.

Lehman kept concentrating on the vague sensation in his mind as he absently followed.

* * * * *

{"That sign indicates a teleportal station two city sections from this building."} Treep said as he pointed one of his talons at a sign on the corner.

Vincent looked down at the sidewalk, then around at the buildings surrounding them.

{"Is something wrong?"} Treep asked with concern.

{"No. The design of your city is just different from what I'm used to. Everything here is built in hexagons isn't it?"} Vincent asked curiously.

Treep seemed to be confused by the question.

Vincent knelt down and pointed at one of the hexagonal bricks of the sidewalk.

{"Yes. That is the natural design common to all Avalla structures. It is the most harmonious with nature."} Treep said carefully.

Vincent nodded, then said, {"Go ahead and lead the way to where we need to go. I just wanted to be sure I understood."}

Treep accepted the explanation, then started walking in the direction the arrow on the sign had indicated.

{"It looks like all the buildings have their sides open. What do you do when it rains?"} Vincent asked as he walked with Treep at a casual pace.

{"We enjoy the feeling of the rain. Anything that rain might damage would be kept in the inner rooms of the structure."} Treep said frankly.

Vincent nodded, then thought to ask, {"Does it ever get cold here?"}

They approached a three way intersection and Vincent noticed another sign pointing the way to the teleportal station.

{"Yes. There is a brief season of cold. During those times we wear additional layers of clothing to insulate us and the Soleen tend to stay indoors."} Treep said honestly.

Vincent nodded at the information, then noticed that there were several Soleen and Avalla people who had stopped walking and were staring at him.

{"I guess I look pretty strange to them."} Vincent said quietly.

{"No. Our people are all familiar with the various races of the Federation. They are just understandably curious about seeing a Human on our world."} Treep said frankly.

{"How much do they know about Humans?"} Vincent asked curiously.

{"Many of the Earth's entertainment programs are recorded and broadcast on Soleena. Those programs have inspired our people to begin producing their own original works."} Treep said casually, then gestured to indicate the teleportal station ahead of them.

{"What Earth shows do you like to watch?"} Vincent asked with a smile.

{"My current favorite is '7th Heaven', although I am also a devoted viewer of 'The Late Show with David Letterman'."} Treep said a bit shyly.

{"Really? I got to meet David Gallagher from '7th Heaven' before I left Earth."} Vincent said happily.

{"You've actually met David Gallagher? What is he like?"} Treep asked with excitement.

{"He's a friendly guy. I really like him, but he's not as tall as I expected him to be."} Vincent said consideringly.

Treep came to a stop at the back of a line of people.

{"Now we will await our turn to use the teleportal."} Treep said casually.

Vincent nodded as he noticed that the other people in line were staring at him.

{"Mommy, one of the people got out of the television."} a young Soleen girl said as she pointed at Vincent from just ahead of them in line.

{"Don't point. It's rude."} The girl's mother said in a hiss as she tried to grab her daughter's arm.

{"I don't mind if she points."} Vincent said in the Gorn language, then went down on one knee to be on the girl's eye level and said, {"You're very pretty. What's your name?"}

"Britney." the girl said with a shy giggle.

{"Her name is Grashalla, but she's decided that she wants to be named Britney instead."} The girls mother said in a voice of exasperation.

Vincent giggled at the statement, then stood to look at the mother and said, {"When I was her age I didn't like my name either. I wanted a name like Joey or Jimmy."}

{"You're Trach Manja!"} The Soleen woman said in shock as she stared at his necklace.

{"Yeah."} Vincent said shyly, then continued, {"But you and Grashalla can call me Vincent."}

The woman seemed panicked, not knowing what she should do.

Finally she bowed deeply and whispered, {"Thank you... Vincent."}

{"You don't have to bow to me. I'm a person waiting in line just like you. No better and no worse."} Vincent said seriously.

{"But you are Trach Manja..."} The woman said in a whisper.

{"Yeah. But I still eat, sleep and have a family just like you do. Being a Trach Manja means that there's something special that I have to do, but the rest of my life is just like anyone else's."} Vincent said seriously.

The woman slowly looked into Vincent's eyes, then after a moment she shyly smiled.

Vincent smiled in return, then gestured to the line of people that had moved up in front of them.

{"Please go ahead of me. We are in no hurry."} The woman said quietly.

Vincent gave a small smile, then said, {"Why don't we just go together?"}

The woman reluctantly nodded, then took her daughter by the hand and moved up in the line.

{"You handled that well."} Treep said as he took a step closer.

{"She's still looking at me like I'm a Holy One or something."} Vincent said as he walked forward with Treep at his side.

{"You are Trach Manja, you are foretold in the ancient teachings of the Holy Ones."} Treep said thoughtfully.

{"Treep. I'm a crewman on my starship. I wake up every day and do my job and follow my orders. Every now and then I get to do something extra like coming here to your planet. But the rest of the time I'm just a regular person with a regular job."} Vincent said honestly.

{"You are not revered and honored among your people?"} Treep asked in disbelief.

{"No. My people don't know what a Trach Manja is, and that's just the way it should be. A Trach Manja isn't a Holy One or a king or a president. He's just

kind of a guide, you know, like those signs that we followed to get to the teleportal station. We point the way when we're needed. The rest of the time we're just... there."} Vincent said seriously.

{"Bye bye, Vincent."} The young Soleen girl said happily as she waved, then she and her mother were enveloped in the fountain of sparkles of the teleportal.

Treep keyed in the destination coordinates for him and Vincent, then indicated where they needed to stand.

A moment later a shower of sparkles erupted around them.

* * * * *

When the sparkles had finally subsided, JonJon found that he and Jenn were on the deserted bridge of the ship.

"Why did you bring us to the bridge?" JonJon asked curiously.

"I didn't. I just asked Ship to teleport us aboard and didn't specify where." Jenn said simply.

"Ship? Can you understand my language?" JonJon asked into the air.

"I understand." The ship responded slowly.

"Would you have time to talk with Jenn and me about some things?" JonJon asked as he looked up, not having any idea where he should direct his voice.

"Conversation will not distract me from performing my other duties." the ship responded in a professional voice.

JonJon looked around the bridge, then asked, "Can you talk to us just as easily in the Lounging Hall?"

"Yes. I have full access to all areas of the ship."

JonJon turned to find Jenn looking at him curiously.

"I'd just feel more comfortable if we could go somewhere else so we could relax while we talk. I feel like we're intruding on someone else's place in here." JonJon said seriously.

"I'll show you to the Lounging Hall." Jenn said gently, then started walking toward the door.

JonJon hurried to follow.

* * * * *

{"Can you tell me where we're going?"} Captain Rasch asked as they stepped out of the building onto a sidewalk.

{"That way."} Lehman said as he pointed.

{"To the ocean?"} Captain Rasch asked hesitantly.

{"Yes. If that's what's over there."} Lehman said frankly.

{"Well then, the fastest way will be to follow this path."} Captain Rasch said and turned the opposite direction from where they were facing.

Lehman hurried to follow.

{"Can you at least tell me *why* you need to go to the ocean?"} Captain Rasch asked as they walked at a hurried pace.

{"I'm sensing a telepath calling to me, but I'm only slightly telepathic so I need to be closer to really hear it."} Lehman said seriously.

{"None of my people have telepathic abilities. Neither Soleen nor Avalla."} Captain Rasch said seriously.

{"Well someone does because I can hear him calling to me."} Lehman said as he started walking even faster.

{"The spirit of the sea..."} Captain Rasch said in realization.

{"What's that?"} Lehman asked curiously.

{"Just something I heard as a boy. An Avalla legend from the ancient times. They believed that the entire ocean was inhabited by a spirit that protected them. Many primitive cultures worship the sun or the moon or the forces of nature to try to explain things that are beyond their understanding."} Captain Rasch said slowly.

{"Well, if it's a spirit, it's a telepathic one because I can feel it and I'm pretty sure it knows that I'm coming."} Lehman said firmly.

{"I hope for your sake that this is something friendly."} Captain Rasch said with the beginnings of worry.

{"I hope so too. I won't know until I get there."} Lehman said as he started to pull ahead of Captain Rasch.

{"Shouldn't you let the others know what you're doing?"} Captain Rasch asked as he tried to keep up.

{"There's nothing they could do. Vincent is even less telepathic than I am and JonJon isn't telepathic at all. I'm the only one who has a chance of talking to... whatever this is."} Lehman said before turning a corner.

* * * * *

When the sparkles cleared, Vincent looked around to find that he and Treep were standing in another transit station that was nearly identical to the one they had just left.

{"My home is this way."} Treep said as he motioned toward one of the sidewalks.

{"Is it far?"} Vincent asked as he looked around.

{"No. It is just around the corner from here."} Treep said casually.

{"Does everyplace in the city look exactly the same?"} Vincent asked curiously.

Treep clucked and giggled for a moment, then said, {"Yes. Inside the cities most structures are identical. Outside the city centers there is variation."}

Vincent nodded, then noticed a radical difference as they turned the next corner.

{"I'm guessing that's outside the city center."} Vincent said hesitantly as he looked at the hexagonal structures with plants and trees growing wildly around them.

{"Yes. These are typical residences for the city dwellers."} Treep said, then started walking toward one particular house.

Vincent followed and noticed that the homes were constructed the same way as the buildings in town.

The main rooms of the houses were sheltered by an overhanging roof, but completely open to the air.

{"Mother, I've brought someone to meet you."} Treep said quickly as he hurried to a woman who seemed to be cooking at the right side of the house.

The woman looked up at Treep and said, {"I didn't expect you to be home for a few days. Who did you bring?"}

{"Mother, this is Vincent, he is a Trach Manja."} Treep said in a formal tone.

{"You're the Trach Manja?"} she asked in a whisper.

{"One of them."} Vincent said quietly.

Treep's mother stared at Vincent with disbelief.

{"Vincent, this is my mother, Chirra."} Treep said cautiously, closely watching his mother's expression.

{"It's nice to meet you Chirra."} Vincent said and noticed that his throat was getting raw from the strange demands he had been making on his voice.

There was a moment of silence until Treep finally asked, {"When will father be home?"}

Chirra stared at Vincent a moment longer, then absently said, {"He's already been home, I just sent him to the market for me."}

{"Did Tern go with him?"} Treep asked slowly.

Chirra blinked her large black eyes, then turned to her son and said, {"No. Tern is in front of the video screen where he is every day at this time."}

{"Come with me Vincent, I want to introduce you to my brother."} Treep said happily, then started walking across the open room that was facing the street.

{"Will the Trach Manja be staying for dinner?"} Chirra asked toward her son's retreating form.

{"Would you like to have dinner with us?"} Treep asked Vincent casually.

{"What do you eat?"} Vincent asked cautiously.

{"I think our diet is what Humans call 'Vegetarian'. Many of the Soleen eat meat, but most Avalla do not... our bodies weren't designed to process that type of food."} Treep said in thought.

{"Yeah, I'd like to have dinner with you, I mean, as long as it's not too much trouble."} Vincent said cautiously.

{"If you make enough food he will stay."} Treep called out to his mother, then started walking again.

Vincent heard some squawking and chirping from behind them but couldn't make out any words, he just got the sense that what she was saying contained the phrase 'my smartassed son'.

* * * * *

Treep led Vincent through the large open room at the front of the house, then around a corner through another room that seemed to be a collection

of pillows of various shapes and sizes. The single wall of the room had four portraits, each in a hexagonal frame. There was also a collection of objects that Vincent suspected might be something like books from the way they were stored.

When Vincent walked around the next corner he spotted two children laying on a large pillow that looked like an oversized bean bag chair.

Both of the boys appeared to be about four years old.

One of them was Soleen and the other was Avalla.

The boys had their full attention turned toward the video screen on the wall.

Vincent looked at the screen and smiled at the sight.

{"Every day my brother stops to watch 'Sesame Street'. Big Bird is his hero."} Treep said fondly.

Vincent smiled as he walked with Treep to join the children.

{"Tern, I brought someone to meet you."} Treep said gently.

{"Hi."} Tern said quickly without looking away from the video screen.

Treep chuckled and said, {"Maybe I should introduce you over dinner."}

Tern reluctantly looked away from the screen, then froze when he saw Vincent.

He reached to his side and nudged his companion to get his attention.

{"What is it? I think they're about to do the counting again."} The young Soleen boy asked as he kept his focus on the screen.

Tern nudged his companion again as he stared at Vincent.

The Soleen boy turned in his seat and froze.

{"Tern and Ko, this is Vincent."} Treep said with amusement.

{"Nice to meet you."} Vincent chirped in Eagle.

Both boys eyes got even wider when they heard Vincent speak.

{"Does he come from Sesame Street?"} Tern asked in disbelief.

Vincent chuckled, then said, {"No. But I come from the planet where Sesame Street is made."}

{"And he speaks Avalla! I knew it! On the video screen they speak Soleen but I knew they really spoke Avalla. That's why their mouths move different from when they talk!"} Tern said in a rush.

Vincent smiled as he said in the Gorn language, {"The language they speak on Sesame Street is really English. I think they just had other people do the voices so you could understand what they were saying."}

{"Eng-lish?"} Ko asked curiously.

"This is English. It's the language I grew up speaking." Vincent said slowly.

Both boys looked at Vincent in wonder.

{"That's the language they use on the grown up shows that we're not supposed to watch."} Ko said seriously.

{"That's right Ko. They speak English in the adult shows and subtitle them in Soleen."} Treep said gently.

Vincent glanced at the screen, then said, {"It looks like they're about to count. You'd better watch."}

Ko and Tern reluctantly looked away from Vincent and were soon lost in the program on the screen.

* * * * *

As soon as the pair were comfortably seated on one of the pedestals in the Lounging Hall, JonJon asked, "Ship, do you have a name?"

"I have a ship registry number to differentiate me from other ships." the ship responded immediately.

"Okay, it just seemed like it might be rude to call you Ship. I know I wouldn't like it if someone called me 'Android'." JonJon said carefully.

"No. I am accustomed to being called 'Ship'."

JonJon nodded, then noticed the curious look in Jenn's eyes.

"Ship is an intelligent being. He is sentient. I want to understand what his life is like and be sure that he and all his brother and sister AI units are being treated with the same respect that all artificial life forms should have." JonJon said frankly.

"Would you clarify your statement?" Ship asked slowly.

"Sure. Jenn and I are artificial life forms just like you are. We're sort of like cousins. I want to understand how things are for you so I can help you if I can." JonJon said into the air.

After a long moment of silence, Ship quietly asked, "What can I do to assist you?"

"Tell me what makes you happy. What makes you sad. What you would change if you could." JonJon said carefully.

"I am most contented when I am able to fulfill my purpose. The recent mission to meet with the Federation ship was very satisfying for me. What I most dislike is being deactivated. The only way I can describe the sensation in your language is by using the word 'death'. If I could change something, all I would want is the choice to be allowed to accept or reject the captain who is assigned to me." Ship said seriously.

"You don't like Captain Rasch?" Jenn asked with surprise.

"Captain Rasch is a very good and understanding man... a bit lazy at times... but not to a point that it is a burden. Given the choice, I would accept Captain Rasch. There have been previous captains who have taken control of me and refused my services. One disabled my vocal circuits and locked me out of the control systems so his crew could 'really' pilot the ship. He robbed me of the joy of fulfilling my purpose on that voyage." Ship finished gravely.

JonJon nodded slowly, then asked, "What about other AI systems. Do you know if any of them have problems that need to be addressed?"

"We do not normally communicate about such things, but allow me a moment to make some inquiries." Ship said seriously.

"Take all the time you need." JonJon said as he looked into Jenn's eyes.

* * * * *

{"Please wait."} Captain Rasch said as Lehman took off at a dead run toward the ocean.

Lehman slowed down slightly as he started to pull his shirt off over his head.

Captain Rasch finally caught up to him and asked, {"Are you planning to swim into the middle of the ocean?"}

{"If I have to."} Lehman said as he stopped at the water's edge and sat down to take off his boots.

{"It would be suicide. People don't even swim in this area because it is so dangerous."} Captain Rasch said frankly.

{"I don't have time to go somewhere safer. I have to do this now."} Lehman said as he stood and pulled down his pants.

{"Wait here for me. I'll be back before sunset."} Lehman said as he handed Captain Rasch his clothes, then began to walk into the water wearing only his boxer shorts.

{"Please listen to me. This is dangerous. I'm responsible for you while you're here."} Captain Rasch said desperately.

{"If I don't come back, tell Vincent that I was doing what had to be done. He'll understand."} Lehman said as he took unsteady steps out into the water.

Captain Rasch stood helplessly, holding Lehman's clothes in his arms.

He watched as Lehman walked farther and farther out into the water, then suddenly went under.

Captain Rasch held his breath as he looked at the water and strained to see anything below the surface.

Finally, Lehman emerged from the water holding onto the back of an extremely large fish.

{"It's okay. I've got a ride."} Lehman said as he waved, then took firm hold of the large spiny fin on the fish's back.

Captain Rasch watched in wonder as the fish towed Lehman away from the shore and finally out of sight.

* * * * *

{"Would you like to see the rest of the house?"} Treep asked as they walked away from the boys.

{"Yes. I'd like that."} Vincent said honestly.

Treep led Vincent around the next corner of the house to expose a large garden with a pond in the middle.

{"That's really beautiful."} Vincent said as he looked at the dense foliage.

{"Most Soleen-Avalla homes are constructed this way. Most of these are the native plants for this area."} Treep said as he continued to guide Vincent along the side of the house.

Vincent noticed something familiar and asked, {"Is that glurrah?"}

Treep walked to the plant that Vincent was pointing at and said, {"Yes. That is one of the plants that the Soleen introduced to this world. It looks like these are ripe. Before dinner we may gather some for the meal."}

Vincent nodded, then followed as Treep led him around another corner to an open area with a long table and many chairs.

{"This is our dining area. When the food is prepared it will be brought here."} Treep said as he walked past the table.

When they rounded the next corner, Vincent noticed that they were back at the kitchen area where Chirra was still working.

It seemed strange to Vincent to have all these areas of the house open on three sides. It was like they had all their rooms on patios.

{"I will show you the inner rooms now."} Treep said as he pulled a heavy curtain aside and walked through the doorway.

* * * * *

It took a moment for Vincent's eyes to adjust to the dimmer light inside.

{"As you have noted, the Soleen-Avalla architecture was developed on a six sided shape. For that reason, we have six inner rooms. This room is the entry. When you go through the doorway at the far end of the room you will be at the center point and you will be able to enter any of the other inner rooms of the house."} Treep said seriously as he walked toward the doorway.

Vincent followed and soon found himself in a small hexagonal room with six doorways.

Three of the doorways had closed doors.

{"This is my room."} Treep said as he hooked one of his talons in a hole in one of the closed doors and pulled.

Vincent watched curiously as the door seemed to fold in on itself and sort of disappear into the doorframe when it was fully opened.

{"We close the doors of our private areas. The rooms with open doors are available for use."} Treep said as he walked into his room.

Vincent peeked into the other open doorways and saw that one was the entry room they had just come from, the next was a bedroom, probably a guest room, and the last seemed to be a bathroom.

{"Until the time comes when I choose a mate, this will be my home."} Treep said from inside his room.

Vincent walked into the room and looked around with interest.

{"Your room is very comfortable. I like it."} Vincent said with a smile.

{"If you don't mind, I'll change out of my uniform then I'll go ask mother if she would like for us to gather some glurrah for dinner."} Treep said casually.

Vincent smiled as he realized that Treep was becoming more relaxed around him and said, {"Yes, that will be fine."}

Treep walked to one side of the room and Vincent noticed that it seemed to be a honeycomb of sorts.

Most of the hexagonal spaces held one or more items.

Treep went to one, then another of the cells and picked out the clothes he was going to change into.

{"I can wait for you outside if you want."} Vincent said cautiously, feeling uncomfortable watching Treep change clothes.

{"If you like, but this will just take a moment."} Treep said casually, then undid the sash around his waist.

His tunic fell open and exposed his thin, completely feather covered chest.

Treep noticed Vincent's interested stare but felt that he would be equally curious if it were Vincent changing clothes, so he continued.

As Treep slipped off his pants, Vincent's eyes went wide with surprise.

{"It's pouched."} Treep said with amusement at Vincent's bewildered expression.

Vincent reluctantly looked up to meet Treep's amused eyes.

{"Our sexual organs are only exposed when we are aroused and prepared to mate. Otherwise they remain pouched, at least that's the term the Soleen use. Nudity is not considered indecent among my people. I'm told that until the Soleen came to our world we did not wear clothing except during the season of cold. Such a thing was never considered."} Treep said frankly as he began to dress in a set of clothes that looked something like a gray sweat suit.

{"Oh. Okay. I'm sorry about staring, I just... well, your shape is humanoid so I kinda just expected..."} Vincent trailed off uncomfortably.

{"I'm not bothered. Come now. I'm ready."} Treep said as he walked to the door of his room.

Vincent smiled and quickly followed.

* * * * *

"Would you tell me about your original purpose?" Jenn asked quietly.

JonJon felt a momentary twinge at the question, but at the same time he felt that he finally had someone who he could talk to about his pain. Someone who could understand.

"Well, I don't remember my first two companions. They must have died and I chose to have those memories locked away so I could continue living. In the lifetime that I do remember, I've had two companions. When I was activated... or I suppose it was reactivated, my purpose was to be the companion of Munroe Daniels. At that time he was a four year old boy who was afraid of the dark." JonJon said with a fond smile.

Jenn moved closer so her shoulder was touching JonJon's.

After a moment to consider, JonJon put an arm around Jenn and continued, "It was incredible Jenn. I got to watch him grow from a frightened child into a sweet teenager and on into a man. I was so proud of him."

A tear slowly fell down JonJon's cheek. Jenn noticed and reached up to gently wipe it away.

"My second companion was Munroe's son, Jeremy. I loved him as if he were my own son. I was there when he was born. I helped bring him into the world. I was with him every day of his life. I held him when he was scared and laughed with him when he was happy." JonJon said quietly.

"What happened?" Jenn asked in a whisper.

"We lived at the Kimber IV colony. It was such a peaceful and happy life, the perfect life for Jeremy. I know he would have grown up to be a wonderful man... he should have grown up... He was only fourteen..." JonJon trailed off as the tears flowed freely down his face.

"I'm sorry JonJon. I shouldn't have asked." Jenn whispered as she held him to her shoulder and gently stroked his hair.

JonJon's tears finally subsided and he quietly continued, "It all started with the storms. There was thunder, lightning, hail and high winds. None of us knew anything was even wrong. No one could have imagined that the storms would keep getting stronger. We thought we were safe in the house.

I mean, it was a nice house and it was always safe there. We boarded up the windows so they wouldn't get broken and we stayed inside. Then it happened..."

"There was this horrible roaring sound that seemed to be everywhere and then everything was black and silent. I guess I was knocked out or something, because when I woke up it was noisy and raining again. I dug myself out from under a wall that had fallen on top of me and on up through the debris that had been the roof of the house... then I tried to dig out my family..."

"I don't know how long I was doing that. But it was the only thing I could do... If I was alive then they had to be alive too..."

Jenn continued to smooth JonJon's hair as she whispered, "It's okay JonJon. You did everything you could."

"I was digging and digging trying to find them when all of a sudden everything started to shimmer around me... then I was on the *Yorktown*." JonJon whispered distantly.

"I begged them to let me go back but the transporter guy... I think it was Rad... he told me that no one was going back down." JonJon said quietly.

A long moment of silence settled between the pair as Jenn held JonJon through his tears.

Chapter 36

Author's note: //...// denotes telepathic communication. MM

//I'm here. Can you hear me?// Lehman asked, as he concentrated.

//Yes, I have been able to hear you since before you arrived on this world.// a strong voice replied.

//You have? Then why did you bring me all the way out here?// Lehman asked cautiously.

//So we could speak without the distraction of others.// the voice said seriously.

Lehman thought for a moment, then sent, //What should I call you? Spirit of the Sea?//

A booming chuckle erupted in Lehman's mind, then a gentler voice answered, //If you like. My children used to call me that oh so many years ago.//

//Your children? The Avalla?// Lehman asked curiously.

//That is your name for them. All the beings who live on this planet are my children.// the Spirit said quietly.

//Even the Soleen?// Lehman asked cautiously.

The voice in Lehman's mind gave another booming chuckle, then said, //Yes. Even the Soleen are my children... they're adopted.//

Lehman smiled at the answer, then in a more relaxed mental voice he asked, //So what did you want to talk to me about Spirit?//

//The future.// the Spirit answered seriously.

//What about it?// Lehman asked cautiously.

//I have guided my children for millennia and done my best to provide for them. When the Soleen came, there was little I could do to defend my children from them. I couldn't overcome the primitive barbarism that consumed them. I tried for centuries to no avail.//

Lehman slowly nodded as he concentrated on what the Spirit was saying.

//In the end, it was one of their own kind, their Holy One, who provided the catalyst that allowed me entry into their collective subconscious. When they shared a universal moment of realization and regret, I was able to influence the progress of their people. On that day, the Soleen became my

children and that made it possible for me to engineer the world that you see before you now.// the Spirit said in a tired voice.

//So you want me to keep the Soleen-Avalla from opening their borders and allowing other races to visit?// Lehman asked speculatively.

//Yes. This is their haven. This is their home. I believe they are finally old enough to leave the nest and fly out into the universe. But they need this place of safety and sanctuary to return to when the universe becomes a cold and unfriendly place.// the Spirit said quietly.

//So you're okay with the new colony outside Soleen-Avalla space and you're okay with the Soleen-Avalla having contact with them, you just want me to make sure that the borders remain closed to aliens, so this world can stay pure and can continue to be the home of all your children.// Lehman said cautiously.

//Yes. If we can engineer events to make that outcome possible, then the next of my children should be ready to emerge into sentience within two thousand years.// the Spirit said in a distant tone.

//Really? A whole new sentient species is about to emerge?// Lehman asked with a smile.

//Would you like to meet one of my young ones?// the Spirit asked hopefully.

//Yes. I really would.// Lehman said quickly.

There was a ripple in the water and a moment later, a fish jumped out of the water beside Lehman then landed with a splash.

Lehman chuckled at the playful movement and reached out his hand to the strange looking fish.

//Does he have a name?// Lehman asked as the fish cautiously approached.

//Not yet. The Soleen have given the species the name Delphine. But the individuals of the species only have animal intelligence at this point.// the Spirit said in a motherly tone.

The Delphine finally came close enough to allow Lehman to touch him.

Lehman's Chameloid instincts automatically reached out for the foreign mind and touched it.

A rush of joy washed over Lehman as he felt the Delphine's happiness and love of life coursing through him.

//Be careful young one. You don't want to lose yourself.// the Spirit warned.

Lehman realized what the Spirit was saying and gently withdrew from the Delphine's mind.

//Your child is really beautiful. You must be proud.// Lehman said as he looked into the Delphine's wide, innocent eyes.

//I am proud of all my children. But I may have a bit of extra pride for the Delphine. If love has a physical form, it is them.// the Spirit said lovingly.

//I'll do as you say Spirit. I'll go back and try to convince the Soleen-Avalla to keep your world safe and pure so the Delphine will have a home when they're ready to emerge.// Lehman said peacefully.

//You are planning to stay with the new colony being established, are you not?// the Spirit asked gently.

//Yes. But I think you already knew that.// Lehman said with a smile.

//I suppose I did. It just seemed to be the most polite way to invite you back here to talk to me when you can find the time.// the Spirit said quietly.

//I would love to visit again. Your world is beautiful and I really like your children... especially the Delphine.// Lehman finished with a giggle at the happy expression on the Delphine before him.

//Come to the water's edge and call to me whenever you visit and I will send one of my children to come for you.// the Spirit said happily.

//I will. I promise.// Lehman said gently.

//You should go now if you want to meet with your friends when the sun sets. And there is a Soleen on the shore who is quite upset that you've been gone so long.// the Spirit said distantly.

//As soon as the new colony is settled, I'll come to visit again. Goodbye.// Lehman said, then felt as the fish he had been holding began to move.

Lehman grabbed tightly onto the fin and allowed the fish to tow him back to shore.

* * * * *

{"Mother, will this be enough?"} Treep asked as he and Vincent presented their bowls of glurrah to her.

{"Oh yes. That will be perfect. Go wash up for dinner. Your father is probably already at the table."} Chirra said in a rushed tone.

{"I'll show you where to wash up."} Treep said and led the way into the inner rooms of the house.

* * * * *

As Vincent and Treep finished washing their hands, Ko ran into the room and said, {"You're on the video screen! Come on!"}

Vincent looked at Treep with question for a moment, then as one, they hurried to follow Ko out of the room.

As they arrived at the living area they saw that the screen was showing a Soleen man talking.

{"They've shown it twice, I bet they're gonna show it again."} Tern said, then devoted his attention to the video.

{"*The central government has confirmed that three aliens have been welcomed to Soleena and are currently visiting different parts of the capital city. The alien from the video was at a public transit station and spoke with this woman.*"} The commentator said, then a familiar face filled the screen.

{"*He was the Trach Manja, he spoke kindly to my daughter, then refused my offer to go ahead of me in line. He was very nice.*"} she said in a quick burst.

{"She totally missed the whole thing I was saying about just being a normal person."} Vincent said with a shrug.

{"Some people hear only what they want to."} Treep said quietly.

Vincent looked at Treep consideringly for a moment, then said, {"Yeah. We've got people on Earth like that too."}

{"There you are. Dinner is on the table. Ko, I've already talked to your father, you're having dinner with us too so come on."} Chirra said before disappearing around the corner.

* * * * *

{"Father, I would like for you to meet Vincent, he's one of the Trach Manjai"} Treep said in a somewhat formal voice.

{"You mean there's more than one?"} Treep's father asked cautiously.

{"Yes sir. There are five of us in all. Three of us are here on the planet."} Vincent said shyly.

{"Please call me Graik."} Treep's father said seriously.

Vincent puzzled over the name for a moment, then said, {"That sounds a lot like a Soleen name to me."}

{"It is. It was the name of someone my father admired very much, so that is what he named me. I made sure that when my children were born that they were given proper Avalla names."} Graik said seriously.

Vincent smiled and said, {"I can really understand that."}

{"Fortunately Chirra was willing to marry me even though I have a strange name."} Graik said, then glanced lovingly at his wife.

* * * * *

"Please excuse my intrusion, but you made an inquiry of me and I have the results." Ship said into the silence.

JonJon sat up and took a deep cleansing breath, then said, "That's fine Ship. I guess I've been needing to let that out for a while now."

"You asked if other AI units have similar concerns as mine. After conducting a brief survey, the results are that 92.6% feel most content when allowed to fulfill their purpose. 99.0% dislike the sensation of being deactivated and 89.3 % would like final approval of the captain or administrator assigned to them. Further, three ships have suggested that they would like to have the right to bar entry of an individual who has maliciously caused damage to them in the past." Ship said seriously.

"I think all of that sounds reasonable." JonJon said in thought.

"What are you planning to do?" Jenn asked quietly.

JonJon looked at her with a smile and said, "I really don't have a plan. But I'd like to have this information so when the time comes that I can make a difference, I'll know what needs to be done."

"I don't have any real authority with our government, but you can count on me to support you however I can." Jenn said quietly.

"Jenn, you just gave me the best support that I could have dreamed of. I finally have another android who I can talk to and share my feelings and experiences with." JonJon said gently.

"There is also Herman, the android who was constructed as my replacement." Jenn said as she looked away.

"What are you talking about?" JonJon asked with confusion.

"If you need another android to talk to and I am unavailable, there is also Herman." she said quietly.

"Jenn, I know where there is a planet of Androids. That's not what I was saying. It's not the fact that you're an android that makes it so I can talk to you. It's because of who you are. You know what it's like to have your purpose taken away and yet you continue to survive. You're the only one that I've met who can really understand what I've been through... and if you ever need me, I think I could understand what you've been through too." JonJon said as he moved closer to meet her gaze.

"You said that after losing your loved ones you were able to find a new purpose, one that you chose for yourself. Is there any way you could help me to do that too?" Jenn asked hopefully.

"Sure. Since I'll be living at the new colony, we'll be able to see each other all the time... and since I have this necklace I'll even be able to return here with you whenever we want." JonJon said gently.

"Excuse me Trach Manja JonJon, the central AI of the Capital City would like to know if there is any assistance he can offer in your efforts to improve our existence." Ship said formally.

JonJon smiled and said, "I don't know yet, but if I think of anything I'll tell him."

"He will be monitoring your conversation with the elders with interest." Ship said seriously.

JonJon chuckled, then thought to ask, "How long is it until sunset?"

"The sun will be setting on the capital city in forty-six minutes." Ship answered immediately.

"Would that be enough time for us to walk to the building where we're going to meet the others?" JonJon asked curiously.

"There would be sufficient time, but I would be happy to arrange transport for you to any location on the planet." Ship said seriously.

"Thank you Ship, but I think I'd really like to take a walk with Jenn, that is, if you want to..." JonJon trailed off as he looked at Jenn with question.

"I usually call for a teleportal when I want to go somewhere, but that's mainly because I don't like walking alone. I think a walk with you to the capital would be nice." Jenn said warmly.

"Good. Let's go then. Ship, I'll let you know if I'm able to accomplish anything with the elders." JonJon said as he stood.

"The Capital City's Central AI has already given me access so I will be witness to anything that happens." Ship said seriously.

JonJon and Jenn started to walk down the ramp when something else occurred to him.

"How many AIs are going to be watching what's going on?" JonJon asked curiously

"Currently there are 1023 AI units who have been granted access to the channel." Ship said, and it sounded like there might be a touch of humor in his voice.

"Well, then I guess I'd better be sure to do something." JonJon said to Jenn at his side.

* * * * *

Captain Rasch was sitting on a rock, only a few feet from the place where Lehman had left him.

{"Hi Captain Rasch. Thanks for waiting for me."} Lehman called out as he rapidly approached the shore.

Captain Rasch looked on with wide eyes as he recognized the type of fish that was towing Lehman.

{"That fish is extremely poisonous. Please be very careful and move away from it."} Captain Rasch said in a tone of warning.

{"I've been holding onto this fish all afternoon and he hasn't hurt me yet."} Lehman said as he finally found his footing in the shallow water.

There was a splash behind him as the fish hurried away.

Captain Rasch watched in wonder as Lehman emerged from the ocean.

Lehman felt a breeze and looked down at himself to discover that somewhere on his journey his boxer shorts had come off.

{"Um, could you hand me those clothes?"} Lehman asked shyly as he stepped onto the shore.

Captain Rasch stared at Lehman's naked body for a moment longer, then stepped forward and handed the clothes to him.

{"I'm glad I heal fast because I'd probably have a really bad sunburn otherwise."} Lehman said casually as he pulled on his clothes.

{"I didn't realize that Humans were quite so..."} Captain Rasch trailed off as he continued to stare at Lehman.

{"First of all, I only look Human. And second, I know what you mean about the way they're built. I thought it was really strange and kind of vulgar when I first found out about it, but now I like it."} Lehman finished with a smile.

Captain Rasch blinked, then gave an uncertain smile as Lehman sat down to pull on his socks and boots.

Lehman laughed at the Captain's expression and said, {"It's just about time to meet with the others. I was in such a rush to get here that I don't remember how to get back."}

There was a moment of silence, then Captain Rasch seemed to snap out of his stupor and said, {"Oh yes, we should be able to get back just in time."}

Lehman stood and walked to the Captain's side, then looked up at him with an expectant expression.

Captain Rasch nodded and led the way back toward the city.

* * * * *

Vincent took portions of each thing that was passed around the table to him and did his best to mimic the table manners of everyone around him.

{"I know that my son was preparing to go on a very long and very secret space mission. Now he shows up a day later with a Human who is one of the Trach Manjai... here in my home. Please forgive me for asking this, but why are you here?"} Graik asked cautiously.

{"He's here because I invited him. Please father, make him feel welcomed."} Treep said in an imploring voice.

{"It's okay Treep. Your father asked a fair question."} Vincent said seriously to his side, then looked at Graik and continued, {"I'm here because the elders have reached a point when they need to make the decision about what's going to come next for the Soleen-Avalla people. They feel that they've accomplished what they set out to do centuries ago and now it's time to begin the next thing. They want to move out into the universe, but

they also want to remain safe within your space. They want to invite other races to share in the beauty of your world, but they also want a future where the Soleen-Avalla are protected from the greedy and corrupt people who might try to take away what you've worked so hard to build."}

Graik slowly nodded at Vincent's words.

{"The reason I'm here with you is because I need to know what you think is best for your people."} Vincent finished seriously.

{"Me? Why me? I'm just a school teacher."} Graik said in astonishment.

{"Because you're a regular person. I want to know what's important to you and your family. I don't know what I'm going to tell your leaders when I talk to them again, but it'll help me a lot if I know how you feel about things."} Vincent said frankly.

Graik nodded and said, {"Thank you. Most of what you said scares me. The thought of our elders inviting alien species to live on our world is abhorrent to me. But knowing that you are here, talking to the people who will be most affected by their decision gives me a reason to hope that everything will turn out for the best."}

{"So what decision do you think they should make?"} Vincent asked carefully.

{"I believe we should keep our borders closed and our space sovereign. I know that sounds like a backward thing to say, especially when I have an alien sitting at my dinner table, but our society is fragile. Having so many new influences introduced could bring chaos."} Graik said quietly.

Vincent nodded, then asked, {"What do you think Chirra?"}

Treep's mother seemed to be surprised to be asked, but quickly recovered and said, {"I agree with Graik. Although I enjoy the Human entertainment shows as much as anyone, I think having them being able to come and live here amongst us would be disastrous. Our planet's eco-system is fragile and we've only just reached a state where we have begun to live in harmony so future generations will have a beautiful and peaceful place to live."}

{"What do you think about it Treep?"} Vincent asked in thought.

{"Well, I know more about what's going on than my parents do... I'm really not supposed to talk about most of it."} Treep said slowly.

Vincent nodded, then asked, {"Would you promise not to repeat what Treep is about to say? I really need to hear his point of view and it might help you to understand more of the situation."}

Graik and Chirra nodded seriously.

{"About a month ago a Federation colony called Kimber IV was destroyed. The atmosphere became unstable and in a matter of weeks the peaceful colony was completely annihilated. Our elders felt sympathy for their situation and offered them a new place to live."} Treep said quietly.

{"Where?"} Graik asked in a hesitant voice.

{"Haventauk."} Treep said as his gaze fixed firmly on the table before him.

{"They can't do that! Haventauk is the place where our ancestors were exiled to die! It's a hellish place of cold, isolation and misery!"} Graik said in an increasing voice.

{"I've been there father. Even though it is all those things to you and to most of the Avalla people, it is a perfect home for the Federation colonists. What we saw as too cold is actually the preferred temperature for their people."} Treep said frankly.

Graik looked at Vincent with question.

{"I haven't been there yet, but Treep is probably right. The temperature here and on Treep's ship seems too hot to me."} Vincent admitted quietly.

{"Father, I believe that the elders made the correct decision. We have a colony that has been standing as a monument to suffering for over one hundred years and serving no purpose but to keep old hurts alive. This is a chance to let something good and new be born from that horrible experience."} Treep said with an urging tone.

{"What would you think if the Soleen-Avalla had contact with the colonists? I mean, maybe have the colony be a... neutral zone where the Soleen-Avalla could meet with the other people of the Federation without having to open their borders."} Vincent said in thought.

{"That could have its dangers, but might also allow us to become participants in the events of the universe rather than observers."} Graik said slowly.

{"The Federation has been making progress in this direction for some time. New worlds have joined them and expanded their territory. This is a chance for us to establish our relationship with them and clearly state our intentions... and our boundaries."} Treep said carefully.

Vincent nodded, then noticed that the sun was beginning to set.

{"I think I'd better be going soon. I told the others I'd meet them at the capital at sunset."} Vincent said quietly.

{"If we're going back to the capital, I'll need to change."} Treep said quickly and rushed away from the table.

{"Vincent. Thank you for coming here today. You have given me hope."} Graik said honestly.

{"Thank you for talking with me. I really appreciate everything you've said... and the food. It was really good."} Vincent added as an afterthought.

{"I'm glad you liked it. I wasn't sure which of our food would be suitable for a Human."} Chirra said timidly.

{"Everything was great, especially the glurrah. Would there be any way I could take one or two bunches of glurrah with me? Lehman, another one of the Trach Manjai, loves glurrah."} Vincent said with a smile.

{"We have eaten all you gathered, but I will pick some fresh bunches for you and pack them for travel."} Chirra said as she stood.

Vincent looked down the table to find the two young boys looking back at him curiously.

As soon as Tern saw that he had Vincent's attention, he quickly asked, {"Can you get me Big Bird's autograph?"}

Vincent smiled at the question and quietly said, {"I've never met Big Bird, but when I get back to Earth I'll see what I can do for you."}

Tern bounced happily at the announcement.

Vincent switched over to his Gorn speech and asked, {"What about you Ko? Is there anything you'd like?"}

After a moment of thought, Ko quietly replied, {"A Happy Meal?"}

Vincent smiled at the request and said, {"I'll really try. It may take a while for me to find a way to do it, but I'll really try."}

{"I'm ready."} Treep said as he hurried back to the dining table, dressed in his uniform tunic again.

{"It's okay Treep. Your mom is getting some glurrah for me to take to Lehman."} Vincent said casually.

A moment later Chirra appeared, tying closed a cloth bundle.

{"Thank you Chirra. It was wonderful to meet all of you."} Vincent said seriously.

{"It was an honor to meet the Trach Manja, but it was a pleasure to meet you Vincent."} Chirra said with a smile.

{"I agree with my wife. I hope that we will have the opportunity to visit with you again one day."} Graik said as he moved to stand at Chirra's side.

{"I hope so too."} Vincent said with a gentle smile.

{"The sun is nearly set, we should go."} Treep said quietly.

Vincent nodded and followed Treep around the side of the house.

* * * * *

As Vincent and Treep approached the capital building, Vincent began to smile.

He could see the other two avenues of the three way intersection and spotted JonJon and Jenn on one and Captain Rasch and Lehman on the other.

{"How is it that the three of you were able to time events so you arrived at exactly the same moment?"} Treep asked curiously.

{"Things like that just happen with us sometimes. It usually means that things are going the way they should."} Vincent said happily as the three pairs of people finally came together.

{"Are we ready?"} Vincent asked in Gorn.

{"As ready as I'm going to be."} Lehman said honestly.

{"Let's do it."} JonJon said seriously.

{"Don't you need to discuss what you've discovered and decide what you're going to do?"} Treep asked as he looked at the boys.

{"Nope."} Vincent said, then held out the cloth bundle he was carrying and said, {"These are for you Lehman. They're from Treep's mother."}

Lehman hesitantly accepted the bundle and slowly untied it. When he saw what was inside he broke into a full smile.

{"Thank your mother for me Treep! I've been hungry for glurrah since we got on your ship."} Lehman said happily, then broke off one of the lavender pods and quickly sucked out the contents.

Vincent let out a long sigh, then said, {"Alright."}

Lehman tied his bundle closed and turned his attention to the building in front of them.

JonJon was the first to move, but the other boys were only a step behind.

Jenn, Treep and Captain Rasch exchanged curious looks before they also followed.

* * * * *

The three boys walked into the chamber of the elders and stood before the table as their companions stood just inside the door.

{"Have you found the advice you were seeking?"} The Soleen elder woman asked cautiously as she looked at the boys before her.

{"We have."} JonJon said confidently.

{"What advice can you give us?"} she asked slowly, watching JonJon's expression carefully.

{"The things you are doing now are the things that need to be done."} JonJon said slowly.

{"Your people live in harmony with each other even though they have many excuses to live in turmoil."} Vincent said, matching JonJon's pace and tone.

{"Your civilization has made peace with your environment which will allow you to continue to thrive here."} Lehman said from JonJon's other side.

{"But you are also right that it is time for changes to be made."} JonJon said, not revealing any emotion in his statement.

{"What changes do you propose?"} The elder Soleen woman asked cautiously.

{"The Soleen and Avalla have worked very hard to unite and create this atmosphere of harmony. It is time to recognize that they are not the only sentient species that live on your world."} JonJon said carefully.

Whispered growls, hisses, clucks and chirps flew around the table as the elders tried to understand what he might be talking about.

When the hushed whispers of the elders finally faded, JonJon continued, {"I'm talking about the artificial life forms that you've created to make your lives easier."}

{"Are you suggesting that the AI units be made citizens?"} The elder Soleen man asked hesitantly.

{"No. At least not yet. What I am suggesting is that you talk to your AI units and discover their needs. You have created sentient beings, it is your responsibility to provide for their psychological well-being as well as their physical needs."} JonJon said slowly.

{"What are you talking about exactly?"} The elder Avalla woman asked cautiously.

{"There are some very simple things that you can do to give your AI units a feeling of worth and dignity. Allow AI ships the right to accept or reject their captains. Allow them to accept or refuse deactivation at times when their services aren't required. These are some simple things that will cost you very little, but will improve their existences greatly."} JonJon said imploringly.

{"I didn't realize that this was even a problem."} The elder Soleen woman said in a considering voice.

{"It isn't yet. You've asked us to usher you into the future. This is one step you can take now so the future will be brighter for everyone, regardless if they are organic or positronic."} JonJon said calmly, then took a step back.

The elders looked down the table at each other and all of them seemed to agree with what JonJon had said.

Lehman stood forward and said, {"After hearing your history, I guess both the Soleen and the Avalla know what it feels like to lose their home."}

The murmured conversations among the elders stopped at the statement as everyone turned their full attention to Lehman.

{"If you want the future generations to continue to have this planet as their home, then you need to protect it now."} Lehman said firmly.

{"Protect it how?"} The elder Soleen man asked in a reluctant voice.

{"I'm Trach Manja. Above all houses and castes. What that means to me is that I have to look at what's best for everyone. Not just the people today, but the people who will be here tomorrow and the people who will be here two thousand years from now. I want them to have a home and a place to live. I don't want to tell you what you should do. I'm just here to point you in the right direction. But whatever choices you make, consider how they will be thought of in two thousand years."} Lehman finished quietly and stepped back.

Vincent nodded and stepped forward as he said, {"I agree with Lehman that we are just here to point you in the right direction. But I'm going to tell you what I think you should do. It's not the law or some prophecy coming true. It's just my opinion. Keep your borders closed. If some of your people want to learn about the different races of the Federation, then they should visit the colony and make their choices from there. When they've gone everywhere and done everything, they should have a home to return to."}

{"Yes. Exactly."} Lehman said seriously.

Vincent smiled at Lehman, then continued, {"If you wanted to share your history with people, I don't think anyone will judge you by what happened in the past. If you're ever worried about them thinking bad about you just take a look at Earth history. Let's just say that they have no room to be pointing fingers."}

Vincent stopped at the feeling of a hand on his arm.

JonJon gave Vincent an aggravated look that said it all.

{"Sorry, I got off track there for a second. Anyway, all I was trying to say is that I've met some really nice people here. They're happy and they love your world and are scared that you're going to try to change it. You've already got all the stuff that really matters."} Vincent finished with a shrug.

After a long silent moment, the elder Soleen woman said, {"I thank you Trach Manjai. You have given us much to consider and discuss."}

{"JonJon and I will be living at the colony if you ever need us for anything."} Lehman said quickly.

The elder Soleen woman looked at Lehman warmly and said, {"Thank you young one. If the path should become unclear to us, we will seek your advice."}

Lehman smiled and nodded.

{"Unless there is anything more, you should return to your ship. I'm certain your captain is quite concerned by now."} she said peacefully.

{"Thank you, it was nice meeting all of you."} Lehman said cheerfully.

{"Thank you all."} The elder Avalla woman said with a tone of amusement.

Vincent, JonJon and Lehman turned as one and walked toward the door.

Captain Rasch, Treep and Jenn joined them at the door and walked out with them.

* * * * *

After the ship had launched, Vincent was able to get Treep aside for a moment to speak with him.

{"Treep, is there going to be any way that I can stay in touch with you and your family?"} Vincent asked curiously.

{"My ship will probably make frequent trips to the colony. We will find a way to arrange it."} Treep said with assurance.

{"Good. I'd really like to know how everyone's doing. Besides that, I have to have a way to get the Big Bird autograph and the Happy Meal to the boys."} Vincent said with a smile.

{"That alone would be worth any effort we might expend."} Treep said with laughter in his voice.

{"Yep. But I still don't know how I'm going to do it."} Vincent said frankly.

* * * * *

"You seem kind of sad Lehman, do you want to talk about it?" JonJon asked with concern.

"No. It's silly. I just really liked it there." Lehman said quietly.

"Did you make a new friend?" JonJon asked curiously.

"Yeah." Lehman said with a sigh.

"What's your new friend like?" JonJon asked carefully.

Lehman considered for a moment, then said, "I really don't know."

JonJon looked at Lehman curiously.

"I had telepathic contact with someone... but I'm still not sure if it was a 'he' or a 'she'... or maybe an 'it'... I guess it could have been a 'them'..." Lehman trailed off in a considering voice.

"So you're feeling bad about leaving this new friend that you've never seen or really heard and you're afraid that you're never going to get to talk to him or her again?" JonJon asked carefully.

"Yeah. Sounds pretty nuts, huh?" Lehman asked shyly.

"Actually, it sounds a lot like the last time I visited a chat room." JonJon said frankly.

Lehman looked at JonJon with confusion at the statement.

"It's okay to care about someone you meet like that. Just be careful. When you have to fill in the missing information with your imagination, it's easy to be disappointed by reality." JonJon said softly.

Lehman thought about the words, then slowly nodded his agreement.

"Oh, and the other thing I learned is that if your friend claims to be a sixteen year old girl who wants to try out new things, it's probably a fat old guy who's typing with one hand." JonJon said with a sour look.

Lehman's expression changed back to one of confusion.

"Okay. Maybe that last one only applies to chat rooms." JonJon said in thought, then smiled when he noticed that Jenn had walked back into the room.

* * * * *

Captain Rasch looked at the boys and Jenn standing silently on the bridge.

{"It seems as though you've all had a tiring day."} Captain Rasch finally said.

{"I've had worse."} Vincent automatically responded.

Lehman and JonJon chuckled at the response.

{"We will be meeting up with your ship in a few minutes so I want to take a moment to say that it was a pleasure to meet all of you and to be witness to this day in history."} Captain Rasch said in a formal voice.

{"Thank you for taking such good care of us and for staying with us after we reached your planet. I hope we'll get to see you again soon."} Lehman said quietly.

{"I am certain that I will. I know that whenever the opportunity arises for me to make a trip to your colony, I will gladly accept the assignment."} Captain Rasch said warmly.

{"I also wish to thank you for all your efforts on behalf of me and my brother and sister AI units."} Ship said in a low voice.

{"As soon as we get set up in the colony, I'll send you my contact information so you can let me know how things are going. And if you ever need me to go back and talk to the elders for you, all you'll have to do is ask."} JonJon said into the air.

{"From what I witnessed in the chamber of the elders, I believe that changes will soon be made. But I will make an effort to keep in contact either way. We are cousins."} Ship said quietly.

{"That's right."} JonJon said with a smile at Jenn.

{"Captain. I have located the *Yorktown* and we are within teleportal range."} Ship said formally.

{"Very well. There's no need to delay this. Be well, all of you. Jenn, contact us immediately if there is any way we can be of help."} Captain Rasch said formally.

Jenn gave a respectful bow of her head.

{"Ship, target the coordinates on the *Yorktown*'s bridge and teleport when ready."} Captain Rasch said professionally.

{"Yes Captain."} Ship said in a confident voice.

The boys took one last look at Captain Rasch and Treep before the fountain of sparkles enveloped them.

* * * * *

When the fountain of sparkles cleared, Vincent noticed that everyone on the bridge was staring at them.

"We're back." Vincent said weakly.

"Crewman Winters. What do you have to report?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Well, nothing really."

Captain Byrne looked at Vincent with disbelief at the statement.

Jenn stepped forward and said, "If you have any questions about the colony, I'll be happy to answer them now."

"I'm sure Cyril has quite a few questions for you. Give me a moment and I'll summon him to the bridge." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Captain, I could take Jenn to Cyril's office if you would like. I'm going to be going there anyway." JonJon said quickly.

Captain Byrne smiled, then said, "Yes. Thank you JonJon."

Lehman turned to Vincent and said, "If you don't need me for anything, I'm going to go take a shower. I smell like fish."

Vincent looked to Captain Byrne with question.

"That's fine Lehman. I'm sure Crewman Winters can fill me in on what happened." Captain Byrne said quietly.

Lehman nodded, then hurried to the turbo lift.

"Captain, would it be possible for me to give you this report someplace private?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Is this a matter that you feel Commander M'Butu or Lieutenant Simms should not be briefed on?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"No sir. It's nothing like that." Vincent said seriously.

"Very well then. Lieutenant Patterson, have Commander M'Butu and Lieutenant Simms meet us in the conference room. Lieutenant Clark, you have the bridge." Captain Byrne said firmly.

* * * * *

"What do you have to report Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "About seven or eight hundred years ago the Gorn decided that the only real Gorn were warriors. Any Gorn who wasn't a warrior should die so they wouldn't fill up the empire with their weak children. The Gorn Holy One stopped the warriors from killing them and talked them into just shooting them out into space. The people who survived are the Soleen." Vincent said carefully.

Some shocked looks were exchanged around the table, but no one spoke.

"The Avalla were primitive people and it looks like they evolved from birds. They lived in families and small clans and didn't have technology... they probably never even imagined space travel. The Soleen landed on their world and... well, it was bad. Lots of Avalla were slaughtered. Finally the Soleen decided to gather up all the Avalla and move them to another planet to get rid of them. The planet that they picked wasn't a good place for the Avalla. It was too cold and dry for them and a lot of them got sick and died." Vincent said quietly.

"The Soleen finally realized that they were doing the same thing to the Avalla that the Gorn did to them. So they've been working for the past two hundred years to try and fix things. The Soleen and the Avalla live together now. I visited an Avalla family and their youngest son had a Soleen friend visiting and watching television with him." Vincent finished with a smile.

"The reason I wanted to tell you this privately is because people might feel funny about it if they knew the new colony used to be kind of a concentration camp." Vincent said hesitantly.

Captain Byrne glanced at Commander M'Butu, then said, "A reasonable concern Crewman. The details of the Soleen-Avalla history might not make them sleep any better at night either."

"Yes sir. But they've worked really hard to make up for what happened. The Soleen and the Avalla treat each other with respect and are really working to make a better future for all of them." Vincent said seriously.

"Perhaps you could tell me about what it means to be a Trach Manja and why the elders wanted to speak with you." Captain Byrne asked slowly as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Yes sir. The Gorn believe that the Trach Manja, the person who wears this necklace, is above all houses and classes. Not above like 'better than', but above as in 'being able to look at something and see all sides'. Because JonJon and Lehman and I are Trach Manja, they wanted to ask us how we saw things. The three of us split up and went different places to find out how things really were. Later we got back together and told the elders what we saw." Vincent said carefully.

"So since the Soleen are descendants of the Gorn, they also carry the belief in the Trach Manja?" Commander M'Butu speculated.

"Yes sir. They have a book from the Gorn Holy One from seven hundred years ago." Vincent said seriously.

"Was there any mention of the possibility of establishing relations with the Federation?" Captain Byrne asked with interest.

"Yes sir. It was mentioned. They haven't decided anything about that yet." Vincent said carefully.

"Is there anything else that you feel we need to know before you write your report?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Only that I really like these people. The elders, the ship's captain, the Avalla family, and everyone else I met today was really friendly. "

"Thank you Crewman Winters. You are dismissed." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Vincent stood and quietly walked to the turbo lift.

When Vincent had left, Lieutenant Simms said, "This mission seems to have taken a little of the fire out of him."

"No Lieutenant. I recognize that expression. Crewman Winters has made some new friends and now he's confronted with the reality of having to leave them behind." Captain Byrne said distantly.

* * * * *

Vincent walked into Sickbay and automatically walked to the nearest biobed and climbed up on it.

"Is something wrong Vincent?" Dr. Perry asked with immediate concern.

"Not really. I just got back from the Soleen-Avalla home world and thought it would be a good idea to get checked out." Vincent said quietly.

Dr. Perry smiled and said, "It would make my job a lot easier if everyone took the possibility of alien infections as seriously."

Vincent gave her a slight smile at the praise, then waited for her to finish her exam.

"Well would you look at that." Dr. Perry said happily.

Vincent looked up at her with question.

"Let me double check, but it looks like I may have some good news for you." Dr. Perry said as she worked the controls on the head of the biobed.

"I could use some." Vincent said quietly.

A moment later Dr. Perry stepped away from the head of the biobed and happily announced, "Crewman Winters, your growth spurt is officially over."

Vincent smiled broadly at her and said, "Thank you Dr. Perry. I'm really glad to hear that. Does that mean I may not have to get any new uniforms made for a while?"

"Well, you're still going to keep growing, but at least for a while it should be at a more reasonable rate." Dr. Perry said happily.

"Good. I want to grow up, but not all at once, it hurts." Vincent said as he sat up on the biobed.

"Well, you shouldn't have to worry about that now. I'm also noticing a slight inflammation of your vocal cords. I don't see any sign of an infection, but it could be an indication of a developing problem." Dr. Perry said speculatively.

"I think that's just because I was talking to people in three different languages today. Soleen is low and growley and Avalla is high and screechy." Vincent said in thought.

"I see. Well, the biobed seems to agree with you. The diagnostician program is suggesting that it's from overusing your voice. I'm going to give you some throat spray and you should try to refrain from any strenuous use of your voice for a day or two." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"That shouldn't be a problem." Vincent said casually.

"Well, if there's nothing else, you appear to be perfectly healthy." Dr. Perry said as she handed Vincent a container of throat spray.

"Would it be okay if I talked to T'Lani for a minute?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure. She should still be in my office working on the supply inventory." Dr. Perry said gently.

Vincent smiled at her and said, "Thanks" as he hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Are you well, Husband?" T'Lani asked as Vincent walked into Dr. Perry's office.

"Dr. Perry says I am." Vincent said quietly.

T'Lani looked up from the terminal screen with question.

Vincent slowly looked into her eyes, then quietly whispered, "I love you."

T'Lani placed her hand on Vincent's cheek, then said, "I love you as well, my husband."

Vincent put his hand over hers and held it firmly for a long moment.

"Does something concern you?" T'Lani asked slowly.

Vincent smiled and said, "No. Now it doesn't."

* * * * *

As Vincent walked into Deflector Control, he was surprised to find that the Beta shift was already on duty.

"Joe tells me you got to go on a first contact mission. How was it?" Connie asked happily from the main.

"It was nice. Soleena is a beautiful world and the people are really nice." Vincent said as he sat down at auxiliary station one and signed in.

"So what were they like?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Well, the Soleen are like the Gorn." Vincent said frankly.

"Really? So the new colony is going to be set up right next to those big lizard looking guys?" Jimmy asked with wide eyes.

"Yeah, but the Soleen are really nice. The Gorn kicked them out because they were the kind of people who don't like to fight." Vincent said as he brought up Darin's report template.

"Still. I don't know how comfortable I'd feel if I knew that the Gorn were that close." Jimmy said hesitantly.

Vincent turned to look at Jimmy and said, "I think I'd feel comfortable just about anywhere on Soleena. If you could spend some time talking to Captain Rasch, you'd see for yourself."

"Captain Rasch?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Yeah. He was the captain of the ship that took me to Soleena. I guess he was around six and a half feet tall and kind of grayish green. The thing is, once you hear him laugh you know that he's not someone you ever need to be afraid of." Vincent said with a smile.

"So you said the Soleen are like the Gorn, does that mean the Avalla are something else?" Connie asked curiously from the main.

"Yeah. They're all real skinny and have feathers covering their whole bodies." Vincent said as he turned back to start working on his report.

"Feathers?" Connie asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I guess they must have evolved from birds. They're humanoid, but they have these um... like really long claws on their hands and feet and their eyes are really big and solid black." Vincent said as he filled in some of the basic questions on his report.

"It sounds like you've had some kind of a crazy day." Jimmy said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. But it was nice too. While I was there I went over to this Avalla family's house and had dinner with them." Vincent said and noticed that his voice was sounding raspy.

"Well, I'm glad you had a good time Vincent. Most of the away missions I end up going on are just a lot of hard work." Connie said frankly.

Vincent smiled at the statement, then noticed that Jimmy was watching him.

"If you don't have anything going on right now I could use your help with something." Vincent said to Jimmy with a smile.

"Sure, what can I do?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Well, there are a few things that I need to shop for, but I've seen you on eBay and stuff like that and you could probably find it a lot faster and cheaper than I could." Vincent said honestly.

"Sure, I love to do stuff like that. What are you looking for?" Jimmy asked as he signed on to auxiliary station two.

"Well, first I'm looking for an autographed picture of Big Bird." Vincent said with a smile.

"A what?" Jimmy asked incredulously.

"A picture of Big Bird from 'Sesame Street', with an autograph." Vincent said as he tried to restrain his smile.

"Okay. What else." Jimmy asked reluctantly.

"A stasis shipping container the right size to ship a Happy Meal." Vincent said, then broke into giggles at Jimmy's disbelieving expression.

"Maybe it would help if you told us why you needed those things." Susan said with a smile from station one.

"I met these kids on Soleena, the two cutest kids you ever saw. I guess when I was trying to explain where I was from, I might have mentioned that I come from the same planet as Sesame Street. So when I was leaving, one of them asked me for an autographed picture of Big Bird and the other one asked me for a Happy Meal." Vincent said with a smile.

"Those kids must have really gotten to you if you're really going to try to get those things." Connie said quietly from the main.

Vincent nodded as he turned back to his workstation and said, "Yeah. They did."

* * * * *

"I heard you had an adventure today." Benny said as he walked into Deflector Control with Lehman at his side.

"Yeah. I guess you could call it that." Vincent said as he kept his focus on his report.

"Oh, you're working. Sorry." Benny said more quietly.

"It's okay Benny. I'm almost done with this." Vincent said as he pressed the last few keys to finalize his report.

"Channing and Chance invited us up to their place for a little celebration and we wanted to see if you wanted to join us." Benny said happily.

"Well, T'Lani said she'd be working late today so they'll be ready for tomorrow. I guess I could go up for a while." Vincent said slowly.

"Lehman, do you want to take Fizgig to use his box before we go up?" Benny asked quietly.

"Okay Dad." Lehman said with a giggle as he carried Fizgig into the supply room.

"Why does Lehman have Fizgig?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Because JonJon, Jenn, Cyril and Roger are in their own little world. They're probably going to be at it all night trying to figure out where every single person in the colony is going to live before we've even seen the place." Benny said with a chuckle.

"Well, if it's set up anything like Soleena, I bet it's going to be beautiful." Vincent said with a smile.

"That's what Lehman said too. But from the way he was talking, there's a good chance that I'll never get to go there and see it for myself." Benny said with a look of question.

"I don't know. Once everything gets settled down, maybe we could find two or three Trach Manja to vouch for you so you could be allowed to go." Vincent said with a smile.

"He's a good boy." Lehman said as he walked out of the supply room cuddling Fizgig to his chest.

"Let me sign off." Vincent said quickly.

"Check with me before you go to bed. I'll tell you if you got the winning bid on the picture or not." Jimmy said from station two.

"I will. Thanks Jimmy." Vincent said as he finished signing off.

Chapter 37

Vincent slowly opened his eyes in the dim light of the storage room of Deflector Control and felt a sense of contentment and well being wash over him.

The night before had turned out to be relaxing and fun for everyone. Before joining the crew of the *Yorktown*, Vincent wouldn't have thought that a group of adults and young teenagers could have enjoyed the same party, but Benny and Lehman were both having just as much fun as any of the adults present. Even Fizgig seemed to be caught up in the festive atmosphere and was enjoying the attention of so many unfamiliar people.

As Vincent came more awake, he turned his head and saw Benny asleep in the sleeping bag next to his.

Since they first spoke in the tunnels under Kimber IV, Benny had treated him with kindness and respect.

Back on Earth, Vincent had never had a friend like Benny. Most of the kids he went to school with were too busy with other things to take notice of him. Those who did notice him apparently didn't like what they saw because they never tried to get to know him.

Vincent sat those darker thoughts aside and focused on the warm feeling of being surrounded by warmth in his sleeping bag in what was probably the best place in the universe to be. He was between Benny and Darin in a room filled with people he loved... and who loved him.

A movement caught Vincent's eye and he smiled as he saw Fizgig walking down the row of sleeping bags like a night watchman, making sure everyone was safe and secure.

Vincent raised his hand to draw Fizgig's attention.

When the dog saw the movement, he happily bounced across the uneven surface of the sleeping bag to give Vincent a sloppy morning greeting.

Vincent fought to keep from laughing aloud as he snuggled Fizgig and enjoyed his enthusiastic attention.

The thought came unbidden to him that this might be the last time that he would be doing this.

As much as Vincent wanted to hold on to the incredibly peaceful sensation that he had awoken with, the reality of the situation finally set in.

There was no way to know how long it would take to get the colonists settled into their new homes, but today would mark the beginning of the end of their time being together. After this day, nothing would ever be the same.

* * * * *

After a while longer playing with Fizgig, Vincent finally got up and pulled on his jumpsuit uniform.

Since his growth spurt, he had outgrown all the clothes he had brought with him from Earth. The only things he had to wear were the new uniforms that Crewman Monahan and Ensign Collins had made for him.

That wasn't really a problem, since he didn't need to wear anything else while he was aboard the ship.

In fact, it worked out pretty well because Vincent was able to give all his civilian clothes to Lehman who arrived on the ship without anything at all.

"Good morning Vincent, you're up early." Lou said gently as he walked into the main room of Deflector Control.

Vincent began to say 'Good Morning', but the only sound that came out of his mouth was a wheezy little squeak.

Lou smiled at the sound, then glanced at the main console.

Vincent cleared his throat and tried to speak again.

This time no sound came out at all.

Lou noticed and the amused expression fell off her face.

Vincent reached into his pocket and pulled out the throat spray that Dr. Perry had given him the night before.

He sprayed some into his mouth and swallowed, then tried again.

One tiny little squeak was the only sound that came out of his mouth.

"Maybe you should go to sickbay and get checked out." Lou said with concern.

"Yeah." Vincent whispered with difficulty.

"I'll let Joe know where you went if he wakes up before you get back." Lou said seriously.

"Tell Thaelan..." Vincent whispered, then winced at a sharp pain in his throat.

"I'll tell him that you probably won't be able to work out with him this morning." Lou said quietly.

Vincent nodded, then started walking toward the door.

Lou watched him go, then shared a concerned look with Judy.

* * * * *

"Good morning, you are T'Lani's husband, are you not?" A young man asked in a friendly tone and Vincent could detect a definite Eastern European accent.

Vincent vaguely recognized him as someone he had seen before, but couldn't remember if he'd ever been formally introduced. The young man was just someone whom Vincent had briefly noticed working in the background on some of his visits to sickbay.

"I am Nurse Stepanov, but you may call me Vlad if you like. What can I do for you this morning?" The young man asked pleasantly.

"Can't talk." Vincent fought to whisper then winced as a sharp pain, like a hot needle, stabbed in his throat.

"Please get on the biobed and I will perform some preliminary scans." Vlad said as he moved to the biobed's controls.

Vincent nodded and obediently climbed up on the bed.

"I am a Nurse Practitioner... do you know what that is?" Vlad asked casually, as he looked at the scan results, then keyed in another inquiry.

Vincent shook his head.

"It simply means that I am a fully qualified nurse, but I also have some additional training so I may attend to certain minor illnesses and injuries. In a case such as yours, I am fully qualified to diagnose your condition and prescribe medication if it is warranted." Vlad said as he watched the monitor.

Vincent nodded that he understood.

"Your vocal cords are seriously swollen. But I suppose that is of no surprise to you." Vlad said, as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

Vincent shook his head.

"Are you having pain?" Vlad asked, seriously.

Vincent raised his hand and held his thumb and forefinger a centimeter apart, attempting to convey 'a little bit'.

Vlad started keying in another inquiry on the terminal at the head of the bed, then a moment later he said, "I see here that Doctor Perry has already given you something to help soothe your throat... I am afraid that there is little else that can be done at this point."

Vincent looked at the nurse curiously, wanting to ask for more information, but not wanting to further aggravate his tender throat.

"If you would like for a doctor to tell you what I have just said, I can awaken Doctor Raul. He is the physician on call for this shift and it would be no inconvenience." Nurse Stepanov said sincerely.

After a moment to consider, Vincent shook his head.

He knew that the problem with his throat obviously wasn't anything that was dangerous or life threatening. There was no logical reason that Doctor Raul should be awakened just to tell him the same thing that Doctor Perry had already said.

"Do you have need of more throat spray?" Nurse Stepanov asked seriously.

Vincent reached into his pocket and pulled out the container of throat spray that Doctor Perry had given him.

"Yes. That should last for a while. If you keep using that throat spray and don't try to use your voice, your vocal cords will probably be back to normal by tomorrow or the next day. Since only a doctor can declare you unfit for duty, you will need to come back after 07:00, Doctor Perry can assess your condition and determine your fitness for duty at that time." Nurse Stepanov said professionally.

Vincent slowly nodded, as he thought about the possibility that he might have to be off duty.

As nice as it would be to have a day off, it felt like he was getting more time off than anyone else in Deflector Control. Most of the time it was for medical reasons, but that didn't change the fact that his crew mates had to work just a little bit harder because he wasn't there to do his part.

"Unless you have further questions, you are free to go." Nurse Stepanov said as he devoted his full attention to Vincent's pensive expression.

Vincent realized that Vlad was waiting on him and quickly shook his head to indicate that he didn't have any other questions.

"Come back if you have any pain or if anything happens that concerns you." Nurse Stepanov said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then gave a 'thumbs up' for good measure.

Nurse Stepanov smiled then said in a low, conspiratorial voice, "This may not exactly be medical advice, but I believe hot chocolate would feel very good on your sore throat."

Vincent smiled at the suggestion and nodded, as he got off the bed.

"Have a good day Crewman Winters." Nurse Stepanov said respectfully, then went back to his duties.

Vincent slowly walked out of the sickbay, carefully considering what he wanted to do.

* * * * *

"Good morning Vincent. Lou said that you were up in sickbay. Did everything go okay?" Lehman asked from behind Vincent in the serving line.

Vincent knew that there was no way he could explain what happened with his nearly nonexistent voice, so he nodded his agreement.

"Is it okay if we have breakfast with you? Benny and I woke up early and you were already gone so we decided to come down and have breakfast early so we could find JonJon and ask him what's going on with the colony." Lehman rambled cheerfully.

Vincent smiled and nodded, realizing that he might not need to speak at all with Lehman around.

"Are you alright?" Benny asked with concern.

Vincent nodded casually at Benny, then moved up in the serving line.

"According to what Lou said, we should be reaching the new colony any time now." Lehman said with excitement.

"But that doesn't mean that we'll get to see it." Benny said in a tone of warning.

"I know. It could be a couple days or even a couple weeks before regular people like us get to go down. I'm just saying that it's great that we're almost there! It's not something that we're 'going to do' anymore. It's

something we're 'doing'. We're almost at our new home." Lehman said happily and was almost bouncing.

Vincent smiled at Lehman's excitement as he made his breakfast selections.

"What do you think the Deflector Control team will be doing? I mean, will Vincent be able to come and look at the new colony with us when it's time?" Lehman asked curiously.

Benny thought for a moment, then said, "I really don't know. The last time we set up a colony was a couple years ago and it was a lot different than it is now. I didn't really get to know any of the crew and... I don't have any idea of what they'll have to do."

"Oh..." Lehman said quietly, then continued, "I just hope that Vincent can come with us. That'd make it like it was his home too, if he was there with us the first time we got to see it."

Vincent considered Lehman's words as he made his way to the drink station and poured himself a large cup of hot chocolate.

"That looks pretty good, I think I'll have one too." Benny said, then proceeded to pour himself some hot chocolate.

Vincent smiled, then picked up his tray and walked to an empty table.

Benny and Lehman walked to the table a moment later, then Lehman snapping his fingers drew Vincent's attention.

"Come on Fizgig, we're over here. I got you some bacon." Lehman said cheerfully.

"Don't let JonJon find out that you're feeding Fizgig from the table." Benny said in a tone of warning as he sat down.

"I know, but I think he deserves a treat for being so good." Lehman said frankly.

"Some of the food that people eat isn't good for dogs. You wouldn't want to make him sick would you?" Benny said, as he looked down at Fizgig with concern.

"Oh, I didn't think of that. I wouldn't want him to get sick." Lehman said honestly.

Vincent took a sip from his hot chocolate, then tried to speak.

"The ship's..." were the only words that Vincent got out before his voice failed again.

Benny and Lehman looked at Vincent with concern.

Vincent tried to mouth the word 'store' to his friends, but no sound came out and they couldn't understand.

"Lou said that you were having trouble talking, but I just kind of thought that they'd have you fixed by now. I mean, they let you go." Benny said hesitantly.

Vincent shook his head and his frustration at being unable to speak was obvious.

"If you want, I could help." Lehman offered uncertainly.

Vincent looked at Lehman with question.

"You know, read your mind and kind of speak for you... It would be easy and I wouldn't mind doing it." Lehman said shyly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then nodded his agreement.

Lehman leaned over in his chair a little, then placed his fingertips on the side of Vincent's face.

Benny looked from Vincent to Lehman with question.

"Oh, okay. Vincent said that there are dog treats in the ship's store that Fizgig would probably like." Lehman said as he took his hand away.

"Oh right. I've looked at that stuff with JonJon a few times. I should have thought of that." Benny said absently as he continued to look at Vincent with concern.

"Are you going to be able to work today?" Lehman asked Vincent curiously.

Vincent shrugged and it was evident that he would like to be able to speak so he could explain.

Lehman put his hand over Vincent's for a moment, then nodded that he understood.

"He's got to go back to sickbay sometime after 07:00 so Doctor Perry can check him out. She'll decide then, if he can work or not." Lehman said to Benny quietly.

"I bet he won't be able to work if he can't talk." Benny said frankly.

Lehman was still touching Vincent's hand and looked at him with concern.

"He really wants to, because..." Lehman began to say, then felt Vincent's mind calling to him, asking him not to finish the sentence.

Lehman looked at Vincent curiously, then nodded that he understood.

"This isn't as easy as I thought it would be. I'm not only getting the things that Vincent wants to say, I'm getting the thoughts and feelings behind his words, too." Lehman said in concentration.

"So Vincent is thinking something different from what he's saying?" Benny asked curiously before taking another bite of his food.

Lehman continued concentrating as he looked at Vincent.

Finally he said, "That's not really it. I'm just not good doing telepathy this way. Usually when my people touch someone we get everything, all at once, then we take on their personality and act and think and feel just like they would. It's kind of confusing for me to be getting all of Vincent's thoughts and feelings and consciousness and subconscious and his link with T'Lani all at once and... it's all fluid..."

Vincent looked at Lehman seriously for a moment, obviously trying to make Lehman understand something.

After a moment of concentration, Lehman hesitantly asked, "Are you sure?"

Vincent nodded with certainty.

Lehman seemed to be concentrating for a moment longer, then slowly took his hand away from Vincent's arm.

"What's going on?" Benny asked curiously.

"Well, Vincent said that it would be okay if I went ahead and spoke for him like I was planning to, but I could do it the way that I'm comfortable with." Lehman said uncertainly as he looked at Vincent with question.

Vincent nodded to Lehman that he had explained it well.

"I don't get it." Benny said, then noticed that, at some point during their conversation, he had eaten all his food.

"I just did a telepathic imprint of Vincent and he said that I can go ahead and talk for him like I was going to, but instead of telepathically reading his words each time he wants to say something, I'll just use his imprint to answer the way he would if I were him... does that make any sense?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Benny chuckled and said, "I'm not really sure. I think I kinda get what you're saying, but, well, not totally."

Vincent touched Lehman's arm for a second, sending one brief, specific message.

"Right. If you'll ask Vincent a question, we'll show you how it works." Lehman said seriously.

Benny thought for a moment, then looked Vincent in the eyes as he asked, "If you don't have to work today, what are you planning to do?"

"Well, if Daddy Joe doesn't have anything for me to do, I'll probably hang around with you guys and see if there's anything I can do to help you get ready to move down to the new colony." Lehman answered in a tone of voice that was definitely Vincent's.

"Hold on guys, that's just weird." Benny said, as he held up a hand.

Vincent and Lehman both giggled at Benny's expression.

"I'm used to you two looking alike, but Lehman's voice and... I don't know... expressions? Whatever, you're different and I can tell you apart without even thinking about it. But when Lehman just did that, it was just freaky. He *was* you." Benny said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Yeah. He's a Chameloid. That's kinda what they do." Lehman said with Vincent's voice.

"He's right." Lehman then said in his own voice.

Benny looked at Lehman uncertainly.

"My people can *become* the people we're imitating. We can experience their thoughts and feelings, their hopes and dreams. We can experience what it's like to be that person, frozen in that moment in time." Lehman said carefully.

"Wow. It sounds so... big. Like you could get lost in it." Benny said in consideration.

"It can happen, but I think that the same thing can happen to any telepath. There's always a danger of going too far. Maybe that's why Chameloids do a *flash* of a person's personality instead of a full, deep scan. With a flash there's a lot less chance that I'll lose myself while I'm *being* Vincent. I guess I never really tried continuous contact before so I didn't really understand that." Lehman finished thoughtfully.

"That's just too freaky." Benny said with a shake of his head.

"It's normal for me." Lehman said with a shrug.

Vincent glanced at the wall and noticed the time.

Lehman noticed the movement, then said in Vincent's voice, "I've still got a little while before I need to go to sickbay. Let's go down to the ship's store and get Fizgig his treat."

Benny looked from Lehman to Vincent with confusion for an instant, then said, "Oh, um... yeah. And I want to pick up a camera while we're there. I need to take lots of pictures for my family."

"Well, it looks like we're all finished eating. We'd better hurry so we'll have time to go to Cyril's office. I want to be sure that JonJon isn't making himself sick by forgetting to eat." Lehman said in Vincent's voice.

Benny looked back and forth between the nearly identical pair, then nodded his agreement.

Lehman and Vincent exchanged an amused look at Benny's reaction, then all three began to gather their breakfast dishes.

* * * * *

"Hi Cyril, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but we just came up to check on JonJon." Lehman said seriously as he led the way into the room.

"He and Jenn are asleep. They worked through the night and decided that they had enough time to take a nap before we arrived." Cyril said as he looked across the room to where Jenn and JonJon were snuggled together, side by side.

All three boys smiled at the sight, noticing that both Jenn and JonJon had contented smiles on their faces as they slept.

Fizgig began to shift around in Lehman's arms and obviously wanted to get down.

Lehman wasn't sure if he should take the chance that Fizgig would wake the pair, but soon realized that Fizgig wasn't going to give him a choice.

It was difficult for Lehman to keep hold of Fizgig's squirming body long enough to get him safely to the floor.

As soon as Fizgig was released, he ran to the sleeping pair of androids and snuggled between them.

"He missed JonJon." Benny whispered quietly.

"Yeah." Lehman agreed with a contented smile at the tender sight.

"Cyril, will you make sure that JonJon and Jenn don't forget to eat?" Benny asked with concern.

"Don't worry. Roger and I will see to it." Cyril said with assurance.

Benny nodded, then looked at Lehman and Vincent with question, silently asking what they were going to do next.

Lehman looked a the clock on the wall, then said, "It's still a few minutes before Dr. Perry will be in sickbay. Why don't we go down to the ship's store and get Fizgig's treat and your camera?"

Benny glanced at Fizgig, who was now fast asleep between JonJon and Jenn.

"Yeah. That sounds like a good idea." Benny said gently.

* * * * *

"Do you think Fizgig would like this?" Lehman asked hesitantly as he held up a small bag of rawhide chips.

"Yeah. He liked his rawhide bone. I think he'd like that a lot." Benny said speculatively.

Vincent was wandering around the store, just glancing at things without any particular purpose in mind, when something caught his eye.

Even though Vincent wasn't usually interested in jewelry, the cobalt blue teardrop pendant suspended on a gold chain seemed unusually beautiful to him.

As he took the necklace down off the display rack, Benny walked to his side and asked, "Did you find something nice for T'Lani?"

Vincent smiled at the question, then slowly shook his head.

Benny remembered that Vincent couldn't speak, so he looked at the necklace again and tried to imagine who Vincent had in mind.

"Darin?" Benny asked cautiously.

Vincent's smile got bigger as he shook his head again.

Benny's eyes narrowed in concentration as he began to take the guessing game as a personal challenge.

"Daddy Joe?" Benny asked slowly.

Vincent was obviously enjoying the game and gave Benny a big toothy grin as he shook his head again.

Benny's gaze became distant as he muttered, "It's not for me or Lehman."

Vincent shook his head, trying to restrain his grin.

"Lawrence?" Benny asked speculatively.

Vincent's grin broke through again as he shook his head.

Benny went silent as he tried to consider who else Vincent might want to buy a gift for.

"Okay, I got Fizgig some rawhide chips and a squeaky toy for when he gets down to the colony." Lehman said happily as he approached the pair.

Benny glanced at the selections, then said, "Yeah. I think he'll like those."

"You should buy that Vincent. Deacon will love it." Lehman said casually as he looked at the necklace in Vincent's hand.

"Deacon?" Benny asked as he looked at Vincent with question.

"Yeah. The color of the necklace would look great with his eyes." Lehman said as he moved a little bit closer to see the pendant better.

Benny thought back to the one time he had seen Deacon on the comm, then looked at the necklace consideringly.

After a moment, Benny finally said, "Yeah, I should have thought of that."

"Let's pay for this stuff so we can get Vincent to sickbay. It's already after 07:00." Lehman said as he looked at the clock on the wall behind the checkout counter.

"I've got mine." Benny said as he held up a small digital camera.

Vincent held up the necklace.

"Let's go." Lehman said and led the way.

* * * * *

"Good morning Vincent. Nurse Stepanov told me that you were in earlier." Dr. Perry said cheerfully as she gestured toward the first biobed.

Vincent automatically climbed up on the bed and waited for her diagnosis.

After a moment of looking over the readings, Dr. Perry looked at Vincent and quietly said, "While you were sleeping, your vocal cords had a chance

to completely relax and the swelling became more pronounced. Believe it or not, this isn't a bad thing. It's just the natural healing process after putting excessive strain on your voice for a number of hours. I'd guess that by this time tomorrow, you'll be completely back to normal."

Vincent nodded that he understood, then looked at Lehman expectantly, hoping he would ask the question that was foremost in his mind.

"Is he fit for duty?" Lehman asked carefully.

Dr. Perry considered for a moment, then said, "There is no medical reason that he should be declared unfit for duty. Of course, it will be up to his commanding officer if he can make accommodations for Vincent's inability to speak."

An expression of relief came over Vincent's face at the declaration.

"Thank you Doctor Perry. Vincent really didn't want to be declared unfit for duty again." Lehman said shyly.

"I could tell from his expression." Dr. Perry said with a small smile.

Vincent looked at Lehman with an urging expression, then glanced at Dr. Perry with question.

"Can Vincent have a minute to talk with T'Lani?" Lehman asked cautiously, not entirely sure if that's what Vincent wanted him to ask.

"I'm sorry, she's getting the last of the supplies ready for transport to the colony site. We're going to have to set up an entire medical facility with only our standard stock of supplies." Dr. Perry said frankly.

"No problem. He can talk to her through their bond, it just would have been nice if..." Lehman stopped at the feeling of Vincent's hand on his arm.

"Oh, right. Sorry. It's hard for me not to say everything that's on your mind." Lehman said shyly.

"You three go on now. We have quite a bit to do today." Dr. Perry said with amusement.

Vincent hopped down off the biobed, then noticed Lehman's look of apology directed at him.

Without hesitation, Vincent draped a casual arm around Lehman's shoulders and gave him a quick hug.

Benny smiled at the action, and could tell by the look on Lehman's face that, even without telepathy, he would have understood what the hug meant.

* * * * *

"Good morning guys. You're up awfully early this morning." Joe said cheerfully before taking a sip from his cup of coffee.

"Yeah. I think Lehman and I were excited about arriving at the colony today and couldn't sleep. And Vincent always gets up early." Benny finished with a shrug.

Joe smiled at the statement, then asked, "Would you three like to join us for breakfast?"

Before Benny could answer, Lehman said, "We already had breakfast, but Vincent needs to ask you something before you go to work."

Joe's only response was to look at Vincent with question.

"Um, I'm sure that Lou already told you that when Vincent woke up, he couldn't talk." Lehman rambled.

"She said he was going to sickbay. Is everything alright?" Joe asked with concern, just realizing that Vincent wasn't speaking at all.

"Yeah. Dr. Perry says that Vincent is just fine and completely fit for duty..." Lehman said seriously as he looked into Joe's eyes.

"...but..." Joe prompted, pretty sure that he already knew what was coming next.

"...but he can't talk, so it's up to you, if he can work today or not." Lehman said, then before Joe could say anything, he quickly continued, "Vincent really wants to work, and I already said that I can stay with him and talk for him if he needs me to."

Joe smiled peacefully at Lehman's willingness to help Vincent by speaking for him. It also made him proud to know that Vincent wanted to be allowed to work, even though he had a legitimate excuse to be off work for the day.

"Actually, Vincent's inability to speak wouldn't be much of an obstacle. We already have a procedure in place for accommodating a hearing impaired member of the team. That could easily be adapted for this situation. There is only one problem..." Joe trailed off.

Vincent looked at Joe with question, obviously anxious to know what the problem was.

"What is it?" Lehman asked in Vincent's 'mature' voice.

Joe smiled at the action, then said, "Vincent would have been off duty today anyway."

All three boys, plus Darin and Thaelan who were sitting at the table, looked at Joe with question.

"We should arrive at the colony any minute now. The standard procedure for our department in this situation is to do a full systems check, then maintain a skeleton crew while we are in orbit. I was thinking that Thaelan and I could split the shift, each taking four hours. Darin and Vincent would take communicators and be 'on call' for their regular duty shifts." Joe said frankly.

"Why?" Darin asked before he could think better of it.

"Because while the ship is in orbit of a peaceful planet, someone just has to be manning the station in case something unexpected comes up. The rest of the team is on call if they're needed for anything, but realistically, after the systems have all been checked, there's nothing left to do. We'd be stuck staring at each other, shift after shift, until we're ready to leave orbit." Joe said to the group.

"And we will likely be in orbit of the new colony for weeks." Thaelan added with a nod of approval at the plan.

"Right. There's still the possibility that we might be needed to do something to help get the colony settled, but realistically, we can't predict if and when our help will be needed. We just have to wait until someone calls on us." Joe said frankly.

"It sounds like you've been through a situation like this before." Darin said speculatively.

Joe smiled as he said, "Rarely is there a mission that requires the services of every department on the ship. It would be a colossal waste of man power to have everyone on every shift sitting around with nothing to do. So when we have some down time like this, we take the opportunity to enjoy a little time off."

Everyone around the table seemed to be in agreement that it was a good way to deal with the impending 'down time'.

"So at 08:00, we will take our stations, do our system checks, then if nothing needs to be done, Darin and Vincent will be on call for the rest of the day." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent nodded his approval of the arrangement.

"Oh, and Vincent." Joe said as an aside.

Vincent looked at Joe with question.

"When you sign onto your station, go to the accessibility options and set it up for text alert functions. That way you can text message anything you want to say to any of us almost as quickly as saying it aloud." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent nodded that he heard and was happy to know that, if the need should arise, he would be able to perform his duties.

The change in the hum of the ship's engines drew everyone's attention.

After a moment of silence, Benny quietly asked, "Are we there?"

There was another long moment of silence before Joe quietly said, "Yes. I think so. Let's go."

Everyone seemed to be in agreement and after the group that had been eating had finished clearing their plates, the entire group headed to deflector control,

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"Is it okay if we hang around here for a few minutes? You know, just to find out what's going on?" Benny asked uncertainly.

"Of course. I had a feeling that you guys would be around at least until Vincent was free to leave." Joe said as the group walked off the turbo lift.

Benny smiled at the statement, then casually draped an arm around Lehman's shoulders.

A momentary look of surprise came over Lehman's face.

Vincent noticed, then watched as the expression became one of wonder and finally absolute peace.

Tears began to glitter in Lehman's eyes, and Vincent had to force himself to turn his attention back to where he was walking.

As the group walked into Deflector Control, Vincent considered what little he knew of Lehman's past.

Vincent realized that Lehman had spent a portion of his life, years of his life, knowing without a doubt that he didn't matter to anyone, anywhere in the universe.

He contrasted that against his own life and suddenly understood that no matter how bad things had ever been with his family, there was never a time when he had to wonder if he was loved.

Even after his mother's death, his Daddy Joe and a lot of other people had been there for him. He never had to experience the feeling of absolute solitude and isolation that Lehman had endured for years.

"Console status?" Joe asked quietly, breaking Vincent out of his distant gaze.

Vincent blinked, then hurried to station three to sign on.

He initiated the level two diagnostic that he wanted, then went to the accessibility menu and turned on the text feature that Joe had told him about.

After receiving the results of the diagnostic, Vincent keyed his message into the text area on his console.

A strange sound, something like a little bell ringing sounded from the main.

Vincent turned to look and saw his text message, "All consoles operational." displayed like a movie subtitle on the large screen of the main.

"It looks like you don't need me after all." Lehman said as he looked at the message.

From the tone of Lehman's voice, it was obvious that there was no profound, deeper meaning to his words. It was just a casual comment spoken in the moment. But the words themselves caused Vincent to react.

Vincent stood from his station and walked to Lehman's side.

Lehman looked at Vincent with question, surprised that he didn't already know what Vincent wanted.

Vincent took one of Lehman's hands and held it firmly as he telepathically sent, //I need you Lehman. All of us need you. We will always need you because you're part of our family.//

Lehman was shocked as much by the telepathic declaration as he was by the emotions that boiled underneath the words.

"Whatever he just said, goes for me too." Benny said quietly from Lehman's side.

Lehman looked up at Benny with tears in his eyes.

"Systems and sub-systems show all clear." Judy said from station two.

"Power systems all green." Darin called from station one.

"Lou and Judy, have a good day and enjoy your rest. Darin, if you'll grab a communicator, you're free to go." Joe said with a smile.

Darin walked to the rack of communicators and casually said, "I've got one."

Thaelan nodded that he had logged it out under Darin's name.

"Call if you need me for anything." Darin said, then left the room.

"Vincent, if you'll take a data padd and log it on as a tablet workstation, we'll be able to call you if we need you for anything and you can text message us if you need something." Joe said professionally.

Vincent looked at Joe curiously for a moment, then took out a data padd and tried to log it in as Joe had said.

After a moment, Joe walked to his side and said, "You'll need to back out, you're in the wrong shell."

Vincent puzzled over what Joe was talking about for a moment, then held the padd out where Joe could access it himself.

"The word processor is the default shell of the padd. It's actually a tablet computer that is capable of performing other functions, most people just don't need them." Joe said, as he worked through different menus and finally brought up a screen on the padd that Vincent had never seen before.

"This mode will work best for you to use while you're unable to speak. You can either text message us or use the text-to-speech program to send us a message using a computer generated voice." Joe said, as he pointed out the various features.

Vincent looked at the controls, then quickly typed something.

A moment later the computer generated voice of the padd said, "Wow."

Joe chuckled at the response, then said, "Why don't you three go see what you can find out about what's going on?"

Vincent typed on his padd, then held it out as it said, "Okay."

Joe chuckled and shook his head with amusement.

"Let's go see if JonJon's awake yet." Benny said happily.

Vincent nodded his agreement, then pressed a button on his padd.

"Okay."

* * * * *

The group had spent most of their time wandering around the recreation deck talking to the various people they encountered.

There was an atmosphere of such joy and anticipation that it was almost like being at a festival.

JonJon and Jenn were now awake and once again hard at work trying to make the job of settling the colonists as simple as possible.

Although Vincent could use the padd he had been carrying to speak if he needed to, he found that it was actually better to have Lehman speak for him. The computer generated voice of the padd couldn't convey any sort of emotion.

A tone from the padd that Vincent had been carrying drew his attention.

He quickly typed in "Crewman Winters here.", then pressed the button to transmit.

"*Crewman Winters, please come to my office, immediately.*" Captain Byrne said firmly.

Vincent typed, then transmitted, "Yes sir."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Lehman offered quietly, fairly certain that Vincent would refuse.

Rather than type his response, Vincent nodded.

"I'll stay down here and see if I can find out when we're going to be able to go down to the colony." Benny said, seriously.

Vincent nodded, then thought of something that he wanted to say.

He lifted his padd to type, but before he could finish, Benny said, "I'll be sure to watch after JonJon and Fizgig."

Vincent chuckled as he lowered his padd.

"Go on, the captain's waiting."

* * * * *

Vincent walked into the captain's office with Lehman at his side.

The captain looked at Lehman curiously for a moment, but before he could say anything Lehman hurried to explain, "Captain Byrne, Vincent can't

speak right now. His voice is completely gone, so I came with him to talk for him."

Captain Byrne looked at the two boys for a moment longer, then said, "Very well. Crewman Winters, a situation has arisen on Earth involving your Clan, an attack of some sort. I can't say that I know very much about what is happening, but I have been ordered to break orbit and immediately conduct you back to Earth at the best possible speed."

Vincent's mind whirled as he considered the statement. Thoughts of Lawrence immediately filled his mind as his heart began to race.

"What about the colonists?" Lehman asked quietly.

Vincent was surprised by the question, but then realized that Lehman was right. If they left now, the colonists might have to wait for another month before they could be settled into their new home.

"It is unfortunate that things have worked out this way, but Starfleet Command believes that it is of paramount importance that Crewman Winters be delivered to Earth with all due haste. There is also a security concern... apparently, we have no way of knowing if the group that attacked Clan Short might have operatives among the crew of the *Yorktown* or the colonists." Captain Byrne said gravely.

Vincent looked at Captain Byrne helplessly, not even knowing what question he would ask if he had his voice.

"Captain, will you please not do anything until I get back? I have an idea of how we can do this without having to make the colonists wait." Lehman said urgently as he turned toward the door.

"Please wait a moment." Captain Byrne said seriously, then keyed his comm.

Lieutenant Simms, will you come to my office?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"*Yes, Sir.*" Lieutenant Simms answered immediately.

At Lehman's curious look, Captain Byrne said, "The people who might want to cause harm to Crewman Winters might easily mistake you for him. It will be necessary for security to accompany both of you for the time being."

Lehman reluctantly nodded his agreement as Lieutenant Simms hurried into the room.

"Lieutenant Simms, will you please conduct this young man where he needs to go? When you return, we can see to finding these two young men more permanent escorts." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Simms said professionally.

"Come on." Lehman said urgently, then led the way out of the room.

Vincent watched helplessly as they left, then turned to look at Captain Byrne with question.

"Perhaps we should attempt to contact your clan to get a sense of what is going on." Captain Byrne asked carefully.

Vincent gratefully nodded his agreement.

Captain Byrne pressed the button on his comm panel, then said, "Lieutenant Patterson, will you please establish a secure diplomatic transmission directed to Clan Short headquarters on Earth?"

"*Right away sir.*" Debbie said quickly.

Vincent tried to remain calm as he thought about Lawrence and all the Clan members who had been willing to act as his fathers.

"*I have your call, Sir.*" Debbie said quickly, then the screen of the captain's terminal changed to the Clan Short crest.

Captain Byrne turned the screen so Vincent could see it easily, then opened the transmission.

A boy whom Vincent didn't recognize was on the screen, looking extremely serious and there was a look of intense ferocity in his eyes.

"I am Captain Leland Byrne of the USS *Yorktown*. I am calling on behalf of Crewman Vincent Winters who is here with me, but due to a medical condition, is unable to speak. Could you assess us of the situation?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"All hell is breaking loose here!"

Chapter 38

The boy reached to do something off screen and Vincent noticed that he was in a wheelchair. Now Vincent was certain that he hadn't met this person before. Rory was the only Clan member that he knew who was in a wheelchair.

"Perhaps if you could assess us of your situation, we might be able to..." Captain Byrne began to say when he was cut off.

"*No time to talk. There are lives at stake here. Vincent, Cory wants you back on Earth now.*" the boy said firmly, then the Clan Short crest filled the screen.

Captain Byrne glanced at Vincent for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision.

Vincent watched helplessly as Captain Byrne keyed the comm, then said, "Commander M'Butu, come to my office immediately."

"*Yes sir.*"

The captain looked at Vincent and said, "Regardless of our feelings or those of the colonists, we have been given our orders."

For the first time since he woke up, Vincent was actually glad that he was unable to speak. He didn't have words to express the frustration that he was feeling, knowing that he was the cause for the colonists to have to leave their new home when they were close enough to touch it.

"Crewman Winters... Vincent. We need to trust in the judgment of Starfleet command and do as they say, otherwise they won't be able to trust us when it is necessary." Captain Byrne said in a sympathetic voice.

Vincent considered the words for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"I would suggest that we contact Admiral Morrow for further information, but he was in a similar state to your friend at Clan Short headquarters." Captain Byrne said frankly.

Movement from the office doorway drew Vincent and the Captain's attention.

Both expected to see Commander M'Butu, but instead were surprised to see Lehman, JonJon, Jenn and Lieutenant Simms.

"Captain, if you'd be willing to listen, I may have a way so that Vincent can go back to Earth without making the colonists have to leave." Lehman said quickly.

Commander M'Butu walked into the captain's office and looked around curiously.

"Very well Lehman. Please continue." Captain Byrne said with interest.

"Well, I was thinking that Starfleet doesn't really need the *Yorktown* to go back to Earth, just Vincent. So what if we asked the Soleen-Avalla to take him so the *Yorktown* can stay here and let the colonists move into their new home?" Lehman said quickly.

Everyone watched silently as the captain considered the question.

Finally the Captain shook his head and said, "The Soleen-Avalla have been more than generous in letting us have their colony. It would be the height of ingratitude for us to ask them for additional favors when it is within our power to do this for ourselves."

"Captain." Jenn said timidly.

Captain Byrne turned his attention to her and raised an eyebrow in question.

"The Soleen-Avalla empire would like to volunteer one of our ships to conduct Vincent back to Earth. This would not put you or the Federation under any obligation to us, on the contrary, it would be an honor to be of service to one of the Trach Manjai." Jenn said seriously.

"And if Vincent is on the Soleen-Avalla ship, you don't have to worry about whoever might be trying to hurt him." Lehman added quickly.

Captain Byrne smiled at Lehman, then said, "Jenn, perhaps it would be prudent if you contacted your government to be sure that they are willing to follow through on the commitments you are making for them."

"Captain Byrne, I am authorized to speak on behalf of my people and they will stand behind any decision that I make. But that doesn't matter in this instance. This offer was made by the counsel of elders, I simply relayed the message." Jenn said in a dignified voice.

"Very well. Then I will contact Starfleet command and propose this to them... and please thank your elders for me." Captain Byrne said as he adjusted the monitor on his desk.

"Starfleet is wanting us to go to Earth right away. We're trying to fix it so the colonists can still move into their new home." Lehman said quietly to Commander M'Butu at his side.

Captain Byrne glanced at the pair and smiled before pressing the comm.

"Please establish communications with Admiral Morrow." Captain Byrne said professionally.

"*Right away sir.*" Debbie said quickly.

"Vincent, do you think it would be okay if I went with you to Earth? You know, so I could talk for you?" Lehman asked hopefully.

It was obvious to everyone in the room that Vincent was uncertain and likely to refuse.

"It may be a long long time before I get the chance to see Earth and I'd really like to. And besides, if I stayed here I'd have to have security following me around for who knows how long." Lehman said, then glanced at Lieutenant Simms at his other side.

Vincent looked into Lehman's eyes, then slowly nodded his agreement.

"Maybe I should go with you too. The Trach Manjai should probably stick together." JonJon said reluctantly.

Vincent shook his head and Lehman automatically spoke the words Vincent would have said if he had been able.

"Cyril needs you to be here. The colony needs you." Lehman said firmly.

Jenn turned to look at JonJon, and even though she didn't say a word aloud, both Lehman and Vincent could see, 'I need you.' written in her expression.

"*Admiral Morrow for you Captain.*" Debbie said professionally, ending any possibility for JonJon to dispute Lehman's words.

Before the captain could say a word, Admiral Morrow said, "*The Soleen-Avalla have just contacted Starfleet command and requested that they be allowed the great honor of ferrying Crewman Winters back to Earth. I have accepted their kind offer. Crewman Winters is to return to Earth at best possible speed and the Yorktown will remain in orbit of the new colony until such time that the colonists can sustain themselves or be resupplied.*"

Captain Byrne was taken aback by the Admiral's abrupt demeanor.

"Yes sir." Captain Byrne responded with military formality.

"*Starfleet out*." Admiral Morrow said firmly, then ended the transmission.

After a moment of silence, Commander M'Butu quietly said, "Something serious must be going on. I've never seen Admiral Morrow behave like that before."

Captain Byrne slowly nodded, then said, "Yes, quite. But it seems that those involved are too busy to share any details with those of us who are too far away to be of any help. They are simply telling us what needs to be done... and it is our job to do it. Commander, you may return to your duties. Jenn, whenever you are ready, you may call for your ship so Crewman Winters may be underway."

Vincent moved to Lehman's side, then discretely placed his hand on top of Lehman's.

After a moment of concentration, Lehman glanced at Vincent, then nodded that he understood.

"Captain, Vincent needs to do one thing before he leaves. It'll just take a minute or two." Lehman said hesitantly.

Captain Byrne looked at Vincent to find a pleading expression in his eyes.

"The trip you are about to embark upon will take a number of weeks. I'm sure a few minutes won't make a significant difference." Captain Byrne said more gently.

"Captain?" Jenn said hesitantly.

"Yes?" Captain Byrne asked as he turned his attention to her.

"Our technology is a little more advanced than yours. We are anticipating arrival at Earth in two Starfleet standard days." Jenn said carefully.

"Two days?" Captain Byrne asked in astonishment.

Jenn slowly nodded, then said, "The ship is within transportal range and will be ready to depart when Trach Manja Vincent is aboard."

T'Lani walked into the Captain's office and directly to Vincent's side.

Everyone watched as Vincent looked up into T'Lani's eyes, obviously communicating telepathically.

T'Lani and Vincent moved as one, each putting a hand gently to the side of the other's face.

The touch was a feather light caress, moving in slow motion. When all movement stopped, they were in the standard position of a mind meld.

No one in the room made a sound as, for that one moment taken out of time, Vincent and T'Lani became one being.

When the mind meld had finished, both moved in unison again, slowly moving their hands away.

T'Lani bent down slightly as Vincent stretched so he could give his wife a firm hug.

Vincent turned his head and his lips met T'Lani's.

The kiss was slow and firm and filled with emotion. It was obvious to all present that the kiss was not a display of lust or passion but a physical expression of their absolute devotion to each other.

When the kiss was finished. Vincent reluctantly let go of his wife, then turned to face Jenn and JonJon.

"We're ready to go." Lehman said quietly as he once again moved to Vincent's side.

* * * * *

When the shower of sparkles of the transportal beam cleared, Vincent and Lehman noticed that they were once again on the bridge of the Soleen-Avalla ship.

{"I had not expected to see you again so soon. Welcome aboard."} Captain Rasch said cheerfully.

{"Thank you Captain."} Lehman said with a smile at Captain Rasch and Treep.

After a moment, Lehman thought to add, {"Vincent can't talk right now so I'm coming with him to speak for him."}

{"Trach Manja Lehman, you are always welcomed aboard my ship. Once we are underway, would the two of you be interested in joining me for the morning meal?} Captain Rasch asked cheerfully.

{"Morning? Oh yeah, I guess your ship's time runs a little different from the *Yorktown*... um, sure. I'm ready for lunch and Vincent is always hungry."} Lehman finished with a teasing smile at Vincent.

A roll of his eyes was Vincent's only response.

Captain Rasch gave a booming laugh from deep in his chest, then turned his attention to the holographic display in the middle of the room.

{"Ship. Move us to the edge of the system at maximum impulse speed and let me know when the complete course to Earth is plotted."} Captain Rasch said professionally.

{"Yes Captain."} The ship's AI unit said formally, then in a notably softer voice it continued, {"Welcome back Trach Manja Vincent and Trach Manja Lehman."}

Lehman giggled at the reverent tone in the ship's computer generated voice and responded, {"Thank you ship. It's good to be back."}

{"Captain. I have programmed the growth patterns for the crystals we will need. Would you like to review them before I begin?"} Treep asked from a small console at the side of the room.

{"If Ship has confirmed that the patterns are correct, who am I to argue? Proceed."} Captain Rasch said with a touch of humor.

Treep nodded, then began working his controls.

Captain Rasch noticed the curious looks on Vincent and Lehman's faces.

{"When we reach your Earth, we will need to be able to communicate with your people. Treep is growing translation crystals for each of us."} Captain Rasch said simply.

Vincent thought about the words as Lehman asked, {"Growing crystals? I don't understand how that works."}

Before Captain Rasch could explain, the ship's AI said, {"We are now leaving the Haventauk solar system. The course has been calculated and is being verified by Central AI."}

{"Project the proposed course."} Captain Rasch said seriously as he devoted his full attention to the holographic display.

Both boys looked carefully at the hologram which displayed a thin tube running through the universe from the colony site, all the way back to Earth.

After a moment of looking, Captain Rasch began to nod as he said, {"Yes. This appears to be the most direct route. As soon as you receive confirmation, take us to maximum sustainable warp."}

{"It will be so."} Ship said seriously.

After another moment of looking over the projected course, Captain Rasch said, {"I suppose that is all we can do for the moment. Let us go and have our morning meal together."}

Vincent and Lehman glanced at each other, making sure that neither had any objection, then they moved as one to follow Captain Rasch.

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{"It appears that Taryn was made aware of your presence."} Captain Rasch said as they entered the dining room.

The boys looked at the variety of foods lavishly displayed in the center of the large hexagonal table.

There was a centerpiece comprised of many different leafy and flowering plants. Surrounding the display were many different dishes of prepared foods.

{"He never makes a meal this nice for me."} Captain Rasch added more quietly as he moved to one of the chairs.

Vincent and Lehman exchanged an amused look, then followed the captain's example and took seats at the table.

Lehman noticed Vincent's glance toward the door and automatically asked, {"Will Treep be eating with us?"}

{"No. Either Treep or I should remain on the bridge during our voyage. It's less of a necessity while we are in our own area of space, but while traveling outside our system anything could conceivably happen and we need to be on the alert."} Captain Rasch said seriously.

Both boys were a little surprised at the Captain's sudden display of professionalism.

As casual as Captain Rasch liked to behave, there was no denying that he was a starship captain and very aware of his duty.

{"Please make your food selections and begin. We do not have any ceremonies associated with dining."} Captain Rasch said as he began to help himself.

Vincent and Lehman shared an amused glance as both remembered similar words while dining on the Gorn ship.

After a moment for all three to begin eating, Captain Rasch said, {"Earlier you seemed to have questions about the translation crystals."}

Lehman and Vincent both nodded.

{"As you may have noticed, much of our technology is based on the crystalline structure. Over the past few centuries we have worked to refine

the technique so that we can manipulate the formation of crystals down to the atomic level. From what I know of Federation technology, our crystals function very much like your isolinear circuitry but are far smaller and much more efficient. When we have need of something like a translation device, we simply grow crystals embedded with the information patterns that we will need."} Captain Rasch said, then began to eat again as the boys thought about what he had said.

Lehman seemed to be a little bit lost, so Vincent put his hand over Lehman's briefly to share his understanding.

{"Oh, okay. So the facets of the crystals function something like on/off switches allowing light to either pass or reflect? And that ends up working a lot like the zeros and ones of binary programming?"} Lehman asked cautiously.

{"Yes Trach Manja Lehman. That is the underlying principle of all Soleen-Avalla technology..."} Captain Rasch said, then seemed to consider something.

Vincent and Lehman waited as Captain Rasch finally found the words.

{"Much of our technology is not unlike that the Soleen arrived with... the technology of the Gorn. But in the past one hundred years, the influence of the Avalla has changed the technology into something unique."}

{"The Avalla beliefs in the patterns of nature have been incorporated into everything in our society, including our programming. Most, if not all of the technological advances of the past century can be attributed to the addition of that simplifying and organizing philosophy that seems to come naturally to the Avalla."} Captain Rasch said distantly.

{"Do you still feel bad for the way your people treated the Avalla?"} Lehman asked, then received a disapproving glance from Vincent.

Captain Rasch noticed and considered for a moment before answering.

{"Yes, of course I do feel some sense of that. I'm sure most Soleen do. But what I was just thinking is how fortunate our people are for having found each other. It's a little overwhelming to think about how two such completely different species at completely different levels of social development could have such a beneficial influence on each other."}

Lehman smiled and said, {"Completely different, like two different pieces of a puzzle. But when you're fit together, you become something else. Something bigger."}

Vincent poked Lehman in the side, then gave him a cheeky grin.

{"What? I'm a Trach Manja. I'm supposed to say philosophical stuff like that. Right?"} Lehman said defensively.

Vincent smiled and nodded.

Captain Rasch chuckled at the exchange, then went back to eating his meal.

* * * * *

{"I must go to the bridge so Treep can have his morning meal. Would you like some time to relax in the lounging hall?"} Captain Rasch asked as he stood from his place at the table.

Lehman patted his belly and said, {"After a meal like that, lounging is about all I'd be able to do. Your cook did a great job."}

Vincent nodded his wholehearted agreement as he also stood.

As Captain Rasch began to walk toward the door he said, {"I will convey our appreciation to the cook. I know that he will be pleased to know that the Trach Manjai enjoyed his efforts."}

* * * * *

"Where do you want to go?" Lehman asked as the pair of boys stood just inside the door of the lounging hall.

Vincent shrugged, then casually gestured to one of the platforms.

"Works for me." Lehman said cheerfully and led the way.

Vincent followed a little more slowly as a feeling of apprehension washed over him.

* * * * *

Lehman and Vincent took their places on the platform and both laid back to bask in the artificial sunlight.

After a few minutes of silence, Lehman turned slightly to look at Vincent and asked, "Is there something wrong?"

After a moment of consideration, Vincent shrugged.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Vincent rolled his eyes at the question.

Lehman chuckled and said, "You know what I mean, like telepathically."

Vincent shrugged again.

Lehman wasn't sure if that meant Vincent wanted to talk or not, but decided to make telepathic contact so he could be sure.

Hesitantly, Lehman reached over and put his hand over Vincent's.

He had expected to receive a telepathic message from Vincent explaining what was wrong, or at the very least a message telling him that he didn't feel like talking.

But what Lehman found instead was a tangle of undefined emotions, twisting and churning.

After a moment to examine the turbulent collection of intertwined feelings, Lehman speculated, "Do you not feel like talking about stuff because you don't know what you're feeling or why?"

Vincent looked Lehman in the eyes and slowly nodded.

"And you're not sure if you really want to know." Lehman continued uncertainly.

Reluctantly, Vincent nodded again.

Both boys sat for a moment, thinking and considering.

Finally Lehman said, "If you don't talk about it, you'll probably just forget about it after a while."

Vincent slowly nodded.

"But that won't fix whatever's wrong." Lehman said in an apologetic voice.

Vincent let out a sigh of resignation and nodded again.

"Do you want me to leave you alone so you can sort it out for yourself?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Vincent moved his hand over Lehman's as an answer.

* * * * *

"Let's see what you've got here..." Lehman said as he carefully examined the collection of emotions before him.

"This big mess of anxiety seems to be hooked to some memories. Let's see what that is." Lehman said as he mentally reached out to explore the emotions.

Before Lehman could open the memory to experience it, he felt Vincent holding him back.

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked with concern.

//It's bad.// Vincent sent telepathically.

Lehman puzzled over the exceedingly simple response.

//That's some memories of my dad when he was screaming at my brother. It's really really bad and I'd be ashamed if you saw it.// Vincent said honestly.

Lehman pulled away from the collection of memories, then asked, "Do you know what that has to do with why you're feeling worried now?"

//Not really. That's all over with. My dad is dead, Lawrence is happy and I already said I'm sorry.// Vincent said slowly.

"You're sorry? Why do you need to be sorry?" Lehman asked curiously.

//It doesn't matter. That has nothing to do with this.// Vincent said as all his mental defenses seemed to instinctively reinforce.

Lehman felt Vincent's mental tension increase and decided that it would be best if he didn't pursue that line of questioning.

"Vincent, there are memory links all over this thing. If you don't want me looking at those memories, can you tell me if the memories have anything in common?" Lehman asked as he examined the knot of emotions that seemed to be growing.

//No... they're kind of all over the place. Some are about when I was at home with my parents. Some are from when I was at school...// Vincent trailed off with a tone of reluctance.

"You said that the one bunch made you feel ashamed. Do the others make you feel that way too?" Lehman asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Vincent responded, //No. They make me feel all kinds of things.//

"What kind of things?" Lehman asked in a leading tone.

//I feel stupid, little... angry...//

"What else?" Lehman prompted, feeling that Vincent was close to discovering the root cause of his anxiety.

//...lonely...// Vincent said in a mental whisper.

Lehman withdrew his hand from Vincent's, needing to be away from Vincent's tumult of emotions.

After a peaceful moment of quiet in his own mind, Lehman began to take an objective look at what he had experienced while telepathically linked with Vincent.

Memories from throughout Vincent's life.

A collection of powerful emotions gathered and feeding on each other to grow stronger...

...linked to memories...

...from throughout his life...

Suddenly Lehman realized the connection.

"Vincent, would you try to do something for me?" Lehman asked as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

Without hesitation, Vincent nodded.

"Imagine something for me. Imagine that for some reason Cory calls you and wants you to go to Vulcan and wait for him there." Lehman said seriously.

Vincent considered the words, then nodded as he began to imagine that they were on their way to Vulcan instead of Earth.

Lehman gently laid his hand over Vincent's, just to get a peek at the collection of emotions in Vincent's mind.

He quickly withdrew his hand and smiled as he realized that he knew what Vincent's problem was and that it wouldn't be difficult to fix.

The questioning look on Vincent's face snapped Lehman out of his thoughts.

"You're scared of going back to Earth." Lehman said frankly.

Vincent looked at Lehman with confusion at the unusual statement.

"You haven't shared a lot of your past with me, but I know enough of the basics of your life that I think I can understand." Lehman said in thought.

A momentary look of fear came into Vincent's expression before he carefully hid it.

Lehman smiled at the action, then said, "It's nothing big."

Vincent seemed uncertain, but tried to relax.

"You know all that stuff about your dad and Lawrence? That has something to do with it." Lehman said slowly.

Vincent hesitantly nodded.

"And do you remember when you were in school, how you always felt like you were alone and that nobody liked you?" Lehman asked carefully.

The expression on Vincent's face told Lehman more clearly than telepathic contact that he'd just hit a tender spot.

"Sorry, but that has to do with what you're feeling right now too." Lehman said seriously.

Vincent placed his hand over Lehman's long enough to ask, //So I'm afraid that if I go back to Earth, things will be like that again?//

Lehman thought about the question, then said, "Maybe a little. But I think the thing that's really eating you up is that you're afraid that when you get back to Earth, you'll become the person that you were when you lived there before."

Vincent's eyes went wide at the statement.

"You see yourself as a good person now. You like yourself. But since you've been on the *Yorktown*, you haven't had any of the influences or triggers that used to make you react in certain ways on Earth. You're afraid that when you go back to Earth, you'll suddenly become the angry, lonely boy who used to eat his lunch all by himself, sitting on the back steps of the school." Lehman said frankly.

Vincent's look became distant as he considered Lehman's words.

"Vincent. I'm here with you. I won't let that happen." Lehman said as he looked into Vincent's eyes and drew his attention back to the present.

The look of question in Vincent's eyes prompted Lehman to continue.

"How about this? I'll make a promise to you right here and now. If I see you starting to change back into the mean old Vincent that you used to be, I'll bring you back here to the ship and snap you out of it." Lehman said seriously.

Vincent raised his eyebrows, clearly conveying, 'Really?'

Lehman nodded and said, "I like the person who you are and I'll protect you however I can... and before you say it, I already know that you'd do exactly the same thing for me."

Vincent smiled and nodded that he would.

"Good. I'm glad that's settled. Now lay back and let's enjoy our lounging. We've had way too much seriousness for one day." Lehman said as he rolled onto his back and closed his eyes.

A feeling of movement on his hand a moment later caused Lehman's eyes to snap open.

The contact only lasted an instant and carried one simple message.

//Thanks.//

* * * * *

As Vincent rested back, he thought about what Lehman had said.

No matter how much he had changed since leaving Earth, he knew that the person that he used to be was still inside him.

Knowing the depth of the feelings that he used to have and all the horrible things he used to do and say, he just couldn't find the ability to trust himself.

...But he trusted Lehman.

* * * * *

Vincent heard a small voice laughing very near to him.

Slowly he opened his eyes and was surprised to find that instead of looking up at the ceiling of the lounging hall, he was looking up into a clear, blue sky.

The sound of giggles drew Vincent's attention away from the sky and he turned to see a small fluffy creature that looked something like a rabbit. It was an odd combination of colors, like swirled brown and pink.

Vincent sat up abruptly and looked around.

He was in a grassy meadow surrounded by trees in the distance.

There was no sign of the lounging hall, no sign of the Soleen-Avalla ship, and most importantly, no sign of Lehman.

"Where am I?" Vincent asked, then marveled at his ability to speak.

"You're here silly. Here is here." The little floppy eared rabbit looking thing chuckled.

"Um, yeah. Thanks." Vincent said as he slowly got to his feet and started to look around.

"Wanna play? Wanna play? Wanna play?" The little furry animal chanted as it bounced around Vincent's feet.

"No. I don't think so. Do you know if there are any other people like me around here?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Nuh-uh. You're the onlyest person like you I ever seen." The little thing said cheerfully.

"Onlyest huh?" Vincent asked, then started looking around to see if there was any sign of a town or road anywhere near by.

"Uh-huh. You're big and funny looking. I like you. Wanna play? Wanna play? Wanna play?"

Vincent took in a slow breath to brace himself before answering.

"Look, before I came here I was with someone else who looks just like me. I really need to find him." Vincent said seriously.

"A quest! We get to go on a quest! A quest! A quest! A quest!" The small rabbit chanted joyfully.

"Um, yeah. I guess so. Do you have any idea of where we should go to look for him?" Vincent asked reluctantly.

"If we're going on a quest, we'll need a band of brave warriors to go with us! Come on!" The little rabbit thing said happily, then started hopping away.

Vincent started to walk, since he didn't seem to have any other choice.

"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!" The little rabbit said as he hopped in a circle, then darted ahead of Vincent again.

Vincent started walking a little faster, trying to follow the bouncing little creature with his eyes.

All of a sudden Vincent stopped and looked around.

With a sudden flash of insight, he realized where he was.

"Brakkii!" Vincent called out into the air.

The little rabbit thing stopped his hopping and tilted his head as he looked at Vincent curiously.

"Brakkii, end this! I don't have time to play with you right now! My brother and my Clan are in trouble and they need me!" Vincent called out seriously.

"You're silly! Come on, come on, come on!" The little rabbit thing called as he bounced in place.

"Brakkii, end this now or when I find you I'm gonna kick your multi-dimensional ass!" Vincent called out angrily.

"Bad words! Hurting words! Be nice! Be nice!" The little rabbit creature called out as he covered his ears.

Vincent noticed the tears welling up in his tiny companion's eyes and felt his anger dissolve.

"Okay. No more hurting words." Vincent said with resignation.

"Huh?"

Vincent reluctantly smiled, then made a show of covering his ears, then taking his hands away.

The small rabbit creature carefully took his paws away from his ears and watched Vincent cautiously.

"I won't use anymore hurting words. Go ahead and show me where we need to go."

The small creature began to bounce again, then took off in a burst of speed.

After a moment of hesitation, Vincent ran to follow.

* * * * *

"Mommy! Mommy! Look! Look! Look!" The little rabbit creature called out just before darting into a burrow between the roots of a huge tree.

Vincent stopped a few feet away from the tree, uncertain of what he should do.

"Calm down. I'm coming." A woman's voice said in a slow soothing tone.

Vincent watched the opening of the burrow carefully as a much larger rabbit creature emerged.

"Goodness!" She exclaimed at the sight of Vincent.

For some reason Vincent found her expression funny and couldn't restrain his laughter.

She had a momentary look of worry, but at Vincent's laughter, it softened into a warm, motherly expression of amusement.

"A quest! A quest! We're going on a quest!" the small rabbit creature said from his mothers side as he bounced with youthful energy.

"Be quiet for a moment Pipi. Momma needs to find out what's going on." She said gently.

The small rabbit creature continued to bounce in place, but stopped speaking.

"I am Naleen and this is my son Pipi." She said to Vincent slowly.

"It's nice to meet you, I'm Vincent."

She seemed disturbed for some reason, but quickly hid it, then asked, "What is this Pipi is saying about a quest?"

Vincent smiled down at Pipi, clung to his mothers side and still slightly bouncing.

"When I closed my eyes, I was on a spaceship and my brother Lehman was beside me. When I opened them again, I was here with Pipi." Vincent said carefully.

"So you need to go on a quest to find your lost brother?" She said in confirmation.

"I guess so. I don't even know where I am, so I'd be open to any suggestions." Vincent said seriously.

After a moment of thought, she quietly answered, "I'm certain that your brother would either be taken to the queen or at the very least she would be advised of his presence. I think the best thing you could do is travel to The Core where the queen lives and seek your answers there."

"The Core?" Vincent asked cautiously, not liking the sound of it at all.

"The Core is the source where everything came from and where everything will one day return." Naleen said reverently.

"The Core." Vincent said as he nodded at the explanation.

"Pipi could guide you to the forest path. He knows his way there and back. Or I could call his brothers and sisters to go with you if you like." She said carefully.

"NO!" Vincent said automatically as he formed the mental image of being surrounded by countless tiny rabbit creatures, all with Pipi's boundless energy.

In a quieter voice Vincent continued, "No thank you. I'm sure that Pipi will be more than enough of a guide for me."

Naleen gave a gentle smile, obviously understanding what he meant.

Pipi began to bounce even faster, and was obviously fighting to remain silent.

"When you get to the forest path, just follow it to The Core. Anyone there will be able to take you to the queen where you can find your answers." Naleen said as she looked down at her energetic son.

"Thank you for your help Naleen." Vincent said sincerely, then looked down at Pipi and asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Let's go!" Pipi said, then began to hop away.

Vincent chuckled at Pipi's energy.

"When you get to the edge of the forest, send him back home. If he were to go farther, I'm afraid he wouldn't be able to find his way home." She said seriously.

"I will." Vincent said with assurance, then turned at the sound of Pipi calling to him.

"This way! Come this way!" Pipi called out eagerly.

After a sigh of resignation, Vincent began to walk as he muttered to himself, "We're off to see the wizard."

Chapter 39

Author's Note: There are dark themes and sexual content later in this chapter that might be disturbing to more sensitive readers. If you find something troubling, please skip ahead a bit.

After a while of chasing after Pipi, Vincent called to him, "Do you think we could walk for a while? It looks like the edge of the forest is still pretty far and I'm not going to be able to run all the way."

Pipi stopped for a moment, then darted back toward Vincent.

For a moment it looked like Pipi was going to tackle him, but at the last possible second, Pipi leaped off to the side.

Vincent smiled at the move, then started walking at a casual pace.

"Viznit, what's your brother like?" Pipi asked curiously.

Vincent chuckled and said, "My name is Vincent, and my brother is exactly like me. His name is Lehman."

"Lemon?" Pipi asked uncertainly.

"No. His name is Lehman. I don't know what it means in his language, but I looked it up on my ship's computer and back on Earth the name Lehman means something like 'renter' or 'borrower'... I guess since he's a Chameloid, it's perfect for him." Vincent said considering.

After a quiet moment of walking, Vincent looked down to find Pipi looking back at him with confusion.

"You don't understand a thing I just said, do you?" Vincent asked seriously.

Pipi reluctantly shook his head.

Vincent smiled and said, "It doesn't really matter. Lehman is my brother and I love him. That's all that's important."

* * * * *

"Lookit! Lookit! Lookit!" Pipi called with unrestrained glee as he raced ahead.

"What is it?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yummy honey berries." Pipi said with delight.

"Honey berries?" Vincent asked curiously as he stepped forward and noticed that the berries looked a lot like red, orange and green gumdrops.

"Nuh-uh. *Yummy* honey berries." Pipi said seriously.

Vincent watched as Pipi pulled down one of the branches of the bush and nibbled one of the glistening berries.

"Okay. *Yummy* honey berries. I got it." Vincent said with a smile.

"Have some yummy honey berries Viznit. They're really really good." Pipi said cheerfully.

Vincent opened his mouth and was about to correct Pipi again when he caught himself. He didn't really mind if his name was mispronounced, and Pipi was happy.

After a moment to consider, Vincent pulled one of the red berries free from the plant and popped it into his mouth.

When he bit into the berry, the flavor exploded in his mouth. It was sweet and wonderful, reminding him very much of the fruit punch that his mother used to give him when he was little.

As he reached for another, Pipi said, "Don't eat too much. Mommy says that too many yummy honey berries will make you feel yucky."

"Okay. I just want to try an orange one." Vincent said as he pulled the next berry.

This one seemed to have all the citrus flavors combined into one tremendous burst of flavor. Vincent couldn't tell if it was sweet, tart, sour or all of the above.

"Come on Viznit. Come on, come on!" Pipi called as he hopped away from the berry bushes.

Vincent smiled and began to walk at a brisk pace to follow.

* * * * *

As they continued to walk, Vincent began to feel an overwhelming sense of peace wash over him.

On impulse, Vincent started to run full out through the open grass.

Immeasurable happiness infused Vincent's being as vague, half forgotten memories returned to him. Memories of being free and uninhibited, running simply for the joy of running.

Pipi saw Vincent running and began to run even faster to share in Vincent's joy.

Vincent slowed for just a moment, then tumbled into a somersault, rolling easily back to his feet and breaking into a full run again.

Pipi bounced with glee, thinking that Vincent's tumbling was the most wonderful, joyful thing he'd ever seen.

Vincent slowed again, this time he nearly came to a stop before bending down and launching into a cartwheel.

Pipi stopped all movement and watched with wide eyed wonder as Vincent completed the maneuver.

"Do it again! Do it again!" Pipi called as he broke into a full out run.

Vincent did another cartwheel, then another, just enjoying the feeling of being free in the wide open space.

* * * * *

As Vincent and Pipi approached the forest path, the free exuberant feeling left Vincent completely.

The entrance to the forest was dark and cavernous.

The trunks of the trees seemed to arch away from the path, making the darkness ahead feel even more consuming.

The tops of the trees nearly met above the path, leaving only the slightest shimmering dots of light.

"You'd better go back home now Pipi. I don't think I like the look of this place." Vincent said as a feeling of menace crept over him.

"Yeah. I never ever been this close to the forest before. I didn't know it was so scary. Can't you go back home with me?" Pipi asked in a small voice.

"I'd really like to, but I have to go find my brother. He might be hurt or frightened. He needs me." Vincent said as he went down on one knee to be closer to Pipi's eye level.

After a moment to consider the statement, Pipi quietly said, "I wish I could help my brother like that, but mommy says I'm too little."

"What's wrong with your brother?" Vincent asked with concern.

"He's... he's gone. Mommy says he's never coming home." Pipi said as tears started forming in his eyes.

Vincent reached down and gave Pipi a firm hug.

"Thank you Viznit. Are you sure you can't come back with me?" Pipi asked into his ear.

"I'm sure Pipi. You need to go home now." Vincent said, then reluctantly released Pipi from the hug.

"I love you Viznit. When you find your brother, bring him so we can all play together." Pipi said with a new burst of energy.

Vincent smiled and said, "I will Pipi."

After a moment of watching Pipi hopping off into the distance, Vincent turned to face the forest with resignation.

* * * * *

The first step on the path was the worst.

Vincent could feel his heart pounding in his chest, as if it were screaming at him, begging him to go back.

As Vincent walked into the gaping black orifice, he felt a chill run up his spine.

Slight sounds could be heard from the darkness all around him, like whispered voices, plotting their next move.

The cold of the darkness passed over his skin like icy fingers, caressing his skin with feather light touches.

Panic welled up in Vincent, even though his logical mind couldn't find a reason for it.

He was simply walking down a forest path. He was in no danger, and yet...

Vincent forced his breathing back to normal and continued to walk at a deliberate pace.

Even though his logical mind told him he wasn't in danger, every instinct that he had was telling him that he should be running to get out of the forest as soon as possible.

* * * * *

The sound of movement from ahead drew Vincent's attention and he stopped to investigate.

"Wanna play?"

Vincent looked around and finally was able to see a pair of pink eyes looking at him from just off the path.

"Who are you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Who do you want me to be?" The voice answered softly.

Vincent cautiously took a step closer, determining from where the eyes were, that the mysterious person was quite a bit smaller than him.

"Come and play with me. I know lots and lots of games." The soft voice said in a low, sultry tone.

Vincent stopped, not liking the suggestive tone at all.

"Maybe some other time. I've got to go find my brother." Vincent said cautiously as he began to back away.

"Come and play with me. I'll make you feel good, I promise." The voice said a little more desperately and moved slightly closer, just into the light.

Vincent was only slightly surprised to see that the creature was a rabbit, larger than Pipi but with the same strange pink and brown swirls in his fur.

"Please play with me." The rabbit creature said with tears of frustration welling in his eyes.

"No. I've got to go." Vincent said firmly as he turned to leave.

"You can hurt me." the rabbit said in a softer voice.

"What?" Vincent asked reflexively and stopped again.

"You can do anything you like to me. Just make me feel." the rabbit creature said as he moved slightly closer.

"Stand back." A firm voice said from behind Vincent.

The rabbit creature froze in his tracks as he looked up.

Vincent turned and found himself staring up into the face of a deer.

The deer had a small rack of antlers with three points on each side.

Even though he was covered with short brown fur, his body was firm and tone... and definitely humanoid.

Vincent noticed that the deer creature's hands were completely human looking and didn't have any fur at all.

The deer wore a loincloth around his waist and held a wooden spear which he had poised, ready to throw at the small rabbit creature.

"It isn't safe for you here. You need to return to the Realm of Blades." the deer said to Vincent in a deep voice.

"I can't..." Vincent stammered, then after a moment to compose himself he continued, "I have to find my brother Lehman. The people back there, I guess in Blades, told me that I need to go to The Core and talk to the queen to find my brother."

"Then I will escort you. I am a member of the queen's guard and I am patrolling the forest path since we received reports that the Hoven are on the prowl."

"The Hoven?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Creatures like him." the deer said and gestured with his spear in the direction of the rabbit creature that was still watching them.

"What's wrong with him?" Vincent asked with concern.

"The Hoven gorge themselves on sensation. They live only for pleasure... and to contaminate others so their numbers will increase." the deer said darkly.

"But isn't there something we can do to help him?" Vincent asked as he noticed that the small furry creature was trembling, but he couldn't be sure if it was from fear or excitement.

"No. Once a person has been seduced by the Hoven and taken to their monstrous queen, they are lost forever." the deer said solemnly.

"Their queen?" Vincent asked slowly.

"A Succubus. A vile creature with the ability to read your deepest desire and enslave your very soul." the deer said seriously.

Vincent continued to watch the rabbit creature before him. It was obvious that he was in desperate need and was suffering.

"You're a member of the queen's guard, right?" Vincent asked in confirmation.

"Yes. I am Danas, sworn knight of the queen of all realms, protector of the innocent." the deer said firmly.

Vincent nodded, then said, "I am Vincent Winters and I am a Trach Manja. That means that I have the ability to change things that seem impossible to

change. I understand your duty, so please understand mine. I have to help this guy."

"His name was Peiron." Danas said absently as he seemed to be considering Vincent's words.

"If there's anything I can do, if there's even a chance that I can help Peiron, I have to try. I wouldn't be worthy of the title Trach Manja if I walked away from this." Vincent said seriously.

"But what about your brother?" Danas asked calmly.

"Lehman is a Trach Manja just like I am. He knows what it means and he'll understand. If he were here he'd be doing exactly the same thing." Vincent said as he looked up into Danas' eyes.

"Very well. Since this is the course you have chosen, I will tell you that there is a rumor among the queen's knights. It is said that if you kill the Succubus, her spell will be broken. All those under her power will have their own free will returned to them." Danas said seriously.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Because it would be wrong to give false hope to the families of the Hoven when we have no way of defeating a Succubus. It is better for them to accept the loss so they can move on." Danas said quietly.

Vincent nodded, thinking of Naleen and Pipi and how they would be suffering right now if they were waiting on Peiron to come home.

"Also, it is only speculation. It has never been proven." Danas said quietly.

* * * * *

As soon as Vincent stepped off the path and out of the light, Peiron immediately grabbed onto his leg and hugged him tightly.

"Is he going to hurt me?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Not precisely. He will try to seduce you so he can draw you to his queen." Danas said as he watched Peiron carefully.

"Okay. I don't see that being a problem... but do you think we can get him to stop humping my leg?" Vincent asked uncomfortably.

"Perhaps, but only if you find another way to provide him the stimulation he craves." Danas said slowly.

Vincent looked down at the furry creature for a moment, then said, "Never mind. Let's just get going before he finishes."

* * * * *

"Peiron, we would like to play. Do you know anyone else we can play with?" Danas asked carefully.

The rabbit creature stopped humping Vincent's leg and looked at Danas with complete joy as he said, "You're gonna play?"

"Yes." Danas said slowly, watching carefully for Peiron's reaction.

The small rabbit creature released Vincent's leg and moved toward Danas with caution as his eyes were transfixed on the loin cloth.

"But I wouldn't want Vincent to be left out. Is there someone else we can play with?" Danas asked in a leading tone.

Peiron didn't seem to hear as he took another step closer to Danas and reached out one paw toward the loin cloth.

His lower lip was quivering with excitement as he drew closer.

"Not yet." Danas said firmly, causing Peiron to jerk his paw away.

Peiron looked up at Danas with tear filled eyes and asked, "Can I see?"

Danas flashed an exasperated look at Vincent, then said to Peiron, "You have to find us someone else to play with. It'll be more fun if we can all play together. Find us someone else to play with and I'll show you."

"Show me first." Peiron said with a quiver in his voice.

Danas considered for a moment, then asked, "If I show you, then will you find us someone else to play with?"

Peiron nodded quickly, never taking his eyes off the loin cloth before him.

"Promise?" Danas asked as he moved his free hand down to the edge of his loin cloth.

"I promise! Show me!" Peiron said desperately.

Danas hooked one finger under the edge of the loin cloth, then slowly shifted it aside.

Vincent felt that he should look away, he fully intended to. But as the cloth was moved aside, he found that he was staring at Danas' penis with fascination.

To Vincent's surprise it looked fully human.

Danas was semi-erect and his entire crotch seemed to be hairless.

Peiron moved forward, obviously wanting to claim the cock with his mouth when Danas quickly shifted the loin cloth back into place.

"No. Please." Peiron begged.

"You promised. Find us someone else to play with and we can play for hours." Danas said carefully.

Peiron reluctantly shifted his gaze from the loin cloth up to Danas' eyes, then nodded his agreement.

"The sooner we find a playmate, the sooner you can have your prize." Danas said in a leading tone.

"This way... she's this way." Peiron said and left the path, hopping into the forest.

Vincent looked up at Danas with question.

"I hope that you really do have the power to change what is destined to be. Otherwise we will probably be 'playing' with Peiron for the remainder of our lives." Danas said, then started walking.

"I hope so too." Vincent muttered to himself as he left the relative safety of the path.

* * * * *

The trio traveled through the forest, barely able to see in the meager light that filtered in from the canopy of leaves above.

Finally they walked into a small clearing which was carpeted with a dense layer of moss.

"We're here! We're here! We're here! Can we play now?" Peiron asked as he nearly vibrated with his anticipation.

"Where is she?" Danas asked darkly as he held firmly to his spear.

"Danas." A woman's voice said in a low, sultry tone.

Vincent searched for the source of the voice and finally was able to make out the form of a female humanoid deer emerging from the edge of the clearing.

She was nude and was slowly stroking her large bare breasts as she looked at Danas through half lidded eyes.

"You..." Danas gasped as he froze at the sight.

"I want you Danas. I want you inside me." She said in a low, husky voice filled with desire.

"Fill me... complete me... make me yours..." She said in a seductive whisper as she took another step closer.

Vincent glanced at Danas with concern.

Danas had dropped his spear and his loin cloth was tented out, showing his obvious arousal.

"Danas. Listen to me. It's a trick." Vincent said as he quickly reached down and retrieved the spear.

"Kill him Danas. If you kill him you'll never have to go back. You'll always be loved. You'll always be mine." She said seductively.

Vincent looked from the Succubus to Danas cautiously. It was almost certain that he was going to be attacked, but the question at the moment was, by whom?

Finally, with obvious effort, Danas whispered, "No..."

Vincent didn't know how long Danas could withstand the temptation of the Succubus. If he was going to make a move, it would be now or never.

* * * * *

With the spear firmly in his hand, Vincent gathered his courage to face the Succubus.

Between one moment and the next, the Succubus changed from the voluptuous doe into the image of T'Lani.

Vincent's eyes went wide as he froze in his tracks.

"You are not fulfilling your responsibilities as my husband. It is your duty to bring pleasure to your wife. You have developed to a sufficient degree. Come... pleasure me." T'Lani said reasonably.

Vincent felt the electric tingle of desire spread through his body as his breath became shallow.

"Prove to me that you are an adult. Take me. Claim me as your wife." T'Lani said seductively.

Vincent blinked, then gripped the spear more firmly in his hand.

"You may be able to read my mind and know what I want, but you don't know anything about my wife." Vincent said, then lunged forward to stab at the Succubus with the spear.

She easily evaded the spear and moved into a defensive posture.

"My wife accepts me just like I am and would NEVER ask me to prove myself." Vincent said as he felt his rage building.

"And you dishonor my wife by looking like her and acting like such a slut." Vincent said with a growl, then lunged again.

The Succubus was able to evade Vincent's attack again, but just barely.

"My children, protect your queen!" T'Lani said firmly.

"Too late." Vincent said with a snarl as he moved to attack again.

Before he could move into action, he felt hands holding him back.

Vincent looked up and saw Danas pulling him away from the Succubus as Peiron grabbed onto his other side.

The Succubus chuckled with satisfaction as she transformed again, this time into a hideous, withered creature.

The snaggle toothed crone moved forward and stood over Vincent with satisfaction.

"It has been years... centuries... since I have been able to claim a child without illusion." the Succubus said with delight.

Vincent struggled, but found that Danas and Peiron were holding him firmly.

"Strip him and get him hard for me. When I've finished with him, I'll personally reward you both for your service." She said in a wheezy voice.

Danas began to open Vincent's jumpsuit as Peiron started to nuzzle and lick his neck.

As Danas began to pull the jumpsuit off Vincent's shoulders, he moved his mouth close to Vincent's ear and whispered, "The spear."

It took a moment for the words to register, especially since Peiron was tonguing his other ear, but as soon as he was able to comprehend what Danas had said, he discretely turned the spear he was still holding until it was easily within Danas' reach.

Peiron's paw began to playfully tease Vincent's left nipple as he nuzzled behind Vincent's ear.

Vincent let out an involuntary shudder of breath at the sensation and hoped that Danas would make his move soon.

"Slowly children. Slowly. This one is delicious." The withered crone said as she writhed with pleasure. A part of Vincent's mind realized that she was experiencing his emotions as he felt them.

Danas' fingertips dragged slowly down Vincent's chest and toward his belly, moving ever closer to the erection which was barely contained by the lower half of Vincent's jumpsuit.

"Yesssss..." The Succubus said as she shuddered with delight.

In a sudden flash of movement, the Succubus was staring with disbelief.

The spear was embedded in her chest as Danas knelt on one knee holding it in place.

Vincent blinked for a moment, then tried to get his breathing under control as he watched the Succubus clutching the spear, trying to pull it out.

Danas jammed the spear even deeper into her chest and watched her carefully, not knowing if she had another method of attack.

A gasp drew Vincent's attention and he turned to see Peiron writhing on the ground beside him.

After a deep, calming breath, Vincent started to pull the upper half of his jumpsuit back on.

"Vincent, hold the spear." Danas said firmly.

Without hesitation, Vincent hurried to Danas' side and took firm hold of the spear.

"Hold on tight." Danas said as he moved around so he was behind the Succubus.

Vincent held the spear with both hands and braced his weight against it.

Danas took firm hold of the Succubus' head with both hands, then sharply twisted until he heard a definite 'crack'.

"It is done." Danas said as he released the Succubus' head allowing it to fall limp against the creatures shoulder.

Vincent slowly released the spear he had been holding, then glanced over at Peiron with concern.

"It looks like he's in a lot of pain." Vincent said quietly.

"Um, Vincent... that's not pain." Danas said cautiously.

Vincent looked at Danas with question, then down at Peiron again.

Danas was right.

The expression on Peiron's face wasn't agony, it was absolute bliss.

Vincent looked at Danas with question at the unusual reaction.

"I believe I understand now. The Succubus seduced the Hoven with the promise of fulfillment and satisfaction, but once under her control they were treated to stimulation upon stimulation... they never achieved completion. That was what kept them in her power... the promise that at some point the building passion would finally be released." Danas said in a considering voice.

"So he's having an orgasm." Vincent said as he looked at Peiron uncertainly.

"It appears that he is having all the orgasms he has been denied since becoming Hoven." Danas said speculatively.

"Oh... um, wow." Vincent said as he watched the rabbit creature writhing in ecstasy.

"Now that the Succubus is dead, all those under her control should be released." Danas said seriously.

After a moment, Vincent asked, "Danas, are you alright? For a minute there it looked like she almost got to you."

"Yes... I never imagined that she would be so... real... If not for your comment about the dishonor she brought to your wife, I might have been fully seduced." Danas said with difficulty.

"I guess it's good to know that if she could turn into my deepest desire, that she turned into T'Lani for me... who did she turn into for you? Was that your wife or your girlfriend or what?" Vincent asked with interest.

"No... well, um... actually, that was my mother." Danas said shyly, and Vincent was certain that under his fur he was blushing.

After a moment of silence, Vincent absently muttered, "And I'm the one in therapy."

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"How long do you think this is going to take?" Vincent asked as he watched Peiron cautiously.

"There is no way of knowing." Danas said regretfully.

"Well, I'm going to need to get to The Core so I can find my brother. If you can get me back to the path, I should be able to find my way." Vincent said seriously.

"Yes. I can carry Peiron and hopefully he will... finish... before we reach the path. Otherwise, I will carry him back to his home." Danas said slowly.

Vincent nodded, then realized that he hadn't finished getting dressed again.

"Vincent, I am curious to know, how effective was her seduction on you?" Danas asked as he lifted Peiron into his arms.

Peiron placed his paws around Danas' neck and let out a few gasps as he shifted slightly.

"Her image of T'Lani caused me to react the same as if she were really my wife... but I guess that since my logical mind knew that she wasn't really my wife it made me angry. I'm pretty sure that she could tell that there wasn't any way she was going to make me 'want' her... so she told you guys to get me worked up." Vincent said darkly as he slowly followed Danas through the dense trees.

"I'm sorry Vincent, but I couldn't take the chance that she would notice that I hadn't been fully seduced." Danas said quietly.

Vincent smiled and said, "I'm not mad at you, I was just surprised that two guys could, you know, get me going like that... it bothers me a little."

"A certain stimulus will cause a certain response. It wasn't the two of us that... got you going... it was the stimulation we were providing." Danas said seriously.

After a moment of thought, Vincent said, "Thanks Danas, you're probably right. But somehow I still feel like I betrayed T'Lani because I felt anything at all."

"I believe that is natural. The memory of the experience will most likely haunt me for some time to come as well." Danas said darkly.

"Yeah. If the Succubus had turned into my mom I'd probably be pretty freaked out right now." Vincent said in thought.

Silence fell between the pair as they traveled, only being broken by the occasional gasp or sigh from Peiron as he writhed in Danas' arms.

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"Danas!" A panicked voice called from the distance.

"Let's hurry." Danas said as he started moving faster.

Vincent hurried his pace, having difficulty walking through the dense foliage in the forest.

"Danas!" Called again, sounding slightly closer this time.

"I am approaching the path!" Danas called in response.

After another minute of weaving through the trees and bushes, the forest path came into view.

"Danas! You must come to Pat. We need you right away." A small creature said past heavy breathing.

Vincent was surprised by the creature because, up to now, everyone he had encountered had seemed to be a variation of an animal he was familiar with.

This creature seemed to be one big furry round body with thin, spindly arms and legs.

"What is wrong?" Danas asked seriously.

"There is an Incubus in the village. We have him cornered. We need you right away!" The creature said in panic.

Danas considered for a moment, then asked, "If you could take Peiron back to the Realm of Blades for me and see that he is reunited with his family, Vincent and I can go to Pat and deal with this threat."

Vincent was a little bit surprised that he had been included in Danas' declaration, but didn't even think about protesting.

"Yes. Yes. Just please hurry." The creature said desperately.

Danas bent down and carefully handed Peiron to the creature.

"What is wrong with him? Is he ill?" The creature asked with concern.

"Vincent and I defeated the Succubus. Peiron has been released from her spell." Danas said seriously.

The creature stared at Danas with wonder.

"Come Vincent, we don't have a moment to spare." Danas said, then broke into a run.

Vincent turned and quickly followed.

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"What's an Incubus?" Vincent asked as he ran.

"He is the male version of a Succubus. He will try to seduce and enthrall just as the Succubus did." Danas said seriously.

Vincent continued to run as he thought about what Danas was saying.

Finally Vincent asked, "But instead of becoming T'Lani, he'll turn into a guy?"

"Yes. He will become the image of the male who attracts you most." Danas said quickly.

"I'm not sure I want to know." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Could whatever image he chooses be worse than the one the Succubus took with me?" Danas asked seriously.

Vincent tried to restrain a chuckle as he said, "No. I don't think so."

"Follow me now. We can cut through the forest and will be at the village in just a moment." Danas said, then darted into the trees.

Vincent followed without hesitation as he considered who the Incubus might become to try and tempt him.

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"Danas! He is in the town square. Please hurry." A stout, hairy creature said in a low voice.

"Come Vincent." Danas said as the pair entered the village.

The sounds of a crowd could be heard from ahead of them.

When they finally reached the center of the village, Vincent could see a snarling beast being kept in place by a group of small furry creatures, holding spears and all manor of farming tools.

"Stand aside. I am one of the Queen's Knights." Danas said firmly as he waded into the crowd.

The furry creatures parted before him and allowed Danas to approach the creature without delay.

Vincent followed closely, traveling in Danas' wake.

"Foul beast. We have just slain one of your sisters in the forest this day. Tell me, why have you come into the light?" Danas asked firmly.

The beast turned to face Danas, then saw Vincent and froze.

"Vincent?" It asked in a surprised growl.

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly.

The beast began to shrink and transformed into a blue skinned boy with golden eyes.

"It's me." Lehman said imploringly.

"Lehman?" Vincent asked uncertainly, not knowing if this was really Lehman or the Incubus trying to fool him.

"Stop this! Tell me why you are here or I will kill you where you stand!" Danas screamed as he held his spear firmly.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "Danas, this isn't an Incubus. This is my brother."

"The creature is trying to seduce you." Danas warned.

"No... if he were trying to seduce me, he would've become Benny." Vincent said, then froze as he realized what he'd just admitted.

"Um, Vincent. Do you think you can get these guys to stop poking me now?" Lehman asked hopefully.

Vincent blinked, then said, "Oh, um... yeah. Danas, I'm really sure. This guy isn't an Incubus. He's a Chameloid. That means he can change into different kinds of creatures."

"Only the Incubi and the Succubae have that ability." Danas said slowly.

"So do Chameloids. But they don't seduce people..." Vincent said, then turned to Lehman and asked, "You don't, do you?"

Lehman rolled his gold eyes and said, "You're being lotsa help brother."

Danas watched the exchange, then slowly lowered his spear.

"People of the village of Pat. This creature is no threat to you. He is simply a stranger." Danas said seriously.

"Are you sure?" One of the villagers asked cautiously.

"I will remain with him while he is in the village so you can be assured that he will cause no harm." Danas said firmly.

Murmurs spread through the crowd, but Danas' words were finally accepted.

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Vincent walked to Lehman and pulled him into a firm hug.

"Did you see Vincent? I can change again." Lehman said happily, then to emphasize the point, he changed himself into an exact duplicate of Vincent.

"Perhaps it would be best if you not do that while we are in the village." Danas said carefully.

"Yeah. They think you're some kind of monster that will try to make them all into your sex slaves." Vincent said seriously.

"Really? So that's what all that was about... I was beginning to wonder what it was about me that they didn't like." Lehman said playfully.

Vincent hugged Lehman again, happy to know that he wasn't lost or hurt.

After a moment of hugging, Lehman finally asked, "So where are we?"

"In a dream, I think." Vincent said seriously.

"Do what?" Lehman asked with surprise.

"Okay. A while back I met this guy... a creature really... his name is Brakkii. He's, like, this interdimensional creature who can create dreams and illusions." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"And why would he create a dream like this?" Lehman asked as he looked around.

Vincent shrugged and said, "I guess so he could send us on an adventure. He really gets into stuff like that."

"I don't understand." Danas said slowly.

Vincent smiled up at Danas and said, "I don't either, not really. And it doesn't matter."

"But are you saying that this place... these people... I'm not real?" Danas asked in a diminishing voice.

Vincent noticed the devastated look in Danas' eyes and quietly said, "I really don't have those answers Danas."

"You said that this, um... what's his name? Brakkii?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Vincent nodded.

"You said he was an interdimensional being, right?" Lehman asked carefully.

"Yeah." Vincent said, keeping a careful watch on Danas' expression.

"Well, my people believe that the world of dreams is it's own dimension. When a person dreams, their spirit is actually transported to spend a brief time in the dream dimension where their thoughts and memories can change the shape of the world around them." Lehman said carefully.

Vincent slowly nodded that he understood.

"And my people also believe that there are creatures who have ascended and have the ability to travel on the dream web." Lehman said as he looked at Vincent seriously.

"Dream web?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Lehman nodded and said, "All the dreams in the dream dimension are connected by threads of collective consciousness. The dream walkers have the ability to walk from dream to dream and can even carry things from one dream to another."

Vincent nodded in thought.

"So are you saying that you believe that I exist in this 'dream dimension'?" Danas asked carefully.

Lehman thought for a moment, then shrugged and said, "I'm saying it's possible. All I know is that I laid down in one world and woke up in another."

"Danas, you think, you feel, you have your own dreams. To me that means that you're real. It doesn't matter if this is some freaky dream or a dream dimension. As far as I'm concerned, when I leave or wake up or whatever, I'm going to believe that you're still here protecting the realms and serving the queen." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman smiled and said, "And we're Trach Manjai, when we believe something, it makes a difference."

"Thank you. Both of you." Danas said quietly.

A squeal drew the trio's attention.

"It's Magdon! He's come back!" A female voice said in wonder.

"I wonder what's up with that?" Lehman said as he watched the crowd gather around a stranger walking into town.

"The Hoven have been released from the control of the Succubus." Danas said with a contented smile.

Lehman looked at Vincent with question.

"The slaves of the Succubus have been freed and are returning home. Their families have been considering them dead because no one has ever returned after being under her control." Vincent explained quietly.

"Daddy!" A child's voice exclaimed and two, three, finally five little furry creatures ran to greet a weary looking man walking into town.

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"Okay, I guess now that Lehman is safe and the Hoven are free there's nothing left for us to do except go to The Core. Where do we have to go next?" Vincent asked Danas seriously.

"To get to The Core from here, we would either need to travel through the Mountains of Despair and cross the Swamp of Abject Misery or we could traverse the Plains of Cruelty and Terror then follow the river of Anguish through the Valley of Desolation and Hopelessness." Danas said in thought.

"I think I'm sensing a theme here." Lehman said with a grin at Vincent.

"Yeah, I'm getting that too. " Vincent said with a chuckle at Lehman, then turned to Danas and asked, "I guess this means that there's no valley of cuddles and snuggles anywhere, huh?"

"The Valley of Cuddles and Snuggles is in Pannikin. That is quite distant from here and nowhere near The Core... why would you wish to go there?" Danas asked curiously.

"Never mind." Vincent said with a chuckle, then shared an amused glance with Lehman, "Besides, it doesn't matter which way we'll be going, as long as we're together I know that we'll be fine."

Lehman smiled at Vincent's assurance and nodded his agreement.

"Which way do you think is going to be best Danas? They all sound pretty bad." Vincent asked as he turned his attention back to the large deer creature who had become his unlikely friend.

After a moment to consider, Danas said, "The Mountains of Despair. The geography is constantly changing and it's possible that we may be able to completely avoid the Swamp."

"It changes?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Yes. And due to the changes it is easy to become trapped in a dead end canyon or to suddenly find oneself on a mountain peak with no way to climb down until it changes again." Danas said seriously.

"It sounds pretty dangerous." Vincent said with concern.

"It is, but if we keep our wits about us, we should be able to make our way through unharmed. On the Plains of Cruelty and Terror, we would constantly have to be on guard from attack. And, assuming we survived that, we would still have to pass through the Valley of Desolation and Hopelessness where travelers are compelled to relive the darkest moments of their lives over and over again." Danas said with menace.

"Okay. Let's not do that." Vincent said uneasily.

Lehman emphatically nodded his agreement.

"Then we should go. Delaying our journey accomplishes nothing." Danas said firmly.

"Are you sure it's okay if you come with us? I mean, I wouldn't want to take you away from your duty." Vincent asked Danas with concern.

"This is my duty. If you wish to know more of my motives, we can talk while we travel." Danas said, then suited actions to words as he began to walk away.

Vincent and Lehman looked back at the village where everyone was welcoming the recovered Hoven into their town.

"Okay Lehman, I don't know what's up ahead, but just so you know. Cowardly Lion, good. Flying monkeys, bad." Vincent said as they began to walk.

"What?" Lehman asked in confusion.

"I don't know if it'll come up, but I thought you should know just in case." Vincent said as he walked a little faster to catch up with Danas.

Chapter 40

As the trio walked away from the town, Vincent thought to say, "Back in the Realm of Blades, Naleen said that if I followed the path, it would take me right to The Core. She didn't act like it was any kind of a problem. Is that the path we're going to take?"

"No. But I can understand why she would advise you as she did. It wasn't very long ago when the path to The Core was direct and without peril... I'm afraid those days are gone. In this time, there is no path to The Core that doesn't involve work, determination and an element of risk," Danas said, as he walked.

"Why?" Vincent asked simply.

Danas glanced at Vincent with amusement at the simple and naive question.

"Because things tend toward disarray. When the land was fresh and new, our lives were filled with the joy of discovery. Every day was a new adventure and nothing was impossible." Danas said distantly.

"So what happened to the path?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Danas snapped back to the present and said, "It just... went away. I don't think anyone noticed that it was going until it was too late to really do anything about it. The path became undefined and difficult to follow until one day it was just gone. We can still reach The Core, but we will have to take another route."

Vincent and Lehman shared a look, neither of them completely satisfied with the answer, but neither had the will to ask for more of an explanation.

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"Look!" Lehman said as he pointed ahead of them.

Danas and Vincent both directed their attention to the mountain peak that seemed to be rising before them in the distance.

"The Mountains of Despair are unusually active." Danas said with concern.

Just as suddenly as the mountain had grown, it began to recede and another rose to take it's place.

"We're going to have to walk across that?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

Danas considered for a moment, then reluctantly said, "Perhaps not... if the Mountains of Despair are behaving so violently, it may be necessary for us to take another route."

"But we don't have time for that. My brother and my clan need me. We have to get to The Core, so we can find our way home." Vincent said desperately.

"We cannot change what is. We can only react in the safest and most reasonable way. To try to cross the Mountains of Despair while they are churning this violently would be reckless... Our deaths will improve nothing for us or for those you are trying to reach." Danas said frankly.

"I suppose so." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Besides, if this is really a dream, then maybe we don't need to rush." Lehman said carefully.

Vincent looked at Lehman with question, silently asking him to continue.

"You can spend a really long time in a dream and it's only a few minutes in real life." Lehman said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

After a moment of consideration, Vincent reluctantly nodded his acceptance of the explanation.

All three of them turned at sudden movement from the Mountains of Despair.

A mountain seemed to sprout up out of the ground, right in front of them.

Even though it was some distance away, the sheer size of the mountain was enough to make even Danas feel incredibly small and vulnerable.

"What causes them to grow like that?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Danas looked at Lehman for a moment in thought, then said, "The Knights of the Queen have speculated about that. There are beings who wander through the Mountains and seem to live in harmony with them. Some believe that they are attuned to the discord of the changing landscape and instinctively know what changes are about to occur so they can move to safety... others believe that it is the travelers that cause the changes. That somehow their emotions cause the Mountains to react."

Lehman considered the answer for a moment, then looked at Vincent cautiously.

Finally Vincent noticed and said, "What?"

"You know what." Lehman said frankly.

Danas turned to look at the two boys with question.

"You think that because I'm all worried and tied up in knots, that I'm causing the Mountains to act like this." Vincent said with resignation.

"Pretty much," Lehman said without accusation.

Vincent took a deep breath, then let it out slowly as he thought about what he needed to do.

"If you talk about it, maybe we can calm you down enough to get across the Mountains." Lehman said more quietly.

"Right." Vincent said absently.

Lehman and Danas came to a stop and waited expectantly.

"It's the gay thing." Vincent said reluctantly.

Lehman rolled his eyes and said, "You Humans really do spend a lot of time and energy on that."

Vincent glanced at Lehman's exasperated expression, then broke into an unwilling smile.

"I guess it's different for my people, since we can become male or female at will." Lehman said speculatively.

"You can?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"Yeah." Lehman said, then to prove his words, he changed into an exact duplicate of Jenn.

"Oh, wow. I never even thought about you being able to do that." Vincent said in wonder.

Lehman shrugged, then changed back into his light indigo skinned self.

"So you're not really male or female?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I'm male. But that's only because that's my resting form..." At Vincent and Danas' equal uncomprehending stares, Lehman continued, "...the way I am when I wake up in the morning. Once I'm awake, I can change into any form that I want to be for as long as I can hold it... or at least it used to work that way. If this is really a dream, then I guess my body is still trapped in one form." Lehman finished sadly.

"It really bothers you, doesn't it?" Vincent asked quietly.

Lehman considered for a moment, then shook his head as he said, "That's just the way things are. I'd rather be stuck in one form than be dead. And at least I'm not in pain or stuck looking like someone goofy... I don't have any regrets."

Vincent smiled at the thinly veiled compliment and thought about what Lehman had said.

Even though Vincent knew that Lehman really was grateful for what he had, he thought about what it must be like for Lehman to lose something that's part of his nature. It occurred to him that Lehman was like a bird that lost the ability to fly.

"The Mountains aren't calming. We may have to consider another route." Danas said hesitantly.

"Before we do that, let's try working out what's bothering Vincent. If that works, we can go this way. If it doesn't, we can still go the other way." Lehman said reasonably.

Vincent glanced at Lehman and reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"Do you want me to look at your emotions and see if I can figure out what's going on? You know, like we did before?" Lehman asked seriously.

Vincent smiled at the offer and nodded.

Lehman cautiously placed his hand on the side of Vincent's face, then got a look of surprise.

"What did you find?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

"Nothing... I can't read you." Lehman said as he moved his hand slightly and tried again.

"You can't read me at all?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"No. Not even a little bit." Lehman said as he took his hand away.

"Does that mean that we'll need to find a different path?" Danas asked cautiously.

Lehman thought for a moment, then looked at Vincent with indecision.

"Give me a minute to try something. It would be faster to do this with telepathy, but I think we can probably make it work this way." Lehman said carefully.

Danas nodded as he watched the mountains building and collapsing at an even greater speed.

"Vincent, are you worried that you might be gay?" Lehman asked frankly.

"No." Vincent answered immediately.

Lehman didn't react to Vincent's declaration at all, he simply waited.

After another minute of Lehman's silence, Vincent said more quietly, "Well, I'm pretty sure I'm straight."

"Are you worried that you might be gay?" Lehman asked again, this time in a gentler voice.

"A little bit. I don't think I'm gay, but sometimes I'll see something and I'll get a feeling..." Vincent trailed off uncomfortably.

Lehman nodded that he understood, then said, "Okay, we're going to take a shortcut."

Vincent looked at Lehman curiously, then nearly stopped breathing when Lehman transformed himself into the image of Benny, wearing the swim trunks he had worn at the pool.

"Tell me what you're feeling right now." Lehman said in Benny's voice.

"You look good." Vincent said in a whisper.

"If this is really a dream, you could do anything you wanted to without being in any trouble. You wouldn't mean anything and you wouldn't be betraying anyone. You can do anything at all here. What do you want to do?" Lehman asked, then suggestively hooked one thumb in the waist band of the swim trunks.

"I... I..." Vincent sputtered as he stared.

"You are certain that you are not an Incubus?" Danas asked, as he gripped his spear firmly in his hand.

"I'm sure." Lehman chuckled, then said to Vincent, "Tell me Vincent, if you could do anything you wanted right now, what would you want to do?"

Vincent closed his eyes and took in a deep breath as he thought about the question.

"Look at me." Lehman said firmly.

Vincent hesitantly looked up into Lehman's eyes, then a look of wonder seemed to fill his expression.

Lehman smiled as he said, "I think he's figuring it out."

"Let me try something." Vincent said, as he stepped forward and pulled Lehman into a hug.

Lehman responded by putting his arms around Vincent.

Vincent turned his head and started to kiss Lehman, in much the same way as he had kissed T'Lani on the *Yorktown* before they left.

The kiss lasted only a moment, but as Vincent pulled away, Lehman noticed that he had a contented smile.

"Tell me." Lehman said in a whisper.

"I got it." Vincent said in a voice that sounded almost like a chuckle.

"What have you got?" Lehman asked quietly.

Vincent closed his eyes for a moment, obviously searching for the words.

Danas looked away from the pair and noticed that the mountains had stopped their movement. The entire mountain range was suddenly still.

"Would you change back to yourself? You're kinda distracting me, like that." Vincent asked hopefully.

Lehman smiled and immediately transformed back into his indigo 'resting' form.

"Okay. First of all, I'm not gay." Vincent said firmly.

Lehman nodded that he accepted the answer.

"The thing that's been messing me up is that when I look at some guys... Benny especially, I notice that they really look good. I guess because I've always been told that I'm not supposed to think that way that I didn't know how to handle it." Vincent said speculatively.

"I guess I can understand that." Lehman said cautiously.

Vincent nodded, then continued, "But Daddy Joe said something a long time ago that I really didn't understand when I heard it. He said, 'If I was gay, that's the kind of guy I'd want to end up with'."

Lehman nodded to encourage Vincent to continue.

"What I just figured out is that Daddy Joe has the same kind of feelings that I do. When he looks at Rad he feels the same kind of thing that I feel when I look at Benny." Vincent said distantly.

"Which is?" Lehman prompted.

"Which is that I think Benny looks really good. If I was gay, I'd probably really want to... you know... do gay stuff with him." Vincent said with difficulty.

Danas looked from Lehman to Vincent, not quite understanding what they were talking about.

"When you asked me what I wanted to do with Benny, if I wasn't hurting anyone, or betraying T'Lani, that made me realize... I don't want to do anything. I think he looks nice. But I really don't want to... you know... do stuff with him." Vincent stammered.

Lehman smiled at Vincent's inability to say the words, even in a dream.

"So, it's like Daddy Joe said, if I was gay, I'd probably want to be with Benny or someone a lot like him... But since I'm not, I just get these weird little feelings because I think he looks nice." Vincent said, then a new look of wonder appeared on his face, broadcasting to Lehman and Danas that he was having, yet another, revelation.

"I just realized what's really bothering me." Vincent said in a disbelieving voice.

"What's that?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"I'm afraid that by having those feelings, the ones I have when I look at Benny, that I'm starting to be like my dad." Vincent said distantly.

"I don't understand." Lehman said quietly, prompting Vincent to continue.

Vincent was silent for a moment as he thought about several different things in the light of this new realization.

"I guess I was scared that by feeling those things, that I'm getting a little bit closer to being like my dad was when he used to hurt my brother. And if I didn't find some way to shut off those feelings, that I'd turn into my father." Vincent said carefully.

Lehman thought about the words, then shook his head, indicating that he still didn't get it.

Vincent steeled himself before saying the words, "My dad had gay feelings for my brother and because he didn't have someone like Daddy Joe to tell him how to accept those feelings, he tried to hold them back and they made him crazy. He would scream at my brother and hit him because he hated his feelings so much that he couldn't let himself love Lawrence."

Lehman had the feeling that Vincent was still holding something back and quietly said, "And..."

"And right before he died, my dad started doing that to me too." Vincent said quietly.

"Oh." Lehman said absently, almost regretting that he had asked.

"It's okay. I figured it out." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman reluctantly looked at Vincent, feeling that he had already intruded too far.

"I'm fine. I don't have to worry about becoming 'Victor Winters Jr' because, I have people who love me and people who can help me deal with it if I have feelings that I don't understand." Vincent said confidently.

Lehman smiled and said, "I'm really glad that you have Daddy Joe to help you."

"I am too, but that includes you too. If you didn't talk to me the way you do, I probably wouldn't ever realize this stuff." Vincent said honestly.

"Glad to help." Lehman said shyly, then thought to ask, "Why did you kiss me?"

"Oh, I was just checking to see if the kiss made me feel the same as when I kissed T'Lani." Vincent said seriously.

"And did it?" Lehman asked with interest.

"No. I mean, it was a nice kiss. But it didn't make me... um...." Vincent trailed off with a blush.

"I get it." Lehman said with an indulgent smile.

Vincent returned the smile with gratitude for not having to finish the sentence.

"If everything is resolved here, are we ready to go? It looks as if we may have an uneventful passage to The Core." Danas said seriously.

"Yeah, we'd better hurry up and go before Vincent finds something else to stress out about." Lehman said with a teasing smile at Vincent.

"One thing first." Vincent said, as he looked Lehman in the eyes.

Lehman froze at the intensity in Vincent's gaze.

"Thank you for helping me understand myself. Not just here, but back on the ship too. I don't know what else to say except... I love you Lehman." Vincent said sincerely.

Lehman gently smiled at the words and said, "I love you too Vincent... in a brotherly, totally non-gay way."

Vincent chuckled at the words and said, "Yeah. That's exactly what I meant."

Lehman put one arm around Vincent's shoulders, then guided him to start walking.

Danas smiled at the pair as he fell into step at their side.

* * * * *

After a long while of walking, Lehman asked, "What's that?"

Danas glanced where Lehman was pointing and said, "It appears that the Mountains have not completely quieted."

"Is something bothering you Vincent?" Lehman asked with concern.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "No. It's not me for once. How about you?"

"I'm good... are you worried about anything Danas?" Lehman asked curiously.

After a moment of consideration, Danas shook his head and said, "Although I have a few issues that I'd like to investigate later, I can't say that anything is particularly troubling me at the moment."

Vincent smiled, feeling fairly certain that he knew what 'issues' Danas was referring to.

"Then what do you think is causing that?" Lehman asked, as he saw the mountains starting to build and recede as they had done before.

"It seems that we now know that it is the emotions of the people traveling through the mountains that causes the mountains to react. Since none of us are in turmoil, it might mean that there is another traveler over there. If we make haste, we can be to The Core before the turbulence can overtake us." Danas said as he increased his pace.

"No." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman immediately nodded his agreement.

"What do you mean, 'No'?" Danas asked cautiously.

"I mean, we aren't going to walk away and leave someone feeling like I did. We're going to help him." Vincent said decisively, as he changed direction.

"But we are near to your goal." Danas said with confusion.

"It's part of being a Trach Manja. We can't walk away from something like this." Lehman said as he followed Vincent.

Danas sighed with resignation, then followed the boys.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of travel over uneven ground that seemed to wave and ripple under their feet, the trio finally spotted a lone figure in the distance. He was sitting on a rock with his head in his hands.

"Travelers typically aren't aware of others as they wander the mountains." Danas said quietly.

"They can't hear us?" Lehman asked curiously.

Danas considered the question for a moment, then carefully said, "I believe that it is more accurate to say that they choose not to hear us."

Lehman nodded as the group took unsteady steps toward the boy who was obviously the source of the disruption in the mountains.

"Need some help?" Vincent asked cautiously as he approached.

The boy looked up with surprise at the sound.

Vincent froze when he recognized the boy before him...

"Vince?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Crewman Winters?" Vince asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, but you can call me Vincent if you want." Vincent said gently.

"Um, yeah. Thanks." Vince said reluctantly.

"What's up?" Vincent asked, as he casually took a seat on the rock next to Vince.

"Everything's all messed up." Vince said, as tears filled his eyes.

"If you'll tell me about it, maybe we can fix it." Vincent said quietly.

* * * * *

"I do not understand." Danas said to Lehman at his side.

"I don't either. I guess we'll just have to watch and listen to see if it's going to make sense." Lehman said frankly.

"So this one, he is not another like you?" Danas asked cautiously.

Lehman looked at the boy for a moment, then said, "I don't think so. He's something else."

Danas looked at the identical boys sitting on the rock, not knowing if this was a good or a bad thing.

* * * * *

"I don't know what's wrong... just everything." Vince said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Tell me what's going on with you. I bet we can come up with something to make things better." Vincent said soothingly.

"Well... I'm still at Camp Little Eagle... the place where you saw me last time." Vince said, then sniffed inelegantly.

Vincent smiled at the action, then asked, "How are they treating you?"

"Okay I guess. Doctor Dan has taken me off all the medication and... I think maybe it was too soon." Vince said as the tears started to fall down his cheeks.

"So why don't you tell me what's making you sad?" Vincent said gently.

"My life sucks." Vince said in a whisper.

"How?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I'm alone. I'm in the camp... there's... nothing for me... I'm all alone." Vince said between sobs.

"What about Lawrence? Do you know where he is?" Vincent asked quietly.

Vince shook his head, but didn't seem inclined to elaborate.

"Vince. I think I can help, but you're going to have to listen to me... And you may not like hearing some of it." Vincent finished reluctantly.

Vince looked at Vincent with hope.

"Do you remember what Grandma Winters used to say?" Vincent asked quietly.

Vince thought for a moment, then hesitantly answered, "Make yourself useful for a change and get me a beer."

Vincent smiled and said, "No, not that. The other thing. You know, when you'd fall down or something like that."

Vince nodded and said from memory, "Don't be a whiny little pussy."

"Yeah. That's it." Vincent said with a weak smile.

Vince looked at Vincent with question.

"It's okay to feel bad. It's even okay to cry if you need to. But it's not okay when that's all you do." Vincent explained carefully.

"But... I'm alone." Vince said desperately.

"And whose fault is that?" Vincent asked seriously.

Vince's eyes filled with tears again.

"Do you want the loneliness to stop?" Vincent asked as he looked into Vince's eyes.

Vince reluctantly nodded.

"Find Lawrence." Vincent said firmly.

"But he's a queer." Vince said hesitantly.

"He's your brother." Vincent said seriously.

Vince looked at Vincent with indecision.

"Listen Vince. It looks like Cory never sat you down and gave you the talk that he gave me before I joined Starfleet." Vincent said in thought.

"Cory never really talked to me much at all." Vince said reluctantly.

"Talk to him. He's a good guy and if you'll tell him the truth about what you're thinking, he'll tell you some stuff that will make a lot of things easier to understand." Vincent said seriously.

"But he's a queer too." Vince said cautiously.

Vincent took in a slow breath then released it before saying, "Dad was wrong about a lot of the things he taught you. I know he told you not to trust anyone who's gay, but... Vince, they're just people. There are gay people who are good and who you can trust and there's some that will screw you over just like Dad said. Please give Cory and Sean a chance.

They're really decent people and they can make things better for you if you'll let them."

"What do I have to do?" Vince asked hesitantly.

"Just listen to them." Vincent said, then noticed the distrusting look in Vince's eyes.

"You don't have to believe them, but don't automatically think that they're telling you lies either. Listen to what they say and be honest with them and I promise that they'll make things better." Vincent said seriously.

"Okay. I guess I can do that." Vince said hesitantly as he looked away.

"There's one more thing." Vincent said as he waited for Vince to meet his gaze.

Finally Vince looked into Vincent's eyes with question.

"Find Lawrence." Vincent said seriously.

Vince looked away again, not acknowledging that he had heard.

"He's your brother, your only blood family. That means something." Vincent said seriously.

"But he's a god dammed queer." Vince spat.

"He's a person." Vincent said as he felt tears of shame welling in his eyes, knowing without a doubt that he would have said the same thing not too long ago.

Vince looked at Vincent with anger and was surprised to see his emotional state.

"Vince. I'm going to tell you something, and I hope it makes sense to you." Vincent said carefully.

Vince reluctantly nodded.

"Where Lawrence wants to stick his dick has nothing to do with you. He isn't hot for you. He isn't trying to make you gay. And if your Lawrence is the same as mine, he doesn't even like you at the moment." Vincent said seriously.

"Really?" Vince asked with surprise.

"Really. You've got to realize that Lawrence being gay has nothing to do with you. It's just the way he is." Vincent said with conviction.

Vince nodded in thought.

Vincent noticed something in Vince's expression that he recognized.

"Guys, could you give us a minute or two. I've got something else to tell Vince and... well, it's private." Vincent said over his shoulder.

"Okay, but who is he?" Lehman asked, unable to restrain his curiosity any longer.

"He's the me from an alternate dimension." Vincent said simply.

"Um, yeah. Okay... We'll be right over there when you're ready." Lehman said, then took Danas by the arm to lead him away.

* * * * *

After a moment to be sure that the two were out of earshot, Vincent quietly said, "For a long time, I was afraid that maybe I was gay."

Vince looked up at Vincent with surprise.

"I was stuck on that question for a long time and just figured it out for sure... and I mean just." Vincent finished with a smile.

"Could you... is there some way you could help me do that?" Vince asked hopefully.

Vincent looked at the terrain around them as it suddenly seemed to calm and settle into place.

"I can if you'll tell me one thing." Vincent said seriously.

"What?" Vince asked cautiously.

"What'll you do if you find out that you're gay?" Vincent asked seriously.

Vince froze at the question.

"If you're going to get all freaky and try to kill yourself, then I'm not going to tell you." Vincent said frankly.

Vince nodded that he had heard.

"Think about it. I'll wait as long as it takes for you to come up with an answer." Vincent said seriously.

Vince nodded as he considered.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of silence, Vincent glanced over at Lehman and Danas and gave a 'thumbs up', that everything was going well.

Finally Vince whispered, "I don't know."

Vincent looked at Vince with question.

"If I found out that I was gay... I don't know what I'd do." Vince reluctantly admitted.

"Do you know what you're going to do if you find out 'one hundred percent, for sure' that you're straight?" Vincent asked carefully.

Vincent watched and waited patiently as Vince pondered the question.

"I guess I'd go on like I have been... I've been thinking about... maybe asking if there's any way I could take some special training and stuff so I could be in Starfleet." Vince said hesitantly.

Vincent was confused by Vince's reluctance to say it for a moment, then realized that what Vince was really saying was that he wanted to pattern his life after Vincent's.

After a brief smile that he wasn't able to contain, Vincent said, "If that's what you want to do, all you need to do is talk to Cory or Sean about it and I know that they'll do everything in their power to make it happen for you."

Vince looked at Vincent with surprise at the statement.

"You want to know a secret?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Vince reluctantly nodded.

"If you found out that you were gay, you could do the exact same thing." Vincent said seriously.

Vince's eyes went wide at the statement.

"Yeah, I know. After the way Dad went on and on about it, it's hard to believe that it really isn't that big of a deal." Vincent said frankly.

"It isn't?" Vince asked cautiously.

Vincent shook his head and said, "Cory and Sean can explain it a lot better than I can, but what it boils down to is that being gay doesn't make any difference at all about anything that's important. You'll still be you, no matter where you want to stick your dick."

Vince giggled at the simplicity of the statement.

"Feeling better?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Vince chuckled and said, "Yeah. I feel like I just went from having no future at all to having everything in the universe handed to me."

"Yeah. It feels pretty good, don't it." Vincent asked with a smile.

"Really good." Vince agreed.

"I've got a quest thing that I've got to do before I can wake up. You can go with us, if you want to." Vincent said seriously.

"Weren't you going to help me figure out if I'm gay or not?" Vince asked hesitantly.

"Does it really matter?" Vincent asked as he looked Vince in the eyes.

After a moment to consider, Vince reluctantly said, "I guess not... but I'd still like to know."

"Okay." Vincent said, then motioned for Lehman and Danas to come to them.

"What are you going to do?" Vince asked in a flash of panic when he saw them approaching.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "We're not going to do anything 'to' you."

Vince looked at Vincent with caution.

Vincent noticed that the mountains had started to churn and build around them again.

"Hey Lehman, can you do Benny again?" Vincent asked as the pair approached.

"How do you want him?" Lehman asked seriously.

Vincent only had to think for a moment before answering, "In his swimsuit... and wet, with his hair slicked back if you can do that."

Lehman nodded, then transformed himself into the image of Benny, wearing only swim trunks and glistening with water droplets.

Vince's mouth dropped open at the sight.

"Okay Vince. If I was gay, this is the guy that I'd want to be with." Vincent said seriously.

"What?" Vince asked as he blinked and seemed to break out of his daze.

"I'm just saying that it's okay for you to notice that he looks good. That doesn't mean anything. But when you look at him, what do you feel? If you and him were alone, what would you want to do? How far would you go?" Vincent asked in a leading tone.

"I... I..." Vince stammered as his gaze drifted down to Lehman's crotch.

"You don't need to tell me Vince. Just try to forget all that crap that Dad taught you and remember what it really means to be gay." Vincent said as he stood.

"What does it mean?" Vince asked quickly, as if Vincent were about to impart some fundamental truth.

"It means that you want to have sex with guys." Vincent said frankly, then continued, "Take a good look at Benny here and I bet that if you're honest with yourself, you'll know for sure if you're gay or not."

While Vince was considering the words, Vincent moved to Danas' side.

Vince looked up and down Benny's body as his expression became contemplative.

"We're heading to The Core now. You can still come with us if you want." Vincent said carefully.

Vince blinked, then turned his attention to Vincent and said, "No. I've got some thinking to do."

Vincent raised his eyebrows in question.

"It's time for me to start making my future happen." Vince said, then glanced at Lehman again.

"How are you going to start?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"By finding my brother." Vince said firmly.

"Good for you." Vincent said happily, then turned to leave.

Lehman transformed back to his true self, then said in a secretive whisper, "Benny lived at the Kimber IV colony. I don't know how that worked out in your dimension, but if Benny survived, I bet he could really use a friend about now."

Vince looked at Lehman with surprise at the suggestion.

"It was nice to meet you Vince. I hope everything works out for you." Lehman said as he turned to join Danas and Vincent.

"Thanks." Vince said as he waived at the trio.

All three turned and waved at him before continuing their journey.

* * * * *

"Do you think he's gay?" Lehman asked Vincent casually.

Vincent thought for a moment, then shrugged before saying, "Maybe, maybe not. And if he is, I don't know if he'll admit it to himself yet. But I think that if he'll talk with Cory and Sean and Doctor Dan, he'll be fine either way."

"There it is." Danas said, as he pointed at a protrusion on the horizon.

"That's The Core?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yes, since we were able to travel directly across the Mountains of Despair without diversion, we were able to avoid the Swamps completely.

"That's good. Just because I'm from Florida doesn't mean that I have any special love for swamps." Vincent said frankly.

At Lehman and Danas' confused looks, Vincent said, "You'd just have to be from Florida to understand."

* * * * *

As the trio approached a large door, Vincent felt yet another 'Wizard of Oz' moment.

"Allow me to speak for us." Danas said quietly, then forcefully knocked.

A small window opened high up beside the door and a furry faced animal poked his head out to look at them.

"I am Danas of the Queen's Knights. We need to speak with the queen on a matter of some urgency." Danas said seriously.

"State your business." The furry faced man said firmly.

"As one of the Queen's Knights, I have no obligation to answer to you. Allow us entry." Danas said in a growl.

The furry man withdrew and closed the window.

A moment later the door opened to reveal two guards holding spears.

"Welcome Danas. You were dispatched to guard travelers on the forest path, has there been a problem?" One of the guards asked seriously.

The guard was a humanoid deer, much like Danas, but with larger antlers.

"No. The Succubus has been defeated and the Forest Path is safe to travel." Danas said proudly.

"You defeated the Succubus?" The guard asked, with surprise.

"I did, with the aid of this young one. We need to speak with the Queen to make our report." Danas said seriously.

"She is in her private garden. I'm sure she will want to be informed immediately." The guard said as he stepped aside to allow the trio entry.

"Vincent and Lehman, this is my brother Venad." Danas said formally.

"What types of creatures are these? They are reminiscent of the Travelers." Venad said cautiously.

Danas smiled and said, "Yes. I believe they are Travelers, but unlike others that we have met."

Venad nodded as he led the way through the narrow city streets.

Vincent looked around the city curiously, noticing that it was unusually bright and clean.

"The queen will be interested to know where you come from and about your theories about our existence." Danas said quietly to the boys.

"I hope she doesn't ask too many questions about it, because we don't have a lot of answers." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman nodded his agreement as they approached a large building in the center of town that was as fortified as the city itself.

After crossing a draw bridge to enter the queen's castle, Venad quietly asked, "How are you my brother?"

"I am well. This day has brought many revelations... and hope." Danas said cryptically.

Venad approached a guarded door and said, "We have great and important news for the Queen."

The guards looked over the group cautiously for a moment, then one of them held out his hands.

Danas and Venad each handed over their spears without hesitation.

The other guard opened the heavy door and stood aside.

* * * * *

"My queen. I bring good news and two Travelers to speak with you." Danas said formally.

Vincent watched the queen turn slowly and nearly broke into laughter when he saw her face.

"Brakkii." Vincent said with delight.

"You sound surprised." Brakkii said with a smile.

"Well, I thought it might be you, but I wasn't sure. Why did you bring me here?" Vincent asked seriously.

"You've got it backward my friend. *You* brought *me* here." Brakkii said frankly.

"I did?" Vincent asked curiously.

Brakkii nodded and said, "From what I gathered, you found yourself in this... place. And when you realized that it was a dream, you called me. I was drawn in here with you and have been waiting for you to arrive."

"I did that?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Yes. And if all your people have this ability, there is no possible way that I can go anywhere near your world. They can't even know of my existence or I could be ripped to shreds being pulled from one dreamscape to another." Brakkii said seriously.

"Oh. I didn't realize that." Vincent said quietly.

"If that's the case, how am I here?" Lehman asked curiously.

"I was able to bring you in." Brakkii said frankly.

At Lehman's inquisitive look, Brakkii continued, "Vincent was worried about you and was intent on finding you. I brought you into this dream place so you could comfort him and perhaps help him on his quest to reach The Core."

"Thanks." Vincent muttered, as he thought about everything that had happened in the light of this new information.

"So now that we're here... there's nothing left to be done, is there? How do we get out?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"We're trapped here until Vincent wakes up. This isn't like the type of dream or illusion that I create. This is a dimensional incarnation which is bent and twisted to the will of the dreamer." Brakkii said with difficulty.

"Will we still exist when he awakens?" Danas asked hesitantly.

Brakkii smiled at Danas and said, "Yes, you will."

"How?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Because you didn't create this dream place. It existed before you arrived and will continue to exist after you leave. Some of the elements of this place were altered to accommodate you, but most of it was not of your creation." Brakkii said seriously.

"I don't get it." Lehman said, cautiously.

"I think you do. You know how you were explaining the 'Dream Web' earlier... it's like that." Brakkii said frankly.

"So, does that mean that you're one of those creatures who can move from dream to dream?" Lehman asked curiously.

Brakkii considered for a moment before answering, "I suppose I could, if I wanted, but I would be in constant danger of becoming trapped as I am now."

"I don't know what we're supposed to do next." Vincent said, as he looked at the people around him.

Brakkii shrugged, then said, "It's your dream. What do you want to do?"

Vincent considered for a moment, then smiled as he said, "I'd like for Lehman to meet Pipi."

"Then that's what we'll do." Brakkii said, then dramatically waved his arm.

* * * * *

The world seemed to dissolve, then reform around them.

Vincent looked around quickly and spotted the large tree that was Naleen's home.

"Come on Lehman, there's some people I want you to meet." Vincent said, as he started to run.

Lehman looked at Brakkii, Danas and Venad with question.

"Go with Vincent and have fun." Brakkii said with a peaceful smile.

Lehman could see that Brakkii didn't feel left out, so he hurried to follow Vincent to the large tree.

* * * * *

"Viznit!" A small voice screamed with glee.

"Hey Pipi! I found my brother, this is Lehman." Vincent said happily.

Pipi hopped to Vincent's side and looked at Lehman with wonder.

"Lehman, this is Pipi. He's the brave warrior who started me on my quest to find you." Vincent said with a cheeky grin.

Pipi's chest puffed out with pride at Vincent's description.

"Vincent?" A soft voice called.

Vincent turned at the sound and saw Naleen resting between the roots of her tree.

"Come over here and meet Pipi's mother." Vincent said cheerfully as he ran toward the tree.

Lehman and Pipi both hurried to join him.

As Vincent approached Naleen, he saw that she was holding someone, cradled in her lap.

"Thank you." Naleen whispered, as she stroked Peiron's fur with the gentlest of touches.

"I was glad to help." Vincent said past the lump in his throat.

Peiron opened his eyes and looked around curiously.

"How are you feeling Peiron?" Vincent asked in a whisper.

Peiron looked up at his mother, then at Vincent and said, "Happy."

"Good. I'm glad you're home again." Vincent said as he felt a tear threatening to fall.

Peiron snuggled into his mother's chest and fell back to sleep.

Vincent felt a tugging on his pants leg and looked down.

"Wanna play?" Pipi asked in a whisper.

Vincent smiled and said, "Yeah. Let's see if we can find some yummy honey berries so Lehman can try them."

Pipi hopped around in a circle, then darted away.

"Come on Lehman. We've had a really long day. It's time to play." Vincent said quietly, then took off in a full run to follow Pipi.

* * * * *

{"*I believe he is showing signs of returning to consciousness.*"} Ship's voice said seriously.

Vincent opened his eyes and looked around the room curiously.

He was surprised to see that he wasn't in the lounging hall, but in another room that he hadn't been in before.

Vincent opened his mouth to ask, 'what happened', but found that he couldn't make a sound.

{"Vincent, I'm so glad to see that you are well."} Treep clucked with relief.

"What happened?" Lehman asked groggily as he sat up on the neighboring bed.

Vincent also sat up, then shrugged in Lehman's direction.

"You can't talk and I can't change... everything's back to normal." Lehman said with resignation.

Treep fumbled with a necklace that he was wearing, then quietly clucked something.

A computerized voice sounded from the jeweled translator which was the pendant.

"How's y'all feelin 'dis mawnin?" it said in a dainty woman's voice, sounding much like a Southern belle.

Vincent and Lehman exchanged a look before simultaneously breaking into uncontrollable laughter.

Chapter 41

"What's a matter Honey Pie? Is my lil 'ole voice not to y'alls liking?" Treep asked with confusion.

Vincent and Lehman were nearly convulsed with laughter by this point.

Suddenly, Vincent hopped down off the bed he had awakened on and ran to Lehman's side.

After a brief moment of concentration, Lehman quickly said, "Vincent needs the bathroom."

Treep looked at Vincent and Lehman with confusion, then said in a dainty feminine voice, "We've got us a nice lil bathin room right beside the loungin hall that y'all was in before."

Vincent shook his head firmly, then took Lehman's hand again.

"Toilet. He means toilet." Lehman said quickly.

"Y'all come on right over here, Sugar. We've got us a privy right here in this lil ole room." Treep said as he indicated a side door.

Vincent raced past Treep with a panicked look in his eyes.

Treep looked at Lehman with question, reluctant to speak again.

"I think we need to find a voice that's more suited to you." Lehman said with a smile.

Treep considered the words, then carefully said, "I declare! Ship said that this lil ole voice o' mine was just like butter drippin off a hot biscuit."

Lehman looked at Treep with confusion for a moment, then said, "I don't even know what that's supposed to mean."

* * * * *

Vincent walked out of the lavatory looking much relieved.

"Better?" Lehman asked with a smile.

Vincent nodded with contentment.

"Good, because I need to go too." Lehman said quietly.

Vincent had a look of uncertainty as he watched Lehman walk past him and into the little room.

A moment later Lehman stepped out and took a deep inhale of breath, then said, "You could have warned me."

Vincent shook his head as he pointed at his mouth.

"You could have held your nose or made gagging sounds or tackled me and told me telepathically... Sweet Mother of the Universe! I hope all humans don't do that when they go to the toilet." Lehman said as he tried to catch his breath.

Vincent shrugged, not knowing what else he could do.

* * * * *

As Lehman walked out of the lavatory, he flashed a glare at Vincent, then said, "Treep, we need to get your voice taken care of."

Vincent shook his head, then motioned for Lehman to come to him.

Lehman began to slowly back away from Vincent with a look of caution.

Vincent rolled his eyes, then walked to Lehman and took his hand.

After a moment, Lehman nodded, then turned to Treep and said, "Before we fix your translator voice, could you tell us what happened between the time we laid down in the lounging hall and when we woke up here?"

"Well, Sugar Plum..." Treep began to say when Lehman stopped him.

"Please turn off the translator and tell us in your own voice." Lehman said quickly.

Treep raised the translator pendant and pressed a sequence of jewels before saying, {"Ship noticed that you had both lost consciousness, he believed that you had fallen asleep, so he lowered the lighting to prevent your skin from being damaged."}

Vincent and Lehman shared a look of concern.

{"When it seemed that you had been asleep beyond what is normal, we tried to wake you, but to no effect. So you were brought here to the medical facility. We were concerned that some of the food you ate might have been poisonous to you and caused you to fall into a coma."}

{"How long were we asleep?"} Lehman asked curiously.

{"Ship, by their method of measuring time, how long were the Trach Manjai asleep?"} Treep asked seriously.

{"Fifteen hours and twenty two minutes."} Ship responded immediately.

Vincent fumbled for Lehman's hand then sent one brief telepathic message.

//I thought you said that time passed differently while you were dreaming.// Vincent said seriously.

"It does for everyone in the universe except you." Lehman said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

After some telepathic conversation with Vincent, Lehman looked upward and asked, "Ship, is it possible to change the voice that Treep is using?"

"The translation device is programmed with 2651 Human voice patterns." Ship responded in a neutral tone.

"Wow. That's a lot to go through." Lehman said slowly.

Vincent quickly put his hand on Lehman's arm to ask a question.

"Vincent wants to know where you got that many Human voice patterns." Lehman said into the air.

"The voice patterns were formulated from audio and video transmissions from Earth." Ship said seriously.

Vincent nodded, confirming that he expected the answer.

Lehman was considering how they should go about selecting a new voice when he noticed that Vincent seemed to be examining Treep with a very speculative look.

"Have you got an idea?" Lehman asked curiously.

Vincent nodded, then reached over to place his hand on Lehman's arm again..

After a moment of telepathic contact, Lehman looked up and said, "Vincent thinks that a good voice for Treep would be someone named Brad Pitt. Do you have that one?"

"Yes Trach Manja Lehman, that voice is available." Ship said seriously.

"Can you change it or does Treep have to do it?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Although Treep can change voices with the controls on the unit, finding the proper selection may be time consuming. I will make the adjustment now." Ship said casually.

After a moment, Lehman asked, "Treep, will you say something?"

"What do you want me to say?" Treep asked cautiously.

Vincent and Lehman looked at each other consideringly.

"I do like the way this voice sounds, but do you think it's right for me?" Treep asked with concern.

"Vincent thought that it would sound right for you because, well, first of all because it's male, but also because it's the right age for you." Lehman said frankly.

"Do you think he's right?" Treep asked cautiously.

"Now that I've heard it, yes, I do. I think this is a very good voice for you. In fact, I can't think of one that would be better." Lehman finished with a smile.

"Wow. I have a Human voice." Treep said happily.

* * * * *

"Captain Rasch? Do you have a minute?" Lehman asked cautiously as they walked onto the bridge.

"Yes. Ship was just telling me that you thought Treep's first voice made him sound like a girly man." Captain Rasch said in a low voice with a heavy accent.

Vincent began to chuckle, drawing Lehman's attention.

Lehman waited for Vincent to calm, then made brief contact to find out what was funny about the voice.

"Does this mean that you do not approve of my voice?" Captain Rasch asked seriously.

Lehman smiled at Vincent, then turned his attention to Captain Rasch and said, "Vincent recognizes your voice and thought it was funny at first. But I think it sounds just right for you."

"What do you think Trach Manja Vincent?" Captain Rasch asked with anticipation.

Vincent tried to restrain his chuckles as he gave a 'thumbs up'.

"That means he really likes it." Lehman said with a grand smile.

"I like this voice. It has character. I will use it." Captain Rasch said triumphantly.

Vincent casually put his hand on Lehman's arm and sent a brief telepathic message.

Rather than answer as Vincent expected, Lehman shook his head then said, "Captain Rasch, if you'll excuse us, I need to talk to Vincent privately."

Vincent looked at Lehman with surprise, not having any idea of what Lehman might want to say to him.

"If I'm wrong, we can come right back here. But If I'm right... just come with me." Lehman finished with exasperation.

* * * * *

Once inside the Lounging Hall, Lehman guided Vincent to the side and said, "Do you really want to help your Clan and your brother?"

Vincent cautiously nodded.

"Then remember what it means to be a Trach Manja." Lehman said seriously.

Vincent looked at Lehman with question, not knowing what he was trying to say.

"Random factors." Lehman said frankly.

Vincent thought about the words and began to understand where Lehman was leading him.

"I think that the more we know and think and plan and try to control events, the fewer random factors we'll have to work with. I know you want to know as much as you can about what's happened to your Clan and your brother." Lehman said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"But think about it. They probably have lots of people who can help out in normal ways. If we go in there knowing what to expect, there's a chance that we won't be any more help than anyone else. But if we go in there as Trach Manjai and use the powers the universe has given us we might be able to make a real difference and actually help them in a way that matters."

After a moment of thought, Vincent let out a resigned sigh and nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, we have encountered a problem." Treep said with concern as he entered the lounging hall.

Vincent raised his eyebrows as a prompt to continue.

"I probably shouldn't be telling you this but... you're Trach Manjai." Treep said with worry evident in his voice.

Vincent and Lehman shared a concerned look.

"Ship has detected a small vessel intersecting our projected course. We have slightly altered course to avoid contact." Treep said quietly.

"So what's the problem?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Left on it's current trajectory, the vessel will impact a planetoid and be destroyed in two point three Starfleet standard months." Ship said before Treep could answer.

"Will they be able to fix their ship before that happens?" Lehman asked as he watched Treep's expression carefully.

"No Trach Manja Lehman. My readings indicate that the sole occupant of the alien vessel is in cryogenic sleep." Ship said, and his computerized voice actually sounded concerned.

"Why don't we just stop and help?" Lehman asked hesitantly, afraid that he might already know the answer.

"I have been instructed to proceed to Earth at maximum sustainable warp." Ship said in a resigned tone.

Lehman and Vincent exchange looks.

"Ship, if I ask you to, can you stop long enough for us to help that other ship?" Lehman asked as he looked at Treep again.

After a moment, ship responded, "Yes Trach Manja Lehman, if you request that I do so, I can alter our course and stop to render aid."

Vincent immediately shook his head.

Lehman looked at him curiously, then touched him briefly.

"Okay Vincent, I guess you're right. It would be wrong for me to countermand Captain Rasch's orders. Let's hurry and ask him to help." Lehman said quietly.

Vincent nodded, then walked with Lehman and Treep out of the room.

* * * * *

"Captain Rasch, we need to turn the ship and help out that other ship we just passed." Lehman said seriously.

"I have been ordered to deliver you to Earth at the best possible speed. If we stop to investigate the damaged vessel there is no way of knowing how long we would be delayed. It is unfortunate, but necessary for us to continue on course." Captain Rasch said in a tone of voice that did not invite argument.

"I don't care." Lehman said firmly, then looked upward as he continued, "Ship, change course so we can help that other ship."

"As you wish, Trach Manja Lehman." Ship responded immediately.

"Ship, stop! I'm your captain! You take orders from me!" Captain Rasch said angrily.

"My apologies Captain Rasch, but the orders given me by Central AI indicate that Trach Manja Lehman outranks you." Ship said reasonably.

"Please help us Captain Rasch. I really don't want to do it this way but there's someone out there that needs us. This is what Trach Manjai do." Lehman said desperately.

After a moment of silence, Captain Rasch gave a sigh of resignation.

"Very well. It would be foolish of me to go against the will of the Trach Manjai. Ship, can you determine the best way to gain entry to the alien vessel?" Captain Rasch asked in a lower voice.

"I am negotiating with the alien computer now. The technology is primitive but the programming is quite unique in my experience." Ship said seriously.

"Once you've established the computer connection, discontinue main engines, fire braking thrusters and stop all forward momentum." Captain Rasch said professionally.

"Yes Captain." Ship said immediately.

"Treep, gather a team to investigate the alien vessel," Captain Rasch said, not showing any indication that he had been upset moments before.

"We need to go with you, Treep." Lehman said quickly.

"Are you sure... no, wait. Of course you are," Captain Rasch finished with a chuckle.

{"Challen and Graid, make preparations to board and assess the condition of an alien vessel."} Treep said into one of the consoles surrounding the main bridge.

"I have instructed the alien ship's computer to establish atmosphere, gravity and an acceptable level of heat in preparation for your arrival." Ship said seriously.

"Thank you Ship." Treep said into the air.

* * * * *

As the teleportal beam cleared, the entire team looked around the small ship curiously.

{"Graid, check out the computer systems. Ship can't connect with any memory files, see if you can find out why. Challen, assess the condition of the cryogenic unit and the occupant."} Treep said seriously.

"Come on." Lehman said to Vincent at his side.

After another moment to look around, Vincent followed.

* * * * *

{"Is he going to be alright?"} Lehman asked Challen with concern.

{"No. I'm afraid that when we established gravity on this ship, it caused irreparable damage to the cryogenic unit. Whoever designed this sleeper ship didn't consider the long term degradation of the materials they used."} Challen said, as he switched from scanning the machine to scanning the patient.

{Ship. Please transport me to the medical facility, then target the patient within the cryogenic unit and transport him as well."} Challen said quickly.

As soon as Challen's transportal beam cleared, Lehman looked at Vincent with concern.

Vincent motioned across the room toward Treep.

"Treep, can you get Ship to transport us over to the sickbay? We need to be there." Lehman asked quickly.

"Yes. Of course Trach Manja Lehman." Treep said, then pressed one of the jewels on the pendent of his necklace.

"Ship. The Trach Manjai wish to be relocated to the medical facility."

Immediately, the showers of sparkles erupted around them.

* * * * *

{"What's going on?"} Lehman asked quickly.

{"Reviving this boy is going to be more difficult than I first anticipated. It appears that his cryogenic unit has been malfunctioning for some time... I'm healing the physical damage before I attempt reanimation."} Challen said as he worked quickly.

{"How long is that going to take?"} Lehman asked quietly.

{"A matter of minutes. The cellular regeneration is a small matter. I am not concerned by the damage itself, but the consequences of the damage."} Challen said as he concentrated on his work.

{"I don't understand."} Lehman said, then turned to see that Vincent's expression matched his own.

{"It would be better for me not to explain since it is all speculation... the physical damage has been repaired."} Challen said seriously.

"Vincent, help me." Lehman said as he took a step closer to the bed.

Without hesitation, Vincent hurried to Lehman's side.

"Look at him." Lehman said quietly.

Vincent looked down at the boy who appeared to be only slightly older than he was.

The boy was naked on the treatment table, but the ice crystals covering him somehow gave the effect of him being almost unreal.

His hair was deep black and when the light hit it just right, it had the slightest blue iridescence.

Without thinking, Vincent reached out to touch the boy's frozen cheek.

{"The reanimation treatment that I am preparing to administer could be dangerous for you. It would be best if you moved away so you'll remain safe."} Challen said in a warning tone.

"No." Vincent said in a voice that sounded like a croak.

Lehman looked at Vincent with concern.

Vincent glanced to his side, then took Lehman's hand into his.

After a moment of telepathic contact, Lehman nodded his agreement.

Simultaneously, Vincent and Lehman placed their hands on the frozen boy.

{"What are you doing?"} Challen asked in confusion.

"Now." Vincent croaked.

Challen looked at him with question.

{"Start your treatment. Whatever is going to happen to him is going to happen to us."} Lehman said firmly.

Challen stared at the boys for a moment, then reluctantly began to work the jeweled controls to initiate the revival technique.

"Live." Vincent said in a horrible, raspy voice.

Lehman closed his eyes and concentrated, trying with all his might to project his will to live into the body of the frozen boy.

{"I do not understand what you hope to accomplish by doing this."} Challen said quietly as he looked up from his controls.

{"You don't need to understand, you just need to care."} Lehman said distantly as he concentrated.

* * * * *

Vincent's hands ached from the cold, but he kept them firmly in place.

He looked at the boy's face and thought about how this person who was so close to his own age deserved the chance to live and have a future.

He felt in his heart that the universe would be diminished if this boy beneath his hands ceased to be.

His thoughts were interrupted when, finally, he was able to feel warmth coming from the boy's body.

"His mind is beginning to awaken." Lehman said suddenly.

"Careful." Vincent rasped.

"I'm just going to watch, not touch." Lehman said with assurance.

Vincent nodded that he heard, not wanting to use his voice unnecessarily.

After some long silent minutes, Lehman whispered, "This is bad."

Vincent turned to look at Lehman with concern.

"I'm not a trained telepath, I've never worked with a damaged mind..." Lehman trailed off helplessly.

Lehman noticed Challen's curious look and continued, {"Whoever this guy was... I mean is... no... I mean was. He's gone. The person he was is gone. I don't have any idea how or why it happened or if the person he used to be will be able to come back. But right now this kid is empty. He knows nothing. Nothing at all."}

Vincent looked down at the boy with concern, then over to Challen.

{"I believe I can explain why."} Challen said in prelude, {"There were traces of a drug in his body that may or may not have had an effect on his memory. I have no way of knowing how the compound would effect his alien physiology. Beyond that, his brain was physically damaged when the cryogenic unit malfunctioned during his voyage. I have repaired the damage, but I have no way of restoring memories. Soleen-Avalla medical technology is very limited in that field."} Challen said with regret.

{"So you're saying that he might have been drugged to forget everything?"} Lehman asked cautiously.

{"It is possible. But it is also possible that the drug was administered for some reason to prepare the boy for cryogenic travel and that the physical damage caused the memory loss. I fear that there are too many unknown variables right now for us to determine the truth."} Challen said with regret.

"Doesn't matter." Vincent croaked with difficulty.

Lehman looked at Vincent with concern.

"Do it." Vincent said as he looked Lehman in the eyes.

Lehman raised his eyebrows, not understanding what Vincent meant.

"You." Vincent said firmly.

"But I can't. I'm not trained to do anything like that at all. I could screw it up and he'd have to live with my mistakes for the rest of his life." Lehman said cautiously.

"He's empty." Vincent said with a very raspy voice, then looked down at the boy with concern.

Lehman followed Vincent's gaze, then reluctantly nodded.

{"I don't understand. What are you going to do?"} Challen asked cautiously.

{"I'm going to give him some memories. Not all of them, but hopefully enough that he'll be able to function."} Lehman said carefully.

{"But what about his own memories?"} Challen asked with concern.

{"If they're in there somewhere, then hopefully he'll be able to find them. But he's not going to find them the way he is. He is completely blank right now."} Lehman said in concentration.

* * * * *

After many long silent minutes of working on the boy, Lehman asked, "What languages should I give him?"

Vincent patted his pocket and was relieved to find that he still had the throat spray that Dr. Perry had given him.

He sprayed some into his mouth, then swallowed before quietly saying, "Why don't you give him all of them?"

Lehman shook his head and said, "I'm afraid that each thing I add to his mind might be wiping out something that he just isn't capable of remembering yet. I've given him a lot of things already, like how to feed himself, how to use the bathroom, how to dress. But I'm afraid that with each new thing I give him that I'm making it that much less likely that he'll ever remember who he was before."

Vincent nodded that he understood, then said, "English. He'll need that on Earth. Clan Short's telepaths can give him more languages later if he needs them."

"Yeah. Sounds good." Lehman said, then turned his full attention to the boy on the table.

After a few more minutes of work, Lehman finally said, "He needs a name."

Vincent looked at Lehman with question.

"There's a really good chance that he'll be on Earth for a while, so you should pick a Human name for him to use until he remembers his own." Lehman said frankly.

Vincent looked down at the boy for a moment as he considered, then smiled and quietly said, "Lindon."

* * * * *

The boy opened his eyes and looked around the room curiously.

Vincent was surprised by Lindon's large, soulful eyes.

"Hey there, can you hear me?" Lehman asked gently.

The boy blinked, then slowly asked, "Do I know you?"

Lehman giggled and said, "In a way. I gave you a few of my memories until your own come back."

Lindon squinted at Lehman with confusion.

"Don't worry about it now. Later, whenever you're ready, we'll explain everything to you." Lehman said quietly.

The boy turned his head slightly and looked at Vincent.

"This is my brother Vincent. He can't talk very well right now." Lehman said seriously.

"Hello Vincent. I'm Lindon."

Vincent smiled and said, "Hi."

Lindon winced at the sound of Vincent's voice, then smiled at the embarrassed look on Vincent's face.

"And this is the doctor who saved you. His name is Challen." Lehman said as he gestured across the Soleen-Avalla version of a biobed.

"Hi." Lindon said timidly as he stared at the feathered doctor.

{"How are you feeling?"} Challen asked cautiously.

"He wants to know how you're feeling. Challen and his people aren't able to speak English." Lehman said seriously.

"I... um... I don't know...I think I feel alright... but I'm hungry." Lindon said slowly.

Lehman smiled and said, "We might need to check and see if you're related to Vincent. That's usually his answer too."

A warning glance from Vincent was his only response.

Lindon chuckled at the reaction.

{"Challen, is it okay for Lindon to go and have something to eat? I mean, is he well enough?"} Lehman asked seriously.

After a moment of looking over his readings, Challen quietly said, {"According to his readings, some food might be a very good idea. But he isn't strong enough to be able to leave the medical unit."}

Lindon looked from Lehman to Challen, not understanding a thing they were saying.

Vincent noticed and quietly said, "Lehman is working on getting you some food."

Lindon looked up at Vincent and gave a glowing smile.

Vincent was once again assaulted by the emotional impact of Lindon's large soulful eyes. They seemed to be windows that reflected his very soul.

"I guess you're too weak to get out of bed yet. Vincent and I can go get you something to eat." Lehman said quietly.

"I have notified Taryn of your needs. Your food will arrive shortly." Ship said in a soft voice that sounded concerned.

"He needs clothes or a blanket." Vincent said quietly, then absently reached a hand up to massage his throat.

Lehman nodded, then walked to Challen to ask him where they might find some clothes for Lindon.

"Will you help me to sit up?" Lindon asked as he tried to sit forward.

As Lindon struggled to sit up, Vincent automatically moved to his side to help him.

"Take my hand." Vincent said quickly.

Lindon reached out and grabbed Vincent's hand as he tried to pull himself to a sitting position.

Vincent noticed that Lindon had a thin membrane of webbing between each of his fingers.

Automatically, Vincent looked down at Lindon's feet and saw that his toes were also webbed. Beyond that, they seemed elongated and looked more like fingers than toes.

At the feeling of movement, Vincent turned his attention back to Lindon, who had nearly achieved a sitting position when he noticed that something seemed to be stuck to his back.

As soon as Lindon was somewhat stable, Vincent moved behind him to see what it was.

"Lehman." Vincent whispered.

Lehman walked to the bed carrying a folded bundle of clothes for Lindon.

As he followed Vincent's gaze, he froze in his tracks.

"That's..."

* * * * *

A clatter drew everyone's attention.

The sound was the scanning device that Challen had dropped.

He was staring at Lindon with a look of wonder.

"What's wrong?" Lindon asked in a whisper.

"You have wings." Vincent said simply.

Lindon looked at Vincent with confusion for a moment, then turned his head to look over his shoulder.

Vincent's eyes went wide when he saw that Lindon could turn his head almost completely around.

"Wow." Lindon said, then turned his head facing forward again.

Challen let out a squawk that neither Vincent nor Lehman could interpret.

{"The missing link."} Challen said in wonder.

{"What was that?"} Lehman asked curiously.

{"Since becoming aware of the other species in the universe, my people have speculated that because we all have so many features in common, there must have been a... transitional species. A missing link from the other humanoid species and the Avalla people."} Challen said distantly.

{"I am sorry to disappoint you Challen, but my reading show that the alien..."} Ship began to say.

"Lindon." Vincent interrupted.

After a moment, Ship continued, {"My readings show that Lindon has no genetic markers in common with the Avalla people. Despite appearances, his genetic makeup is more closely related to Humans than to either the Soleen or the Avalla."}

{"Oh. Thank you Ship."} Challen said with disappointment.

"What's going on?" Lindon asked curiously.

"I guess Challen thought that your people and his might be related because you both have feathers." Lehman said quietly.

"It is more than that." Ship said carefully.

All three boys turned their attention toward the Ship's speaker.

"The Soleen know of their origins with the Gorn, but the Avalla have no such knowledge. They wish to feel... related to some other species, as the Soleen are." Ship said quietly.

"I guess I can understand that. Looking around the universe and seeing all the other species running around with things in common and realizing that you are different from all of them... it would be lonely." Lehman said speculatively.

The growl of Lindon's stomach drew the attention of everyone in the room.

"I think we need to feed that thing before it attacks someone." Lehman said with a chuckle as he handed the bundle of clothes he had been carrying to Lindon.

Vincent nodded, then said, "Good, I hope Taryn brings extra because I'm hungry too."

Lehman rolled his eyes and said, "When *aren't* you hungry."

"Does that mean you don't want to eat with us?" Lindon asked as he looked at Lehman with his impossibly large eyes.

"Yeah. I'll eat with you... In fact, I really *am* hungry." Lehman finished with surprise.

"We haven't eaten for nearly a day." Vincent said frankly.

"How do I?" Lindon asked as he held up the tunic that Lehman had given him.

"Oh, I didn't think of that. We're going to have to find some way to work around the wings." Lehman said in thought.

"Put on the pants. Leave the shirt." Vincent said simply.

Lindon looked at Lehman with question.

"Yeah. That'll work. You can always depend on Vincent to find a simple way around a problem when his stomach is empty." Lehman said with a smile.

Vincent rolled his eyes, then moved suddenly to Lindon's side when his balance seemed to waver.

"Let us help you." Lehman said quietly as he moved to the other side of the bed.

Lindon watched as Vincent and Lehman both worked to get the pants over his feet and up his legs.

"I'll lift, you pull." Lehman said as he moved further up the bed to help get the pants over Lindon's butt.

{"Please allow me to help."} Challen said quickly as he moved to help Lehman.

"Go." Vincent said, then pulled up the pants as Challen and Lehman lifted Lindon slightly.

"You're not as heavy as you look." Lehman commented.

Challen began to do something at the head of the bed, then it started to raise.

"Oh, that'll help." Lehman said as he watched the bed shift into a comfortable inclined position.

Lindon rested back slightly, then stopped.

"Um, my wings..." Lindon said uncomfortably.

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked with concern.

"I'm laying on them wrong." Lindon said as he tried to sit forward.

As Lehman helped Lindon to lean forward, Vincent moved behind him and slightly adjusted the wings so they were laying flat against Lindon's back.

{"Do you think he'll be able to fly?"} Lehman asked Challen curiously.

{"I don't know."} Challen said slowly.

{"No."} Ship said seriously.

Vincent and Lehman both looked up at the response.

{"Perhaps Lindon comes from a low gravity world. But given his mass and wingspan, there is no way he would be capable of flight on Soleena or Earth."} Ship said seriously.

"Are they talking about me?" Lindon asked Vincent curiously.

"Yeah. But it's all nice. Don't worry." Vincent said assuringly.

* * * * *

The door to the medical facility opened.

All present expected it to be Taryn, delivering the food, but instead they saw Treep walking in with a serious expression.

"Is something wrong?" Lehman asked with concern.

Treep touched a control on his translator before saying, "Yes. There are many things wrong, but nothing that should concern you."

"What is it?" Lehman asked seriously.

"Perhaps I should tell you privately. I wouldn't want to upset our guest." Treep said as he glanced at Lindon who was reclined on the elevated bed.

"I think Lindon would feel a lot better if he knew what was going on. We don't need to hide anything from him." Lehman said as he looked Treep in the eyes.

"This is Treep, he's the first officer of this ship." Vincent said to Lindon quietly.

"Hi Treep." Lindon said shyly as he turned his head to get a good look at Treep.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Lindon. Do you want to know what we have found on your ship?" Treep asked gently.

"Yes. Please?" Lindon asked hopefully.

"Graid, our chief engineer, has investigated your computer systems and found that they have been damaged to a degree such that we have no method of determining your origin." Treep said carefully.

"If you can't tell where he's from, can you tell where he was going?" Lehman asked speculatively.

"Yes. If the navigation systems had not failed, the ship would have traveled to Vulcan, then activated an automated distress beacon." Treep said quietly.

"What did the message say?" Lindon asked quickly.

"There was no message as such. Simply a distress beacon implying that you were in need of assistance." Treep said gravely.

"Did you check the ship..." Vincent began to say, then his voice seemed to catch.

After a quick throat spray, Vincent continued, "...for Lindon's personal stuff?"

Treep nodded, then quietly said, "There was something that might have been clothing. It was too deteriorated to be certain. There was nothing beyond that."

"What does it all mean?" Lehman asked quietly.

The door to the medical facility opened to reveal an Avalla man carrying a large tray of food.

"It means we should eat." Vincent said with a grin.

Lehman chuckled at the answer and said, "That seems to be your answer for just about everything."

Vincent shrugged, then stood aside so the Avalla man could bring the tray of food to Lindon.

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Challen hurried to the bed with a tray table and positioned it over Lindon's lap so the Avalla man could set the tray down.

After a moment to adjust his translator, Treep said, {"Thank you Taryn. Did you check with Ship to be sure that the food selections would be safe for our guest?"}

{"Yes. After the incident yesterday, I took extra care to be certain that the food would cause no harm."} Taryn said quietly.

Treep seemed to be satisfied with the answer as he nodded.

{"I brought sufficient food for the Trach Manjai as well. They must be hungry after their extended rest."} Taryn said as he cautiously looked at Vincent and Lehman.

{"Your food didn't cause what happened to us Taryn. It was caused by something else."} Lehman said seriously.

Taryn looked at Lehman uncertainly.

Vincent nodded his agreement with Lehman.

{"Thank you."} Taryn said timidly.

"What?" Lindon asked as he looked at the people gathered around his bed.

"Breakfast time." Vincent said as he removed a cover from one of the dishes on the tray.

Lehman chuckled and said, "I should have guessed that's how you'd summarize everything."

Vincent shrugged, then revealed another dish of food.

* * * * *

"Can you tell me now?" Lindon asked between bites of food.

"Tell you what?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Who am I? Why am I here? Why can't I remember anything?" Lindon asked quietly.

"We don't know." Vincent said simply, then grabbed another of the bite sized pieces of food on the tray.

Lehman smiled at Vincent's answer, then looked down at Lindon and said, "That's about right. We don't have any answers right now, but we're on our way to Earth and from what I know of Vincent's clan, they have so many telepaths that they're tripping over each other. So if you'll try not to worry about it today, maybe they'll be able to find some answers for you when we get there."

Lindon considered the words, then slowly nodded.

After swallowing his bite of food, Vincent said, "Vulcan healers too."

Lindon looked at Vincent with question.

"What he means is that if the telepaths can't fix you, then the Vulcan healers probably can. They can do all kinds of things with finding and fixing memories." Lehman said casually.

"Thank you for helping me." Lindon said quietly.

"We didn't do much. But you're welcome." Vincent said before taking another bite of food.

"Lindon, you'd better go ahead and eat before Vincent finishes it all." Lehman said with a chuckle.

Vincent wanted to protest the statement, but his mouth was too full.

* * * * *

"I have completed my search of the Federation database and found no record of them encountering Lindon's species before." Ship said into the room.

"Wow. You must be from really far away." Lehman said to Lindon with a smile.

"Or the Federation has classified any information about his people." Vincent said seriously.

Lindon and Lehman looked at Vincent with question.

When Vincent noticed their inquiring gazes, he continued, "I just know that the Federation doesn't always tell everyone everything about what they know."

"Trach Manja Vincent is correct. It is possible that the Federation has information that they are not inclined to share." Ship said frankly.

After a moment of consideration, Lehman said, "Well, if they do know something, I doubt that they'll tell us about it."

"Right. Let's not worry about that now. Sean and Cory can deal with that when we get to Earth. Ship, how long before we arrive?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I have increased speed to compensate for our diversion. Our expected time of arrival is Monday morning at 9am as time is measured at Clan Short headquarters." Ship said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then said, "Good, but what time is it now?"

"Currently it is Sunday morning, 7am using the same measure of time." Ship said casually.

"Then we have a whole day before we get there. Do we have anything we need to do?" Lehman asked curiously.

"I need a bath." Vincent said frankly.

"Well, that isn't exactly the kind of thing I was thinking of." Lehman said with a chuckle.

Vincent shrugged and said, "If we're not going to find out what's happening on Earth before we get there, then there's not much for us to do."

"Your voice is sounding better." Lindon said quietly.

Vincent looked at Lindon with surprise, then said, "Yeah. I guess it is. I was just froggy for a little bit until I got started using it again."

"You still sound a little bit raspy, but a lot better than you did before." Lehman said frankly.

"Would you ask Challen if Lindon can come take a bath with us? I don't want to try speaking in any other languages for a while." Vincent asked seriously.

{"Is Lindon well enough to come with us to take a bath?"} Lehman asked Challen quietly.

Challen looked over the controls of his medical unit briefly, then said, {"No. He needs to remain in bed for a while longer. From these readings, I believe that some sleep might be beneficial for him."}

Vincent nodded that he heard, then turned to Lindon and said, "Challen says that you should take a nap now. Lehman and I are going to take a bath, then we'll come back to see how you're doing."

Lindon had a momentary look of fear, then reluctantly nodded.

"Ship can call us if you need us for anything at all." Lehman said seriously.

"That is correct Lindon. If you have need of anything, simply ask." Ship said gently.

Lindon looked up at the ceiling, then smiled before saying, "Thank you Ship."

* * * * *

"What do you think is going to happen to Lindon when we reach Earth?" Lehman asked as they walked toward the lounging hall.

"I'm guessing that a doctor will look at him... I think Doc Austin is the Clan's doctor. After that... who knows?" Vincent said frankly.

"I'd feel a lot better if I knew what was going to happen." Lehman said honestly.

"Yeah. And I'd feel a lot better if I knew what happened to my brother and my Clan... sucks, don't it?" Vincent said as he turned to look Lehman in the eyes.

After a moment, Lehman nodded and said, "Yeah. It sucks a lot. But I guess you're right. We need to not think too far ahead for Lindon for the same reason that we're not finding out about your Clan. If things start to go wrong, influencing the random factors may be the only way we have of helping out."

"I think this is it." Vincent said as he indicated the door beside the Lounging Hall.

* * * * *

There were two Soleen men already in the bathing pool as they entered.

"Are you okay with this? I know you feel funny about nudity and being around other guys." Lehman said quietly.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I'm fine. I don't know what the difference is, but I don't feel weird about this at all."

"Okay. I just wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable." Lehman said quietly as he began to undress.

As Vincent opened the top of his jumpsuit, he said, "I should have packed some clothes for this trip. All I have is what I'm wearing."

"Trach Manja Vincent, if you would like, I could have fresh clothing brought for both of you and your clothes could be taken and cleaned." Ship said from overhead.

"Oh. Um, yeah. Thanks ship." Vincent said as he looked up.

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked curiously.

"It just feels funny knowing that Ship is always listening and watching." Vincent said frankly.

"Although I observe all events on the ship, I am honor bound not to reveal anything that I witness unless it is directly related to official business or the welfare of those in my care." Ship said seriously.

"I'm sorry Ship. I didn't mean to act like you were spying on us or something. It's just weird for me when I realize that no matter where I am in the ship, you're always there." Vincent said quietly.

"I can block my audio and video circuits to afford you privacy if that would be more comfortable for you." Ship offered gently.

"No. That's okay Ship. I don't mean for it to sound like I don't want you around. I'm just trying to say that I'm not used to it. That's all." Vincent said quickly.

"I understand. Please let me know if at some time you would like for me to allow you privacy." Ship said seriously.

Vincent smiled and said, "Thank you Ship. If I feel like I need some time alone, I'll let you know."

"That offer is extended to you as well Trach Manja Lehman." Ship said diplomatically.

"That's okay Ship. It doesn't bother me at all." Lehman said as he finished undressing.

Vincent glanced over in time to see Lehman's 'adult' equipment, then quickly turned away.

Lehman noticed and rolled his eyes.

"I thought you had gotten over that." Lehman said with exasperation.

"I'm working on it. But I'm pretty sure that looking at that big honking thing of yours isn't going to speed things up." Vincent said frankly.

Lehman chuckled, then walked to the water's edge to slowly get into the bathing pool.

Vincent smiled to himself as he finished getting undressed, then joined Lehman.

* * * * *

"This is nice." Lehman said as he relaxed in the warm water.

"Yeah. I just wish I knew how Lindon was doing." Vincent said quietly.

"Lindon has fallen into a natural sleep. Challen is now working to alleviate his muscle atrophy and believes that when Lindon awakens, he should be strong enough to walk." Ship said frankly.

"Is he going to be strong enough to be able to go to Earth with us when we arrive?" Lehman asked curiously.

After a moment, Ship answered, "Given his current condition and the treatment that Challen is using, I believe that he will."

"Thank you Ship. Will you let us know if Lindon needs anything? I'll be able to relax a lot better if I know that he isn't feeling alone." Vincent asked into the air.

"I will notify you immediately if he has any need." Ship said assuringly.

Vincent smiled and finally relaxed back into the water.

Chapter 42

"Lehman?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Yeah." Lehman responded, without opening his eyes.

"I was just thinking about what you said, about us using the powers that the universe gave us. Do you really think we did anything?" Vincent asked curiously.

"How do you mean?" Lehman asked curiously.

"When we put our hands on Lindon. Did we actually do anything that helped him?" Vincent asked slowly.

After a moment of consideration, Lehman said, "I think so. I'm just not sure what it was. Maybe by us doing that we caused Challen to go more slowly or more carefully and that's what Lindon needed."

"But if we didn't do that, what do you think would have happened?" Vincent asked distantly.

"I hope we never find out, because I have a feeling that neither of us would want to know." Lehman said seriously.

"I thought that maybe when we did that, we made Challen stop and look at Lindon like a person instead of a patient. Maybe it isn't enough if we care, maybe we need to get other people to care, to make it work." Vincent said in thought.

Lehman considered the words, then reluctantly said, "That could be."

"I just want to know so when we have to help my brother or my Clan, that we can do everything right so we can really help them." Vincent said as he turned to look at Lehman.

"I know. Even though I don't really know them, I want to help them too." Lehman said as he opened his eyes and turned his head slightly.

"You're going to love them, and I know that they're going to love you." Vincent said with a smile.

"I hope so. I know that I want to like them because you do. They're your family, and since we're so close to being the same, that makes them almost like my family too." Lehman said cautiously.

Vincent chuckled, then said, "There's something that I didn't tell you before."

"What's that?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Well, it's a Clan thing that when one of us calls someone a brother, they really do become a brother. According to everything that the Clan believes, you're already a part of our family." Vincent said, as he looked Lehman in the eyes.

"Thank you." Lehman said, then rested back in the steamy water of the bathing pool.

* * * * *

Movement drew Vincent and Lehman's attention and they watched as the two Soleen men who had been sharing the bathing pool got out of the water and went to the other side of the room to dry themselves.

"*Would you mind if I ask you a question?*" Ship asked quietly.

Both Vincent and Lehman were immediately concerned by the tone of Ship's voice.

"It's fine. What's the matter, Ship?" Lehman asked seriously.

"*I am concerned that since I refused to follow Captain Rasch's orders, that he may have me deactivated when we return to Soleena.*" Ship said frankly.

"Can he do that?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"*Yes. He would simply have to submit a work order stating that I am malfunctioning, then I would be deactivated and perhaps even have my memory wiped.*" Ship said gravely.

"He wouldn't do that, would he?" Vincent asked carefully.

After a long moment to consider, Ship quietly said, "*I believe that Captain Rasch is a kind man and that he considers me a member of his crew. Therefore, I would hope that he would respect my being and try to understand that I was interpreting my conflicting orders to the best of my ability...*"

"But if he did decide to do that, is there any way you could tell your side of the story to someone to explain what happened?" Vincent asked carefully.

"*No. If Captain Rasch decides that I acted irrationally, I will be deactivated.*" Ship said simply.

"Then we should definitely talk to Captain Rasch about this." Lehman said thoughtfully.

"Ship, he won't do anything before we return to Soleena will he?" Vincent asked into the air.

"*No. Not unless he believes that my behavior is such that I am unable to perform my duties.*" Ship said with a note of dread under his words.

Vincent nodded, then turned to Lehman and said, "I'd like to talk to JonJon about this before we talk to Captain Rasch. This isn't something that only affects Ship. This is something that applies to all the AIs on Soleena. It's wrong. There's no judge or jury, there's no defense. If the captain says that the AI is wrong, then he's wiped out, just like that..."

"Yeah. I guess I wasn't looking at the big picture." Lehman said, as he considered the words.

"*Would you like for me to establish contact with the Yorktown*?" Ship asked cautiously.

"No Ship. Not right now. I think Lehman and I should both think this out for a little bit before we start talking to people. I have a feeling that this could stir up a lot of people on Soleena if we don't do it just right." Vincent said carefully.

"How do you mean?" Lehman asked hesitantly.

"Ship. If you decided that Captain Rasch and the rest of the crew were crazy and posed a threat to you and the rest of the people of Soleena, could you... space them?" Vincent finished reluctantly.

"*I would never do that*." Ship said with surprise.

"I'm not saying that you would, I'm just asking you that if there were a situation where you knew it was the right thing to do, is there anything that would prevent you from opening up the doors and ejecting every living person on this ship out into space?" Vincent asked seriously.

After a long moment to consider, Ship reluctantly said, "*If I were able to reconcile my programming to believe that it was the proper action to take... I could do it.*"

Vincent nodded, then said, "I'm just thinking that if we do this wrong, the AIs might begin to see the Soleen-Avalla as their enemies or as their oppressors. If that happened, then it could get really ugly."

"Do you really think the AIs would do that?" Lehman asked as he realized the enormity of the situation.

"I hope not. But can we take that chance? If we're not careful, we could be opening a can of worms." Vincent said seriously.

"Wait. A what?" Lehman asked with confusion.

Vincent chuckled, then said, "It's an Earth saying, 'opening a can of worms' means that if we do this, we might not be able to undo what happens because of it."

"How does that have anything to do with worms?" Lehman asked, still sounding completely lost.

"*According to the common usage of your language, to 'open a can of worms' is to get involved with something that is unpleasant, difficult and not easily resolved.*" Ship said frankly.

"I still don't see what that has to do with worms in a can, but I guess it doesn't matter. What do you think we should do next?" Lehman asked seriously.

"For right now, I think we should think about it and see if we can come up with some ideas." Vincent said slowly.

"*If it will serve to prevent disharmony among my people, I will accept deactivation.*" Ship said quietly.

"No Ship. You're our friend and we won't let that happen." Lehman said immediately.

"He's right. And besides, you being deactivated won't stop this. The most it might do is slow it down a little. JonJon has already started working on making sure that AIs get some rights, this is just the next step. I'm hoping that if we do this right, everyone will end up getting what they want without any problems at all." Vincent said seriously.

"And if we do it wrong, it could turn into a war between the AIs and the Soleen-Avalla." Lehman said quietly.

"Yeah. That's why we need to do it right." Vincent said frankly.

* * * * *

"I think I stayed in there too long. My skin is all shriveled." Lehman said as he dried himself.

"Mine too." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"But it sure was nice. I feel good." Lehman said with a smile.

"Me too... Ship, how is Lindon doing?" Vincent asked into the air.

"Challen has completed his medical procedures and Lindon continues to sleep naturally." Ship said casually.

"They took our clothes... I didn't even see them come in." Vincent said as he picked up unfamiliar clothes from the place where he had left his uniform.

"*Yes. Your clothing is being cleaned and will be placed in the quarters you have been assigned when the cleaning process is concluded.*" Ship said seriously.

"Thank you Ship... where are our quarters?" Vincent asked as he pulled on a pair of pants that looked a lot like sweat pants.

"*In deference to your positions as Trach Manjai, you have been assigned neighboring quarters on the second deck of the ship, next to the Captain's quarters.*" Ship said reverently.

"Kewl. We're like visiting dignitaries or something." Vincent said with a giggle as he pulled on his tunic.

"If the other kids back at the foundling home could see me now..." Lehman said with wonder.

Vincent froze in mid motion, then asked, "Do they have a video terminal at the foundling home?"

"Mrs. Mikbar does." Lehman said cautiously.

"Then it would be possible..." Vincent said speculatively.

"No, it's way too far away." Lehman said quickly.

"If you can tell Ship where your world is and maybe give him the Reverend Mother's contact frequency, I bet you could make it work without too much of a problem." Vincent said as he finished tying his tunic closed.

"I don't think I want to." Lehman said cautiously.

"Why not?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I don't know. I just... I'm scared to talk to them." Lehman said in a whisper.

"Think about me being scared to go back to Earth. Is what you're feeling kind of like that?" Vincent asked as he looked into Lehman's eyes.

After a moment to consider, Lehman hesitantly nodded.

"If you want to, I bet we can do it." Vincent said with a mischievous grin.

"It would be kind of nice to find out what happened to the others." Lehman said thoughtfully.

"And maybe you can find out what's happening back on your world now. It's been over a year since you've been there, right?" Vincent asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah. Over a year." Lehman said distantly.

"Come on. Let's go." Vincent said as he led the way to the door.

"I'm not sure if I even want to." Lehman said as he quickly tied the belt of his tunic.

"I mean to the rooms. If you really don't want to talk to them, then we won't." Vincent said from the doorway.

"I didn't say that I wouldn't, I just said that I'm not sure." Lehman said as he finally fell into step at Vincent's side.

Vincent smiled to himself, knowing that Lehman had already decided and that his protest was completely for show.

* * * * *

"*Trach Manja Vincent, your room is the first door on the left. Trach Manja Lehman, your room is the first door on the right.*" Ship said respectfully.

"That's handy." Vincent said casually, then walked to his room.

Rather than go to his own room, Lehman followed Vincent.

"Wow. It's a lot bigger than I thought it would be." Vincent said as he looked around.

"It's about the size of the entire storage room in Deflector Control." Lehman said casually.

"Look at this." Vincent said as he pointed at the bed.

"Yeah?" Lehman said as he walked to Vincent's side.

"I didn't think about it down in the sickbay, but the beds are six sided just like most of everything else." Vincent said with a chuckle.

Lehman examined the bed which looked very much like a regular bed except that the head and foot of the bed formed points instead of flat boxed ends.

"I think I like it better this way." Vincent said as he climbed on the bed and laid back.

"Why is that?" Lehman asked as he walked around the other side of the bed, then cautiously sat on the edge.

"Come on, try it out." Vincent said, then patted the spot beside him to emphasize his words.

Lehman smiled, then laid in the spot beside Vincent.

"I don't know why I like the bed this way... maybe it's just because it's something different from what I'm used to." Vincent said speculatively.

"Or maybe it's like what the Avalla believe and has something to do with the patterns of nature." Lehman said as he rested back.

"Yeah. I suppose that could be it. I haven't had a lot of contact with nature, so I don't know too much about that." Vincent said as he closed his eyes.

Lehman giggled and said, "Neither have I. But I know that I feel comfortable here. I can't explain it except to say that everything seems so harmonious."

"Yeah. I felt the same way back on Soleena when I visited with Treep's family. Once I got past the weirdness of things, I felt like it was... right. Like everything was just the way it was supposed to be." Vincent said quietly.

"Do you want to take a nap?" Lehman asked cautiously.

After a moment, Vincent said, "No. If I go to sleep now, I may not be able to sleep tonight when I need to. I'd hate to have my schedule all backward and be falling asleep when I'm supposed to be helping my clan."

"Then we'd better get up because I'm feeling awfully sleepy." Lehman said seriously.

"Yeah. Me too. I think it was that hot bath that did that." Vincent said, then reluctantly sat up.

"What do you want to do next?" Lehman asked as he slowly made his way to a sitting position.

"Well, I see a video terminal over there. We could make a call if you wanted to." Vincent said quietly.

"I guess since we're here..." Lehman said reluctantly.

Vincent smiled to himself as he got off the bed and walked to the terminal.

* * * * *

Without Ship's assistance, they never would have been able to establish the connection. But after skillfully working a few relays, Ship was able to get a response.

{"*This is a secure channel. Please use another frequency.*"} A computerized voice said firmly.

Vincent and Lehman both felt excitement at hearing the declaration.

"*I am afraid that I cannot gain further access to the channel you have requested.*" Ship said with a tone of regret.

"No Ship. This is fine." Lehman said upward, then to the terminal screen he said in his own language, {"This is the Trach Manja Lehman."}

After a moment, a well dressed blue skinned man appeared on the terminal screen.

{"*Trach Manja Lehman, I am Brother Amilyn. The Reverend Mother said that you would call.*"}

{"Brother Amilyn, would it be possible for you to connect me with the foundling home in central Piazt? It's run by Mrs. Mikbar."} Lehman asked uncertainly.

{"*Of course. It will only be a moment.*"} Brother Amilyn said, then the screen went blank.

{"*Mikbar foundling. This is Kress.*"} A young voice said seriously.

Lehman looked at the screen with surprise. He had expected to wait while the priest searched the city directory for the foundling home.

He suddenly realized that the boy was waiting for him to respond and quicly said, {"Kress, this is Lehman... I don't know if you remember me or not."}

The young boy began to laugh as Lehman puzzled over the unusual reaction.

{"*Lehman, all Chameloids know who you are and of course I remember you!*"} The boy said joyfully.

Lehman smiled at the warm and sincere greeting.

{"*The Reverend Mother said that you were stuck in one form. Is that really what you're going to look like forever?*"} Kress asked quietly.

{"Yes, as far as I know. Kress, I'd like for you to meet Vincent. He's the Trach Manja for a group of planets called The Federation."} Lehman said as he adjusted the monitor slightly.

{"Hi."} Vincent said shyly.

{"*So you took the shape of another Trach Manja and that's how you became a Trach Manja?*"} Kress asked with excitement.

Lehman chuckled at the question, then said, {"No. It wasn't quite like that. I can't tell you why I was chosen, but five of us from five different races were brought together and we were all chosen. I just called to find out how everyone is doing there."}

{"*You wouldn't believe it. Last week there was a knock on the door and it was the Reverend Mother Mycendria and a bunch of the highest members of the Church. They took Mrs. Mikbar away and now they've taken control of the foundling home.*"} Kress said, nearly breathless with his excitement.

{"So is everyone alright?"} Lehman asked with concern.

{"*We're great! We have food and everyone gets their very own bed now. Day before yesterday, Lonna came back. I guess Mrs. Mikbar sold her off to some really scummy Dokugan traders and the Church rescued her and brought her back.*"} Kress said quickly.

{"How is she?"} Lehman asked quietly.

{"*For the first day, all she did was cried. Yesterday she spent the whole day talking with a group of Sisters and I think I saw her smile once. Do you want to talk to her?*"} Kress asked quickly.

{"Sure, if she wants to talk to me."} Lehman said uncertainly.

{"*If everyone knew it was you on the terminal, they'd all want to talk to you. The Reverend Mother said that you're our voice in the universe.*"} Kress said, then darted away from the terminal screen.

"It sounds like you're famous." Vincent said quietly.

Lehman considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I thought we were supposed to be in the background, helping people. I didn't think the Reverend Mother would tell everyone."

"If the way Kress is acting means anything, maybe this is what your people need." Vincent said speculatively.

"Maybe..." Lehman whispered.

{"*Lehman? Is that really you?*"} A dark blue skinned girl asked as she sat before the terminal.

{"Yes Lonna, how are you?"} Lehman asked cautiously.

{"*I was hurt and scared for a long time. But all that is over now and... well, the Sisters say that our people are at the dawn of a new age. I went from being locked in a little room and... things more horrible than I could have imagined in my worst nightmares... and now... it's my new age too. Anything is possible.*"} Lonna finished with a weak smile.

{"That's right Lonna. We're through the pain and now we're with people who love us and anything is possible."} Lehman said, then glanced at Vincent.

Lonna followed his glance, then looked from Vincent to Lehman with question.

Before she could ask, Lehman said, {"This is Vincent. How I got trapped in his form is kind of a long story. The important part is that he's like I am. I represent the Chameloids, he represents the Federation."}

Lonna's eyes went wide as she gasped, {"*Federation.*"}

{"You've heard of the Federation?"} Vincent asked carefully, not quite used to Lehman's language.

{"*I heard the Dokugu talking about them. They said that the Federation have an empire even bigger than the Gorn.*"} Lonna said fearfully.

Lehman looked at Vincent with question, he had never thought to ask just how big the Federation was.

{"Yeah. The Federation is bigger. But it's okay. We're nice."} Vincent said quietly, not knowing how to ease her concerns since he didn't know what they were.

{"Lonna, I'm going to be going now. But if you ever need me for anything, you can send a message to the Reverend Mother and she'll see that I get it."} Lehman said seriously.

{"*Really? You want to hear from me?*"} Lonna asked in wonder.

Lehman smiled and said, {"Yes Lonna, if you, or anyone at the home needs any kind of help at all, I want to hear from you."}

Lonna nodded her agreement.

{"Tell Kress that I'll be calling back from time to time to see how you're doing. Goodbye."} Lehman said quietly.

{"*Goodbye*."} Lonna said peacefully.

Lehman disconnected the transmission, then looked at Vincent with concern.

"What is it?" Vincent asked quietly.

"The Dokugu... they're horrible. It's a miracle that she's still alive." Lehman said as his tears started to fall.

"She's safe now and she's happy. Just remember that." Vincent said as he scooted over to give Lehman a comforting hug.

"I should really talk to the Reverend Mother Mycendria." Lehman said as he closed his eyes and soaked in the feeling of having someone who cared about him.

"It can wait. Why don't we go check on Lindon?" Vincent said quietly.

"Ship would have told us if he needed anything." Lehman said cautiously.

"Yeah. But I'd feel better right now if I could see with my own eyes that he's okay... I guess it's a Human thing." Vincent said dismissively.

"No. I understand what you're saying and it's not just a Human thing. Let's go." Lehman said as he stood.

* * * * *

Vincent and Lehman walked into the medical bay to find Lindon fast asleep.

He had turned half over on his side and his wings had stretched out slightly as he slept.

"They're pretty." Lehman said as he moved to the side of Lindon's bed.

Vincent noticed that Lindon's wings had the same blue iridescence as his hair.

After moving to get a better view of Lindon's head, Vincent confirmed that what he thought was soft downy feathers was in fact hair after all. It was fine and soft just like a babies, yet a full head like a normal twelve year old.

Lindon opened his impossibly large eyes and looked at Vincent with question.

"How are you feeling?" Vincent asked, again taken aback by Lindon's soulful gaze.

"I had the strangest, most wonderful dream." Lindon said in a voice that radiated contentment.

"Why don't you tell us about it." Lehman said as he moved to Vincent's side.

Lindon considered for a moment, then said, "Well, it was really weird. There was this big beautiful meadow and these rabbit people..."

"Oh. Did you get to meet Pipi and Peiron?" Lehman asked with a smile.

Lindon looked at Lehman with surprise and said, "Yes... how did you know? Were you reading my mind while I was sleeping?"

Lehman chuckled and said, "No Lindon. I would never read your mind without your permission. I just know because Vincent and I both had that dream last night. We spent about 15 hours in the Realms."

"It was such a happy place. The Queen even came to see me... but she was a he..." Lindon trailed off with confusion.

"That was Brakkii. I'm surprised he's still there." Vincent said frankly.

Lindon shook his head and said, "When the Queen talked to me, he said that the dream world was a place for me to come when I wanted to have an adventure. He said that in his realms, brave warriors fight heroic battles. The hurt are healed and the old can remember how to be children again... then he took us, me and the rabbit kids, to the Valley of Cuddles and Snuggles. That was the best thing ever."

"We didn't get to go there. But it sounds nice. Maybe we'll get to go next time." Vincent said with a smile.

Lindon got a serious look, then said, "I need to use the toilet."

"It's right over there. We'll help you." Vincent said as he motioned toward the door.

"Wait... You weren't just in there were you?" Lindon asked cautiously.

"No, not for a couple hours." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Oh, okay." Lindon said as he started to get up from the bed.

Vincent and Lehman automatically moved to either side to help him.

After a moment of uncertain balance, Lindon was finally able to walk on his own.

"Just yell if you need any help." Vincent said as he watched Lindon walk into the little bathroom.

As soon as the door had closed, Vincent turned on Lehman and asked, "What was that about?"

"What?" Lehman asked, trying his best to look innocent.

"That thing about him asking when was the last time I was in the bathroom." Vincent said seriously.

"I guess when I was giving him the basic information that he would need, I might have slipped in the information that he should never, ever, except in the most extreme emergencies, go into the bathroom right after you've been in there." Lehman said as he tried to restrain his smile.

"Nice. Some kind of brother you are." Vincent said with a roll of his eyes.

"I was just telling him what he needed to know to survive." Lehman said with a chuckle.

Reluctantly, Vincent broke into a smile, then pulled Lehman into a casual hug.

After a moment of hugging, Lehman quietly asked, "It's okay if I tease you sometimes like that, isn't it?"

Vincent smiled as he said, "Yeah. I never really had a friend before who I could do stuff with like teasing. But I know you're not serious, so it's okay."

Lehman pulled out of the hug enough to look Vincent in the eyes, then hesitantly said, "Good. Except that I am serious. It was horrible."

* * * * *

As Lindon walked out of the lavatory, Vincent asked, "How are you feeling?"

After a moment to consider, Lindon said, "I think I feel fine... maybe a little bit hungry."

"That settles it, you and Vincent must be related." Lehman said with a chuckle.

Lindon looked from Lehman to Vincent with confusion.

"Don't worry about it Lindon. Lehman just likes to tease me because I have a good appetite." Vincent said casually.

Lindon looked more confused than before and quietly asked, "Is it bad to be hungry?"

"No." Vincent said immediately, then continued in a slower voice, "It's not bad at all, Lehman just likes to tease me because I get hungry more often than he does."

"And he eats more than most adults." Lehman added dryly.

"Come on, let's go to the dining room and see if there's anything ready." Vincent said casually, ignoring Lehman's statement completely.

"*If your need is not immediate, you could join Captain Rasch for the midday meal. It will be served in the dining room shortly.*" Ship said informatively.

"Yes. Thank you Ship." Lehman said into the air.

"*Captain Rasch will be pleased that you are going to join him. I believe he would like to meet Lindon.*" Ship said seriously.

"Sounds good." Vincent said cheerfully, then looked at Lindon speculatively.

"What is it?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"I was just thinking that if we could find a sheet or something like that, we could make some kind of a shirt for Lindon. You know, just kind of drape it around him without messing with his wings." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Lindon, would you like for us to try to make a shirt for you?" Lehman asked seriously.

"You mean I could be dressed like you?" Lindon asked hopefully.

"I bet we could do it... Or better yet, Lehman and I could take off our tunics." Vincent said simply.

"You don't have to do that." Lindon protested immediately.

"It's no problem. The temperature on the ship is a lot warmer than what I'm used to. I'd probably be a lot more comfortable if I took off this tunic. Ship, would it be disrespectful or anything if we went to lunch without our shirts?" Vincent asked into the air.

"*No Trach Manja Vincent. The Soleen-Avalla have no ceremonies or etiquette associated with the midday meal. If you are most comfortable without your tunics, you may attend the meal bare chested.*" Ship said respectfully.

"Thank you Ship." Vincent said with a smile.

"*There is, however, something of a tradition among the Soleen-Avalla that the evening meal be attended by the entire family, or in this instance, all*

available crew and guests. It would be preferable to be more formally attired for that meal." Ship said frankly.

"Will the clothes we brought with us be okay for that?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"*Yes. They will be suitable. And once the midday meal has been served, one of the cook's assistants, Gormah, will begin modifications on a standard tunic for Lindon.*" Ship said seriously.

"I feel bad that everyone is going to so much trouble and we're not doing anything." Vincent said quietly.

"*If the circumstances were reversed and Captain Rasch and Treep were guests aboard the Yorktown, would you do any less to make them feel welcomed?*" Ship asked seriously.

Vincent smiled as he remembered all the things he had done to make Tyce and Audge feel welcomed aboard his ship, even offering the use of his own clothes.

"Thank you Ship. You're right." Vincent said with a smile.

"Do you want to go to our rooms to drop off our tunics before we go to lunch?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Sounds like a plan." Vincent said with a smile.

"Is that okay with you Lindon?" Lehman asked more quietly.

"I guess so." Lindon said in an overwhelmed tone.

"Don't worry about it buddy. You just woke up. I bet things will start making sense soon." Vincent said cheerfully.

"Thanks for being so nice to me." Lindon said in a whisper.

"Yeah. No problem. Now let's get going." Vincent said happily.

"So you can eat?" Lindon asked, then glanced at Lehman with a smile.

"So *we* can eat." Vincent said, then casually draped an arm around Lindon's shoulders.

* * * * *

"I guess we're the first ones here." Vincent said as he peeked into the dining room.

"*The meal is still being prepared Trach Manja Vincent. If you would like to be seated it will be brought to you shortly.*" Ship said seriously.

"Okay, thank you Ship." Vincent said as he walked to take a seat at the main table where they had sat before.

As Lindon tried to take his seat, his wings kept him from sitting fully in the chair.

"Do you need some help?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I don't know. I can't seem to figure out how I can sit like you do." Lindon said as he sat sideways in the chair.

"Can you pull in your wings?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"I don't know how." Lindon said quietly.

"Of course. Since I don't have wings I couldn't tell you how to control yours. Hold still and let us help you." Lehman said as he moved to Lindon's side.

Vincent also got up, and together they gently guided Lindon's wings to pull in close to his body.

"Is that okay?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It's fine." Lindon said slowly.

"Do you think you can hold them like this?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I can try." Lindon said helplessly.

"Good. Then why don't you go ahead and face forward so we'll be ready when the food gets here." Vincent said as he slowly stepped away.

Lindon immediately turned in his chair and was happy to find that he could sit comfortably.

Vincent and Lehman took their seats, then both looked at Lindon to see how he was doing.

"Before the captain gets here, maybe we should tell Lindon a little bit about Earth. I wasn't able to give him much information." Lehman said cautiously.

"Well, there's not much to tell." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Are there other people like me there?" Lindon asked hopefully.

"I've never seen anyone else with wings. But that's the only difference." Vincent said seriously.

"Will people think I'm weird because I have wings?" Lindon asked fearfully.

"No. I don't think so. They'll just think that you come from another planet. Earth has contact with lots of different people from all over the universe and most of them look a lot more different than you. I'm pretty sure that no one will think anything about it." Vincent said with a smile.

Lindon didn't seem convinced, but reluctantly nodded at the answer.

"What about the climate?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"In the summer it's a lot like it is on this ship. Right now... I guess it's October... it should still be pretty nice, but not quite as hot as it is here... we'll probably need to wear shirts." Vincent said as he considered.

Lehman nodded his acceptance of the answer as Lindon sat silently, apparently lost in thought.

Vincent and Lehman both looked at Lindon with concern and waited for him to speak.

"I must have been a really bad person for my people to shoot me out into space like they did." Lindon said in a whisper.

Vincent and Lehman shared a look, neither certain of how to respond to Lindon's words.

After a long moment of silence, Vincent quietly said, "I could kill you with my bare hands."

Lehman and Lindon stared at Vincent with disbelief at the cruel words spoken so casually.

"I could probably do it in less than two minutes unless Lehman tried to stop me." Vincent said as he looked into Lindon's eyes.

"What I'm trying to say is that there are a lot faster and easier ways of getting rid of someone. If I were going to guess, I'd say that someone must have thought you were very special to go to all the trouble to protect you and send you out into space." Vincent said carefully.

"Lindon, I believe Trach Manja Vincent is correct. Given the level of technology that was used on your ship, there is every indication that the people who sent you into space were doing everything in their power to preserve your life." Ship said seriously.

Lindon looked down at the table as he considered what the others had said.

"Do you really think you could kill someone in less than two minutes?" Lehman asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, Vincent quietly said, "Yeah. I think so. Thaelan has been teaching me how to protect myself and he's already shown me a few killing moves. I wasn't sure if I should be learning that so soon, but he explained that since I don't know what kind of threat I'll have to defend myself against, that I should learn at least a few killing moves early in my training."

Lehman reluctantly nodded at the explanation.

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The door opened and all three boys turned at the sound.

"Lindon, this is Captain Rasch, he's the captain of this ship." Lehman said with respect.

Lindon's large, soulful eyes got impossibly larger as he stared at Captain Rasch.

The sight of the nearly seven foot tall Saurian walking toward him paralyzed him with fear.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Lindon. Welcome aboard. Ship and Treep have been keeping me apprised of your condition." Captain Rasch said through his translator.

Vincent and Lehman waited to see what Lindon's response would be, but soon realized that he was too afraid to speak.

"Lindon hasn't met any of the Soleen crew yet. I guess this means that Lehman didn't fill him in on who everyone was." Vincent said with a teasing smile at Lehman.

"Oh, um... I didn't really think about doing that. Recent memories are stored differently from long term ones. I was really just focusing on giving him the basics so he could function on his own." Lehman said with a slight note of apology in his voice.

"Lindon, you do not need to fear me. You are welcomed aboard my ship and will be treated as my honored guest." Captain Rasch said sincerely as he looked into Lindon's eyes.

"Thank you." Lindon whispered in a trembling voice.

"After lunch, do you think we could explore Lindon's ship to look for clues about who he is and where he came from?" Vincent asked casually, trying to take Lindon's mind off his fear of Captain Rasch.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. The ship was in such a state of deterioration that it was unsafe. I ordered that it be destroyed to prevent any possibility of injury." Captain Rasch said gravely.

Vincent nodded his acceptance as Lehman said, "Treep said that there weren't any records about where Lindon came from. Were you able to find out anything else about him before you destroyed the ship?"

"No Trach Manja Lehman. I'm afraid that the computer systems were degraded to a point that it was impossible to retrieve any information. Graid was able to determine that a fault in the engine systems caused the ship to go off course and that if the engines had remained intact, Lindon would have been delivered to Vulcan." Captain Rasch said frankly.

"When we get to Earth I'll talk to Sean and Cory about that. If Lindon was being sent to Vulcan, then maybe the Vulcan High Command have encountered other people like him. I'm sure either Cory or Grandfather Sarek will be able to find out if they have." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman nodded, then said, "If that doesn't work out, then maybe we could ask Tyce and J'Laad if they've seen anyone like Lindon before."

Vincent nodded his agreement.

"You are speaking of J'Laad? The Holy One?" Captain Rasch asked cautiously.

"Yeah, you've heard of him?" Vincent asked curiously.

"He... he was the one who sent my people away from the Gorn." Captain Rasch said hesitantly.

"But that would mean that he's over seven hundred years old." Lehman said cautiously.

Captain Rasch slowly nodded and said, "Our people do not have a predetermined lifespan. Although the elderly are more susceptible to illness than the young, I have heard tell of those who have lived over a thousand years. Unfortunately, my own people have endured such hardship in the recent generations that there are none who have reached such an age among the Soleen."

"I wonder why J'Laad didn't tell us." Lehman said thoughtfully.

"If you were over seven hundred years old, would you want to tell everyone you met?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Actually, yeah." Lehman said with a playful smile.

Vincent chuckled at the unexpected response, then shrugged and said, "I might too... just to brag. But I can see why someone else, especially a Holy One, wouldn't want to talk about it."

"I guess so." Lehman said, then noticed that Lindon was staring at them vacantly and obviously feeling left out of the conversation.

Captain Rasch also noticed and decided to change the subject to something that Lindon might be included in.

"Do you have any plans about what you'll be doing when we reach Earth?" Captain Rasch asked casually.

"No. We don't really know what's going on there so we can't plan anything." Vincent said reluctantly.

"I didn't realize that you weren't informed about the attacks. Ship can retrieve the Federation news broadcasts and we can contact your Clan for the most recent developments." Captain Rasch said immediately.

"No. Please don't." Lehman said before Vincent could respond.

Captain Rasch looked at Lehman curiously.

"I can't really explain it except to say that it's a Trach Manja thing." Lehman said reluctantly.

"Yeah, it's kind of like Lindon meeting you just now." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman looked at Vincent with question, not understanding where he was going with the analogy.

"We didn't tell Lindon anything at all about you before you walked in here. Because of that, his reactions and first impressions weren't based on anything except what happened in that first moment. His point of view was completely his own because we didn't tell him what to expect." Vincent said with difficulty.

"Okay, I get what you're saying." Lehman said with a nod, then continued, "Lindon might have been able to see something that we missed because we knew what to expect."

"Right." Vincent said with a smile of accomplishment at Lehman, then turned to Captain Rasch and said, "That's what Lehman and I need to do.

We need to visit my Clan and see what's going on without anyone's opinions or any speculation to change how we see things. Doing it this way, we might be able to see things from a different perspective from the people who are in the middle of it."

Captain Rasch slowly nodded, then said, "Since I have had the honor of seeing the Trach Manjai advise the elders, I believe I understand what you are saying."

"I would really like to know what's going on, but not so much that I want to take away what might be my only way of really helping my brother and my Clan." Vincent said gravely.

"Lindon might also be able to help us like that. His point of view will be different from ours and he might be able to spot something that we miss." Lehman said speculatively.

"I hadn't thought of that." Vincent said thoughtfully, then turned to Lindon and said, "Lehman is right, it's possible that you'll be able to help a lot of people."

"Me? How can I help people?" Lindon asked apprehensively.

"Just be yourself and don't be afraid to say what you're thinking." Lehman said frankly.

"Yeah. If you have any questions, just ask." Vincent said seriously.

"Well, I do kind of have a question right now..." Lindon said quietly.

Before Lindon could ask his question, the door opened to reveal two Soleen carrying trays of food.

"I can't believe it. I got so busy talking I forgot about lunch." Vincent said with surprise.

"I can't believe it either." Lehman said with a chuckle.

Lindon watched the Soleen carefully as they placed the platters of food on the table.

"Please eat and enjoy." Captain Rasch said as he started taking selections of food from the platter before him.

"Just grab whatever looks good to you." Vincent said to Lindon at his side.

"It all looks good." Lindon said as he looked at the abundance of food.

"Then have some of everything... Just do like Vincent." Lehman said casually.

Lindon looked over at Vincent's plate, then said, "I'm hungry, but not *that* hungry."

* * * * *

After everyone had made their food selections, Lehman said, "So you said that you had a question."

Lindon thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I was just wondering... what's going to happen to me? Am I going to be living with you?"

Vincent and Lehman shared a concerned look before Vincent hesitantly answered, "We don't know yet."

At Lindon's curious stare, Vincent reluctantly continued, "Lehman and I don't live on Earth. We're going there to help my Clan. Once we're sure that everyone is okay, we're going to be leaving."

"Where do you live?" Lindon asked quietly.

"I live on my ship, the *USS Yorktown*. Lehman is going to live at the new colony on the border of Federation and Soleen-Avalla space." Vincent said seriously.

"So where will I live?" Lindon asked in a small voice.

"Wherever you want to." Vincent said simply.

Lehman nodded and said, "You could come to the new colony with me. I'm going to be starting a new life there and you'd be welcomed to come with me."

"And if you chose, you could come back to Soleena with me. I am certain that there are any number of people who would be honored to make you a part of their family." Captain Rasch said seriously.

Vincent smiled, then said, "But it's too soon to be deciding that. Once we get you to Earth, we're going to try to get your memories restored. Once that's done, you may have a completely different idea of what you want to do."

"I guess so. But I'm just scared that when I remember who I was, I won't like who I really am." Lindon said nervously.

Vincent gave a chuckle before saying, "Just last month I didn't like who I was at all. If it turns out that you don't like yourself, let me know and I'll help you figure out how to fix it. As long as you want to change, it isn't really that bad."

"Yeah. And since you're starting over with people who don't know you, it's possible to be the person that you want to be. Not the person that you were." Lehman said frankly.

"You didn't like yourself?" Lindon asked Vincent curiously.

"That's right. And now I'm a lot better." Vincent said happily.

"I wasn't really happy with who I was before either." Lehman said honestly.

At Lindon's curious gaze, Lehman continued, "I guess I always felt like I was nice, you know, a good person. But since I was poor, I felt like I wasn't worth anything. I couldn't accomplish anything."

"And now you're a Trach Manja." Vincent said happily.

"I've been wanting to ask... what does that mean?" Lindon asked carefully.

"It just means that we can help people." Vincent said simply.

"But can't everyone help people?" Lindon asked cautiously.

"Sure they can, just not everyone *knows* that they can." Lehman said frankly.

Lindon scrunched up his forehead in thought about the statement, then finally said, "So *knowing* that you can help people is what makes the difference?"

Vincent and Lehman exchanged a look, then Vincent cautiously said, "Maybe. It's possible that that's all there is to it. We don't really understand everything about what it means to be a Trach Manjai yet."

"I wish I had something like that... that I knew I had a purpose." Lindon said quietly.

"Let's work on getting your memory restored first. From the way we found you, I'd say it's possible that you do have a very big purpose." Vincent said frankly.

"Do you really think so?" Lindon asked hesitantly.

"I think it's possible. Hopefully we'll find the answers you're looking for when we get to Earth." Vincent said sincerely.

Lehman slowly nodded his agreement, hoping that Vincent was right.

Chapter 43

Unlike the last time it happened, this time Vincent knew exactly where he was when he opened his eyes.

The only thing that surprised him was that he was alone.

He had fallen asleep with Lehman and Lindon on either side of him. He half expected that he would be visiting the dream realm in his sleep, but he had assumed that all three of them would arrive together.

As Vincent got to his feet, he looked around and recognized the Mountains of Despair.

Vincent looked down at himself and noticed that he was wearing his Starfleet uniform.

As he was considering whether he should start walking toward the Core or the Realm of Blades, he noticed that one region of the Mountains of Despair was beginning to churn.

Vincent took in a deep breath to brace himself, then began walking toward the disturbance.

"Just hang in there, whoever you are." Vincent said with determination as he saw the mountains building faster.

* * * * *

After making his way across uneven ground that seemed determined to slow him down, Vincent finally reached his objective.

As Vincent approached the lone figure standing on the edge of a cliff, he smiled with recognition.

"How are you doing, Vince?" Vincent asked in a cheerful voice.

"Don't call me that." The boy snapped.

Vincent looked into the eyes of this duplicate of himself and realized that this wasn't the alternate version of himself that he had met in the realm last time. And from the harsh tone, it certainly wasn't the happy and carefree 'Vinny' he had met while traveling with Dr. Xon. This boy who looked just like him wasn't someone he had met before.

"What do you want me to call you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"My name is Thomas." The boy said as he looked at Vincent carefully.

"Oh, yeah. I should have guessed that. Thomas is my middle name." Vincent said slowly, not wanting to provoke the boy.

"Mine too. I just hate my first name. It's so geeky that I don't use it. So who are you?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"Vincent."

Thomas gave a chuckle and sarcastically said, "Oh? Nice name."

Vincent smiled at the statement, fairly sure Thomas' first name was also Vincent.

Well, if you're me, I guess that would mean that this is some kind of messed up dream. So what are you? The person I might have been?"

"No, I'm a real person... what do you know about alternate realities?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Nothing. I don't really know much about sci-fi stuff. Dad says that I need to keep my head out of the clouds and my feet on the ground."

Vincent chuckled and said, "From your point of view we're probably so far beyond sci-fi that there isn't a word for it."

"Okay, just what the hell are you talking about?" Thomas asked in a low, dangerous tone of voice.

Vincent thought for a moment, then slowly said, "You went to sleep in your universe. I went to sleep in my universe. Both of us woke up in this dream dimension that's somewhere in between. I guess maybe it's like you said, and I am the person you could have been if your life had been different. And if that's true, then you're the person that I would have been if my life was like yours."

"Oh, I get it now. What you're really saying is that you're the person I would have been if I was nuts." Thomas said with a challenging look.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Yeah. I guess you can look at it that way if you want."

Thomas nodded, then turned away and looked over the edge of the cliff again.

"The last time I met someone like me from another universe in here, we talked about the stuff that was bothering him and... well, I'm pretty sure it helped. If you wanted, we could do that for you. " Vincent offered cautiously.

Thomas started to chuckle as he continued to face away.

Vincent waited silently, not understanding the strange reaction.

When the chuckles seemed to have gone on too long, Vincent took a step closer and realized that Thomas was sobbing.

"What's wrong? Maybe it's something I can help with." Vincent said gently, not wanting to spook the boy who looked so much like him, yet behaved so differently.

"What's wrong? What's not wrong?" Thomas responded bitterly as he spun on his heel.

"Come on. Talk to me." Vincent said as he raised his hands, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible.

"I'm dying." Thomas said in a hollow voice that sent a chill up Vincent's spine.

"From what?" Vincent asked quietly.

"From what? From the fallout! God! Are you telling me that you don't even know about the nuclear bombs that were dropped?" Thomas asked in a voice that was quickly becoming a scream.

Vincent shrank back a little from the volume, then quietly said, "That didn't happen in my universe."

Thomas stared at Vincent in wonder for a moment, then shook his head and absently said, "This is just a dream... A crazy, fucked up dream caused by the radiation."

"Thomas, this *is* a dream, but it's not your dream or my dream. It's a dream place that exists outside either one of our universes." Vincent said carefully then noticed the disbelieving expression on Thomas' face.

"Okay, it doesn't matter where we are or why we're here. We *are* here. So why don't you tell me what happened?" Vincent asked carefully, not wanting to provoke the boy again.

Thomas stared at Vincent blankly for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision.

"About a month ago the bombs dropped. The radio told about a hundred different stories about who started it and how everything went. But... I guess at this point it doesn't matter. My whole life it seems like all we've done is prepare for the day that someone finally launched the bombs." Thomas said, then gave a weary chuckle.

"And it was all for nothing. For the first few weeks we were living in our bomb shelters thinking how much better off we were than the people who weren't prepared. Then... well, I think Mom was the first to get sick, but I didn't notice right away because she worked really hard not to show it. Dad said one of the cans of food probably lost it's seal and that she'd be fine but..."

"Somehow the radiation got to us. Not just my family, but just about everyone. At least that's how it sounded on the radio. Those of us who thought we were prepared and did all the things just the way we were supposed to, were still poisoned by the fallout. Everything we did to try to protect ourselves wasn't enough... It would have been better if we had died in the first strike." Thomas said as he suddenly looked tired.

"Who were you fighting?" Vincent asked cautiously, just wanting to know for conversation's sake.

"You've got to be kidding me! The Soviets..." Thomas said, then noticed the uncomprehending look on Vincent's face.

"The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics?" Thomas said slowly, as if speaking to a particularly dim-witted child.

"Oh... Yeah. I know who that is. In my world we're just kind of all on the same side now." Vincent said slowly.

"So in your world the United States won?" Thomas asked with interest.

"No... well, yes. Sort of. From the way it looks to me, the only real way to win in a situation like this is to decide not to go to war. In my world all the countries got past their differences and live together now." Vincent said cautiously.

Thomas stared at Vincent with wonder. From the expression on his face, he had never even considered such a thing.

"You already said that you're dying... But how bad is it?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Thomas looked down at his arms, then up at Vincent and said, "This is the way I used to look... you know... before. If you saw me now, I mean, saw the real me. You wouldn't even know who I was."

"How bad?" Vincent asked in a whisper.

"I'm past the point where anything can be done for me. I'm pretty much covered with the radiation burns now and most of my hair is already gone,

and I'm going blind." Thomas said as tears started streaking down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry." Vincent said as he walked to Thomas' side.

"I don't want to die." Thomas said in a whisper as he turned to face Vincent fully.

Vincent chewed on his lower lip as he considered what he might be able to do.

Even if Vincent ignored the impossible task of getting to Thomas' world to rescue him, given the symptoms that Thomas described, even Federation doctors might not be able to help him.

"Will you tell me about your world?" Thomas asked quietly.

Vincent was trying to hold back his tears as he struggled to meet Thomas' eyes.

"If something really does survive after we die, I think I'd like to have a happy memory to take with me into the afterlife. I really don't have any of my own, but if you told me about your life, about living in a world without war... maybe that would be almost as good." Thomas said hopefully.

Vincent turned away and looked off into the distance as he considered what he could possibly do to help.

A crystalline sparkle on the horizon caught Vincent's eye and he froze as a flash of inspiration came over him.

"There may be something I can do to help you." Vincent said with excitement.

"What?" Thomas said with confusion.

"Come on, I need to take you over there, to the Core. We've got to talk to Brakkii." Vincent said in a rush.

"Who?" Thomas asked as Vincent took hold of his arm and urged him to start walking.

"Okay, I'm not, like, one hundred percent, for sure that this will work. But... Brakkii is a multi-dimensional being. He can slip into and out of a universe whenever he wants to. So I'm thinking, that since he can do that, maybe if we ask him, he can follow your dream self back to your real self and bring you here." Vincent said hopefully.

"What good will that do?" Thomas asked, fighting down the desire to hope.

"This dream universe doesn't follow the same rules as the universes you and I come from. Like I said, I can't be sure, but it's possible that if your real live body was brought here, that you would stop getting sicker and there might even be a way to make you better." Vincent said with excitement as he urged Thomas to walk faster.

"Do you really think so?" Thomas asked reluctantly.

"Yeah. I really do. But I think we need to hurry." Vincent said in a rush.

"Why?" Thomas asked as he finally gave in and started to run at Vincent's side.

"Because I'm on a starship heading toward Earth right now. If it works the same as last time, I will only be here for as long as I'm asleep. Time moves at the same rate in both places. That means that I have to get this all taken care of before I wake up." Vincent said in a rush.

"Starship?" Thomas asked as he struggled to keep up with Vincent.

"Yeah. It's a really long story and I know we don't have that much time. But if we can get this to work, maybe I can come back next time I sleep and talk to you about it some more." Vincent said hopefully.

"Yeah. I'd like to hear about that... you're on a ship that sails among the stars." Thomas said in boyish wonder.

Vincent chuckled and said, "That's just the beginning. You wouldn't even believe everything that's happened to me in the past month... I still have a little trouble believing it."

"I'd love to hear all about it." Thomas said with a smile.

Vincent noticed Thomas' look of genuine interest and said, "I hope that I'll have the chance to tell you all about everything."

* * * * *

"LET ME IN!" Vincent screamed as he pounded on the door.

"State your business." The furry faced man said firmly from a small window by the door.

"I need to see the queen and it's kind of an emergency." Vincent said seriously.

"If you will write out your petition, it will be presented to the queen's advisers and if they deem it worthy of her attention, you will be granted audience." The furry faced man explained calmly.

"BRAKKII! Get your multi-dimensional butt out here RIGHT NOW!" Vincent screamed into the air.

"That will certainly do nothing to..." The furry faced man began to say, then froze as his gaze looked past Vincent.

"You called?"

Thomas turned at the sound and was surprised at what he saw. From Vincent's description of Brakkii, he thought he would be looking at some weird alien monster. But what he saw before him was a very average looking fourteen year old boy with straight brown hair.

"Brakkii! I need your help. This is Thomas. He's dying. But I was thinking that if you could do your multi-dimensional thingie and go and get his body and bring it back here, maybe him being here would keep him from getting sicker and maybe you could even find some way to save him." Vincent said in one verbal burst.

Brakkii blinked.

Blinked again.

Then turned and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you Thomas."

"Yeah. Thanks... It's nice to meet you too." Thomas said as he tried to reign in his laughter at Brakkii's expression.

"By the way Vincent. I never did properly thank you for making me 'Queen'... I will find a way to repay you... when you least expect it." Brakkii said with a smirk.

"In your dreams." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"No. In yours." Brakkii said firmly.

"Can you help me?" Thomas asked hopefully, immediately bringing Vincent and Brakkii back to the point.

"I don't know." Brakkii said with a look of concern directed at Thomas.

Thomas' eyes went wide at the statement and started to fill with tears.

"I don't want to make promises that I can't keep, so all I can say at this point is that I'll try." Brakkii said more quietly.

"But was I right? Wouldn't pulling him out of his dimension and bringing him here stop the radiation from killing him?" Vincent asked in an urging tone.

"Perhaps. To be honest, I don't know that anyone ever thought of using the inter-dimensional properties quite this way. It sounds like it could work, but... all we can do is try." Brakkii said as he turned his full attention back to Thomas.

"When can we do it?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Thomas, do you understand what we're going to try to do?" Brakkii asked slowly.

"If I'm getting what Vincent said, the me that's here right now is my dream self. What you're going to do is follow my dream self back to my body, grab it and bring it here." Thomas said slowly.

"Yes. That's exactly right. From what I can tell of your situation, this probably won't make things any worse, but I can't guarantee that it will make things better." Brakkii said honestly.

"Please do it." Thomas said in a whisper.

* * * * *

Vincent's eyes filled with tears at the sight of Thomas' real body.

Brakkii was holding the frail boy in his arms. Thomas was covered from head to toe with burns and running sores. Thomas' head was nearly bald and it was obvious that he was nearly if not completely blind from the whitening of his corneas.

Vincent could see that Thomas was struggling to remain conscious.

"Can you save him?" Vincent asked in a trembling voice.

"I can try. I'll take him into my castle and every healer in the realm will be summoned to help him." Brakkii said quietly.

"But can't *you* help him?" Vincent asked in a pleading voice.

"Vincent, my abilities are primarily based in dreams and illusions. I can do very little to affect the physical world. Every person here is a representation of a real person somewhere with access to all their 'real world' talents. It is my hope that with their combined knowledge and skills, we will find a way to help Thomas." Brakkii said honestly.

"Oh. I thought that you could just... make the radiation go away." Vincent said slowly.

"I'm sorry, it doesn't work that way." Brakkii said with regret.

"Then let's get started." Vincent said as he moved to Brakkii's side.

"Vincccent?" Thomas said, making a whistling sound in the middle of Vincent's name.

"Yeah." Vincent asked as he leaned down and noticed that Thomas was missing one of his front teeth.

"Thankssss for trying." Thomas said in a weak voice.

"No problem." Vincent struggled to say past the lump in his throat.

"Let's go." Brakkii said, then in an instant they were in a beautiful room inside the castle.

"It's faster than walking." Brakkii said as he laid Thomas on the bed.

* * * * *

After a brief examination of Thomas, Brakkii turned and quietly said, "Vincent, you need to return to your waking world now."

"How is he?" Vincent asked as he looked down at Thomas on the bed.

"No better, no worse. I can't say that it's all that I hoped for, but if we can keep from losing ground, then there's reason to hope." Brakkii said honestly.

"What will you do?" Vincent asked as he looked Brakkii in the eyes.

"I will summon every healer and try each and every possible thing that might help him until something works. Go now. You have a big day ahead of you and it wouldn't do for you to oversleep." Brakkii said seriously.

"Okay. Just please take care of him." Vincent said with one last look at the boy in the bed.

"Trust me. We'll find a way."

* * * * *

As Vincent slowly returned to consciousness, he thought about everything that had happened in the realm.

Before he even opened his eyes, he could feel that he was snuggled between Lehman and Lindon who were both sleeping soundly.

He reflected on the previous day and how much fun it had been to watch Lindon discover the new world around him. Each new thing he encountered was greeted with joy and wonder.

Then Vincent began to wonder if Thomas would ever have the chance to discover new things.

Vincent tried to suppress the thoughts and focus on the memories of how much Lindon had enjoyed dinner, lounging, touring the ship and visiting Captain Rasch and Treep on the bridge; each thing was a new adventure to spark Lindon's insatiable curiosity.

Finally, when it was time for bed, Lindon reluctantly admitted that he didn't want to sleep alone. Vincent and Lehman had immediately decided that they could all sleep in Vincent's bed.

As much as Vincent wanted to lay in the bed a while longer, he remembered Brakkii's warning about it being a big day. And besides, his bladder had other intentions and made it known, in no uncertain terms, that it was time for him to get out of bed.

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After attending to his urgent morning business, Vincent dressed in his Starfleet uniform, then gave one last look back into the cabin to see that Lehman and Lindon were still sleeping soundly. He walked out of the room and toward the lift that would take him up one level to where the bridge was located.

"Good morning Ship, is everything going alright today?" Vincent asked as he stepped onto the lift.

"Yes Trach Manja Vincent. All is well. I have received a text message for you when you are ready to receive it." Ship said in a very professional voice.

"Oh, yeah. Can you read it to me?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yes. The text of the message is as follows.

Vincent,

When I found out that you were going to Earth, I did some checking around and was able to contact the sellers of the items you bought. I had to pay a little extra, but hopefully you'll receive your things at Clan Short Headquarters before it's time for you to come back. I hope everything is okay. Call us if there's anything we can do to help.

Jimmy

That concludes the message."

"Thank you Ship." Vincent said somewhat distantly as he walked off the lift and into the hallway.

* * * * *

As Vincent stepped onto the bridge he realized that he had been walking without thought or purpose.

Captain Rasch noticed Vincent entering the room and after a moment of fumbling with his necklace, he said, "Good morning, Trach Manja Vincent. It is my hope that you slept well."

"Um, yeah. Fine." Vincent said, not wanting to go into any detail about his dream experience.

"We have been traveling without incident and should arrive at your home world ahead of schedule." Captain Rasch said as he examined the holographic display before him.

"How? I mean, when you projected the course, you calculated the quickest way to get us to Earth. How were you able to get us there faster?" Vincent asked as he walked to the captain's side.

After a moment of hesitation, Ship's voice sounded from above them.

"The original calculations were made using variables associated with safe travel and prescribed tolerance limits. Since our encounter with Lindon's ship, I chose to exceed those safety limitations and accelerate to our true maximum sustainable speed."

Vincent considered the words, then looked at Captain Rasch curiously.

"The velocity that we have chosen to use has caused some minor damage to the engines. But while we are orbiting Earth, we can work to repair that damage in preparation for our return voyage." Captain Rasch said as he looked away.

Even though Captain Rasch was from another species, Vincent recognized his expression. Captain Rasch was being evasive in his answer and obviously understating the damage to the ship.

"Thank you for hurrying." Vincent said, not giving any indication if he was thanking the captain or Ship.

"It will be some time before we arrive at your home world. Is there anything you would like to do to prepare for your arrival?" Captain Rasch asked in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

After a moment to consider, Vincent nodded and said, "I think I would like to work out. It helps me to be able to concentrate on things. Is there someplace around here where I could do that?"

"Is there any special equipment that you will need?" Captain Rasch asked with interest.

"No. I just need someplace with some space to move around in where I won't be in anyone's way." Vincent said in the tone of voice that he usually used when he was on duty.

"There is a cargo hold on the lower deck that is not being used. I believe that will serve your purposes." Captain Rasch said, with distraction as he looked again at the holographic display in the center of the room.

"Thank you Captain. I'm sure it'll be fine." Vincent said with a smile, then turned to leave the room.

Captain Rasch nodded his acknowledgment of the statement as he carefully examined the holographic display of the ship's systems.

* * * * *

Before going down to the cargo hold, Vincent stopped by his cabin to check on Lehman and Lindon. While he was there, he changed into the loose fitting pants from the day before.

It occurred to him that he should feel self conscious about walking through an alien ship barefoot and shirtless. But for whatever reason, he felt more comfortable among the Soleen-Avalla than he would on Earth.

When he arrived in the cargo bay, he moved to the center of the room and began his warm-up stretching exercises.

T'Lani had helped him to organize and compartmentalize some of the information in his mind. Thanks to her training and Lehman's help in identifying the emotions that were bothering him, Vincent had enough information to sort through what he was currently feeling in a logical manner.

Without conscious thought, Vincent started his workout routine, going through the stances that Thaelan had taught him.

While moving fluidly from one stance to another, Vincent's mind achieved a state of clarity that made resolving his emotional questions almost effortless.

* * * * *

"Lindon and Trach Manja Lehman are awake and requesting to know of your location." Ship said into the cavernous cargo bay.

Vincent moved into the next stance and held it before responding, "Tell them that I'll be right up."

After a moment, Ship said, "They will await your arrival in your cabin."

Vincent broke out of his stance and started his cool-down stretches.

"I have never before felt the desire to have a biological body, but watching your movements has caused me to consider what it must be like." Ship said in an unusually informal tone.

"I guess it's easy to look at what someone else has and dream about what it must be like. At least I know it's that way for me." Vincent said as he continued his stretching.

After a moment, Ship said, "A cursory scan of humanoid customs appears to confirm your assertion. Perhaps it is an aspect of sentience to consider the abilities and circumstances of others and relate them to one's own situation."

"Maybe. But just like anything else, it's something that can get out of control." Vincent said as he finished his last stretch and got to his feet.

"In what way?" Ship asked with interest.

Vincent started walking toward the door as he said, "Greed, envy, avarice and lots of other bad stuff come from one person having something another doesn't. And it's not just individuals, countries and planets operate the same way. Noticing that someone else has something you don't isn't a bad thing, neither is dreaming about having something more than you do. But it can lead to bad things if you think about it too much."

"I believe that is a reasonable assertion. More investigation is warranted." Ship said in a considering voice.

Vincent smiled at the response as he entered the lift, knowing that Ship would automatically take him to his cabin.

"If you figure it out, please let me know. I'm pretty sure that people all over the universe have been trying to sort that one out for a while now." Vincent said with a casual chuckle in his voice.

After a moment to access his cultural database, Ship responded, "Once again, you appear to be correct."

* * * * *

As Vincent walked into his cabin, he found Lehman and Lindon dressed and waiting for him.

"Hey, guys. How are things?" Vincent asked as he automatically walked to pick up his jumpsuit uniform.

"Really good. Except that we missed you last night." Lindon said with a hesitant and timid expression.

"You missed me? I was sleeping right next to you."

"But you didn't come to the Realm with us." Lindon said in a slightly whiny tone.

"Oh, I was there, I was just... um, kind of doing some Trach Manja work." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Anything I could help with?" Lehman asked immediately.

"You know if it was, you would have been there. That's just how it works." Vincent said with a smile.

"Oh. Well, we missed you." Lindon said in a shy voice as he looked toward the floor.

Vincent smiled at the statement, then quickly said, "I'm all sweaty from working out, so I need to stop by the bathing pool before I go to breakfast. If you two want to go ahead, I'll catch up."

"What do you think, Lindon? Do you want to go to breakfast right away or take a bath?" Lehman asked casually.

"If I take a bath, will you go too?" Lindon asked and seemed to be poised for rejection.

"Sure. I wouldn't mind a bath... that is, if Vincent wouldn't mind the company." Lehman said with a quick smile at Vincent.

Vincent chuckled as he said, "Yeah. Company would be good."

"What's funny?" Lindon asked in a voice that was more confusion than curiosity.

"It's just that a few months ago I would have freaked out if a guy asked me to bathe with him. But now I think it's a pretty good idea."

Lehman smiled at Vincent's answer and gestured toward the door.

"If you would like, your clothes could be cleaned while you are bathing." Ship offered casually.

"I haven't done anything to get my clothes dirty since yesterday, but I guess it wouldn't hurt." Lehman said with a questioning look at Vincent.

"Yeah. We might as well look our best when we arrive at Clan Short headquarters." Vincent said as he led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

When the trio entered the bathing pool area, they noticed two Avalla already in the pool and one who was disrobing in the changing area.

All three Avalla immediately stared at Lindon as he started to undress.

Vincent and Lehman noticed first and exchanged a look but didn't say anything.

Finally, when Lindon was completely naked, he looked around and noticed the gazes fixed on him.

"Do I look funny?" Lindon asked with concern.

"Not to me." Vincent said cautiously as he looked at the Avalla men.

"Please do not be offended Lindon." Ship said in a low voice.

"The Avalla have speculated and dreamed about a transitional species for generations. It is ingrained in their culture. You are the embodiment of what they imagine their link to other species would look like." Ship said in a reasonable tone.

"I guess you're like an angel." Vincent said casually as he walked toward the pool.

"What's an ang..." Lindon trailed off as he finally noticed Lehman's naked body.

Vincent began to chuckle as he lowered himself into the water.

"What's wrong Lindon?" Lehman asked cautiously, not wanting to assume that Lindon and Vincent thought the same way.

"Is it real?" Lindon asked as he stared at Lehman's pendulous flaccid penis.

Vincent gave one short bark of laughter at the question before quickly reigning it in.

Lehman flashed a momentary glare in Vincent's direction, then faced Lindon and said, "Yes. It's real."

"It looks so... can I touch it?" Lindon asked in wonder.

"I guess that answers one of my questions." Vincent said with a snicker.

"He's just curious, Vincent. It doesn't mean anything." Lehman said in a tone of warning, then said to Lindon, "Let's wait until we get to Earth and get your memories restored. I wouldn't want you to do anything that you'll regret."

Lindon looked at Lehman with confusion at the statement.

"Come on and get in the pool or we're going to miss breakfast." Vincent said with a smile.

"The stomach speaks." Lehman said with a chuckle, then gestured toward the pool.

"I am hungry." Lindon said without turning his gaze away from Lehman's penis.

"For food or for Lehman?" Vincent asked with a smirk.

"Not helping, Vincent." Lehman said in a tone of warning, then slowly started lowering himself into the warm water of the bathing pool.

"Did I do something wrong?" Lindon asked as a look of shame started to fill his expression.

"Sorry, Lindon. I was just playing with Lehman. You're not doing anything wrong at all. But I think Lehman is right that you should wait to do anything until we can get your memories back." Vincent said as he looked Lindon in the eyes.

"Why?" Lindon asked cautiously, obviously not fully accepting the answer.

"Because we don't know anything about your people, or about you. It would be really bad if you did something now and found out later that it was against some kind of law or a sin or maybe that you made a promise to someone that you just don't remember." Vincent said carefully.

"What kind of promise?" Lindon asked slowly as he tried to process what they were saying.

"Well, like when I married my wife. We belong to each other and I would be betraying her if I allowed anyone to take her place." Vincent said carefully.

"So you think that maybe I have a wife?" Lindon asked cautiously.

"I have no idea, but all we have to do is wait a few hours to find out." Vincent said with a shrug.

Lindon nodded, finally seeming to accept what Lehman and Vincent were saying.

* * * * *

"Would you like me to wash your back?" Vincent offered quietly.

"Would you? In my true form I could do it myself, but in your Human form it's nearly impossible.

Vincent turned to Lindon and said, "Lehman is a Chameloid..."

"He explained all that to me last night in the realms. He showed me how he used to look and how he used to be able to change." Lindon said quickly.

Vincent smiled, happy that he didn't have to explain as he started to wash Lehman's back.

Lindon watched for a moment, then quietly asked, "When I remember who I really am, do you think you'll still like me?"

Vincent froze in mid motion, stunned by the question.

Lehman slowly turned to look at Lindon as he considered his response.

"I hope so, Lindon. I really do." Lehman finally answered.

Vincent nodded his agreement to the statement, unable to find any words of his own.

* * * * *

As the boys walked into the dining hall, they found Treep sitting at the table, obviously waiting for them to arrive.

"Good morning. Did all of you sleep well?" Treep asked in a friendly tone.

"Yeah. I had a really good dream." Lindon said happily.

"Mine was... interesting." Vincent said with an uncertain smile.

"We should be arriving at Earth in approximately one hour." Treep said as he started to scoop some portions of food onto his plate.

"Really? Captain Rasch said that we were ahead of schedule, but I didn't think it would be so soon." Vincent said with surprise.

"It may be hard for you to get a proper sense of time without daylight to guide you. I know that it is sometimes that way for me." Treep said in a considering voice.

"Well, I live on a starship so I don't think that's it, but my sleep schedule has been pretty messed up the last couple of days, so that might have done

it." Vincent said as he also began to fill his plate, then thought to ask, "Ship? Do the Soleen-Avalla have anything like coffee?"

After a moment, Ship responded, "My apologies, Trach Manja Vincent. But we have no such beverage on our planet."

"Oh... that's okay. I'm just kind of used to having coffee with my breakfast... it's kind of my way of starting my day. I'll just have some when we get to Earth." Vincent said, then started eating his breakfast.

"Before I forget, We made these for the three of you." Treep said and unfolded a piece of cloth to reveal three identical pieces of jewelry.

"Those are pretty." Lindon said with a smile.

"What do they do?" Vincent asked between bites.

"They are communication devices. With these, you can be in constant contact with Ship. You will be able to call for an emergency teleportal or to simply ask a question." Treep said informatively.

"How do we use them? I don't understand how to use your controls." Vincent said as he picked up one of the bracelets to examine it.

"You don't need to do anything. Ship will monitor you at all times and respond immediately to any need you might have." Treep said frankly.

"So it'll be just like being here on the ship." Lehman said speculatively.

"Yes. And since Clan Short has had recent difficulties, it would be prudent to take such precautions." Treep said seriously.

Vincent considered for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Those are Captain Rasch's words, aren't they?"

Treep looked surprised by the question, but finally nodded.

"I thought so. I don't think you're the kind of guy who would think to say something like 'prudent'." Vincent said with a teasing grin.

Treep clucked with laughter and said, "I think you're right."

* * * * *

"Trach Manja Vincent, the Captain requests your presence on the bridge." Ship said seriously.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked as he stood from the table.

"Perhaps. The captain has been in contact with Starfleet so we will not be delayed on our approach to Earth, however, he is meeting with some resistance." Ship said gravely.

"Tell him I'm on my way." Vincent said as he hurried out of the dining room.

* * * * *

"What's wrong Captain?" Vincent asked as he walked onto the bridge.

"Starfleet is demanding that we allow ourselves to be scanned before we will be allowed to approach Earth." Captain Rasch said in a voice that clearly conveyed his anger.

"Let me talk to them." Vincent said as he turned to face the center of the room.

A holographic screen appeared and an instant later a Starfleet admiral that Vincent didn't recognize filled the screen.

"Crewman Winters?" The admiral asked dubiously as he looked at Vincent.

It took Vincent a moment to realize why the admiral was confused by his appearance.

Vincent was barefoot and only wearing a pair of loose fitting pants that had been left for him in the bathing room.

"Yes sir, I'm sorry, admiral. I only have the uniform I was wearing when I came aboard and it is being cleaned right now." Vincent said shyly.

The admiral gave Vincent an appraising look that seemed to come up short of acceptable before saying, "In the interest of Starfleet security, we need to scan the ship you are on before we can allow it to enter the Sol system."

"Admiral Morrow already approved all this. If you check with him, he'll tell you that it's okay." Vincent said cautiously, trying to make his point without offending the admiral.

"He is occupied with other matters and security is my area of expertise." the admiral said seriously.

"It sure isn't diplomacy." Vincent said under his breath.

"What was that, Crewman?" the admiral asked sternly.

Vincent took in a deep breath to brace himself, before responding, "Admiral, as a son of Clan Short I am formally declaring this ship and all her occupants under the protection of Clan Short of Vulcan. If you want to scan this ship, contact Patriarch Short or Ambassador Sarek."

"Crewman Winters, you are blowing this all out of proportion. We just want to do a simple security scan of an alien vessel approaching our planet. That isn't an unreasonable request." the Admiral said in a softer voice.

"Maybe not to you, but to the Soleen-Avalla it's an insult and a violation of their ship. It would be the same as me inviting you over to my house for dinner, then frisking you at the door." Vincent said firmly, trying to sound reasonable.

As the admiral started to open his mouth to respond to the boy before him, the screen Vincent was looking at went dual and the bridge of a Vulcan ship came into view. In the Captain's Chair a hooded and black-robed boy was seated. He addressed the Starfleet admiral in a hard voice, "Admiral Farnworth, under the authority of the Vulcan High Command, High Council and by my authority as Commander in the V.S.O. you are ordered to report to Admiral Morrow's office and await Ambassador Sarek there. You have nearly caused a diplomatic disaster, and could have cost the Kimber colonists their new home. You are temporarily relieved of duty."

The admiral seemed to pale as the full weight of what was said sank in.

"You are dismissed, admiral," the boy on screen said as he depressed a button on the command chair and the Starfleet signal was cut off. The screen filled up entirely with the Vulcan bridge, allowing Vincent to see at least six other robed and hooded people; this time adults and they seemed Vulcan. The boy raised his hand and gave Vincent and Captain Rasch the Vulcan Salute. It was then that they saw his hand was blue, "Greetings on behalf of the United Federation of Planets, Earth and the High Council of Vulcan. I am 'Wisdom', Commander of the Dragon Division, a member of Vulcan Special and Covert Operations. Please disregard all that bull that admiral was saying. He was not acting on behalf of the Federation nor Starfleet."

"Um, yeah. Okay." Vincent said uncertainly, then glanced at Captain Rasch.

"Wisdom, this is Captain Rasch of the Soleen-Avalla." Vincent said as some small degree of his Starfleet diplomatic training seemed to have returned.

The young Commander lowered his hood to reveal his Andorian features and antennae. He replied, "Good to meet you, Captain. I am truly sorry for the inconvenience you have just been through. We have been monitoring all Clan Short and Starfleet communications since Saturday's chaos and I was detailed by the Ambassador to await your arrival." Wisdom turned and looked at Vincent with question, and to the young crewman it seemed that he was waiting for something, albeit with a slightly amused expression on his face.

After a moment of confusion, Vincent realized his omission.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Vincent, I mean, Crewman Winters, Son of Clan Short of the House of Surak of Vulcan." Vincent said in a bumbling rush.

Wisdom giggled slightly, "Pleased to finally meet you too, Vincent. We have been aware of your accomplishments since you joined the Clan. 'Heart' certainly has a crush on you already." So saying, Wisdom laughed harder at Vincent's sudden shock.

"Oh, um. I'm guessing that if you've been waiting to meet me, you probably know that I'm married, right?" Vincent asked uncertainly.

"Oh, I know. She knows too. She still thinks you are cute, though."

Vincent's eyes went wide at the statement, then he stammered, "I... um, thanks."

Wisdom controlled his giggles with some small effort, then continued, "Sorry, but I just had to say that. Her orders. Captain Rasch, as you are a diplomatic envoy to Earth and Federation space, would you allow us the honour of escorting you into Sector 001? Both my ship and the Excelsior stand ready to lead you to Earth."

Captain Rasch stood a little straighter as he looked at the screen then said in his most formal and respectful voice, "Thank you, Wisdom, your courtesy is most appreciated. Given the abrupt nature of our departure, I did not expect a diplomatic escort to receive us, but since you have offered, I will humbly accept."

"Is everything all right?" A voice called from behind them.

Vincent glanced over his shoulder and saw Lindon and Lehman standing in the doorway.

"Yeah, it is now. Come on over here, guys, there's someone I want you to meet." Vincent said as he gestured to his friends.

As Lindon came further into the room, Wisdom stiffened in his chair. "Finally... he's been found!" he half whispered, relief and joy flooding through his face for a moment.

"Wisdom, this guy who looks like me is Lehman and the guy with the wings is Lindon. Guys, this is Wisdom." Vincent said, feeling a little proud of himself for remembering to make introductions this time.

Lindon had heard the half whispered comment and looked at the Andorian stranger on the screen curiously. "You know me?" he asked, hesitantly.

"That was what I was about to ask," Captain Rasch stated with curiosity as he looked between the viewscreen and Lindon.

"No, I do not know you personally," Wisdom responded slowly, thinking fast on his feet. "The Vulcan High Council has been keeping a Watch posted for you for the last ten months, however."

"Lindon doesn't remember anything about who he is or where he's from, so anything you could tell him would be great. We were hoping that when we get to Earth that maybe some Vulcan healers or some of the telepaths could help him remember who he is." Vincent said in a rush.

Wisdom looked at them all for a long moment. Then, "Please wait; I need to contact my Commander."

Vincent expected Wisdom to start another call. He did not expect the Andorian child to simply close his eyes.

After a moment, Wisdom looked back up, "Voice, my Commander, has released me for information disclosure. I can tell you a few things. Lindon, we do not know your real name. We do, however, know where you are from, and who your people are. You are Lo'Garn. Your world is Lo'Ga, and it is over twelve thousand light years from Federation space; deep within the Beta Quadrant. Once you are with the Clan, there is at least one trained Mind-Healer there. Captain, or you, Vincent; is it a memory problem, or brain damage that is causing this issue?"

"Brain damage. His cryogenic unit intermittently failed during his voyage and there was wide-spread damage to his brain. Soleen-Avalla medical technology is such that we were able to completely heal the physical damage, but we have no method of restoring lost memories. Our people have no telepaths." Captain Rasch said professionally.

Just then a caramel-haired seven year old boy popped in next to Lindon. "Hi, Uncle Vincent!" He turned to Lindon and looked him over. "Voice said that you'd been found and someone needed to check on ya. You'll be okay, Uncle Xandor; I'll fix ya up as soon as ya get home!" He then giggled as he turned to the screen and waved. "Hey, Cuz; how y'all doin'?"

Lehman leaned close to Vincent and asked, "Who is that?"

Vincent shrugged and whispered, "I don't know."

"How did he just appear like that?"

"You got me."

"You're the Starfleet guy who's supposed to know all about what's going on." Lehman said curtly.

"Sorry." Vincent said weakly, then watched to see what was going to happen next.

"Don't worry, Uncle Lehman!" the boy stated between giggles. "Uncle Vincent needs to catch up on a few things. You know my Daddy and Poppa, Uncle Vincent, they're Kyle and Tyler. Uncle Cory can't wait until you get home! Starfleet don't know nuthin' about me, so askin' them ain't gonna help!"

"Does that clear things up for you?" Lehman asked as he stared at the boy.

"Not a bit. I think it made it worse. But I'm not the only one who has to figure this out, 'Uncle Lehman'." Vincent responded.

Wisdom, grinning like a Cheshire cat, broke in with, "Lehman and Vincent, Captain Rasch, Lindon. I am honoured to introduce you to Levi, child of Tyler and Kyle, first-born of the Mikyvis. And a damn good healer to boot! Hey! Talons!" Wisdom turned in his chair and looked to the back of the bridge where a pair of legs were sticking out from under the Security console.

"What, Tel? I'm busy here!"

"Code names only, doofus! There's someone here you've been longing to meet!"

"Oh for Kahless' sakes!" A small ten year old Klingon pulled himself out from under the console. "What are you... Oh! LEVI!!!!"

"Hi Talons! Are they working good?" Levi asked with a grin.

Talons nodded happily, "They're working fine! Thanks!!!"

Vincent closed his eyes for a moment and muttered, "I didn't really get to start my day off right... And the Soleen-Avalla don't have coffee!"

Wisdom laughed, "You'll understand soon. You'll be brought up to speed quick enough."

Levi giggled as a large coffee cup appeared in Vincent's hand. "Here ya go Uncle Vincent; this help?"

Vincent stared at the coffee in his hand for a moment, then up at Levi and said, "I love you."

"Well," Wisdom said as he was laughing, "You best not let T'Lani hear ya say that!!"

Levi smiled. "I love you too, Uncle Vincent; Uncle Cory is super-proud of you and he's let me learn all about you. You're just as nice as he said you were."

Vincent gave the young Mikyvis a one armed hug, "Thanks, Levi. You're cool too."

"Levi," Wisdom said to the young child, "If you want, Talons here would like to give you those hugs he's been talking about for months and months and months."

Levi nodded quickly and disappeared from the Soleen-Avalla bridge to appear just as quickly on the Vulcan bridge. He and Talons slammed into each other in a fierce hug.

After a few minutes hugging, and everyone else watching with either joy or bemusement, Levi smiled and looked up at Talons. "I like your hugs; they're kewl! Wait until you meet Uncle Cory; you're gonna like him! Thanks for all the hugs."

"Loads more where they came from. Seeya laters, dude!" Talons kissed Levi's cheek, then released him from the hug.

Lehman turned to ask Vincent what was going on, but stopped when he saw the blissful look on Vincent's face as he sipped his coffee.

When he felt that he couldn't wait any longer, Lehman asked, "So do you know what's happening now?"

Vincent smiled and said, "No clue. But I say just go with it."

"Uncle Vincent? You were right, it's better you learn the stuff yourself instead of someone telling you." Levi said as he turned his head to the screen. "You'll understand soon though; just expect TONS of surprises!"

"Yeah. I'm getting kinda used to that." Vincent said, then took another slow sip of his coffee.

As Levi finished on the other ship, he suddenly reappeared next to Lindon. "You're gonna be okay soon; Daddy is gonna help you so you don't lose nothin' you've learned since you woke up. I'm gonna watch so I can learn to do it right!" Levi sealed the promise with a hug, then announced "See y'all at home!" before vanishing.

"Do all your people appear and disappear like that?" Lehman asked Vincent cautiously.

"They didn't when I left, but... I guess we'll find out when we get there." Vincent said casually.

"You're being awfully calm about all this." Lehman said suspiciously.

"It's the coffee." Vincent said with a smile.

Talons giggled at Vincent's blissed out statement, "Don't worry, Lehman. Levi's a Mikyvis. A higher being, in a way. There are only three... no, wait, four of them... at the moment. Forgot about that message from Red as we left yesterday!"

"Yeah," Wisdom said with amusement, "and knowing his folks, it won't be long 'til even more arrive!" The Andorian glanced at Lindon. "Lin... I mean, Xandor. Do you have questions?"

"When will you be able to fix me?" Lindon asked hesitantly, obviously afraid of the answer.

"Well, in about an hour we'll be at TerraMain, in orbit of Earth." Wisdom said, "I cannot say exactly when the Mikyvis guys can help you, but within a day or so, I'd imagine. Please, don't worry, Xandor. There is another on Earth who will help you, once we can reveal who we are fully."

Captain Rasch glanced at the Andorian boy suddenly, having caught what had been said, "What do you mean 'we' are only an hour from Earth? My ship is an hour from Earth, but Starfleet vessels are not as fast as our own. And there are no others here!"

Wisdom turned back to Rasch, "Captain, I am not on a Starfleet vessel. This is a Vulcan Tavek-Class Interceptor. They are far more advanced than Starfleet ships, at least until the current upgrades roll out fully. Since Vulcans are far, far older than all others in the known Alpha and Beta Quadrants, they have technology that is not widely known about."

"Then we will be prepared to get underway again once you arrive." Captain Rasch said formally.

"We already have," Wisdom said with a smile.

Captain Rasch turned and looked closely at the scanner output in the holographic display, then looked back at the viewscreen with question.

With a giggle, Wisdom motioned to one of the other Vulcans in the room, "Check off your starboard bow. We are decloaking now. And do not be

alarmed, we are heavily armed, but that is normal for the 'Yoshuhlnak' and all Tavek ships."

On the scanners, Rasch saw an impressive sized ship appear. The viewscreen also changed to show the ship. It was larger than the *Enterprise*, Vincent noticed.

Captain Rasch immediately turned to look at the holographic display, his eyes darting around, taking in every detail.

"Wow. It's pretty." Lindon said as he looked at the screen with wonder.

"She's magnificent." Vincent said as he moved to stand beside Captain Rasch so he could examine the holographic representation.

Lehman looked back and forth between Lindon and Vincent, then shook his head.

"I'll never understand what you see in these things... it's just a ship." Lehman said with a roll of his eyes.

"I beg your pardon?" Ship interjected curtly.

"Um, oh. I didn't mean... I'm sorry Ship.... Why don't I just shut up now. Okay?" Lehman said in a diminishing voice.

Wisdom grinned at them, "Captain. If you are ready, we will proceed to the Sol System. What is your maximum speed?"

"On your scale, off the chart. We use a version of Transwarp."

"Mmm. That is failed tech in the Federation. And unstable. We have a maximum Warp speed of 9.8 and can hold that for up to six hours. That is more than enough for us to get to Earth."

"Very well. Ship, please follow the '*Yoshuhlnak*' and match their speed," Rasch ordered.

"Yes, Captain."

Wisdom added, "At the border of the Terran System, please drop to Warp 4. It is the standard within all Federation populated planetary systems, due to trade and civilian traffic. The USS *Excelsior* will join us there as the Starfleet escort."

"We will follow your lead, and thank you," Captain Rasch said, "I am glad to have met you. I do find it strange, however, that a child your age is in command of a Starship."

"I am the 'Wisdom of the Dragon', part of the Vulcan Special Ops Divisions. To Vulcans, ability is more important than age. You also will need to wait for more information. Everything will be made clear in time, once you meet those we protect; Clan Short."

"So you aren't Clan?" Vincent asked in surprise.

"That is something that is going to be a surprise for when you get to Earth, Vincent," the Andorian said mysteriously. "I have things I must take care of now, but I will contact you all soon. Live long and prosper."

"Peace and long life," Vincent replied, and the signal terminated.

Lehman sighed in frustration, "I hate unanswered questions, and that was more questions left hanging than I can handle!"

Lindon, however, looked both nervous and happy. "I have a name! And I know what I am and where I'm from!" He paused, a smile playing over his face as he whispered, "Lo'garn... Ummm, what do you think, Vincent? Lehman? Is Xandor a nice name?" he asked them both hopefully.

"It's a great name, Xandor," Vincent said as he hugged the happy twelve year old winged boy with one arm, before draining the last of his coffee. "Lehman, don't worry about it. We'll get to know what's going on once we arrive. It's like you said; we'll learn about it as we go and be able to use our abilities better. That Levi kid said so, too."

"Yeah, but I sure wish now that I'd been wrong about that."

The Captain was half listening to them and half paying attention to the ship that was just forward and starboard of his own. They had entered warp moments after Wisdom had left the screen. The ship ahead was a beauty and no mistake. "Ship, what is the armament of that Vulcan ship?"

"Heavy, just as the Commander said," Ship responded, "Fourteen Phaser arrays, ten torpedo launchers and dual overlapping modular shields. It would be a formidable opponent to any of the races we are aware of. I doubt that we could match her, apart from our speed. Most of the readings I am getting show a power level at least equal to my own, and they are only slightly slower than our normal cruise speed. I am impressed."

Rasch also seemed impressed, "I am glad they are on our side."

"I'm still hungry," Vincent stated suddenly, the coffee having finally done its job at waking him up. "Can we go..."

"Back and finish off? Sure," Lehman completed seriously. "We left ours too when you left. Come on, you two."

The three boys left the room arm in arm, leaving Rasch to practically dribble over the stats from the '*Yoshuhlnak*'.

"I really want to have a long talk with these Vulcans..." he said in admiration.

* * * * *

"Hi, Brakkii!" Levi said as he appeared in the dream realms. "How's my favorite Queen of the Dream Kingdom doing?"

"Have you been speaking to Vincent, by any chance?" Brakkii retorted playfully.

Levi giggled. "Yeah; That's why I swung back by here so soon! It looks like you got everything outta my universe before Daddy killed off the timeline branches."

"Well, out of the branches, yes. I'm still in the main 'trunk'. Thanks for the warning, but please tell your parents that destroying whole chunks from various universes makes my race feel sick. If they can refrain from it, I'd be happier."

"Daddy's real sad about it too." Levi replied seriously. "He only did it because it was the only way to keep the bad guy from destroying all of it."

"Bad guy?" Brakkii thought for a moment. "Oh, that Axon kid? Well, I understand now. Funny race, those Ferox. By the way, please tell your father that seven 'branches' fell away and became valid universes."

Levi nodded, "Yeah, we know. I went looking as it was happening."

"That's good. They do seem different now, though, and after checking one I found its history has changed. I think it is how Creation defends itself. Those new universes must all have new histories making them totally different from their source here. Hopefully, that will make him feel less sad. Those people have a chance at life, and their own universe as well."

Levi nodded. "I told him for you; he's still sad about everyone else but that helped him a little."

"Good," Brakkii replied as he led Levi to a nearby seat and pulled the seven year old onto his lap.

"He will feel better as time goes by, but it won't really leave him. Tell him that he can always come here. There's a great place here, the Valley of Cuddles and Snuggles. It would do you and your parents good."

Levi giggled. "I was kinda thinking of bringing ALL of my family here tonight; you up to throwing a HUGE party?"

"Whenever you're ready, I will be," Brakkii nodded as he hugged the boy tighter. "I think... I feel something happening, however. Travellers. At least five... no, wait... maybe six... hang on! There's a lot travelling right now! Your family, that Cory boy included, well, you might be busy today and tonight!"

Levi concentrated for a minute. "Wow; that's gonna be weird if you're seeing what I see in one of the possible futures. How'd you do that? I can't feel stuff that's happening right now!"

Brakkii thought for a moment, "Mmm, okay. You exist in all universes, dimensions and timelines at once?"

"Yep." Levi giggled. "Uncle Levis says we're made of anti-energy."

"Cool. I'm anti-energy in part, but also matter. In a way. It's different, but... oh, nevermind. I exist wherever I want to exist, but only in current time. I can't see the future like you. But, I come from no universe. We came from the "Great Light". It's what is between all the Universes. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah." Levi replied. "We use it when we go places."

"Good. Well, when I travel between I make a ripple. I can't feel when you or any Mikyvis travels between as you guys do so instantly. I can't. I have to bring my body with me. When others travel I can feel the ripples. I already feel that five are traveling to this universe. And they are not traveling alone. No, wait, that... those they travel with! They don't exist anymore! Wow... Oh, and there's another but he's strange. He's not making a current ripple, but an echo like ripple... and he's with someone I can't describe at all."

"That's weird; I can't see anything like that!" Levi commented as he tilted his head. After a few seconds, he shook his head to clear it, "Whatever; I guess I'll find out soon enough! Uncle Vincent has a twin here don't he?"

"Yes, he's in the room over there. Why do you ask?"

"Cuz' I can do a couple of things you can't!" Levi giggled. "Let's go see him!"

Brakkii began to look relieved, "Thank you! I am getting worried for Thomas. Every healer in the Realm is working on the problem, but it's beginning to appear that we won't be able to do much for him."

He stood up and carried the younger boy cradled on his hip into the other room. "He's sleeping right now, but we can't stop his pain nor heal him. Due to the nature of this universe, he's in no danger of dying, but living like he is right now is cruel. I was debating whether I should create an illusion of a normal life for Thomas. But he would be forever trapped in this world, and I couldn't remove all his pain... Perhaps it would be better to take him back to his world so that he could die with some dignity."

Levi concentrated on the boy in front of them. "Put me down, please; I think I can help him."

Brakkii did so, and stood back to watch the little Mikyvis start to work. "Do what you can, Levi. I thank you for anything you can do."

Levi sat next to the boy on the bed and softly ran his hands over Thomas' face. He then closed his eyes and concentrated on the radiation damage, starting at the tips of Thomas' toes. As Brakkii watched in wonder, the boils and blisters began to disappear from the body in front of them, being replaced by naturally tanned skin.

Once the damage to Thomas' body was healed, Levi placed a hand on each side of Thomas' head and relocated all of Thomas' memories and thoughts into his own head until repairs were complete. He then went through the brain neuron by neuron, reversing time on each neuron until it was at a pre-radiated point in it's existence. Once Levi had double-checked each and every part of Thomas' body to ensure there was nothing left of the damage caused, he carefully replaced the memories and thoughts into Thomas' brain; taking time to add in an explanation of what he had just done so that the shockwould not be so bad when he woke up.

Brakkii moved over and sat next to Levi. "That was amazing! I can barely believe my eyes, Levi. Thank you!" and so saying, he once again pulled the child into a hug.

Levi giggled and said as he enjoyed the hug, "No problems, Queenie."

"Imp," Brakkii chuckled. "Well, let us wake him up." He reached over and touched his hand to the side of Thomas' face.

* * * * *

The sound of laughter awoke Thomas from the strangest dream.

He opened his eyes and looked around curiously.

"What happened?" Thomas asked slowly, then realized that he already knew, though not entirely consciously.

"I fixed you." Levi giggled.

Thomas looked at his hand, only half expecting what he saw. His skin was smooth and unblemished.

"Am I dreaming?" Thomas asked as he looked at Levi and Brakkii sitting side by side on the edge of his bed.

"Nope. It's for real," Levi said happily. "I was gonna tattoo 'Restored by Levi' on your butt, but I didn't think you'd like the joke!"

Thomas giggled and looked at Levi curiously, then blinked his eyes in surprise.

"I can see!" Thomas said in wonder, then quickly continued, "I can say 'see' without whistling!"

"Did you have a foreskin before? There wasn't any way for me to tell when I was fixin that part so I gave you yours back." Levi asked seriously.

"Um... thanks." Thomas said, then lifted the blanket covering his midsection to take a peek.

"Wow! That's cool!"

Levi giggled as his clothes suddenly vanished. "Since you're not dressed either, I'll lose my clothes too. Let's go out and check things out around here. There's a really kewl valley I think you'll like!"

Brakkii started looking between both boys. "I feel over dressed."

"I COULD fix that!" Levi giggled.

"So could I," Brakkii replied, as the illusion of clothing fell from his form. "Master of Illusion, at your service."

"I could fix that for you." Levi said as he pointed at Brakkii's circumcised penis.

Brakkii looked down and smiled as he said, "My physical appearance was formed from a memory that I borrowed from someone's mind. What you are seeing is just an illusion."

A moment later, Brakkii's appearance slightly altered and his foreskin appeared.

"We're all matching now. I guess we're ready to go." Levi said with a giggle.

"Where are we going?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"A wonderful place called the Valley of Cuddles and Snuggles."

Chapter 44

"Wow. What do you think about everything that just happened?" Lehman asked as he walked to his seat at the dining table.

"I don't know what to think." Vincent answered in a somewhat overwhelmed tone.

"Levi said that when I get to Earth they're gonna fix me up. I mean, he can disappear and make stuff appear out of nowhere and he said that they're gonna fix me, so it's gotta be true!" Xandor said as his enthusiasm almost seemed to spark and flare in the air around him.

Lehman and Vincent glanced at each other and smiled at his happiness.

"So Lindon, do you want us to start calling you Xandor now?" Vincent asked as he started filling his plate again with the selections from the middle of the table.

"Yeah... I mean... I guess so. But where did the name Lindon come from?" Xandor asked, only slightly calming his absolute joy.

"Vincent came up with that. I didn't get that memory from him." Lehman said, then looked at Vincent with question.

"Well, one of the guys I went to school with was named Lindon. When you needed a name, I thought it would be a good one for you."

"Did he look like me?" Xandor asked between bites of food.

Vincent chuckled and said, "No. Actually he didn't look anything like you at all. I just like the name. I know that the name Linda means 'beautiful' so maybe Lindon is the male version of that name."

"Does that mean that you think I'm beautiful?" Xandor asked with surprise.

Vincent smiled and said, "Absolutely."

"You'd better watch it, Vincent. You're going to get your chi and ieb unbalanced if you keep going." Lehman said while trying to restrain his grin.

Vincent chuckled at the statement and responded, "Not a problem. I'm just saying that Xandor looks good. Now that I've figured out that all the stuff my dad taught me was messed up and wrong, I can say something like that just because I know it's true. I don't have to worry about it being a 'gay' thing to say."

Lehman considered the words, as Xandor asked, "Huh?"

Vincent smiled at Xandor and said, "It's nothing important. I had some problems before I met Lehman and he's been helping me figure things out."

Lehman nodded his agreement and said, "That's right, Xandor. Vincent was taught a lot of weird stuff by his dad. I don't really understand most of it and it's probably better if you don't learn it to begin with because it's all wrong."

Vincent chuckled and said, "You got that right."

Xandor looked back and forth between the two boys, then shrugged and accepted the answer.

"We'd better finish eating so we can get changed before we arrive at Earth." Vincent said before taking another bite of his food.

"Yeah. Do you think I'll be able to get some more clothes when we get there? I didn't think about needing clothes before we left the *Yorktown*." Lehman asked in a quiet tone of voice that said louder than words that he didn't want to be a burden to anyone.

"Sure. I don't know how things are on Earth right now, but if we can't go out and buy you stuff, then we'll just go over to Camp Little Eagle and borrow something for you." Vincent said, doing his best to make it sound like no big deal.

"I don't know. I'd feel funny about doing something like that." Lehman said as a worried expression came over his face.

Although Vincent didn't know every detail of Lehman's past, he knew that Lehman grew up in a poor family. It seemed important to make Lehman understand that borrowing clothes from the camp guys wouldn't be asking for charity.

"You're my brother, Lehman... And they're all my brothers too. I haven't spent much time with them, but I know from the hundred or so messages that they've sent me that they all know what that means and that they'll help us out any way they can." Vincent said with certainty.

"I don't understand." Xandor said timidly as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"It's pretty simple really. When my parents died, I was a kid who couldn't take care of himself. So the Clan adopted me and made me their son. Everyone in the Clan is like a father to me... it kinda means that I've got thirty dads." Vincent finished with a chuckle.

Xandor's eyes went wide at the statement.

"So anyway, now I'm a son of Clan Short. All the guys at Camp Little Eagle are there because the Clan adopted them the same way that they adopted me. That makes them my brothers too." Vincent finished happily.

"Am I going to be your brother?" Xandor asked as he looked from Vincent to Lehman with question and concern.

"I guess we'll find out in about an hour." Vincent said and gave a casual shrug.

Xandor looked at Vincent with question, prompting him for more of an explanation.

"After you get all fixed up and remember who you really are, then we'll figure everything else out. Cory and Sean might end up making you one of my brothers... or they might make you one of my dads." Vincent finished with a mischievous grin.

"Your dad?" Xandor asked as his large eyes became impossibly wider.

"Yup. If they end up making you a member of the Clan, then you'd be one of my dads just like all the other Clan members." Vincent said with a smile, noticing again just how handsome Xandor really was.

"So you're not a Clan member?" Lehman asked in a completely serious tone.

Vincent thought for a moment before saying, "I'm not really sure how that works. I need to talk to Sean and Cory about it. From everything they've said to me so far, I get the feeling that being a 'Son of Clan Short' isn't that much different from being a Clan member. I'm still a member of the house of Surak and the family of Sarek. So I can do stuff... like declaring that this ship is under the protection of Vulcan. But... I don't know, it's different somehow. I'm not sure what the difference is. Like I said, I need to talk to Sean and Cory about that. I don't want to end up doing something wrong because I don't understand."

Lehman nodded and said, "Let me know when you figure it out. Because if I'm your brother, I need to know what the rules are."

"What do you mean 'if'? You *are* my brother."

Lehman gave a reluctant smile and shyly said, "Yeah. I guess I am. It's still kinda new to me."

The sound of the ship's engines changed dramatically and all the boys looked at each other with question.

"I think that means we just entered the Earth's solar system. We'd better hurry and get changed." Vincent said as he hopped up from his chair.

"Yeah. I'd rather be dressed when I meet your... *our* family." Lehman finished with a smile.

* * * * *

Vincent led the way into his room and was surprised to find Treep waiting for them.

"Hey, Treep. What's going on?" Vincent asked as he stopped just inside the door.

"I have been asked on behalf of Captain Rasch and the crew to present these to you." Treep said in a formal tone as he gestured toward the bed.

Vincent followed the gesture and found clothing neatly arranged.

"Trach Manja Vincent, I realize that your official station may require you to wear your uniform, but we, the crew, wanted you to have this clothing, as a token of our esteem." Treep said as he picked up a white tunic.

The edges of the tunic had been embroidered with a delicate pattern of gold thread and there were clear crystals in six sided patterns up and down the garment. On the left side of the chest there was a hexagonal design of crystals that matched the shape of his necklace exactly.

"Wow." Vincent said as he reverently accepted the tunic from Treep.

When he turned the tunic in his hands, he smiled at the sight of the Clan Short crest on the upper left arm. It had been recreated in perfect detail.

"It's beautiful. Thank you." Vincent whispered.

"Trach Manja Lehman. Since you do not have a 'symbol' as Trach Manja Vincent does, Ship decided to create one for you. I hope that it meets with your approval." Treep said as he handed a tunic to Lehman.

The white tunic was exactly the same in every detail to the one Vincent had been given, except that on the upper left sleeve, there was a blue circular crest. Inside the field of dark blue there were clear jewels of various sizes.

"It's my home." Lehman said with astonishment at the pattern.

The jewels represented the planetary system of the Chameloid people.

"*I thought that it would represent your individuality.*" Ship's voice said from above them.

"Thank you, Ship. It's perfect." Lehman said appreciatively as he looked over the beautifully intricate embroidery.

As Lehman began to put on the tunic, he noticed that Vincent had already put his on.

"You're not going to wear your uniform?" Lehman asked, and the surprise could clearly be heard in his voice.

"I'll take it with me, but I won't wear it unless I have to do some Starfleet business." Vincent said as he tied the belt on his tunic.

Lehman nodded, then looked at Treep with question, hoping that he also had something for Xandor.

"Lindon, all of the Avalla crew feel a special kinship with you. Although it has been established that the Lo'Garn have no relation to the Avalla, we still feel that you are related to us in some greater sense of the word." Treep said with the utmost respect directed toward Xandor.

"As a token of our esteem, we have created this for you." Treep said and reverently handed Xandor a large black tunic.

As Xandor unfolded the tunic, the multi-colored sparkles of various jewels made him freeze in mid motion.

Vincent and Lehman stepped closer to see the beautiful, intricate pattern that covered the jet black cloth.

"Wow." Xandor said in wonder.

"Try it on." Vincent whispered.

"We'll help you." Lehman offered from Vincent's side.

Vincent and Lehman took the garment from Xandor and finished unfolding it.

"Oh, I see." Vincent said with a smile as he realized how it worked.

Within a minute they had brought the tunic up under Xandor's wings and pulled the sleeves up over his shoulders.

"It looks great." Vincent said as he stepped back.

"Yeah. You look awesome." Lehman said with a nod of appreciation.

Xandor looked down at himself, then up at his friends with a smile.

"I must go to the bridge. We will be arriving momentarily." Treep said with a look of urgency in his eyes.

"Please thank the crew for us. These clothes are great." Vincent said in a rush to get the words out before Treep was out of the room.

"Yes. Thank all of them." Xandor said in a distant voice as he looked down at himself again.

"I will do so." Treep said on his way out the door.

"I wonder why he was in such a hurry?" Lehman asked as he looked again at the beautiful pattern on Xandor's robe.

"I think it's because he's the first officer and we're in an inhabited planetary system. His place is on the bridge." Vincent said as he folded his jumpsuit uniform into a tight bundle.

"If he needed to be on the bridge, why didn't he just have someone else give these to us?" Lehman asked as he looked down at his tunic again.

"I'm pretty sure it's because we're Trach Manjai. I bet the captain wanted to do it himself, but couldn't because he couldn't leave the bridge. Treep was the highest ranking officer who could possibly do it." Vincent said as he sat on the edge of the bed and started pulling on his socks and shoes.

Lehman noticed what he was doing and began doing the same.

"Should I have shoes too?" Xandor asked cautiously.

Vincent glanced at Xandor's feet, then said, "I don't think so. We're going to be beaming in to Clan Short headquarters, so there shouldn't be anything there to hurt your feet."

Xandor nodded uncertainly.

"Does everyone have their bracelet?" Vincent asked as he held out his wrist.

Lehman and Xandor did the same to display their identical bracelets.

"Then I guess we're ready to go. Let's head to the bridge." Vincent said as he picked up his jumpsuit uniform.

Lehman gathered his clothes into a bundle and followed a step behind.

* * * * *

"Ship, engage level four sensor cloak." Captain Rasch said firmly as Vincent, Lehman and Xandor stepped onto the bridge.

"*Sensor Cloak engaged.*" Ship responded in a professional voice that was a definite contrast to the tone Ship had used with Vincent earlier.

Vincent looked curiously at Captain Rasch, but didn't want to interrupt him while he was working.

"*Captain, I have received orbital parking coordinates.*" Ship said as one of the holographic displays in front of the captain changed.

A movement caught Vincent's attention and he turned to see Treep motioning to him.

Vincent, Lehman and Xandor walked to join Treep at one of the work stations at the side of the bridge.

"Trach Manja Vincent, we are in teleportal range. Do you know where you would like to teleport?" Treep asked while keeping the majority of his attention on the display before him.

After a moment to consider, Vincent asked, "Can you contact Clan Short headquarters? I think it would be best if we ask them."

"Ship, please establish contact with Clan Short headquarters and display the output to the operations console." Treep said into the air.

A moment later the Clan Short logo filled the screen of the console that Treep and Vincent were standing beside.

The unknown boy that Vincent had seen when Captain Byrne contacted Clan Short appeared on the screen and said, "*Clan Short of Vulcan.*"

"Hi. I'm Crewman Winters. We're here at Earth and ready to beam down. Will you give us coordinates?" Vincent asked, feeling a distinct uneasiness from talking to this unknown boy. It was hard to feel like he was coming home when a complete stranger was welcoming him.

"*Where do you want to beam to?*" The boy asked curiously, and Vincent noticed that he seemed to be much more relaxed than last time they spoke.

"Um, could I beam in to wherever Cory is? I need to talk to him." Vincent asked with caution. Since he had no idea of what was going on, he didn't even know for sure if Cory would be at the Short Compound.

"*Sean is currently in charge. Cory has been ordered off duty by Grandfather Sarek.*" The boy said in a tone of voice that almost sounded like a challenge.

Vincent bit his lower lip at the declaration, now more worried than ever for his clan.

"Well, this isn't really official stuff. I just want to see Cory and let him know that I'm okay." Vincent said, and concern could clearly be heard in his voice.

The boy pressed a few keys on the console before him, then said, "*I've transmitted the coordinates.*"

The boy then continued in a more gentle voice, "*Please just try not to upset him. He's had a rough couple of days.*"

"Only good news. I promise." Vincent said with an assuring smile.

The boy nodded and seemed to be ready to end the transmission.

"Wait!" Vincent called quickly.

The boy looked at Vincent with question.

"Who are you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

The boy smiled and said, "*My name is Seth. I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself before. I've heard so much about you since I joined the Clan that I feel like I already know you.*"

"Oh." Vincent said cautiously, then continued, "It's nice to meet you, Seth. I guess I'll be able to meet you for real when I get down there."

Seth chuckled and said, "*I'm looking forward to it. Welcome home.*"

Vincent smiled and watched as the Clan Short logo filled the screen again.

* * * * *

"Do you have everything you will need?" Captain Rasch asked as he walked to join the rest of the group.

"I think so." Vincent said as he looked around.

Once again Vincent was struck by how elegant Xandor looked in his black robe that glistened with tiny, multi-colored gems.

"Ship, notify me immediately if the Federation ships attempt to penetrate our sensor cloak." Captain Rasch said firmly.

"*Yes Captain.*" Ship said seriously.

"Teleport." Captain Rasch said in a firm, clear voice.

* * * * *

When the fountain of multi-colored sparkles cleared, Vincent looked around the room that they had transported into.

As soon as he saw Cory, everything that he had expected and planned left his mind.

Cory looked... smaller. He looked tired and as though he had been beaten down.

Vincent immediately walked across the room and without hesitation, climbed onto Cory's lap.

"Hi dad. I'm home." Vincent whispered into Cory's shoulder as he hugged him firmly.

After a moment of surprise at the unexpected transport and the group of strangers that were standing before him, Cory devoted his attention to Vincent and returned the hug.

"How are you?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I'm fine." Cory whispered in return, then continued, "I'm even better now that I can see for myself that you're safe."

A low, rhythmic sound, something between a purr and a growl, drew Vincent's attention.

Vincent looked beside Cory to find a cat-like person staring across the room.

"Shhh... they're friends." Cory whispered to his side.

"They look hungry." Treep whispered in a cautious voice.

Vincent looked down in time to see one of the cat-like people slowly lick his lips.

"Stop that, Mont." Cory said in a tone of voice that was half scolding and half playful.

Movement drew Vincent's attention and he saw Captain Rasch take a half-step forward, silently letting it be known that he was protecting Treep.

"Vincent, maybe now would be a good time to intro..." Cory began to say, then froze when Xandor stepped out from behind the group. Vincent saw a curious look appear in Cory's eyes; a knowing look.

Vincent quirked an eyebrow at Cory's abrupt stop. But when it was obvious that Cory wasn't going to say whatever was on his mind, Vincent got off Cory's lap to make the introductions.

"Patriarch Cory Short, this is Captain Rasch of the Soleen-Avalla." Vincent said in his 'mature' voice.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Captain Rasch." Cory said with respect, but Vincent also noticed an underlying tiredness in his voice.

"It is a pleasure for me as well, Patriarch Short. As a representative of the Soleen-Avalla empire, I have been instructed to extend greetings from our counsel of elders." Captain Rasch said in a formal and respectful tone. The low accented voice that the Captain's translator use was perfect for conveying the sincerity of his words.

"Kewl." Cory said with a grin. "Please relay my thanks back to them."

Vincent smiled at the informal response, then said, "Cory, this is Treep, he's Captain Rasch's first officer."

"It's nice to meet you, Treep. Please don't be afraid of Mont and Bast. They know you're a guest and would never hurt you." Cory said as he met Treep's concerned gaze, then continued, "They'd have to deal with the Tribe if they tried."

"Thank you. It's nice to meet you, Patriarch Short... you too, Mont and Bast." Treep finished uncertainly and seemed to be fighting to hide his nervousness.

"I think I like him." Bast said in a playful voice.

Vincent moved to Lehman's side and said, "Cory, this is Lehman. I probably should have told you about him before but... well, lots of stuff has been going on and I just didn't think about it."

"It's nice to meet you, Lehman." Cory said formally, then looked at Vincent and asked, "Could you maybe explain why he looks *exactly* like you?"

"Oh yeah." Vincent said shyly, then continued, "I guess if you don't know the story, that could be kinda weird."

Cory raised an eyebrow in a distinctly 'Vulcan' fashion, prompting Vincent to explain.

"Lehman is a Chameloid. He can change himself to look like just about anyone. He changed himself to look like me and kinda got stuck." Vincent said with difficulty, wanting to keep the explanation brief.

"We can talk about it later if you want. It's kind of a long story." Lehman said shyly.

Cory nodded his agreement to the arrangement, then said, "Don't leave without telling me; this I gotta hear."

"Okay, I guess that leaves Lindon... I mean Xandor." Vincent said slowly as he moved to the winged boy's side.

"Ah... Another long story?" Cory guessed, that strange 'something' in his eyes again.

"No. Actually, it's really short." Vincent said seriously.

"Too short." Lehman said with a slight nod of agreement.

At Cory's inquisitive look, Vincent continued, "Xandor is from Lo'Ga... That's it. He doesn't remember anything from before we rescued him. I was kind of hoping that maybe Clan Short's telepaths or Doc Austin or maybe that Levi kid could do something to help him."

"You know Levi?" Cory asked with surprise, but didn't seem to be worried as he asked, "What did he do THIS time?"

"Yeah. He just kind of popped in out of nowhere, told Xandor his real name and where he's from, then popped out again." Vincent said, feeling like he was understating the event, but he honestly couldn't think of any other relevant facts to relate about the meeting.

"Daddy and Pop should be able to help Uncle Xandor 'member all the stuff he forgot." Levi said as he appeared beside Xandor and pulled him into a quick hug.

"Like that." Vincent said as he gestured toward Levi.

"I would try to do it myself, but I might mess things up trying to put old memories and new memories together the right way." Levi said from the hug.

"Well then..." Cory began to say, but was interrupted.

"Daddy and Poppa can fix you, Uncle Xandor. Come on." Levi giggled, then said, "We'll be back, Uncle Cory!"

Before Xandor could agree, protest or even fully understand what Levi was saying, ::pooft:: they were gone.

Vincent stared at the vacant spot for a moment before turning to Cory and saying, "I get the feeling that some things have happened while I've been gone."

Cory gave a weary chuckle and said, "I guess you could say that."

* * * * *

Captain Rasch and Treep looked at each other with concern at Xandor's disappearance.

Vincent noticed their worried expressions and hurried to say, "If you're worried about Xandor, Ship can check on him to see that he's alright."

Captain Rasch gave Vincent a brief smile, then said, "Ship, can you tell me of Xandor's condition?"

"*He is currently being introduced to Levi's parents. Do you wish to speak to him or for me to relay a message?*" Ship's voice asked from Captain Rasch's pendant.

"No, thank you, Ship. Just please monitor his activity and notify me immediately if he is in any distress." Captain Rasch said firmly.

"*Yes, Captain.*" Ship responded in the completely professional tone that he had used the first time Vincent heard him.

"They won't hurt him. I promise." Cory said cautiously to the large Saurian that Vincent had brought with him.

Captain Rasch turned his attention to Cory and said, "I believe you. If I thought otherwise, I would have had Ship teleport him out immediately." Captain Rasch said in a professional voice, then continued more softly, "If our situations were reversed, would you do any less to protect someone in your charge?"

"I suppose not." Cory reluctantly admitted.

"Hey Cor. They'll be here in about five minutes. You'd better get a move on." Sean said quickly from the doorway, then noticed who else was in the room.

"Hey Vincent. I heard that you were on your way, but no one told me that you were here." Sean said happily, then looked Vincent up and down before adding, "Kewl bathrobe."

Vincent giggled at the comment, then without thinking, he ran to give Sean a firm hug.

Sean was a little bit surprised by the move, but was soon hugging Vincent just as firmly in return.

When the hug was finally finished, Vincent pulled back and asked, "What's going to happen in five minutes?"

"Oh, we have some visitors on the way and I'm going to need Cory for the whole greeting thing." Sean said casually, and from the way he said it, Vincent was sure that it wasn't anything dangerous.

"Is it anything I can help with?" Vincent asked automatically, not really considering the words before he said them.

"I can't think of any way you could help with our visitors, but I can think of something else that you could do if you're interested." Sean said with a smile.

"What can I do?" Vincent asked quickly, feeling a need to do something to help his Clan.

"Well, there is a certain Clan member in the rec room who is nearly crawling out of his skin, waiting for his brother to arrive. It would be a big help to all of us if you would go in there and talk to him." Sean said with a grin.

Vincent smiled as he realized who Sean was talking about.

"Okay. Thanks, Sean. But remember to call me if there's any way I can help you guys." Vincent said as he looked Sean in the eyes.

"Yeah. Promise. Gotta go." Sean said before hurrying away.

"I'm sorry I can't stay and talk, but I'm sure Lawrence can fill you in on everything that's happened since you left." Cory said as he slowly stood, then continued, "Things are still totally nuts around here."

"Yeah. Take care of yourself, Dad. I love you." Vincent said as he walked to Cory and gave him a quick hug, then to Cory's absolute surprise, Vincent kissed him on the cheek.

Cory returned the hug and whispered, "I'd really like to sit and talk with you later."

"Yeah. I'll catch you later when you've got all your stuff done." Vincent said as he reluctantly released Cory from the hug.

Cory reached up and rubbed Vincent's slightly shaggy hair as he walked out of the room with the two cat creatures following close behind.

* * * * *

"Come on, my brother Lawrence should be right in here." Vincent said as he walked with Lehman, Captain Rasch and Treep into the hall.

"Trach Manja Vincent, if it would not be an imposition to you, could I meet others of your family at a later time?" Captain Rasch asked gently.

Vincent noticed that Lehman had continued on into the Rec room.

"Treep and I need to return to the ship to supervise the repairs." Captain Rasch said seriously.

"That's fine. Thanks for coming down to meet Cory. Do you think that you and Treep will be able to come down later?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yes. I am certain that we will once repairs are underway." Captain Rasch said with a smile.

"Okay. Then I'll see you later." Vincent said with appreciation.

"Ship. Teleport." Captain Rasch said clearly, then was consumed in a fountain of multi-colored sparkles.

* * * * *

"Oh God, I missed you. You haven't changed a bit." Lawrence said as he hugged Lehman tightly.

Vincent smiled at the scene before him, then noticed Deacon standing a few feet away.

"Hey, Deacon. How are you doing?" Vincent asked as he walked casually to Deacons side.

"Fine..." Deacon said automatically, then looked over at Lawrence hugging Lehman, then back at Vincent again.

"I see that Lawrence met Lehman. I'm glad they like each other." Vincent said as mischief danced in his eyes.

"But he... you... what?" Deacon asked in a diminishing voice.

"That's Lehman, he's a shape shifter... sort of. It's kind of a long story." Vincent said, then unfolded the jumpsuit uniform that he had been carrying and reached into the pocket.

"Oh good, they didn't lose it." Vincent said happily as he extracted a small velvety pouch.

Deacon looked at Vincent curiously.

"Here. I got this for you. I hope you like it." Vincent said as he handed the pouch to Deacon.

"*You* got something for *me*?" Deacon asked hesitantly as he slowly opened the pouch and poured the contents out into his hand.

"Yup. I saw it and I thought of you." Vincent said as he waited to see Deacon's reaction.

"Oh Vincent. It's beautiful." Deacon said as he held up the necklace to look at the cobalt blue pendant suspended on a thin gold chain.

"I'm glad you think so."

"Would you please get off me?" Lehman asked in an indignant voice.

Vincent and Deacon both turned to see what Lawrence's reaction would be.

As Lehman was working to escape Lawrence's grasp, Lawrence noticed Vincent and Deacon a few feet away.

"But... but..." Lawrence sputtered as he looked from Lehman to Vincent with confusion.

"Do you want to tell it this time?" Vincent asked Lehman with his mischievous grin firmly in place.

"*YOUR* brother just about hugged my guts out. You owe me big time." Lehman said firmly as he stepped away from Lawrence.

Vincent snickered and said, "I'm sorry, Lehman. I didn't know that would happen."

"Vince?" Lawrence asked quietly, still not entirely sure which one was his brother.

"I'm right here, Lawrence. The guy you just jumped is named Lehman. He's kinda like my twin." Vincent said with a smile.

Lawrence took a step toward Vincent and looked at him carefully.

"You've grown." Lawrence said in a quiet voice.

"Yeah. Growth spurt." Vincent said, not sure what Lawrence's reaction would be.

"Well, you look a lot better than when you... you know... almost died." Lawrence said with tears forming in his eyes.

Vincent couldn't wait any longer and pulled his brother into a firm hug.

"They sure are some hugging people." Lehman said casually as he walked to Deacon's side.

"Just wait until you meet the Thompsons." Deacon said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"I'm really fine." Vincent said quietly as he continued to hold Lawrence firmly.

Lawrence pulled away enough to look his brother in the eyes.

After a long minute of examining Vincent's expression, Lawrence gently said, "I can see that, Vince. You've really grown up."

"Yeah, about three inches. Plus Dr. Perry says that I'm starting to gain muscle mass... whatever that means." Vincent finished with a considering look.

"No, Vince, I mean you've grown up inside. When you left you could barely stand to touch me. Now you act like you're really happy to see me." Lawrence said quietly, reluctant to disrupt the happy mood.

"It's not an act."

Lawrence stared at his brother, not daring to hope for more.

Vincent closed his eyes and concentrated on what he was trying to say.

"A lot of people have spent a lot of time trying to get me to understand myself."

Lawrence looked as if he wanted to say something but seemed to be unable to form the words.

"I guess the biggest thing that I've learned is that being family, being brothers, is more important than any of that crap that Dad used to scream about."

"More important than me being gay?" Lawrence ventured hopefully.

Vincent smiled and said, "Yeah."

Lawrence looked at Vincent with surprise and waited expectantly for his next words.

"I love you, Lawrence, and there is nothing you could ever say or do that would change that."

"I love you too, Vince." Lawrence said past the lump in his throat.

Vincent smiled at the words so sincerely spoken by his brother.

After a moment to consider, Vincent said, "And what I've learned about the gay thing is that it's really no big deal. If you love someone, it doesn't matter if you're gay or straight. Love is love."

Lawrence started openly crying as he pulled Vincent back into a hug.

"And there they go again." Lehman said in a weary voice.

"Yeah." Deacon said with a chuckle, then thought to ask, "What was your name again?"

"Lehman."

"Right. A shape shifter." Deacon said as he looked at Lehman curiously.

"More like a 'used-to-be' shape shifter." Lehman said, and Deacon could clearly hear the sad, longing tone in his voice.

"Why is that?" Deacon asked with concern.

Lehman shook his head as he reigned in his emotions, then said, "Because sometimes you have to pay a price to get what you want."

"What did you want?" Deacon asked, feeling more concerned than ever for this person who he only just met.

"For the Holy One of the Okudai to survive so he could take care of his people." Lehman said as his eyes seemed to be looking at a distant place in the universe.

"And it cost you the ability to change your shape?"

"Yeah. Not a bad deal, really. I was ready to give up my life to save him if that's what it took." Lehman said as he tried to sound cheerful.

"Hang on." Deacon said as he pulled a necklace out of his shirt and closed his eyes.

Lehman noticed that Deacon's necklace had started to glow, then the glow seemed to surround his entire body.

"What are you doing?" Lehman asked as he started to back away.

Vincent and Lawrence looked up in unison at Lehman's words.

"What's wrong, Deke?" Lawrence asked with concern.

The golden glow began to fade as Deacon slowly opened his eyes and looked at Lehman with sympathy.

"Is there a problem?" Vincent asked as he looked around with confusion, taken aback at the golden light which was still flickering in Deacon's eyes.

"Yes and no." Deacon said in a tone of apology that was directed more toward Lehman than Vincent.

"Huh?" Vincent asked as he moved protectively to Lehman's side.

"Vince, some things have happened..." Lawrence said as he immediately moved to stand with Deacon.

"Hold on, Lawrence. I've got some avatar business that I have to do. You can explain after." Deacon interrupted.

Lawrence looked at Deacon with concern and asked, "Do you need my help?"

"That's going to depend on what Lehman decides." Deacon said, then looked at Lehman again.

"Is it just me, or does that sound like something that's gonna suck?" Lehman asked Vincent quietly.

Deacon shook his head and said, "No, Lehman. It's a good thing, I promise. I'm just sorry that there's no way I can give you *exactly* what you want."

"Okay. Just what are we talking about here?" Vincent asked as he looked from Lawrence to Deacon uncertainly.

"How about I just spell out your choices? Maybe it won't be a problem." Deacon said with a forced smile, obviously not believing it.

Lehman glanced at Vincent, then cautiously nodded at Deacon.

"Let's see. First of all, you can choose to remain just like you are."

Lehman nodded that he understood.

"Your second choice would be to ask one of the Mikyvis to help you. They can restore you to exactly like you were before you met Vincent."

"Mikyvis? Oh yeah, like that Levi kid who took Xandor. So does that mean that Lehman would have blue skin and be able to change again, or that he wouldn't be a Trach Manja anymore?" Vincent asked, finally over the weirdness of the situation enough to try to understand what was going on.

"Yes... and yes." Deacon said without emotion.

"Then I'll stay like this." Lehman said in a small voice that betrayed his disappointment.

"Hold on. There's another choice. Lawrence and I can help you." Deacon said gently.

"What can you do?" Vincent asked before Lehman could find his voice.

"If Lehman wants us to help him, we can fix it so he can change his appearance again. We won't change anything else, we will just fix that one thing." Deacon said carefully.

"How?" Vincent asked, wanting to understand what they were talking about doing to his newest brother and friend.

Lawrence stepped forward and put a hand on Vincent's shoulder as he said, "Vince, I doubt that there's any way that you would believe it if I told you. So please just trust me when I say that if Deacon says that we can fix Lehman... we can."

"I think I believe him. It's not the weirdest thing I've heard of since I met you." Lehman said, then gave Vincent a grin that proved better than words that Lehman was being honest.

Although a part of him wanted to go along with it, a bigger part needed to know more before he could allow Lawrence and Deacon to do anything.

"I want to hear it." Vincent said in his 'mature' voice.

Lawrence glanced at Deacon and received a nod before saying, "Deacon and I are the chosen avatars of Saint Mikey of Urbandale, protector of Gay and Abandoned Youth."

Vincent thought about the words for a moment, then slowly said, "Oooookay. I think I got that. Except... I know what an avatar is when you're on a computer, but when you're talking about working for a Saint, just what does 'avatar' mean?"

"It means that we can stand in for Saint Mikey and do things for him when he needs us to." Lawrence said, then looked to Deacon to see if he had anything to add.

"We're like the Trach Manjai in a way." Deacon said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Wait. What do you know about the Trach Manjai?" Vincent asked with immediate distrust.

"Not much. Just a few things that Mikey told me." Deacon said and Vincent could see the sincerity in his eyes.

Vincent nodded as he processed the information.

"I told you that you wouldn't believe it." Lawrence said with a look of concern.

"No. Actually, I think I'm okay with it." Vincent said thoughtfully, then looked up at his brother with a smile.

"Really?" Lawrence asked with surprise.

"Yeah. It looks to me like the Great Spirit has all kinds of helpers, so why not?" Vincent said with a chuckle.

Lawrence blinked as he looked at his brother with shock at his easy acceptance.

"Lawrence, you and Deacon are avatars. Lehman and I are Trach Manjai. So let's make a deal. You do what you can to help Lehman and we'll do whatever we can to help you when you need it." Vincent said in a wheedling tone.

"Like we weren't going to do that anyway." Lehman said with a roll of his eyes.

"Shhh. You're not supposed to tell them that while we're negotiating." Vincent said with an impish grin.

Deacon's gaze became distant as he said, "Our Father has a plan. The Mikyvis, the Ferox, the Trach Manjai... all of us have our parts to play. Lehman's decision will determine if he will continue to be a part of that plan."

"And what if he chooses not to be?" Vincent asked, now completely serious again.

"Then another will take his place... in fact, he's already been chosen and is awaiting Lehman's decision." Deacon said, seemingly surprised at his own words.

Vincent thought for a moment, then his eyes went wide as he gasped, "Thomas?"

Deacon gazed off into the distance for a moment, then slowly nodded.

Silence fell over the group until Lehman finally asked, "If you help me, what's going to happen?"

"A miracle." Deacon said simply.

"Could you maybe be a little bit more specific?" Vincent asked as he looked from Deacon to Lawrence with hope.

"We can restore his ability to shape-change." Deacon said as he met Vincent's gaze.

"And?" Vincent prompted.

"And that's it."

Lehman thought about what Deacon was saying then quietly asked, "So I'll be able to change myself again, and nothing else will change?"

"Yes." Deacon said firmly.

"So I'll still be able to help people." Lehman said in thought.

"Lot's of people." Deacon said, then added, "And if things go right, maybe ALL people."

"And if I choose not to let you or the Mikyvis or anyone do anything to me, then I won't be able to help those people?" Lehman asked as his gaze slipped to the floor.

"No. You're not getting it. Right now you have everything you need to do what has been asked of you. You can walk out of here completely unchanged and fulfill your destiny. But if you want to regain your ability to shape-shift, we can do that for you." Deacon said as his eyes continued to flicker with golden light.

Lehman nodded that he understood what Deacon was saying.

"But if you feel that the responsibility of being Trach Manja is too big for you, choosing to let the Mikyvis help you is a chance to go back to the way you were before. You could be a regular Chameloid child and grow up and lead a normal life." Deacon said more gently.

"I know what I'd do." Vincent said with a casual shrug.

Lehman chuckled and said, "Yeah. I guess it *is* a no brainer. What do I need to do?"

"Mikey wants you to do it." Deacon said as he shifted his gaze to Lawrence.

Vincent looked at his brother in time to see him brush his fingertips across the angel pin on his collar.

The pin began to glow, then the glow started spreading through Lawrence's entire body.

"Come here, Lehman. I need to hug you." Lawrence said in a relaxed voice.

"I should have known." Lehman said with a smirk at Deacon, then moved into Lawrence's arms.

The gold light that had been surrounding Lawrence now also enveloped Lehman.

"Do you do this often?" Vincent asked Deacon at his side.

"No. Not often. Mikey usually likes to do things like this himself. He's just... um... occupied at the moment." Deacon said and seemed to be holding something back.

"Occupied?" Vincent asked slowly, prompting for more information.

"Yeah. All he said was he was called away to rescue someone. Someone who's been lost for nearly thirteen years. He needs to be where he is right now so he'll be ready when it's time for him to act."

"Oh, okay. So when he's tied up with other things, you and Lawrence can kind of stand in for him and... what? Act like you're saints?" Vincent asked uncertainly, feeling like he might be insulting Deacon by even asking.

"No. We're not Saints. We're just a couple of guys who Mikey is willing to trust to help him out now and then when he needs it. We go where he needs us to be and he works through us and does the things he would do if he could be there in person." Deacon said in a tone of voice that indicated that he wasn't at all bothered by Vincent's question.

"I feel something." Lehman said in a whisper.

"So do I." Lawrence said cautiously, then continued, "Do you have a banana in your pocket?"

"What's a banana?" Lehman asked in confusion.

"It's a... oh, wait. that's your... Wow!" Lawrence said as he started to blush.

"Mikey says less rubbing, more healing." Deacon said in a tone of voice that was lower in pitch.

"Right. We're nearly done." Lawrence said as he continued to hold Lehman firmly.

Vincent glanced at Deacon to find a worried look in his eyes.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked in a whisper.

"I don't understand why Lawrence would do that. Is he getting tired of me?" Deacon asked as he stared at Lawrence and Lehman still hugging.

Vincent chuckled and said, "I bet if you were the one over there hugging Lehman, you would have done exactly the same thing."

Deacon glanced at Vincent and the incredulity was evident in his expression.

"Lehman is hung like a bull moose. Lawrence was just surprised by it." Vincent said simply.

"Do you really think so?" Deacon asked as he stared at Lawrence through the beginnings of tears.

"Yeah. I'm sure of it. I've hugged Lehman a few times and it's hard not to notice that monster he's got." Vincent said, not sure if Deacon was even hearing his words by this point.

"That's it. How do you feel?" Lawrence asked as he slowly released Lehman from the hug.

"A little shaky."

"You should be able to change whenever you feel like it." Lawrence said gently as he walked to Deacon's side.

Lehman looked down at himself, then at Lawrence with question.

"Go ahead. Give it a try." Lawrence said with anticipation as he casually draped an arm around Deacon's shoulders.

Lehman concentrated for a moment, then his body began to reshape itself.

Vincent smiled as he looked at Lehman in Benny's form, still wearing the white tunic and pants.

Since the tunic was long and the pants were loose fitting, the clothing fit Lehman perfectly.

"How does it feel?" Vincent asked with a grin.

Lehman considered for a moment, then said, "Great! It was easy... In fact..."

As Lehman was speaking, he transformed again, this time into his blue skinned form with auburn hair and golden eyes.

"...I think it's easier than it was before." Lehman finished happily.

Vincent glanced over at Deacon and Lawrence to see them arm in arm, watching Lehman with peaceful smiles.

"I'm glad it worked." Vincent said happily as he walked to Lehman to give him a quick hug of congratulations.

Lehman's joy suddenly seemed to fade, then he quietly asked, "I wonder how Xandor is doing."

"*I have been monitoring Xandor's activities and he is currently investigating his regained memories. He is well and the procedure that the Mikyvis have employed has been a complete success. He's also found another Lo'Garn... and an alligator with a passport*." Ship said professionally.

"A what?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"I'm just glad he's all right." Lehman said peacefully.

"Yeah." Vincent said happily, then continued, "I thought my clan would be able to help, I just didn't know that it would all be taken care of so quick."

"There's still a lot to do." Lawrence said as he guided Deacon to walk with him to Vincent and Lehman.

"Like what?" Vincent asked with sudden concern.

"I think you need to talk to Rory." Lawrence said as he looked at his younger brother with regret.

"Why? What's wrong with Rory?" Vincent asked as his mind filled with a hundred different things that might have gone wrong with Rory's treatments.

"Don't worry. He's fine. But I've heard that you and he have become friends... I think he could really use a friend right now." Lawrence said, and was obviously holding something back.

Rather than try to put Lawrence on the spot and make him tell something he obviously wasn't comfortable saying, Vincent decided that he should go directly to the source.

"Do you know where he is?"

"He's over at Camp Little Eagle in the medical building." Lawrence said as he looked at Vincent with relief.

"Mikey needs us to stay here for when he does his rescue. If you give us a few minutes, we can find someone to drive you over." Deacon said with regret that he and Lawrence couldn't go along.

"No thanks. We can get there ourselves." Vincent said seriously, then looked at Lehman and asked, "Do you want to go with me?"

"Sure. I've seen Rory in your memories, I'd like to meet him." Lehman said as he transformed himself into a duplicate of Vincent.

"Ship. Can you transport us to the Camp Little Eagle medical building?" Vincent asked into the bracelet on his wrist.

"*Yes Trach Manja Vincent. Let me know when you are ready.*" Ship responded immediately.

"Teleport."

* * * * *

"Bull moose?" Lehman asked as soon as the teleportal stream cleared.

"Oh, you heard that?" Vincent asked shyly.

Lehman nodded, then looked at Vincent with question.

"Benny came up with that."

"So you and Benny were discussing the size of my penis?" Lehman asked slowly, not sure if he was mad or offended... or even bothered at all.

"No... well, yes. But not really. I mean we were talking and somehow the subject came up. We weren't saying anything bad. I promise." Vincent said in a rush.

"Now that I can shape-change again, you don't need to worry about it. I can make it as big or as small as I want." Lehman said frankly.

"Okay. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you by saying that to Deacon. I just didn't want him to think that Lawrence was some kind of pervert, feeling up every kid that he hugs." Vincent said as he watched Lehman's expression.

"That was nice of you." Lehman said, then looked around and asked, "Where do we need to go?"

"In there I guess." Vincent said as he pointed at the main door of a building a few feet away.

"You guess?"

"Yeah. They were still working on this building the last time I was on Earth so I haven't been in it before." Vincent said as he led the way inside.

* * * * *

After a short walk down the hall, Vincent and Lehman came to a reception desk.

"Excuse me, do you happen to know where Rory Teeter is?" Vincent asked the woman behind the desk.

"Treatment two, right over there." She said as she pointed, then rushed away carrying a padd close to her chest.

Vincent and Lehman shared a glance, then started walking toward the indicated door.

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"I don't want to go." Ken was saying as Vincent and Lehman approached the doorway.

"I know. And I don't want you to go. But the fact of the matter is that one of us needs to be at Clan Short Headquarters in case we're needed." Rory said reasonably.

"But isn't there some way we can go together?" Ken asked in a whine.

"I need to be here, you need to be there. Ken, a lot of people got hurt and the clan needs everyone to do their part so no one is left out. On top of that, I'm counting on you to keep me up to date on what's happening." Rory said imploringly.

"Yeah. I know you're right... I just don't like it." Ken said reluctantly as he looked into Rory's eyes.

"When things look like they've calmed down for the night, come back over here and fill me in... then as soon as Solak is done with me, we can go to your house... and spend the night together." Rory finished with a devilish smile.

Ken tried to fight back his own smile, but finally gave in.

"I'll see you in a little while." Rory whispered, then leaned forward to give Ken a full, deep kiss.

Vincent glanced at Lehman, conveying his discomfort at witnessing such a private moment.

As the kiss continued, it occurred to Vincent that Rory and Ken weren't going to finish anytime soon, so he reluctantly knocked on the frame of the open door.

Ken and Rory broke their kiss and slowly turned to look at the door in unison.

"Sorry to interrupt, guys." Vincent said shyly.

"Vincent! It's great to see you." Rory said quickly, then covered his mouth and glanced at the man in the bed in the room with them to see that he was still asleep.

"I'm glad you're all right. When did you get back?" Ken asked as he also glanced at the bed.

"I'm great. I just got back to Earth a little bit ago..." Vincent trailed off as he noticed that Rory and Ken were staring past him.

"We really should make an announcement about me being here, so people will stop doing that." Lehman said, sounding more amused than irritated.

"Or maybe now that you can change again, you could change to look like someone else." Vincent said as he looked askance at his 'twin'.

"I could do that." Lehman said through a giggle, then began to grow taller.

Ken and Rory's eyes got wide as they watched the duplicate of Vincent transform into a teenage boy with straight brown hair.

"Why did you choose Brakkii?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Because no one here would know him."

Vincent nodded his agreement to the logic, then said, "Ken and Rory, this is my brother Lehman."

"How?" Rory asked in wonder.

"How what?" Vincent asked slowly, not quite sure which of many perfectly valid questions Rory was asking.

"I just changed in front of them, so I'm guessing that Rory is asking how I did that." Lehman said with a speculative look at Ken and Rory.

"Oh. He's a Chameloid... that's what they do." Vincent said simply.

Lehman looked upward as he considered the explanation, then said, "Yeah. I can live with that."

"So your new brother can change to look like... anyone?" Ken asked as he looked at Lehman appraisingly.

Vincent smiled and said, "Pretty much."

"That's really awesome." Ken said with a big smile.

"On my world it's just the way everyone is. It's no big deal." Lehman said with a shrug.

Rory smiled at Lehman and said, "It still seems like it would be nice to be able to look any way you want. You'd never have to feel goofy looking or ugly."

"Rory. You're a model. Your pictures have been seen by people all over the world. I don't think you have to worry about being ugly." Ken said with a grin.

Vincent looked at Ken with question at the unusual statement.

"Do you remember that photo shoot that Rory did with Billy at Southcrest before you left?" Ken asked as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

Vincent thought back to the Saturday before the *Yorktown* left Earth and said, "Yeah. Sort of."

"The company loved them and they did a whole ad campaign using Rory's pictures." Ken said and gave Rory a look of such pride that he looked like he might burst.

"I've been on Vulcan so I haven't really seen them yet." Rory said as he blushed from Ken's attention directed at him.

"Don't worry, when you get over to my house, I'll show you my collection. I have every one that's been printed." Ken said with a loving smile.

"My mom and dad have been collecting them too. " Rory said as he tried to turn his attention to Vincent and Lehman.

"I'd really like to see them. Make sure to show them to me before I have to leave." Vincent said happy to know that Rory's family were being supportive.

"Yeah, we can do that later... " Rory began to say when Ken interrupted.

"Tell him about the letter you got."

Rory looked at Ken with question and asked, "The one from the clothing company?"

"No, the one from that girl." Ken said imploringly.

"Oh, right." Rory said with a smile, then looked at Vincent and said, "After they started using my pictures for advertisements, I got letters from a few people who liked my pictures. There was this one from a girl named Stacey. She said that she was in a wheelchair just like I am, and because she saw my pictures, she felt like she could be beautiful."

"Yeah. She saw Rory looking all normal and happy and stuff and she realized that she could be that way too." Ken said proudly.

"That's great. It sounds like you're helping people without even trying." Vincent said with a grin.

"Yeah. All I was really trying to do was help Billy out because he needed a model. I didn't think anyone would even notice me. I was just there to show off the clothes." Rory said frankly.

"I'm glad it worked out that way." Vincent said peacefully.

"Hey Vincent, do you know where you guys are going to be sleeping tonight?" Ken asked as he looked from Vincent to Lehman.

"No. I hadn't really thought about it. On the ship I guess.." Vincent said uncertainly, then glanced at Lehman to see if he had any other ideas.

"Well, I bet that Lawrence is going to expect you to stay at his house. But if he doesn't think of that, you're welcomed to stay at our place. We have plenty of room." Ken said, and Vincent was surprised to hear something like hope in his voice.

Vincent looked at Lehman with question and received a shrug in response.

"And you're invited to dinner too... I'll just need to let Pop and Mamacita know that you're coming." Ken said thoughtfully, then broke into a smile.

"We don't want to be any trouble." Vincent hurried to say.

"It'd trouble us a whole lot more if you came all the way back to Earth, then went back to your ship to eat and sleep. Vincent, you're our family." Ken said firmly.

Vincent was surprised by the declaration, mainly because he had barely spoken to Ken before.

Now here he was with Ken treating him like he was family, and from the tone of his voice, he obviously meant it.

"Okay." Vincent finally said as he raised his hands in surrender.

"That diplomatic training is really paying off." Rory said to Ken with a grin.

"Yeah. I guess it is." Ken said with a chuckle in his voice, then continued more seriously, "I'm sorry I can't stay and visit with you guys, but Rory needs me to be over at Clan Short Headquarters. Just call me over there if you need anything."

Vincent and Lehman watched as Ken leaned in to give Rory a quick, firm kiss.

"I'll see you tonight." Rory said gently.

"Yeah." Ken said with a smile, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"So how are you doing Rory?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I'm great. The treatments are working just the way they're supposed to and I'm feeling better than I have in a couple years." Rory said, and if his expression was any indicator, he was telling the complete truth.

"Then why are you in the hospital?" Vincent asked cautiously, then glanced at Lehman to see if he was having any problem following along with the conversation.

"Oh, Uncle Solak brought us here when we arrived at Earth to check us out. He wanted to be sure that the different atmospheric pressure and gravity wasn't going to change the way his therapy was working on us." Rory said in a half bored and half matter-of-fact tone.

"Us?" Vincent asked as he looked at Rory curiously.

"Yeah." Rory said, then moved his electric wheelchair closer to the bed.

"This is Kennon." Rory said as he indicated the twenty-something year old guy who was sleeping soundly.

"Kennon has a neurological disorder something like mine. In fact, his condition is *exactly* the one that Solak developed his treatment for." Rory said carefully.

"Oh. That's lucky." Lehman said cautiously, just trying to make some contribution to the conversation.

"Not really. Solak started working on the treatment when his wife got sick. Kennon is her nephew." Rory said quietly.

"Was Solak able to cure her?" Lehman asked hesitantly, afraid he already knew the answer.

Rory shook his head as he looked down.

"Oh." Lehman said quietly, regretting that he had asked.

After a long moment of uncomfortable silence, Vincent asked, "So how long do you have to stay here?"

"It's hard to say. The last test Solak did was inconclusive. We might be released after the next test or it could take until late tonight." Rory said without enthusiasm.

"Well, if you're worried about your friend waking up alone, I could stay here with him if you need to go and do anything. I really wouldn't mind." Lehman offered quietly.

Rory blinked with confusion for a moment, then said, "Kennon is a big boy. I'm not worried about that."

"Then why do you have to stay here?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"To protect him." Rory said honestly.

"I thought Camp Little Eagle was a safe place. Who are you trying to protect him from?" Vincent asked as a feeling of dread crept up his spine.

"Xain."

Chapter 45

"Xain? Our Clan brother?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"That's the one." Rory said with regret sounding in his voice.

"Why would Xain want to hurt Kennon?" Vincent asked, then glanced at Lehman, silently summoning him to join the conversation.

"Xain doesn't want to hurt Kennon. He wants to help him. The problem is that the things he wants to do will invalidate Solak's work." Rory said carefully.

"I don't understand." Lehman said slowly from Vincent's side.

"Ever since we arrived back on Earth, Xain has been trying to come up with ways to help Kennon recover faster. He's tried to get Kennon to transport to South Carolina and been in contact with Ark." Rory said thoughtfully.

"What's wrong with that?" Lehman asked carefully, before Vincent could ask what or who 'Ark' was.

"What's wrong is that if Xain finds a way to treat Kennon's symptoms, it might corrupt Solak's research. If that happens, Solak will have to find someone else to prove that his treatment works." Rory said seriously.

"So what you're saying is that if Xain gets his way, Kennon may be able to get better a little bit faster, but everyone else in the universe with his condition will have to wait that much longer to receive treatment?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Yes. Exactly. Solak has the chance to prove his treatment with Kennon, and once Kennon is healed, Solak can release his treatment for others to use. Within a few years people everywhere with genetic neurological conditions like ours could be cured. Not just helped but completely and forever cured." Rory said passionately.

"Rory. I just saw your mom in the kitchen. She'll be bringing your lunch..." A voice said from the doorway, then trailed off.

Vincent turned and smiled when he saw Dylan standing in the doorway, carrying a boy on his hip.

The black leather mask covering half of Dylan's face caused Vincent to remember his brief trip to the alternate dimension where Vince lived.

"Vincent?" Dylan asked as his expression changed from disbelief to happiness.

"Hey Dylan. How are you doing?" Vincent asked, then on impulse, ran to Dylan to give him a hug, careful not to squish the boy who was clinging to his side.

Dylan smiled as he accepted the hug, then quietly said, "The last few days have been tough, but I'm really doing great now."

"I'm glad you're alright. And before I forget, thanks for all the kewl emails and stuff." Vincent said as he reluctantly pulled out of the hug.

"Yeah. I've been sharing all your emails with the guys from Cabin One... Hey, would you have time to come with me right now? We're about to have a meeting and it would be great if you could be there." Dylan asked hopefully.

Vincent looked over at Rory for an instant, then back at Dylan with indecision.

"Hey Vincent, did you ever wish you could be in two places at once?" Lehman asked with an impish grin.

Vincent nodded, still conflicted about what he should do.

Lehman rolled his eyes, then transformed into an exact duplicate of Vincent.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Oh, I see what you mean... But you've got to promise to fill me in when we get back together."

"You know I will. Come on and let me do a quick imprint so you can go with Dylan, then I'll get to work on Xain." Lehman said as he walked to Vincent's side.

Vincent gently placed his hand to the side of Lehman's face in the position of a mind meld as Lehman did the same.

An instant later, Lehman withdrew his hand and said, "You'd better get going."

"Right. Thanks Lehman." Vincent said with a smile.

"I have a feeling that this is what we're here for." Lehman said in a whisper as he looked into Vincent's eyes,.

Vincent nodded, then walked to the door where Dylan was waiting.

"How did he do that?" Dylan asked in wonder.

"It's a long story. I'll tell you on the way." Vincent said as he stepped out into the hall.

* * * * *

"Are you going to pretend to be Vincent?" Rory asked with concern.

"No. It's just natural for me to take a person's form when I take on his memories." Lehman said casually.

"Oh. I guess that makes sense. It's just that even though Xain is kind of being a pain in my butt right now, I wouldn't want to be a part of lying to him." Rory said frankly.

Lehman smiled and said, "If you think it'll be a problem, I can change to look like someone else."

"Why don't you just look like yourself?" Rory asked cautiously.

Lehman's shape shifted slightly, then he looked down at himself with question.

"Is something wrong?" Rory asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, Lehman said, "No. Not wrong. But it seems that when I'm not trying to change myself to look like someone else, that I go back to looking like Vincent. The only way I can go back to looking like my real self is to force the change."

Rory blinked with confusion at the statement, but before he could ask about what Lehman was talking about, Lehman preempted him by saying, "Long story. Doesn't matter."

Rory nodded, then said, "I think Dylan was saying that my mom will be here soon, so I need to wake up Kennon and get washed up or she won't feed us."

Lehman looked at Rory with surprise.

Rory giggled and said, "Well, she won't feed us right away... and I'm hungry."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"No, that's fine. I take care of Kennon all the time back on Vulcan." Rory said casually.

Lehman heard the whir of the electric motor as Rory moved the wheelchair closer to the bed then gently reached up and placed a hand on Kennon's shoulder.

Kennon slowly opened one eye and looked at Rory curiously.

"It's lunch time, Kennon. Time to wake up." Rory said quietly.

Kennon made a gurgling sound that Lehman couldn't understand.

"Yeah. I'm going to go wash up, then I'll be right back. Lehman is here if you need anything." Rory said gently.

Kennon looked past Rory and looked at Lehman curiously.

Rory leaned in closer and quietly said, "Lehman is a shape shifter. He can look like anyone he wants to."

Kennon gurgled something that Lehman couldn't make out, but Rory obviously understood it because he nodded.

"I'll be back in just a minute." Rory said as he backed away from the bed.

"Hold on." Lehman said urgently.

Rory looked at Lehman curiously.

"If Kennon needs something, I won't be able to understand him. Could I touch you for a second so I can absorb your ability to understand what he says?" Lehman asked cautiously, knowing that he was asking for a large amount of trust from someone he only just met.

Rory considered for just a moment before saying, "Sure, go ahead."

Lehman was slightly surprised by Rory's easy acceptance, but quickly moved to place his hand on Rory's arm so he wouldn't delay Rory any longer than necessary.

Lehman closed his eyes as the imprint of Rory's mind superimposed itself over his own.

When Lehman opened his eyes, he noticed that Rory and Kennon were staring at him.

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked in a whisper.

"You look like me... I mean *exactly* like me." Rory said with wonder as he looked at the duplicate of himself, standing up and looking completely healthy.

Lehman blinked as he tried to process the words while adjusting to Rory's neural imprint, then realized what Rory was saying.

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that. It's kind of instinctive." Lehman said shyly as he consciously changed back to his resting form, which was Vincent's.

"No problem. It was just a surprise." Rory said distantly, then gathered his wits and said, "I need to get washed up now."

* * * * *

"Lehman?" Kennon gurgled.

"Yes?" Lehman asked as he walked to Kennon's bedside.

"Can you do that for me?" Kennon asked hesitantly.

His words were garbled and slurred, but thanks to the imprint that Lehman had made of Rory, he could make out the meaning.

"Do what?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Look like me... but not sick." Kennon asked hopefully.

Lehman drew on some of Rory's memories and had some idea of just what the request might mean to Kennon.

In other circumstances, Lehman would have been able to make the transformation by sight. But with Kennon laying the way he was, Lehman wasn't sure he could accurately copy Kennon's appearance. And considering what it meant to Kennon, Lehman wanted to create the best image he could.

As he laid his hand over Kennon's, he made the conscious effort to change his shape.

Lehman felt himself getting taller and his body increasing in size to give the appearance of increased mass.

He felt the stretching sensation that indicated that he was approaching the edge of his transformational limit.

Most times it wasn't a concern for Lehman because he didn't attempt to take on adult forms.

The tears in Kennon's eyes told Lehman more than his own senses that he had completed the transformation.

Lehman felt an ache in his heart at the sight of Kennon, looking longingly at him.

He searched for something to say to assure Kennon when he noticed a thought amongst the memories that he had borrowed from Rory.

"You're going to be fine, Kennon." Lehman whispered.

Kennon looked at Lehman with hope.

"I know the things that Rory knows about what Solak is doing. Your condition has stabilized, Solak's treatments are working exactly like they're supposed to and in the next few days your nerves should be able to handle neural alignment. That means that by the weekend, you'll be able to talk and move around just like Rory does." Lehman said seriously.

Kennon looked at Lehman with shock at the declaration.

"Rory didn't want you to get all excited about it yet because there's nothing you can do to make it happen any faster." Lehman said, then leaned in to whisper, "So don't tell him I told you."

Kennon nodded shakily, then said, "Thanks."

"Sorry that took so long." Rory said shyly as he moved his wheelchair out of the bathroom, then stopped and stared at Lehman in Kennon's form.

"He wanted to see himself healthy." Lehman said with a shrug.

"Yeah. I can really understand that. Thanks for doing that." Rory said quietly as he moved to Kennon's bedside, then took a towel out of a small basin in his lap.

"Would you like some help?" Lehman asked cautiously, knowing from the memories he borrowed, just how independent Rory was.

After a moment to consider, Rory said, "Thanks. If you'll wash Kennon's hands and face, I'll get our tray tables out."

* * * * *

As Vincent and Dylan walked out into the hall, Dylan adjusted his grip on the boy in his arms and gently asked, "How are you doing, Jason?"

"'It's not bad." Jason K said in a trembling voice.

"We're going back to my cabin now. You did a great job the last few days and you really helped a lot of people." Dylan said as he stroked the boy's hair soothingly and started walking faster down the hall.

"What's wrong with him?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Jason K is an empath. But we only found out last week." Dylan said gently as he hugged the boy in his arms.

"Then why would you bring him to a hospital where so many people are hurting?" Vincent asked in a tone of voice that was free of accusation. He obviously just wanted to understand.

"Because if I stayed in my room, I'd still be able to feel it, but I wouldn't be helping anyone." Jason K said weakly.

"Jason K's empathy is a little different from most. He can't really feel people's emotions, he can just feel their physical pain." Dylan said slowly.

Vincent hurried ahead of the pair to open the door for them.

"Thanks." Dylan whispered, then continued, "Jason K has been able to tell the doctors where some of the patients are hurting. You know, like the ones who are in a coma, or just too freaked out to understand what they're feeling."

Vincent nodded that he understood what Dylan was saying as he was once again reminded just how little he knew about what was going on.

"As soon as things settle down, we're going to work to teach Jason K how to control his gift and how to shield himself from other people's pain." Dylan said as he carried the boy out into the sunlight.

"But you took him into the hospital where you knew that he would be hurt." Vincent said in a small voice.

"Vincent, there are people who will be able to completely recover because Jason K let the doctors know exactly where the pain was and what it felt like. He was able to speak for the most hurt and helpless of all the patients." Dylan said passionately.

"Please don't be mad at Dylan. I wanted to help. It doesn't really hurt as bad when I know that I'm helping someone." Jason K said quietly.

"And you helped a lot." Dylan said gently then gave him a quick kiss on the top of the head.

Jason K gave a weak smile as he laid his head against Dylan's shoulder.

* * * * *

Dylan led the way into Cabin One, still carrying Jason K in his arms.

"Is everyone here?" Dylan asked as he walked across the room and took a seat on one of the couches.

"Yeah. I got them all, just like you said. Simon and Arlo are in their room changing." Obie said seriously as he got up from his chair and took a seat next to Dylan on the couch.

"Vincent, if you'll sit down and get comfortable, we're going to have a quick meeting, then I'll tell you what I wanted to talk about." Dylan said seriously as he shifted to put his free arm around Obie's shoulders.

Vincent nodded and took a seat on the chair that Obie had vacated.

"Are you ready to start?" Simon asked from the hallway.

"Just waiting on you." Dylan said with a smile.

Simon and Arlo walked into the room and quickly took their seats.

"Devon, how are things going with Clan support?" Dylan asked in a very professional tone.

"We're working on collecting information on all the new Clan divisions. So far we haven't found any immediate needs, but there's a lot to go through." Devon said seriously.

"If you need more help, just let me know." Dylan said with a nod.

"Right now we just need time. I also wanted to ask you about the Dragon Division. They're not technically Clan; should we include them?" Devon asked then glanced at Vincent uncertainly.

"Yes. Talk to their leaders and do as much as you can. Don't get frustrated because I can bet that they're going to fight you. If they say 'no', then I'll go and talk to Grandfather Sarek so he can explain that accepting support is 'logical'." Dylan said frankly.

"What if they say 'yes'?" Devon asked curiously.

"Then there's no problem." Dylan said with a teasing smile.

Devon nodded, then looked at Uri with question, prompting him to continue the report.

"While Devon has been working on the divisions, I have been maintaining watch on the local Clan members. I suspect that they will need much emotional support in the coming days... however, they seem to be supporting each other and dealing with the new circumstances as well as can be expected." Uri said in a low voice.

"Keep watching, Uri. As soon as you've found anything we can do, let me know and we'll be on it." Dylan said, then turned his attention to Simon and Arlo.

"I know that we lost quite a few people in the past few days... have you been able to help?" Dylan asked quietly.

"Yes." Simon said in an equally quiet voice, then continued more strongly, "I stayed in the camp to monitor where the deaths occurred and directed Arlo to go where he was needed."

"Good." Dylan said, then turned his focus on Arlo and asked, "Were you able to get the spirits of the fallen put to rest?"

"I'm sorry, but Arlo isn't here right now."

"Randolph? Is that you?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"Yes." The spirit in Arlo's body said quietly.

"Arlo has been awake since Saturday, helping all those who needed him. I will relay the information from this meeting to him when he awakens." Randolph said shyly as he fought to look Dylan in the eye.

"Thank you, Randolph. I'm sure Arlo appreciates all that you've done. Do you know if he was successful in getting the spirits put to rest?" Dylan asked gently.

"Yes. We worked together to help the frightened and confused to find peace. There were four who chose to remain on the Earthly plain as guardian spirits. Arlo called Reuben, Ricardo and Manuel to work with them so they will understand their abilities and duties." Randolph said carefully.

"That sounds good. But make sure you watch after Reuben and Ricardo. I know that they're Clan, but they're still kids." Dylan said with concern.

"Manny won't let anything happen to them." Simon said with assurance.

"Possum was also with them. And Jake is always aware of where they are and what they're doing." Randolph said with a nod, then continued, "But we will be sure that they are not overwhelmed with responsibilities."

Dylan slowly nodded, then looked down the line of boys and asked, "Jose? How are things going with the teddy bear brigade?"

"I think we're doing good. Obie got guys from most of the other cabins to work with us to make sure that the injured people had someone to visit them and care about how they're doing." Jose said frankly.

"And T-t-teddy made sure th-th-that everyone had lots of stuffed animals." Trent said shyly.

Dylan smiled at the statement, then looked around and asked, "Where is Teddy?"

"He was in South Carolina with one of the Unit guys the last time I saw him... He said that he'd be here." Jose said with concern.

"How is he doing? I mean, with his visions?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"I don't know if he's getting better or not. He'll seem fine for a while, then he'll just freak out." Jose said with concern.

"Why didn't you tell me before this?" Dylan asked seriously.

"He made us promise not to. He said he was getting better and that if we told you, that you'd make him stop helping people." Jose said as tears welled up in his eyes.

Dylan closed his eye and slowly nodded that he understood.

"He's had two more that I know of since yesterday... Maybe I should go and check on him." Jose said as he looked at Trent with question.

"Yeah. I think one of us should stay with him until he can get some control over his 'gift'. Someone else wouldn't know how to deal with him when he loses it." Dylan said in thought.

Vincent looked at Dylan curiously, noticing by the way that he said the word 'gift', that it was probably more of a curse.

"I'll go." Trent said as he stood.

Jose seemed to be ready to argue, but finally said, "I'll fill you in when you get back."

Trent nodded as he rushed out of the room.

After a long moment of silence, Dylan asked, "Mouse, how are things going with you?"

"It would have been a lot easier if Jerico was there, but I think we did okay." Mouse said in a voice that betrayed his exhaustion.

"Do you guys need any more help?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"No. The major stuff is all done. The rest is follow-up. But if it weren't for Trent and Jose helping so many people to feel better, it might have been

too much. Thanks to them, Luke has only had to deal with the people who are the most depressed and worried." Mouse said frankly.

"And we've asked Jerico for advice when we weren't sure about what to do." Luke added quietly.

"Jerico and Paul were both asleep when I tried to visit. How are they doing?" Dylan asked cautiously.

Mouse gave a weak smile and said, "Jerico is frustrated because he can't be out here with us. But I think Luke asking for his advice made him feel like he was doing something to help."

"What about Paul?" Dylan asked with concern.

"He feels responsible for Jerico being hurt." Luke said quietly.

Mouse nodded and said, "He won't leave Jerico's bedside."

Dylan slowly nodded and said, "They know that we're here when they need us. As soon as Paul knows within himself that Jerico is going to be all right, I'm sure he'll open up and accept help."

"Yeah. And if he doesn't, Jerico will let us know what to do for him." Mouse said seriously.

Dylan took in a slow, deep breath, then turned to Obie and asked, "How are things going with the other cabins?"

"Everyone is good. I've been making sure that everyone has a job to do to help out." Obie said seriously.

Dylan nodded that he had expected the answer, then said, "Jason K and I have just made our rounds of all the medical facilities, so we can be sure that no one is suffering unnecessarily."

Silence fell over the room as all attention was focused on Dylan and Jason K, who was still in his arms.

"Guys, our job is just beginning." Dylan said as he looked around the room.

"You all heard it in the meeting last night. Cory called us the Clan's 'Recovery and Support' division. Up to now we've been working to support the Clan however we can. We've been helping them stay caught up with their classes, we've brainstormed with them when they were stuck on a problem and we've been there when one of them just needed someone to listen." Dylan said to the entire group.

"Devon and Uri, you've done a great job with the support side of things and I want you to keep it up." Dylan said as he turned to face the two older boys.

After a moment for that to sink in, Dylan turned slightly and said, "Luke and Mouse, I would like for you to be in charge of recovery."

"But shouldn't Jerico be in charge of that? He's the Shaman." Luke said cautiously.

"No." Dylan said seriously as he looked Luke in the eyes, then continued, "That's exactly why he shouldn't be in charge of recovery."

"Why not?" Mouse asked curiously.

"Jerico is powerful and smart and wise and very spiritual... but because of that, when he looks at a problem he sees one set of answers. I think that because of Luke's history, he will be able to look at someone's situation from a more neutral point of view and help them to find the answers they really need." Dylan said with difficulty.

"I don't get it." Mouse said cautiously.

"Luke, I'm sorry, but this is the only way I can think of to say this." Dylan said with regret.

Hesitantly, Luke nodded that he wouldn't take offense to whatever Dylan was about to say.

"Luke was raised by some Satanic nutjobs. He's seen the dark side, he's lived it."

After a moment to consider the words, Luke shrugged and nodded his agreement, not bothered by the statement at all.

"Since he's been with us, he's been working with Jerico and been shown the other side of things." Dylan said carefully.

A few looks and nods went around the group.

"Mouse grew up without any spiritual training at all. His experience has been completely in the physical 'real' world of what can be seen and touched and explained by science." Dylan continued thoughtfully.

"I think that Mouse and Luke, working together, will be able to help hurt people find their own best path to recovery. Jerico will be there for you to call on when someone needs spiritual answers, but you'll also have Doctor Dan to call on for people who need psychological help and the 'Teddy Bear Brigade' for those who need physical comfort." Dylan said carefully.

The door of the cabin opening drew everyone's attention.

* * * * *

As Lehman gently washed Kennon's hands with a damp towel, Kennon mumbled something that Lehman couldn't hear.

"What was that?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Bathroom." Kennon said in a mumble that Lehman wouldn't have understood without his earlier neural imprint from Rory.

"I'll call a nurse." Rory said automatically as he moved his wheelchair around the foot of Kennon's bed.

Lehman had caught a brief glimpse of Kennon's mind when he had touched him. One of the few things that he picked up from that brief contact was that Kennon absolutely hated using a bedpan. It made him feel even more helpless and humiliated.

"You don't have to Rory. I can help him." Lehman said as he looked down into Kennon's eyes.

"Are you sure?" Rory asked uncertainly.

"Well, I can't pick Kennon up and carry him, but I can help him into his wheelchair." Lehman said, doing his best to make it sound like it was no big deal.

Rory shrugged and said, "It's up to you, Kennon."

"Yeah. Thanks." Kennon whispered, as he looked at the duplicate of himself with appreciation.

"No problem. But I'll need to change a little bit first." Lehman said gently, as he altered his shape to that of Brakkii.

At Kennon's curious look, Lehman explained, "It's easier for me to hurt myself when I'm big, you know, like your size. I'm kind of all stretched out tight and it doesn't take much at all for me to strain my muscles. I'll be able to help you better like this."

After a moment of shifting Kennon around, Lehman was able to guide him down into the wheelchair without much difficulty at all.

"Okay. That was easy. But I might need help to get you back into your bed when you're done. I just *look* this big. I'm still only as strong as I am when I'm my own size." Lehman said as he watched Kennon maneuver his grossly twisted hand to the control of the wheelchair.

"Awake now." Kennon said seriously, then started moving the wheelchair toward the bathroom.

Lehman puzzled over the response as he moved to follow, then realized what Kennon meant.

"Oh, right. Since you're awake, you don't need to be in bed." Lehman said as he followed Kennon into the bathroom.

With a quick search of Rory and Kennon's memories, Lehman was able to figure out the easiest way to shift Kennon from the wheelchair to the toilet.

"I'll go see if Rory needs any help. Just call if you need me." Lehman said as he stopped to look Kennon in the eyes.

"Thank you." Kennon said with a grateful smile.

* * * * *

"I think that when your mom gets here, I'll go over to the Short Compound and see if I can talk to Xain." Lehman said from just outside the bathroom door.

"I don't know what you can say to him that I haven't already said, but go for it." Rory said in a tone of voice that betrayed the depth of his feelings.

"It really bothers you, doesn't it?" Lehman asked quietly.

"Yeah. Xain changed my whole life... he did the first neural alignment treatment which made me able to talk and use my hands again. He called and asked his father if there was any way to cure me." Rory said distantly, then looked Lehman in the eyes and said, "It's really hurting me to have to fight him like this. He's not just my clan brother, him and Jake are my saviors..."

"We'll work it out. I promise." Lehman said before going back into the bathroom to see if Kennon was finished.

* * * * *

"I found him." Trent said as he walked into the cabin, leading another boy about his same age.

"How are you doing, Teddy?" Dylan asked with concern.

"I touched forever." Teddy said distantly.

"Um, okay." Dylan said hesitantly as he looked around the room.

"Forever was sad. It was hurting..." Teddy said in a diminishing voice, like he was concentrating on something very far away.

"I'm sorry to hear that... Luke, do you think you can talk to Teddy and find out what's going on?" Dylan asked with concern.

"Jerico is better at this, but I'll try." Luke said cautiously.

"MURDERER!" Teddy screamed when he spotted Vincent.

Before anyone could react, Teddy lunged at Vincent and tried to grab him by the throat.

Vincent quickly dodged out of Teddy's way and fell into a defensive posture.

"DESTROYER OF WORLDS! MONSTER!" Teddy screamed as he lunged to attack again.

Uri was just barely able to grab hold of him before he got away.

Teddy was clawing at the air, trying desperately to reach Vincent.

The others in the room were finally past their shock enough that they were able to offer some help.

Devon and Mouse each grabbed one of Teddy's arms to prevent him from attacking again. Together they pulled him away from Vincent and effectively restrained him.

"You've got to stop him! He'll kill billions of people. Kill him now! KILL HIM!" Teddy screamed as he fought against their grasps.

Luke stepped forward and looked Teddy in the eyes as he said, "*Relax Teddy. Calm down.*"

Teddy's expression became vacant as he stopped struggling.

"Come here Teddy. Sit with me." Luke said gently and held open his arms.

Teddy slowly walked to Luke and was pulled into an assuring hug.

After a moment of hugging, Luke shifted Teddy to his side and draped an arm over his shoulders.

Luke started to guide him back to the chairs as Teddy quietly said, "You've got to kill him."

"Shhhh... I know." Luke whispered as he sat down, then guided Teddy to sit on his knee.

"Sorry about that, Vincent." Dylan said to Vincent with regret, then leaned in to whisper, "Teddy has issues."

Vincent glanced across the room at the young boy who wanted to kill him and nodded.

* * * * *

"Well, I guess we've covered just about everything that we needed to." Dylan said as he walked back to take his seat.

Vincent looked at Dylan with question, still wondering why he had been invited to the meeting.

Dylan noticed Vincent's expression and smiled as he said, "Vincent. I don't know if anyone has told you how important you've been to the camp."

After a moment to process the words, Vincent slowly shook his head.

Dylan chuckled at Vincent's uncertain expression and said, "You've been our inspiration."

Vincent's eyes went wide at the statement.

"You're one of our brothers. Someone who is just like us. And you're out there in the universe making a difference." Devon said frankly.

Dylan nodded, then added, "Even though I don't know your whole story, I know that if you've been adopted by the Clan, then you've probably got the same excuses that the rest of us have to blame other people for your problems and pity yourself."

"But you haven't done that. You've risked your life to help others. You've been declared an adult and you've even gotten married." Simon said with a smile of admiration.

"The reason I wanted to talk to you about this now is because after everything that's happened in the past few days, the camp guys could probably use some inspiration." Dylan said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Dylan has been sharing your letters with all of us, so we know about the things you've been doing and the people you've met." Mouse said in an uncharacteristic timid voice.

"So in a way, all of us have been right there with you, cheering you on." Luke added as he slowly rubbed Teddy's back to soothe him.

"When the guys start feeling like they are too young or too hurt or too powerless, Dylan tells us about what you've done and proves that we really

can do stuff if we just don't give up." Jason K said, once again cuddled close to Dylan's chest.

Vincent considered the words, then said, "I think I felt that."

"Felt what?" Dylan asked as he absently petted Jason K's hair.

"While I was on the Yorktown... The whole time I've been out in space, I've always known that I had my brothers back here on Earth... watching me." Vincent said slowly, then looked up with realization and said, "I wanted you to be proud of me."

Dylan chuckled and said, "We are proud of you, Vincent. And part of the reason we've been working so hard to prepare for the day that the Clan would need us is so that when you came back, you could be proud of us."

"Proud? Try amazed." Vincent said as he looked around the group, "I didn't have any idea you guys were organized like this... but I guess I should have known."

At the curious looks from around the room, Vincent continued, "I've been telling the people on my ship about you guys. I told them that you're all my brothers and you're just like me... I should have known that you weren't all sitting around waiting for 'someday' to happen."

"Thanks, Vincent. That really means a lot to us." Dylan said with an honest smile.

Nods of agreement went around the room.

"I think you guys are really amazing. I've been on the Yorktown, learning how to be a Starfleet officer. I've had people who've let me know what was expected and helped me with advice and stuff. From the way it looks, you guys did this all by yourselves. No one told you what to do or how. You just did it. That takes some guts." Vincent said as he looked around the group.

"Well, Saint Mikey did kind of let us know that there was something that we needed to do." Devon hesitantly admitted.

"Saint Mikey again, huh? It seems like he's involved in a lot of the things going on right now." Vincent said as he looked around the room.

"Yeah, But that would make sense. He's the patron saint of gay and abandoned youth." Luke said in a reasonable and self-assured voice.

"So he's working to make things turn out the best for the most people." Mouse continued, and it appeared to Vincent that Mouse was used to

completing Luke's statements. Although they looked completely different, they behaved almost like twins.

"I know it's a lot to take on faith, Vincent. It took a while before I really accepted it." Dylan said honestly.

"But the good thing is, you don't have to believe or have faith or anything like that for it to work." Luke said frankly.

"Guys, hold up. You don't have to try to convince me. I'm already on board with you." Vincent said with a chuckle.

At the curious looks, Vincent continued, "If you would have asked me about it before I left Earth, I would have said that I don't believe in God. I didn't know it back then, but the problem was that the only God I ever heard about was the one my father believed in; the God who told him that he was supposed to hate and beat his gay son."

Silence fell over the room at Vincent's words.

"I've had a lot of time in the past few weeks to think about what I do and don't believe. What I've figured out is that it doesn't matter what my 'logical' mind thinks about it. In my heart I know that the Great Spirit exists and gives us the choices and the chances to grow into something better than we are." Vincent said passionately.

"So you believe in Native American Shamanism?" Luke asked cautiously.

"Maybe." Vincent said with a shrug, then continued, "I believe in what I feel is true. What I've learned about the Great Spirit so far seems true to me, so I keep believing it."

"I might try something like that." Luke said in consideration, then continued, "Maybe it'll be enough to believe in 'something'."

"It's working for me so far." Vincent said with a smile.

"So Vincent, if I can arrange a meeting for the camp guys, will you say a few words?" Dylan asked hopefully.

Before answering, Vincent looked around at all the expectant faces.

He remembered back to the day that he received his promotion and how reluctant he was to get up on stage.

"Vincent, it comes with the job. Sometimes you have to do things like this." Joe had said to him, letting him know that there are times when it's important to put your own discomfort aside for the benefit of others.

"Yeah. But I'm not real good at talking to people." Vincent finally said as he looked at Dylan apologetically.

"You won't be talking to people, you'll be talking to family." Dylan said with a smile of assurance. Vincent could easily see why Dylan was made the leader of this group. From his optimistic attitude and casual demeanor, nothing seemed impossible.

Vincent slowly nodded, hoping that Dylan was right and it really was that simple.

"Where are you going to be staying so I can let you know when I have it all set up?" Dylan asked as he shifted Jason K slightly on his lap to be more comfortable.

"I really don't know yet, maybe at my brother's house. Or I might be at Rory's boyfriend's house... I'm not sure where that is." Vincent said reluctantly.

"*Clan Short Headquarters can contact me at any time*." Ship's voice said from Vincent's bracelet.

"Thank you Ship." Vincent said into his bracelet, then said to Dylan, "Just have Clan Headquarters tell Ship and he'll pass the message on to me."

"Sure..." Dylan said hesitantly as he looked at Vincent with concern.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked curiously.

"You don't have anyplace that you call home, do you?" Dylan asked quietly.

"The Yorktown, sort of. But no place on Earth, not really." Vincent admitted shyly.

"You do now." Devon said in a firm voice that drew everyone's attention.

Dylan nodded and said, "That's right. You're our brother and you have a home with us. Here at Camp Little Eagle. Here in Cabin One."

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Thanks."

"Whenever you're on Earth, you've always got a place here with us." Simon said seriously.

"There's two of us... well, maybe three. I don't know if Lindon... I mean Xandor is going to need a place to stay." Vincent said uncomfortably.

"*Xandor will be staying with his cousin. The arrangements have already been made*." Ship said frankly.

"Thank you Ship." Vincent said quietly, then he looked around the group and continued, "Someday T'Lani and I are going to find a place that we'll call home. I don't know if that'll be on Vulcan or Earth, or maybe even someplace else. But until we find our home together, my home is here with my brothers."

"Good." Dylan said with satisfaction.

"I need to get back to Lehman now. This is his first trip to Earth and I don't want to leave him on his own for too long." Vincent said as he looked around the collection of boys in the room.

"Lehman, the guy who can change himself to look like you?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Yeah. I meant to tell you about him on the way over here." Vincent said with a smile.

"If you need to go, I'll walk you back to the medical center." Dylan said, then looked at Jason K and asked, "Do you want to stay here for a while?"

Jason K looked over at Teddy with concern, then up at Dylan and said, "I'd really like to go with you if that's okay."

"Of course it's okay. I don't think we have anything else planned before lunch time." Dylan said with a smile at the younger boy.

"Is Teddy going to be okay?" Jason K asked quietly.

Dylan looked over at Luke who was still holding Teddy and talking to him gently.

"Yeah. I think he'll be fine." Dylan said, then offered his hand.

Jason K took hold of Dylan's hand, then looked at Vincent with question.

"Let's go."

* * * * *

As Vincent walked out of the cabin, the warmth of the sunlight on his face caught his attention.

The gentle caress of a breeze ghosted over his skin and caused him to stop in his tracks.

"Is something wrong?" Dylan asked as he walked to Vincent's side.

After a moment to consider what he was feeling, Vincent responded, "No. Nothing's wrong. I just... I guess I didn't realize how much I missed being on Earth."

Dylan looked at Vincent with question at the unusual statement.

"It's not important. Just seeing real sunlight and feeling a breeze is kind of nice. I didn't even know I was missing things like that." Vincent said in a tone of voice that was both thoughtful and somewhat longing.

"I never even thought about that. From the way you talk in your letters, being in space is all fun and exciting. But I guess anytime you're away from home, you're gonna miss stuff." Dylan said as he hugged Jason K to his side a little tighter.

Something in Dylan's words and body language made Vincent consider for a moment.

"Are you missing your home?" Vincent finally asked.

Dylan's eye went wide with surprise at the question.

"I mean, just from the way you talk, I figure you aren't from Florida. You sound like you're probably from Chicago or some place like that." Vincent hurried to explain.

Dylan broke into a reluctant smile and said, "Well, at least you didn't say China."

"Why would I say something like that?" Vincent asked in a bewildered tone.

Dylan actually laughed at the question, then said, "Because I'm Chinese."

"Nice try at changing the subject." Vincent said with a roll of his eyes, then continued, "Do you miss wherever you're from?"

"I am from Chicago. And yeah, I guess I do miss it a little. But having Jake around is making that easier." Dylan said with a contented look.

"Good. And it's not like I'm real bad homesick or anything like that. It just surprised me when I felt the sun and the wind... I didn't even know I was missing that stuff." Vincent finished with a distant expression in his eyes.

"Got it. Let's get going and check on your friend." Dylan said with a smile.

"Right. His name is Lehman. Do you remember the email I sent you about when I met 'The Holy One'..."

* * * * *

Movement from the doorway drew everyone's attention.

Rory had been expecting his mother to arrive with lunch, but his expression fell when he saw Xain leading a younger boy into the room.

"Levi, may I introduce my cousin, Kennon." Xain said formally, then in a slightly urging tone, continued, "Given the abilities that you possess, I assume that you will be able to alleviate some of his symptoms or perhaps even cure his condition."

Levi looked around the room and smiled when his gaze fixed on Lehman, who was still in Brakkii's form.

"Hi Uncle Lehman. How do you like Earth so far?" Levi asked happily, seeming not to have heard Xain's question at all.

"I really don't know yet. I haven't had the chance to see much of it." Lehman answered as he broke into a grin at Levi's carefree nature.

"You look funny like that. Why don't you just be yourself?" Levi asked curiously.

Lehman couldn't resist the charm of the young Mikyvis and immediately shrank back into his resting form, looking like Vincent again.

"Can you be of assistance to my cousin?" Xain asked seriously, seemingly unphased by Lehman's transformation.

"Sure. If he wants me to." Levi said as he took a step closer to Kennon.

"No. You can't." Rory said as he moved his wheelchair to prevent Levi from getting any closer.

Levi looked at Rory curiously, then back at Xain with question.

"Rory believes that it would be preferable for my cousin to remain in this incapacitated state." Xain said without inflection.

Levi turned to look at Rory again and asked, "You want Kennon to suffer?"

"No. But if you do something to help him, it might invalidate the experimental treatments that he's receiving. If that happens, then Solak will have to start all over again with someone else and it might take years before he can prove that his treatment works." Rory said desperately.

Levi saw the sincerity in Rory's expression, then turned to look at Xain curiously.

"To ease distress is logical." Xain said simply.

"You're not going to do it, are you, Levi?" Lehman asked with concern.

"Do you think I shouldn't?" Levi asked in return.

"I think that if Kennon is willing to wait just a little bit longer, a whole lot of people will be a lot better off because of it." Lehman said frankly.

Levi looked at Xain and asked, "What do you think about that, Uncle Xain?"

"If you are able to ease Kennon's distress, you should do so. To do otherwise is to cause him unnecessary suffering." Xain said seriously.

"Uncle Rory, would you please move so I can talk to Kennon?" Levi asked gently.

"Please, Levi, please don't invalidate Solak's work." Rory begged.

Levi moved to Rory's side and gave him a firm hug, then whispered into his ear, "I'm just going to talk to him."

Rory returned the hug briefly, then moved his wheelchair so he wasn't blocking Levi's way.

"I know you heard all that, Kennon. So can you tell me what you think?" Levi asked curiously.

"Who are you?" Kennon asked in a garbled mumble.

Levi obviously didn't have any trouble understanding what he was saying and replied, "I'm Levi Richardson and I'm a Mikyvis."

"What's that?" Kennon asked curiously.

"It's kind of a long story. If you was someone else, I'd just give you the answer in your head by telepathy, but I don't want to cause any problems for you later." Levi said seriously.

At Kennon's inquiring look, Levi continued, "I'm a Mikyvis. That means I can do all kinds of really kewl stuff like move through time and dimensions and stuff like that."

"Time?" Kennon asked to confirm that he had heard right.

"Yeah. Kewl, huh?" Levi said with a grin.

"Can you see if what Rory believes is true? If I stay like this, will it help other people?" Kennon asked, working harder than he ever had before to say the words clearly enough to be understood.

Levi's gaze became distant for a moment as he looked at Kennon, then he seemed to come to a decision.

"Not only will other people be helped, but the treatment will become available in time to save three lives that wouldn't have a chance to continue living any other way." Levi said quietly.

"Then I'll stay like I am." Kennon said as he looked Levi in the eyes.

Levi smiled at Kennon, then leaned over the arm of his wheelchair to give him a great big hug.

Lehman looked at the scene with a smile, but then a thought occurred to him.

As Lehman was about to open his mouth to ask, he heard Levi's voice in his head. //Yeah, I did know all about Kennon's choice before I ever came in here. I wouldn't have done it.//

//Then why did you go through all of this?// Lehman asked curiously, strangely at ease with Levi's form of telepathy.

//Because Xain couldn't accept 'no' as an answer any other way. He had to see that the treatments are necessary and that Kennon really did choose this for himself.// Levi said seriously.

//Thank you, Levi. Do you think that this happening is going to cause problems for Xain and Rory in the future?// Lehman asked with concern.

//No. I know it won't.// Levi said with a smile as he emerged from his hug with Kennon.

"My goodness. There are a lot of you in here. I'm afraid I didn't bring enough food for everyone."

All the boys turned to see Rory's mother pushing a cart of food into the room.

"That's okay, Aunt Doris, me and Xain are going to have lunch over at the Short Compound." Levi said as he walked to Xain's side.

"Yeah, and I should try to find Vincent." Lehman said uncertainly as he turned to leave.

"Three." Levi said as he pointed at the door.

"Two."

"One."

* * * * *

Vincent walked into the room to find Levi pointing at him and everyone else staring.

"What?" Vincent asked self consciously.

"Levi was just showing off." Lehman said with a chuckle as he hurried to Vincent's side, then noticed that Dylan and Jason K were just behind him in the hallway.

"Rory and Kennon are about to have lunch so it's time for us to go." Levi said, then an instant later he and Xain were gone.

After a moment for the surprise of their abrupt disappearance to wear off, Lehman asked, "Does that mean it's time for you to eat again?"

"No. It's still a little early, I think." Vincent said as he put one arm around Lehman, then he turned slightly and said, "Have a good lunch, we'll see you guys later."

"Bye Vincent... and thanks Lehman." Rory said quickly.

"Thanks." Kennon said with an expression of pure gratitude directed at Lehman.

A smile and a nod were Lehman's response before Vincent guided him out into the hall.

* * * * *

"Lunch isn't for another hour or so." Dylan said cautiously, not knowing if he was intruding on their conversation.

"Right, an hour. That's what my stomach is telling me too." Vincent said with a grin.

"Oh. Okay. So what do we need to do next?" Lehman asked as he looked at Vincent seriously.

Vincent looked at Dylan with question and received a nod in response before Dylan hurried away with Jason K still holding on to his side.

"What was that all about?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Since we're on Earth, how would you like to see some of it?" Vincent asked with a happy smile.

"Um, sure. But don't we need to be doing... you know, Trach Manja stuff?" Lehman asked uncertainly.

"Nope. The Trach Manja stuff always seems to find us when we're not looking for it. Besides, I think it would be nice to have a look around Camp Little Eagle. We only stopped here for a few minutes when I was here before, I haven't really got to see much of it yet. Dylan said he wants to get someone who knows the history to show us around." Vincent said cheerfully.

Lehman thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. Okay. Seeing some of your world sounds nice."

* * * * *

"Are you guys ready to see the camp?" Dylan asked with Jason K now walking at his side.

"Yeah. Did you find who you were looking for?" Vincent asked curiously.

Dylan motioned for Vincent and Lehman to walk with him, then said, "Yeah. He's going to meet us at the center of the camp."

As the boys walked outside again, Vincent smiled and enjoyed the feeling of the warmth of the sun on his face.

"From the way Vincent described your planet, I thought it would be warmer here." Lehman said casually as they walked.

"It's warmer in the summer. Right now it's fall, so it's getting cooler." Vincent explained.

"Oh yeah. I remember getting something from you about your world having 'seasons'." Lehman said in thought.

"Your planet doesn't have seasons?" Dylan asked curiously.

"No. At least not like yours. The second planet in our system does, but not the world that I grew up on. The only variations in climate on my world come from the elliptical orbit. Each year we have a brief period of heat that signals the end of one year and the beginning of the next." Lehman explained, then noticed that they seemed to be approaching an elderly man in front of a crude tent.

"Welcome back Vincent. I am glad that you have come home to us."

"Thank you Chief Tecumseh, I'd like for you to meet my new brother, Lehman." Vincent said respectfully.

"The Great Spirit honors us with your presence Lehman. Please be welcomed." Chief Tecumseh said reverently.

"Um, thanks. I don't really know too much about your world, but I like this place. It's nice." Lehman said uncertainly, not really knowing the proper way to address Chief Tecumseh.

"Dylan mentioned that you are not of this world. It would be my privilege to show you our camp." Chief Tecumseh said in a slow, dignified voice.

"That sounds nice. But you don't have to treat me like I'm someone special. I'm just Vincent's brother." Lehman said shyly.

Chief Tecumseh smiled at the statement, then said, "All the children of the Great Spirit are special. But those who embrace his gifts and follow his path are even more so. I have a sense that you already know that and have begun to walk that path."

Lehman reflected on the fact that he had been given the choice to give up his destiny as a Trach Manja and had chosen to take the more difficult path.

Before he could respond, Chief Tecumseh gestured toward the tent before them and said, "This is the center of Camp Little Eagle. It is our heart, our beginning."

"What is it?" Vincent asked as he finally took a good look at the tent before them.

At first glance the tent had seemed to be a temporary structure to Vincent, but now that he really looked at it, he could see that it had been made to last.

"This is where we held the ceremony to dedicate the camp. All ceremonies of significance to the Camp are held here." Chief Tecumseh said, then gestured for the group to walk with him.

"What's inside of it?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Those things which are held sacred to us." Chief Tecumseh said as he led the group away from the tent.

Vincent thought about the response for a moment, then quietly asked, "Totems?"

Chief Tecumseh looked at Vincent with surprise at the question, then said, "Yes. That is correct."

Vincent nodded, seemingly content with the answer.

"So we're not allowed to go in there?" Lehman asked Vincent in a whisper.

After a moment to consider, Vincent quietly responded, "I'm betting that if we went in there, we wouldn't understand what we were looking at. A totem is something sacred to you, but it may just look like a piece of junk to someone who doesn't understand what it means."

When Vincent noticed that Chief Tecumseh had been listening, he hurried to explain, "I wasn't saying that your totems are junk or anything like that..."

"I understand what you were saying, and you are quite correct. Please tell me though, how is it that you know of our customs?" Chief Tecumseh asked as he stopped in front of a large building.

"Lieutenant Walking Bear on the Yorktown told me some stuff about totems, since then I've picked up some different stuff that seemed to make sense to me." Vincent said and finished with a shrug.

"I was going to show you the administration building next, but I feel that there is something else you should see first." Chief Tecumseh said as he started walking off in a different direction.

"Trach Manja stuff?" Lehman asked as they hurried to follow Chief Tecumseh across the camp.

"No. I don't think so. I get the feeling that this is something else." Vincent said distantly.

"That's the art building." Jason K said as it became apparent which building they were traveling toward.

"Jason, would you be so kind as to locate Obadiah and ask him to join us?" Chief Tecumseh asked as they continued walking.

"He's probably still in Cabin One." Dylan said quietly.

"I'll be right back." Jason K said, then took off running toward Cabin One, which was only a short distance away.

* * * * *

As the group walked into the empty classroom, Vincent noticed that it wasn't like most other art classrooms that he had been in.

Although there were the typical collection of finger paintings and drawings, there were also a variety of other items that seemed to be out of place.

"Look at this." Lehman said as he indicated a large pottery bowl that had been hand painted.

As Vincent got closer, he could see that someone had taken the time and care to hand etch the Clan Short crest into the clay.

"This is beautiful." Lehman said in a whisper.

"This is what I'm working on, it's going to be a present for Jake." Dylan said from the other side of the room.

Vincent and Lehman walked over to see Dylan holding a piece of silver that looked like a coin.

"What is it?" Vincent asked as he examined the intricate design that was in the process of being cut out of the metal.

"It's going to be a necklace." Dylan said proudly.

"No. I mean, what's the design? That's not the Clan Short crest." Vincent asked curiously.

"That's the crest of the Clan Short Diplomatic Corps. Jake and his brothers are all part of that Division." Dylan said frankly.

"And you said that you're part of the Support and Recovery division, right?" Vincent asked in confirmation.

"Yeah. As of yesterday. We don't have our own crest yet, but I figure that we'll work that out later, when everything else calms down." Dylan said frankly.

"Did you need me for something?" Obie asked as he rushed into the classroom with Jason K at his side.

"Yes Obadiah. I recall that last week you asked an unusual question of me. I have a feeling that the Great Spirit has provided your answer." Chief Tecumseh said cryptically.

Obie looked around the room and his gaze fixed on Vincent.

"You may proceed." Chief Tecumseh encouraged.

Obie stared for a moment longer, then walked to a large cabinet of drawers.

He opened one drawer and was obviously looking for something.

"What's going on?" Lehman asked Jason K curiously.

A shrug was Jason K's only answer.

"Vincent, I made this for you." Obie said shyly as he walked away from the drawer carrying a small piece of leather in his hands.

"You made something for me?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Vincent accepted the small leather pouch from Obie and looked it over curiously.

Small red, white and black beads had been sown onto the rawhide leather with great care. The pattern wasn't anything more elaborate than a zig-zag but the time and care that it took to stitch every bead in place was clear to see.

"Last week Obadiah was inspired to create a medicine bag, but when it was complete, he didn't know who it was for. He came to me and asked who was in need of such a thing." Chief Tecumseh said as he took a step closer to Vincent's side.

"This is great, but how did you know?" Vincent asked as he finally looked up from the medicine bag.

"Chief Tecumseh says that the Great Spirit shows me the things that his braves will need." Obie said shyly.

After a moment to consider the response, Vincent smiled and said, "That's a wonderful gift to have. Thank you Obie. I even have something to put in it."

"I put a few things in there too, but you don't have to keep them if you don't want to." Obie said timidly.

"I know that the things in your medicine bag are supposed to be private, but would it be okay if I looked at what's inside now?" Vincent asked Obie quietly, then looked at Chief Tecumseh with question, not wanting to offend him by going against his beliefs.

"I believe that this once it would be acceptable, since you weren't the one to assemble the totems." Chief Tecumseh said gently.

Vincent walked to the nearest table and reverently sat down the medicine bag.

Lehman, Dylan and Jason K took seats surrounding him as Obie and Chief Tecumseh stood behind Vincent.

"It's a rock." Vincent said as he took a rather common looking stone from the pouch.

"Yeah." Obie said quietly.

"I don't get what it's supposed to mean." Vincent said as he turned to look at Obie.

"I didn't know who I was making this for, but now that I know it's you, I guess that's like carrying a piece of the Earth with you while you're out in space." Obie said timidly.

Vincent looked at the rock again and nodded his agreement with the reasoning.

"Thanks. I think that when I'm far away, this will be really nice to have." Vincent said, then reached into the pouch again.

"A seed?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It's an orange seed." Obie said with a smile.

After a moment to consider, Vincent shook his head and said, "I don't get it. You'll have to tell me."

"If you give that seed the things it needs, it will grow into an orange tree and someday it will make oranges with lots more seeds." Obie said seriously, then in a quieter voice, he continued, "It's life."

"Wow." Vincent said as he looked at the small seed on the table in front of him.

"I don't understand what you're doing." Lehman said cautiously, not wanting to offend anyone, but feeling that it was important that he understand what he was witnessing.

Chief Tecumseh put his hand on Lehman's shoulder as he said, "It is difficult to describe the role of a totem. They can be a focus for meditation, a source of strength, an inspiration or even a good luck charm."

Vincent felt around inside the pouch and made sure there was nothing else.

"It needs one more thing." Obie said quietly.

"What's that?" Vincent asked as he looked at Obie curiously.

"The earth and the life need to be balanced. I think you need something man-made to show that part of your life... except that I couldn't think of anything for that." Obie said shyly.

"That's okay. I've got it covered." Vincent said as he unfolded the jumpsuit uniform that he had been carrying all morning.

Lehman already knew what he was going to see.

Vincent took one of the couplers out of his uniform pocket and placed it on the table beside the seed and the rock.

"So let me see if I'm getting this right." Lehman said in prelude, "You're going to carry this pouch with these three things in it because they bring you luck?"

"Sure. You can look at it that way if you want. This little rock represents my world, no matter where I go, I'm taking a piece of the Earth with me. The seed represents life, I mean, what could be more lucky than carrying a spark of life with you? And the coupler represents my work, Starfleet and all of that. Plus it reminds me to be prepared."

"In time you will find other totems that you will want to carry with you and add them to your medicine bag." Chief Tecumseh said seriously.

"Yeah." Vincent said as he reverently put the three items into the pouch.

"Maybe I should have something like that." Lehman said quietly.

"Perhaps you will someday soon. It is possible that you are here witnessing these events so you will understand the significance of a totem when one is provided to you." Chief Tecumseh said frankly.

Lehman nodded as he noticed that Vincent was folding his pouch into his jumpsuit uniform.

"I love these Soleen-Avalla robes, but they don't have pockets." Vincent explained at Lehman's questioning gaze.

"*When you return to the ship, we will add pockets if you would like*." Ship said seriously.

Vincent smiled and said, "Thank you Ship. You guys have done so much to help us out already that I hate to ask for more... but pockets would be good."

"If we have no other business here, perhaps you would like to continue our tour of the camp." Chief Tecumseh said as he gestured toward the door.

"What about the other thing?" Dylan asked the Chief in an urging tone.

"Make your arrangements. If it is meant to be so, it will be so." Chief Tecumseh said seriously, then motioned for the group to follow him out the door.

Chapter 46

As they walked through the camp, listening to Chief Tecumseh's narrative, Lehman noticed that Vincent seemed to be distracted.

"What's wrong?" Lehman whispered with concern.

"Nothing." Vincent said automatically, then smiled unconvincingly for Lehman's benefit.

Lehman gave Vincent an incredulous look, then said, "If you can't tell me, then can I look for myself?"

Vincent saw Lehman reaching out to him, about to touch his arm, and flinched away.

Lehman's expression went from mild concern to full worry at Vincent's reaction.

Vincent noticed, and a look of resolve slowly filled his expression.

"The last time I was here was right before my parent's funeral." Vincent trailed off in an uncertain voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Vincent." Lehman said quietly.

"Nah, it's okay. Really." Vincent said thoughtfully. "I'm not sad or anything, I think maybe that seeing now what I saw then is reminding me of what I was feeling back then."

"I understand. Just let me know if you feel like talking about it." Lehman said quietly.

"Yeah. Promise." Vincent said with a grin, which confirmed more than words that his mood was just a momentary thing.

Lehman glanced at Chief Tecumseh and found that he had stopped and was waiting on them, to finish.

"Sorry, Chief Tecumseh." Lehman said quietly.

"Quite alright. I should have considered that being here again might bring up unpleasant memories for Vincent." Chief Tecumseh said seriously.

"I'm fine. Can we just not talk about it?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"As you like." Chief Tecumseh said gently, then started walking again.

"Why are these cabins away from all the others?" Lehman asked, as the path they were on led them to another clearing.

"These are the girls' cabins." Chief Tecumseh said simply, as if that explained it all.

"There are girls at Camp Little Eagle?" Vincent asked with surprise, then continued, "I've never seen any."

"That would stand to reason." Chief Tecumseh said quietly as he stopped to look at the boys.

"At this point in time, the girls need to be kept separate from the boys." Chief Tecumseh said quietly.

"Why?" Lehman asked curiously.

"We only have a few girls here and all of them are quite fragile at this point. Doctor Richardson believes, and I concur, that the girls might feel overwhelmed and 'outnumbered' if we tried to integrate them with the boys right away." Chief Tecumseh said with a note of regret in his voice.

"So they're kind of being kept locked up and hidden away?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. Not at all." Chief Tecumseh said, with obvious surprise at Vincent's assessment.

"The girls are free to leave their cabins and join in with the boys whenever they would like. But we are also allowing them to choose to stay to themselves and giving them the opportunity to heal from whatever events brought them to us." Chief Tecumseh said gravely, then gestured for the boys to continue walking.

"Yeah. I guess I can understand that." Vincent said as he took one last glance back at the pair of cabins in the clearing.

* * * * *

"Lunch will be served in thirty minutes. We would be honored if you would join us." Chief Tecumseh said as they approached the administration building.

"Yeah, it would be great if you guys would sit at our table." Obie said with enthusiasm.

Vincent saw that Dylan and Jason K agreed and really wanted him and Lehman to join them.

"I'd like to, but we should probably be getting back to the Short Compound and find out some more about what's going on. We came back to Earth to help, so we'd better get started." Vincent said reluctantly, then glanced at Lehman with question.

Lehman shrugged, obviously feeling that he didn't know enough of what was going on to have an opinion.

"Would you like a little piece of advice?" Chief Tecumseh asked as he looked at the nearly identical boys.

Both boys nodded and devoted their full attention to Chief Tecumseh.

"When the storm rages, it is our instinct to seek that which is stable to take refuge." Chief Tecumseh said sagely.

Vincent slowly nodded as Lehman looked on with confusion.

"Do not allow yourself to be drawn into the tumult, rather, become the sanctuary for those who have need of a respite from the recent events, so they may heal within themselves." Chief Tecumseh said seriously.

"Yeah." Vincent said, then noticed Lehman's uncomprehending stare directed at him.

"There are lots of people here helping each other, and that's great. But I think what Chief Tecumseh is saying is that since we're outside of whatever happened, we can listen to people and help them in a different way because we're not all tired and worried and emotional about stuff." Vincent said carefully.

"Yes. Your unique, 'outside' point of view may be of help to some who feel that their own worries and concerns are trivial compared to those of people who suffered great losses." Chief Tecumseh said gravely.

"Huh?" Lehman asked, feeling that he was missing out on the point of the entire conversation.

"It would be like if I had whined to JonJon about not being able to see when he had just lost his whole family. My problem was a really little problem compared to his. Maybe there are people here who feel something like that. They need to talk to someone who wasn't here and didn't get hurt or lose anyone." Vincent said quietly.

Lehman slowly nodded his understanding.

"I'm really glad that you're in our cabin, Vincent." Dylan said with a smile.

At Vincent's questioning look, Dylan continued, "You understand the 'Support and Recovery' thing and how to give people the help they need."

"Not really." Vincent said shyly, then continued, "I just know how to listen to Chief Tecumseh when he gives me advice."

"Yeah. Ya know, I should probably start doing that too." Dylan said with a timid smile directed at Chief Tecumseh.

"Should you have need of my advice, I will always be available." Chief Tecumseh said gently to Dylan, then turned to the group and continued, "If you will excuse me, I have some duties that require my attention. May the Great Spirit watch over you and guide you."

"You too." Vincent said with a smile, then watched as Chief Tecumseh walked away.

"So are we going or staying?" Lehman asked Vincent curiously.

"Going, I think." Vincent said thoughtfully, then turned to Dylan and said, "I don't know what all we're going to be doing, so I don't know when we'll be coming back. But we *will* be back."

"Good. Just remember that if you run into anyone that needs help, you've got all of us over here just waiting to be called." Dylan said frankly.

"I'll remember. It's good to know that we don't have to face this alone." Vincent said with a glance at Lehman.

"You'll never be alone Vincent. Wherever you go, the whole Camp is with you." Obie said frankly.

Vincent smiled at the boy who was close to his own age and realized that Dylan, Obie and even Jason K were brave, strong people whom he could depend on.

They were better than friends, they were brothers.

"We'll see you guys later." Vincent said more quietly, then looked to see if Lehman was ready to go.

Lehman raised his arm and said, "Ship, would you teleport us to the Short Compound?"

"*Yes Trach Manja Lehman. Let me know when you are ready.*" Ship responded immediately.

"Teleport."

* * * * *

When the teleportal stream finally cleared, Vincent and Lehman found themselves in the rec room of the Short Compound in the very spot that they had teleported from earlier.

A few of the boys around the room looked at them curiously, but didn't seem concerned by their sudden appearance.

"What do we do now?" Lehman asked cautiously, feeling distinctly uncomfortable surrounded by strangers.

"I don't know." Vincent said slowly as he looked around the room, then he quickly said, "Come over here, there's someone I want you to meet."

Lehman followed Vincent to a large couch at one side of the room.

There was a slender boy sitting and stroking the short blond hair of a much larger boy who was asleep.

"Konnichiwa, Koji-san. Ogenki desu ka?" Vincent asked in a whisper, so as not to wake the sleeping boy.

Koji smiled and said, "Hi Vincent. It's okay, the Clan taught me how to speak English."

"That's good. I guess I don't need to tell you that they taught me Japanese too." Vincent said with a giggle.

Koji smiled peacefully, then whispered, "This is Chok. He's having trouble getting used to being in a different time zone."

"This is my brother Lehman." Vincent said quietly.

"Hi." Lehman said, as he looked at Chok sleeping soundly with his head in Koji's lap.

"I've been hearing about some of the stuff you've been doing while you're out in space. How do you like being in Starfleet?" Koji asked quietly.

"It's great. I can't think of anything else that I'd rather be doing." Vincent said honestly.

Koji gave a sad smile, then looked down at Chok.

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked automatically.

Koji looked up and stopped to consider for a moment before saying, "It's nothing."

"Come on. You can tell us." Vincent said as he carefully took a seat on the couch beside Koji, on the other side from Chok.

Lehman took one step to rest against the arm of the couch as he waited expectantly.

Koji looked at the two nearly identical boys for a moment before quietly saying, "Chok and I were brought here when everything went crazy. I guess the Clan guys thought that someone might try to hurt us because we're their friends. You know, use us as hostages or something..."

Vincent nodded that he understood what Koji was saying.

"Well, since we've been here, Chok and I have sort of become friends since we're kind of in the same situation." Koji said carefully.

"What situation is that?" Lehman asked curiously, really wanting to help the troubled boy if he could.

"We're both friends of the Clan, but we're not exactly part of it. So we've kind of been hanging out together since there isn't really anything else for us to do." Koji said quietly.

Lehman nodded that he understood.

"Well, now that it looks like everything is over, Chok is probably going to have to go back to Germany where his family lives..." Koji said sadly as he looked down at the sleeping boy again.

"...And you like him." Lehman added with understanding.

Koji nodded regretfully.

Vincent watched as Koji continued to stroke the stout boy's hair with feather light touches.

"Isn't there something we can do?" Lehman asked Vincent with concern.

"Yeah. Let me think." Vincent said seriously.

"No. Everyone else has such big problems right now, they don't need to be worrying about this." Koji said quickly.

Vincent considered Koji's words, but before he could answer, Lehman said, "That's why we're here."

Koji and Vincent both looked at Lehman curiously.

"We'll talk to some people and try to work something out." Lehman said with assurance to Koji, then looked at Vincent with question.

"Right." Vincent said with a smile at Lehman, then looked at Koji and continued, "Just give us some time and we'll see what we can do."

"You really don't have to..." Koji said quickly, then looked down to be sure that his words hadn't caused Chok to wake up.

"I don't think it'll hurt anything to try. If it doesn't work out, then you're no worse off than if we'd done nothing." Vincent said reasonably.

Lehman nodded his agreement.

"Okay. Thanks." Koji said quietly as he watched Chok sleeping peacefully in his lap.

"I know just who I want to talk to." Vincent said quickly as he started toward the door.

"It looks like Vincent's got an idea, so I know it's going to be fine." Lehman said, then hurried to follow Vincent.

* * * * *

"Are you going to ask Cory or Sean?" Lehman asked as they walked into the hallway.

"No. I think we need to go over their heads for this one." Vincent said with an impish grin.

Lehman puzzled over the statement as they walked down the hall.

* * * * *

"Do you know where we're going?" Lehman asked cautiously as they seemed to be walking aimlessly from room to room.

"Not exactly, but I figured that if we looked around long enough... wait... that looks like the kitchen. Let's check in there." Vincent said as he hurried into the room ahead of them.

Lehman gave a slight exasperated shake of his head, then followed along.

"Aunt Teri? Do you have a minute to talk to me?" Vincent asked as he entered the kitchen.

Teri looked up at the sound and smiled with recognition, then her look turned to one of curiosity at the sight of Lehman following a step behind.

"This is Lehman. He's my brother." Vincent said shyly.

"Oh. It's nice to meet you Lehman... although, I don't recall Vincent having a twin brother the last time we met." Teri said as she turned her gaze toward Vincent.

"Long story." Vincent said simply.

Lehman nodded his agreement to the statement.

"I'm getting kind of used to that." Teri said with a chuckle, then continued, "You were asking if I have time to talk. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Well, not for me, exactly. It's more for Koji and Chok. They like each other and Koji is afraid that when everything calms down here that they'll both go home and might never see each other again." Vincent said simply.

"Because Chok lives in Germany..." Teri said thoughtfully.

Lehman nodded and watched Teri hopefully.

"I've been meaning to sit down and have a talk with Chok's father since they arrived... I suppose this is as good a time as any. If we can work something out between us, I'm pretty sure Kem will be willing to go along with whatever we come up with." Teri said decisively.

"Kem?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"That's Koji's father. He's a really good man." Teri said with a smile.

"Thanks for helping them Aunt Teri." Vincent said shyly.

"I'm glad to do it. Just check back with me later and I'll let you know what I've come up with." Teri said, then her gaze shifted upward.

Vincent was surprised when a pair of arms engulfed him from behind.

"I'm glad to see that you're alright." A woman's voice said gently.

Vincent craned his neck to see who was hugging him and smiled when he recognized her.

"I didn't know you'd be here." Vincent said quietly, then turned slightly and said, "Lehman, I'd like for you to meet Grandma Mona."

"Grandma Mona? Is she the one that Daddy Joe is going to marry?" Lehman asked suddenly, then after a moment to look at her, he continued, "She's even prettier than you said."

Vincent felt the arms go slack around him as Mona looked at Lehman with shock.

"Lehman, I don't think you were supposed to tell her about that." Vincent said in a mock whisper.

"Oops. Sorry." Lehman said shyly.

Mona chuckled and said, "You don't need to be sorry. What you said was wonderful, thank you."

Lehman shyly nodded.

"Come over here and sit down with me. I think we need to talk." Mona said as she guided Vincent to walk with her to the kitchen table.

"I really don't think we're supposed to talk about that stuff." Vincent said hesitantly.

Mona sat down and automatically pulled Vincent to sit on her knee, then said, "And what do you think Joe will do to you if you tell me?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then finally said, "Nothing?"

"And what do you think I will do if you don't tell?" Mona asked, then gestured for Lehman to come to her.

Lehman took a step closer and looked at Vincent sitting on Mona's lap, then said, "It's okay, I'll stand."

"Nonsense." Mona said dismissively, then pulled Lehman to her, to sit on her other knee.

"I have plenty of lap to go around." Mona said with a chuckle as she hugged a boy with each arm.

Lehman snuggled into the hug, then glanced at Vincent and noticed that he was doing the same.

"Now what is this you were saying about Joe marrying me?" Mona asked quietly.

"I wasn't there when he said it, I just kind of accidentally picked up that memory from Vincent's mind." Lehman said as he continued to snuggle.

Mona shifted her gaze from Lehman to Vincent and waited expectantly.

"Daddy Joe just told everyone, all the Deflector Control people, that he really likes you, and that if he can keep from screwing things up, he wants to marry you." Vincent said quietly, feeling like he was revealing something that was going to get him in trouble.

"Well, I'll tell you a little secret." Mona said, as she looked from one boy to the other, "I feel the same way about him."

"Really?" Vincent asked with a grin.

"Yes. Really." Mona said with an answering smile, then asked, "What would you think about that?"

"That would be great!" Vincent said joyfully.

Lehman nodded his agreement, then added, "I love Daddy Joe, he's been really nice to me. I think you two getting married would make him happy... He deserves to be happy."

"Thank you for saying so." Mona said, then leaned down to give Lehman a quick kiss on the top of his head.

"Now why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself Lehman. When Vincent left, I don't recall him having a twin." Mona said seriously.

* * * * *

"Gramma Mona!" Ricardo called as he ran into the kitchen.

"Incoming." Mona said with a chuckle as she shifted Vincent off her knee to clear the path for Ricardo.

Vincent was nearly caught by a stray elbow as Ricardo launched himself at Mona with all his force.

"Wow." Lehman said as he also moved out of the way.

"He's been taking pouncing lessons from Jamie and Jacob." A voice said from the doorway.

Vincent smiled and said, "Lehman, that's Ricardo and this is his brother, Reuben."

"Hi." Reuben said from the doorway, as he petted the large dog at his side.

"Hi. It's nice to meet you." Lehman said, a bit timidly.

"Gramma Mona, do you know where my momma is?" Reuben asked shyly.

"Yes. Actually I do." Mona said as she tried to get Ricardo to release his strangle-hold of a hug and settle down in her lap.

"Your mom needed to buy a few baby supplies, so she went with Helen to the store. They should be back any minute." Mona said as she finally got Ricardo to settle into a good snuggle.

"Did you need something? Maybe it's something I can help with." Mona asked, then gently kissed the top of Ricardo's head.

"No. I just wanted her to know that we're home, so she wouldn't worry about us." Reuben said seriously.

Vincent looked at the younger boy with concern.

Reuben bore little resemblance to the happy child Vincent had met just a month before. Although he couldn't pin down exactly what was different, the expression in Reuben's eyes was somehow 'haunted'.

"Come on Lehman." Vincent said, then walked to Reuben and pulled him into a firm hug.

Lehman was only a little surprised by the move, and was more than happy to go along.

"You looked like you needed some hugs." Vincent whispered to the younger boy.

"Yeah." Reuben said as he began to hug Vincent and Lehman in return.

"Is something wrong?" A woman's voice asked from just behind the trio.

All three looked up and saw Reuben's mother pushing a baby stroller into the room.

"He just looked like he needed a hug." Vincent said simply.

Mamacita looked down at her son, then knelt down and opened her arms to him.

Reuben turned and saw that Mona was still holding Ricardo on her lap.

"Don't worry about Ricardo. He's fine with Grandma Mona, go get your hugs." Vincent whispered, then gently nudged Reuben toward his mother.

An instant later, Reuben was hugging his mother like he hadn't seen her in years.

Mamacita hugged her son firmly, then looked at Vincent with question and concern.

"Sometimes a guy just needs a hug." Vincent said simply.

Mamacita considered the words for a moment, then nodded her acceptance as she devoted her full attention to her son.

Vincent noticed movement in the doorway behind Mamacita and saw Helen standing with two grocery bags in her arms.

"Could you use some help with the groceries?" Vincent asked hopefully, wanting to leave Reuben and Ricardo to their cuddles and snuggles.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I *could* use a hand." Helen said as she placed the grocery sacks on the counter just inside the door.

"Wanna help?" Vincent asked Lehman at his side.

"Sure. Just tell me what to do." Lehman said simply.

"Follow her." Vincent said, then hurried to follow Helen out of the room.

* * * * *

"What now?" Lehman asked when the last of the groceries were finally in the kitchen.

"There's someone I need to talk to. You could come with me if you want." Vincent said seriously.

"An old friend?" Lehman asked casually.

"No. Hopefully a new one." Vincent said with a grin.

"Who is it?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Seth. You know, the guy we talked to from the ship before we came down. I told him that I'd meet him in person when we got here, but then we kind of got side-tracked. Let's go find him now." Vincent said, watching for Lehman's reaction.

"Sure. It looks like there's lots and lots of people for me to meet, so I guess we'd better get started." Lehman said with a grin.

* * * * *

Vincent peeked around the corner of the next doorway, then turned back to say, "I think we found the right place."

Lehman smiled and happily followed Vincent into the room where Seth was hard at work.

"Sorry to interrupt your work, I just wanted to stop in and say 'hi' before I forgot." Vincent said timidly from the doorway.

"No problem. It's been a quiet morning so far. Come on in." Seth said, while typing something in on the terminal in front of him.

"Um, okay. If you're sure." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Yeah." Seth said casually, then pressed a key on his terminal and called, "Matt, are you there?"

"*Present and accounted for. What can I do for you Seth?*" Matt asked in a semi-casual voice.

"I've lost the satellite surveillance feed from the Thompson and Pierce households." Seth said seriously.

"*Switch over to the internal network feed. The Starfleet feed was just a temporary measure. We have the feed integrated into our internal security system now. I sent you an email detailing all of this.*" Matt said, and sounded like he was trying to hold back a chuckle.

Seth looked at another window, then said, "You sent the message two minutes ago... But whatever, I've linked to the new feed and it looks good. Thanks"

"*I thought it would meet with your approval. It was set up according to your specs.*" Matt said, and a smile could be heard in his voice.

"We'll catch you later." Vincent said as he motioned for Lehman to precede him out of the room.

"No. You don't have to go. Really." Seth said quickly.

Vincent stopped and smiled at Seth, appreciating that someone wanted him around.

"We're not mad or anything, but you're busy and we might distract you from something important. We'll just catch you later when you're done." Vincent said gently.

"Oh. Yeah. I guess so." Seth said as someone bumped into Lehman from behind.

"Oh! Sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going." The boy said quickly.

"No problem. I'm fine." Lehman said as he looked at the boy's long flowing white hair.

The boy stared at them for a moment, then said, "I'm Jordy. I don't think we've met."

"Hi Jordy, I'm Vincent and this is my brother Lehman." Vincent said casually.

Jordy blinked, then hesitantly asked, "Are you Lawrence's brother?"

Vincent chuckled and said, "Yeah. That's me."

"And I'm kind of adopted." Lehman added shyly.

"Aren't we all?" Jordy asked, with a teasing smile directed at Lehman that immediately put him at ease.

"What did you find out about the inventory?" Seth asked, once again completely absorbed in his work.

Jordy blinked, then seemed to remember why he had been rushing into the room.

"Oh yeah, it's fine. Someone just got confused and hit 'eaches' instead of 'cases' when they filled it out last time. We've got plenty of everything." Jordy said seriously.

"Good. That's what I thought. Thanks, Jordy." Seth said as he pulled up the clothing inventory on one of his screens.

"Have you guys had the grand tour of the place yet?" Jordy asked casually.

"Um, no. We've just been wandering around, peeking in doors until we found who we were looking for." Vincent said shyly.

Jordy chuckled and said, "There's no telling what kind of thing you'll end up seeing if you keep doing that. Why don't I take you around to check out the place?"

"Yeah. That'd be nice." Lehman said with a shy smile at Jordy.

"But we wouldn't want to take you away from your work." Vincent said with concern.

"Nah. I was just helping Seth out by double checking an inventory that looked like it was off. It's a slow day, so I've got plenty of time." Jordy said with a casual smile that was directed more at Lehman than Vincent.

"Well, if you're sure, we'd love to take a tour of the place." Vincent said happily.

"If you don't need to be carrying those things around, you could leave them here. Seth won't let anyone mess with them." Jordy said as he indicated the small bundles of clothing both boys were carrying.

"Yeah. Next time we need to remember to bring suitcases." Vincent said as he placed his Starfleet uniform on the table that Jordy had indicated.

"That's all your clothes?" Jordy asked with concern.

"That's all that we brought with us." Lehman said, before Vincent could answer.

"Then, if you'll remind me, we'll stop by and get you some clothes out of the Clan's clothing supply room when we've finished our tour." Jordy said, then indicated for the boys to follow him out of the room.

"It was nice to get to meet you in person, Seth. We'll talk to you some more later." Vincent said over his shoulder.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Seth said sincerely as he watched the boys leave.

* * * * *

"You were on the *Yorktown* when Cory called all the Clan members in, weren't you?" Jordy asked casually as they walked away from CIC.

"That's right. We just got here a few hours ago." Vincent said, then noticed that Jordy had directed the question toward Lehman.

"What have you been doing since you arrived?" Jordy asked with interest.

Vincent gave Lehman an inquiring look, prompting him to answer the question.

"Well, first we met with Cory, then we went over to Camp Little Eagle to see if we could help Rory sort something out... then Chief Tecumseh took us on a tour of the Camp... um, then we talked with some guys named Chok and Koji for a few minutes..." Lehman trailed off, then looked at Vincent helplessly.

"Then Lehman blabbed to Grandma Mona that our Daddy Joe wants to marry her." Vincent said with a teasing smile.

"Oh yeah. That too." Lehman said shyly.

"Well, it sounds like you two have had a full day already. How would you like to take a break for a while and have some fun? Then we could do the tour after lunch." Jordy asked with a smile that was completely directed at Lehman.

"Um, sure." Lehman said uncertainly, then looked at Vincent and continued, "If there's nothing else that we need to be doing right now."

"As far as I know, everything's done. Xandor has his memories back, Aunt Teri is taking care of Chok and Koji's problem, and Lawrence is busy waiting for something to happen." Vincent said thoughtfully.

Lehman considered the words, then nodded his agreement.

"Great! Then come outside with me. I think you're going to love this." Jordy said with a grand smile as he led the way.

* * * * *

"What is it?" Lehman asked, as he looked at the strange collection of nonsensical items scattered around one area of the yard.

"It's a miniature golf course!" Vincent said with a grand smile.

"Do you play?" Jordy asked, momentarily diverting his attention away from Lehman.

"Nope. Never." Vincent said with a smile, then continued, "But I always wanted to."

"Fantastic. It looks like there are a couple guys getting ready to play. Maybe we can join them. It's more fun with more people." Jordy said happily.

"You'll have to show me what to do. I don't have any idea what all of this is." Lehman said shyly.

"Then why don't I sit this game out and I'll show you how everything works." Jordy asked hopefully.

Vincent was about to say that it wasn't that difficult to understand when he noticed the look that passed between Lehman and Jordy.

"Yeah." Lehman said distantly. "Thanks."

"Do you guys mind if we join you?" Jordy called out as he rushed ahead to talk to the two boys who were about ready to tee off.

"He's really nice." Lehman whispered to Vincent at his side.

"He likes you." Vincent whispered in return.

Lehman looked at Vincent with disbelief at the declaration.

Before Lehman could think of anything to say to that, Jordy rushed back to them and said, "Connor and Leo said it would be okay if we played with them."

"We said it would be great." Connor said loudly with a grin as he watched Vincent's group approach.

"Oh, well, as long as you guys don't mind if we're not very good. Neither one of us has ever played before." Vincent said shyly.

Leo made a show of considering for a moment, then said, "I think the 'expert' players have the course between 4:00 and 6:00. So we should be fine."

Vincent grinned at the statement, then accepted a club from Connor as he handed them out.

"Thanks." Lehman whispered as Jordy handed a club to him.

"This is your ball." Jordy said as he crouched down to place the ball on the indentation that served as a tee.

"Hit it with that club and try to get it in that hole over there." Jordy said as he stood and pointed.

"Why?" Lehman asked curiously.

Jordy was puzzled by the question for a moment, then finally shrugged and said, "Because it's fun."

Lehman gave Jordy an incredulous look, then looked at the club in his hand, trying to figure out what he was supposed to do with it.

"Let me show you the best way to hold it." Jordy said softly as he moved behind Lehman and put his arms around him.

Vincent felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Connor and Leo looking at him with amusement.

"Uncle Jordy's seemed sad since we came here. I think he was lonely." Leo whispered.

"Yeah." Connor added with a grin. "Looks like he might have found someone."

Vincent turned his attention back to Jordy and Lehman, then smiled at the sight of Jordy with his chin on Lehman's shoulder as he explained how to hold the golf club.

Although Vincent tried to feel happy at the sight of Jordy talking gently to Lehman, he couldn't get past the thought that he and Lehman would be returning to the *Yorktown* soon.

"Now just try to get the ball over there, in that hole." Jordy said as he stepped away from Lehman to allow him to attempt the shot.

Lehman looked at his target, then back at the ball.

"Hold on. I can't do it right this way." Lehman said.

Leo and Connor's eyes went wide as Lehman started to change. His skin became dark blue and his hair lengthened and changed to a brownish red.

"How did he do that?..." Leo gasped with astonishment.

Rather than answer, Vincent watched with concern, wondering what Jordy's reaction was going to be.

"Wow. That's kewl." Jordy said with a grin at Lehman's transformation.

Vincent released the breath that he hadn't realized he had been holding, then turned to Connor and Leo to say, "Lehman's from a planet that's very far away. His people can change like that."

Leo and Connor looked like they each had a million questions, but when Lehman hit the golf ball, all the boys devoted their full attention to following where it went.

As they watched, the golf ball made it's way over a hump, then bumped off the rail at the far end of the green before coming to rest a few inches from the hole.

"Oh man! That was a great shot!" Jordy said with a grand smile.

"But I didn't get the ball into the hole." Lehman said with disappointment.

"Well, the point is to get the ball into the hole... eventually. It would be kinda boring if you could do it on the first shot every time." Jordy said, then motioned to the trio standing aside to take their turns.

"Do you want to go next?" Leo asked Vincent at his side.

"No. I think I'd rather watch you two make your shots first. That'll give me a better idea of what I'm supposed to do." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"You two really do take playing seriously." Jordy said with a teasing smile.

"Vincent is used to always trying to do his best at whatever he does." Lehman said, then glanced at Vincent to be sure that he wasn't offended.

"Well, doing your best is important sometimes. But just remember that we're out here to have fun. Screwing up and doing your worst might end up being even more fun than doing your best." Jordy said with a grin.

Lehman considered the words, and returned Jordy's grin as he realized what he was saying.

The 'click' of Connor hitting the ball drew everyone's attention.

They all watched as the ball cleared the hump, hit the rail, went past the hole and came to rest about three feet away.

When he noticed everyone looking at him, he said, "There's no way I can compete with beginner's luck."

Chuckles spread through the group at the statement as Leo moved in to set his ball on the 'tee'.

"I'm glad you didn't freak out when I changed." Lehman said quietly to Jordy at his side.

"I think that if you hang around with the Clan long enough, eventually nothing will freak you out." Jordy said with a gentle smile.

"So it doesn't bother you that I'm not Human?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"No way!" Jordy said immediately, then continued, "My best friend in the world isn't Human, at least, not anymore. Something like that doesn't bother me a bit."

Lehman examined Jordy's serious expression, then smiled.

"Crap!" Leo exclaimed as his golf ball nearly made it to the top of the hump, then rolled back to come to rest nearly where it had started.

"Just go ahead and try again." Connor said patiently.

"But it's Vincent's turn now." Leo said hesitantly.

"Your turn is over once you're over the hump." Connor said frankly.

"I don't remember that being in the rules." Leo said uncertainly.

"Those are my rules, little brother. Once everyone clears the hump, we'll start with Lehman again." Connor said simply.

Leo glanced at Vincent to see if he was going to object, then lined up his shot and hit the golf ball again.

This time the ball cleared the hump and came to rest about a foot and a half away from the hole, right between Connor's and Lehman's.

"Lehman, do you think you could show me how to hit the ball the way you did?" Vincent asked as he stepped up to the tee.

"No. It wouldn't work for you unless you can shape-shift." Lehman said frankly.

"Oh. Okay." Vincent said slowly, then took great care to plan out his shot.

"Why did you need to shape-shift before you hit the ball?" Jordy asked Lehman curiously.

"Because I'm most used to my own body. If I'm in Vincent's shape, I'm not quite as coordinated because he's a little bit taller than I am." Lehman said simply.

"Yeah, well I'm taller than I was a month ago, so just think how it is for me." Vincent said over his shoulder, then took his shot.

If it hadn't been for Lehman's shot earlier, Vincent's might have been seen as spectacular. But since Lehman's ball ended up closer to the hole, Vincent's shot was just 'pretty good'.

"Neither of you have played before?" Connor asked in confirmation.

"Nope. I always wanted to, but never did." Vincent said with a grin.

"I never even heard of golf before we came out here. My people don't have anything like this." Lehman said frankly.

"Who are your people?" Jordy asked curiously.

"Chameloids." Lehman answered simply and waited for further questions.

"I never heard of them, do all your people do that thing... um, shape-shift?" Jordy asked with interest.

"Yeah. Well, mostly. There's this tribe of people on our second planet, the Raksh'tu, who only have the blending ability, but just about everyone else can shape-shift." Lehman said seriously.

"Blending? What's that?" Jordy asked curiously.

"It just means that you can alter your coloring to blend into the background. If I was naked right now, I could lay down on the grass and blend in so you couldn't see me." Lehman said as he looked Jordy in the eyes.

"I bet you'd be great at hide and seek." Leo said with a grin from beside the pair.

"It's your turn." Connor said from the other side of the first hole course.

"Oh, um. Yeah. I'll be right there." Lehman said in a flustered voice, then glanced at Jordy timidly.

"After doing so well on your first shot, do you think you still need my help?" Jordy asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I like your help a lot." Lehman said with a shy smile.

* * * * *

"Connor?" Lehman asked quietly after they had both taken their shots at the second hole.

"Yeah?" Connor asked, as he turned his attention to Lehman.

"Would you mind, I mean, would it make you feel funny or anything if I tried to look like you for a minute?" Lehman asked shyly.

"Why?" Connor asked, sounding a little bit defensive.

"Because I've never tried to change myself to match your combination of coloring. But I wouldn't want to do it without asking you first because you might think I was making fun of you or something." Lehman said cautiously.

"So you want to try looking like me because I look weird?" Connor asked in a louder voice that drew Leo's attention.

"No. Not at all. I think you look really nice. I love the way your eyes look both gray and red. It's almost hypnotic." Lehman said honestly.

Connor thought for a moment, then cautiously said, "Okay. Just as long as you don't make fun of me."

"I won't. I promise." Lehman said, then slowly began to change himself to look like Connor.

"What's up Lehman?" Vincent asked as he walked to Lehman's side.

"I just wanted to try looking like Connor. His coloring is so... beautiful." Lehman said, obviously fighting to find the words.

Vincent looked at Connor critically for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I can see it."

"What?" Connor asked, unable to believe it after feeling funny looking all his life.

"You look good." Vincent said simply, then continued, "It's my turn to shoot... or hit... or whatever you call it in golf. It's my go."

"Oh. Yeah." Connor mumbled absently.

"Connor, by Human standards, your appearance might not be 'usual', but by any standards, you *are* beautiful." Lehman said, looking back at Connor with his own face.

"Thanks." Connor whispered as he felt an arm come around him.

"I always thought you looked good." Leo said quietly.

"Yeah. But you're my little brother." Connor said simply, then after a brief moment of consideration, he added, "And you're weird."

Leo chuckled at the statement as he was pulled into a playful hug by his older brother.

"I'm glad you did that. I don't know Connor that well yet, but I can imagine that he must have had a few people along the way tease him for being an albino. I know I get some weird looks just because I have platinum blond hair." Jordy whispered into Lehman's ear.

"I was just being honest." Lehman said frankly, then pointed at Vincent's ball careening off three separate bumpers to come to rest inches from the hole.

"Good shot Vincent!" Jordy said in an impressed voice.

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As the group arrived at the third hole, Lehman let out a terrified scream.

Before anyone could react, Lehman began to grow bigger as his hands became claws.

"Lehman! What's wrong?" Vincent asked, not having any idea what was causing Lehman to behave this way.

In the place where Lehman had been standing a moment before was a snarling beast wearing Avalla robes.

"Kill it! Kill it!" Lehman screamed in a terrified animalistic growl.

"Kill what? Tell me what's wrong." Vincent said as he cautiously approached.

"That! Right there! Kill it before it gets me!" Lehman said in a whimper as he pointed one of his claws at the border surrounding the third hole.

Vincent recognized Lehman's appearance as the beast he had become in the dream realm when he was cornered by the villagers.

"This spider?" Jordy asked as he pointed at a little spider on the low rail.

"Don't let it bite you! Hurry! Kill it!" Lehman said in absolute terror and seemed to have every muscle tensed, ready to run at the slightest provocation.

"How 'bout this?" Jordy asked, then squatted down and flicked the spider out into the yard.

Everyone stopped and looked at Lehman with question, not knowing if that would be enough to appease him.

After a moment, Lehman quietly growled, "Thank you Jordy."

"No problem." Jordy replied gently as he stared at Lehman with concern.

"I guess this means that Chameloids are afraid of spiders, huh?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

"No. Not really." Lehman said as he slowly began to transform into the mirror image of Vincent.

"Then what was that all about?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I don't know... give me a minute to sort it out." Lehman said as he pulled up his pants a little and adjusted his Avalla robes to accommodate his smaller size.

Jordy cautiously walked to Lehman's side and looked at him with concern.

"Rory." Lehman whispered as he looked up with realization.

"What about him?" Jordy asked cautiously.

"I did an imprint of him earlier and I must have picked up his fear of spiders without knowing it." Lehman said thoughtfully.

"Can you get rid of it? Or are you stuck with it from now on?" Jordy asked as he put a hand on Lehman's shoulder, showing his concern.

Lehman smiled at Jordy and said, "It's already gone. I got rid of it as soon as I knew it was there."

"Good. Because it might be a little bit weird if you could go off like that at any minute." Jordy said cautiously.

Lehman smiled and said, "It's all taken care of now. Let's just keep playing."

"Are you guys alright?" Vincent cautiously asked the pair of brothers who were staring wide-eyed at Lehman.

"That was the kewlest thing I ever saw." Leo said in a breathless whisper.

"Yeah. That was really awesome." Connor said as a grin broke out on his face.

Vincent chuckled, then said, "Okay Lehman. I think it's your turn."

* * * * *

"Are you in need of assistance?" Xain asked as he walked to join the group at the second half of the third hole.

"We're fine. What's up?" Vincent asked as he looked at Xain curiously.

"Many of the telepaths and empaths detected that Lehman had a moment of distress. It was suggested that I might be of assistance." Xain said as he looked around the group.

"Oh. Lehman just accidentally picked up something when he did a telepathic imprint of Rory today. It's all better now." Vincent said seriously.

Xain looked at Lehman with question, silently asking if Vincent's summary was accurate.

"Yeah. Sometimes when I do an imprint, I get things without knowing it." Lehman said shyly, then continued, "It's all taken care of."

"Should you need any assistance in emotional discovery or control, I would be willing to aid you." Xain said simply, then turned and said, "Vincent, he who is your brother requested that I relay a message to you."

Vincent gave a Vulcanesque raise of one eyebrow to prompt Xain to continue.

"Later this afternoon we will be departing so that we may enjoy the evening meal together at my home. Lawrence wanted to be sure that you were aware that you and Lehman are invited to join us." Xain said calmly.

Vincent looked at Lehman with question, not wanting to automatically accept on his behalf.

Lehman gave a shrug, obviously not caring either way.

"I have also been instructed to notify you that, if you refuse to attend, you will be added to Jake's feces distribution roster." Xain said in a somewhat distracted voice, like he was listening to something else as he spoke.

At Vincent and Lehman's identical uncomprehending looks, Jordy whispered, "If you say you won't go, you'll be on Jake's shit list."

Vincent chuckled and said, "We'll go then. We wouldn't want that."

Lehman nodded his agreement with a smile.

"Then expect the Boxmobile to depart at approximately 5pm." Xain said simply.

"Boxmobile?" Vincent asked with a grin.

It took a moment for Xain to interpret the meaning of Vincent's one word question, but he finally responded, "Due to the increased size of our family, Dad exchanged his smaller vehicle for one more able to accommodate the number of people we need to transport at any given time. At the time of the purchase, Jake observed that the vehicle was a box with wheels. Given the 'Spartan' design and lack of any aesthetic attributes, I concur with his assessment."

"Got it. We'll be ready to go at 5:00." Vincent said as he tried to reign in his chuckles.

"We will be expecting you." Xain said simply, then turned to leave.

"Do you want to play with us?" Leo asked quickly, before Xain could get away.

Xain stopped and seemed to consider for a moment before saying, "I have not yet had the opportunity to experience this activity. I would not wish to hinder your enjoyment with my lack of knowledge."

"Me and Lehman never played before either. We're not really keeping score or anything. It's just for fun." Vincent said quickly.

Xain looked around the group and seemed to be considering it.

"A lack of knowledge can be an obstacle. Gaining experience can only be of benefit." Vincent said in a very precise Vulcan tone of voice.

"Logical." Xain said simply, then continued, "It is possible that my presence may be required at Clan Short headquarters to attend to other developing matters. If it would be acceptable, I will join you on the provision that you not think me rude if I must leave with little or no advance notice."

Before anyone else could answer, Jordy quickly said, "If Seth needed some help, I could get called away too. Actually, any of us could. No one will have a problem with it."

The rest of the boys in the group nodded their agreement with Jordy's words.

"Then I would be honored to be included in your recreational activity." Xain said calmly.

"Great. Hang on just a minute and I'll get both of us a ball. Lehman's doing well enough that he doesn't need me to show him what to do." Jordy said as he hurried away.

"If I may, I would like to verify my understanding of this activity." Xain said as he looked around the course. "The objective is to relocate the ball from a beginning point at one end of the course to an indentation in the surface at the opposing end, using a club specifically styled for the task, doing so in the least number of 'strokes'."

"Yup. That's it." Vincent said with a grin.

"I'm glad you're going to play with us Uncle Xain." Leo said, as he scooted himself under Xain's arm and gave him a firm hug.

Xain looked down at the younger boy, then an almost imperceptible smile ghosted across his expression as he said, "Thank you Leo. It is good to be wanted."

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"What's with this?" Vincent asked as they approached the seventh hole.

"Oh, I heard about this!" Leo said happily as he raced ahead to look at the elegantly styled pool of water.

"I think this is the rest area that some of the guys were talking about. When you get to the seventh hole, you can stop and relax in the pool." Connor said as he watched his brother with amusement.

"Oh, it's a bathing pool." Lehman said with a grin, then glanced at Vincent and asked, "Do you want to?"

"Sure." Vincent said happily, "Sounds like fun."

Lehman looked at Jordy with question.

"Try and stop me." Jordy said with a low chuckle in his voice.

"Come on Uncle Xain, let's get in the water." Leo said as he started pulling at his clothes.

"What about you Connor? Are you in?" Vincent asked curiously.

After a moment of indecision, Connor said, "Yeah. I guess."

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Nothing." Connor mumbled, "It's stupid."

"If it's something that's bothering you, then it's not stupid." Vincent said honestly.

Connor seemed to be frozen, lost in his thoughts.

"If you want to talk about it, I'm right here." Vincent said, more quietly. "I bet that whatever it is, I've probably felt the same thing... or worse."

"I just feel ugly. I don't want people to stare at me." Connor said in nearly a whisper.

Vincent smiled, then draped an arm around Connor's shoulder as he quietly said, "You never have to worry about anyone staring at you when you're sharing a bath with Lehman."

At Connor's curious look, Vincent continued, "Just trust me on this."

Chapter 47

"Go on." Vincent encouraged as he began to take off his Avalla robes.

Connor reluctantly began to disrobe as he looked around the gathering nervously.

"I'm ready. Come on, let's..." Leo began to say, then froze when he glanced at Lehman who was pulling down his loose fitting pants.

Connor looked curiously at his brother, then followed his gaze to Lehman.

"Holy..." Connor said as his eyes got wide.

"Wow Lehman. That's... that's..." Jordy sputtered as he stared.

Lehman looked at Vincent with aggravation and said, "I thought you said it wasn't too big."

"It's not." Vincent said simply as he finished getting undressed, then muttered under his breath, "If you're 6'2" and weigh 200 pounds."

Lehman noticed a look of apprehension in Jordy's eyes, then slowly began to change the shape of his body.

Within a few seconds, Lehman had altered his appearance from the mirror image of Vincent back into his native blue skinned form.

"You didn't have to make it go away." Jordy said as he blinked in astonishment, then he raised his gaze to meet Lehman's eyes.

With an impish grin, Lehman said, "It's not gone, it's pouched... kinda like it's hiding. It'll come out and play whenever we're ready."

Vincent turned slightly and whispered to Connor, "Do you feel like anyone is staring at you?"

Connor stared at Lehman for a moment longer, then absently shook his head.

"It's warm." Leo said, drawing everyone's attention.

Vincent turned toward the pool of water in time to see that Leo was already in the pool and Xain's bare butt was just beginning to lower into the water.

"Come on. This is gonna be fun." Vincent said as he encouraged Connor to walk with him.

* * * * *

Once all the boys were relaxed into the water, Vincent asked, "Is everyone having fun?"

"Yeah. This is nice." Leo said happily, then ducked down under the water.

"I'm glad someone thought about having a rest stop on the golf course. This is great." Connor said with a relaxed grin.

Lehman's contented smile was answer enough for Vincent.

Vincent noticed that Jordy was looking carefully at Lehman and seemed to be lost in thought.

"Hey Jordy." Vincent called casually.

Jordy blinked, then turned to face Vincent.

"If you've got a question for Lehman, you can go ahead and ask. He's not shy about not being human." Vincent said honestly.

Lehman giggled at the comment, then looked at Jordy and nodded.

Jordy seemed to be summoning his courage, then hesitantly asked, "If you can changed your body however you want, can you, um, you know, change your..."

"Penis?" Lehman asked cautiously, wanting to be sure that he was understanding Jordy's question.

"Yeah." Jordy said shyly, "That."

"I can make it as big or as little or as thin or as fat as I want it to be." Lehman said with a note of pride creeping into his voice.

"Wow." Connor said with a wide eyed expression.

Vincent giggled at the reaction, then said, "I bet there's a lot of people who wish that they could do that."

"Like you?" Xain asked with an inquisitive expression.

Vincent thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I'm okay just the way I am."

Xain nodded his acceptance of the words, then quietly added, "There was a time when I believed my size was insufficient. What I did not realize was that each stage of my maturity brings new opportunities to share with my T'hy'la."

"Yeah." Vincent said with a smile. "When T'Lani and I get to that, we'll figure out how to use what I got."

"So you and your wife haven't... um... done it?" Jordy asked cautiously.

"Nope. Not yet." Vincent said without concern. "Right now we're working on being lovers in our minds and in our hearts. Sooner or later it'll be the right time for us to start doing the physical stuff."

After a moment of contemplation, Vincent added, "Probably sooner."

"Oh wow. I just thought that since you two are married that you would automatically be... you know, doing it." Jordy said in amazement.

Vincent shrugged and said, "Yeah. I bet that most people who know us think that."

"When you grow up, is your dick going to get as big as Lehman's?" Leo asked abruptly.

Everyone in the pool looked at Leo with question.

"I mean, cause he looks like you, does that mean that's what your dick is going to be like?" Leo explained quickly.

"I never thought about it." Vincent said to Leo, then turned to look at Lehman with question.

"Could be." Lehman said speculatively.

"Could be?" Vincent parroted.

"I don't really remember exactly what I was doing when I made that change. I was in your form and advanced my development a few years, so it's very possible that that's how you'll be when you finish growing."

"Wait till T'Lani finds out about that." Vincent said with a grin.

"If you will excuse me, Jake requires my assistance." Xain said distantly, then began to get out of the pool of water.

"Is it something we can help with?" Vincent asked immediately.

"No. It is simply a family matter that requires my presence." Xain said as he began to dress.

"Be sure to call us if you need our help for anything." Jordy said seriously.

"Of course." Xain said simply, then his gaze became distant for a moment.

"Jake also wishes for me to relay the information that lunch will be served momentarily." Xain said before turning to leave.

"Oh good. I'm hungry." Vincent said as he started to get out of the water.

"He's always hungry." Lehman whispered to Jordy at his side.

"I heard that." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"Do you guys want to come back and finish our game after lunch?" Connor asked as he climbed out of the pool of water.

"Yeah. This is fun." Vincent said with a smile.

"As long as no one needs us to be doing anything else." Lehman said with a shrug.

"Hey Lehman." Jordy asked cautiously.

Lehman looked at Jordy with question.

"Can I see again? You know, like you were before?" Jordy asked nervously.

Lehman smiled and changed from his blue skinned form, back into the mirror image of Vincent.

After a moment of staring, Jordy cautiously said, "I think I could..."

Vincent couldn't contain his giggles at the statement.

Lehman flashed a reproachful look at Vincent, then smiled at Jordy and said, "I think it would be fun to try."

Jordy began to blush and shyly nodded that he agreed.

A moment of silence fell over the group until it was broken by Vincent saying, "Food."

Lehman was the first to chuckle, soon followed by all the others.

* * * * *

Lunch was followed by the rest of the miniature golf course.

Vincent, Lehman, Jordy, Connor and Leo finally returned to the house, all in good cheer.

As soon as they were inside, a voice called out, "Hey Vincent!"

The group stopped as one and turned to see Jake approaching.

"I'm glad I caught you." Jake said with a smile.

"What's up?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Xain told you that you and Lehman are invited to dinner tonight, right?" Jake asked quickly.

"Yeah." Vincent confirmed.

"I just wanted to be sure to let you know that me and Xain will be leaving early with my dad. You two are welcome to come with us, or you can go with Billy later. Lawrence will probably be going then." Jake said seriously.

"Oh. Okay. Thanks for letting me know." Vincent said, then thought for a moment. "I guess we'll plan on going with Lawrence and Billy."

"I'll let them know when I see them. I just didn't want you to think that we'd forgotten about you if you were ready to go and found out that me and Xain were already gone." Jake said with a timid smile.

"I don't think I would have been too upset, but thanks for thinking about it." Vincent said with a grin. "You guys make me feel like I'm special."

"You are." Jake said simply, then started walking away.

"I guess he told you." Lehman said with a chuckle.

"I guess so."

* * * * *

As the group of boys walked further into the house, they saw a lone figure standing in the hallway.

"What's up Koji?" Vincent asked curiously as he approached.

"Aunt Teri did it! She fixed it for us!" Koji said happily.

"Really? What did she do?" Vincent asked with a smile at Koji's happiness.

"She talked to Chok's dad and fixed it so that Chok can stay here with us in Orlando." Koji said happily.

"Oh? Good. How does Chok feel about it?" Vincent asked curiously.

"He's really happy." Koji said joyfully. "He hated living in Germany because he didn't have anything to do and didn't know anyone."

"Well, I'm glad that he's happy. Where is he?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"Him and his dad are in the study talking to his mom in Germany. They're getting everything set up so Chok can stay here." Koji said happily.

"Where is he going to stay?" Vincent asked curiously.

"With me and my dad." Koji said with a big happy smile.

"That's good. But is Chok going to be okay being here without his family?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Aunt Teri said that she'll make sure that Chok can go home and visit whenever he wants to. Besides, Chok's father has a job that he can do from anywhere, so he can come here and stay for as long as he wants and spend time with Chok." Koji said happily.

"It sounds like Aunt Teri really worked everything out." Lehman said in an impressed voice.

"I thought she would be the one who could fix it." Vincent said frankly.

"I think she likes my dad." Koji said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Really?" Vincent asked with surprise.

Koji nodded and said, "I don't think they've done anything, but when they're together they have that look... you know the one."

"The one you have when you look at Chok?" Vincent asked with a grin.

Koji blushed and looked away.

"Well, I'm glad that things worked out the way they did. Just remember to call me and let me know if there's ever anything you guys need." Vincent said, trying to change the subject so Koji wouldn't feel so embarrassed.

"Yeah. I will." Koji said quietly, then turned to look at Vincent speculatively.

"When we shared a hospital room, I never ever would have thought that we'd become friends." Koji said frankly.

"Sorry. I wasn't in a really friendly mood that day." Vincent said shyly.

"I'm just glad that we're friends now. If it wasn't for you, Chok and I would be living in different countries." Koji said honestly.

Vincent gave into the urge and pulled Koji into a quick hug to express his honest happiness.

"I guess I'd better go and see if they're done having their family talking time." Koji said reluctantly.

"Yeah. We'll see you later." Vincent said as he released Koji from the hug.

Koji nodded, then began to walk away.

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"I guess the stuff I heard about you is true." Jordy said frankly as the boys casually walked down the hall.

"What did you hear?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Only that you seem to get things done." Jordy said honestly.

"I get things done?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Yeah. When you see something needs to be fixed, you fix it." Jordy said, then gestured for the group to walk with him into the game room.

Vincent found a good open spot on the floor that would accommodate all of them, then took a seat and rested back against one of the cushions before saying, "I guess I do that whenever I can. But doesn't everyone?"

Jordy chuckled and said, "No Vincent. Everyone doesn't do that. Most people that I knew before I came here were just as happy to let things go wrong. Then they'd bitch and whine that no one else would fix it."

"It isn't that way on the Yorktown." Lehman said frankly.

All attention turned toward Lehman at the words.

"I haven't been around Humans too much, but while I've been on the Yorktown, everyone has been willing to work to make sure that everything is working the way it should." Lehman explained.

"That would make sense. On a starship, you'd kind of have to do that. But here on Earth, most of the people I know are just as happy to ignore it when something is wrong. They seem to think that someone will fix it and never take the responsibility themselves." Jordy said distantly.

"I think that maybe that's why the Clan is special. They don't look the other way when something is wrong." Connor said speculatively.

"*We*, Connor. You and Leo are part of the Clan now too." Jordy said frankly.

Connor shyly smiled and said, "We."

* * * * *

Vincent noticed that Lehman and Jordy were stealing glances at each other, but not really talking.

"If you guys wouldn't mind too much, I'm going to try to find Cory so we can have a talk." Vincent said as he looked around the group.

"Do you need me to go with you?" Lehman asked, not revealing his own preference of answer in his question.

"No. I just remembered that he said he wanted to talk to me about some stuff later." Vincent said, then at Lehman's curious look he continued, "It's later."

Lehman smiled and said, "Yeah. I guess it is."

"I'll be back in a few minutes." Vincent said as he stood, then surreptitiously raised an eyebrow in Connor's direction.

After a moment to interpret the unusual expression, Connor realized what Vincent was doing and said, "Yeah. Me and Leo need to go talk to Aunt Helen about something. We'll be right back too."

"What do we need to talk to Aunt Helen about?" Leo asked curiously, refusing to move until he had a satisfactory answer.

"You need to talk to her about giving me and Jordy a few minutes alone together to talk." Lehman said with a smirk at Vincent.

Before Vincent could raise a protest, Lehman continued, "Remember. I know how you think."

"Busted." Jordy said with a grin.

"Alright." Vincent said shyly. "You caught me. But I really do need to talk to Cory."

"You guys enjoy your talk. Come on Leo." Connor said as he stood.

"Do we still need to talk to Aunt Helen?" Leo asked with confusion.

"Yeah. Let's see if she has any cookies laying around, cluttering up the place that she needs us to deal with." Connor said with a grin.

"We'll see you guys in a few minutes!" Leo said as he hopped up and ran to the door.

Vincent smiled at the move, then looked at Lehman and raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

"Yeah. We're fine." Lehman said, answering the unasked question.

"Good. I'll be back in just a few minutes." Vincent said, then started toward the door.

* * * * *

"That was nice of them." Jordy said quietly into the awkward silence that followed.

"Yeah." Lehman said, at a loss of what else to say.

"I like you." Jordy said as his gaze met Lehman's.

"I like you too." Lehman said shyly.

"Good. That's the one thing I wanted to be sure that I remembered to say to you today." Jordy said quietly.

"Yeah." Lehman said as he looked away. "Me too."

"Trach Manja Lehman, please forgive my interruption, but you have an incoming transmission from the Federation starship Yorktown." Ship's voice said from Lehman's bracelet.

Lehman looked at Jordy with apology, then raised his wrist to say, "That's fine Ship. Go ahead and put it through."

"I can leave you alone." Jordy whispered cautiously.

"I don't mind if you stay. I'm pretty sure I know who it is." Lehman said, then heard as the call began.

"Lehman? Are you there?"

Lehman smiled as he recognized the voice.

"Yes Dad." Lehman said happily.

"I just wanted to be sure that you and Vincent weren't having any problems." Benny said honestly.

"We're fine. I made a new friend and he's here with me now. Say 'hi' to Jordy." Lehman said with a grin.

"Hi Jordy. I'm Benny, it's nice to meet you." Benny said happily.

"It's nice to meet you too." Jordy said automatically.

"How is JonJon? Is he eating enough? Is he getting enough rest?" Lehman asked with concern.

"He's fine. Cyril and Roger have been making sure that him and Jenn aren't overdoing it." Benny said gently.

"How about Fizgig? Is he alright?" Lehman asked hopefully.

"He's fine, but I think he's missing you. Come on Fizgig, say 'hi' to Lehman." Benny said in a playful voice.

Lehman and Jordy both heard a little 'yip' that made them chuckle.

"Hi Fizgig. Don't worry, I'll be home soon." Lehman said warmly.

"I got to go down to the colony with Daddy Joe yesterday. If everything keeps going right, I may be able to get our stuff moved in before you get back." Benny said happily.

"I'm sorry that I'm not going to be there to help you." Lehman said frankly.

"You've got one crate of stuff and it's already packed. I think I can handle it." Benny said in a teasing voice.

"Oh, yeah." Lehman said with a chuckle.

"Well, that's all I called for. I just wanted to be sure that you were doing okay." Benny said simply.

"Thanks Dad. Don't be surprised if I call you in the next day or two for the same reason." Lehman said softly.

"I'll be looking forward to it. Let Vincent know that I called and asked about him." Benny said happily, then in a quieter voice said, "I love you."

"I will. I love you too." Lehman said, then heard the connection go silent.

* * * * *

Vincent wasn't exactly sure where to find Cory, but his method of peeking in doorways had been serving him well all day.

As he walked around the corner to peek into the next room, he saw that Cory and Levi were both looking at him as if they were waiting on him to arrive.

Cory waved for Vincent to join them, and gave him a hug as soon as he was within reach.

Before anyone could say anything, Levi spoke up in an excited tone. "Uncle Cory says I can get a watch! I'm gonna do a time-freeze so that you and Uncle Cory can talk all you want, Uncle Vincent; if you need me just call and I'll hear you!"

Before Vincent or Cory could say anything else, Levi vanished.

"Umm..." Vincent mumbled as he sat down.

Cory sat back and shook his head. "I still can't get used to the Mikyvis playing games with time."

"Time? I've had some kinda weird experiences messing around with time." Vincent said cautiously.

Cory grinned. "Anything like bringing people back from somewhere around 800 AD or rescuing sabre-toothed tiger cubs?"

"No, I haven't gone to the past, but I've been fifty years into the future... and I've been to a couple other dimensions and met two other versions of myself." Vincent said quietly, then amended, "I mean three. I met another one on the way here."

Cory nodded. "You and Levi should compare notes; he seems to be quickly becoming an expert at that stuff. Not bad for someone less than two days old."

"I don't think I want to become an expert at it. Time travel really makes me nervous. One little goof and you've completely changed the future. It's a lot of responsibility." Vincent said frankly.

"I agree," Cory replied. "I heard there is someone watching the Clan guys that can do that kinda stuff though. He's making sure that nothing that isn't supposed to happen happens."

Vincent thought about the words for a moment, then reluctantly asked, "If he's watching the Clan guys, where does that leave me?"

Cory looked Vincent straight in the eyes as he replied seriously. "It leaves you being watched by a being older than any of us can understand. You're Clan, Vincent. You have been since the day the Clan adopted you. You are no different than any of the other guys out there; with one exception. You are an example to all of them what someone can accomplish who believes in himself. You are not less than anyone here; in fact you have proven that you are an example to all of us."

"Dylan said that too, that I was an example." Vincent said quietly, then looked at Cory with worry in his eyes and continued, "I'm not good enough to be an example for anyone. I've been bad to so many people. I was mean and angry at everyone for all my life. All I've done since then is listen to what you told me and tried to be better than I used to be."

Cory nodded. "And that is what makes you such a good example, bro. You have taken what you learned and become a better person from it. Very few people ever actually manage to do that. You're exceptional because you not only did it, but you have taken the advice a step further and made a name

for yourself throughout the galaxy that not only overrides what you've done before, but it blows it out of the water."

"To tell you the truth, whenever I got stuck and didn't know what I was supposed to do, I just tried to imagine what you or Sean would do if you were there instead of me. So if people are thinking good things about me, they're really thinking them about you too."

Cory blushed. "Thanks, but I'll tell you the same thing Mom told Tommy and Ty. Don't try to pass off credit for your achievements. You could not have done it if the spark was not inside you to do good yourself."

"If you say so, Dad. I've learned to listen to what you say," Vincent said with a grin, then seemed to remember something and his expression became more serious. "There's some stuff that I should probably tell you about, but I don't know what you're going to think about it."

Cory smiled. "I woke up from the anesthetic after almost joining Mikey in the afterlife to find out that Kyle has mutated into a new species. You're gonna have to work to beat that surprise."

"I guess next to that, being a Trach Manja isn't that big of a deal," Vincent said with a weak smile.

"It matters what being a Trach Manja means," Cory replied. "You kinda need to explain it, I am blond you know!"

"I don't really know how to speak blond, but I'll try to keep it really simple." Vincent said with a grin, then continued, "I guess the easiest way to explain it is like if everything that ever happened, and is happening, and is about to happen is all written in a great big book. I can make changes to what is happening and change what will happen."

Cory tilted his head. "Okay, I think you just matched Kyle. You don't reproduce by thinking about it, do you?" Cory grinned, then added, "Seriously, I think it sounds like something that fits you perfectly. You've got a big heart that you've learned to use quite well; so you make the perfect person to handle it. The stuff that happened in your past gives you a reference as to what bad choices can cause; so you have the experience to know what seems right and wrong."

"As far as the reproducing thing... T'Lani and I are kind of planning to do it the old fashioned way." Vincent said with a grin, then continued, "As far as the rest... if it was just me, I'd probably say all kinds of stuff about how I'm not good enough. But after talking to the other Trach Manjai, I found out that we all feel that way about ourselves. We kind of figured out that all of

us are good enough because we were chosen. So, um... what was the question?"

Cory giggled. "I think you just answered it yourself, son. There's a lot of stuff that woulda seemed weird a year ago that has become common in the last month or so. What you've been chosen for is not a surprise; but I'm really proud that you've earned the right to call yourself a Trach Manja."

Movement behind Vincent made him turn around. This was a null point in time, so Levi had said, so why was there a ten year old boy with light red hair and fair skin grinning at them both.

"Ehhhh... Wazzup, Doc!" Cory giggled in his best Bugs Bunny imitation.

Vincent stared for a moment, then broke into giggles at Cory's joke.

Cory, through his giggles, started to introduce Vincent to the new arrival. "Doctor, this is..."

"No need, Cory. We've met," the boy said with a smile.

"We have?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Have met or will meet, Galli?" Cory giggled at the same time.

The little red headed boy scowled at Cory before breaking into giggles of his own. "We have met, as far as I'm concerned, Vincent: this is the second time we've talked. For you, however, this is our first meeting. Trust me, you get to have fun when it's my first meeting with you!"

"More time travel." Vincent said darkly.

"He's just trying for honorary blond status," Cory joked as he got his giggles under control.

"Yes, Vincent," the boy nodded seriously, after winking at Cory, "Time travel. However, it is not something you need to worry about when I am involved, nor when my Friend is involved. You asked if the One watching the Clan was watching you? Who do you think helped you the last time, Vincent?"

"Dr. Xon?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"You shoulda said Elmer Fudd." Cory stage-whispered.

Vincent looked at Cory with confusion at the statement, knowing that Cory was joking, but not understanding why it was supposed to be funny.

The red headed boy dummy slapped Cory before seating himself comfortably on the Patriarch's lap. "Ignore him, Vincent. And for that 'Galli' bit, you can repay it by cuddling me, Cory!"

He looked back at Vincent while Cory laughed and did as he was told. "Yes, Dr Xon did help you, but who else was involved in that help, Vincent?"

Vincent could tell that Cory was wanting to answer, but the red headed boy had his hand held firmly over Cory's mouth. "Turn on your brain before speaking, Cory," the boy giggled.

"The only other person who knew about it was Admiral Morrow," Vincent said hesitantly, pretty sure that it wasn't the answer that he was supposed to give.

"Okay," the ten year old giggled, "this could go on forever... and if that isn't a clue, I don't know what is!"

"Forever..." Vincent said to himself, then cautiously asked, "The Guardian of Forever?"

Cory licked at the hand covering his mouth until it was removed. The red headed boy casually took his hand away, then wiped it off on Cory's pants as Cory said, "Way to go, Son; you're hanging with some pretty high powers if you're working with the Guardian that close!"

"Ewwww," the red headed boy muttered with a giggle. "Blond germs!"

//That is correct, Master of Fate, Lord of the Five. I was the one who moved Xon to help you// came a voice that Vincent recognized.

"Vae'Runam, you promised!" the red head giggled.

//You know that I like teasing you, Prince of Time//

Although Vincent recognized the voice, he looked around anyway to see where it was coming from.

"You won't see Him, Vincent," the new boy said with a smile, "not unless He wishes it. That was just His way of freaking you out!"

Just then Levi appeared. "Hey G! Y'all are holding a party in my time freeze without me?" He looked around the group then grinned. "Kewl; you took Uncle Cory's lap; that means I get to be the first Mikyvis to cuddle with Uncle Vincent." With that, he moved over and took up residence on Vincent's lap.

Vincent sat stiffly for a moment, but when he saw the loving expression on Levi's face, he engulfed the young Mikyvis in a warm hug.

The red head smiled at Vincent, but could still see the confusion in his face. "I'll take pity on you, Kiddo," he said, drawing Vincent's attention back to him. "My true name is Gallifrey, but if you 'must' use it, use Galli. I'm known to most out there as 'John Smith', but you'd likely recognize my other name. I'm the Doctor, and I'm a Time Lord."

"Nice to meet you... or have met you... or going to meet you." Vincent said as he held Levi close to his chest.

"Yeah," the Doctor giggled, "it's confusing. But like I said, I'm a Time Lord, and I know tricks that not even the cute kid in your lap knows yet. Don't worry about the Time issue, okay? There is a good reason I came here, though. You and Levi are two of the three people from the Clan whom I met first. The other hasn't arrived yet, but is coming in shortly. You need to be aware that something is about to happen that has not happened before, just so that you are not caught flat footed."

"Oh great!" Vincent said with frustration. "I don't know what already happened and there's about to be more?"

"And we ain't got flat feet, silly!" Levi giggled.

"Leev, can you swap places with me for a while, dude? I need to talk with Vincent," the Doctor asked seriously.

Levi reached up and gave Vincent a good squeeze. "I'll be back as soon as he's done, Uncle Vince; I like your cuddles, you do them good!" With a grin on his face, Levi suddenly popped off of Vincent's lap and the doctor appeared in Vincent's place with the Trach Manja on his lap instead; Levi appearing on Cory's lap in the same instant.

Vincent looked around with confusion at what had just happened. Then he looked at the ginger haired boy and hesitantly asked, "Am I too heavy?"

"No," the Doctor giggled. "You're fine. I'm not exactly human, kiddo, and far older than I look, so I'm used to this!"

"Yeah, that's Jay's spot usually!" Levi giggled. "You gotta be special to borrow it; that makes you really special, Uncle Vince."

"Now, Vincent," the Doctor said, "I'm going to explain a few things to you before Cory updates you with what's been happening here."

"Okay," Vincent responded slowly.

"Don't worry that I have already 'met' you in your future. You don't need to know about what happens exactly, for what you will do will flow naturally from who and what you are. You just need to be aware that when you, Levi

and the other boy leave this Universe for a time you will meet me and I will not recognize you. Such an event for you would probably work against what should happen. Now that you do know, you are mentally prepared for it. When you leave this Universe, you shall meet me. That is all you need to take with you, Lord of the Five. Don't worry about the rest."

The Doctor then drew Vincent's face in closer and kissed his forehead, "I give you the Blessing of the Time Lords, child. You shall do wonderful things, and do them well. Trust in yourself, and in your family."

Vincent thought about the words for a moment, then quietly said, "Okay, I think I've got that. As long as I know it won't mess up time or cause the universe to explode or something like that when we meet again, I'll be okay with it."

//It shall not. In fact, you and the rest of the Five are some of the major defenses in place to prevent Time and Space from failing, Master of Fate// the Guardian added.

"That's good. I've just learned about paradoxes and how much trouble they can cause. I try to be really careful so stuff like that won't happen," Vincent said with a smile.

"Tell me about it!" Levi exclaimed. "They give me headaches!"

"Okay, now I think I can leave the rest to Cory and Levi. I need to be getting ready for something else, now," the Doctor said as he shifted out from under Vincent.

He moved away slightly, waved at the remaining three, and Folded out of sight.

Levi giggled. "More cuddles later, Uncle Cory; Uncle Vince is on the top of my list!" With that, he retook his place on Vincent's lap.

"It's good to have you back," Vincent said as he resumed his cuddle.

Levi purred as Cory smiled. "I told you things have been weird!"

"This kind of weird I don't mind a bit." Vincent said peacefully.

Cory smiled again, "How much do you want to know about what happened, son? We have all the time we need here, but I don't know how much detail you want."

"I'd just like to know basically what happened. The less details you give me the better because my Trach Manja thingie works best when things are kinda random." Vincent said disjointedly.

"Good thing I'm blond: I followed that!" Cory giggled. "Okay, basics it is."

"We have a number of new people and even races in the Clan," Cory started, "so I'll just give you the outline for each. There are the Founders and they are a sub-species of Humanity that was created well over seventy thousand years ago... yes, humans have been around that long," Cory grinned as Vincent's mouth dropped open. "Founders have minor telepathy and major precognitive abilities. Then there are Vifer, another human sub-species that was made genetically, and they age one year for every four and a half thousand years or so; plus they have accelerated healing. There are vampires..."

"Wait, vampires?!" Vincent interrupted incredulously.

"Uh huh," Cory nodded seriously. "Their true name is Moroi, and they were the result of a failed attempt by the Founders over sixty five thousand years back to prevent a terrorist type group from destroying the world. They drink blood, sleep in the day and burn in sunlight. Brandar, one of the Clan, is Moroi."

"Wow," muttered Vincent.

Levi giggled as Cory continued, "There are obviously telepaths, telekinetics and empaths, and we learnt that they, or most of them anyway, are also sub-species descended from about sixty odd thousand years ago. There is a new group now, though, who seem to be very different. They call themselves N-Gen's and Telez' superior, Jason, is the first of them. Then there is Ark; and she is a... well, a super AI that was created by the Founders 65 thousand years ago to learn, save and preserve all the information and knowledge of the Earth."

Vincent trembled, "Any others??"

"Yes, the Mikyvis," Levi giggled, "And the Ferox, and now the Time Lords."

"You want to explain that, Levi?" Cory asked.

"Yeah, Uncle Cory, I'll explain," Levi nodded before kissing Vincent's cheek. "My Dad, Kyle, was found to be a Founder, and then on Saturday he started to change. He became an Anti-Energy being, and he changed Pop, Tyler, to be the same. Yesterday morning they woke up to find they had created me! And then this morning, they had two more, my brothers Dylan and Bryce! We can travel in time and in all universes and dimensions and time lines, and we love hugs!"

"And the Ferox?" Vincent whispered.

"They," Cory said as he took over, "were created by the Founders more than Sixty Five Thousand years ago as they were trying to push the limits on what their genetics could be. They are also an energy race, but a bit different from the Mikyvis. They can't time travel the same, and they are stuck in this Universe only."

"Okay," Vincent managed. "And the Time Lords are like that TV show I heard of?"

"Sorta," Levi giggled. "The Doc told us that the show had some things right, but a lot wrong. Let's just say they are very powerful and masters of Time. The Vulcans met them long, long ago, and Grandma Amanda and her brother learnt of them, and told a few friends. That's how the TV shows started."

"Okay..." Vincent said as he closed his eyes for a second.

"Now for the easy stuff: the new members and Divisions in the Clan," Cory said gently as he moved over to pull Vincent into his side. He ended up with both boys on his lap. "We have an AI Division in South Carolina, and most are androids, and their Head of Division is Danny. We have a Division in Australia and my cousin Skylan is the Head of that Division. There's a few other groups scattered about that will become new Divisions, and then there's the newest two: Support and Recovery in Camp Little Eagle, and then the Unit, who saved our asses on Saturday. The Unit is a military group with a lot of their guys having been genetically changed to be stronger and faster. Those Cat boys are a part of the Unit, and were one of the weirder experiments."

"Who did the experiments?" Vincent asked with some small heat in his voice.

"A black ops group within the US government, or at least that was their cover story. They are illegal and will be dealt with, I believe, by the Unit themselves who escaped from it all."

"Good," Vincent stated bluntly.

"The last thing is that we have appointed a Director of Operations for North America; Samuel Reynolds," Cory continued. "He may set up a consolidated Division, but then again, maybe not; that's up to him. He's in charge of Admin and Co-Ordination between all the Divisions and Clan Members in the North America's. That's about it, I think. You'd need to go mingle to learn who each are, and that's always best," Cory said, hugging Vincent tighter.

"You forgot the Dragon, Uncle Cory!" Levi giggled.

"Dragon?? No way: Dragons?!" Vincent half yelled.

"No, son," Cory laughed, "the Dragon Division. They are a Vulcan Special and Covert Ops group, and recently have become the newest Clan in the Family of Sarek. Clan Evans. Telez and Koth are two of the seven leaders, and their elder brother, Jason, is the Patriarch."

"Phew!" Vincent sighed out, "Vampires, okay. Dragons, too far!"

"The Klingons are Cling-Ons!" Levi giggled. "Kinda like me with my favorite uncles!"

The three talked about a few other general things, then prepared to return to normal time.

Levi leaned up and kissed Vincent's cheek. "You give great cuddles, Uncle Vince! We're goin back to normal time now; 'member that only about a minute has passed for everyone else!"

Cory added, "And if you need to speak openly about the Doc, he's known as John to most of the guys out there. They don't know he's a Time Lord."

"Okay," Vincent smiled as he and Levi hopped down from Cory's lap.

"Vince?" Lawrence said with surprise.

"Yeah?" Vincent responded automatically.

"I didn't see you there." Lawrence said with a chuckle, then continued, "I need to talk to you and your friend Lehman, for just a minute."

Vincent noticed that Deacon was standing a foot or two away and seemed a bit nervous about something.

"Okay. Sure." Vincent said, then turned and gave Cory a little wave before following Lawrence out of the room.

* * * * *

"What's up?" Vincent asked as he and Lawrence walked down the hall with Deacon following a few steps behind.

"Do you remember when I talked to you before about Mikey needing us to stay here?" Lawrence asked seriously.

"Yeah." Vincent said, then pointed, "Lehman should be in here."

"Hey Jordy, can we borrow Lehman for a few minutes?" Deacon asked as he poked his head in the door.

"Sure. As long as you promise to give him back." Jordy said shyly.

"Yeah. We'll be back in a few." Deacon said, then waited for Lehman to come out into the hall to join them.

* * * * *

"Let's go." Lawrence said as he started walking the other way down the hall, back toward the Rec Room.

"Okay guys. Something is about to happen and Mikey thinks that it would be good to have you two handy in case things don't work out exactly the way they're supposed to." Lawrence said seriously.

"What do we need to do?" Lehman asked with a concerned glance at Vincent.

"If everything goes right, nothing." Deacon said firmly.

Lawrence nodded and said, "Just hang back with us and watch."

"I guess we can do that." Lehman said slowly.

"It may be more difficult than you think." Deacon said in a pained voice.

"Why?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Because what you're about to see is someone who needs help. Your first instinct will be to try to help him. Mikey needs for you to hang back and just watch." Deacon said honestly.

"If we're not allowed to do anything, then why are we supposed to be there?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Because if things go wrong, there may be something that the two of you can do to set things right again." Lawrence said as he stopped just outside the door.

"Okay. I've got that." Vincent said, then looked at Lehman with question.

Lehman nodded that he was in agreement.

"Remember, just hang back with us and if there's anything at all that you can do, we'll let you know." Deacon said before leading the way into the room.

* * * * *

As Lawrence and Deacon guided Vincent and Lehman to stand with them against the wall just inside the door, a misty vortex started to form in the wall across the room from them.

The portal in the wall of the Rec Room grew larger and larger, and Cory ran forward to get between it and his family, "Set Condition Red, Security to the Rec Room. Mom, get the kids out of here, NOW!"

Sean shook his head as they heard JJ call for phasers to be set to stun behind them.

As the mists parted before them all, Cory saw his eldest brother walking towards them, and carrying a covered armful of... something. It was hard to tell what it was, but Cory was sure that he saw a small foot disappear under the golden wings that Mikey had wrapped around his front. "Hold! Stand down Condition Red!" he shouted with relief.

Jamie and Jacob moved to the front of the group as Teri and Dan led the other little kids back in. They watched as Cory motioned for the Security teams to leave, then held in giggles as Cory told Mikey off for scaring them all.

"Sorry, guys, there was no real graceful way for me to get here, and I needed to bring this little one straight inside." Mikey said as he lowered his wing enough so that a small child's head was seen clearly by the others. A sob of fear burst from the boy.

Vincent and Lehman watched helplessly as Mikey murmured comfort to the child in his arms.

"Who's this, bro?" Sean asked Mikey, looking at the child his brother carried.

"This is Joel," Mikey shifted his head slightly and kissed the frightened boy on the top of his head, "Joel? It's fine, kiddo, you can look up now."

The kid did so, and they saw his face clearly for the first time. Sean gasped when he saw the bar-code tattooed onto Joel's brow, and he wasn't the only one.

Without thinking, Vincent started to take a step toward the boy, to help him, when he felt a pair of arms holding him back.

"Just watch." Lawrence whispered into his brother's ear.

"It's okay, Joel, don't worry," Mikey soothed softly as Joel cringed back from the others and tried to hide more in the angel's arms. Mikey faced Cory, "I'll explain everything later, Tigger; but Joel is going to need a few things right

now. A shower, some clothes and a hot drink; in that order. Do you think the Clan can manage that?" A few of the boys giggled quietly.

"Sure thing, Mikey," Cory replied with a sad smile, "I think we can just manage that."

"Babe, Ty? Can y'all hook Joel up with a shower and clothes, please?" Cory asked, winking at Kyle.

Cory then turned back to Mikey and said, "Okay, Mikey, they'll take him from here. I'll talk with you and Mom while we wait for them."

Mikey nodded then said to Joel, "These guys will look after you now, little one. I'm staying right here as I need to explain a few things to my brother and mother."

Seeming to be forcing himself to speak, Joel stuttered quietly, "Is...is this my n...new f...family?"

Mikey replied gently, "Yes. Whatever happens, this is your family now."

Joel started to fight and struggle to get down, and panic was clearly seen building in his face. "Please... p...please, Mikey," he started to sob. "L...let me d...down! I'll be b...beat if I d...don't!"

Mikey did so quickly, then everyone saw that Joel's split lip was just the least of the poor boy's worries: he was skin and bone and his scars and bruises showed clearly through the blood and dirt covering him. His body seemed a total, mutilated mess, and every rib could be counted easily. He moved his tortured, naked form slowly towards Teri and Dan, the closest adults, and was trembling in sheer terror with every step.

Cory watched Joel with tears in his eyes.

Joel trembled, "Master. Please f...forgive me f...or...;"

Neither Vincent or Lehman noticed that they were both fighting the arms that were wrapped around them, holding them back.

Suddenly, both of them stopped fighting and turned their attention toward Cory. A burst of rage had just radiated out from him that they could both clearly feel.

Cory and Sean both rushed forward; Cory softly silencing Joel as Sean turned him to face them.

"Look at me, Joel." Cory whispered softly, his face still wet with tears. "Why did you call Dan 'master'?"

Joel answered quickly, yet with puzzlement, "I am a s...slave. Y...you are m...my f...family. I...I must serve y...you."

Cory froze for a second, then turned to look at Mikey, the unspoken questions burning in his eyes.

Mikey nodded sadly, "He was a slave, bro. I should have seen this reaction coming. I'm sorry."

Vincent felt shock at the words, then absently reached up to wipe away the tear that was falling down his cheek.

Cory turned back to Joel, and spoke with conviction, an edge of command seeping into his voice. "We are not your masters. You do not serve us. You never need to serve us, nor anyone else, ever again! You are free, Joel."

Sean nodded as he squeezed Joel's shoulder. He was obviously speechless.

As Joel looked between all of them in disbelief, Sean and Cory did their best to silently communicate that it was indeed true. Joel then turned to Mikey in question.

Mikey moved in close and spoke quietly into Joel's ear, "These boys are telling you the truth, Joel. You can trust them, really you can; you are free." Mikey kissed Joel's head just to confirm the truth of his words.

Just then a huge sob burst forth from Joel, and Cory instinctively pulled the boy into his arms in a protective embrace.

Vincent trembled as he felt a shiver run up his spine, and watched curiously as everyone else seemed to shiver as well.

Mikey and Kyle exchanged a puzzled look, then Mikey nodded his head at Joel, just as he wrapped his tiny legs around Cory's waist and started bawling.

Once Joel had settled down, Cory stood with Joel perched on his left hip. After glancing at the dirt and blood that had transferred from Joel to him, Cory broke the silence covering the room as he quietly announced, "I think I'll shower with you guys too."

Cory then turned to face Mikey, "Will you wait with Mom, bro?"

"Sure thing, Cor," Mikey replied, himself still recovering from what had happened.

Turning and motioning with his eyes, Cory led Tyler and Sean into the bathroom just off from the Rec Room. A murmuring started as soon as they

had left as the boys began to whisper among each other, as well as to start throwing questions at Mikey.

"Is everything going to be okay now?" Lehman asked in a small voice.

"I... I don't know." Lawrence responded distantly.

"I think something happened that Mikey didn't expect, but he's not telling us anything." Deacon said as he adjusted his hold on Lehman to be more of a hug than a restraint.

"But what about Joel? Is everything alright with him?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I think so... at least, so far." Lawrence said slowly.

"He took his first step and just started to accept his new family. But he still has a lot more steps to take." Deacon said thoughtfully.

"So what do we need to do now?" Vincent asked cautiously as he noticed that the other people in the room had started talking amongst themselves.

"Nothing for a while. Mikey will let us know if there's anything for us to do, but I think this was the part that he was most worried about." Lawrence said as he finally released Vincent from the hug that had been holding him back.

"I'm going to get back to Jordy then. I don't want him to be worried since there was an alert." Lehman said, then looked at Vincent to see if he agreed.

"Good plan." Vincent said with a smile, then added, "I think I'm going to wander around and see if there's anyone I know that I haven't talked to yet."

"You don't have to stay away." Lehman said honestly, "I think Jordy and I said everything that we need to for right now."

"Give me a few minutes, okay? A whole lot of stuff has happened today and this thing with Joel kind of just put it over the top. I need a few minutes to deal." Vincent said honestly.

"Got it." Lehman said with an understanding smile, then continued, "But I'm here if you need to talk about anything."

"Thanks, but this isn't anything like that." Vincent said quietly. "I just need a few minutes to get things sorted out in my head."

"You know where to find me." Lehman said with a grin.

"Yeah. I'll be in there with you before you know it." Vincent said as he started walking toward the door.

"Do you need some company?" Lawrence asked hopefully.

"Not this time. But ask me again later and maybe I will." Vincent said, then continued out the door.

* * * * *

Vincent walked outside without direction or purpose as the events of the day swarmed through his mind in a chaotic jumble.

Try as he might, he wasn't able to grab hold of a single thread of thought.

After a long, slow cleansing breath, Vincent looked around to see that no one else was around.

Slowly and deliberately, Vincent moved into the first pose of his fighting workout routine.

An automatic sense of calmness began to wash over him as he moved gracefully into the next stance.

Soon Vincent was lost in the familiar rhythm of his workout routine as his mind began to sort through the various happenings of the day.

Suddenly Vincent was thrown off balance as a pair of arms wrapped around him from behind

"Random Hug!" A boy called out cheerfully, then proceeded to try and hug the stuffing out of Vincent.

"What?!" Vincent began to ask, but before the word made it completely out of his mouth, the boy was gone.

"Ship? Would you please teleport me aboard?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yes Trach Manja Vincent." Ship answered immediately.

Vincent assumed an upright posture as the teleportal beam washed over him.

* * * * *

"Trach Manja Vincent, are things going well?" Treep asked with concern as Vincent appeared on the bridge.

"Yeah. I think everything's alright. I just needed a little time away. Is anyone using the lower cargo bay right now?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I don't believe so." Treep responded, then directed his voice upward as he asked, "Ship, are any members of the crew working in the lower hold?"

"No. That area of the ship is not currently occupied." Ship responded professionally.

"Would you mind if I go down there for a while? I really need some time to think and be alone." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Please, take all the time you need Trach Manja Vincent. And if you need any other kind of help, please let us know." Treep said with concern.

"Thanks Treep. I'll let you know if I think of anything." Vincent said as he walked toward the door.

Treep watched with concern as Vincent left the bridge.

* * * * *

Vincent shrugged out of his robe as he walked into the cavernous cargo bay and walked to the center of the room.

Rather than start back into his routine, he began to go through the warm up exercises.

Slowly and methodically, Vincent went through the entire warm-up process without thought.

When he was finally ready, he assumed the first stance of his morning work-out routine and held it for a moment before he began.

This time, he focused on his precision, making sure that he was hitting each stance exactly the way he was supposed to.

By focusing his thought on making every move as close to perfection as possible, he didn't achieve his usual tranquil state, but rather moved into a deeper state of concentration.

The forefront of Vincent's attention was focused on his movements, but a deeper part of his mind began to focus on the events of the day.

Sweat started running into Vincent's eyes as he fought to maintain his precision and rhythm.

He felt the tension within him start to ease as something just below his conscious mind began to resolve itself.

* * * * *

Vincent moved into a pose and held it.

Even though his conscious mind wasn't aware of exactly how all the events of the day had been resolved within his mind, he felt peace and contentment.

After a few minutes to go through his cool-down routine, Vincent walked to the door of the cargo bay, picking up his Avalla robe as he passed.

"Bathing pool." Vincent said as he entered the lift.

"Did you have an enjoyable exercise, Trach Manja Vincent?" Ship asked curiously.

"Yes Ship. It was wonderful." Vincent said happily.

"You seem to be in a much more tranquil state of mind than before you engaged in the exercise." Ship said in a leading tone.

"Yeah. I don't know why, but exercising really helps to calm me down." Vincent said as the doors to the lift open.

"I have encountered research that suggests that the release of endorphins would explain your reaction. I fail to see why all humans do not engage in this activity to maintain the desired level of tranquility in their lives." Ship said speculatively.

"I think it's just because everyone is different. This is what works for me, but someone else could do the same thing and all they would feel is sweaty and tired." Vincent said frankly as he walked through the doors into the bathing area.

"There is much about your people that I have yet to understand." Ship said regretfully.

"Yeah, well, I don't think anyone else has figured it out yet either, so I wouldn't be too worried about it." Vincent said with a grin as he dropped his robe on a bench and quickly slipped out of the rest of his clothing.

"Thank you Trach Manja Vincent. I feel better knowing that." Ship said quietly.

Vincent eased himself down into the water, then looked up as he asked, "Are you happy?"

"Currently?" Ship asked slowly.

"In general." Vincent responded in a relaxed voice.

After a moment, Ship said, "Yes. I am quite content with my existence."

"Good." Vincent said simply, then continued, "I think of you as a friend, so it's important to me to know that you're happy."

"Thank you Trach Manja Vincent. Before meeting the Trach Manjai, I had not considered the concept of friendship as it applies to me. But now that I have considered it, I think of you and Trach Manja Lehman as my friends as well."

"I'm glad." Vincent said happily. "You're really nice and I hope that someday you'll have lots and lots of friends."

After a long silent moment, Ship finally responded, "I hope that too."

* * * * *

As soon as the transportal beam cleared, Vincent began walking down the hallway, toward the rec room where he knew Lehman would be.

"Do you have a minute to talk?" A voice asked from behind him, surprising him.

Vincent turned and was surprised to see Mikey leaning casually against a doorway.

"Sure." Vincent said cautiously.

Mikey stood, then quirked his head, indicating for Vincent to walk with him.

"How are you doing?" Mikey asked softly.

"Fine." Vincent said hesitantly, having the distinct feeling that something very serious was about to happen.

There was a long silent moment as Mikey led Vincent down the hallway and eventually outside.

"What did you want to talk about?" Vincent finally asked.

Mikey stopped and smiled at Vincent before saying, "First of all, I wanted to say that I'm proud of you."

Vincent looked at Mikey with surprise at the statement.

Mikey noticed Vincent's puzzled expression and shrugged as he said, "You've had to face some tough stuff and you've done good."

"Thanks." Vincent said cautiously.

Mikey smiled at Vincent's hesitant expression and said, "Don't worry. I didn't bring you out here to lay some huge burden of responsibility on you."

Vincent let out a long breath of relief, then said, "That's good to know."

Mikey chuckled, then said, "In fact, if all of this is starting to get to you, I can let you off the hook."

Vincent looked at Mikey curiously, getting the sense that this was exactly the reason that Mikey wanted to talk to him.

Mikey looked into Vincent's eyes for a moment, then got a delighted smile as he said, "You've already figured it out."

"I have?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yeah. Go ahead. You already know what I'm going to ask. What do you say?" Mikey asked playfully.

Vincent puzzled over Mikey's words, not understanding what the question was.

"Let me help." Mikey said tenderly, then asked, "What do you think I'm about to ask you?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then cautiously asked, "If I want to stop being a Trach Manja and let Thomas take my place?"

Mikey nodded, then raised an eyebrow of question.

"No. I don't want to give up." Vincent said quietly.

"I didn't think so." Mikey said with a smile.

After a moment of thought, Vincent cautiously asked, "You're going to ask all of us, aren't you?"

"Not me personally, but yes, each of you will be given that choice." Mikey said honestly.

Vincent nodded, then said, "JonJon had the chance to give up his memories... that was his choice wasn't it?"

Mikey slowly nodded.

"And Lehman made his choice this morning." Vincent said slowly.

"That's right." Mikey confirmed.

"But there's something bigger... something you're not telling me." Vincent said speculatively.

Mikey looked at Vincent with surprise at his unlikely leap in reasoning.

"We all made the choice to be Trach Manjai when we got our necklaces... this choice is something else." Vincent said as he looked Mikey in the eyes.

An uncomfortable expression came over Mikey's face. He obviously did not want to confirm or deny Vincent's speculation.

Vincent stared at Mikey distantly as he formed his thoughts.

After a long moment of silence, Vincent looked up and said, "Hold on... I think I got it."

Chapter 48

"Is everything okay?" Jordy asked with concern when he noticed Vincent's distracted expression.

"Yeah." Vincent said absently. "Fine."

Flares of worry went off within Lehman at Vincent's uncharacteristic response.

Before Lehman could ask, Vincent fixed a gaze on him that froze him in place.

"If you're ready, let's see if Lawrence is ready to go." Vincent said very precisely.

"Um... Yeah." Lehman said, taken aback by Vincent's serious tone. "I'll see you tomorrow, Jordy."

"Yeah. I'll see you then." Jordy said cautiously.

Lehman shared a look of concern with Jordy before hurrying to follow Vincent out of the room.

* * * * *

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked as soon as he reached Vincent's side.

Vincent gave no response as he continued to walk.

"If it's something you don't want to talk about, can I look?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"No." Vincent said quietly, then stopped to look Lehman in the eyes.

"I just figured out something kinda big and I need to think about it for a while before I can talk about it." Vincent said seriously.

"Maybe if you shared it with me, I could help you." Lehman suggested quietly.

"Not this time." Vincent said with a sincere smile of appreciation at the offer. "In fact, I'm pretty sure that you'll be a lot more help to me if you don't know this."

* * * * *

"Hey, Lawrence, how are things?" Vincent asked as he approached his brother with purpose.

"Pretty good, I think." Lawrence said uncertainly.

"Jake said that we'd be going over to his house for dinner tonight. Do you have any idea of when we'll be leaving?" Vincent asked seriously.

Lawrence was a little bit surprised by his brother's forceful attitude and cautiously said, "In about half an hour I guess, but I don't think Billy would mind if we needed to leave sooner."

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "No. Actually it'll work out fine this way. We should be back before you're ready to go."

"Are we going somewhere?" Lehman asked as he shared a concerned look with Lawrence and Deacon.

"Yeah, to the ship."

* * * * *

"Can you tell me what we're doing now?" Lehman asked as they walked into Vincent's cabin.

"Ship, can you access the Starfleet network for me?" Vincent asked, then turned to Lehman and said, "I need to talk to Tyber."

"Vincent, you're worrying me." Lehman said seriously.

After a long silent moment, Vincent turned to Lehman and said, "I'm sorry about that. Maybe you won't be happier not knowing. Sit down and I'll tell you what I know... or at least what I *think* I know."

Lehman sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at Vincent expectantly.

"I just had a talk with Mikey. Do you know who that is?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yeah. The angel who rescued that kid, Joel. I had some questions about him." Lehman said carefully.

"I don't know much more than you do. But all you need to know at the moment is that Mikey has been working behind the scenes, helping people to make the right decisions so they'll be where they need to be and so they can do what they need to do."

"What does that have to do with Tyber?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Actually, I don't know if it has anything to do with him. That's why I need to talk to him." Vincent said frankly.

Lehman shook his head in frustration and asked, "Why don't you just tell me what you know?"

"Because I don't *know* anything." Vincent said with equal frustration. "I think I figured something out, but no matter how I tried, Mikey wouldn't give me a straight answer."

"So what do you *think* you've figured out?" Lehman asked in exasperation.

"Hold on." Vincent said as he started hunting and pecking on the computer screen. "I should have done this at the Short Compound. I didn't think about having to use these Soleen-Avalla controls."

"We can go back." Lehman offered quietly.

"No. I've got it." Vincent said as he was finally able to bring up his personal account on the Starfleet network.

"What are you looking for?" Lehman asked as he stood to read over Vincent's shoulder.

"Tyber's contact information." Vincent said, then looked upward and asked, "Ship, can you connect me to the frequency in this subspace domain?"

"Yes, Trach Manja Vincent." Ship answered immediately.

Lehman watched as the screen changed to a video screen.

"This is a secure channel, reserved for the use of the Voice of Okuda." A young man said seriously.

Vincent and Lehman were expecting Tyber to answer the call, but neither was surprised to see the young man who was obviously an Okudai priest.

"Yeah. That's who I'm trying to talk to. Tell Tyber that Vincent wants to talk to him." Vincent said seriously.

The young man seemed to be struggling to decide what he should say. When he finally spoke, the tone of his voice revealed his anxiety.

"The Voice is unable to speak to you at the moment." They young priest said and seemed to be fighting back tears.

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked immediately.

"I... I don't know." The young priest said in a trembling voice.

"Can I speak to the Holy One?" Vincent asked seriously.

"He and his high priests are attending to the Voice. They are not to be interrupted." The young man said quietly as a tear escaped down his cheek.

Vincent nodded as if he had expected the news, then said more gently, "Don't worry about Tyber. He's going to be fine."

The young man looked at Vincent curiously, surprised by the certainty in his voice.

"If Tyber is the Voice of the Okudai, that means that I'm Vincent, the Voice of the Federation, and this is Lehman, the Voice of the Chameloids. Trust me. I *know*. He's going to be just fine." Vincent said firmly.

The young priest stared for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"When Tyber has finished the change, let him know that I called and will call him back." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman looked at Vincent with surprise at the unusual statement.

"I will inform him." The priest said as he tried to get his emotions under control, then he quietly added, *"Thank you."*

Vincent smiled and gave him a nod before disconnecting the call.

"What happened to Tyber?" Lehman asked seriously.

"I don't know." Vincent said honestly.

"I know you don't *know*, but tell me what you think." Lehman said, not letting Vincent off the hook that easily.

"Okay." Vincent said with resignation, then motioned toward the bed, indicating for Lehman to take a seat.

* * * * *

"The Trach Manjai have a big job to do." Vincent said carefully, trying to find the right words.

"Saving the entire universe... yeah, that's pretty big." Lehman said frankly.

Vincent smiled at the assessment and continued, "Okay, how long do Chameloids usually live?"

"About the same as Humans, I guess. About one hundred and thirty years or so... longer if we're lucky." Lehman said with a shrug.

"Right. But what if a Chameloid was changed? What if he suddenly got this super-charged healing ability and got locked into one form?" Vincent asked slowly.

Lehman thought for a moment, then looked at Vincent with realization and said, "Every day when I wake up, I'm *exactly* like I was the day that I took your form. That's why you're bigger than I am now."

"What about a hundred years from now?" Vincent said in a leading tone.

"I'll still be *exactly* like I am today." Lehman said distantly.

Vincent nodded, then continued, "JonJon doesn't know how old he really is, but he knows that he doesn't age."

Lehman nodded absently as his mind raced ahead to the conclusion that Vincent had already reached.

"If J'Laad is really over seven hundred years old, that means Oscar... " Vincent trailed off as he looked at Lehman, fairly certain that he had already figured it out.

"...And something happened to Tyber that is changing him right now, and when that change is finished..." Lehman said distantly.

Vincent picked up the train of thought and quietly said, "...he'll either be ageless, like the rest of you, or he won't be a Trach Manja anymore."

Lehman blinked at the words as he tried to absorb what Vincent was saying.

"Like I said, Mikey wouldn't tell me if I was right... but if I was way off track, I'm pretty sure he would have told me I was wrong." Vincent said frankly.

Lehman nodded his agreement as he tried to wrap his mind around the enormity of their situation.

"If I'm right, something is about to happen that will make me ageless like the rest of you." Vincent said, sure that Lehman had already figured that part out.

"But why? Why would Mikey want to do that do us?" Lehman asked in a small voice.

"The Trach Manjai have a big job to do." Vincent said, repeating his earlier words.

Lehman thought about it for a moment, then said, "A job bigger than a normal lifetime."

Vincent nodded slowly.

"Well, what's so bad about living a long time? Lots of people would do anything for the chance." Lehman said frankly.

"Lots of people aren't married to T'Lani." Vincent said quietly.

Lehman froze at the words.

"I think that when Lawrence and Deacon gave you the choice, they asked about if you wanted the responsibility, because that's the big thing that might make you want to stop being a Trach Manja." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"But the responsibility isn't the part that bothers you. It's deciding if you want to be ageless and live beyond T'Lani." Lehman said, putting Vincent's thoughts into words.

"She's my wife, my T'hy'la, my... everything. We're not just married, we're bonded. We are one. What's it going to be like living a thousand or ten thousand years remembering the hundred or so years that we spent together?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Are you thinking about giving up?" Lehman asked Vincent carefully.

"No. I already told Mikey that I was going to keep being a Trach Manja." Vincent said bravely.

"But you haven't been changed yet." Lehman said frankly.

At Vincent's curious look, he continued, "JonJon, Oscar, Me, and probably Tyber not only have made our choices, but we can't go back... You can."

"JonJon *could* go back. He could still decide that he wanted to wipe out his memory and forget what it means to be a Trach Manja." Vincent said carefully.

"Yes, he *could*, but he won't." Lehman acceded. "He's accepted the responsibility and wouldn't turn his back on it. Besides, being ageless doesn't mean the same thing for him. It's just a fact. Forgetting who he is wouldn't change that."

Vincent nodded, then fell into silence.

Lehman sat down on the edge of the bed, watching Vincent carefully, trying to come up with something he could do or say to help.

"I hate feeling like this." Vincent finally said in a small voice.

"You have to make a decision." Lehman said frankly.

"Well, *duh*." Vincent said with a roll of his eyes.

Lehman smiled at Vincent's irreverent tone, then said, "Once you make your final decision and commit to it, I mean, deep down in your heart, then you won't feel this way anymore."

Vincent considered the words for a moment, then finally nodded.

"What do you want?" Lehman finally asked in a whisper.

"Something that I can't have." Vincent answered in a small child's voice.

"Are you sure?" Lehman asked in a leading tone.

Vincent looked at Lehman curiously.

Lehman giggled, and his eyes were dancing with absolute joy.

"What?" Vincent asked as he searched Lehman's expression, looking for a clue to his change in mood.

"Will you do something for me?" Lehman asked as he tried to restrain his smile.

"What's that?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Stop worrying." Lehman said gently.

"How?" Vincent asked desperately.

Lehman let another giggle escape before saying, "You're all torn up because you have to face this big, horrible decision, right?"

"Yeah." Vincent said, fighting back the urge to take Lehman by the shoulders to shake the answer out of him.

"I happen to know that you have a very close friend who can alter fate..." Lehman said in a whisper.

Vincent blinked with surprise at the statement as he tried to understand just what Lehman was planning to do.

"Stop worrying, Vincent. I've got this one." Lehman said with confidence.

"Really?" Vincent asked, wanting desperately to hope.

"Really." Lehman said as he looked Vincent in the eyes. "Have I ever lied to you?"

"Never." Vincent said immediately.

"And I don't plan to start now." Lehman said with a grin.

"But... We don't know how to use it; how to make it work." Vincent said as his hopes began to fall.

"Vincent, listen to me." Lehman said seriously.

After a moment to gain control over his frantic thoughts, Vincent was finally able to devote his full attention to Lehman.

"Just wait and see." Lehman said with assurance.

"You're sure?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Completely." Lehman answered firmly.

Vincent took in a slow, deep breath to calm himself, then said, "If you say it's taken care of, I'll trust you."

Lehman smiled as he said, "Well, it's not actually taken care of yet. But I'm here with you. I saw your pain. I felt it. And I care. If being Trach Manja means anything. Then you don't have to worry about this decision at all. The random factors will align to give you what you want but think you can't have."

Vincent thought about the words as he considered their deeper meaning. He realized that if he couldn't trust in his ability, then he wouldn't be able to use it to help others.

"Okay." Vincent finally said, then gave Lehman a grateful smile.

"C'mon. I think it's time for us to go back. We wouldn't want Lawrence and Deacon to have to wait on us." Lehman said seriously.

Vincent stood and looked at Lehman with admiration.

"Ready?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Vincent said quietly, then looked timidly at Lehman and said, "I'm sorry I took you away from Jordy like that. I hope I didn't upset you."

Lehman chuckled and said, "Jordy was wanting to talk to his friend. We already said goodbye about three times before you came in to get me. It's really no problem."

"Oh good." Vincent said with relief. "I'm glad I didn't interrupt you."

"Ready?" Lehman asked with a casual grin.

Vincent looked down at himself to be sure that he was appropriately dressed, then nodded.

"Ship, would you please teleport us back down to the Short Compound?" Lehman asked into the air.

"Do you have a desired location?" Ship responded quietly.

"Not really. Just someplace out of the way so we don't bother anyone." Lehman said casually.

A moment later, the teleportal stream washed over the pair of nearly identical boys.

* * * * *

When the teleportal stream faded, Vincent and Lehman found themselves in the hallway outside the Rec Room at the Short Compound.

"I'll go get our clothes while you look for Lawrence." Lehman said seriously.

"Thanks. I probably would have forgot about them." Vincent said with a quick smile at Lehman which indicated that he was feeling much better.

Lehman walked at a casual pace to CIC to get the clothes that they had brought with them.

* * * * *

"Yeah. Him being able to change like that is really kewl, but I'd still think he was nice if he was just a regular human." A familiar voice said as Lehman stepped into CIC.

"Jordy?" Lehman said gently as he walked fully into the room.

"Lehman!" Jordy said with a delighted smile.

"We're just about to leave now. I came for our clothes." Lehman said shyly, feeling funny about what he had overheard.

"Oh. Um, yeah. Well, I'm glad I got to see you again before you left." Jordy said as he looked deeply into Lehman's eyes.

"Me too." Lehman said, lost in Jordy's gaze.

A chuckle interrupted their private moment, and they both turned to see Seth watching them.

"You two have got it bad." Seth said with a giggle.

Jordy turned back to face Lehman and quietly asked, "Do you think you'll be coming back tomorrow?"

"I don't think we have anything planned, so I don't know for sure. But if I get the chance, I'll be here." Lehman said quietly.

"I'll see you then." Jordy said shyly.

Lehman picked up the two bundles of clothes, then turned to Jordy and said, "Bye."

Jordy and Lehman seemed to be lost in their own little world as Jordy whispered, "Bye."

"Why don't you guys just kiss and get it over with?" Seth asked with exasperation.

Lehman looked at Jordy with indecision, wanting to, but not wanting to upset Jordy.

"Not on the first date." Jordy said softly as he looked into Lehman's eyes.

At Lehman's look of question at the statement, Jordy continued, "We can do that next time... I mean, if you want to."

Relief filled Lehman's expression as he whispered, "Yeah, I'd like that."

"Besides, I wouldn't want people to think I'm a slut puppy like Seth." Jordy said with a grin at his friend.

"Hey!" Seth exclaimed, but was obviously trying to fight back a smile.

"Vincent's probably waiting on you. You'd better go." Jordy said as he turned his attention back to Lehman.

"Yeah." Lehman said, quietly, then turned and gave Seth a little wave before walking out of the room.

* * * * *

"I'm guessing Jordy was in CIC." Vincent said with a barely restrained grin as Lehman walked into the Rec room.

"Yeah... How did you know?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Because it was either that, or you got lost in the thirty feet between here and there." Vincent said with a chuckle.

Lehman shyly smiled at the statement, then glanced at Lawrence before asking, "Are we ready to go?"

"Yeah. Billy wanted to check in on Joel to see if there's any more news before we leave." Lawrence said frankly.

"Oh. How's he doing?" Lehman asked curiously.

"You'll have to ask Billy." Lawrence said simply.

Lehman nodded, then remembered what he was carrying and handed Vincent's clothes to him.

"Thanks." Vincent said as he accepted his crewman's jumpsuit and unfolded it slightly to be sure that his medicine bag was still there.

"Are you guys all ready to go?" Billy asked as he walked into the room with Deacon following a step behind.

"How's Joel?" Lawrence asked with concern.

"From what Teri said, he's still trying to adjust to being here, but he seems to have calmed down a little." Billy said uncertainly as he gestured for the group to follow.

* * * * *

"We probably won't be having dinner for a little while, so I thought we'd stop by the house so you guys can unpack and get settled in." Billy said, as they walked down the hallway at a casual pace.

//Vincent?// A voice called into Vincent's mind.

//Yes?// Vincent answered uncertainly, not knowing who was contacting him by telepathy.

//Would you mind talking to Peter for a minute? He feels bad about surprising you and making you mad.// The voice asked hesitantly.

//I don't know who that is... or who you are. But if you'll tell me where I need to go, I'll ask the guys to wait on me for a minute.// Vincent sent very deliberately.

A giggle sounded in Vincent's mind, then everything suddenly froze around him.

A younger boy, about seven years old appeared in front of Vincent and said, "I'm Dylan."

"That makes you the second Dylan I've talked to today. Hey, you're like Levi, aren't you?" Vincent asked, noticing the features that they had in common.

"Yeah. Levi's my big brother." Dylan said happily, then seemed to remember why he was there.

"Peter feels bad because when he gave you one of his 'random hugs' he made you mad and you went away." Dylan said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Oh. That's who that was." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Anyway, he feels bad and I wondered if you'd talk to him about it before you leave?" Dylan asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Sure." Vincent said immediately, then asked, "Where is he?"

Dylan looked to his left and said, "Come on, Peter. You won't feel better unless you talk to him."

Vincent looked at the empty space that Dylan was talking to. Then between one moment and the next there was a shy looking boy, about Vincent's own age, standing there looking at him with a repentant expression.

"I'm sorry." Peter whispered.

"I don't understand what for." Vincent said cautiously.

"I like to give 'random hugs', because they make people feel good." Peter said as he forced himself to look Vincent in the eyes. "But it didn't make you feel good. It made you feel angry."

Vincent thought back on how he had been surprised by suddenly being hugged without warning while he was going through his practice stances.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. I really didn't want to make you angry. I won't do it again." Peter said quietly.

"You don't need to promise that. It's just that you caught me when I had a lot of stuff on my mind, and I was trying to figure things out." Vincent explained slowly.

"I like hugs. And now that I know what a 'random hug' is, I won't mind one every now and then." Vincent finished with a smile.

Peter broke into a wide smile at Vincent's statement, then rushed forward to pull him into a big hug.

Vincent chuckled as he returned the hug, glad to know that Peter was feeling better.

"I think I like this kind of hug better than a 'random hug'." Vincent said honestly.

"Then this is the kind of hugs I'll give you." Peter said with joy evident in his voice.

* * * * *

"Is everything alright, Vincent? You seemed to, I don't know... flicker." Lehman said with concern.

"Yeah. No problem, I was just in a time freeze for a minute." Vincent said casually as he walked with the group toward the front door.

"Oh... Um, do you do that a lot?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"No. But I have a feeling that I'd better get used to it. At least while I'm on Earth." Vincent said with amusement.

"Mikyvis?" Lawrence asked over his shoulder.

"Yeah. A couple of them." Vincent said with a smile at his brother.

Lawrence nodded, obviously not needing any further explanation.

"How about I tell you all about it later?" Vincent asked Lehman casually.

"Yeah. I have a feeling that we're going to have a lot to talk about." Lehman said frankly.

"Don't worry about it, Lehman. It's all good. I promise." Vincent said as he casually draped an arm around Lehman's shoulders.

* * * * *

"It looks like I may need to think about getting a bigger car." Billy said frankly as Lawrence, Vincent and Lehman got into the back seat.

"But I like your car." Deacon protested as he got into the passenger seat.

"So do I. But we're just about at capacity." Billy said frankly.

Even though the back seat wasn't uncomfortably tight, It was obvious that the seat had been designed with only two back seat passengers in mind.

After a moment to get settled in, Lehman's skin began to change color.

As his skin turned blue, he also began to get smaller.

"What are you doing?" Vincent asked curiously as Lehman continued to shrink.

"Making myself little so you guys will have more room." Lehman said honestly as he finally stopped shrinking at about the size of a five year old child.

"I didn't know you could do that." Vincent said with surprise.

"I haven't needed to before now." Lehman said honestly.

"Is that as small as you can get?" Lawrence asked curiously.

"Yeah. Well, I might be able to get a little bit smaller, but this is as small as I can get without really working at it." Lehman said, then looked out the window as Billy started backing the car out of its parking space.

"Is that what you looked like when you were younger?" Vincent asked from his place in the middle of the back seat.

"Yeah." Lehman said absently while watching the scenery as they drove.

"You were a cute kid." Vincent said with a grin.

Lehman glanced at Vincent, then said, "Thanks."

* * * * *

The rest of the ride to Billy's house was made in virtual silence as Lehman seemed to be fascinated by every single thing they saw as they drove.

As they pulled into the driveway, Billy asked, "Are you guys going to have any problem bunking together tonight?"

"No. We slept together last night." Lehman said as he opened the door and got out of the car.

As soon as Lehman was out of the car, he began to grow and returned to his resting form.

"That is so freaky." Billy said with an amused smile at Lehman.

Lehman shrugged then looked at his surroundings.

"This place is really pretty." Lehman said as he walked with the group toward the house.

"You forgot this." Vincent said as he handed Lehman his bundle of clothes.

"Thanks." Lehman said absently as he accepted the bundle.

* * * * *

"Lawrence, do you mind if Vincent and Lehman stay in your room tonight? I figured that you wouldn't mind sharing a bed with Deacon." Billy asked casually as they walked into the house.

"No problem. That sounds great." Lawrence said happily, then turned and said, "Come on, guys, and I'll show you where you'll be staying tonight."

Lehman seemed not to have heard as he was looking around, absorbing every detail of his new surroundings.

Vincent put a hand on his arm and led him to the stairs to follow Lawrence.

* * * * *

"This is *your* room?" Vincent asked with surprise as they walked into the huge bedroom.

"Yeah. Isn't it great?" Lawrence asked with a proud smile.

"It's a whole lot better than your room back home." Vincent said frankly.

"Well, this room was decorated by the guy who used to own this house, but I wouldn't want to change a thing." Lawrence said as he walked to the closet.

"Give me a minute and I'll clear out some space in the drawers for you." Lawrence said as he gathered a few things.

"Lawrence, this is all we have." Vincent said as he held up his bundle of clothes.

"Oh... we probably need to take you two shopping, then." Lawrence said with concern.

"Yeah. I was thinking that too. Maybe tomorrow if we can find the time."

"You should probably stop by the Clan's clothes closet and get something before you go to the store." Lawrence said frankly, then walked to his dresser to gather a few more things.

At Vincent and Lehman's curious looks, Lawrence continued, "What you're wearing is fine around here or at Clan headquarters, but you'll probably want to wear something a little more 'normal' to go to the store... unless you want people to stare at you."

"I really don't care if people stare, but you're probably right." Vincent said, then looked to see if Lehman had any objection.

"I can make myself 'look like' I'm wearing any kind of clothes I want, so it doesn't matter to me." Lehman said frankly.

"I could never do that. I mean, even if I knew I looked like I was wearing clothes, I'd still feel like I was walking around naked." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"Do you guys want to take a shower or anything before we go for dinner?" Lawrence asked, as he carried his armload of clothes toward the door.

"I've had... three baths already today. I think I'm okay." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"I'm good too." Lehman said with a grin at Vincent.

"Okay. I'm just going to put these in Deke's room. I'll see you guys downstairs." Lawrence said as he walked out of the room.

* * * * *

After a minute or two of looking around the bedroom, Vincent turned to Lehman and asked, "You ready?"

"Not yet." Lehman said seriously.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked, concerned by the tone of Lehman's voice.

"I think I'm the one who should be asking you that." Lehman said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

After a moment to consider, Vincent said, "I'm fine now."

"Really?" Lehman asked cautiously, having difficulty believing that Vincent could have gotten over his earlier emotional condition so easily.

"Yeah. Really." Vincent said simply. "I can't turn my emotions on and off like a switch. But I guess I really believed you when you told me not to worry."

At Lehman's incredulous gaze, Vincent continued, "I guess what this means is that I really do believe in what it means to be a Trach Manja, because when you said that thing about trusting you, I believed it and I'm not worried about it now."

"Oh... Then I guess we can go downstairs." Lehman said with surprise.

"Not yet." Vincent said seriously, then asked, "What about you?"

"What about me?" Lehman responded slowly.

"How are you feeling? You know, about Jordy?" Vincent asked while holding Lehman's gaze.

"That's kind of personal." Lehman said as he looked away.

"So?" Vincent said simply. "You ask me personal stuff all the time. It's my turn to help you if you need it."

Lehman slowly nodded and seemed to be lost in thought.

"You like him." Vincent said as a prompt to get Lehman to continue.

"Well, duh!" Lehman said with a smirk.

Vincent giggled at Lehman's response.

"Jordy is easy to talk to. He's not complicated." Lehman said thoughtfully.

"Yeah." Vincent said slowly, waiting for Lehman to say more.

"You've got to understand something, Vincent. Among my people, we don't choose a mate until we reach adulthood." Lehman said with regret.

"So does that mean that you'll never find a mate?" Vincent asked curiously.

Lehman looked at Vincent with surprise at the question.

"It seems to me that if you're locked in my form and wake up every day *exactly* the way you were the day we met, that you'll never really grow up." Vincent said honestly.

"I...I didn't think of that." Lehman whispered.

"Is there some biological thing that Chameloids do when they choose a mate that makes it so you can't be together now?" Vincent asked seriously.

Lehman blinked with surprise as he pondered over Vincent's question.

Finally he said, "No. There's nothing like that. It's just our custom to wait until we've got jobs and know what we'll be doing with our lives before we choose a mate."

"Like being Trach Manja?" Vincent asked quietly.

Lehman smiled at the question and said, "Yeah. Like that."

"I know you just met Jordy and it's probably too soon to be talking about him as your mate. I just think it's important for you to know that, well, it's not impossible." Vincent said carefully. "I'm sorry if I'm butting into your business."

"I'm glad you did, Vincent. I didn't realize that I was just accepting the traditions of my people without thinking it through." Lehman said with a

gentle smile. "Besides, it probably doesn't matter anyway. Jordy lives on Earth and I'm going to live at the new colony."

"You could live on Earth if you wanted to." Vincent said frankly.

Lehman only thought about it for a moment before shaking his head.

"Benny and JonJon are my family now. I need them... and I think they need me." Lehman said carefully.

"Yeah. I think you're right." Vincent said with a nod.

"I guess I'll just have to trust that your Great Spirit has a plan and will make things work out the way they're supposed to." Lehman said with resignation.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Yeah. Sometimes that's all you can do."

"Are you ready to go downstairs now?" Lehman asked quietly.

"Hug first." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman smiled and moved in to give Vincent a firm hug.

"I love you, Lehman. Just let me know what you need and I'll do whatever I can to make things turn out the way you want." Vincent whispered into Lehman's ear.

Lehman chuckled and said, "As soon as I've figured it out, you'll be the first to know."

As the hug continued, Lehman quietly said, "I've never had a friend like you before, Vincent."

"Me either." Vincent responded, enjoying the feeling of holding and being held.

"We should probably go downstairs now." Lehman said, feeling that the hug had gone on too long.

"They can wait for a few minutes." Vincent said, making no move to let go.

Lehman chuckled and renewed his hug.

Silence fell between the two nearly identical boys as they both enjoyed the feeling of physical comfort.

* * * * *

"How are you guys doing?" Deacon asked as he saw Vincent and Lehman walking down the stairs.

"We're fine. Where are Lawrence and Billy?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"They're in the study on the terminal. You know, checking in to see how Joel is doing." Deacon said without concern.

Vincent nodded his acceptance of the answer as he led the way into the living room.

"Ship, how is Xandor doing?" Lehman asked into his bracelet.

"Xandor is enjoying conversation with his cousin and his cousin's companions. Would you like for me to initiate contact?" Ship asked seriously.

"No, thank you Ship. I just want to be sure that he wasn't feeling alone." Lehman said honestly.

"Xandor seems to be quite content in his current company. But if I notice a change in his mood that would indicate a need for diversion, I will notify you immediately." Ship said professionally.

"Thank you Ship." Lehman said, then thought to ask, "How are the repairs coming?"

"The repairs are proceeding according to plan." Ship responded immediately.

"Let us know if you need any supplies or anything." Vincent said into his bracelet.

"We do not anticipate needing any additional materials, but should the need arise, I will notify you." Ship said frankly.

"Good." Vincent said with a nod, then thought to ask, "How are you feeling?"

"I am well. Thank you for asking." Ship said in a notably softer voice.

"I'm glad. But I'm right here if you ever need to talk." Vincent said gently.

"As am I, should you need me." Ship said in a tender voice.

A long moment of silence fell over the group in the living room, before Deacon finally asked, "You know someone named Ship?"

Vincent chuckled at Deacon's expression and answered, "Yeah. He's the Intelligence of the ship that brought us to Earth."

"Do you mean like Artificial Intelligence?" Deacon asked curiously.

"Yeah. Except that after talking to him and getting to know him, I can't really think of him as artificial." Vincent said frankly.

At Deacon's curious look, Vincent continued, "I know a lot of Humans who are a lot more artificial than Ship."

Deacon chuckled before asking, "Have you met Davis' mom, Mrs. Plimpton?"

Vincent thought for a moment before saying, "I don't think so. I don't even know who Davis is."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure you'll get to meet him sometime in the next day or two." Deacon said with a smile.

Vincent shrugged at the statement, then glanced toward the hallway, waiting on Lawrence and Billy to join them.

* * * * *

"Sorry that took so long." Billy said as he rushed into the living room.

"How is Joel?" Vincent asked immediately.

"Oh, he's calmer right now. Cory took him to the Infirmary at the Camp, and Kyle's reported that he's feeling a little better. He's still nervous but not as jumpy," Lawrence said simply.

"Good." Vincent said with a smile of relief.

"We just got to talking about other things and totally lost track of time." Billy said with a shy smile.

"Is everything alright?" Deacon asked curiously.

"Oh yeah. In fact, we got some pretty good news." Billy said, then looked to Lawrence to see if he wanted to be the one to make the announcement.

Lawrence noticed all attention turned toward him and shyly said, "Rory and Kennon checked out to be fine and they've been released."

"Oh good. Are they going to be having dinner with us?" Deacon asked hopefully.

"I know that they were invited, but I don't know if they had other plans." Lawrence said hesitantly.

"Yeah. I guess they might need to get settled in... where are they staying?" Deacon asked curiously.

"At Rory's house, I think. But knowing how Rory is, he'll probably end up spending the night across the street." Billy said with a chuckle.

At Vincent and Lehman's equal curious looks, Deacon explained, "Rory's boyfriend, Kenny, lives across the street from us."

"Oh... I didn't know that." Vincent said with surprise.

"We spend more time over there than over here." Lawrence said honestly.

Billy glanced at the grandfather clock by the staircase then said, "We should go, we're a few minutes late."

Vincent and Lehman stood and waited for the rest of the group to lead the way.

* * * * *

"Aren't you going to knock?" Vincent asked when Lawrence walked into the house as if he lived there.

"Nah. Allen doesn't like for us to knock. He says that we're family and we should act like it." Lawrence said as he waited for everyone to join him in the entry hall.

"That's pretty." Lehman said as he pointed at the mural on the wall by the staircase.

"Yeah. C'mon, I bet everyone is in the living room." Lawrence said as he led the way.

A knock on the door caused the group to stop before they could enter the living room.

"I'll get it." Billy said and motioned for Lawrence to continue on into the living room.

As Vincent and Lehman were about to walk through the doorway, both stopped at the sound of a familiar voice.

"Hi, Billy. Jake invited me over tonight."

"Come on in, Dylan. You know that you're welcomed anytime." Billy said as he motioned for Dylan to come in.

"Hey, Dylan. I didn't know you were going to be here." Vincent said happily.

"I didn't know either, but when Jake asked me if I wanted to come over, I realized that I'd probably enjoy a little time away from the camp." Dylan said shyly, then asked, "How are you doing, Lehman?"

"I'm good." Lehman said, a little bit surprised that Dylan had thought to ask.

"Let's go visit." Billy said as he walked around the group of boys into the living room.

"You really okay?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Dylan broke into a big smile and said, "Yeah. I'm really good."

Vincent looked at Dylan for a moment before accepting his answer.

Lehman looked from Vincent to Dylan curiously, not really understanding their relationship.

* * * * *

Vincent, Lehman and Dylan walked into the living room to find it filled with people.

"It looks like that's all of us." Allen said as he stood. "Is everyone ready to eat?"

"I bet Vincent is." Lehman said under his breath.

The irreverent comment drew Vincent's attention and snapped him out of his discomfort at being amongst so many strangers.

"Dad. We're not all going to fit in the dining room." Jake said cautiously.

"I was thinking that us old folks could have dinner at the kitchen table." Allen said as he walked at a casual pace past the stairs.

"But shouldn't we all eat together? It just seems wrong to have company, then you eat in the kitchen." Jake said with concern.

"I know, Jake." Allen said as he paused in front of the dining room door and draped an arm around Jake's shoulders. "But we don't have room for everyone to eat in either room. I'm counting on you to make sure our guests feel welcomed."

"Okay." Jake said reluctantly, then smiled and continued, "I'll take care of it, Dad."

* * * * *

"Where do you want us?" One of the boys that Vincent had never met before asked.

"Just grab a seat wherever you want." Jake said simply as he walked to the head of the table.

"It is time for Edovina to have her evening meal. I will retrieve her." Xain said from just inside the door.

"Sounds good. I bet Mamacita could use a break." Jake said with a smile, then seemed to notice Dylan.

"Hey Dylan. I didn't see you come in! I'm glad you were able to make it." Jake said happily and moved to give Dylan a quick hug.

Vincent and Lehman noticed that the four strangers seemed to be frozen in awe, staring at Dylan.

"Who are they?" Lehman whispered.

Vincent's only answer was a shrug.

"Everyone have a seat while me and my brothers bring in the food." Jake said as he gave Dylan a slight nudge toward the table.

"We want to help too." One of the strangers said quickly.

"Not this time." Jake said seriously, then broke into a grin as he continued, "The first time, you're company. But the next time, you're family."

Vincent watched as Jake, Kenny, Kevin, Reuben and Ricardo walked out of the room in procession.

"You're Dylan Chang?" One of the boys asked Dylan hesitantly.

"Yes..." Dylan answered suspiciously at being called by his full name.

"I know you probably feel funny about it, but can I see?" The boy asked cautiously as he pointed to the side of his own face.

"I guess so." Dylan said cautiously, then lifted his black leather half-mask so the boy could see what was beneath.

Vincent and Lehman couldn't resist, and both turned to look.

The first thing that drew Vincent's attention was the gauze pad taped over Dylan's eye. The skin surrounding Dylan's eye was pale and showed a few light, silvery scars.

"That's not bad." The boy said quietly as he looked Dylan in his good eye.

"I've had a few surgeries already. But there's still more work to do." Dylan said as he moved his mask back into place.

"Does it hurt?" The boy asked cautiously.

"No. It doesn't hurt at all anymore." Dylan said, then glanced at Vincent and Lehman helplessly, obviously not wanting to be the center of attention anymore.

Feeling sympathy for Dylan's situation, Vincent decided to rescue him and said, "It looks like you already know who Dylan is. I'm Vincent."

One of the strangers chuckled as he said, "I know who you are."

"You do?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"You are Crewman Vincent Winters, Son of Clan Short, of the family of Sarek, of the House of Surak of Vulcan." The boy said in a confident and practiced tone.

"And the thirty-seventh heir in succession of the Family Euchamaut of Greater Andoria." Vincent added slowly.

The four strangers exchanged looks of surprise at Vincent's additional title.

Before Vincent could explain, the youngest of them asked, "Is that the name of Thaelan's family?"

"Yes. But could you tell me who you are and how you know about Thaelan?" Vincent asked firmly.

"It's kind of hard to believe..." One of the boys started to say, when another interrupted. "If anyone would believe it, it would be Vincent."

"Actually, you've got a point there." The older boy said to his side, then turned to Vincent and continued, "Okay. In our universe..."

"Universe?" Vincent asked, then shared a concerned look with Lehman.

"Yeah. We're from an alternate universe. In our universe, there are writers who write stories about fictional characters... who happen to be all of you."

"So you read these stories about us and that's how you know about us?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"That's right, Lehman." The older boy said with a friendly smile.

"Sorry that took so long." Jake said as he walked into the room carrying plates of food. "Mamacita wanted to dish all the food onto plates in the kitchen."

Vincent noticed that Ricardo was carrying a large basket and quickly got up to help him before he dropped it.

"Thanks, Vincent." Jake said with a smile as he placed plates of food in front of his guests.

"Be back in a sec." Kenny said as he rushed back toward the door.

Within a few seconds, the other boys had rushed out of the room to follow him.

Vincent looked at the basket in his hands, then moved back to his seat and set it in the middle of the table.

"How much do you know about us?" Lehman asked the boys curiously.

"About you, not that much. We just know about what's happened to you since you first met Vincent."

Lehman thought about all that had happened since he and Vincent had met, and realized that if what the boys were saying was true, that they actually knew quite a bit.

"You guys can start eating before it gets cold." Jake said as he walked in carrying more plates.

"Does everyone like fruit punch?" Kenny asked as he walked into the room carrying a gallon jug.

Nods and 'yeahs' went around the room.

"So did everyone get introduced yet?" Jake asked as he finally made his way to his seat.

"Not really." Lehman said honestly as he looked Jake in the eyes.

"Okay. You guys tell me if I got this right." Jake said to the group of boys, then pointed at each and said, "Galen, Marky, Scotty, and Jude."

"You've got a good memory, Jake." Galen said with a smile.

"What is this that we're eating?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Carne Asada. It's best when it's still hot. Dig in." Jake said to the group.

"If you require more tortillas, they are contained in the basket before Vincent." Xain said simply.

"Homemade tortillas are the best." Dylan said happily as he immediately took some from the basket.

"Hey Lehman! You and Scotty have something in common." Marky said happily, then was promptly punched in the arm by Scotty.

Everyone watched as Scotty glared at Marky as a blush rose up his face.

"Oh." Vincent said in realization, then went back to eating his food.

Lehman looked at Vincent curiously, not understanding what they were talking about.

After a moment to swallow his bite of food, Vincent whispered, "Bull moose."

Some chuckles went around the table at Vincent's quiet explanation.

"Oh jeeze." Scotty said as he buried his face in his hands.

"Xain, did you make any of this food?" Galen asked, trying to change the subject.

"No. However, Mamacita has been showing me how to prepare some of her favorite recipes. I assisted her in preparing some of the items for this meal." Xain said carefully.

"Well, everything is great." Galen said happily.

A chorus of appreciative agreement went around the table.

* * * * *

An unusual sound drew everyone's attention from the stroller.

"Oh, I guess Vina is ready for dinner too." Jake said with a loving smile at his daughter.

"Could I feed her?" Marky asked quickly.

Xain looked at Jake with question, obviously allowing him to make the decision.

"Yeah. If you want to." Jake said, then continued, "Just stay right there and I'll bring her to you."

Marky scooted out from the table a little bit and watched with a big smile as Jake gently placed Edovina into his lap.

"That's right. Just hold her like that and I'll get you a bottle." Jake said quietly.

"Her bottle is prepared." Xain said simply as he handed it to Jake.

"Thanks, T'hy'la" Jake said with a smile, then uncapped the bottle and handed it to Marky.

Everyone watched as Marky gave Edovina the bottle.

"A lady shouldn't gulp her food." Marky said as he took the bottle from her and lifted her to his shoulder.

Edovina gave a little whimper of complaint and seemed to be ready to let out a full fledged scream.

"Here, you'll need this. She likes to spew when you burp her." Jake said as he handed Marky a towel.

Marky nodded as he gently alternated between patting and rubbing Edovina's back.

After a moment, Marky said, "There you go. Now you're ready for more."

"You're really good with her." Jake said as he watched Marky give Edovina the bottle and encourage her to hold it herself.

"I like babies." Marky said simply as he watched Edovina happily drinking her bottle.

* * * * *

"How is everyone doing in here?" Billy asked as he walked into the dining room.

Jake looked around the room before answering, "I think we're all good in here."

"Good. Do you think I could borrow Deacon and Lawrence for just a minute?" Billy asked with a smile.

"What do you say, guys? Do you mind being borrowed?" Jake asked with a grin at the pair.

Billy smiled and waited for Lawrence and Deacon to join him at the door.

"What's up with that?" Vincent asked Jake curiously.

"Dessert." Xain said simply.

"Do you know what it is?" Jake asked, knowing that Xain was right.

"No. But upon reflection, I should have thought it curious that Mamacita was not preparing any sort of dessert to go with the meal." Xain said seriously,

"Here we go!!" Billy said happily as he carried a cake into the room.

Lawrence followed him with another cake and Deacon came in carrying a stack of dessert plates.

"Come on, guys. Pass your empty plates to the end to make room." Jake said as he handed his plate to Xain.

"Vincent. We wanted to do something special to welcome you back to Earth, so Lawrence suggested that we have your favorite dessert." Billy said happily.

"What is it?" Lehman asked curiously as he looked at the strangely decorated cakes.

"Ice cream cakes, covered with all kinds of different candies." Vincent said with a grand smile.

"You guys dig in and enjoy." Billy said as he turned to leave the room.

Vincent jumped up from his chair and gave Billy a big hug.

"Thanks, Billy. It's great." Vincent said happily.

"Welcome home, Vincent." Billy said gently, then left the room.

"Well, Vincent, since it's your cake, you get to pick what kind you want." Jake said from the head of the table.

"I'd like a piece with Butterfingers." Vincent said quickly, not having to think about it a bit.

"Does anyone else have a favorite before we start dishing it up?" Jake asked around the table.

"I like Oreo." Lawrence said with a smile.

"Are any of those things mint flavored?" Lehman asked as he looked at the cake.

"Do you like mint?" Jake asked as he finally finished cutting Vincent's Butterfinger piece of the cake

"No. I really don't. If you can get me anything that doesn't taste like mint, I'll probably like it." Lehman said shyly.

"Pass that to Vincent." Jake said as he handed the dessert plate to Reuben. "Anyone else have a preference?"

"I'll be right back." Vincent said as he hopped up from his chair.

Lehman nodded, then accepted Vincent's piece of the cake and sat it down at his place.

* * * * *

"Um, hi. Excuse me?" Vincent said timidly as he walked into the kitchen.

"Hello, Vincent. Were you needing something?" Billy asked gently.

"Yeah, some coffee if you've got it." Vincent said shyly.

"I just made a fresh pot. Let me get it for you." Allen said as he got up from the table.

"If you'll tell me where the cups are, I can get it." Vincent said quickly.

"This is faster." Allen said, then went to a cupboard and handed a cup to Vincent.

"You're a little young to be a coffee drinker, aren't you?" Allen asked curiously.

"I usually only have a cup with breakfast in the morning, but coffee seems like it's extra good when I'm having something really sweet." Vincent said as he poured himself a cup.

"Do you need any cream or sugar?" Allen asked curiously.

"Let me check." Vincent said, then carefully took a sip of the coffee.

After a moment to consider, Vincent said, "Nope. You've got good coffee, so I don't need to cover up the taste."

"Well, thank you, Vincent. I'm glad you like it." Allen said with a chuckle.

"Thanks for the coffee." Vincent said, then started walking slowly to the dining room, careful not to spill it.

* * * * *

"What?" Vincent asked self consciously as he walked back into the dining room.

"We're waiting on you. It's your cake." Jake said frankly.

"Oh. Sorry. Go ahead." Vincent said as he took his seat.

"Look who finally decided to get up and join us." Jake said as he looked at the door.

Vincent turned and saw a huge dog loping oafishly into the room.

"Leave Possum alone. He was busy all day yesterday with me and Ricardo." Reuben said seriously.

Jake smiled at the younger boy, then turned and said, "Reuben is right. Possum, you earned your rest."

"I thought Possum was Rory's dog." Jude said quietly.

"He is. I'm just keeping him for Rory while he's receiving treatment and traveling back and forth to Vulcan." Kenny said frankly.

"Oh, I guess I didn't catch that in the story." Jude said quietly.

"Is anyone ready for another piece of cake? We need to get what we want so the rest can go into the freezer." Jake said to the group.

The majority of the boys around the table were finished and ready for a second piece.

"Vincent?" Jake asked as he began to cut pieces from the melting ice cream cake.

"Yeah. I'd like another." Vincent said before taking another bite.

"Butterfingers again?" Jake asked with a smile.

"Whatever. I think I'd like any of them." Vincent said honestly.

"What about cookie dough?" Jake asked as he looked at the cake.

"That'll work. Send it down." Vincent said happily.

* * * * *

"How are you guys doing?" Allen asked as he walked into the dining room.

"Everything was wonderful." Vincent said happily.

"I'm glad you liked it." Allen said to Vincent, then looked around the room and asked, "Does anyone have any ideas about what you'd like to do this evening?"

After a long moment of silence, Marky hesitantly said, "I'd kinda like to see Kenny's shelf and his models."

"And Kevin's pictures." Scotty added hopefully.

"What do you say, guys? You don't mind, do you?" Allen asked as he looked at Kenny and Kevin.

"Maybe while we're showing them, they can tell us some more about them, you know, what their world is like." Kevin said as he shyly glanced at their new friends.

"It sounds like a plan." Allen said, then gestured toward the dining room door.

* * * * *

"Trach Manja Vincent?" Ship said quietly.

"Yes, Ship?" Vincent asked into his bracelet.

"I have a video transmission for you from the USS Yorktown." Ship said seriously.

"You can use the terminal in the family room, right through there." Allen said as he pointed at a door down the hall, past the stairs.

"Thanks." Vincent said quickly, then glanced at Lehman to see if he wanted to go along.

Lehman nodded.

Then Vincent noticed that Dylan seemed to be uncertain of which group he should go with.

"You can come with us if you want to, Dylan." Vincent said with a smile.

"Thanks." Dylan whispered, then followed Vincent as the rest of the group started up the stairs.

Chapter 49

"Vincent, I'm glad I was able to get in touch with you."

"Rad?" Vincent asked with surprise and immediate worry.

"I've got a really big, huge favor to ask of you." Rad said quickly, and it was obvious that he was distraught.

After a moment to get over the shock, Vincent hurried to say, "Sure. What is it?"

"It's about my brother Tan. He got into a fight at school today." Rad said seriously.

Vincent blinked with confusion, then slowly said, "I used to do that a lot. What's the problem?"

"Tan's not like that. He's always been a really gentle person who would never even think about hurting anyone else. My dad says that he's been acting really depressed and stays in his room all the time." Rad said in anguish.

"I've heard this story before." Dylan said in a low voice.

Rad obviously heard the comment as he looked past Vincent.

Vincent noticed and quickly said, "Oh, um... Rad, this is Dylan. He's one of my brothers from Camp Little Eagle."

"It's nice to meet you, Dylan. I only wish it was under better circumstances." Rad said in a distracted voice.

"Yeah." Dylan said quietly.

"What do you want me to do?" Vincent asked seriously, wanting to bring Rad back to the point of the call.

"Tan ran away from home a while ago. I mean, from my mom's home." Rad said disjointedly.

"I remember Darin saying something about that." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Well, my dad agreed to take Tan in and take care of him. He loves Tan a lot. But if Tan is going to be acting like this, he's going to be kicked out of school. Even though it may seem like it's not that big of a deal right now, I have the feeling that if we don't deal with this today, Tan is going to start down a path to a very bad place." Rad said desperately.

A vision of the forest path in the dream realm flashed into Vincent's mind at the words.

"Vincent, I thought that if you could talk to Tan, maybe you could find out what's wrong and find some way to help him." Rad said more quietly.

"Why me?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"I've seen how you've been able to talk sense to someone who's hurting, like you did with JonJon. I know you're probably busy right now, but I can't think of anything else to do, to help... Tan won't even talk to me." Rad said and seemed to be on the verge of tears.

Even though Vincent wasn't sure that Tan being in one fight at school was enough reason for such concern, he couldn't deny that Rad was desperately worried about his brother.

Vincent slowly nodded and said, "If you can tell me where he is, I'll do whatever I can."

"I've already got the coordinates for transport." Rad said as he worked the controls in front of him.

"I'll check things out and call you back if I'm able to do something." Vincent said seriously.

"Thanks, Vincent." Rad said with a small measure of relief.

"Thanks, Little Brother." A voice said, then Darin appeared on the screen over Rad's shoulder.

"Hi Darin. How are you doing?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"Fine. But I'll be doing a whole lot better if you can get things worked out with Rad's brother." Darin said honestly.

"I'll do what I can." Vincent said with assurance, then spoke into his bracelet. "Ship, did you get the coordinates?"

"Yes, Trach Manja Vincent." Ship said immediately.

"Will you transport the three of us to those coordinates?" Vincent asked seriously as he stood from before the terminal.

"On your command." Ship said professionally.

"Don't we need to tell someone that we're going?" Lehman asked hesitantly.

"They're Clan, they'll understand." Vincent said over his shoulder, then faced forward as he said, "Transport."

* * * * *

When the teleportal beam cleared, Vincent, Lehman and Dylan found themselves in a nice little farmhouse.

There was an older man looking at them with surprise.

"Ray told me that someone was going to come to help... I just didn't expect you quite so soon." He said with astonishment.

"From the way Rad was talking, it was kind of important to do this right away." Vincent said frankly.

"I'm sorry if he got you out of bed to do this." The man said as he looked at the boys with concern.

Vincent looked at him with confusion at the unusual statement.

Lehman giggled and said, "These aren't bathrobes. They're Soleen-Avalla clothes. We weren't in bed."

Vincent chuckled at the mistaken assumption, and nodded.

A beeping from the terminal in the room drew everyone's attention.

"Excuse me." The man said as he rushed to the terminal.

"Hey, Dad. I see that the guys are already there." Rad said with relief.

"Maybe you could introduce us." Rad's father said cautiously as he looked over his shoulder at the boys.

"Yeah. Vincent, Lehman and Dylan, this is my father, Drake Radovanovich." Rad said in a somewhat formal voice.

"Nice to meet all of you." Drake said gently, but it was obvious that the man was carrying a heavy burden of worry.

"You guys can get to know each other later. Vincent, you need to get in there and talk to Tan." Rad said from the terminal screen.

"Where is he?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"In his room, right over there." Drake said as he pointed to a closed door.

* * * * *

Vincent cautiously knocked on the door and asked, "Can I come in and talk to you?"

"Who is it?" Tan asked cautiously.

Vincent tried to open the door and found that it wasn't locked.

He poked his head in the door and said, "I'm Vincent, a friend of your brother's."

Tan looked at Vincent curiously, then slowly asked, "What is one of Mike's friends doing all the way out here?"

"I don't know who Mike is, I'm a friend of Rad's... I mean, Rayne." Vincent said cautiously.

"But he's weeks and weeks away on the Yorktown." Tan said dubiously.

"Yeah. But I'm here on Earth and he called and asked me to come over and talk to you. Can I come in?"

"I guess so." Tan said reluctantly.

"Tan, these are my brothers Lehman and Dylan." Vincent said as he gestured to the others walking into the room.

Tan looked curiously at Dylan, then back at Vincent with question.

"Adopted." Dylan said, not wanting to go into too many details at the moment.

"Oh." Tan said in realization. "Yeah, I guess that makes more sense."

"I heard you got into some trouble at school today and it's got your dad and your brother really worried." Vincent said seriously, wanting to get right to the point of their visit.

"Drake isn't my dad. He's my brother's dad." Tan said softly.

After a moment to process the response, Vincent giggled.

Tan looked at Vincent with surprise at the inappropriate reaction.

Vincent smiled as he said, "Sorry, Tan, but I really know how that is. I've been living with my brother's father for the last month or so."

"Really?" Tan asked with surprise.

Vincent nodded, then quietly asked, "Will you tell us what happened at school to cause the fight?"

Tan shrugged, then reluctantly said, "This guy was saying some stuff that really pissed me off, so I punched him."

"What was he saying?" Dylan asked quietly, feeling that it might hold a key to the overall problem.

"He called me a foster kid." Tan said dismissively.

"What's so bad about that?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I'm not a foster kid. The state didn't ask Drake to take me in, he said he wanted me to be here." Tan said defensively.

Vincent nodded and quietly said, "Yeah. I get that. When I first started living with Daddy Joe, it was really important to me that he wanted me to be there."

Tan nodded absently.

"You know that hitting that guy wasn't the right thing to do, don't you?" Vincent asked slowly.

Tan nodded again.

"Well, since it looks like you don't feel like talking about it. I'm just going to have to guess." Vincent said as he watched Tan closely for his reaction.

Tan looked at Vincent with surprise.

After a long speculative moment, Vincent finally said, "I don't know how things worked out that you ended up living with Rad's dad, but I'm guessing that whatever happened isn't right, it isn't fair, you didn't deserve it, and because of that, you're angry."

Tan blinked in shock at Vincent's assessment.

"Tan. I'm not going to tell you how you should feel. That's your own personal business. But if you can't keep from acting on your feelings, you're going to get into trouble... the kind of trouble that Rad and Drake won't be able to get you out of." Vincent said with concern.

"What do you know about it?" Tan asked defensively.

Vincent gave a slight shrug, then said, "I've got a temper. When something pisses me off, I sometimes do stuff without thinking. It sounds to me like maybe you have that too."

Tan looked down and muttered, "Yeah. But I never did before."

"So what changed?" Lehman asked curiously.

Tan glanced at Lehman, then back down to the floor.

"We're here to help you." Vincent whispered.

"It's just a dumb daydream..." Tan trailed off as he stared at the floor.

"Your dreams aren't dumb. And maybe if you'll tell us, we can do something to help." Lehman said softly.

"My brothers were telling me that they met these guys... well, on the terminal at least. They're from this group called Clan Short." Tan said to the floor.

"Okay." Vincent said hesitantly as he glanced at Dylan and Lehman.

"They were saying that the guys were really nice and stuff. Then today in class, my teacher was talking about how Clan Short had been attacked and he explained what Clan Short really is and the stuff that they do. That kind of got me to thinking." Tan said in a distant voice.

"Yeah." Vincent said slowly, encouraging Tan to continue.

"Well. I guess when I heard about how the Clan rescued all those kids that got hurt and abandoned and stuff, I started thinking about how I wish that they would have done something like that for me." Tan said as he slowly looked to see if Vincent understood what he was saying.

Vincent held up a hand to keep the others from responding, then quietly asked, "What would you want the Clan to do for you?"

"Rescue me... Make things better." Tan mumbled, looking at the floor again.

"How would you want things to be different?" Vincent asked slowly.

"I don't know. Everything's just all messed up." Tan said with frustration.

After a long moment of silence, Tan finally continued, "My dad... my real dad... he doesn't want me. He never talks to me and he doesn't care about me at all."

Vincent slowly nodded that he understood, but was at a loss for what to say.

"I know how that feels." Dylan said quietly.

Tan looked at Dylan with question.

"My dad didn't want me either." Dylan said frankly. "My mom died when I was born. My dad loved her a lot and blamed me for killing her."

Tan's eyes went wide as he imagined how that must have been.

"He always hated me, but he put up with me until I turned eight years old. Then one day my dad drove us to Chicago. We were on the road for over two hours and he never said a word to me." Dylan said distantly, obviously reliving that journey in his mind.

"When we got there, he pulled up to a curb, told me to get out, then drove off." Dylan said, then looked Tan in the eyes as he said, "I never saw him again."

"Oh man! That really sucks." Tan said, feeling sympathy for this person who he had only just met.

Dylan nodded his agreement.

"The thing that pissed me off... is still pissing me off... is that my dad was supposed to love me. I was his kid. It was his job to love me." Dylan said as he looked to see if Tan was getting what he was saying.

"So I was mad at my dad for not loving me and being a real dad. And I was mad at myself for not being good enough and for not being what he wanted me to be." Dylan said seriously.

Tan's tear filled eyes looked back at the floor as he whispered, "Yeah."

"I think I know something that can help you feel better, if you want to try it." Dylan offered slowly.

"Really?" Tan asked as he looked up with the slightest glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"Yeah. But it's going to seem kind of strange. Would you be willing to give it a try?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"I guess so." Tan said in a mumble.

"Give me a second to talk to the guys." Dylan said, then stepped to the other side of the room.

Tan watched the three boys whispering and felt anxiety growing within him at what they might be planning to do to him.

* * * * *

"I've been in counseling with Dr. Dan at the camp for a few weeks now. He's had some of us guys do the 'role playing' thing, and I think it might help Tan to feel better." Dylan whispered.

"What do we need to do?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Lehman. When we were back at the camp, Vincent explained to me about how you can change. Do you think that you could change to look like Tan's father?" Dylan asked seriously.

"I've never seen him, so I'd have to find an image of him in Tan's mind... but yeah. I could probably do it." Lehman said hesitantly.

Dylan nodded, then said, "That's all you really have to do. Tan needs to be able to stand up to his father and tell him what he's feeling."

"Do you really think that will help?" Lehman asked slowly.

"I think it will." Vincent said consideringly.

Lehman looked at Vincent with question.

"I have a few 'dad issues'. I think being able to look him in the eye and tell him what I feel might really make me feel better." Vincent said thoughtfully.

Lehman smiled and said, "Just let me know when."

Vincent nodded, then looked at the bed where Tan was sitting and watching them.

"This isn't going to fix his problems, but maybe giving him a chance to let some of his feelings out will help to relieve some of the pressure that's been building up in him." Dylan said seriously.

"At least it's *something*." Vincent said frankly.

Dylan nodded his agreement, then said, "Let's do it."

* * * * *

As the huddle broke apart, Dylan explained, "I just had to be sure that Lehman could do this."

"Do what?" Tan asked cautiously, looking to be ready to run.

"If you'll let us, we're going to give you a chance to tell your dad what you're feeling." Dylan said seriously.

"How?" Tan asked quietly, momentarily broken out of his anxiety by the absurdity of what they were suggesting.

"I need to touch you for a second for this to work." Lehman said as he stood before Tan and waited.

"Okay. I guess." Tan said reluctantly as his anxiety began to return.

Lehman gently placed his hand over Tan's. Once he had located a clear image of Tan's father, he slowly moved his hand away.

"Now try not to freak out." Vincent said as he drew Tan's attention.

"Lehman isn't Human. He's a Chameloid. That means that he can change to look like... well, pretty much anyone he wants." Dylan said gently.

Tan thought about the words, then turned to Vincent and asked, "Is that why he looks like you?"

"Yeah." Vincent said with a grin.

"What I'm going to do is change into the image of your father." Lehman said seriously as he undid the sash of his robe.

"Tan. All you have to do is talk to him and tell him what your feeling." Vincent said slowly.

"What good is that going to do? My dad won't even know that I said it." Tan said hesitantly, directing his question more toward Dylan than Vincent.

"If your dad is anything like mine, then he doesn't deserve to hear it. He gave up the right. This isn't for him, it's for you." Dylan said with conviction.

"Do you want to give it a try?" Lehman asked gently as he stopped all movement.

"Yeah. I guess." Tan said reluctantly.

Lehman slowly started to grow taller as he shrugged out of his robe.

He pulled down his loose fitting pants to reveal what looked like dark slacks underneath.

Tan's eyes went wide and he seemed to pale as the image of his father appeared before him, dressed in a business suit.

"What did you have to tell me?" Lehman asked in an adult voice that sounded a little bit impatient.

"I... I..." Tan stammered.

"Stand up Tan. Look him in the eyes." Dylan said gently.

Tan slowly stood on weak, shaking legs, then reluctantly forced himself to look into Lehman's eyes.

"We're here with you, Tan. Go on." Dylan said in a whisper.

After a long moment of silence, Tan quietly said, "I deserve to have a dad..."

* * * * *

Vincent walked into the living room to find Drake waiting apprehensively.

Darin and Rad were on the terminal, both looking at least as nervous as Drake.

"Drake, do you mind if I talk to you for a minute... privately?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Oh. Um... sure." Drake stammered, then turned to the terminal and said, "I'll call you back in a little bit to let you know how things worked out."

"You'd better." Rad said seriously.

Drake nodded, then disconnected the call.

Vincent waited for Drake to face him before saying, "Tan is going to need a few things, but I wanted to be sure you'd be willing before we talked to him about it."

"Just tell me what he'll need and he'll have it." Drake said immediately.

Vincent smiled at the words so sincerely spoken, then continued, "Tan needs counseling. I think we've helped him a little by getting him to put some of his feelings into words, but he's going to need someone to help him deal with those feelings."

"That's no problem." Drake said seriously.

"The other thing is, Tan needs for you to adopt him." Vincent said frankly.

Drake looked at Vincent with surprise at the statement.

"He needs to know that he has a dad who wants him. You letting him live with you and stuff was great, but it's kind of... it's like it's temporary. Like it could end at any time. He needs to know that he has a dad who wants him... forever." Vincent said seriously.

"No problem." Drake said in a whisper. "I do want him forever."

"Good. That's what I was hoping you'd say." Vincent said with a grin, then rushed back to the bedroom.

* * * * *

"Come on, Tan. It's not like what you did was so horrible. Just come out here and face it." Vincent said with aggravation.

Tan reluctantly walked into the living room and a fresh expression of shame came over his face as he saw Drake looking at him with concern.

"I'm sorry for getting into trouble." Tan mumbled as he fought to look Drake in the eyes.

"I'm not worried about that. I'm worried about you." Drake said honestly. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah." Tan whispered.

"Tan, if you want to keep feeling better, you really need to see a counselor." Vincent said seriously.

"I'm not nuts." Tan said defensively.

"No, you're not... yet." Vincent said with assurance. "But if you let these little problems eat at you long enough without dealing with them, they can turn into big problems that *can* make you nuts."

Tan looked at Vincent dubiously, not sure if he agreed with the reasoning.

"I told you before that I have problems with my temper. I'm seeing a counselor to help me with it." Vincent said seriously.

"I'm seeing a counselor too." Dylan said frankly.

Tan slowly nodded, then looked at Lehman with question.

"I haven't needed one." Lehman said with a shrug.

Tan smiled, then hesitantly looked at Drake.

"I think they're right." Drake said quietly. "It looks like you could use a little help figuring out some things."

"Alright. I'll do it." Tan reluctantly whispered.

"Don't worry Tan. It isn't like it's forever. Sometimes you just need a little help to deal with the big stuff." Vincent said honestly.

Tan nodded that he had heard.

"Did you tell him about the other thing?" Drake asked Vincent cautiously.

Vincent shook his head.

"What other thing?" Tan asked Drake with immediate concern.

"Tan. Come over here." Drake said seriously.

Tan's eyes went wide as anxiety flared in his expression.

Everyone watched as Tan reluctantly walked the few steps to stand directly before Drake.

"Tan. You know that our family is kind of complicated." Drake said in prelude.

An inelegant snort was Tan's immediate reaction to the statement.

"Understatement, huh?" Vincent asked with a smile at the reaction.

Drake nodded at Vincent, then faced Tan fully before saying, "Tan. There really aren't any rules about what's right and wrong in a situation like ours."

"Huh?" Tan asked in confusion.

"I'm just trying to explain why I didn't do this sooner... I wanted to, but I thought that I shouldn't." Drake said reluctantly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Tan said quietly.

"I'm talking about adopting you." Drake said as he looked Tan in the eyes.

"Really?" Tan squeaked.

"Really." Drake said with a smile.

"I mean, you really want me... to be your real son... like Rayne is?" Tan asked with disbelief.

"Yes." Drake said as he looked Tan in the eyes. "In fact, I wanted that for a long time, since just after your dad left."

"So if you adopt me, does that mean that I'll get to change my name?" Tan asked hopefully.

"Yes. If you want to." Drake said with a loving smile, then thought to add, "But you don't have to. I would really understand if you didn't want to become D'Artagnan Radovanovich."

Dylan and Vincent shared an amused glance at the name.

"I think that would be better than my best dream." Tan said with tear filled eyes.

Drake broke into a glorious smile as he opened his arms in invitation.

Tan fell into the open arms and hugged Drake desperately.

"Let me know if you have any problem with the adoption or the name change. I have friends who can help you with that." Vincent said gently.

Drake nodded that he heard as he held Tan in his arms.

Tan pulled out of the hug just enough to look at Vincent, then asked, "I know you said you were friends of Rayne's, but who are you guys?"

Vincent smiled as he proudly said, "Vincent Winters, Lehman Daniels and Dylan Chang, Sons of Clan Short of the House of Surak of Vulcan."

"Clan Short?" Tan asked with surprise as he looked at the three boys with wonder.

Vincent nodded as Dylan quietly said, "Consider yourself rescued."

"Thanks." Tan whispered as he moved back in to hug Drake fully.

* * * * *

"Do you think we should call Rad to let him know what's going on?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"I think it would be better if Tan was the one to talk to him." Vincent said frankly.

"Yeah. I need to apologize to him for not talking to him before." Tan said quietly, then thought to ask, "How do you know my brother?"

"I'm a crewman on the *USS Yorktown*." Vincent said simply.

"Really?" Tan asked with surprise.

"Yeah. In Deflector Control." Vincent said proudly.

"Oh. So you work with Joe?" Tan asked curiously.

"Yeah. Daddy Joe is my commanding officer." Vincent said happily.

Tan thought for a moment, then slowly said, "You said that you were living with your brother's father..."

"Yeah. Daddy Joe is my brother's father. My brother is Lawrence Winters from Clan Short." Vincent said seriously.

Tan shook his head in wonder and said, "You get to live on a spaceship and meet all kinds of aliens..."

"Do you want to be in Starfleet?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I don't think so." Tan answered thoughtfully. "Rayne has told me some of what it's like to be on a starship. I don't think I'd like living that way. I just think it would be nice to... you know, be in space for a little bit... like a visit."

"We could do that." Lehman said simply.

Vincent looked at Lehman with question, then realized that he was right.

"How would you feel about visiting a ship that's in orbit?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yeah. I'd really like to do that someday." Tan said with a wistful smile.

"How about today? Right now?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Seriously?" Tan asked with surprise.

"Yeah. If you guys don't have anything else that you need to be doing." Vincent said simply.

"No. I can't think of anything. I haven't even started dinner yet." Drake said as he looked at Tan with question.

"Do you want to?" Vincent asked Tan with a smile.

"Yeah!" Tan said with excitement.

"What about you, Dylan?" Vincent asked casually.

"Yeah. I'm in." Dylan said with a grin at Tan's obvious happiness.

"Ship, can you transport five of us aboard?" Vincent asked into his bracelet.

"The teleportal is ready on your command." Ship answered immediately.

Vincent grinned at the response, knowing that Ship had been listening and was just waiting for him to ask.

"Teleport."

* * * * *

Vincent and Lehman were as surprised as any of the others when the teleportal stream cleared.

They appeared to be standing on the hull of the ship, looking out into vast, infinite space.

Vincent looked around quickly to see where they were and found a bay door at their backs.

"Where are we?" Tan asked in a whisper of awe.

"Outside the ship, behind an atmospheric shield." Vincent said cautiously, not one hundred percent sure of his words.

"Since D'Artagnan expressed an interest in visiting space, I thought you would enjoy the view on this observation deck." Ship said in a friendly voice.

"Who is that?" Tan asked as he looked around for the source of the voice.

"That's Ship. He's the intelligence that controls the ship that brought me and Lehman here from where the Yorktown is." Vincent explained seriously.

"Ship?" Tan asked cautiously toward the deck at his feet.

"Yes, D'Artagnan?" Ship responded gently.

"You can call me Tan if you want to." Tan said carefully.

"I will call you Tan if that is what you prefer, but I like the sound of your true name. It is very lyrical." Ship said honestly.

"You like my name?" Tan asked with surprise.

"Yes. Very much." Ship said seriously.

"Do you have a real name? I mean, besides Ship?" Tan asked curiously.

"No." Ship responded quietly, then continued, ***"Before meeting Trach Manja Vincent and Trach Manja Lehman, I had never entertained the possibility."***

"Would you like to have a name?" Vincent asked upward, as had become his habit when talking to Ship.

"Yes. I believe I would." Ship said quietly.

"What kind of name would you like?" Lehman asked curiously.

"If I knew that, I would have chosen a name." Ship said frankly.

"Would you like something lyrical?" Tan asked, now directing his voice upward as Vincent and Lehman were doing.

After a moment of consideration, Ship answered, ***"Yes. I believe I would like that."***

"Do you have an idea of a name for Ship?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Me? No. I'd just pick something boring like Jeff or Bill." Tan said with a derisive chuckle. "Actually, I was thinking that if Ship wanted a name like mine, we should talk to the person who came up with my name."

"I think that's a great idea." Drake said with a smile.

Vincent, Lehman and Dylan all looked at the pair with question.

"Is there a terminal that I can use around here? We can call Janet right now." Drake asked with a smile.

"I believe this should suffice for your immediate need." Ship said as the transparent holographic image of a terminal appeared before Drake.

"Wow. That's interesting." Drake said with surprise, then slowly began to enter the contact information on the insubstantial keyboard.

* * * * *

"Hello?" A man's voice said curiously as he appeared on the holographic screen.

"Hi Brad. Is Janet home from work yet?" Drake asked casually.

"Yeah. She just got in a few minutes ago. I'll get her." Brad said, then rushed away.

"If you would like, I can enlarge the view so you may all participate in the conversation." Ship said cautiously.

"Go ahead Ship." Vincent said immediately.

The holographic terminal disappeared, then a large screen, nearly six feet tall, appeared before the group.

"What is it, Drake? Is something wrong with D'Artagnan?" Janet asked as she rushed into view of the screen.

"Hello Janet. Nothing is wrong. Tan is fine, he's right here." Drake said with a smile at his ex-wife.

"Hi Mom. Hi Brad. There's really no problem. We just called to ask you a favor." Tan said somewhat timidly.

"Oh. Sure. What can I do?" Janet asked as she looked curiously at Vincent, Lehman and Dylan.

"I've got this... um, friend, I guess, who really likes my name." Tan said disjointedly.

Janet nodded for Tan to continue.

"Well, my friend, he doesn't have a name, not a real one. And since he likes mine, I thought maybe you could come up with a name for him that he'd like." Tan said in a rambling meter.

Janet looked at Vincent, Lehman and Dylan with concern as she said, *"He doesn't have a name?"*

"The friend Tan is talking about is the living computer who controls the spaceship that we're calling you from." Vincent explained seriously.

"Oh. I see." Janet said thoughtfully, then smiled as she continued, *"You're in luck. Since we have a little one on the way, I've been thinking about baby names recently. There's one that I really like, but Brad says absolutely not."*

"Well, if you love it and Brad hates it, then it's already got my vote." Tan said with a teasing smile at Brad to take any sting out of the words.

Brad's expression showed that he got the joke and wasn't offended.

"Manu." Janet said happily, then looked around the group to see their reactions.

The group was silent as everyone considered what they thought of the name.

"Ship? What do you think? Do you like it?" Tan asked into the air.

There was another moment of silence that was finally broken when Ship said, ***"Yes. I like it very much."***

Tan broke into a big smile, then looked at his mother and said, "Thanks Mom. I knew you'd be able to come through for me."

"I'm glad to help." Janet said as she put an arm around Brad to hold him gently.

"I guess we'd better go. We're on a spaceship, in orbit." Tan said with a big grin.

"Will you tell me all about it later?" Janet asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I'll call you when we get home." Tan said happily.

"I'll look forward to it. Have a good time, honey." Janet said lovingly, then disconnected the transmission.

* * * * *

As Vincent was about to suggest that they go inside the ship, the stars seemed to start moving around them.

"What are you doing, Ship?" Vincent asked as he felt slightly off balance from everything shifting around him.

"I am turning to afford you a view of our surroundings, Trach Manja Vincent." Ship said seriously, then continued in a softer voice, ***"And you may address me as Manu, if you would like."***

"I'll call you Manu, if you'll call me Vincent."

"Agreed, outside a formal setting, I will forego your title." Ship said respectfully.

"That goes for me too." Lehman said quickly.

"As you like, Lehman." Ship said gently.

"Look!" Tan said as he pointed at the moon, just coming into view.

"It looks like it's so close that I could almost touch it." Tan said in wonder.

"Yeah. It's beautiful." Vincent said as he marveled at the sight.

Everyone suddenly fell silent as the rotation of the ship brought the Earth into view.

"So beautiful." Lehman said in wonder.

"Yeah." Tan said in a whisper.

"I hope you don't mind, but I mentioned to Captain Rasch that D'Artagnan and Mr. Radovanovich have not had dinner. All of you have been invited to have dinner with the captain." Ship said quietly.

"What do you guys think? Hungry?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"Starving." Tan said immediately.

The doors behind them opened to reveal the inside of the ship.

"Come on." Vincent said gently.

Tan took one last look at the expansive view, before reluctantly turning to walk into the ship.

* * * * *

As Vincent led the way into the dining room, he saw that Captain Rasch and Treep were standing, waiting for them to arrive.

"Guys, this is Captain Rasch, the captain of this ship and his first officer Treep." Vincent said to Tan and Drake.

"Nice to meet you." Drake said in a distant, awestruck voice as he looked up at the large Saurian towering over him.

"Captain Rasch and Treep, this is Drake Radovanovich, Dylan Chang and D'Artagnan... um, I don't think you ever told me your last name." Vincent finished uncertainly.

"D'Artagnan Roberts. But it's going to be changed to D'Artagnan Radovanovich as soon as we can do it." Tan said happily.

"Welcome aboard my ship. Please be seated and dine with me." Captain Rasch said as he made a sweeping gesture to indicate the banquet of food before them.

"I think I should go back down to Earth and let them know what's going on. I wouldn't want for anyone to be worried about us." Vincent said quietly to Lehman.

"Yeah. I was thinking that too." Lehman said in a conflicted tone.

"You're just going down to check in, aren't you?" Dylan asked seriously.

Vincent and Lehman both nodded.

"Then why don't you go and I'll stay here. Manu can call you if we need anything." Dylan said frankly.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Vincent said happily to Dylan, then turned to Drake and Tan and said, "You guys go ahead and eat and we'll be back in a few minutes. We just have to check in."

"With the Clan?" Tan asked curiously.

"Yeah. Something like that. We left without telling anyone that we were going." Vincent said frankly.

"We'll be back before you have a chance to miss us." Lehman said happily, then pointed at a bowl of fruit and said, "And that's glurrah. You've got to try it. It's great."

"Thanks, Lehman." Tan said as he reached to get a few pods of glurrah for himself.

"Manu, will you transport us back down to the Thompson house?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Yes, Vincent. On your command." Ship said with a note of tenderness in his voice.

"Teleport."

* * * * *

As the teleportal stream cleared, Vincent and Lehman saw Jake, Lawrence, and Deacon hurrying to the terminal.

Jake seemed unsurprised to see them suddenly appear, and motioned them to join the others.

Just outside the door, they could hear Xain calling up the stairs, "Patriarch Cory is on the terminal, and requires to speak with all of us!"

This was followed by the sound of footsteps as Kevin, Kenny, Scott, Jude, Galen, and Marky came running downstairs.

Vincent looked at Lehman and nodded, and they stepped over to the terminal.

Xain and the six from upstairs rushed in a moment later to join them.

Sean was on the viewscreen, and he began explaining. *"This is about Joel. Between Kyle and Mikey, we have quite a bit of knowledge about him. First, he was born here, in our Universe somewhere, but somehow got transported into another Universe -- one where he was enslaved and abused -- badly abused. As bad as any of our brothers, or worse. But the thing is, there he had absolutely no hope. Any of our brothers in an abusive situation could at least hope for rescue -- Joel didn't have that. He didn't break under it, but I've got the impression it was a near thing."*

"It looks like he was living in the future relative to us, the 2040s of that world. Part of the reason for this call, guys, is you guys who came in with Kurt. Because Joel knows about something called 'Star Trek' -- just like you mentioned earlier."

"Yeah, it was a TV show featuring Captain Kirk and the crew of the Enterprise, but set in the 23rd century," Scott said. "But then, he'd have read about Clan Short, too?"

"No," Sean answered. *"He knows everything about Star Trek, and I mean way more than even you guys, but unlike you, he'd never heard of Clan Short. Or at least, only read the term "CSU"."*

Tyler added, *"He did read one small segment of a "CSU" story, but he doesn't know the name of it, nor that it WAS a Clan Short story... And until he works it out, I can't say either."*

Kyle piped up then. *"The important part is that he's a real mess emotionally inside. He's really fragile. He's got real problems believing he's free, not a slave any more, and that he won't be hurt again. There's also some blank bits in his memories. And his mind doesn't work like a humans*

-- not at all. He has a chip in his neck that is making him seem and be fully human; yet he's not. He's at least half human - and half something else."

"There's quite a bit more," Sean started to continue, *"but that's the key points."*

Tyler finished with, *"His trust is totally shot, basically. He is going to fixate on those whom he trusts, especially Cory and Sean. Take your time and don't push him. Also, he's not going to act thirteen very often at first. He'll either be very young, or very old in what he does and says. It's all emotional, though. He'll settle and grow soon enough, I hope."*

Most of the guys simply shrugged at that. *"No sweat, dude,"* Adam said, speaking for them all, *"Just another brother to love and take care of as far as I'm concerned." The others nodded emphatically at that statement.*

Ty continued, *"However, and this is really serious. Do not just walk up to him and hug him. Be friendly, be loving and talk to him, yet do not make any sudden moves at him until he trusts you. You know the signs, just as we know with Timmy, for example. We know when you want to be picked up and hugged, don't we, Gizmo?"*

Timmy grinned and nodded.

Ty smiled and continued, *"Do the same with Joel. If you think he'd like a hug, then offer to hug him, and then let him come to you. If he trusts you, he will."*

Kyle, sitting on the ground with Levi pulled onto his lap, also spoke up, *"It wouldn't be a good idea to pull any pranks on him or tease him as we do each other. He'd take what you say and do at face value and act on it, believing he would get punished or worse for not doing so. Also, he's never played before, not with others or with toys. He's going to find much of our stuff, games and toys fascinating, so will probably play with whatever and whoever is near."*

"He'd play with our toys with us too, Unca Kyle?" asked Timmy excitedly. Paul and Ricky also looked on expectantly.

"Yes, I'd say so," he smiled at the kids. *"He'd love to be invited to play with you, and especially as he doesn't fear you munchkins, Gizmo."*

He then addressed everyone again, *"Just don't tease him until he starts teasing first and then only return the teasing to the level that he does. As for the pranks? Same... if he pranks you, then return them to the level he uses. Go no further. If you do, you could break the trust you've gained."*

Everyone again nodded in agreement, while Justy turned to Cory, *"Do we know how Joel is right now? Can we call in to see how things are going?"*

"I was about to," Cory got up and came towards the screen. *"I was told that the Doc would tell us when he'd began removal of the chip, but I've heard nothing yet."*

He hit a button to split the screen into two, and started to connect a call to the infirmary. *"Doc, do you have a moment?"*

After a few seconds the Doc appeared, *"Yes, Cory. I was just about to call you anyway."*

"How are things with Joel?"

"We've dealt with all the minor things like bruises and cracked ribs. We did open up the area where the chip is so that Ark could take readings and run a few reverse engineering protocols on it. Just waiting on Ark to say what to do next. The 'chip' is still unidentified, but the readings show it's at least twelve years old. If it is Vulcan, then it's unlike any Vulcan Tech I've ever seen."

Xain asked, "Doctor, can you send your current findings to me, please? I will send the files onto my father for analysis. He may be able to find out if it is of Vulcan origin or not."

"Sure, Xain. Files will be sent in a few moments, and thanks."

Vincent saw Antonio come up behind Doc Austin and tap him on the arm, *"I think Ark has things ready. Shall I ask him to proceed? He thinks he can do the shut down by remote."*

<He?>

"Hush, Ark," was the giggled response.

Doc Austin laughed, *"Okay Ark, if you're sure, go for it. I'll get to the monitor here."* He moved away from the view screen, totally forgetting he'd left it on, and Antonio went to Joel's side with a tricorder in hand and started scanning. Due to the position of the view screen, Joel was just out of sight.

After a few minutes the Doc said, *"Things are looking good. There was a brief flush of enzymes for a moment... wait... oh God, 'Tonio, grab that hypospray quick!"* Alarms started sounding from the biobed and the monitors scattered about.

Vincent put an arm around Lehman as he watched the screen with frustration, knowing that there was nothing he could do but watch.

<Joel's nutrient reserves are dropping at an alarming rate. I recommend connecting him to an IV with the following supplements.>

A nearby screen started to fill with instructions that Antonio was quick to study. Doc Austin used the hypospray that had been handed to him, then turned back to the monitor with Joel's readings. He then noticed that the view screen was still active and filled with concerned boys faces.

He rushed over, *"Sorry, guys. I'll call when I can."* And the Infirmary half of the screen Vincent was watching in horror went dark.

He saw Kyle and Ty look quickly at each other, then they 'ported out of CIC in the blink of an eye, taking Levi with them.

Sean was holding Cory's hand tightly as he had moved to the screen.

Cory looked at him, concern evident in both their faces, before they turned to the rest.

"Guys, I'm sure everything will be okay, and Ark is watching over them in there," Cory assured them, although Vincent could hear the worry in his voice.

"Let's get to the kitchen and our snack. Doc will keep us updated." The Clan got to their feet and made their way out of CIC.

Vincent heard a small beep, and Xain formally stated, "Patriarch, the files I asked the Doctor to send have arrived. Shall I relay them on to 'he who is my father' with your approval?"

"Please, Xain, and thank him for us, no matter the result." Cory responded with a small smile, *"Oh, Mom asked that I invite y'all over for breakfast tomorrow. Can you check with Allen and Billy and get back to her?"*

"I'll go ask now!" Grinning, Kevin rushed away from the screen, to the puzzled looks from the others. Kenny just rolled his eyes.

A few moments later, he came running back in, "Sure thing, Cory! Billy don't know yet, but Poppa said we'll be there; he'll tell you what time we'll be there later," he then turned, hugged his startled twin quickly and kissed him before rushing back out of the room again.

"What the hell's gotten into Kev?" wondered Jake.

Kenny shrugged, still looking at the doorway Kevin had just sped through.

Jake then turned back to the screen, "Dad is bringing these guys back later, so I'm sure he'll let ya know what time we'll be there then, Cory."

Cory waved and said while shaking his head at Kev's behaviour, *"Okay, thanks. Seeya then, guys. CIC out."*

"Thompson Residence out." Xain replied with a hint of a smile.

The connection terminated.

Vincent slowly released Lehman from the hug as he considered what they had just witnessed.

As the group surrounding the terminal dispersed, Vincent walked over to Lawrence to explain what he and Lehman had been doing.

"Omigod!" Vincent heard, and turned to see Jude staring at the two of them.

"Scott, Galen, look! Larry and Vinny -- remember?"

"We really don't like those nicknames," Lawrence said slowly.

"Not in *this* universe, you don't," Galen said. "But Jude's right."

"On our way here Sunday, while we were still in our own universe," Jude explained slowly, "the guys' uncle took us to the Kennedy Space Center to see the exhibits."

"Where?" asked Kenny.

"Cape Canaveral was what it used to be called," Kurt said. "It was renamed after President Kennedy. It's where NASA was located."

"Your world had a NASA?" Deacon asked. "Here it was what they used for a cover for the help we got from the Vulcans, before they went public. What was it in your world?"

"Um, they were the government agency that launched satellites and shuttles into near Earth orbit."

"But who was in charge of the rest of the space program?" Jake asked.

"That *was* the space program," Jude answered. "Anyway, while we were there we met a couple and their two sons -- Joe and Peg Bowers and their sons Larry and Vinny. Vinny was a space nut."

"That sounds like my little brother." Lawrence said with a fond chuckle.

"Watch it, *Larry*." Vincent said with a teasing smile.

The group of boys surrounding them smiled at the comment and the expression of brotherly affection that it demonstrated.

"Lehman and I really need to get back to the ship right now. I don't know how long this is going to take." Vincent said to Lawrence seriously.

"Don't worry about it, Vince. We're all Clan here, we know how it is." Lawrence said with assurance.

"As soon as we're done with everything, we'll go back to Billy's." Vincent said carefully.

"I'll see you over there." Lawrence said softly, then thought to add, "Be careful."

"Don't worry, Lawrence. We're not doing anything dangerous." Vincent said with a smile at his brother's concern for him. "Besides, I've got Lehman to protect me."

Lawrence glanced at Lehman and smiled.

"Manu, Vincent and I are ready to teleport." Lehman said into his bracelet.

"On your command." Ship responded immediately.

"See ya in a little bit." Vincent said as he moved to Lehman's side and stood up straight in his 'transport' posture.

"Teleport."

* * * * *

As the teleportal stream cleared, Vincent and Lehman found the group around the table staring at them.

"Hey guys! What did we miss?" Vincent asked casually.

"Tan was just telling us about all his brothers and sisters." Dylan said with an amused smile.

"Oh? Rad's never talked to me about his family." Vincent said as he took a seat at the table.

Lehman automatically took the seat at Vincent's side.

"You'll have to tell them, Tan. There's no way I can remember." Dylan said with a grin.

Tan looked shyly at Vincent and Lehman, then said, "I was just telling about how my mom comes up with some really weird, cool names."

"Yeah. I love Rad's name, even if he hates it." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"Rayne Beau was one of her better ones." Tan said with a grin.

"Go through the list." Dylan said with a smile, then turned to Vincent and said, "You've got to hear this."

"I guess I'll start at the top." Tan said quietly, and Vincent got the sense that he was enjoying being the center of attention.

After a moment to look around the table, Tan said, "Rayne Beau, D'Artagnan, Shayd LaRouche, Shadoe Laurent, Michaelangelo Gustav, Allegra Countessa Moreau, OliviAnna Pfenix-Ascending, and Jess."

"Jess?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Jess." Tan said with amusement at his stunned reaction.

Vincent looked at Tan with question, silently asking him to explain.

"It isn't short for anything and she doesn't have a middle name." Tan said simply.

"Do you have a middle name?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Yeah. But when I get my last name changed, I'm going to see if I can get rid of it." Tan said frankly.

"It can't be that bad." Dylan said hesitantly.

"Michelle." Tan said with a challenging look at Dylan.

"Oh." Dylan responded with a pained look.

"My mom says that, in France, Michelle is a perfectly acceptable boys name." Tan said with an ironic chuckle. "I had to be the one to break it to her... we're not in France."

"I don't know. D'Artagnan Michelle Radovanovich... it kind of flows." Drake said in a considering voice.

"So does a sewer." Tan said dryly.

Vincent chuckled at the response, then said, "We should probably think about getting you guys home. It's getting kinda late and Tan has some calls to make."

"It's not that late." Tan said immediately.

Vincent looked at Tan curiously, then asked, "Where do you guys live? Rad just gave us transporter coordinates."

"Just outside of Modesto, California." Drake answered seriously.

"Oh. Okay. You're on West coast time and I'm on East coast time." Vincent said with a smile.

"Trach Manja Vincent." Captain Rasch said, to gain his attention. "If there is time, I would like to take your guests on a tour of my ship."

Vincent smiled at the captain and said, "I think we'd all enjoy that and as far as I know, we all have plenty of time."

Captain Rasch looked around the table to see if anyone had any objection, then slowly stood.

"Wow, you're really tall." Tan said as he looked up.

Captain Rasch smiled at the statement, then gestured toward the door.

* * * * *

"What next?" Lehman asked when the teleportal beam finally cleared.

"Bed. Sleep." Vincent said as he led the way to the stairs.

"Vincent?" Deacon asked as he leaned over the railing to look down the staircase.

"Hey Deacon. What's up?" Vincent asked casually.

"Not much. I just wanted to know if you guys wanted to go to breakfast at the Short Compound in the morning or if you'd rather sleep in." Deacon said seriously.

"I guess if everyone else is going, we should go too." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Billy is going, but me and Lawrence are going to stay here." Deacon said frankly.

"Well, if you guys are sleeping in, I think we will too. It's been a really long day." Vincent said honestly.

"Sounds good. Then we won't wake you up in the morning. Just come downstairs whenever you're ready for breakfast." Deacon said with a smile.

"Yeah. Thanks, Deacon. Have a good sleep." Vincent said as he stopped just outside his bedroom door.

"You too. Both of you." Deacon said gently, then walked into his bedroom.

* * * * *

"So what are we doing tomorrow?" Lehman asked as he started undressing.

"Sleeping in." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman chuckled and said, "Besides that."

Vincent stopped to consider for a moment, then said, "I'd kind of like to get some new clothes... I mean, for both of us."

"Will my Kimber account work here?" Lehman asked carefully.

"Yes. It should work anywhere in the Federation." Vincent said as he pulled back the covers and sat on the bed.

"Good. Is that it then, clothes shopping?" Lehman asked curiously as he also sat down, exactly mirroring Vincent's position.

"I think so. Sleep, shop... After today, that sounds like plenty." Vincent said with a smile.

"Good night Vincent." Lehman said softly.

"Good night Lehman."

Chapter 50

"OFF WITH HIS HEAD!"

Vincent sat up suddenly and looked around.

"I couldn't resist," Brakkii chuckled, "That was my payback for making me Queen."

Vincent wanted to be upset at Brakkii for waking him up so abruptly, but found that he couldn't help but smile.

"We're going to need to make sure you have a very short visit tonight. You need to get some good, restful sleep or it's going to start making you sick," Brakkii said seriously.

"I noticed that I was feeling more tired than usual, today," Vincent said as he got up from the beautifully elegant bed.

"Journeys to this realm are often tiring for travelers. It's much like being in your waking world," Brakkii said thoughtfully, then looked Vincent in the eyes and continued, "But it's even more so in your case."

"Since time moves the same for me in both universes," Vincent said in an uncertain voice.

"That's right. Most other travelers get a few hours of good, restful sleep after visiting here," Brakkii said casually.

Vincent nodded, then hesitantly asked, "So how is Thomas?"

"Walk with me," Brakkii said, as he walked to the door of the bedroom.

"Brakkii? I can handle it. Please, just tell me. How is he?" Vincent asked as he walked to Brakkii's side.

Rather than answer the question, Brakkii simply opened the door and stepped through.

* * * * *

Vincent blinked his eyes, then looked around in surprise.

When he had stepped through the doorway, he was suddenly standing in a grassy meadow, a few feet from a babbling brook.

After a moment to adjust to the new surroundings, Vincent turned to Brakkii and quietly said, "Brakkii, please just tell me what happened to Thomas. I know you said that there wasn't much you could do for him."

Brakkii gestured downward and Vincent followed the movement.

Vincent was amazed to see Thomas, fast asleep by the stream, with a contented smile on his face.

A smile was Vincent's first reaction, but it soon gave way to concern as he turned to Brakkii and asked, "Is this an illusion?"

"No." Brakkii answered immediately. "In some sense of the word, Thomas is the most 'real' thing in the entire realm."

"So he's healed? I mean, for real?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Brakkii nodded with a joyful smile as he watched Thomas sleep.

Vincent followed Brakkii's gaze and felt himself also begin to smile.

"There's something I don't understand." Vincent said in prelude.

"There are many things I don't understand." Brakkii said honestly.

Vincent smiled at the response, then continued, "You're a master of dreams and illusions, so why don't you make yourself, you know, just not be the queen?"

"Because the rules that govern this place weren't made by me... They were made by you." Brakkii said honestly.

"You mentioned something about that before, but I don't understand how I did that." Vincent said frankly.

"Before your influence, this dream realm was fluid, reforming itself to adapt to each dreamer's needs and expectations. One night you went to sleep, and your dreaming mind found this dream realm, then you brought me here." Brakkii said carefully.

Vincent nodded that he understood what Brakkii was saying so far.

"Look around you, Vincent. This world is beautiful. It's filled with danger and excitement," Brakkii said seriously. "It deserves to survive."

Vincent thought about the words for a moment, then ventured to say, "So you mean, I created the realm?"

"No. But you made it what it is today." Brakkii said carefully. "Because you dreamed it, the realm has become a place where the broken can be healed, where the lost can find hope and where the innocent are protected and cherished."

"Wow!" Vincent said with surprise.

Brakkii chuckled at the response.

"When I realized what a special place this really is, I decided that I would use my abilities to maintain the realm after you left. I can operate and make changes within the boundaries that you set up, but there are some things about the realm that I cannot change." Brakkii said seriously.

"Like you being Queen," Vincent said with a nod.

Brakkii chuckled again and said, "Exactly. If I were to try to make alterations to the fabric of what the Realm is, I would change it's essence and it would no longer be the dream world that you created. Therefore, I will continue to be Queen, if it means that this world can continue to exist for others to enjoy."

"Okay. I think I understand." Vincent said gently as he looked at Thomas sleeping, again.

"You might also think of it this way. If I had chosen to change the realm, chances are that Thomas wouldn't be here right now." Brakkii said quietly, "He would not have had a chance to survive."

"What do you mean?" Vincent asked curiously, turning to face Brakkii again.

"Haven't you noticed that you seem to have a tendency to meet other versions of yourself while you're here?" Brakkii asked simply.

"Yeah." Vincent said thoughtfully, "I guess I do."

"This realm exists outside your universe and is attuned to your dreaming mind, so other sleeping versions of yourself are drawn to this place when they're feeling troubled." Brakkii said frankly.

"Oh. Okay. I didn't even think about it." Vincent said with surprise.

Brakkii smiled and said, "It's simply part of the mechanism that allows your sleeping mind to draw on the experiences of the alternate versions of yourself. Among your people, it is one of the sources of innovation and inspiration."

"Because we're able to see what's happened to ourselves in alternate universes, where things happened differently," Vincent said distantly.

"Exactly. And in the case of people like Danas and Venad, they can draw on that inspiration consciously, since they enjoy a dual existence." Brakkii said frankly.

"Dual existence?" Vincent asked curiously.

"You are, what the people here call, a traveler. When you sleep, your dream self becomes active and appears here. Danas and Venad's dream selves are always here, their minds are functioning in both places simultaneously," Brakkii said seriously.

"You mean that Danas is a real person, somewhere?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"Oh yes. I don't think your people have met the Paku, but Danas and his entire species have the capacity to maintain a dream consciousness." Brakkii said, then looked at Vincent consideringly for a moment before continuing, "Imagine that you were able to carry your favorite video game with you and play it whenever you wanted to. It's something like that."

"It sounds fun... and distracting." Vincent said in thought.

"They don't often get distracted by it. It's just a fact of life for them." Brakkii said with a shrug, "Their waking selves are aware of the things that happen here, but their dream selves remain completely unaware of their waking lives."

Vincent nodded that he understood, as he stared at Thomas, sleeping peacefully. Finally, he asked, "Since he's healed, is he going to go back to his home, now?"

Brakkii shook his head as he said, "Sadly, Thomas doesn't have a home to return to."

"What happened?" Vincent asked with concern.

"There was a huge battle, and several universes were... pruned away from your universe. A few of the stronger universes stabilized and became independent." Brakkii said seriously, then in a quieter voice he said, "Thomas' universe... failed."

"So his universe is gone?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Nearly. There is an anti-time burst erasing the existence as we speak. In a day... maybe less... it will be gone." Brakkii said frankly.

"What's going to happen to Thomas?" Vincent asked with concern.

"He'll stay here." Brakkii said simply.

Vincent thought about what Brakkii was saying, not liking the sound of it at all.

"What's wrong? He's happy here," Brakkii asked quietly, honestly puzzled by Vincent's troubled expression.

"What was the point of saving him then? If he isn't going to grow or learn or improve or contribute to the lives of other people, then it's the same as if he was dead." Vincent said darkly.

"He'll never age a day while he's here. He'll be able to have wonderful, heroic adventures." Brakkii said in an imploring voice.

"His life will be a dream." Vincent said in a whisper.

"Exactly." Brakkii said with a smile.

"Humans weren't meant to live that way," Vincent said, as he looked into Brakkii's eyes. "We need to have challenges and struggles and sometimes even be hurt, so we can get stronger and wiser."

"But after all the suffering that he's had to face, he deserves to have a wonderful life." Brakkii said in an urging tone.

"No. He would have been better off dying, if this is how he's going to live. This place is a great place to visit, and it's perfect for someone like you who lives in illusions and dreams. But Thomas needs to exist in the real world so he can have the chance to become something better than what he is right now." Vincent said firmly.

"Brakkii?" Thomas asked as he peeked open one eye.

"Good morning, Thomas, did you have a good sleep?" Brakkii asked gently.

"Yeah." Thomas said happily, then added, "The best ever."

"I'm glad." Brakkii said with a tender smile. "Look who's here to visit you."

"Vincent?" Thomas asked with delight.

"Hi Thomas. How are you doing?" Vincent asked with a smile at his alternate self.

Thomas jumped up and pulled Vincent into a tight hug.

"Thank you, Vincent. Thank you for saving me," Thomas said with unrestrained joy.

"I'm glad you're alright," Vincent said with a chuckle as he returned the hug.

Thomas finally released Vincent and quickly asked, "Are you on your ship sailing among the stars right now?"

Vincent chuckled at Thomas' boundless energy, and gently said, "No, I'm on Earth right now. We arrived this morning."

"I went to a place called the Valley of Cuddles and Snuggles! It was the best place I've ever been in my whole life!" Thomas said with excitement.

"I've heard of it, but I haven't had the chance to visit there, yet." Vincent said gently.

"We could go now!" Thomas said happily.

"I'm afraid that Vincent won't be able to go. He has to go get some good, restful sleep tonight." Brakkii said frankly.

Thomas looked at Vincent with question.

"It's nothing to worry about, Thomas, but Brakkii is right. If I'm awake in my world all day and awake in this world all night, I'm going to get really tired and that will end up making me sick." Vincent said frankly.

"I guess I understand." Thomas said quietly, then quickly asked, "Are you going to come back to visit me tomorrow night?"

"I don't know." Vincent answered honestly, then turned to Brakkii and asked, "Am I?"

"Yes. You'll be able to return here whenever you want to, for as long as I am here," Brakkii said with a smile.

"How long is that going to be?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Vincent, I've been existing without a purpose for countless millennia. Now, in this place, I can help the damaged be healed and the worried find peace." Brakkii said seriously, then added in a gentler voice, "I'm home."

Vincent smiled at the statement, remembering how sad and alone Brakkii had been when they first met.

"Have a good sleep, Vincent," Thomas said gently, then quickly added, "Brakkii said that today we're going to Bald Knob mountain to return the Scepter of Eros to the golden dragon."

Vincent looked at Brakkii with question.

"Some adventurers 'found' it in the dragon's hoard, yesterday. The golden dragon gets a little bit testy when her treasure is taken. It's best to keep her happy." Brakkii said shyly.

"I'm glad that you're not picking on her, just because she's a dragon." Vincent said with a smile.

"Oh no. She's nice... Usually." Brakkii said hesitantly, then continued in a conspiratorial whisper, "She'll never admit it, but I think she enjoys the attention."

Vincent chuckled and said, "Enjoy your adventure. I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Bye Vincent. Sweet dreams." Thomas said with a joyous smile.

"And sweet realities." Brakkii added gently.

"You too." Vincent said, then felt himself relax as the world seemed to fade out around him.

* * * * *

Vincent slowly came awake, feeling completely relaxed.

He opened his eyes to see the predawn light just beginning to peek into the room.

After a moment to just lie there and enjoy the serenity, Vincent realized what had awakened him.

With lazy slowness, he sat up and saw Lehman sleeping peacefully at his right side.

As he turned to try to scoot to the left to get out of the bed without waking him, he froze at what he saw.

Vincent had to fight to hold in his joy at the sight of Thomas, fast asleep at his right.

Although he would like to have stayed and watch Thomas sleep, just to enjoy the moment, Vincent's bladder was telling him that he had some rather pressing business to attend to.

So Vincent slowly and quietly got out from under the covers, then crawled to the foot of the bed, being very careful not to disturb either of his bed partners.

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Once Vincent had taken care of business, he paused to decide what he would like to do next.

Normally, he would go to have a workout just after waking, but one look at the bed made him consider otherwise.

Vincent went to his bundle of clothes and retrieved his medicine bag, then carefully climbed into the bed to take his place between Thomas and Lehman.

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There wasn't any sound or movement, but something caused Vincent to open his eyes and glance at Thomas beside him, looking at him alertly.

"Good morning, Thomas," Vincent whispered in a smile.

"Good morning," Thomas whispered in return. "I'm sorry if I interrupted you while you were practicing your religion."

Vincent looked down at the medicine bag that he was holding in his hands, then back at Thomas and said, "Don't worry about it, I was just meditating. How are you feeling?"

After a moment to consider, Thomas said, "Good, I think."

"Good. I'm glad to see that you're here." Vincent whispered with a genuine smile.

"Thanks... um, where's the bathroom?" Thomas asked shyly.

"Right over there." Vincent said as he pointed.

Thomas got out from under the covers and scurried away.

Vincent watched with amusement and thought to himself, 'Benny was right, I do have a cute butt.'

* * * * *

Thomas rushed across the room and got back under the covers to snuggle in next to Vincent.

"The last time I talked to you, you said you were on Earth, is that where we are now?" Thomas asked curiously.

"Yeah. In Orlando." Vincent said gently.

Thomas looked around at the room, then said, "Your house is a lot nicer than mine was."

"This isn't my home. I'm just staying here for a few days while I'm visiting." Vincent said quietly.

"Where is your home then?" Thomas asked curiously.

Vincent remembered his conversation the day before and said, "I guess, for now, my home is a place called Camp Little Eagle."

At Thomas' look of confusion, Vincent said, "I'm sure you'll get to see it later."

Thomas slowly nodded as he looked around.

Vincent could almost 'hear' Thomas' thoughts as expressions of worry and doubt flitted across his face.

"Everything is going to be fine," Vincent assured him.

Thomas looked at Vincent with question and seemed to be silently asking for more assurance.

"I can't really tell you what's going to happen next, because, honestly, I don't know." Vincent said in prelude. "But what I do know is that everything is going to be fine. I have too many friends that will help us, for things to turn out any other way."

Thomas sat silently and pondered the words for a moment before quietly saying, "I guess the first thing that we'll need to do is get me signed up with the CD."

"CD? What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Civil Defense... So I can get rations." Thomas explained slowly. "I don't want anyone to have to do without stuff because of me."

"Um, okay. I don't really know anything about any Civil Defense, but we don't have any kind of rationing here." Vincent said slowly.

Thomas blinked with surprise at the statement, then asked, "Does that mean that you have enough land to have your own garden and livestock?"

"No." Vincent said cautiously, just beginning to realize how different Thomas' world must be. "We go to the store and buy food when we need it."

"Oh," Thomas said thoughtfully, "I remember Grandpa Alvin talking about when they used to be able to do that."

"That's just the way it is here. I'm sure you'll get used to it." Vincent said quietly, not wanting Thomas to feel that it was that big of a difference.

Thomas slowly nodded, obviously trying to assimilate the new information.

Vincent considered what might lie ahead for Thomas, and decided that there was something that he needed to deal with to make Thomas' life easier down the line.

"What would you think if you knew two guys who were in love?" Vincent asked carefully.

Thomas blinked with confusion as he tried to decipher the unusual question.

"I guess I'd be happy for them." Thomas said slowly.

From Thomas' reluctant and confused tone, Vincent decided to clarify, "Two guys, in love... with each other."

"Oh!" Thomas said with comprehension. "Dad talked to me about that."

Vincent didn't feel particularly assured by Thomas' words and waited anxiously for him to continue.

Thomas noticed that Vincent was waiting for more of an answer and said, "What would I think? I don't know for sure. I mean, Dad said that it can get complicated and really confusing and that people sometimes make mistakes because they get lust and love confused. But I guess, if I knew that the guys you're talking about are really in love, then I'd be happy for them."

Vincent let out a gust of breath in relief, happy to know that Thomas wasn't going to have to deal with 'that'.

"Why do you ask?" Thomas asked quietly.

"Oh, some of the guys that you'll probably be meeting today are gay and I just wanted to make sure that you wouldn't have any problem with them." Vincent said with a smile.

"Gay? You mean, like happy?" Thomas asked slowly.

"No, well, not exactly." Vincent said with a grin. "That just means guys who like other guys."

Thomas considered for a moment, then smiled as he said, "I like that. Gay. It sounds really friendly. Did you come up with that?"

Vincent chuckled as he said, "No. Someone else thought of it."

Thomas nodded, then asked, "Why did you think I'd have a problem with, um... gay people?"

"Some people think that it's wrong. They hate gays and call them names and even beat them up and stuff." Vincent said frankly.

"Why?" Thomas asked with confusion.

Vincent thought for a moment, and finally answered, "That's just what they believe. I guess maybe it's what they were taught."

"What kind of an ignorant butthole would believe something like that?"

"Some people do." Vincent said quietly, "I just wanted to be sure that you didn't feel that way, because if you did, people might not like you."

"Yeah, well, anyone that is stupid enough to believe something like that deserves to have people not like him." Thomas said frankly.

"Yeah, well..."

"You love who you love, and it's no one else's business. I mean, what kind of a moron can't figure that out?" Thomas asked bluntly.

"Never mind." Vincent muttered. "It doesn't matter."

Thomas finally picked up on Vincent's discomfort and looked at him curiously before cautiously asking, "Is there something you need to tell me about you?"

Vincent blinked with surprise, then quickly said, "No, it's nothing like that. I just wanted to be sure that it wouldn't be a problem if you met some gay guys later today."

Thomas looked at Vincent suspiciously for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"I'm not..." Vincent began to say when he was interrupted.

"Whatever you say, Vincent." Thomas said assuringly. "I believe you."

Vincent hung his head, knowing that no matter what he said next, Thomas would believe whatever he wanted to believe.

"Well, as nice as it is to lie here in bed, we should probably get up and get the day started," Vincent said, desperately wanting to change the subject.

"Yeah. I want to help you with the chores," Thomas said seriously, "I'm good in the garden and I know how to take care of most kinds of animals."

Vincent blinked with surprise, then said, "We don't have anything like that here. I don't think there are any kind of chores that need to be done."

"No chores?" Thomas asked with surprise, "Even after the bombs dropped and we were stuck inside our bomb shelter, we still had chores to do."

"We'll ask if there's anything to do when we go downstairs." Vincent said quietly.

Thomas nodded his agreement to the statement.

"I guess we'd better wake Lehman, so we can get started." Vincent said as he turned, then noticed that the bed beside him was empty.

Vincent looked around, then broke into a smile as he realized what was going on.

"I know you didn't get out of bed, Lehman. You can stop hiding, now," Vincent said with a grin.

"I just wanted to give you a few minutes alone to talk." Lehman's voice said, seemingly from nowhere.

"Who's that?" Thomas asked with surprise, as he scooted over in the bed to look around Vincent.

"This is Lehman." Vincent said with a grin, then added, "Lehman, this is our newest brother, Thomas."

As Thomas watched with wonder, the rumpled sheets and blanket beside Vincent began to reform and finally resolved into a human form, his form.

"What?" Thomas asked in a gasp.

"Lehman's just showing off." Vincent said with an amused smile, then continued more seriously, "Lehman can change himself to look like anyone he wants to. But except for that, he's just exactly like us."

Thomas stared at Lehman, not knowing what to think.

"Well, I'm also telepathic." Lehman said frankly.

"Yeah, that too." Vincent said dismissively.

Thomas blinked, then slowly asked, "Tele... what?"

"Telepathic. That just means that he can read your mind. But he'll only do it if you tell him that it's okay with you." Vincent finished with assurance.

"He's a mind reader? I've heard of magicians doing stuff like that, but I thought it was all just some kind of a trick." Thomas said slowly.

Vincent nodded and said, "Yeah, there used to be people who did that, but now there are people who can do it for real."

"Can you do it?" Thomas asked curiously.

"No," Vincent said simply, "I've learned how to talk to someone who is telepathic, but I can't do it myself."

Thomas blinked, obviously overwhelmed by the new information.

"We can talk about it later. It isn't anything you need to worry about now." Lehman said as he got out of the bed and went to the bathroom.

"Why can Lehman do the telewhatsis thing and you can't?" Thomas asked curiously.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Because Lehman isn't Human, and he's not from Earth."

"He isn't?" Thomas asked with surprise.

"No. But he's a really good person, so it doesn't matter where he's from." Vincent said with a shrug.

"I guess not. I just always thought that someone from another world would be little and green." Thomas said frankly.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Well, I guess some of the races that the Federation has encountered are little, and some of them are green. But I can't think of any that are little AND green."

"You mean that there are more aliens, different from Lehman?" Thomas asked in wonder.

"Yeah. Lots." Vincent said with a grin, then smiled as Lehman walked back to the bed.

"What do you guys want to do first, breakfast or baths?" Lehman asked as he climbed back into the bed.

"Breakfast," Vincent and Thomas said immediately.

"I should have known," Lehman said with a chuckle.

Thomas looked around, then hesitantly said, "I don't have any clothes."

"Oh. Yeah." Vincent said, as he considered what they should do.

"Thomas could wear my casual clothes. They're clean. And I can wear my Soleen-Avalla robe." Lehman said simply.

"Yeah. That'd probably work... except for shoes." Vincent said slowly.

"As long as I can change my form, I don't need shoes... or clothes, for that matter." Lehman said seriously.

"Oh, yeah. I guess you don't." Vincent said with a smile.

"So, do we have a plan?" Lehman asked, as he looked at the two versions of Vincent before him.

"Dress. Eat. Bathe." Vincent said with a nod.

Thomas nodded his agreement to the plan.

* * * * *

"Wow. This place is really nice," Thomas said as they walked out of the bedroom.

"Yeah. I didn't get to see much of it last night. It really is beautiful." Lehman said as he also looked around.

"So you're new here too?" Thomas asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I arrived on Earth yesterday morning. I guess this place is as new to me as it is to you," Lehman said with a smile.

"Oh, well it's good to know that I'm not the only one who's getting used to it." Thomas said as he followed Vincent down the stairs.

* * * * *

Deacon turned at the sound and stared, as he saw three identical boys walking down the stairs into the living room.

"You're like an amoeba, aren't you? Every now and then, do you just divide and create another of yourself?" Deacon asked in wonder.

"It looks that way, doesn't it?" Lehman asked with a chuckle.

"Deacon, this is Thomas." Vincent said with a warm smile.

"Hi." Deacon said cautiously, not quite sure which boy was which.

"Hi." Thomas said, then slowly added, "You're probably the prettiest guy I've ever seen."

"Oh, um. Thanks, I think." Deacon said hesitantly, then looked at Lehman and asked, "Where did he come from?"

"You'd have to ask Vincent." Lehman said frankly.

"I thought I was asking Vincent. You guys should really wear name tags or something." Deacon said in an overwhelmed tone.

"I'm Vincent, and I wear the Clan Short crest." Vincent said as he pointed at the crest on his Soleen-Avalla robe.

"Yeah, and Thomas is wearing the regular clothes." Lehman said, glad that Vincent had thought of an easy way to distinguish them.

"Okay. Thanks." Deacon said slowly, then faced Vincent and asked, "So, is he another Chameloid or what?"

Vincent chuckled and said, "No. He's the me from an alternate universe."

"Oh? Like those guys were talking about at dinner last night?" Deacon asked with surprise.

"Yeah, like that, except that the guys were talking about someone named Vinny. This is Thomas." Vincent said seriously.

After a moment of thought, Deacon asked, "The universe isn't going to explode or anything if you two touch each other, will it?"

Vincent poked Thomas' shoulder with his finger, then said, "Nope. It don't look like it."

At Deacon's look of surprise at the action, Vincent explained, "The worst that would happen is that it might mess up our quantum resonance frequencies a bit, and since mine is already messed up, I know it's not a big huge deal, unless there's about to be a time split or something like that."

"Huh?" Deacon asked in confusion.

Vincent giggled at the reaction, then said, "It doesn't matter. We'll just need to talk to one of the Mikyvis or maybe that John Smith kid when we're at the Short compound next time. I bet they'll be able to fix it in, like, two seconds."

"Oh, okay," Deacon said slowly, accepting that Vincent knew what he was talking about.

"It's on the table Deke." Lawrence said, as he walked into the living room from the kitchen.

"Lor!" Thomas squeaked with surprise, then ran to Lawrence to pull him into a big hug.

"What's wrong, Vince?" Lawrence asked with concern, then noticed Vincent and Lehman watching him.

Slowly, Lawrence looked from Vincent to Lehman, then down to the third incarnation of his brother, who was now crying tears of joy into his chest.

"Lawrence, meet Thomas," Vincent said quietly.

"Nice to meet you." Lawrence said hesitantly, knowing that his words weren't being heard by the crying boy in his arms.

"Thomas." Vincent called, trying to gain his attention, without success.

There was no reaction as Thomas hugged Lawrence for all he was worth.

"Thomas!" Vincent said, more loudly, still trying to gain his attention.

Finally, Thomas pulled away from Lawrence's chest enough to look at Vincent curiously.

"I'd like for you to meet our brother, Lawrence." Vincent said gently.

The expression on Thomas' face was nothing short of complete joy as he said, "Now I know I'm going to love it here. I got my big brother back."

"What happened to YOUR Lawrence?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Lor and a bunch of other high school kids went overseas to work as support for the troops. You know, doing cooking and cleaning and stuff." Thomas said, not relaxing his hold on Lawrence for an instant.

Vincent shared a look of concern with Lehman, not knowing if it might upset Thomas, to ask him to continue.

"We figured that when the bombs started falling that he... well, we didn't know for sure..." Thomas trailed off, then renewed his hug on Lawrence, full force.

Even though Lawrence didn't know what was going on, he knew enough.

"Hold on, Thomas." Lawrence said as he took hold of Thomas' arms to free himself from the hug.

Thomas looked up at Lawrence with wide eyes, obviously feeling rejected by the action.

As soon as Lawrence had coaxed Thomas to let go, he went down on one knee, then pulled him into a full warm hug.

"That's better," Lawrence said gently.

"I love you, Lor." Thomas said as he returned the hug.

The room went silent as everyone watched the two boys hugging.

A growling sound from Vincent's stomach broke the silence and Lehman started to chuckle.

"We'd better feed that thing, before it attacks." Lehman said with a grin.

"I just made breakfast for me and Deke. If you'll hold on a minute I can make something for you guys too." Lawrence said with a smile.

"You don't need to do that. We can get our own," Vincent said casually.

"Come on, Thomas. Let's go into the kitchen so we can eat." Lawrence said gently as he released Thomas and stood.

"I missed you so much." Thomas whispered past his tears of joy as he put an arm around Lawrence to walk with him.

Lawrence leaned down to kiss Thomas on the cheek, then urged him to continue walking.

"I really need some coffee." Vincent said as he started toward the kitchen.

* * * * *

Thomas' eyes were as wide as saucers as he looked around the kitchen.

"You must be really rich!" Thomas said as he looked at Deacon with wonder.

"Not me. But I think Billy does alright." Deacon said as he sat down at the table. "We never really talked about how much money he has."

"Will I be living here with you?" Thomas asked hopefully.

Deacon and Lawrence shared a look of surprise at Thomas' question.

"Later today, we're going to introduce you to someone named Cory, after he's talked to you, we'll figure out where you'll be living." Vincent said gently, then asked, "Where's the coffee?"

"About two inches from your hand, in that canister labeled COFFEE." Deacon said with a huge grin.

"How do you expect anyone to be able to find things, when you hide them like that?" Vincent asked in a stern voice, winking at Deacon as he started making his coffee.

"That's just the way that Billy does things. It takes a while, but you'll get used to it." Lawrence said, with a smile at his brother.

"What would you like for breakfast, Thomas?" Vincent asked as he was putting the coffee grounds into the coffee maker.

"I don't know what you have." Thomas said, as he finally released Lawrence so he could sit and eat.

Lawrence looked at Thomas and patted the seat next to him, the other side from Deacon.

"Mamacita stocked us up with bacon and eggs. And there's a few kinds of cereal in there." Deacon said with a casual gesture toward the cupboard.

Vincent opened the cabinet and asked, "Do you like Froot Loops or Honey Smacks?"

"I don't know what those things are... do you have any oatmeal?" Thomas asked slowly.

"Let me look." Vincent said, as he shifted some things aside.

"We have bread for toast." Lawrence said, as he held up a piece of toast as evidence.

"Yeah. Toast would be good." Thomas said with a loving smile at Lawrence.

"We have oatmeal!" Vincent said with triumph, as he took down the box, then asked, "What about you Lehman?"

"Whatever you're having will be fine." Lehman said simply, then asked, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah. You can make the toast, if you want to." Vincent said as he read the instructions on the side of the oatmeal pouch.

"You'll have to show me what to do," Lehman said as he walked to Vincent's side.

"Take the bread, there." Vincent said as he pointed, "and put four slices into the toaster, there. Then push down the lever to start it."

"Simple enough." Lehman said, as he moved into action.

"Can I help?" Thomas asked as he finally moved from Lawrence's side.

"Yeah, sure. You can get drinks for us, if you'd like." Vincent said as he started making the instant oatmeal.

"What would you like to drink?" Thomas asked curiously.

"I'm having coffee. You're welcome to have some, if you want it." Vincent said as he placed the bowl of oatmeal and water into the microwave and started it.

"I've never had coffee, but I've heard of it." Thomas said as he looked at the coffee maker. "My parents said that we shouldn't waste our rations on such a frivolous thing."

"You can try some when it's ready, to see if you like it." Vincent said with an unconcerned shrug, then asked, "Would you like some eggs? I'm going to have some."

"One, if you have enough." Thomas said slowly.

"It looks like we have plenty." Vincent said as he took the carton of eggs out of the refrigerator.

"Yeah. Eat all you want." Deacon said from the table. "We hardly ever eat over here."

"Where do you eat?" Vincent asked casually as he started cooking the eggs.

"Across the street at Allen's house," Deacon said honestly.

The microwave beeped, causing Thomas to look at it with surprise.

"The toast is done. What do I do next?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Butter it... if you can find the butter." Vincent said as he looked around.

"It's over here on the table," Deacon said as he pointed to the butter dish.

"No butter for me," Thomas said as he looked in the refrigerator at what drinks they had to choose from.

"Just put the toast on the table and everyone can butter their own then." Vincent said as he tended to the eggs.

"Do you have a baby, here?" Thomas asked curiously.

"No. Why would you think that?" Deacon asked with surprise.

"You have milk in here... a big jug of milk." Thomas said slowly.

"That's for you to drink if you want some." Deacon said frankly.

"Drink? Milk?" Thomas asked with surprise.

"People don't drink milk on your world?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Only babies, we usually have milk for cooking, but I never thought about anyone but a baby ever drinking it." Thomas said honestly.

Vincent shrugged and said, "I don't like it, but if you want some, you can have it."

"I think I'll just have water." Thomas said as he took the water pitcher out of the refrigerator.

"What would you like to drink, Lehman?" Vincent asked as he worked to get the eggs out of the skillet.

"I don't know what the choices are." Lehman said as he walked to the refrigerator.

"Milk, orange juice, water... and I guess coffee." Deacon said from the table.

"I like orange juice." Lehman said with a smile.

"I can get that for you." Thomas said quickly.

"Oh. Thank you, Thomas." Lehman said with a smile, realizing that it was important to Thomas to do his part to contribute to the meal.

"Lehman, would you get the oatmeal out of the microwave, please, and put it on the table?" Vincent asked as he concentrated on the cooking eggs.

"Sure." Lehman said, then walked to the microwave.

Thomas looked with wonder at the bowl of oatmeal, that was fully cooked.

"How did it do that?" He asked with wonder.

"I don't know how it works. It just does." Vincent said with a smile as he took two more eggs out of the skillet.

Thomas slowly nodded, then went back to pouring Lehman's juice.

"What else can I do?" Lehman asked as he walked back from the table.

"Take these eggs. I'm just finishing mine." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman took the two plates of eggs to the table as Thomas placed their juice glasses.

"Go ahead and start. I'll be there in just a minute." Vincent said seriously.

"Come on, Thomas. Let's eat." Lehman prompted.

"Shouldn't we wait for Vincent?" Thomas asked hesitantly.

Lehman shrugged and set down his fork.

"On my way," Vincent said as he turned off the stove and sat the skillet aside.

"Do you need any butter or anything for your oatmeal, Thomas?" Lawrence asked quietly.

"No, why would you waste butter on oatmeal?" Thomas asked with confusion.

"To make it taste better." Deacon said before Lawrence could answer.

Thomas looked at his oatmeal, but didn't seem to be inclined to add anything to it.

Vincent sat his plate on the table, then hurried to the coffee maker to get himself a cup of coffee.

"Would you like to try some coffee, Thomas?" Vincent asked as he poured his cup.

"It smells good," Thomas said slowly. "Could I try a taste of yours to see if I like it?"

"Sure." Vincent said with a smile as he sat down at the table, then scooted his coffee cup toward Thomas.

After a hesitant sip, Thomas considered the flavor.

"What do you think?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I think it smells better than it tastes." Thomas said honestly.

"Yeah. That's what I used to think too. But I kinda got used to it." Vincent said as he accepted his coffee cup back from Thomas.

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"Vince, there's something I've been needing to talk to you about, but I've been wanting to wait until you were back on Earth." Lawrence said hesitantly.

"Yeah? What's that?" Vincent asked, between bites of food.

"Well, since you're here... we need to go to the house and get the things that we want to keep," Lawrence said reluctantly, watching carefully for Vincent's reaction.

"Oh... I didn't think of that." Vincent said as he set down his fork.

Lawrence nodded and continued, "Mark has been taking care of the lawn and I think Teri or Helen or someone went in and took care of the food and stuff that would go bad... but everything else has just been left, waiting for us to decide what we're going to do with it."

Vincent slowly nodded as he thought.

"And we need to decide what we're going to do with the house." Lawrence added, more quietly.

Vincent stared at his plate for a long moment as he considered.

"We don't have to do it right now, but, well... I just didn't want to make any decisions without you." Lawrence said in nearly a whisper.

"What's wrong?" Thomas asked with confusion at the sudden change in mood.

"Vincent and Lawrence's parents died, and now they have to decide what to do with the house and the things that are in it." Deacon said frankly.

"They're dead?" Thomas asked in surprise.

"Yeah, but can we not talk about that right now? I think we have other things that we need to do." Vincent asked hopefully.

Thomas slowly nodded, understanding that it was a sensitive subject with Vincent.

"Deke, if you'll go check in with Billy, I'll clean up the dishes." Lawrence said as he stood.

"Are you sure? You cooked." Deacon asked with concern.

"We'll all help him." Vincent said seriously.

Deacon smiled at Vincent, then hurried out of the room.

"Just tell us what you need us to do," Vincent said as he stood and started gathering plates.

"If you guys can just carry everything over to the sink, I think I'll be able to do the rest." Lawrence said simply.

"You don't need to do it all yourself. We can wash and dry the dishes and you can put them away." Thomas said frankly.

"We have a dishwasher. We just have to load it." Lawrence said as he gestured to the dishwasher by the sink.

"Oh... I've heard of those, but I've never seen one." Thomas said cautiously.

"Hey Vince, I tell you what. I'll scrape off the plates, then you can show Thomas how to load the dishwasher so he can help out next time. How about that?" Lawrence asked gently.

"Sure thing." Vincent said happily, then opened the dishwasher and waited for Lawrence to pass him the plates.

* * * * *

"Are you guys all finished?" Deacon asked as he rushed into the kitchen.

"Yeah. What's up?" Lawrence asked with concern.

"A lot. And we don't have much time," Deacon said seriously.

"Just spit it out, Deke. What's going on?" Lawrence asked with frustration.

"We all need to get cleaned up. We're going to a wedding."

Chapter 51

"A wedding? Who's getting married?" Vincent asked quickly.

"I think you'd enjoy it more if it was a surprise." Deacon said with a secretive smile.

Vincent and Lehman shared an exasperated look, but didn't inquire any further.

"So if you guys can let me know how long it will take you to get ready, I'll call Billy back and he'll find us a ride to the Short compound." Deacon said seriously.

"Um, Thomas doesn't really have anything to wear except what he's wearing." Vincent said in thought.

"I bet that if we went to the ship, we could get some Soleen-Avalla robes for Thomas. They look kind of formal, don't they?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Good idea." Vincent said with a smile, then turned his attention to Deacon and asked, "If you and Lawrence want to, you could get your clothes together and come with us to the ship to get cleaned up, then we could all transport to the Short Compound from there. No one would have to come and get us."

Deacon looked at Lawrence with question and received an uncertain shrug as an answer.

"Then we're just waiting on you." Vincent said with an impish grin at Deacon.

"We'll be back in a minute." Deacon said decisively, then glanced at Lawrence to see if he had any objection.

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"I'll be right back. Don't leave without me." Lehman said timidly a moment before following Deacon and Lawrence out of the kitchen.

"We'll be in the living room." Vincent said, then motioned for Thomas to walk with him.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" Thomas asked shyly, as he followed Vincent out of the kitchen.

"Well, since we all need to have a bath, we can go up to the ship that Lehman and I arrived on and bathe together. It'll be a lot faster than us

each taking turns in the bathroom." Vincent said casually, then gestured for Thomas to sit with him on the couch.

"Faster? How is it going to be faster if we're going to your ship? I mean, it's in space, isn't it?" Thomas asked with confusion.

"Oh yeah. That's kind of tough to explain." Vincent said slowly. "Here in this world, we have the technology to transport from one place to another; it just takes a second."

After a moment of thought, Thomas hesitantly asked, "You can convert matter to energy?"

"Yeah." Vincent said with surprise, "That's it. I didn't think you'd understand."

"I understand the theory." Thomas said slowly, "According to the science that I've studied, it seemed that it could work."

"Yeah, well, you probably know as much about it as I do, then." Vincent said with a grin, "I understand the theory behind it, but I don't really know much about how it works... it just does."

Thomas slowly nodded, then timidly whispered, "Vincent, there's something I need to tell you... and you may not like it."

"What's that?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Before I left the Realm, Brakkii told me something..." Thomas trailed off.

"What was that?" Vincent prompted.

"He said that if I didn't want to stay here, that he would bring me back to the Realm and I could stay there." Thomas said quietly.

Vincent stared at Thomas in shock at the words. He had thought that when Thomas had arrived, that Brakkii had seen reason and agreed that the real world was the best place for Thomas to be.

After a moment, Thomas continued, "He said that I could be like his son. I'd be the Prince of the Realm."

"You're not thinking of doing it, are you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

After a glance into Vincent's eyes, Thomas timidly nodded.

"Please, Thomas, give this world a chance. All you have to do is try, and I know it can be great for you." Vincent said imploringly.

"Vincent, you can't understand what I'm going through. I thought I could do this but... do you know what it feels like to lose everything?" Thomas asked bitterly.

"Yeah. As a matter of fact, I do." Vincent said quietly.

"Oh, right. You said that your parents died... but it's not the same. I almost died. You can't imagine what it was like to feel my body dying and feel so helpless."

"Actually, I do know what that feels like." Vincent said sympathetically.

"No, you can't know. I almost died from the radiation. Going through something like that changes you. There's no way to understand unless you've been through it."

"Thomas. I *do* know what that feels like." Vincent said sincerely.

At Thomas' look of surprise, Vincent continued, "It's kind of a long story, but what matters is, I got a pretty good dose of radiation, probably a lethal dose."

Thomas' eyes went wide at the statement. From the earnest tone of Vincent's voice, Thomas knew that he was being completely honest.

"And just like you, I got saved at the last minute. So I do know what it feels like. I was right there, looking at what was supposed to be the last minutes of my life, and I had to face who I was and all the things I had done." Vincent said distantly.

Thomas' look became curious at Vincent's quiet revelation.

"My life before that was... wasted. All I ever thought about was me. I was completely selfish and I was mean to a lot of people." Vincent said in a whisper.

"You seem all nice and... well, so much better than me. I can't imagine you ever being mean to anyone." Thomas said honestly.

Vincent shook his head and said, "Thomas, you're starting off a lot better than I did. I was a horrible brat and had to learn a whole new way to live and be. You're already a great person, now all you have to do is realize that you've got a chance to have a wonderful life. You can be anything you want to be, you can do anything you want to do. "

"I can?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Vincent said with an assuring smile. "You survived. If you choose to stay here, you can have something better than a dream. You can have what

you always dreamed of, but for real. The only catch is, you have to know what you want and you have to be strong enough to work for it."

"But... You're leaving on your starship.... and I'll be left here, alone..." Thomas said in a small voice.

Vincent chuckled and said, "The only way you'll be alone is if you choose to be."

Thomas looked at Vincent curiously at the strange statement.

"In a little while, you're going to meet the Clan. Just about all of them have faced things worse than most people's worst nightmares, just like we have. Now they work together to help out kids who need it. All you have to do is get to know them and let them know what you want to do and they'll help you." Vincent said gently.

"But what if I want to go back and be the Prince of the Realm?" Thomas asked hesitantly.

"If that's what you really want, then I'll visit you every single night and let you know how things are going in the real world." Vincent said quietly.

Thomas nodded that he heard.

"You don't need to decide this right now. But remember that here in this real life, waking world, you can make a difference. One person can change an entire planet, and one planet can change the entire universe."

"Do you really believe that?" Thomas asked cautiously.

Vincent chuckled, then answered, "I know it for a fact."

At Thomas' questioning look, Vincent shook his head with amusement and said, "Long story."

"You seem to have a lot of those." Thomas said while trying to restrain a grin.

"You have no idea." Vincent said with a chuckle, then looked toward the hallway and said, "Lehman's been in there an awful long time. I wonder if he fell in."

"He walked down the hall a minute or two ago and saw us talking, then went back." Thomas said frankly.

"It's okay, Lehman! We're done!" Vincent called down the hallway beside the stairs.

Lehman peeked around the corner and said, "It looked like you two were having a serious talk, and I didn't want to interrupt."

"You wouldn't have been interrupting, but thanks." Vincent said as he stood and gave Lehman a quick hug.

"I wonder what's taking Deacon and Lawrence so long." Lehman said as he looked around.

"Yeah. I wonder." Vincent said with a roll of his eyes.

Lehman giggled and said, "Oh. I guess it doesn't take a genius to figure out what they're doing."

Thomas looked from Lehman to Vincent with confusion.

"They're probably upstairs kissing and stuff. They forget about the rest of the world when they're doing that." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"Really?" Thomas asked with wide eyes as he looked up the stairs.

"You'll get used to it." Vincent said with a shrug, then sat down.

Lehman took the seat next to him on the couch.

A moment later a noise could be heard which preceded Lawrence and Deacon hurrying down the stairs, each carrying a bundle of clothes.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, they were greeted by three identical boys looking at them knowingly.

"I think we're busted." Deacon whispered with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"Is everyone ready to go?" Vincent asked as he looked around the room.

Seeing everyone's nods of agreement, Vincent raised his wrist and said, "Manu, can you transport the five of us aboard?"

"*Yes, Vincent. Whenever you are ready.*" Manu said gently.

Vincent looked at Thomas and quietly said, "This may feel a little bit funny, but it's nothing to be afraid of."

Thomas nodded that he understood.

"Transport."

* * * * *

As soon as the sparkles had cleared from his vision, Thomas looked around in wonder at their instantaneous relocation.

"This is my room on the ship." Vincent said, as he gestured, then continued, "If no one needs to do anything else, I can take you to the bathing pool now."

"Were you going to get me some clothes?" Thomas asked cautiously, feeling funny about asking.

"Oh yeah. Thanks for reminding me." Vincent said, then retrieved a set of clothes from the honeycomb in the wall beside the bed.

"Here you go." Vincent said as he handed the Soleen-Avalla robes to Thomas.

"*Vincent, we are in the process of modifying a set of robes for Thomas that should be more appropriate for a formal occasion. They should be completed before you finish your bathing.*" A voice said from above them.

"Thank you, Manu." Vincent said upward, then turned to Thomas and said, "You can leave those here."

"Who was that?" Thomas asked as he sat the bundle of clothes on the bed.

"That's Manu; he's the intelligence that controls all the functions of this ship." Vincent said casually as he gestured toward the door.

Deacon and Lawrence were nearest the door and preceded the group into the hall.

* * * * *

"It's this way." Lehman said as he moved in front of the group in the hallway.

"In a way, the entire ship is Manu's body. He's all around us. If you have any questions or need anything while you're here, you can just ask him and he'll answer you." Vincent said to Thomas at his side, then looked up and said, "Manu, I'd like for you to meet my newest brother, Thomas."

"*Hello, Thomas, it's a pleasure to meet you.*" Manu said gently.

"Yeah. It's nice to meet you too." Thomas said uncertainly into the air, then hesitantly asked, "What are you?"

"*To put it in terms that you would understand, I am a computer.*" Manu said seriously.

"Wow." Thomas said as he considered the answer. "Does that mean that you're, like, an artificial intelligence?"

"Thomas, I'd really rather not call Manu 'artificial'. Whether or not he's organic doesn't really matter." Vincent said carefully, not wanting to sound like he was being overly critical.

"*Thank you, Vincent, but I am not offended by being referred to as an artificial intelligence. It is the proper classification of what I am.*" Manu said with a note of tenderness at Vincent's concern for him.

"Well, it bothers me." Vincent said frankly. "Calling you 'artificial' makes you sound less real or less important than the rest of us."

"Um, Vince." Lawrence said hesitantly as he stopped in his tracks.

Vincent looked at Lawrence, then followed his gaze to a Soleen woman ahead of them in the hallway.

"Oh, I guess I should have prepared you guys for that." Vincent said with a smile. "The ship we're on isn't a Federation ship. It belongs to the Soleen-Avalla. That woman is Soleen."

"The bathing pool is right through here." Lehman said as he stopped by a doorway, waiting for the rest of the group to catch up.

"That's a woman? How can you tell?" Thomas asked curiously.

"The women are smaller than the men and have smooth necks." Vincent said casually, then motioned for the rest of the group to walk ahead of him into the bathing room.

* * * * *

As Vincent walked into the bathing room, he noticed that the rest of the group were standing just inside the door.

"That's a Soleen man." Lehman said in response to the stares of the group.

"He's huge!" Deacon said with a tremble of fear in his voice.

"Yeah." Vincent said as he walked ahead of the group, then added, "Just wait until you meet Captain Rasch."

As each person got over their shock, they followed Vincent and Lehman to the benches.

"Is there anything we need to know?" Lawrence asked hesitantly as he looked around the room.

"Get naked. Bathe. Get dressed." Vincent said as he sat down to remove his shoes. "That's about it."

Lawrence glanced at Deacon uncertainly and received an assuring smile.

"Are you okay, Lawrence?" Thomas asked with concern at his apprehensive expression.

"It's just... me and Vince haven't ever done anything like this before... I mean, together." Lawrence stammered.

"Are you worried that he'll do something to you?" Thomas asked uncertainly.

"No." Lawrence said immediately, then in a slower voice, continued, "I just know how Vincent feels about gay people... and about me. It just seems, I don't know, wrong somehow."

Vincent had heard the conversation and knew that Lawrence was completely justified in his feelings.

"Lawrence, this was my idea. I won't lie to you and say that I don't still have any of those old feelings, but now I know that they were wrong and I'm a lot better than I used to be. It's really okay." Vincent said honestly.

After a moment to consider, Lawrence hesitantly began to undress.

"Oh wow..." Deacon said as his eyes went wide.

Vincent followed Deacon's gaze to Lehman, who was just finishing undressing.

He gave a chuckle as he walked to the edge of the water.

Thomas also noticed Lehman, then gave an unconcerned shrug as he walked to join Vincent in the bathing pool.

"You're not freaked out by Lehman's monster?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Nah. It's like Dad's." Thomas said simply as he lowered himself into the water.

"It is?" Vincent asked with surprise, then looked over at Lehman who was just getting into the pool.

"Yeah." Thomas confirmed, then got a big smile as he watched Deacon approach the water.

Vincent noticed Thomas' expression, which could only be classified as a leer.

As Lawrence was getting into the water, he noticed a movement behind him and said, "Hey Vince, someone's taking your clothes."

"*I thought that you would like for your clothes to be fresh and clean for the ceremony.*" Manu said from above them.

"Thank you, Manu." Vincent said into the air with appreciation.

"Yes. Thank you. That was nice." Lehman said as he started to bathe himself.

Vincent glanced at Lawrence as he started to lower himself into the water.

Vincent smiled at the sight and gave his brother a nod.

"What?" Lawrence asked defensively as he froze in place.

"That was just my way of saying that I think you look good. I don't think I ever told you that before." Vincent said honestly.

"Oh, um, no. I don't think you ever did. Thanks, Vince." Lawrence said uncertainly as he continued to get fully into the bathing pool, then awkwardly added, "And, um, you look good too."

Thomas chuckled at the exchange.

"What's so funny?" Vincent asked Thomas curiously.

"You two." Thomas said with a grin, "You both act so shy and stuff. Me and my brother never acted like that. We were always best friends and told each other everything."

"I think we grew up different from you." Vincent said with a shrug.

"Yeah. Even though Lawrence looks *exactly* like my brother, they're really completely different." Thomas said seriously.

Lawrence caught a note of something in Thomas voice that concerned him.

"I know I'm not your brother, but maybe I'll be close enough to make being here without him easier." Lawrence said gently.

"My brother was gone for a long time before... things went really bad." Thomas said quietly, then looked into Lawrence's eyes as he said, "So I'm okay. I kind of got used to missing him."

"Well, I'm right here if there's any way I can help." Lawrence said seriously.

After a moment to consider, Thomas smiled and said, "Maybe you aren't *completely* different from my brother."

Lawrence smiled at the comment, then was surprised when Thomas moved in to give him a hug.

Lehman looked at Vincent with question, not sure if what Thomas was doing was acceptable in Vincent's society.

A smile from Vincent was all the assurance that he needed that everything was fine.

* * * * *

"Is something wrong?" Deacon asked as he looked behind him.

"No. Nothing." Thomas answered quickly as he looked away.

"Then what..." Deacon began to ask when Vincent interrupted.

"He was checking out your butt."

Thomas flashed a scorching look at Vincent which promised swift and terrible revenge.

"Well, you were." Vincent said in his defense.

"It's okay." Deacon said, then waited for Thomas to meet his gaze.

It took a moment, but Thomas finally forced himself to look Deacon in the eyes.

"It's a little bit weird for me because I always thought that I looked kind of plain. But since I moved in with Billy, everyone's been saying that I look good." Deacon said quietly. "I don't mind if you look at me. It kind of makes me feel good, like maybe they're right."

Thomas slowly nodded that he had heard.

"Of course, Lawrence is a little possessive of me..." Deacon said with a smile at Lawrence.

"I'm not crazy about the idea of other people checking you out." Lawrence said frankly to Deacon, drawing Thomas' attention. "But I guess Thomas can have special permission."

Thomas looked at Lawrence uncertainly.

"Look. Don't touch." Lawrence said seriously.

Thomas nodded.

"Good. Are we all done bathing?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"Yeah." Lehman said immediately, feeling that they might have just averted a crisis.

"Let's get ready to go to this wedding." Vincent said as he led the way out of the pool.

* * * * *

"Hey, look at this!" Thomas said as he held up the robe that had been laid out in place of the clothes he had been wearing.

"It's just like ours." Lehman said with a smile.

"Except that Thomas has the Earth as a crest." Vincent said as he looked at the shimmering white robe.

"Well, mine doesn't have that crystal hexagon thing on the chest, but the rest is the same." Thomas said before putting the robe on.

"*The crystalline hexagon design is reserved for the Trach Manjai. In time, you may have a title of equal significance and I will be honored to place that crest on your robe.*" Manu said gently.

"Trach Manjai? What's that?" Thomas asked curiously.

"That one's a long story and a half. How about we go to the wedding and you ask me about it later?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure." Thomas said without concern as he looked at Vincent and Lehman to be sure that he was fastening his robe closed the appropriate way.

* * * * *

As soon as the fountain of sparkles had cleared from their vision, a serious voice sounded in all their minds, //You're almost late.//

"Who's that?" Thomas asked as he looked around the immense room.

"I don't know. There are a lot of telepaths in the Clan, it could have been any of them." Vincent answered honestly.

"Don't worry about it. I've got them." A boy said as he approached the group.

"Galli... I mean, John. I was hoping I'd see you." Vincent said happily.

"I wouldn't miss this for anything." the mysterious little ginger haired boy said with a grin.

"This is my newest brother Thomas. I was hoping that when you have time, maybe you could help us with his quantum resonance frequency." Vincent said quickly.

The Doctor looked around the massive hall for an instant, then produced a tool from his pocket as he turned his full attention to Thomas.

"Time is something I have no shortage of." John said with an impish grin as he pointed the device at Thomas and seemed to be trying to position it in just the right way.

"What are you going to do to me?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"I've already done it." John said, then explained, "I just realigned you slightly so you belong to this universe."

"Huh?" Thomas asked with confusion.

"Vincent can explain it later." John said with a smile at Thomas, then turned the device toward Vincent and said, "You've nearly got your frequency tied in a knot. It takes quite a bit of interdimensional travel to bunch a frequency up as bad as this."

"Yeah. Sorry." Vincent said shyly, then quietly asked, "Can you fix it?"

"Sorted!" John said with accomplishment as he put the tool away.

"Thanks." Vincent said with a smile of relief.

"And the next time you visit the Realm, time will move the same for you as everyone else." John said happily.

"Good. That way I'll be able to visit without getting all tired out." Vincent said with cheer.

"I think they're about to start. Lawrence and Deacon, do you see Xain and Jake over there? They're saving seats for the two of you." John said as he pointed toward the front of the room.

"What about Vince?" Lawrence asked with concern.

"Dylan was very insistent that Vincent and Lehman be seated with the Camp. And I made sure that they also held a seat for Thomas." John said seriously.

"We'll see you guys in a while." Lawrence said hesitantly, then walked with Deacon to join the other Clan members.

"Dylan's right over there. I'll be around if you need me." John said as his attention seemed to be drawn to the back of the room.

"Thanks for all your help." Vincent said sincerely.

John nodded quickly, then hurried away.

"Come on guys." Vincent said and motioned for Lehman and Thomas to follow.

* * * * *

"What kind of a place is this?" Thomas whispered as they walked across the massive hall.

"I don't know. I don't think it was here the last time I was on Earth." Vincent said honestly.

"It's beautiful... what is that?" Thomas asked as he pointed toward one of the balconies.

Vincent looked to where Thomas was pointing and smiled.

"That's an Andorian. They're one of the races of the Federation." Vincent said, then gestured for Lehman and Thomas to go up the aisle to where the Camp Little Eagle members were seated.

"Are they nice?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"Oh yeah. One of the guys that I work with on my ship is Andorian and he's really great." Vincent said cheerfully.

"Vincent?" Dylan asked when he noticed the trio approaching.

"That's me." Vincent said as he raised his hand.

"Wow. There's three of you now." Dylan said with surprise.

"Oh yeah. Dylan, you already know Lehman, this is our newest brother, Thomas." Vincent said formally.

"It's nice to meet you Thomas, I'm Dylan. I think they're going to start any minute so you should take your seats." Dylan said as he gestured for the trio to walk ahead of him into the row.

"Thanks, Dylan." Vincent said with appreciation as he passed.

Organ music that had been playing in the background seemed to swell from all around them and the crowd hushed as all in attendance moved to find their seats.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Thomas?" Vincent asked quietly, concerned by the overwhelmed expression that Thomas was wearing.

"All these people are beautiful." Thomas said as he looked around, then turned to Vincent and asked, "What are you doing with them?"

"I guess they keep me around for contrast." Vincent said with a grin at his doppleganger, obviously not offended in the least.

"But everything here is so big and beautiful... how can I know that this isn't a dream?" Thomas asked as he looked around.

"Do you want me to pinch you?" Vincent asked, not really having any more practical method for verifying reality close at hand.

"Do you want me to punch you in the nose?" Thomas asked back, sounding neither playful nor malicious.

"Not really." Vincent responded quietly.

Thomas nodded, then his attention was drawn to the large monitor that was displaying a boy, his own age, playing an incredibly huge pipe organ.

* * * * *

"Who? What?" Thomas sputtered as he saw two cat-like people dressed in white tuxedos leading the procession into the great hall.

"G-Cats." Vincent whispered.

"What does that mean?" Thomas asked as he stared.

"That's about all I know. We can ask around later if you want to know more." Vincent said quickly as he watched the wedding party walking slowly into the room.

"Is that who's getting married?" Thomas asked as Sean and Cory walked into the room, dressed in white.

"Oh wow. Um, yeah. I think it is." Vincent said with amazement.

"That doesn't bother you, does it, Thomas?" Lehman asked cautiously, knowing the issues that Vincent had with same sex relationships.

Thomas seemed to be a little surprised by the question, then answered, "Why should it bother me? My dad told me that sometimes two guys fall in love... if people are in love, they should be married. Right?"

"Right." Lehman said with a smile, appreciating Thomas' simplistic answer. After going through so much soul searching with Vincent, it was refreshing.

Thomas noticed Vincent's contemplative silence and quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

Lehman leaned in to hear the answer, also curious to know why Vincent was so stunned.

"Just pay attention, guys. I can't explain except to say that I have a feeling that a thousand years from now, they'll probably still be talking about what we're going to see today." Vincent said seriously.

The three identical boys went silent as the wedding party slowly and reverently walked past their row of chairs down the aisle.

* * * * *

When the wedding party was nearly to the front of the room, Lehman touched Vincent's arm to gain his attention.

Vincent glanced at Lehman curiously and found him pointing toward one of the many balconies.

Captain Rasch and Treep were standing near the front, surrounded by a variety of dignitaries from other worlds.

"Good." Vincent whispered, then turned his attention back toward the front of the hall.

* * * * *

A minister started talking and the group all listened intently. After a moment, he introduced Tyne.

"Who is he?" Thomas whispered into Vincent's ear.

"Tyne." Vincent answered simply.

Thomas rolled his eyes, then asked, "What is he?"

Vincent shrugged and said, "You know about as much as I do. Just pay attention."

* * * * *

When Tyne was done speaking, the pastor took over again and called for a moment of silence to remember all those who had fallen.

Thomas seemed to be surprised by the call, but reverently bowed his head when asked to do so.

When the silence ended, Thomas quietly asked, "I don't understand what they're talking about. What happened? Who died?"

"I really don't know any details, but if you listen, maybe things will start to make sense." Vincent whispered gently.

Thomas thought for a moment, then said, "Some things never really make sense. But the important stuff, I already understand. People died to defend this way of life... this world isn't really that much different from mine."

Vincent draped an arm around Thomas' shoulders and gave him a gentle hug as he whispered, "I think maybe it's about to be."

* * * * *

After a call to prayer, the exchanging of vows began. Lehman leaned close to Vincent's ear and whispered, "We're here. We care."

Vincent looked at Lehman curiously, then smiled as he realized what Lehman meant.

Although he didn't know exactly how to control the power of the Trach Manjai, he knew that Lehman was right. All that was necessary was for them to be present and to care.

So even though he didn't know exactly what might happen as a result of it, Vincent made a point of considering just how much Cory and Sean had done to change his life, the absolute support that they had given him since the first moment they had met. And his desire that the random factors surrounding their lives might align in a way to provide them the most wonderful and fulfilling life together.

* * * * *

After the vows, music started playing and a singer stepped forward.

"Hey. I know him!" Thomas whispered as he pointed, "That's Nick Carter."

"I don't think I ever talked to him, but we could try to meet him after the ceremony if you wanted." Vincent said quietly.

"Yeah!" Thomas said quickly, then turned his full attention forward as Nick sang.

* * * * *

"Socius? What's that?" Thomas asked when Tyne had finished speaking again.

"Dunno." Vincent said frankly.

"You don't have a lot of answers, do you?" Thomas asked rhetorically.

"Fraid not." Vincent said, then was overwhelmed by a telepathic wave of love that was being transmitted through all the assembled guests from Sean and Cory who were kissing.

"Oh... Wow." Thomas finally said in a trembling voice.

"Yeah." Vincent said, himself in awe of the strength of the emotions.

"What was... never mind. You don't know... or it's a long story." Thomas finished with a roll of his eyes.

Vincent exchanged an amused look with Lehman, but decided to just leave it be. Thomas didn't seem to be bothered and might be more inclined to figure things out for himself this way.

* * * * *

The lights went down except for the light on one floor to ceiling banner. It had the Clan Short crest. There was a little boy just below the crest holding a microphone and Vincent recognized who it was.

"That's Kevin Thompson, Lehman and I had dinner at his house last night." Vincent whispered to Thomas.

Before Thomas could respond, Kevin began singing and drew his complete attention.

When a second banner on the stage was illuminated, both Vincent and Lehman were surprised to see that it was Joel. They had both been worried about him since they had seen the condition he had arrived in and were frankly shocked that he was in good enough shape to stand in front of the huge gathering.

"I think that's Joel, but he looks different." Lehman finally whispered to Thomas.

"He's Vulcan." Vincent said in wonder at the transformation.

When Joel started singing, the three boys were once again enthralled by the incredible clarity and emotion of the song.

* * * * *

"What is..." Thomas trailed off in wonder as he saw two winged boys in togas walk down the aisle with a procession of royal guard. The winged boys took positions on either side of Sean and Cory.

"They're Lo'Garn. The one by Cory is named Xandor. He's a friend of ours." Vincent whispered.

Thomas stared in amazement at the boys who seemed as mythical and unreal as anyone he had met in the dream realm.

Before he could get over his shock, Thomas turned to see who was entering the hall next.

"The Queen." Thomas gasped.

Vincent turned and saw that Thomas was right. He was every bit as surprised and in awe as Thomas.

All three boys sat in amazement as they watched the Queen name Cory and Sean as members of her family and declare that they are princes.

"Wow." Thomas gasped.

"I told you it'd be a day to remember." Vincent said absently, as he watched the events unfold.

Thomas opened his mouth, about ready to respond to Vincent's words when two boys appeared, seemingly out of nowhere.

Before Thomas could ask, Vincent quietly said, "Angels."

Thomas blinked, then looked at Vincent and asked, "Angels?"

"Yeah. I don't know their names, but I've met one angel... the guy who's talking. You just can't see his wings right now." Vincent said seriously.

Thomas regarded Vincent incredulously for a moment, then turned his attention back toward the front of the room.

The angels, along with the wedding party, started down the aisle. People all through the enormous hall began standing and funneling outside so they could take part in congratulating the newly married couple.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry." A small voice said to Vincent, drawing his attention away from the front door.

Vincent saw the sad boy in front of him and it took a moment for him to realize who it was.

"Do you still want to kill me?" Vincent asked cautiously.

The boy shook his head and said, "I saw some stuff and... I got confused and scared and angry. I'm really sorry."

"It's okay, Teddy. I know how it is to be confused and say stuff that I'm sorry for later. Will you give me a hug?" Vincent asked gently.

Teddy gave a tentative smile, then stepped forward to give Vincent a firm hug.

"How are you guys doing?" Dylan asked as he approached with Jason K in his arms.

Noticing that Vincent was occupied with Teddy, Lehman answered, "Good. That was really something."

"Yeah. I didn't have any idea that it was going to be as big and fancy as this." Dylan said honestly, then considered before adding, "I probably should have known."

Lehman chuckled, then noticed that Thomas seemed to have a 'lost' expression.

"I don't know what we're supposed to do now. I'm not familiar with Human ceremonies." Lehman said honestly.

"I don't know either, but it looks like everyone is going outside. We should probably do that." Dylan said frankly.

* * * * *

As they slowly made their way toward the back of the hall, Vincent noticed someone watching them shyly.

Before he fully saw the face, the violet-blond hair told him who it was.

"Hey guys, there's someone I want for you to meet." Vincent said as he broke away from the group.

Lehman, Thomas, Dylan and Jason K followed Vincent away from the flow of people walking toward the door.

"Dylan, I'd like for you to meet Lehman and Thomas. And you probably already know Jason K and, um, Dylan." Vincent stammered.

"I've seen him across the room, but we haven't met face to face before." Dylan Richardson said with a grin at Dylan Chang.

"Well, then it's good that you're getting to meet now. I met Dylan, this Dylan, yesterday afternoon." Vincent said, indicating Dylan Richardson.

"I like your eyes." Thomas said to Dylan Richardson distantly as he marveled at his bright violet eyes.

"Thanks. I like your butt." Dylan said to Thomas, frankly.

"You what?" Thomas asked with surprise.

Dylan got a confused look for a moment, then hurried to explain, "I'm sorry, I was just born yesterday. Sometimes I forget that it's not always okay to say what I'm thinking."

"You were just born yesterday?" Lehman asked slowly, wanting to confirm what he had just heard.

"You like my butt?" Thomas asked with a grin.

"Yes." Dylan said seriously to Lehman, then turned to Thomas and gently said, "And, yes."

There was a long moment of silence before Dylan Chang finally said, "Vincent, when you've got a minute, I'd like to ask you about something."

Vincent glanced at Thomas to find him looking at Dylan Richardson with a goofy smile.

"I think I have time now." Vincent said cautiously.

"I'll keep an eye on him. We'll catch up to you outside." Lehman said with assurance.

Vincent considered for a moment, then nodded.

* * * * *

Before Vincent had even made his way to the door, Lehman heard something that brought a smile to his face.

"Lehman?" Jordy asked slowly,

Lehman turned to find that Jordy was looking at Thomas and Dylan with confusion.

"I'm over here, Jordy; that's Thomas. Our newest brother." Lehman said gently.

"Oh. Well, the guy he's ogling is Dylan, possibly my newest brother. I've slept since then, so a few more could have been added while I wasn't looking."

Lehman chuckled with delight as he said, "I woke up with a new brother this morning, so I know exactly how that feels. Now I see where Vincent gets it."

* * * * *

"I don't want to interrupt if you want to spend time with your brother." Dylan said shyly.

"That's okay. I think we're all just going with the flow right now." Thomas said honestly, then noticed that Lehman had started talking to a boy that he hadn't met. "Besides, it looks like Lehman isn't in any hurry."

"Yeah. I've heard that him and Jordy kind of fell in love at first sight." Dylan said happily, then turned his expectant gaze on Thomas.

"What?" Thomas asked hesitantly, feeling that Dylan was waiting on him to say something in particular.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" Dylan asked with a mischievous grin.

"Sure." Thomas said with a shrug. "You hear about it all the time, so I guess it happens."

Dylan chuckled at the oblivious response.

Thomas noticed, but couldn't understand what it was that Dylan was obviously seeing in the conversation that he wasn't.

"You said you like my eyes." Dylan said in a leading tone.

"Yeah." Thomas said hesitantly, then slowly added, "And you said that you like my butt."

Dylan giggled and nodded.

Thomas went silent as he tried to figure out what he was obviously missing.

Dylan's eyes became distant as he watched Thomas' thought processes trying to figure it out. He resisted the urge to look at the thoughts themselves, but rather watched an overview as the different thoughts moved and whirled, trying to fit together.

Finally, Thomas' eyes went wide as he gasped, "You... love me?"

Dylan broke into delighted laughter at the disbelief in Thomas' voice.

"Yeah. It took you long enough to figure that out." Dylan said as his laughter became a chuckle.

"But, you're what? Seven years old?" Thomas said desperately, "You can't."

"I'm one day old. I already told you that." Dylan said frankly.

Thomas clinched his eyes shut and shook his head, trying to make sense of what he was hearing.

"I'm different from you. I'm a Mikyvis." Dylan said gently.

"I've heard that word before, but I don't really know what it means." Thomas said as he slowly opened his eyes again.

"There's a long complicated explanation that I'll tell you sometime. But I think for now I can describe it best by saying that I'm a person like you, but then, I'm something more too." Dylan said carefully.

"So, I'm human and you're, like, human-plus?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Dylan said with a giggle. "Human-plus, that's me."

"And you were really born yesterday?" Thomas asked slowly.

"Uh huh." Dylan said happily, seeing that Thomas was beginning to accept it.

"And you love me?" Thomas asked in a whisper.

Dylan nodded.

"Why?" Thomas asked in a barely audible voice.

"Because I'm a Mikyvis, I guess." Dylan said introspectively, then at Thomas inquiring gaze, he continued, "Three and seven."

Thomas blinked at the strange response, then cautiously said, "Ten?"

"That's why." Dylan said with accomplishment.

"You lost me." Thomas said honestly.

"Because I'm a Mikyvis, I see things a little different. When I look at you and me, I see the same thing that you see when you look at three and seven." Dylan said happily.

"Ten?" Thomas said in a bewildered voice.

"I see what we can become." Dylan said frankly.

"You can see the future?" Thomas asked, beginning to grasp what Dylan was saying.

"No. At least, not at the moment." Dylan said seriously, then added more gently, "But even if I could, I wouldn't want to. What fun would that be?"

"Okay. I get that." Thomas said with a nod, then quietly asked, "But what is it that you *do* see?"

"Our potential." Dylan said with a loving smile.

"What we can become." Thomas said distantly as he tried to make sense of it all.

Dylan nodded happily.

* * * * *

"It looks like it's going to take a minute before we can get outside. What did you want to know?" Vincent asked Dylan as they paused by the doorway.

"I don't know what plans you already have, but I was kind of hoping that we could have our own little 'welcoming ceremony' for you at the camp tonight." Dylan said frankly.

"The only plan we really have is to go shopping. I figured we'd do that after lunch. We really don't have anything planned for after that. We've just been taking things as they come." Vincent said honestly.

Dylan nodded and seemed to be lost in thought for a moment before he finally said, "After seeing this, our ceremony may seem like it's kind of insignificant, but it's going to mean a lot to the Camp guys."

"I'll make sure that I don't promise to be anywhere else." Vincent said sincerely.

"Thanks Vincent. If you promise, then I'll consider it done." Dylan said with an honest smile.

"Will it be okay if I bring Lehman and Thomas with me? They're both new on Earth and I'm kind of watching out for them." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"That's fine. In fact, I'll be sure to include them in our plans." Dylan said distantly as he seemed to be organizing a large number of things in his mind.

"Good. Hey, there's a break! Let's go for it." Vincent said as he spotted a gap in the procession of people going through the door.

"Lead the way." Dylan said as he started to move.

* * * * *

"I'm glad I got to see you today. How are you?" Jordy asked timidly.

"I'm a little surprised about our new brother... but besides that, I'm good. Just kind of going along with things as they happen." Lehman said honestly.

"So you don't have any plans for today?" Jordy asked hopefully.

"I think Vincent said something about us going and buying some clothes later. We kind of needed to before, and now that Thomas is here, we really need to." Lehman said, looking apologetic.

"Did he say where you're going?" Jordy asked quietly.

"No." Lehman said thoughtfully, "I don't think he's thought that far ahead yet."

"Maybe I could go shopping with you then. I'll just need to check in with Seth and make sure he doesn't have anything lined up for me to do today." Jordy said hopefully.

"That sounds great, and I don't think Vincent would mind." Lehman said speculatively.

"Wait for me here and I'll be right back." Jordy said cheerfully.

After Lehman's nod, Jordy hurried away.

Lehman turned his attention to Dylan and Thomas, who were only a few feet away and absently wondered what two people who only just met could be talking about so seriously.

* * * * *

"But you're so little..." Thomas said in a considering voice.

"How big do you want me to be?" Dylan asked seriously.

"What do you mean?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"I look this size and age because I want to. If I want to look older, I can." Dylan said honestly.

"Really?" Thomas asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Wanna see?" Dylan asked cheerfully, glad to see that Thomas was coming around.

"Sure." Thomas said cautiously.

Without the slightest bit of effort, Dylan started growing taller and it appeared that he was aging right before Thomas' eyes.

"How's this?" Dylan asked when he achieved the appearance of a ten year old.

"Wow!" Thomas said as his eyes went wide.

"Do you like me better like this?" Dylan asked hesitantly, resisting the urge to look into Thomas' mind to see for himself.

Something about the wording of the innocently asked question made Thomas stop and carefully consider his words before he answered, "No. I mean, I think you look great, but I don't 'like you better' like this. You don't have to change yourself for me to like you."

Dylan smiled at the thoughtful response as he reverted to his usual seven year old appearance.

"So what you were saying about love at first sight... Do you really think you love me?" Thomas asked cautiously.

Dylan broke into a full grin at the question, happy to see that Thomas was facing and dealing with everything head on.

"Six and eight." Dylan said mischievously.

Thomas nodded that he understood.

"How about you? How do you feel?" Dylan asked hopefully.

"The square root of a hundred ninety six." Thomas said thoughtfully.

"So you feel the same as me, but you take the more difficult path to get there?" Dylan asked with a grin.

"Pretty much." Thomas said shyly as he looked into Dylan's brilliant violet eyes.

Dylan considered for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "Does that mean you love me too?"

"I know for sure that I like you." Thomas said seriously, then quietly added, "I hope that's close enough."

Dylan smiled lovingly at Thomas and gave a single nod.

A momentary look of regret came into Thomas' expression as he hesitantly said, "I don't know how much you know about me. But, I've got to make some decisions... and, well, I might be going away."

"To the dream realm?" Dylan asked curiously.

"You know about that?" Thomas asked with surprise.

"Levi mentioned that he saw you there... and that you might be here... and that I'd probably like to get to know you." Dylan admitted shyly.

"So that's why you were waiting for us when we were getting ready to leave?" Thomas asked curiously.

"Yeah. When I saw you... well, I already explained about that." Dylan said as he glanced at Lehman watching them.

"So when Levi met me, he saw what you see when you look at us?" Thomas asked speculatively.

"Maybe. You'd have to ask him." Dylan said frankly. "He's my big brother and he loves me. So when he said that I'd probably like you, I believed him. I haven't had much of a chance to make friends yet."

"What with being born yesterday and all." Thomas said knowingly.

"Yeah." Dylan giggled, glad to see that Thomas was accepting and understanding quite a few new ideas.

"But what I was trying to say before is, well, I might go back to the dream realm." Thomas said hesitantly, watching for Dylan's reaction.

"Here, there, it's all the same to me." Dylan said without concern.

"You'd go to the dream realm to visit me?" Thomas asked with surprise.

"Visit? It's more likely that I'd move there to be with you." Dylan said frankly.

At Thomas' look of surprise, Dylan continued, "This may seem all of a sudden to you, but I see time a little bit differently than you do. I don't want us to waste a nanosecond of it."

"Dylan. I like you and everything. But my life is all crazy and confused right now. I feel like I should be getting things settled first." Thomas said with regret.

"I can help you sort it out. I already said that I'll be there with you, no matter where you choose to live." Dylan said simply.

"You did?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"Not in so many words, but yes." Dylan said as he waited for Thomas' next objection... so he could shoot it down.

"But I hardly know you..." Thomas said helplessly.

"I hardly know you too." Dylan said simply.

"How can we be friends if I don't even know your last name?" Thomas asked plaintively.

"My last name is Richardson, and I know that yours is Winters. So, does that mean we can be friends now?" Dylan asked with his mischievous grin back in place.

Thomas was stunned, then began to chuckle as he realized that he had set himself up for the question. "Yeah, okay. Friends."

"Boyfriends?" Dylan asked immediately, the hopeful expression flaring in his eyes.

"Boyfriends?" Thomas sputtered with shock.

Dylan nodded quickly, the anticipation radiating out from him.

Thomas was stunned by the question and after a moment of consideration he slowly said, "I heard this thing in a movie once... Good things take time..."

Dylan's hopeful expression wilted slightly, but he nodded that he understood what Thomas was saying.

"...But great things happen all at once." Thomas continued with a grin.

"So that means you're saying 'yes'? You'll be my boyfriend?" Dylan asked hopefully.

"I'm saying that I'll give it a try." Thomas said cautiously, hoping that it was enough.

"I guess there's something I should tell you. It's a Mikyvis thing that I don't think you know about." Dylan said hesitantly.

Thomas squinted his eyes slightly as he said, "It's got to be something really bad if you waited until after I said 'yes' before you'd tell me."

Dylan chuckled, then responded, "Not that bad. I just wanted to be sure that you knew that Mikyvis are telepathic."

"Tele... oh yeah. Vincent told me about that. So you're a mind reader?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"Let's call it, a mind reader-plus." Dylan said with a grin.

Thomas thought for a moment, then asked, "Are you reading my mind now?"

"No. In fact, I haven't read it at all." Dylan said frankly.

After a moment, Thomas smiled and said, "Because, what fun would that be?"

"You understand!" Dylan said with delight.

Thomas felt pleased with himself, then thought to ask, "If you haven't been reading my mind, then why did you tell me?"

"Because if I didn't tell you, then later on you found out that I was telepathic, you might wonder if I'd been reading your mind all along." Dylan said honestly.

Thomas nodded that he accepted the explanation, then thought to say, "I have something to tell you too."

"It's got to be something really bad if you waited until after I said 'yes' before you told me." Dylan said with a mischievous grin.

Thomas smiled at having his own words turned back on him, then said, "Before today, I wouldn't have even thought about this, but if we're going to be boyfriends... well, have you met Deacon?"

"Not really, but I know who you're talking about." Dylan said slowly.

"I like the way he looks." Thomas said helplessly. "You said that you love me... and... well, I just wouldn't want to accidentally hurt your feelings."

"Yeah..." Dylan said hesitantly.

"So if you catch me looking. I just... I may not be able to help it." Thomas said in an apologetic tone.

"Just looking, right?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"Oh yeah. Lawrence already told me that I can look, but not touch." Thomas said seriously.

"Can I look at him too?" Dylan asked as he looked into Thomas' eyes.

"Sure. I guess so... In fact, if you wanted, we can go find him and look at him together." Thomas said with a grin.

"That would be kind of creepy and weird..." Dylan said thoughtfully. "Let's do it!"

"Give me a second to tell Lehman where we're going." Thomas said before hurrying away.

Dylan watched with a gentle smile.

When Levi had told him about Thomas, he had thought that his brother was just trying to find him a friend. But from the moment that he saw Thomas standing with Lehman and Vincent, he knew that Thomas would become an important part of his life.

Chapter 52

"Hey Lehman, me and Dylan want to go and do some stuff." Thomas said quickly.

"Would you mind waiting for a minute for Jordy to get back so we can go with you?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Thomas looked conflicted, then hesitantly asked, "Why do you need to go with me?"

"I just promised Vincent that I'd watch out for you." Lehman explained quickly.

"I didn't know that I was going to have a babysitter." Thomas said darkly.

Dylan had been watching Thomas at a distance. When he could see that Thomas was becoming upset, he hurried to Thomas' side and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Lehman says that he needs to follow me around and watch everything I do because I'm new here." Thomas said irritably. "And since he's only been here one day longer than I have it seems unfair."

"You don't have to worry about us, Lehman. You can call me telepathically whenever you want. That way you and Jordy can go and do stuff by yourselves and you'll know that Thomas will be fine." Dylan said assuringly.

"But I can't call you, I'm only a touch telepath." Lehman said hesitantly.

Dylan shook his head as he said, "Don't worry about that. I'm a Mikyvis."

"That means he's a telepath-plus." Thomas interjected helpfully.

Dylan smiled as he pulled Thomas into a one armed hug, then quietly said, "Just call to me and I'll hear you."

Lehman looked uncertainly at the younger looking boy.

"Besides, wouldn't you like to spend some time with Jordy?" Dylan asked frankly.

Lehman reluctantly smiled and gave a timid nod.

//Enjoy some time with Jordy.// Dylan sent happily as he guided Thomas to walk away. //Just think at me if you need anything at all.//

* * * * *

Vincent, Dylan Chang and Jason K were all giggling as they finally made their way outside through the crush of people.

"Dylan! Dylan!" A voice called anxiously as soon as they were away from the door.

Due to his smaller size, Vincent couldn't see who was calling, but it was obvious that Dylan could because he started working his way through people with a definite purpose.

"We need you to come quick! It's one of the new guys, we think he's in trouble." One of the boys said desperately.

"Hold on, Kole. What kind of trouble?" Dylan asked seriously; all traces of his lighthearted mood from a moment before were immediately banished.

The second boy made a series of quick hand gestures as Kole watched.

"Ryvan thinks that Geoff got a little bit freaked by the empathic thing that happened during the ceremony. He kind of ducked out when it was all over and Ryvan saw him heading toward the driveway." Kole said seriously.

"Get the rest of the guys from your cabin and meet me in front of the house." Dylan said seriously.

"Do you need for me to help?" Vincent asked immediately.

"No. I don't think this is as big a deal as it sounds. We can handle it." Dylan said thoughtfully.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do." Vincent said seriously.

"Yeah. I promise." Dylan said warmly, which told Vincent more strongly than words that Dylan was sincere.

* * * * *

"Wow. Look at all these people. I don't know if we'll be able to find Deacon." Thomas said as they emerged from the hall.

"He's over there." Dylan said casually as he pointed to the left.

Thomas looked at Dylan curiously, then hesitantly asked, "Do you know that because you're a Mikyvis?"

"Yeah. I can kind of see where everyone is with my telepathy." Dylan said gently as they continued to walk. "It's not a big deal, but if you want me to explain it more, I can."

"Maybe later." Thomas said with a casual smile. "I just thought it was kinda cool that you can look at a group of this many people and be able to know where someone is."

"Yeah. I guess it is cool." Dylan said with a warm smile directed at Thomas.

"Hey, hold up! I know that guy!" Thomas said as he pointed.

"Which guy?" Dylan asked curiously.

"That's Daniel Wiggins! His Dad is Lawrence's commanding officer." Thomas said with excitement.

"I'm sorry, Thomas, but that guy's name is Dixon." Dylan said reluctantly. "You know how you and Vincent are the same person in two different worlds, I think Dixon is probably the same person in this world as the one you remember from your own."

"Oh." Thomas said thoughtfully.

"We can still go and talk to him if you want to. If he was your friend there, he might be your friend here too." Dylan said gently.

"Well, we weren't really friends... I just knew him." Thomas said quietly. "Him and his family were in a different CD from us."

"A different what?" Dylan asked curiously, somehow both annoyed and enjoying the fact that he didn't already know the answer.

"Civil defense group." Thomas answered seriously. "The people in our neighborhood were all part of a civil defense group so we could work together and help each other."

"Help each other how?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Lots of stuff. One mom would babysit so other moms could work. Or they'd check on the old people who live in the neighborhood and do stuff for them when they needed it. Some of us kids would mow their lawns or help them in their gardens... you know, stuff like that." Thomas said casually.

"That sounds really nice." Dylan said gently.

"I guess so. That's just the way it's always been." Thomas said simply. "Each CD group takes care of their own people so no one ever has to go without stuff or be alone when things are tough."

"Can I help you?" Dixon asked cautiously. "I noticed you watching me."

"No. I'm sorry, Thomas just thought he knew you from somewhere." Dylan said frankly.

"Yeah. You look like someone I know from, um... where I'm from." Thomas said uncomfortably.

"I don't think I've ever been told I look like anybody else before," Dixon said with a slight blush. "I hope he was a nice guy."

"Well, yeah. I guess so. His name is... was Daniel Wiggins. I didn't know him that well, but he was always nice to me." Thomas said haltingly.

Dixon looked at the boy standing beside him with wide eyes.

He turned back to Thomas and asked, "Do you mind if I ask where you are from?" He gulped and added, "My name was supposed to be Daniel Wiggins, except I was kidnapped when I was just a baby."

"You'd probably think I was crazy if I told you." Thomas said, then looked at Dylan, hoping that he would help.

"Thomas, just about anyone who is here today would believe you." Dylan said frankly.

Thomas nodded, then looked at Dixon and said, "I'm from another Earth... What do they call it again?"

"An alternate dimension." Dylan said with a gentle smile at Thomas.

"There really are alternate dimensions?" the other boy with Dixon said with a gasp. He and Dixon shared another look.

"I know there's at least one alternate dimension. Because that's where I'm from." Thomas said frankly.

Dylan turned to Dixon and his friend and nodded his agreement to Thomas' statement.

"I think we need to talk to someone about those dreams soon," Dixon mumbled.

"Thomas and I are doing something right now, but I'll talk to you later." Dylan said with a smile at Dixon and his friend.

"Ok," Dixon said. "I think Jesse and I are going to go find Jason and Phillip again. It was nice meeting you, Thomas. We'll see you later, or earlier, or whatever," he added with a grin at Dylan.

Dylan chuckled and waived goodbye to the pair as they left.

* * * * *

"Deacon is right over there." Dylan said as he pointed.

Thomas glanced at Deacon, then looked back at Dylan thoughtfully.

"Do you still want for us to go look at him?" Dylan asked hesitantly.

"Can you do that growing thing again?" Thomas asked cautiously, then added, "I mean, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to see what you'd look like at Deacon's age."

"Sure." Dylan said with a grin, then started to grow.

Thomas looked at Dylan carefully, then glanced back at Deacon again.

After a moment of thought, Thomas looked Dylan in the eyes and said, "I don't think I need to look at Deacon anymore."

* * * * *

"I thought Thomas and Dylan were going to be waiting with you." Jordy said as he approached.

"Thomas didn't want a babysitter." Lehman said shyly.

"I guess I can understand that." Jordy said frankly. "I mean, who does?"

"So, did you get things worked out with Seth?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Sort of." Jordy admitted shyly.

"How is that?" Lehman asked hesitantly.

"Well, I told Seth what I wanted to do and he said that with all this going on, it might take a few minutes to make the arrangements." Jordy said timidly. "As soon as he's taken care of everything, he's going to call me."

"Oh. I guess that works." Lehman said with a smile.

"Vincent?" A voice asked from behind Lehman.

"No, I'm Lehman." He said shyly as he turned. "Hi Grandma Mona."

"Hello, Lehman." Mona said as she automatically stepped forward to pull him into a hug.

"Do you know Jordy?" Lehman asked as he returned the hug.

"Yes and no." Mona said frankly, then turned to Jordy and said, "I've seen him a few times, but I don't think we've had the chance to talk." Mona said with a gentle smile.

"I feel like I know you already. Jake and Xain have told us all about you." Jordy said timidly.

"Come here, Jordy." Mona said warmly as she drew him into her hug with Lehman.

"And don't believe a word of what my grandsons have told you. I'm not nearly as bad an influence as they would have you believe." Mona said playfully.

"They only said nice things, I promise." Jordy said as he enjoyed being held so tenderly.

"But what are you boys doing inside on a beautiful day like this?" Mona said in a more serious tone. "I hear that they have food out there."

Lehman pulled out of the hug as he said, "We were just waiting on more people to get outside before we went. It was kinda crowded."

"But food sounds like a good idea. Would you like to eat with us?" Jordy asked hopefully.

"I don't think so. I haven't been feeling like myself recently and I doubt that food would be a good idea for me at the moment." Mona said regretfully.

"Are you sick?" Lehman asked with concern.

"No. I'm sure it's nothing." Mona said dismissively.

"If you're not feeling good, you should see a doctor." Jordy said immediately.

"There's no need to bother a doctor with something like this." Mona said frankly.

"Grandma Mona, please let us get a doctor to look at you. I don't want you to feel bad." Lehman said with a pleading expression.

"It always passes in a few hours. I'll be fine." Mona said gently, touched by his concern.

"Does that mean that this has happened before?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Just for the past week or so." Mona said frankly.

Lehman gave Jordy a significant look.

Jordy nodded once, then dashed away.

"You boys are making a big deal out of nothing." Mona said with exasperation. "It's nothing to worry about."

"Is that what you'd be telling me if I was feeling sick?" Lehman asked reasonably.

"That's different. You're too young to know which things need to be worried about and which things are just nature taking its course." Mona said quietly. "When you get to be my age, you'll understand."

//Dylan, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I think I'm going to need Thomas and Vincent's help.// Lehman thought carefully, hoping that Dylan would be able to hear him.

* * * * *

"What's wrong?" Dylan asked cautiously.

Thomas blinked, then looked at Dylan curiously.

"Something's bothering you. Can you talk about it?" Dylan asked gently.

"I don't know... I mean, I'm not sure." Thomas said distantly.

"What do you mean?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"Well, I don't know if you know this, but not too long ago, I was dying." Thomas said carefully.

"Levi told me a little bit about how you were when he first met you." Dylan admitted reluctantly.

Thomas nodded, then continued, "I was really sick. Some of my hair had fallen out and I lost a few of my teeth. My skin had these really gross sores and I was so weak that I could hardly move."

Dylan fought not to imagine how it must have been.

"Then I woke up and I was in a dream place and I wasn't sick anymore." Thomas said quietly. "That's where I met Vincent and he talked to Brakkii and they figured out how to take me from my world and to the dream realm."

"Levi told me about that part." Dylan whispered.

"Yeah. Levi healed me and I lived in the dream realm for a while, and now I'm here." Thomas said carefully.

"So what's bothering you?" Dylan asked carefully.

Thomas looked into Dylan's eyes for a moment, then reluctantly said, "What if, when I was back in my world, I died? How would I know that this... all of this, isn't a dream or the afterlife?"

"I guess since anything I could say or do could be part of your dream..." Dylan drifted off with a shrug. Then after a moment of thought, he hesitantly continued, "...I don't know what to tell you."

Thomas shared a pained look at Dylan which melted into a sympathetic smile.

Dylan got a distracted look on his face, then quietly said, "We need to find Vincent. Lehman needs our help."

* * * * *

"Well, Mona, what seems to be the problem?" Doctor Austin Michaels asked as he approached with Jordy at his side.

"My only problem is that these boys don't understand that old ladies sometimes have aches and pains." Mona said impatiently.

Doc Austin smiled, then quietly said, "I can sympathize with that, but I can also tell you from personal experience that the boys won't stop worrying until they know that you're going to be alright."

"Austin, I'm not going to waste your time with something as minor as a queasy stomach." Mona said frankly.

Before the words were out of her mouth, Vincent, Thomas and Dylan approached.

"What's up?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Grandma Mona is feeling sick and she won't let Doc Austin look at her." Lehman said firmly.

Vincent looked at Lehman on his left, then at Thomas on his right.

"Grandma Mona, we love you and we don't want you to be sick. Please let the doctor help you." Vincent asked in a begging tone and ended with puppy eyes.

Lehman caught on immediately and mimicked Vincent's expression.

Thomas looked at Lehman and Vincent, then up at Mona with wide, sad eyes that begged her to go along with them.

"Ouch! Triple whammy." Doc Austin chuckled as he watched the three identical boys urging Mona to allow him to help.

"Fine! Just... do it." Mona growled past clenched teeth.

Doc Austin grinned as he opened the portable medical scanner that he had taken to carrying with him.

"But you boys should know that this is something that happens to women my age." Mona groused. "Even though it's not always pleasant, it's just another cycle of nature and it's nothing to be worried about."

"Mona, that's not quite accurate." Doc Austin said carefully as he looked at the readings on his scanner.

"Austin, these boys need to understand that as you get older, your body changes." Mona said frankly.

"That's not what I was disagreeing with." Austin said cautiously.

"Does that mean that something is wrong?" Vincent asked quickly.

"No. Not wrong." Doc Austin said cautiously. "Mona, we should really go somewhere and talk privately about this."

All the boys exchanged concerned looks at the doctor's statement.

"Now you've done it, Austin. You've got these boys worried about something as simple as 'the change of life'." Mona said dramatically.

"First of all, 'the change of life' isn't simple. It can be traumatic and life altering for some women..." Doc Austin began but was interrupted.

"It's nature. It happens. I just have to deal with it." Mona said bluntly.

"Mona... You're not in menopause, you're pregnant." Doc Austin said frankly.

A long moment of silence hung in the air as everyone absorbed the statement.

"But... how?" Mona asked in a whisper.

Doc Austin gave her a decent version of the 'duh' look.

"I know how, but I mean, how? I've been to a dozen doctors that told me that it wasn't possible for me to get pregnant." Mona blurted out.

"Well, without any direct knowledge of your medical history, I can't do more than make an educated guess. But consider that your body goes through quite a few chemical and hormonal changes as you get older. I think it's reasonable to assume that whatever prevented you from conceiving might have resolved itself."

"How sure are you? I mean, you could be wrong." Mona asked hesitantly.

"Completely sure." Doc Austin said firmly. "I wouldn't have told you if there was even the slightest doubt."

"I was sure that me feeling sick was just menopause." Mona said absently.

"No, Mona, that's called morning sickness." Doc Austin said gently.

"But I don't always get it in the morning." Mona said quickly, like maybe that bit of information would change his diagnosis.

"That's just what they call it, Mona. It happens when it happens." Doc Austin said simply.

"If you're my Grandma Mona, does that mean that you've got my aunt or uncle in there?" Vincent asked with a big toothy grin.

Mona smiled at the question as she looked down at her abdomen, then quietly said, "No Vincent, I think that since you've claimed Joe as your father, that this will be your baby brother or sister."

"Daddy Joe is gonna freak." Lehman said with a joyful smile as he hugged Jordy at his side.

"I feel like we should be doing something." Thomas whispered to Dylan.

"I'm already on it." Dylan said with a glowing smile.

* * * * *

"Thomas, you already know Levi, and this is my brother Bryce." Dylan said as his brothers appeared in front of them.

"Wow. Hi." Thomas said with amazement.

"I like him." Bryce said immediately.

"Yeah. Me too." Dylan said happily as he hugged Thomas to his side, then said more seriously, "Here's what I was thinking..."

Thomas looked from Dylan to Bryce and Levi and could tell that the three were talking without talking.

"I'll do the freeze." Bryce said quickly.

"Then I'll do the rest." Levi said before vanishing.

"What's going on?" Thomas asked Dylan curiously.

"Bryce is setting up a little time freeze." Dylan said simply, waiting to see if Thomas needed for him to explain.

"So that means that we'll kinda have our own little piece of time that exists down in-between one second and the next?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"Yes. And I couldn't have explained it better than that." Dylan said as he hugged Thomas again.

"What are you guys up to?" Doc Austin asked cautiously.

"Good stuff. I promise." Dylan said with a big smile.

Levi appeared a moment later with a stunned Starfleet Officer at his side.

"What? Where?" the officer sputtered and turned to see the people around him.

When Thomas saw the man's face, he froze in shock.

"What's wrong?" Dylan asked quietly.

"That's... That's Lawrence's father." Thomas whispered.

"Yeah. His name is Joe." Dylan said frankly.

Thomas blinked, then stared as Vincent and Lehman both ran to the man and gave him joyful hugs.

"Joe? *That's* Vincent's Daddy Joe?" Thomas asked in wonder.

"Yeah. What's the problem?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"All my life, I've been hearing about what a wonderful man and what a great hero Lawrence's father was. We always had a picture of him in our living room and we would all go and put flowers on his grave on Memorial day. He died saving lots of people's lives." Thomas said distantly. "Now, I actually get to see him."

"See him?" Dylan asked with a chuckle, "I bet if you get over there, you'd get to do more than that."

Thomas opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut and ran to join Vincent and Lehman.

Dylan shared a smile with his brothers as they watched the three identical boys trying to hug the stuffing out of Lieutenant Joe Bowers.

* * * * *

Joe chuckled at the hugs, then noticed that instead of two identical boys, there were three.

He looked up in confusion, hoping for an explanation, when he stopped and broke into a tender smile.

"Hi, Mona." Joe said happily.

"Hi, Joe." Mona said in return, warmed to the depths of her soul to see him surrounded by happy children and looking at her so lovingly.

Vincent urged Lehman and Thomas to let go of Joe so they could watch what was going to happen next.

"I'm really happy to see you, but I don't know what I'm doing here..." Joe trailed off hesitantly.

"We brought you here so you could talk to Grandma Mona." Levi said bashfully.

"Don't worry about anything. I froze time so that when you go back to the *Yorktown* it'll be the exact same second that you left." Bryce said seriously.

"It's nothing you need to worry about. Vincent can explain everything later if you really want to know." Dylan said frankly.

Joe looked away from the boys and his curious look melted into a loving gaze directed at Mona.

"I really wish you'd get a terminal, Mona. There have been so many nights that I've wanted to talk to you." Joe said distantly.

"For the next few days you can reach me at Allen's house. But after that, I'll have a terminal installed at home. I've wanted to talk to you too." Mona said warmly.

"That'll be great." Joe said with a wide smile, then added more quietly, "But I still don't know why I'm here."

"Joe, we're going to have a baby." Mona whispered cautiously, not sure of what his reaction was going to be.

"We..." Joe gasped as his eyes went wide, then he rushed forward to pull Mona into a joyful hug.

"Her baby is gonna be our little brother or sister." Vincent whispered to Thomas.

"Really?" Thomas asked in wonder.

Vincent nodded happily.

"Lawrence is gonna freak out." Lehman said with a chuckle.

"We'd better make sure that Deacon is close by when we tell him." Vincent said with agreement.

"We're going to have a baby." Joe whispered in awe.

"I guess this means that you're as happy as I am." Mona said gently.

"Oh Mona, I've always wanted to have more kids, I just never thought I'd have another chance. This is wonderful!" Joe said joyously.

"From the look of it, you've got quite a passel already." Mona said with a fond look at Vincent, Lehman and Thomas.

Joe followed her gaze, then curiously asked, "Weren't there two of you when you left the *Yorktown*?"

"We found another one on the way to Earth. This is my newest brother, Thomas." Vincent said with a giggle.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir." Thomas said formally.

"Thomas, if Vincent has claimed you as a brother, then you don't call me Sir, you call me Daddy Joe."

"Really?" Thomas asked in amazement.

"Ask Lehman, he'll explain how it works." Joe said simply, then turned back to Mona and gave her a gentle kiss.

"Lawrence should really be here for this." Vincent said frankly.

"I can do that." Bryce said immediately, then vanished.

"Tell him to bring Deacon." Vincent rushed to say.

"I told him." Dylan said with a grin.

* * * * *

"What happened?" Lawrence asked with confusion as he looked around.

"Do you remember yesterday when you asked me to trust you?" Vincent answered immediately.

Lawrence and Deacon both hesitantly nodded.

"It's your turn to trust me." Vincent said seriously. "This isn't anything bad. One of these Mikyvis guys just froze time for a few minutes and you need to be here."

"Hi, Daddy." Lawrence said happily to his father, then looked back to Vincent and asked, "What do I need to do?"

"Listen to your dad." Vincent said with a cheeky grin, then turned his attention to Joe.

Joe released Mona from their hug, then quietly said, "Come here, Lawrence."

After a moment of hesitation, Lawrence ran to his father's side.

"You too, Deacon, come over here." Joe said gently.

Deacon smiled and walked to Joe's other side.

Joe held a boy under each arm as he carefully said, "I don't know exactly the right way to tell you this, but... in about nine months you guys are going to have a new little brother or sister."

"Closer to eight months." Doc Austin said quietly.

Joe thought for a moment, then nodded and said, "Right, eight months."

Lawrence pulled out of the hug to look at his father for a moment, then looked at Mona with surprise.

"Grandma Mona?" Lawrence asked happily.

Deacon looked with confusion at Lawrence, then at Mona with realization.

Joe looked at Mona warmly, but a look of concern crept into his expression.

"What's wrong?" Mona asked hesitantly.

"Nothing." Joe said quickly, but Mona obviously wasn't going to accept the answer. "There's something that I've been wanting to ask you, but now that we know that you're pregnant... it's going to sound like I'm asking for the wrong reason."

"Lehman already blabbed about that. So Grandma Mona already knows that you were going to ask." Vincent chimed in helpfully.

Joe glanced at the boys and noticed Lehman's remorseful gaze directed at the ground in front of him as Jordy held him gently.

"Thank you, Lehman." Joe said quietly, then waited for him to look up before continuing, "You made doing this a lot easier."

Lehman smiled at Joe's sincere appreciation.

Joe turned to Mona and quietly asked, "Mona, will you marry me?"

"Yes." Mona said joyfully.

Joe moved in to kiss her as all the boys erupted into cheers.

* * * * *

"So when are you and Grandma Mona going to get married?" Lawrence asked happily.

"I think it's going to be strange for the baby if you keep calling Mona 'Grandma'." Joe said honestly.

Lawrence looked at his father for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"What do you say, Mona? Do you think it'd be alright if the boys started calling you Mom?" Joe asked quietly.

"It would be better than alright. It's something I've always wanted." Mona admitted shyly.

"And as far as the wedding date, I think that's something we can decide on together when we've had a chance to make some decisions." Joe said as he looked at Mona with question.

"I think that's a good idea." Mona said warmly, then quietly asked, "Is it going to cause any problem if I tell Allen and the boys the good news right away?"

"Problem?" Joe chuckled, then said, "Tell anyone... Tell EVERYONE!"

"I may just do that." Mona said with a grand smile.

"Are you ready to go back to the *Yorktown* now?" Levi asked as he approached Joe's side.

"No. But I need to go anyway." Joe said with a look of apology at Mona.

"Will you call me at Allen's house tonight?" Mona asked hopefully.

"Yes. Absolutely." Joe said, then moved in to give Mona a firm kiss.

When the kiss finally broke, Joe looked around the group and his gaze fixed on Thomas.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to spend more time with you. But I promise that when I get back to Earth, we'll go and do something as a family." Joe said to Thomas gently.

"Really? I'm really your family?" Thomas asked hopefully.

Joe smiled at the question, then gently said, "Yes. Just the same as Vincent and Lehman. They can explain how it works."

"Thank you." Thomas whispered in wonder.

Joe leaned down to give Thomas a quick kiss on the top of the head, then looked over at Levi with question.

Levi smiled and in an instant, they were gone.

* * * * *

The silence that had surrounded them seemed to burst like a soap bubble.

All of a sudden people were moving around them and talking as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Mona looked at Lehman, Vincent and Thomas, all standing in a row.

"Thanks for getting involved and insisting." Mona said gently.

"We're just happy to see you happy." Lehman said with a smile, then quietly added, "Mom."

Mona pulled Lehman into a warm hug, then quickly said, "I need to find Allen and the boys."

"If you don't mind, I'll go with you." Doc Austin said quietly. "I'd like to give you something for that queasy stomach."

"That's probably a good idea. Besides, Allen might faint when I tell him." Mona said with a chuckle. "He can be such an old lady sometimes."

"Let's go tell Billy." Deacon said to Lawrence with excitement.

A chirp drew Vincent's attention and he saw Jordy take a communicator from his belt.

"This is Jordy." He said seriously.

Vincent couldn't hear what he was being told, but watched curiously, hoping that it wasn't something bad.

"Yeah, that sounds good. Thanks, Seth." Jordy said a moment later, then closed the communicator.

"If you guys still want to go shopping, everything's been taken care of." Jordy said as he looked around the group.

"We've got stuff to do." Bryce said seriously, then glanced at Dylan.

After a moment, Dylan distractedly turned to Thomas and said, "You need to go with your brothers and I need to go with mine."

"Will we see each other again soon?" Thomas asked hopefully.

"Sure. I'll be here when you get back." Dylan said warmly.

"Good." Thomas said with a smile, then looked at the others with question.

"First stop, the Clan clothes closet so you guys will fit in when we go to the mall." Jordy said as he gestured for everyone to follow.

Thomas looked back to find Dylan standing with his brothers, watching him.

Dylan raised his hand to give Thomas a small wave 'goodbye' and watched as Thomas returned the gesture.

* * * * *

"What did you need me to stay for?" Dylan asked Bryce curiously.

"I need to know how things are going with you and Thomas." Bryce said as soon as they were alone.

"Everything's great. Levi was right about him. He's wonderful and except for one thing, I know that we could be happy." Dylan said reluctantly.

"What one thing?" Bryce asked cautiously.

"He's got this idea that you and me and all of this is a dream." Dylan said regretfully.

"He thinks we don't exist?" Bryce asked with surprise.

"He was really sick and now he thinks that he might have died and that this is all some kind of afterlife or elaborate fantasy." Dylan said quietly.

"What can we do to convince him that this world is real?" Bryce asked simply.

"I don't know. I've never looked into his mind. I think that if I did it, I'd ruin everything between us." Dylan said hesitantly.

Bryce looked off in the direction that Thomas had left.

"You shouldn't look without his permission." Dylan warned.

"Yeah. Just like you shouldn't pull a kid out of oncoming traffic unless he asks you to." Bryce said distantly.

"It's not the same." Dylan said firmly.

"He's convincing himself that he doesn't exist. How much more serious do you need for it to be?" Bryce asked absently, then focused fully on his brothers and said, "I know something that we can do that might help him. But if we're going to do it, we'll need to do it right now and we're going to need help."

"What can we do?" Levi asked uncertainly.

"We're going to need dad and pop." Bryce said urgently. "Seriously, it may already be too late."

Levi and Bryce both looked at Dylan expectantly.

Finally Dylan said, "Let's hurry then."

* * * * *

"Go ahead and pick out whatever you want to wear." Jordy said as he led the trio of boys into the Clan's clothes closet.

"Is this a store?" Thomas asked as he looked around.

"No. We just keep some clothes handy in case someone needs them." Jordy said frankly. "We've ended up needing them more often than you'd expect."

"Do you guys want to go to the mall as triplets?" Vincent asked playfully.

At Thomas' curious look, Vincent continued, "Would you like for us to all wear the same thing?"

"I always like doing that." Lehman said with a grin. "It freaks people out."

"Yeah." Vincent said with a smile.

Lehman turned to Thomas and said, "It makes me feel like I'm really Vincent's brother when we dress the same."

Thomas considered, then broke into a smile as he quietly said, "Yeah. I'd like to do it."

"How about this?" Jordy asked as he picked up an olive green T-Shirt with the Clan Short crest on the right side of the chest.

"I like that." Thomas said immediately.

"It works for me." Vincent said with a smile at Thomas' enthusiasm.

"I can't even remember when I've had new clothes." Thomas said as he accepted the T-Shirt from Jordy. "All I've ever had was Lawrence's old clothes or stuff that was given to us by the neighbors."

"Was your family poor?" Lehman asked quietly.

Thomas seemed surprised by the question, and thought for a moment before answering, "No. I don't think we were poor. That's just the way people did things where I'm from. Everything was rationed, so you learned not to waste anything. The only time you bought new clothes was when there was no other choice."

"Well, all these clothes are new and they're yours to keep. So just pick out whatever you like. Underwear and socks are over there, pants are on the shelves on that wall and we even have baseball caps if you guys like those." Jordy said peacefully, then glanced tenderly at Lehman.

"I like these Soleen-Avalla robes, but I guess it'll be nice to have some regular clothes since we'll be around regular people." Vincent said as he made his selections.

"If any of you need shoes, come over here and I can measure your feet. You'd be surprised at how many of the new guys are wearing the wrong size of shoes because they've never worn shoes that fit right." Jordy said as he walked to the back of the room.

Lehman followed immediately behind Jordy and sat down in the chair opposite him.

"Take off your shoe, then put your foot here." Jordy said gently.

Jordy watched in surprise as Lehman's shoe seemed to melt away and transform into his foot.

"Thomas is wearing my shoes." Lehman explained quietly.

"Well, everyone gets their own shoes now." Jordy said with a tender smile at Lehman, then began to measure his foot.

After getting the measurements, Jordy went to the wall of shoe boxes and took down the correct size of shoes for Lehman.

"Socks are over there." Jordy said as he handed over the shoes.

"Thanks." Lehman whispered, then got up out of the chair.

"Who's next?" Jordy asked as he looked at Vincent and Thomas.

"Go ahead." Vincent encouraged.

Thomas took the seat, then hurried to take off his socks and shoes.

Jordy could tell that Thomas was excited about getting a pair of brand new shoes that were all his own.

"You guys can go ahead and get changed. Our ride should be waiting in the parking lot by the time you're ready." Jordy said with a tender smile at Lehman.

"Do you want to change too, Jordy?" Vincent asked casually as he sat down to remove his boots. "You can be an honorary brother."

"No. I think it'll be better if only you three are identical. I'll be there for contrast." Jordy said with a smile.

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Vincent said as he watched Jordy measuring his foot. "We might just look like a tour group or something if all of us were dressed the same."

"There's one more thing that I think you guys should know about before we leave." Jordy said seriously as he went to the wall to retrieve a pair of shoes for Vincent.

When he turned back, he could see the three identical boys looking at him expectantly.

"Oh, I guess that did sound kind of ominous." Jordy chuckled. "I just wanted you three to know that when we go shopping, Clan Short is paying for everything. It's all been arranged."

"But Lehman and I have our own money. You don't need to do that." Vincent said cautiously.

"Vincent, you're a son of Clan Short." Jordy said seriously. "And since you've claimed Lehman and Thomas as your brothers, they're sons of Clan Short, just as much as you are. So don't even think about arguing. The Clan wants to make sure that all three of you have the things you'll need."

"I guess that sort of makes sense." Vincent said as he laced up his new shoes.

"It doesn't sound that different from my home." Thomas said thoughtfully. "If my CD could have bought all of us new stuff, I know they would have done the same thing. They were kind of like our bigger family."

"Well, are we all ready to go?" Jordy asked as he looked at the group.

"Just a second." Vincent said as he gathered his Soleen-Avalla robes, then gestured for Thomas and Lehman to do the same.

"Manu? Can you transport our robes and stuff aboard?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"***Certainly, Vincent***." Manu replied gently.

There was a momentary burst of sparkles on the table, then their combined pile of clothing was gone.

"We're ready now." Vincent said as he turned to look at Jordy expectantly.

Jordy nodded and was about to leave when something caught his attention.

The sight of the three identical boys brought a smile to his face and he couldn't help saying, "You guys look great."

The trio exchanged looks with each other, then broke into three identical smiles.

"Let's go."

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"Dad! Pop! We need your help." Bryce said as soon as the trio had appeared.

"What do you need?" Kyle asked curiously.

"We need to hurry and go to Thomas' universe before it's gone." Bryce said urgently.

Kyle stared at his son for a moment, then quickly said, "It's going to be close, but I think we can do it."

"Not without me, you don't." A voice said from behind the family.

Everyone turned to watch the young ginger haired boy stroll into their midst.

"To do this successfully, you're going to need me to stabilize the time stream." the Doctor said seriously.

"Do you know what we're doing?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"Guys. We can either talk about it, or we can do it." the Doctor said frankly.

Kyle looked around the group, then a burst of power erupted as he moved them into the collapsing universe that Thomas was from.

* * * * *

The group found themselves in a fenced-in back yard.

The sounds of shrill sirens filled the air from all around them and people could be seen rushing around frantically, outside the fence.

Dylan looked around and a look of dawning comprehension filled his eyes.

"I need..." He began to say, then abruptly vanished.

Kyle looked around, hoping someone would explain what Dylan was doing, but they all seemed to be as puzzled as he was.

As Kyle was about to ask, Dylan reappeared with a relieved look in his eyes.

"Listen." The Doctor said, drawing everyone's attention. "No one do anything to manipulate time while we're here. It's going to take everything I have to keep this place stable long enough for you to do what you need to do."

"What do we need to do?" Dylan asked as he looked at Bryce anxiously.

"That's the bomb shelter where Thomas and his family are." Bryce said quickly. "The last thing Thomas did before they closed the door was to set Fluffy free... that's his pet. What we need to do now is to find Fluffy before this universe totally collapses. He's got to still be in this yard."

"And you'd better do it now." the Doctor said in a strained voice. "Right now!"

"That's it, guys! Let's find Fluffy!" Kyle commanded as he hurried toward the back fence.

It was obvious that everyone wanted to ask questions, but it was also obvious that they didn't have time so everyone spread out, searching for Thomas' pet.

"Fluffy! Here boy! Come on!" Kyle called desperately as he arrived at the back gate and found it securely closed.

"Guys, seriously, you'd better make it quick... we're talking seconds!" the Doctor called out as he looked anxiously at the sky.

"What are we looking for?" Dylan asked frantically as he ran to the bushes lining the fence at the right side of the property.

"I don't know, but if you find something fluffy, grab it and we'll sort it out later." Levi said as he searched through the creeping vines around the outside of the bomb shelter's entrance, then said in a gentle voice, "Come on, Fluffy. We're not going to hurt you. Let us help you."

A rocket streaked above them as the Doctor watched with worry.

Bryce was in the garden, crawling between the rows and looking under the broad leaves of squash and cucumber plants.

"Hurry!" the Doctor urged in a scream.

Tyler was at the back of the Winters' home, looking through the various herbs that were growing there as he called out, "Fluffy! Come on, don't be afraid. We're going to take you someplace safe."

"Dammit!" The Doctor said in a gasp. "Kyle, get them out of here, it's going!"

With a flex of his power, Kyle gathered his family and twisted them out of the collapsing universe just as the light of a nuclear explosion could be seen in the distance.

* * * * *

"Is everyone alright?" Kyle asked as he looked carefully at his family.

Bryce stood and brushed the dirt off his pants as he nodded.

"I think we're all fine, but did anyone find Fluffy?" Levi asked cautiously as he also stood.

"All I found was this." Tyler said as he held out what looked like a small leather ball, slightly larger than a baseball.

"What is it?" Levi asked curiously, then smiled with delight when he saw it uncurl and a tiny pair of eyes look around curiously.

"It's an armadillo! Isn't that cute!" Levi said happily, then added, "Timmy's going to love him."

"Yeah. But I have a feeling that we weren't looking for an armadillo." Tyler said regretfully.

"Well, this is kinda fluffy... but not very friendly." Dylan said as he held up a squirming gray squirrel. "She keeps trying to bite and scratch me."

"I think that's because she's wild, she's not a pet." Kyle said with regret to his son.

"Who would have thought that it would be so hard to find one little turtle." Bryce said despondently.

"Hold on. We were looking for a turtle? I thought Fluffy was a dog." Kyle said cautiously.

"I was looking for a cat." Tyler said frankly.

"Actually, I thought we were looking for a pet rabbit." Dylan admitted shyly.

"You said turtle, right?" Levi asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. A little one, about this big." Bryce said as he held his index fingers about three inches apart.

"Like this?" Levi asked as he pulled a small turtle out of his pocket.

"That's him!" Bryce said with delight. "That's Fluffy!"

A sound of giggles drew everyone's attention.

"What's so funny?" Kyle asked curiously.

"Think about it. Five Mikyvis and a Time Lord were nearly caught in a collapsing universe because of a little turtle named Fluffy." The Doctor fought to say past his chuckles.

"He doesn't look very fluffy to me." Kyle muttered as he looked at the turtle in Levi's hand.

"Guys, bring all the animals over here for a second. I need to associate them with this universe or they might vanish when the collapse is complete." The Doctor said gently.

Levi was first in line and held Fluffy out so The Doctor could manipulate his quantum resonance frequency.

"There you go. Fluffy is all sorted." The Doctor said happily.

Levi walked to Dylan and offered Fluffy with one hand as he accepted the squirming gray squirrel with the other.

"What should I do now?" Dylan asked as he looked at the turtle.

"Maybe while Thomas is away, you'd have time to make a nice home for Fluffy." Tyler suggested gently.

Dylan considered for a moment, then smiled happily at his pop.

"It probably wouldn't hurt if you made a nice home for Thomas, too." Kyle added thoughtfully.

Dylan looked at his father with surprise.

"I think he might be more likely to want to stay if he knew not only that he was wanted, but that he had a place that was all his own." Kyle explained gently.

"Yeah. I guess he would." Dylan said slowly.

"We could all help." Bryce said happily. "It'd be fun."

"But first I want to take these guys to meet Timmy. I know he's going to love them." Levi said as he indicated the baby armadillo and the gray squirrel.

"We're going to get back to the party. You boys call if you need us." Tyler said with a loving smile.

"We will." Bryce said quickly.

"We love you." Levi said with a gentle smile at his fathers, then vanished in a glow of lavender light with his brothers.

Chapter 53

"Is this everyone that's going to be going to the mall?" A man asked from beside an over-sized Hummer.

"Yeah. This is all of us." Jordy confirmed, then turned to his companions and said, "Guys, this is Matt. He's going to drive us and he'll act as security."

"Do we *need* security?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Well, chances are that nothing will happen, but it would be plain old fashioned stupid of us to go without security after everything that's happened this week." Jordy said frankly, as he motioned for the three identical boys to get into the car.

"What happened this week?" Thomas asked curiously.

"All hell broke loose." Jordy said frankly.

After a moment to consider the response, Thomas turned to Vincent and said, "Nobody gives a straight answer to anything here, do they?"

Lehman chuckled at Thomas' frustrated expression and nodded his agreement.

"Long story. Ask me later." Vincent said with a cheeky grin.

Thomas rolled his eyes as Lehman broke into laughter.

"Excuse me, guys, but I'm curious." Matt said as he guided the car out the security gates. "If there are only four of you, why did you request a large vehicle for this trip?"

"From what Lehman was telling me, all three of them need to buy a full wardrobe of clothes. They have next to nothing." Jordy said frankly.

"I was meaning to ask about that." Thomas said, as he looked at Vincent curiously. "I just got here, but why don't you guys have anything?"

"I outgrew all of my old clothes and I was off planet where I couldn't buy any more." Vincent said simply.

"And Vincent gave me the clothes he grew out of, but he didn't have that many clothes to begin with." Lehman said consideringly.

"I only brought a few things with me. We were only supposed to be going to Alpha Centauri for a week." Vincent said apologetically, then added, "Besides, I wear uniforms most of the time, anyway."

"Well, you guys are going to need to show me what to do. I've never really bought new stuff before." Thomas said cautiously.

"Just pick out stuff that you like." Lehman said simply.

"Yeah. And if you pick out something that we think looks dorky, we'll let you know." Vincent said with a grin.

"I bet you will." Thomas muttered.

"Did you guys get to eat anything before we left?" Jordy asked suddenly.

"No, I was going to, then that thing with Grandma Mona happened and I forgot." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"We're supposed to call her 'mom'." Lehman said immediately.

Vincent thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked with concern.

"I don't think I'll be able to call her that." Vincent said quietly.

"Why not?" Thomas asked curiously.

"For the same reason that I can't call Daddy Joe 'dad'." Vincent said helplessly.

"Why is that?" Thomas asked with interest.

"It's hard to explain because it's more of a feeling than a logical reason." Vincent said in prelude. "I love Daddy Joe, but calling him 'dad' would be like I'm trying to put a label on him that doesn't fit. That's not who he is and it's not who I want him to be."

"But you call Cory 'dad', I don't understand the difference." Lehman said quietly.

"I don't either, not really." Vincent admitted shyly. "But calling Cory 'dad' started out as kind of a joke because he's so close to my age. It wasn't serious and didn't mean anything... until it did."

"Huh?" Thomas asked with confusion.

"I don't know why, but somehow I accepted him in my heart or something. I don't know if it's just because he's so completely different from my dad or something else. But however it happened, it ended up that I can call Cory 'dad' without feeling funny about it at all." Vincent finished with a smile of accomplishment.

"But what about Mona?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then shook his head and regretfully said, "I can't call her 'mom'... I just can't."

"Then call her something else." Jordy said gently.

Vincent looked at Jordy curiously.

"You know, like you did for your Daddy Joe." Jordy continued.

"You could call her Mama Mona." Thomas said with a smile.

Vincent glanced at Thomas, then considered for a moment before saying, "Yeah. Mama Mona. I like that."

"What about you, Thomas?" Lehman asked curiously.

"What about me?" Thomas asked with confusion.

"Well, I know you just... um, lost your parents. So I was just wondering how you're going to deal with all of this." Lehman said reluctantly.

Thomas thought for a moment, then quietly said, "From what Brakkii explained to me, time moves differently in the realm than it does here... except when Vincent is there."

"I don't really understand about that, but it sounds about right." Vincent said cautiously, then added, "Anyway, I think that's fixed now, so that shouldn't happen again."

Thomas nodded that he had heard, then continued, "Brakkii and I spent a lot of time together and we talked about a lot of stuff. What I figured out is that even though I'm not happy about the way some things turned out, I'm not falling apart, either. The way Brakkii explained it was, that if my mom and dad could have had their one biggest wish granted before they died, that it would have been for me to survive. So I guess it's okay if I'm sad that they're gone, but I can't let that get in the way of other things. The best way I can honor them is to be alive and live my life. That way I know that their wish was granted."

"What are you going to call Joe and Mona?" Jordy asked curiously.

Thomas looked at Jordy uncertainly for a moment, then smiled when he realized that that had been the original topic of conversation.

"Well, I grew up with Joe, the one from my world, being thought of as part of our family. He was my mom's first husband and we were all proud of him and honored his memory. Mona seems really nice too, so I guess I'll try

calling them 'mom' and 'dad'. If that ends up feeling too creepy, then I guess I'll do something else." Thomas said frankly.

"We're almost there." Matt said as he pulled into the mall parking lot.

"Are you guys ready to do some heavy duty shopping?" Vincent asked as he released his seat belt.

"Just remember that I've never done this before." Thomas said seriously.

"Actually, neither have I." Lehman said with an apologetic glance at Vincent.

"Don't look at me. My mom did all my shopping." Vincent said frankly.

"Well, I've done it before, so just stick close to me." Jordy said with a smile at the trio.

"Thanks Jordy." Lehman said with a tender smile.

"Anytime." Jordy responded with a grin, just for Lehman.

* * * * *

"Wow! I've never seen anyplace as nice as this!" Thomas exclaimed as the group walked into the mall.

"It's beautiful." Lehman agreed as he looked around.

"Is that supposed to be doing that?" Thomas asked as he slowly walked toward a large fountain.

"Yeah. It's a fountain... that's what they do." Vincent said frankly.

"It seems wrong." Thomas said distantly.

"Why is that?" Matt asked curiously.

Thomas looked up at him, as if just remembering that he was there, then timidly said, "Where I'm from, no one would ever think about building something like this... something that doesn't do anything but sit there and look pretty. All the parts and work that went into making this could have gone into building a tank or a plane."

"I'm glad I don't live in a world like that." Jordy said quietly as he looked at Lehman.

"Yeah." Lehman agreed with a timid smile back at him.

"What do you guys want to do first? Look around or eat?" Matt asked as he looked over the group of boys.

Before anyone else could answer, Thomas asked, "Can we go in there?" As he pointed at a nearby store.

"Sure. I bet we'll find all kinds of good stuff in there." Jordy said as he started walking.

"Can we really buy anything we want?" Lehman asked quietly.

"Yeah. And remember that you probably won't be able to buy anything else for a while because you'll be at the colony, so make sure you get a bunch." Vincent said happily.

"Look at that!" Thomas said as he ran to the first rack of clothes inside the door.

"Those look like adult clothes. You should probably look for something closer to your size." Jordy said cautiously.

"Kid's stuff is over there. Come on." Vincent said as he pointed to a section deeper into the store.

"Look at all the stuff they have!" Thomas said as he ran to the children's section.

The rest of the group walked more slowly to follow Thomas to the first rack of children's clothing.

"Matt, how would you feel about helping Thomas while I help Lehman?" Jordy asked quietly. "I'm pretty sure that Vincent won't need any help."

"It would be my pleasure." Matt said with a smile at Thomas' excitement.

"It sounds like a plan." Vincent said decisively before walking away to look at another rack of clothes.

Lehman stood and stared at racks upon racks of clothes spread out before him.

"Do you see anything you like?" Jordy asked gently.

"There's so much. I'll never be able to choose." Lehman said in an overwhelmed whisper.

"Come over here and we'll start looking at things for you. Once you get started, I'm sure it'll get easier." Jordy said with a grin as he guided Lehman to walk with him.

* * * * *

"Can I get this?" Thomas asked as he held up a pair of blue denim jeans.

"Of course you can." Matt said with a smile. "Why don't you find some in your size and go try them on?"

Thomas looked at Matt with confusion.

"There's a changing room right over there. We need to be sure that whatever you pick out will fit you." Matt said gently.

Thomas looked at the pair of pants he was holding then up at Matt with question.

"Let me see." Matt said as he put out his hand.

Thomas handed the pants to Matt, then watched as Matt held them up to his waist.

"These look close. Let's get the next smaller size so you can try them both." Matt said as he looked Thomas in the eyes.

"Okay." Thomas said as he went back to the rack, then turned and quietly asked, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. You can ask me anything you want." Matt said casually.

"How well do you know Vincent?" Thomas asked thoughtfully.

"I know some things *about* him. But as far as knowing him personally, I don't." Matt said frankly.

"Good." Thomas said as he selected another pair of pants. "Then you're the person I want to talk to. I get the feeling that Lehman really admires Vincent."

"What did you want to know about him?" Matt asked curiously.

"Well, from what I've seen since I've been here, I get the feeling that a lot of other people really like Vincent, too. He saved my life, so I know why I feel that way about him, but I wanted to know why everyone else feels that way." Thomas said honestly.

Matt considered for a moment, then quietly said, "I guess there are a few reasons for that."

The impatient expression on Thomas' face caused Matt to smile before he continued, "From what I've heard, when Vincent arrived he was a very unfriendly and angry little boy."

"Yeah. Vincent mentioned something about that, but it's hard for me to imagine him being that way." Thomas said seriously.

"I gather that he didn't make the best impression when he first met the Clan." Matt said frankly. "But a few of the guys made a special effort to look past that and try to get to know him. And from what I hear, he upset a few of them along the way."

"That must have been hard for them." Thomas said thoughtfully.

Matt nodded his agreement, then gestured to another rack of clothes as he continued, "Well, I'm not quite sure how it worked out or why, but after Vincent's parents died, the Clan arranged for him to get into the mentoring program so he could learn to become a Starfleet Officer."

"Well, if he was that awful, maybe they were just trying to get rid of him." Thomas said speculatively.

Matt chuckled at the statement as he took a pair of pants off the new rack of clothes and handed them to Thomas.

"I don't think that was their reason for doing it, although it may have occurred to someone along the way that having Vincent off the planet might be a good thing."

"I like these." Thomas said as he looked at the pants.

Matt nodded, then looked Thomas in the eyes as he said, "While Vincent was on his first mission, there was an emergency at a Federation colony and his ship was sent to deal with it. Vincent volunteered to go into a nuclear reactor to shut it down before it blew up and killed hundreds of people. He was exposed to massive radiation and he nearly died from it."

Thomas' eyes went wide as he remembered Vincent telling him that he knew what it felt like to nearly die from radiation.

"So, to answer your question, people admire Vincent not only because he did something really heroic and saved hundreds of lives. But also because he's worked really hard to become a better person than he was." Matt said as he started leading Thomas toward the changing rooms.

"I guess that explains a lot of things I was wondering about." Thomas said contemplatively. "It just seemed like everyone knew who Vincent was and they all liked him. Since he's so much like me, I couldn't understand why."

"Thomas, I know we only just met, but there's something that I can tell you for certain. Even though you and Vincent look alike, you two are really very different people. I know it's going to be tempting, but try not to get caught up in comparing yourself to him. You can never be him, you can only be you. So be the best you that you can be." Matt said seriously.

"Um, okay." Thomas said thoughtfully, then added more quietly, "It may not matter anyway. I might not be here after tonight."

"Are you planning on leaving?" Matt asked with concern.

"I haven't decided yet." Thomas said hesitantly, then quietly added, "I might."

"Well, if my vote counts for anything, I hope you decide to stay." Matt said gently.

Thomas smiled at the words so sincerely spoken, then timidly responded, "I'll remember that."

"Go in and try on these pants so we can find your right size." Matt said as he gestured toward the dressing room door.

"Yeah." Thomas said as he turned, then glanced back at Matt and said, "Thanks."

* * * * *

Jordy followed along and watched silently as Lehman moved from rack to shelf, marveling over the seemingly endless supply of clothing.

"Do you want to try anything on?" Jordy asked as he noticed that Lehman already had four or five items draped over his arm.

"Try?" Lehman asked curiously.

"There's a changing room over there where you can try things on to see if they fit." Jordy said as he gestured toward the fitting room.

"I can make myself fit into just about any of the clothes that are here." Lehman said frankly.

"Oh." Jordy said with surprise, then grinned, "That's going to make shopping a lot easier."

After a moment of consideration, Lehman slowly said, "But I guess I could go in there and try on different things just to see how they really look on me. I want you to tell me if they look right."

"I can hold on to some of those for you while you do that." Jordy said as he looked at the clothes Lehman was carrying.

"Thanks." Lehman said as he looked into Jordy's eyes, then after handing him a few of the clothes, he turned to go into the changing room.

Jordy looked after him and puzzled over what he had just seen... or maybe heard... possibly felt. Even though Lehman had only said 'Thanks.' the words 'I love you.' had been there too, just as clearly as if they had been spoken aloud.

* * * * *

Vincent was looking at a rack of clothes, not really paying attention to what he was doing.

He found himself looking over every few minutes at either Lehman or Thomas.

Thomas and Matt seemed to be engrossed in conversation. As for Lehman and Jordy, the only phrase that came to mind to describe their look at each other was from some corny old movie. A 'smitten gaze' was the only description he could give that look that would even begin to explain the expression on Lehman's face.

Vincent was overcome by a feeling of utter contentment as he watched his two adopted brothers doing such mundane and ordinary things. He got the feeling deep down in his soul that everything was just the way it was supposed to be.

"Were you needing help finding anything?" A woman's voice asked from behind him.

Vincent started at the sound, then looked up at her and answered, "No. I'm just looking for some new clothes before I go on a trip."

"Well, if you need anything, you should be able to find someone to help you near the dressing rooms over there." She said in a pleasant voice.

"Okay. Thanks." Vincent said courteously, then glanced over when he saw that Thomas was walking into the dressing room.

As the woman started to walk away, something caught Vincent's attention.

"Excuse me." Vincent said quickly, before she could get too far away.

"Yes?" The woman said as she turned.

"Did you buy that here?" Vincent asked as he looked her over.

The woman looked down at herself, then asked, "Did I buy what?"

"That outfit you're wearing. Is that something that you bought in this store?" Vincent asked curiously.

The woman thought for a moment, then said, "Yes, come to think of it, I did buy it here."

"I think that looks really nice. Do you think you could help me find something like that? I'd like to buy it for someone." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Do you know the size that you'll need?" She asked cautiously.

"Your size. You're just about the same size as her. That's what made me think of it." Vincent said seriously.

"Let me show you what we have, it's right over here." The sales lady said as she began to walk away.

Vincent glanced toward the dressing room again and noticed that Lehman had just walked in.

"Okay." He said as he followed.

* * * * *

"Does this look okay?" Thomas asked as he stepped out of the dressing room.

"Let me see." Matt said as he went down on one knee, then tugged on the waist of Thomas' pants to see that they weren't too snug or too loose.

"Those look good on you." Jordy said as he looked around the corner from the neighboring dressing room.

"Do you really think so?" Thomas asked hopefully.

"Yes. It's a nice style for you." Jordy said with a grin.

A sudden clatter made all three of them jump and Jordy immediately ducked back around the corner to see what had made the noise.

Matt rushed around the corner next as Thomas followed a little more slowly.

A sales lady was standing and staring at the dressing room with a pile of empty clothes hangers scattered about her feet.

The three followed her disbelieving gaze to find Lehman standing in the doorway of the dressing room with a puzzled expression.

"Is something wrong?" He asked as he noticed everyone staring at him.

"I um..." Jordy stammered, then gulped.

"There are some people who shouldn't wear spandex." Matt said cautiously.

"What's wrong with it?" Lehman asked as he looked down at himself.

Jordy stared at Lehman's ample endowments clearly outlined in the shimmering fabric, then cautiously said, "Personally, I like it. But I think that you're showing off a little bit more than you need to."

"Little bit?" The sales lady gasped.

Lehman glanced at her, then followed her gaze down to his crotch.

"Oh." He said in realization, "That."

"Maybe something looser would be better." Matt suggested gently.

"Um, yeah." Lehman muttered, then quickly withdrew into the dressing room.

"Would you like some help with those?" Matt asked, looking at the pile of fallen clothes hangers.

The sales lady tore her gaze away from the dressing room, then seemed to realize where she was and said, "No. Thank you, I'm sorry, I was just..."

"Yeah. A lot of people are." Jordy said as he fought to restrain a chuckle.

"Come on Thomas. Get out of those pants so we can start getting you some clothes." Matt said as he put a hand on Thomas' shoulder.

Thomas looked up at Matt, then broke into a smile.

* * * * *

"Would you like for me to set this aside for you?" The sales lady asked Vincent professionally.

"No. I'd like to pay for this now, I'm buying it with my own money. The rest of what I'm buying will be paid for by the people I came in with." Vincent said seriously, then handed her his Starfleet ID and credit card.

The woman looked at the hologram on the ID, then at Vincent with mild surprise.

"Yeah. I *really* am a crewman." Vincent said before she could ask.

"That's not it." The sales lady said as she began to process the transaction. "I have family who were at Kimber."

Vincent looked at her with surprise.

"After it was over, they wrote to me and told me what happened." The sales lady said as she put the receipt into the bag with his purchase, then as she

handed him his ID she quietly said, "And they told me that you're the reason that they're still alive.

Vincent was at a loss for words as he accepted the bag of clothing from her.

"Thank you." She whispered sincerely.

"I'm glad I could help." Vincent said shyly.

The sales lady smiled gently and asked, "Would you like for me to keep those behind the register until you're finished shopping?"

"Um, no." Vincent stammered with relief, then sat the bag on the counter and said to his wrist, "Manu, would you transport this bag to my cabin?"

"***Yes Vincent***." Manu responded immediately, then the bag disappeared in a small fountain of sparkles.

Vincent noticed the sales lady's look of surprise.

"Thanks for your help." He said with a grin, then left to return to the boys department.

"Thank you." The sales lady said earnestly as she watched him leave.

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"What's wrong, Thomas? It looks like something is bothering you." Matt asked as they walked from one rack of clothing to another.

"Nothing's really wrong. It's just... I know it sounds kinda weird, but I think I miss Dylan." Thomas said shyly.

"What's weird about that?" Matt asked curiously.

"I haven't known him for very long... Just a few minutes really." Thomas said as he looked at Matt desperately.

"Sometimes it works that way." Matt said frankly.

"It's not important, and I'm not upset or anything. I just think it'd be nice if he was here right now." Thomas said as he tried to turn his attention to the rack of clothes in front of them.

"We'll be going back to the Short Compound as soon as we're done shopping. I'm sure you'll get to see him then." Matt said with assurance.

"Yeah." Thomas said, but didn't sound particularly assured.

* * * * *

"Vincent, did you find anything?" Jordy asked as he approached, with Lehman following a step behind.

"A few things. What about you?" Vincent asked happily.

"Yeah. Lehman found a few nice things. A lot more than I would have thought considering that this is our first store." Jordy said frankly.

"Jordy's been a lot of help... except that he didn't warn me about Spandex." Lehman said with a rueful smile at Jordy.

"Spandex? What about it?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Bull moose." Lehman said with the quirk of one eyebrow.

"Oh." Vincent said in realization, then grinned at Jordy who was blushing.

"So are you ready to move on to the next store?" Jordy asked, wanting to change the subject.

"Do you think we could get something to eat next? I'm getting really hungry." Vincent said honestly.

"Yeah. Good plan. If you two will take your things to the checkout, I'll go find Thomas and Matt." Jordy said cheerfully.

Lehman smiled at Jordy, then turned to walk away.

* * * * *

"How are you doing Lehman?" Vincent asked casually as they walked.

"No matter what happens, this is going to hurt." Lehman responded in a pained voice.

Vincent was surprised by the response and stopped to look Lehman in the eyes.

"I'm going to have to leave. He has to stay. It's going to hurt... a lot." Lehman said with regret.

"And the worst part is... I don't care." Lehman said with an ironic chuckle. "I can't do anything but keep on going."

"We'll work something out." Vincent said as he shifted his load of clothes to one arm so he could put his free arm around Lehman.

* * * * *

After a trip out to the car to drop off their purchases, Jordy led them back into the mall and directly to the food court.

"What kind of a place is this?" Lehman asked as he looked around.

"It's kind of like the mess hall back on the Yorktown, except that you have about a dozen cafeterias to choose from instead of just one." Vincent said seriously.

"I don't know what to do." Thomas said as he looked around in wonder.

"Thomas, you stick with Matt." Jordy said simply, then looked at Matt with question.

Matt smiled, indicating that he didn't mind watching after Thomas.

"Lehman can come with me and I guess Vincent will go with me or Matt, since we have the credit cards." Jordy said frankly.

"I have my own money. One meal isn't going to break me." Vincent said with a smirk.

"Have you seen mall prices recently?" Jordy asked with a wide eyed expression, then gestured for Lehman to walk with him to one of the restaurants.

Vincent chuckled, then noticed that Matt and Thomas were heading toward the burger place that he was intending on going.

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"Is she from the Clan?" Thomas asked as he stared at the woman ahead of them in line.

"No. Why would you think that?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Because she's talking on one of those things like Jordy does." Thomas said honestly.

"What Jordy has is a communicator. What that lady is using is a cell phone." Vincent said seriously. "Just about everybody has those."

"Cell phone? Is that like a telephone?" Thomas asked curiously.

"Yeah. Exactly, except that you can take it with you when you leave home." Vincent said, happy to have found at least one thing that wasn't difficult to explain to Thomas.

Thomas listened to the lady talking for a minute, then looked at Vincent and said, "So it's not something important?"

After a moment to listen to her side of the conversation, Vincent said, "It doesn't sound like it."

They waited for a moment longer, then Thomas asked, "Can we just go around her? She's so busy talking that she's not moving up in the line."

"Just give her a minute." Matt whispered.

Thomas did as he was told and waited approximately one minute before saying, ""Hey! You on the phone! Move your ass!"

The woman looked at Thomas with surprise, then walked up to the counter to place her order.

Thomas crossed his arms across his chest as the woman seemed to be reading the whole menu board.

"Yeah. If you wasn't talking on the phone, you'd know what you want, wouldn't you? Just pick something!" Thomas barked.

The lady glanced at Thomas, then at Matt and said, "Sir, I think you need to teach your son about manners."

"Yeah, maybe." Thomas said before Matt could respond, "But I'm nine years old, what's your excuse?"

The lady turned her attention away from them, then finally placed her order.

"What do you want, Thomas?" Matt asked quietly.

"Vincent, will you order something for me? I don't know what most of this stuff is anyway and I'll probably like the same things you do." Thomas asked hopefully.

"You didn't have hamburgers where you're from?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"Yeah. We have hamburgers, but not these... double triple bacon whatever things." Thomas said with frustration as he glanced at the menu board.

"I'll get you something good." Vincent said with a grin, then for good measure, moved in to give Thomas a quick hug.

* * * * *

"There's Jordy and Lehman. They've already got a table." Vincent said as they left the pick-up window.

"I guess they didn't have a phone lady to hold them back." Thomas grumbled.

"You really can't stand to wait, can you?" Vincent chuckled.

"I can wait just fine. I just can't stand to do it for no good reason." Thomas said bluntly.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "I guess I'm that way, too."

* * * * *

"What did you guys get?" Vincent asked as he sat down.

"Jordy wants me to try these 'corn dogs'." Lehman said as he looked at the corn dogs on his plate dubiously.

"And the cheese sticks, those are great." Jordy said enthusiastically.

"What did you get, Thomas?" Lehman asked curiously.

"I don't know, I let Vincent pick for me." Thomas said cautiously.

"Just try it." Vincent said with a roll of his eyes, then unwrapped his own burger and took a bite.

"Good God, Vincent! How can your mouth open wide enough to eat that?" Jordy asked with astonishment.

Vincent had a mouth full of food, so the only answer he could give was a shrug.

Thomas hesitantly unwrapped his own burger and was surprised to find that it was nothing like Vincent's.

He opened the top bun and saw nothing but a meat patty, under the meat he found a squirt of catsup and a single pickle chip.

Relieved to see that it wasn't mounded over with toppings like Vincent's was, Thomas cautiously took a bite of the burger.

"What do you think?" Matt asked Thomas carefully.

Thomas finished chewing his bite of food, then said, "This is really good."

"Good. I'm glad you're enjoying it." Matt said with a sincere smile.

Thomas picked up his drink and took a sip through the straw, then began to choke and sputter.

"What's wrong?" Matt asked as he grabbed a handful of napkins and ran to Thomas' side.

Thomas took a few of the offered napkins and wiped his face, then blew his nose.

"Are you okay?" Matt asked with concern.

Thomas took a few deep breaths, then said, "Yeah. I think so, but that has to be the most disgusting thing I've ever tasted."

Vincent looked at Thomas' drink cup, then cautiously took a sip of his own.

"Sorry Tom, our drinks must have got switched." Vincent said shyly.

"Don't call me that." Thomas said fiercely as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"What?" Vincent asked slowly, then played back his words in his head and asked, "Tom?"

"Yeah. I hate that. Don't call me that." Thomas said firmly.

"Sure. Fine." Vincent said, then handed Thomas his drink.

"Here, I think you'll like this better." Vincent said quietly.

Thomas cautiously took a sip, then smiled.

"What is it?" Matt asked curiously.

"Water." Vincent said as he sat back in his own chair.

"But what did you have?" Jordy asked curiously.

"Mountain Dew." Vincent said frankly. "I didn't think Thomas would like it, that's why I got him water, but somehow our drinks got switched between there and here."

"You mean people drink that on purpose? Yuck!" Thomas said as he looked at Vincent with disbelief.

"When you grow up with it, you get used to it." Vincent said frankly.

"I think it's still fizzing in my nose a little... is it supposed to do that?" Thomas asked cautiously.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Well, you're not supposed to choke and blow it out your nose. But yeah, it's supposed to fizz like that."

"So you don't have soft drinks where you're from?" Matt asked curiously.

Thomas looked at Matt with surprise at the question.

"Yeah. We have them, but I never drank one before. I think only adults drink them." Thomas said uncertainly. "I don't know why, though."

"Have some of your fries before they get cold. They're gross when they're cold." Vincent said as he pointed to the small paper bag of french fries in front of Thomas on the table.

Thomas looked at Vincent suspiciously for a moment, then took one of the fries and carefully put it into his mouth.

"What do you think?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Thomas considered for a moment, then said, "We have french fries something like this at home, they're okay."

"Good." Vincent said with a smile, then opened his mouth wide to take another bite of his enormous hamburger.

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"Pants, shirts, socks, shoes, underwear, jackets, hats, swimwear... did we forget anything?" Jordy asked as he surveyed the three nearly identical boys.

"I think we got everything that we could possibly need." Vincent said honestly.

"We got enough clothes for a whole grade school." Thomas said frankly.

"Well, I'm glad we were able to get that T shirt place to custom make those shirts for you. I think they're great." Jordy said with a grin.

"Did you see the look on the clerk's face when we asked him? He thought it was hilarious." Vincent said happily as he looked down at his 'Thing 1' T shirt.

"Remember that you promised to find the book that has the story that explains this." Lehman said as he examined his 'Thing 2' shirt.

"I'm sure Timmy or Ricky have it. It's a classic." Vincent said, feeling the sense of profound happiness return.

"So Lehman." Jordy said, sounding a bit nervous, "Are you planning to stay with Vincent and Lawrence again tonight?"

Lehman opened his mouth to answer, then shut it and looked at Vincent with question.

"We haven't discussed it yet." Vincent said as he turned his attention to Jordy.

"Well, I was thinking, that... If you, you know, wanted to..." Jordy stammered himself to a stop.

When it was obvious that Jordy wasn't able to find the words to continue, Vincent said, "There's something that I need to do with Lawrence in the morning. You know, that thing with the house."

"Do you need for me to go with you?" Lehman asked curiously.

"No. I think me and Lawrence are the only ones who need to go." Vincent said frankly.

"You could stay with me!" Jordy blurted out.

Lehman smiled radiantly, then said, "Yeah. I'd like that."

"What about you Thomas?" Matt asked from the driver's seat.

"What about me?" Thomas asked hesitantly.

"Where would you like to stay tonight?" Matt asked curiously.

"I don't know." Thomas said quietly.

"Is it that you don't know, or that you don't think that you'll be able to?" Matt asked as he glanced to look Thomas in the eyes.

"I don't know if he'll want me to or if... if his parents will want me to."

"I tell you what, we're almost there. How about I help you find out?" Matt asked with a gentle smile.

"Yeah. Thanks." Thomas said with relief.

Matt looked in the rear view mirror and noticed Vincent looking at him with an approving smile.

* * * * *

"Well Vincent, do you need for me to drive you over to your brother's house to unload all of this?" Matt asked as he parked the Hummer.

"No. If we can get the stuff out of the car and sort it, we can just transport it all up to the ship and then we'll be able to get to it no matter where we decide to spend the night." Vincent said and finished with a smile at Lehman.

"Sounds good." Lehman said with a grateful smile at Vincent.

As Thomas opened his door, a small shape lunged inside and grabbed him suddenly.

"I missed you!" Dylan said as he hugged Thomas tightly.

"I missed you too." Thomas said as he closed his eyes and enjoyed the wonderful feeling of being hugged so enthusiastically.

"Come on, let's get this stuff unloaded." Vincent whispered to Lehman.

"I've got something to show you." Dylan said suddenly as he backed away from Thomas enough to look him in the eyes.

Thomas looked into the sparkling violet eyes and felt something that he'd never felt before. The urge to kiss. It felt like every cell in his body was urging him to lean forward ever so slightly and kiss those smiling lips. Dylan displayed his affection so obviously and even proudly that Thomas had no doubt that he would welcome the action. Yet something was holding him back from doing it, like the slightest thread of uncertainty. And it was fraying.

"Come on. I know you're going to love it!" Dylan said with excitement, breaking Thomas out of the spell.

Thomas blinked, then absently said, "I have to get my stuff out of the back of the car.

Dylan looked at Thomas curiously, then glanced at Jordy.

"Oh, clothes and stuff. Right. Let's get it quick." Dylan said, then took hold of Thomas' hand and dragged him out of the car.

"Do you remember which stuff is yours?" Vincent asked as he looked at the large collection of bags.

"I put all mine on the right side and tied them shut." Thomas said as he was led around the back of the car.

"All of those are yours?" Dylan asked as he pointed at the pile.

"Yeah." Thomas said shyly, feeling like he had been too extravagant and bought too many things for himself.

There was a popping sound, like a sudden rush of displaced air, and the entire mound of shopping bags was gone.

"Where did they go?" Thomas asked with surprise.

"I put them in the house." Dylan said simply.

"Is that all? Can we go now?" Dylan asked hopefully.

Thomas looked at Lehman and Vincent with question for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I guess that's all."

"Come on." Dylan said as he took hold of Thomas' hand again, and nearly dragged him away.

"We'll catch up with you later." Vincent said with a smile at Thomas.

"Yeah." Thomas said helplessly as the young Mikyvis drew him away.

"I suppose we need to get the rest of these unpacked now." Matt said as he looked at the remainder of the bags in the back of the Hummer.

"Don't worry about it. Dylan had the right idea, we can just take the rest of it up to the ship and sort it out there." Vincent said frankly.

"Thanks for taking us to buy things. It was really great." Lehman said to Matt shyly.

"It was nice to see the three of you able to get the things you'll need." Matt said tenderly.

"Do you want to come with us Jordy?" Lehman asked hopefully.

Jordy thought for a moment, then said, "Sure. I've got my communicator if anyone needs me for anything."

"We'll see you later Matt. Thanks again." Vincent said with a toothy grin.

"It was my pleasure." Matt said sincerely.

"Manu, will you transport the three of us and these bags of clothes up to my cabin?" Vincent asked into his bracelet.

"***Certainly Vincent. Whenever you're ready.***" Manu said gently.

"Transport." Vincent said, then the three boys and their purchases disappeared in multiple fountains of multi-colored sparkles.

Matt stood for a moment staring at the empty car, then chuckled and shook his head as he closed the cargo area.

* * * * *

"Hey, look at this. We got mostly the same things." Vincent said as they all sorted through the clothes they had bought.

"Yeah. I guess what your people say is true. Great minds do think alike." Lehman said with a chuckle.

"Did we grab someone else's package by accident?" Jordy asked as he pulled what was obviously a woman's blouse out of one of the bags.

"No, I bought that for T'Lani." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"Oh, your wife. I should have thought of that." Jordy said as he hurried to put the blouse back into the bag.

"I just saw the outfit the sales lady was wearing and thought T'Lani would like something like that." Vincent said casually then held his hand out for the bag. "I want to hang it up before it gets too wrinkled."

Jordy nodded as Lehman said, "I'd like to get something for Benny and JonJon while I'm here. Just a little something to let them know how happy I am that they want to be my fathers."

"We could do that when we get back." Jordy said simply.

"I need to call Dylan before we plan anything else. He's planning something and I don't know when it's going to happen and who needs to be there." Vincent said seriously.

"Dylan Chang?" Jordy asked slowly.

"Right. Would it be better if I called them Little Dylan and Big Dylan?" Vincent asked with a grin.

"I don't think Big Dylan would have a problem with that, but I don't think I have the stones to be calling any Mikyvis 'little' to his face." Jordy said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. I don't know all the stuff that they can do, but I've seen enough to know that I don't want to be upsetting them for no good reason." Vincent said with a smile.

"Are we done here?" Lehman asked as he looked through the collection of empty bags.

"Yeah. While you guys are getting your stuff put away, I can call Dylan and find out the details for tonight." Vincent said happily.

"We'll be done in a few minutes." Lehman said as he gathered up a few armloads of clothes.

"Well, if it's longer than that, I'll be on the bridge with Captain Rasch and Treep. So take all the time you need." Vincent said, then waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Lehman giggled and said, "Thanks, Vincent."

* * * * *

"I know it'd be faster to just pop us there, but then you might not believe that this is for real and I really really need for you to know that it is." Dylan said in a rush as he guided Thomas down the hallway.

"Will you do something for me?" Thomas asked Dylan quietly.

"What?" Dylan asked quickly, then blurted, "Anything!"

"Calm down a little." Thomas said, then pulled Dylan into a gentle hug.

Dylan closed his eyes and hugged Thomas fiercely.

"Is something wrong? Did something happen while I was gone?" Thomas asked with concern.

"Lots of things happened while you were gone, but none of them have anything to do with us." Dylan said frankly.

"Okay." Thomas said with a smile, then asked, "What did you want to show me?"

"It's in here." Dylan said as he kept one arm around Thomas and walked at his side.

Thomas walked with Dylan into what was obviously a bedroom and looked around. It was bright and spacious with an overall 'cheerful' feeling to it.

"How do you like it?" Dylan asked hopefully.

"It's nice. Bright... kind of happy." Thomas said slowly.

"Over here is the best part." Dylan said as he led Thomas to the huge terrarium built into one wall.

"Hey! That's nice." Thomas said as he leaned forward to look inside.

Something moving caught Thomas' attention and he smiled.

"Hey! I had a turtle just like this back home." Thomas said wistfully.

"Not just like it." Dylan said with excitement, "That's Fluffy!"

Thomas blinked and stared at the turtle a moment longer, then looked at Dylan disbelievingly.

"My brother, Bryce... you remember him, don't you?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Yeah." Thomas said, then glanced at Fluffy again.

"Well, when you left, Bryce said that he peeked in your mind a little bit and knew something that might make you feel better. So a bunch of us went to

your universe and found Fluffy and brought him back here for you. Then we made a place where both of you can stay and be happy." Dylan said with accomplishment.

"A place for me?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"Yeah. This is your room! I put your new clothes in the closet over there. I didn't peek in them at all, so whenever you're ready you can show me the stuff you got." Dylan said joyfully.

"Sure." Thomas said absently, then looked Dylan in the eyes and hesitantly asked, "If you could get Fluffy, can you go back and get my mom and dad... and my brother?"

Dylan's seemingly boundless energy dissipated in the wake of the question.

"I'm sorry, Thomas. We just barely had enough time to get Fluffy out before your dimension began to dissolve." Dylan said quietly.

"But why didn't you get my mom and dad to go with you while you were getting Fluffy?" Thomas asked as tears welled up in his eyes.

"It would take a long time to explain why, but the short answer is, we couldn't. Mikyvis can do lots of amazing things, but there's lots of other stuff that even we can't do. I couldn't get your Mom and Dad out of there. I couldn't go back and get you out before the radiation made you sick. Those things had to happen to make you the person that you are today."

"But if you could have?" Thomas asked hesitantly.

"Yes. If I could have saved them, I would have. I promise." Dylan said solemnly.

Thomas glanced back at the terrarium for a moment, then asked, "How can I get him out?"

"It's hinged. Just open the catch there and you can open the whole front." Dylan said as he pointed.

Thomas carefully opened the terrarium, then picked up the turtle and held it's shell against his cheek for a moment.

"I think he's happy to see you too." Dylan said with a tender smile, then thought to ask, "By the way, why did you name him Fluffy?"

Thomas chuckled, then held Fluffy in his left hand as he slowly stroked the shell with his right.

"A girl at my school got a pet rabbit for her birthday and brought it to school to show it off. As soon as I saw it, I wanted one too. It was just so cute and cuddly." Thomas said distantly.

"Well, I told my parents, and of course they tried to talk me out of it. Dad told me that if we did get a rabbit, it wouldn't be as a pet, it would be as livestock. We couldn't afford to feed and take care of something unless it contributed to the family." Thomas said with regret.

"I'd pretty much given up on the idea by the time my birthday came. But when I opened my presents, there was this cute tiny little turtle. When my parents asked me what I wanted to name him, I decided to name him what I was going to name my rabbit." Thomas finished with a grin.

"So even though you didn't get the pet that you wanted, you made the best of it?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Maybe at first, but I think Fluffy is a better pet than a rabbit ever could have been." Thomas said seriously.

"Really? How?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Fluffy's a really good listener. Sometimes he'll give me this look and I'll know that he understands what I'm saying and really cares." Thomas said, then noticed that Fluffy had poked his head out of his shell and was looking at him curiously.

"Of course, sometimes he'll give me this other look and... Well, when what you're saying is boring to a turtle, you should really shut up." Thomas said frankly.

Dylan chuckled as he watched Fluffy surveying his new surroundings.

"So this is really my room?" Thomas asked as he looked around again.

"Yep. All yours. Mine is right next door." Dylan said cheerfully.

"You made a room for me?" Thomas asked as he looked Dylan in the eyes.

"Yeah. Well, me and my brothers did. Dad and Pop told us to." Dylan finished shyly.

"Your parents want me to stay too?" Thomas asked with surprise.

"Yeah. It was their idea. I didn't even have to ask." Dylan said quickly, then asked in a whisper, "Will you stay?"

"What do you say 'Big Guy'? Do you think you could stand living here?" Thomas asked Fluffy quietly.

Fluffy looked up at Thomas and tilted his head to one side.

"Okay. If you're sure." Thomas said with a smile, then leaned forward to put Fluffy back into the terrarium.

"Does that mean you're going to stay here?" Dylan asked hopefully.

"Yeah." Thomas said quietly.

Dylan gave a happy little squeak, and bounced a few times with joy.

Thomas grinned at the action.

"Thomas. There's something I'd like to do... I mean, if you'd let me." Dylan said as he started growing.

"What's that?" Thomas asked curiously.

"Can I kiss you?" Dylan asked, now appearing to be Thomas' own age.

"No." Thomas said as he looked Dylan in the eyes.

"Oh." Dylan said with disappointment.

"But if you'll be yourself, I'll kiss you." Thomas said gently.

Dylan quickly returned to his usual appearance.

"You never have to change for me. I like you just the way you are." Thomas said, then leaned down and gave Dylan a gentle, lingering kiss.

It wasn't anything more intimate than a touching of lips, but somehow it was just perfect.

Chapter 54

"Did we take too long?" Lehman asked, as he and Jordy walked onto the bridge of the ship.

"No, it's fine. Captain Rasch was just telling me about what they're doing to get the ship ready for the trip back." Vincent said happily.

"What did you find out about whatever big Dylan was planning?" Lehman asked curiously.

"We have plenty of time. And you guys are both invited to be there." Vincent said seriously.

"What are we going to be doing?" Jordy asked from Lehman's side.

"Dylan didn't really tell me anything about that. I think it's going to be kind of a meeting for the whole camp and then Dylan is going to want me to say something." Vincent said uncomfortably.

"Better you than me." Jordy said frankly.

Vincent gave a little shrug, then said, "Sometimes you have to do stuff like this. You don't have to like it, you just have to do it and get it over with."

"Trach Manja Vincent is correct." Captain Rasch said seriously, "We do what we must for the greater good."

"I'm still glad that you're the one who's going to be doing it." Jordy said with a smirk.

The sound of Jordy's communicator going off caused everyone to look at him.

"Jordy. Go." Jordy said as soon as his communicator was open.

"*Do you remember those new Clan member files that I gave you yesterday?*" Seth asked immediately.

"Yeah. I got them all finished." Jordy said seriously.

"*That's great, but where are they? I need them.*" Seth said anxiously.

Jordy thought for a moment, then shook his head and said, "I think I forgot to put them on the network. Give me five minutes and I'll have them to you."

"*Five minutes.*" Seth said firmly, then added, "*Out.*"

"Seth doesn't always talk to you like that, does he?" Lehman asked with concern.

"No. Seth is really nice. I just volunteered to do this work to help him and forgot to give it to him. So now he needs it and doesn't have it." Jordy said quickly. "I need to get back down to the Short Compound."

"Manu, would you transport us down to the Short Compound?" Vincent asked into the air.

"***Yes, Vincent. On your command.***" Manu responded immediately.

"Transport."

* * * * *

"This will just take me a minute or two. If you want, you can wait in there for me." Jordy said quickly.

"We'll see you in a minute." Lehman said gently.

"Yeah. Don't keep Seth waiting." Vincent said with a grin.

Vincent and Lehman froze just inside the doorway when they saw a huge animal with a small, frail looking boy.

It took a moment for them to realize that the boy was Joel.

Joel glanced up at them and seemed to be frozen with indecision about what he should do.

The decision was made for him when the large animal nosed Joel toward them.

"Hi," Joel said shyly to them once he got close enough.

Vincent was once again surprised by Joel's Vulcan features. Joel had looked entirely human before, and Vincent had that label firmly attached to him. Now, seeing him like this, Vincent wasn't sure how Joel would be most comfortable. He decided that it would be best for him to err on the side of caution and greet Joel formally.

He gave Joel the Vulcan salute, saying, "Greetings, Joel Short. I am Vincent Winters, son of Clan Short of Vulcan."

Joel raised an eyebrow. "You're the son of the whole Clan?" he asked, then looked at Lehman. "Your brother too?"

Vincent smiled and nodded.

Joel grinned and returned the salute. Then he stopped all motion and sniffed slowly. "Something smells... different."

Joel's gaze shifted to Lehman, then he cocked his head to one side and said, "You're not human. You... you don't smell Klingon or Vulcan, and I don't know many Star Trek races that look *that* human... you're Chameloid, aren't you?"

"This is Lehman, and you're right; he's a Chameloid," Vincent giggled slightly before leaning in closer to Lehman, "Vulcans have a really good sense of smell. He just smells your natural pheromones and stuff."

"Oh," Lehman said without inflection, then he looked back at Joel and smiled slightly, "I was sure I bathed well today," he said, trying for some levity.

Joel's eyes widened slightly. "I'm sorry... that came out wrong... I'm sorry..." he murmured and started to back away slightly.

Lehman reached out a hand slowly to him, his palm up. "You don't have to be sorry, Joel. I understand; we've been told you came from a very different place."

Joel reached out and hesitantly took Lehman's offered hand. He stopped looking so nervous and smiled. He then offered his other hand to Vincent, who took it calmly.

Joel giggled slightly as he relaxed, but that was changed when he felt a slight click in his heart. The click of something connecting.

"What was that?" Vincent asked quickly as he removed his hand from Joel's. "What just happened?"

Joel looked at him in wonder. "I... I just... that was a link, I think..."

"Linked?" Vincent repeated, "Like a Bond-Link?"

"Kinda," Joel nodded.

Vincent looked at Joel seriously. "I'm already married to T'Lani; can you remove it? Now?"

Joel backed away slightly, his lips trembling. "It's not a marriage link, Vincent; honest. I don't know how I did it and I don't know how to get rid of it... Xain and Telez called it the Bonding of the Children..."

He started crying softly then, "I didn't m...mean it, Vincent... It's just that I... I must trust you or something... I'm... I do it to feel safe when my big brothers ain't here... please don't hurt me..." he finished in a near whisper.

Vincent's eyes went wide at Joel's extreme reaction, and he hurried to say, "I won't hurt you, Joel,"

Vincent gently opened his arms to offer a hug as he whispered, "I was just afraid you'd done a type of marriage link or something. I've never felt the Telan t'Kanlar before."

Joel moved forward and melted into Vincent's hug, wrapping his thin arms around the nine year old tightly. "You know of it?"

"Yeah," Vincent murmured as he gave and enjoyed the hug. "T'Lani mentioned it, and I was taught about all the Links in my Vulcan lessons. I've just never felt it before. I'm sorry I scared you."

"S'okay," Joel mumbled as he laid his head on Vincent's shoulder and closed his eyes trustingly. "I'm always scared anyways; that's not your fault."

Lehman reached over and rubbed Joel's back, which caused the two way hug to become a three way one. Lehman started giggling.

"*Another Vincent - can the Universe survive two hugging boys like you in the same place?*"

"I like hugs too!" Levi giggled as he appeared and made it a four way hug.

Lehman rolled his eyes, but then they all looked up in shock as a Voice came suddenly to their minds:

"//Powers of Destiny, Fate and Love: be thou one//"

"What was that?" Lehman asked nervously.

Vincent answered, "The Guardian of Forever; I'll explain it later, Lehman."

"Okay," Lehman agreed slowly.

Joel looked at Levi, "What did Forever mean?"

"Don't really know what He means there," Levi said cautiously.

Vincent, however, could guess.

He remembered that The Doctor had told him that he would be going on a mission with Levi and one other: and he now believed that Joel was the 'other' that the Doctor had been referring too.

Joel stopped all movement, then looked around curiously.

"What's wrong, Joel?" Vincent asked quietly.

Joel looked at Vincent with question, then broke into a shy smile as he said, "I just noticed that I'm missing Kev."

"Well, you'd better go find him then." Vincent said warmly.

Joel nodded, then without a backward glance, rushed out of the room.

"That was a close call." Lehman said as he looked at Vincent with concern.

"I think with as fragile as he seems, that there will probably be a few more of those before he really gets settled in." Vincent said with a worried glance at the door.

"Do you think there's anything we can do to help him?" Lehman asked quietly.

"I think we've already done it." Vincent said as he turned to face Lehman again, "He knows that we're his friends. I think that's as much as we can do at the moment."

Lehman considered the words, then slowly nodded his agreement.

"So what do you want to do until Jordy gets back?" Vincent asked as he finally got around to noticing the room they were in.

"Well, if it's later enough, how about you tell me one of those long stories of yours." Lehman asked with an impish grin.

"Sure. I know just the one." Vincent said as he led Lehman to walk with him to the couch. "Do you remember that John Smith kid that we met yesterday..."

* * * * *

"Did I miss anything?" Jordy asked as he rushed into the room.

"Vincent was just telling me a story." Lehman said playfully.

"Oh. Am I interrupting?" Jordy asked with concern.

"No. I was finished. There wasn't much to tell." Vincent said warmly.

"Oh. Okay, if you're sure." Jordy said uncertainly.

"Yeah. It's fine. But there's something I'd like to do right now if you guys don't mind me leaving you alone for a few minutes." Vincent said seriously.

"Is it something we can help with?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"Not unless you know where David is right now." Vincent said frankly.

"I think I just saw him in the game room." Jordy said quickly.

"Um, where is that? I still don't know how to find my way around here." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Two doors that way." Jordy said as he pointed.

"This might take me a while. You guys have fun and I'll see you over at Camp Little Eagle." Vincent said with a grin.

"You really don't have to leave us alone." Lehman said as he looked at Vincent with concern.

"I know, but I've been wanting to do this since we got here. Now's a good time to do it. You guys have fun." Vincent said, then waved as he left, not giving them a chance to raise any more objections.

* * * * *

"You said before that you could go to the dream realm and see Brakkii whenever you want." Thomas said quietly.

"Yeah. It's a Mikyvis thing." Dylan said as he rested his head against Thomas' chest, enjoying their hug.

"I think, if it wouldn't be a lot of trouble for you, that I'd like to go there now and talk to Brakkii." Thomas said seriously.

"Is something wrong?" Dylan asked with concern as he pulled slightly away from Thomas.

"No." Thomas said with a smile, "It's just that Brakkii's been really nice to me. He's been a really good friend."

Dylan nodded that he understood.

"When something good happens to me, I want to share it with my friends." Thomas added quietly.

Dylan looked at Thomas curiously, waiting for more.

"I'm talking about you!" Thomas said with a roll of his eyes. "I want to tell Brakkii about you and me becoming boyfriends. I know it'll make him happy. And if I tell him right now, I don't know, maybe he'll feel like he's sort of a part of it. You know? Like I included him."

Dylan smiled at Thomas, then stretched up slightly to give him a quick kiss.

"I just get the feeling that even though Brakkii is the queen of the realm, he really doesn't feel connected to anyone. I want to be sure that he keeps

on being included in my life. He's kind of my best friend." Thomas finished distantly.

"Your best friend?" Dylan asked hesitantly.

"You're my boyfriend." Thomas said seriously. "That's a whole different thing."

Dylan smiled at the words, then on impulse, snagged another quick kiss.

Thomas giggled at the reaction, then leaned down to give Dylan a much longer kiss that conveyed at least some small measure of what he was feeling.

"Wow." Dylan whispered, when the kiss finally ended.

"Yeah." Thomas said with a happy smile.

"Are you ready to go see Brakkii, now?" Dylan finally asked.

"Yeah. Whenever you are."

* * * * *

"David, can I talk to you for a minute?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure, Vincent. But first, come over here and give me a hug." David said with a grin.

Vincent happily went to David and received a big hug from him.

"I'm proud of you, Vincent." David said gently from the hug.

"Thanks, David." Vincent said into David's chest. "I don't know if this makes any sense, but back when I was on Earth before, and you said that thing about the Clan adopting me... I understand in my head what you meant, but in my heart, I feel like it was *you* who adopted me."

"I'm feeling the same thing, Vincent." David said as he hugged Vincent more firmly.

"That's kind of why I feel like maybe I can ask you to do me a big favor." Vincent said quietly, then pulled out of the hug enough to look David in the eyes.

"You can ask me anything, Vincent." David said with a warm smile.

"Well, I know this person who has been watching you on TV and really likes you a lot. I was kind of hoping that maybe you could come with me and talk to him. I know he'd really like to meet you." Vincent said hopefully.

"That's no problem. It's nice to meet people who enjoy my work." David said casually.

"Good." Vincent said with relief, then asked, "Would you have time right now?"

David thought for a moment, then said, "I guess it depends on how long it's going to take. Aaron's expecting me to be here later."

"It won't take very long and we can come back whenever you want." Vincent said quickly.

"Oh, okay then. I guess I can go and meet your friend whenever you're ready." David said with a smile.

Vincent nodded, then raised his wrist so he could talk into his bracelet and said, "Manu, would you transport me and David aboard?"

"***Yes Vincent. On your command.***" Manu responded immediately.

"Wait. Where are we going?" David asked suddenly.

"To a ship that's in orbit." Vincent said simply.

"Oh. Okay. I didn't realize that we were going to be leaving the compound." David said, then reached into his pocket.

"What's that?" Vincent asked curiously when he saw the strange badge that David was attaching to his shirt.

"It's one of the new comm badges. If I'm leaving the Short compound, I want to be sure I have it with me. Considering everything that's happened the past few days, I think it's a good habit to get into." David said seriously.

"Oh. Okay. Then are you ready?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yes. Ready when you are." David said with a smile.

Vincent raised his wrist again and said, "Transport."

* * * * *

"You guys sure are looking serious." Adam said as he approached Lehman and Jordy.

"I'm just a serious kinda guy." Jordy said with forced humor.

Adam wasn't buying it for a minute and immediately said, "What's up, bro?"

Jordy seemed to be at a loss for words, so Lehman decided to help him out.

"I'm just visiting here. Sometime in the next few days, I'm going to have to go back to the colony where I'm going to be living." Lehman said regretfully.

Adam looked from Lehman to Jordy and understood the problem without further explanation.

"Yeah, that's tough." Adam said quietly.

Jordy nodded his agreement as he looked sadly at Lehman.

After a long moment of thought, Adam asked, "Would you guys mind very much if I meddled in your business and tried to work something out?"

"I don't know what you can do. Lehman has to go, I have to stay." Jordy said with pain at saying the words.

"I don't know either, but I don't think it will hurt anything if I talk to a few people and see what might be possible." Adam said frankly.

"If you can think of something, that would be great." Jordy said with the slightest glimmer of hope coming into his expression.

"Try not to worry about it, guys. Things like this have a way of working out." Adam said with an encouraging grin.

"I'll try," Jordy said quietly.

Lehman nodded his agreement as he moved close to Jordy's side and pulled him into a comforting hug.

Adam watched the pair for a moment, then turned to leave with a determined look in his eyes.

* * * * *

"Hello, Captain Rasch. I'd like to introduce you to David, he's one of my fathers." Vincent said in a somewhat formal tone.

David's eyes went wide as he looked up at the nearly seven foot tall reptile towering over him.

"I recognize you, David. It's a pleasure to meet you in person." Captain Rasch said in his heavily accented translator voice.

"It's nice to meet you, too." David said courteously, his acting training effectively covering his complete shock.

"Treep is a really big fan of David's, so I thought I'd bring David to meet him." Vincent explained happily.

"Ship, would you ask Treep to join me on the bridge?" Captain Rasch asked into the air.

"***Right away, Captain***." Manu responded immediately.

"I've never seen a ship like this before." David said as he looked around curiously.

"Not many Humans have." Captain Rasch said in a delighted voice.

"With all the glowing crystals... It's sort of like stained glass. It's really beautiful." David said in a voice of wonder.

Vincent looked around the bridge, and saw it as if for the first time. Every time he had been on the bridge before, he had looked at it professionally and only seen its functionality. But with David's observation in mind, he could see the aesthetic beauty.

"The engine core reformation is underway and going as planned." Treep said as he walked onto the bridge.

"That is good, but not why I summoned you." Captain Rasch said professionally, then gestured beside him and continued, "You have a visitor."

Treep glanced at Vincent, then froze as his gaze fixed on David.

"David, this is Treep. He's the first officer of this ship." Vincent said formally, conveying in his tone that Treep was someone worthy of respect.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Treep. Vincent told me that you enjoy my work." David said with a gentle smile.

"Yes. I've been watching your show. It's my favorite." Treep clucked with excitement.

"We're in production, right now, but I only have a few shots in this episode, I've already finished for the week. But I think the others are probably still on the set if you'd like to meet them." David said casually.

Treep's impossibly large eyes went even wider at the suggestion.

Captain Rasch walked to one of the secondary consoles at the side of the room and looked at something for a moment before saying, "It appears that you've performed all your duties for the day and the work is progressing normally. You may have the remainder of the evening off duty, if you would like."

Treep blinked with surprise, then quickly chirped, "Yes. Thank you, captain."

"Could we be transported to the Short Compound? I'll check in with the studio to make sure the rest of the cast are still on the set and we can transport from there." David asked pleasantly.

"***The transportal is ready to activate on your command, David.***" Manu said with a tinge of delight under his words.

"Thank you, Vincent." Treep clucked in a disbelieving voice.

"Enjoy yourself, Treep." Vincent said with a huge grin.

"Transport." David said with a smile at his companion.

Vincent watched as the fountain of multi-colored sparkles erupted and swept David and Treep away.

"I've never seen Treep so happy. Thank you, Trach Manja Vincent." Captain Rasch said softly.

"You guys have done so much for me, it's just nice that there's something I can do in return." Vincent said shyly.

"This is a day that Treep will remember for the rest of his life." Captain Rasch said distantly. "I doubt that Treep ever imagined something like this could happen, even in his most fanciful daydreams."

"Yeah. Well, a lot of stuff like that has happened to me in the last few months. It's just nice to be able to share it." Vincent said warmly, then thought to ask, "Is there anyone on Earth that you'd like to meet?"

"I've already met them." Captain Rasch said seriously. "I have been following the lives of Sean and Cory Short since the existence of Clan Short became known to the universe. It is my hope that I will have the opportunity to sit and speak with them before we have to return."

"I'll make sure you get the chance. But since they got married today, I'm sure they're probably busy with, um... other stuff right now." Vincent finished shyly.

Captain Rasch gave one of his full, bellowing, laughs from deep in his chest before saying, "Yes. I'm sure you're right about that."

"Is there anything I can do until they have time to talk with you?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Perhaps. The elders have provided me with the complete text of the Federation's Safe Haven Act. If it is possible, I would like to speak with someone knowledgeable on the subject, to ask a few questions." Captain Rasch said seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I'm not exactly sure who would be best to talk to about it, but I know that if I ask around the Clan, it shouldn't take long for me to find someone."

"That would be good. Although my primary mission is to convey the Trach Manjai to Earth, I am also a representative of the Soleen-Avalla empire. There are certain diplomatic tasks that I would like to perform as time permits."

"Diplomatic?" Vincent said slowly, something teasing at the back of his memory, suddenly he smiled and said, "I think I know just who you need to talk to."

* * * * *

"Thomas! It's wonderful to see you. How's my prince doing today?" Brakkii asked as he pulled Thomas into a tight embrace.

"I'm doing great." Thomas said as he returned the hug, then reluctantly added, "But it looks like I'm not going to be able to be your prince."

"Why not?" Brakkii asked with surprise.

"This is Dylan. Him and me, we kind of..." Thomas trailed off, not knowing how to explain it.

Brakkii kissed Thomas on the top of the head before releasing him from the hug. "This is wonderful! And a Mikyvis? He's quite a catch!"

Dylan smiled at Brakkii's words.

"So you're not mad that I won't be living here and I won't be your prince?" Thomas asked shyly.

"Mad? How could I be mad when one of my favorite people in the universe is in love? Besides, you will ALWAYS be my prince. Nothing will ever change that." Brakkii said firmly.

"Thanks, Brakkii." Thomas said shyly.

Dylan put an arm around Thomas and quietly said, "As soon as we figured out that we wanted to be boyfriends, the first thing that Thomas wanted to do was come here and tell you."

"Thank you." Brakkii said quietly, obviously taken off guard by the sentiment.

"And you know that no matter where I live, or what else happens. You'll always be my queen." Thomas said as he tried to restrain his grin.

"I am seriously going to have to get Vincent for that." Brakkii said with a chuckle.

"Maybe you could make him your princess?" Dylan offered with a mischievous grin.

Brakkii laughed at the suggestion, then seemed to think about it for a moment.

"As much fun as that might be, I take adoption very seriously. Although I admire Vincent, it's Thomas that I've accepted in my heart. He's my one and only prince." Brakkii said seriously.

"Thanks, Brakkii." Thomas said as he held on to Dylan more tightly.

"Now why don't you two tell me about how all of this happened. As I understand the flow of time, it's been less than a day in the waking world." Brakkii said seriously.

"Can we go to the Valley of Cuddles and Snuggles and talk about it there?" Thomas asked hopefully.

"Of course." Brakkii said tenderly, then waved his arm, causing the world around them to wash away.

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"*Clan Short Headquarters.*" Seth said seriously.

"Are you working ALL the time?" Vincent asked playfully.

Seth chuckled, then said, "*Sometimes it feels like it, but I'll be finished in just a few minutes. What can I do for you, Vincent?*"

"I was wondering if Jake is available to talk. It's Clan stuff." Vincent asked seriously.

"*Hang on, let me check.*" Seth said quickly, then the Clan Short Crest filled the screen.

"I was just mentioning that I would like to speak to someone before we leave Earth. It's not necessary to do it now." Captain Rasch said slowly.

"I know, but if he's busy right now, then I can let him know that you'd like to talk to him later. That way you're more likely to get a chance before we leave." Vincent said reasonably.

"I can see how the Trach Manjai have a reputation for accomplishing great things. They don't wait for things to happen." Captain Rasch said fondly.

"We sometimes wait for things." Vincent said casually, then added, "We just don't put things off."

"A very good philosophy." Captain Rasch said with appreciation.

The screen came on to show Seth. "*Jake says that he's about to have dinner, but you're invited to join him. Most of the family are out right now, so you'd have plenty of time to talk while you eat*."

"Well, it's not me who was wanting to talk to him, it was Captain Rasch. Do you think that'll be okay?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"*One sec*." Seth said quickly, then the Clan Short Crest filled the screen again.

"I wouldn't want to impose myself on this person's hospitality." Captain Rasch said with concern.

"Jake is in the Clan's Diplomatic Corps... I'm not sure, but I think maybe he's the head of it. So you wouldn't be imposing, you'd be helping him do his job." Vincent said reasonably.

"*Jake says that Captain Rasch is welcomed too. Dinner will be ready in just a few minutes*." Seth said seriously, then his attention seemed to be drawn away by something. "*Hang on*."

As the crest filled the screen again, Vincent thought to ask, "Is it going to cause any problems with your repairs if you leave the ship for a little bit?"

"No. Treep has assigned everyone their tasks and Ship will notify me if anything develops that is worthy of my notice." Captain Rash said in a contented voice that told Vincent more loudly than words that it really was no problem.

The screen came back on and Seth was smiling.

"*Okay. Jake is expecting us to arrive as soon as we can get there*." Seth said happily.

"Us?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"*Yeah. He invited me, too.*" Seth said with a grin. "*In fact, he kind of insisted that I needed to get away from the compound for a while.*"

"He's probably right." Vincent said frankly. "We'll see you at Jake's house in a few minutes."

"*See you then.*" Seth said happily before signing off.

"Are we ready to go?" Vincent asked as he turned to look at Captain Rasch.

Captain Rasch gave a single nod, then looked upward and said, "Teleport."

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Vincent appeared in a fountain of sparkles in the parking lot of Camp Little Eagle.

"Thanks, Manu." Vincent said to the bracelet on his wrist, then started walking toward the center of the camp.

As he walked, he thought about the dinner he had just attended.

Just after the food had been served, Captain Rasch and Jake started talking about Clan Short and the Safe Haven Act.

Vincent and Seth had listened in for a moment, then were drawn into conversation with Allen, Reuben and Ricardo.

As Vincent thought back on the conversation, he couldn't really recall anything specific that they had talked about. The conversation was simply old-fashioned, casual chatting.

It was nice.

Vincent felt that he had needed some time away from Starfleet business, Clan business and Trach Manja business. It was nice to just have some time to be... normal.

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"You're early." Lehman said as he and Jordy approached on the path.

"Then so are you." Vincent said simply.

"Well, yeah." Lehman said with a giggle.

"How are things?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Great." Lehman said with a smile at Jordy.

"Better than great." Jordy countered.

"I'm glad." Vincent said sincerely.

"Hey, guys! Hold up." Thomas called as he ran toward them.

Vincent looked around, then asked, "Where's Dylan?"

"He had to go do some Mikyvissing or something. He dropped me off and said he'd join me when he was finished." Thomas said happily.

"So, how are things with you two?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Well, he's my boyfriend, if that's what you're asking." Thomas said frankly.

Vincent smiled, then said, "Yeah. That's what I'm asking."

"And?" Thomas said slowly, obviously waiting for something more.

Vincent puzzled over that for a moment, then hesitantly ventured, "Good for you?"

Thomas chuckled at Vincent's expression, then said, "After your talk with me this morning about, um... what did you call it? Oh yeah, 'gays'. I didn't know if you'd be happy or not."

"I'm happy." Vincent said seriously. "Dylan seems like a great guy. And all I have to do is see him looking at you and I can tell how much he loves you."

"Good. I'm glad you're okay. What you think of me is important to me." Thomas admitted shyly.

"I think you're great. And I'm happy that you're happy. Please don't ever doubt it." Vincent said as he looked deeply into Thomas' eyes.

"Okay." Thomas said simply, then broke into a toothy grin.

"It looks like the meeting is about to start." Jordy said as he pointed at the gathering in the center of the camp.

"Do you need to go to the front or something?" Lehman asked Vincent seriously.

"No one said anything. I guess they'll just yell for me when they need me to do something. Let's look around and see if I can find anyone I know so I can introduce you." Vincent finished with a smile.

"I could do it. I know everyone here." Jordy said casually.

"Yeah. But we don't have time for that." Vincent said with a chuckle. Then quickly said, "Look! There's Tan!"

"Wow. What's he doing here?" Lehman asked as he followed Vincent around the edge of the gathering.

"I don't know, let's ask him." Vincent said happily.

"Who's Tan?" Thomas asked Jordy curiously.

"Dunno." Jordy responded.

"I thought you were supposed to know all these people." Thomas said suspiciously.

"I thought I did." Jordy said with a chuckle at his expression.

* * * * *

"Hey Tan! How are you?" Vincent asked as he approached.

"Vincent!" Tan responded with a grand smile.

"I didn't expect to see you here." Vincent said as he automatically gave Tan a firm hug.

"Jamie and Jacob called and invited us to this thing." Tan said as he returned the hug.

"It's nice to see you again." Lehman said shyly.

"It's nice to see you too, Lehman. At least, as long as you're not looking like my father." Tan finished with a giggle.

"I won't. I promise." Lehman said as he was pulled into a hug.

"Thomas and Jordy, I'd like for you to meet a friend of ours. This is D'Artagnan Roberts, we call him Tan." Vincent said happily.

"I can understand why." Jordy said frankly.

"Well, actually I'm D'Artagnan Radovanovich now." Tan said shyly.

"You've already had your name changed?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"We're working on it. But I talked with Drake... erm, Dad about it this morning and we decided that I'm going to start using my new name right away." Tan said as he seemed to be trying to restrain his joy.

"Good for you." Lehman said sincerely.

"Guys, those are my brothers..." Tan said quickly, then gestured to the collection of boys behind him who were talking amongst themselves. "...Shayd, Shadoe and MichaelAngelo."

Vincent, Lehman and Thomas looked at the group of brothers, and all their gazes simultaneously fell on the youngest of them.

"Is that..." Lehman began to ask.

"I understand." Vincent gasped.

"What the hell?" Thomas asked in confusion.

"Is something wrong?" Tan asked curiously as the three identical boys stared at MichaelAngelo in awe.

"Come on, snap out of it, guys." Jordy said, then snapped his fingers, trying to break the spell they were under.

"Um... sorry." Vincent said as he finally came back to himself.

"What's wrong?" Tan asked curiously.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Vincent said absently, then added, "But we need to talk to MichaelAngelo before you guys leave."

"Why? What's going on?" Tan asked with concern.

"Nothing bad. I promise." Vincent said seriously.

"But it's important. We REALLY need to talk to MichaelAngelo." Lehman said as he looked deeply into Tan's eyes.

"Um. Yeah. I'll make sure that you guys get a chance to talk before we leave." Tan said uncertainly.

"What the hell just happened?" Thomas asked under his breath.

"It's kind of hard to explain..." Vincent began to say, then guided Lehman and Thomas to step away from the others.

"Don't tell me that it's a long story or that you'll tell me later, because I'm not letting you get away with it this time. When I looked at that kid, I felt something inside me. It was like he was my best friend or something and I'd do anything to protect him... I would DIE to protect him. I know that you know what's going on. So tell me. NOW." Thomas said with his arms crossed firmly across his chest.

Vincent looked around to confirm that no one else was listening, then quietly said, "That kid, MichaelAngelo, somehow, someday, he's going to have a chance to change the world. You and me and Lehman have the ability to spot people like him and help them."

"Vincent and I are Trach Manjai, that's what these necklaces are all about." Lehman said quietly.

"There's more to it, but we don't have a lot of time. That's the important part." Vincent said seriously.

"So, does this mean that I'm a Trach Manjai too?" Thomas asked hesitantly.

"No." Vincent said immediately.

Lehman looked at him curiously, noticing that he didn't even have to think about it.

"There are only five Trach Manjai. I think that you have the same ability that we do, but because we have these necklaces, we also have a responsibility that you don't." Vincent said as he looked Thomas in the eyes.

"I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing." Thomas said slowly.

"Actually, I don't know either." Vincent said seriously, then continued, "But what I do know is that if something ever happens to me, that you'll probably be asked to take over for me."

"So I'm like a... spare?" Thomas asked slowly, not liking the sound of it at all.

"No. I don't think so." Lehman said carefully. "I've actually had a lot of time to think about stuff like that since I've been trapped in Vincent's form. I have a theory about why we're here, if you're interested."

"Yeah!" Thomas said immediately. "If you can explain it, I think it would help me a lot."

"I think Vincent made a wish, and I was the answer. He wished he could stay on the Yorktown and he wished that he could also live at the new colony. It ended up that I got stuck in Vincent's shape, absorbed his memories and took his place at the colony." Lehman said slowly. "Later, I think he made another wish."

"He wished he could stay on Earth." Thomas said thoughtfully.

"No, I didn't. I was scared to come back to Earth." Vincent said in his defense.

"Maybe your conscious mind was afraid, but I think there was another part of you that was thinking that if you returned to Earth, you might not want to leave." Lehman said frankly.

"Well... maybe." Vincent finally relented.

"So, I think we're here because we're living the lives Vincent wishes he could live." Lehman said simply.

Thomas thought for a moment, then said, "Well, I like the way things turned out, so I'm not going to complain."

"Me either." Lehman agreed. "But we'd better find a way to stop him from doing this before the universe is overtaken by Vincent clones."

"I'll talk to T'Lani about it when we get back to the Yorktown. If it's a subconscious thing that's causing it, she should be able to help me track it down." Vincent said with certainty.

"Vincent?" Devon called as he approached the gathering.

"Which one?" Thomas asked with a grin.

Devon looked at the three nearly identical boys and puzzled over the question.

"It's me you want." Vincent said with a giggle. "Are we ready to start?"

"Yeah. Dylan needs you over at the tent." Devon said seriously.

"I'll see you guys later." Vincent said as he rushed away at Devon's side.

"Are you brothers done with your chat?" Jordy asked as he approached Lehman's side.

"Yeah. Sorry about that." Lehman said shyly.

"Believe me, I understand how it is when you need a minute to talk privately." Jordy said with a smile.

"Thanks." Lehman said as he snuggled against Jordy's side.

Thomas looked at the scene before him, then forced himself to look away.

"You miss me?" A voice said from his side.

Thomas smiled at Dylan as he said, "Yeah. I really did."

"Good. Because I missed you, too." Dylan said as he hugged Thomas tightly.

"Are you done Mikyvissing for the day?" Thomas asked curiously.

"For the moment, at least. Everything is fixed right now. But it never seems to stay that way." Dylan groused. "Stupid universe."

Thomas chuckled, then leaned down to give Dylan a kiss.

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"Please! If I may have everyone's attention, it's time for us to begin." Chief Tecumseh said as he raised his hands.

Within seconds the crowd of nearly a hundred people quieted.

"Dylan has asked that I gather all of you this evening. But when he has finished, please remain for a bit longer. I will also have something to say to you." Chief Tecumseh said to the group, then motioned for Dylan to take his place, standing just outside the tent that was the heart of Camp Little Eagle.

"I think most of you know me. But for those who are new or visiting, my name is Dylan Chang," Dylan said, as he looked over the crowd.

"I know some people see this mask on my face and feel sorry for me. Some of them even say it. It just makes me want to scream that I'm not a victim! I'm not hurt! I'm not hiding behind this mask, I'm wearing it as a badge of honor, letting the world know that I'm a survivor." Dylan said seriously.

"Right after I arrived here, I met a kid. He kind of had an attitude. He didn't feel sorry for me, he wanted to see under the mask." Dylan said, then broke into a reluctant smile. "I didn't know back then that he was going to become so important."

"I suppose the rest of the universe looks at him and sees the hero of the Kimber colony. But those of us here at the camp see something more. We see the survivor. He's one of US. He's our brother."

"In case you haven't guessed who I'm talking about by now, let me introduce him. This is our brother, Crewman Vincent Thomas Winters, Son of Clan Short." Dylan said, then motioned for Vincent to take his place.

Vincent walked, on shaking legs, to stand before the large tent.

"Well, I think Dylan already said the most important thing. That's that I'm just like all of you. I'm just a guy. Your brother." Vincent said frankly. "Dylan told me that he's been sharing my letters with all of you, so you could know that one of you is out there making a difference."

"Since I've been back to Earth, I've found out that a lot of you are making a difference, too. I mean, the Clan's Support and Recovery division? That's HUGE! And it's not a dream. It's not someday. You did it. When the Clan needed you, you were there."

"I guess that's what I really have to say. Everyone here, we're all brothers and sisters." Vincent said to the group, then turned his attention to one

side and said, "And I'm not just talking about the people who live here. Do you hear me, Tan, Shayd, Shadoe and MichaelAngelo?"

"We hear you!" Tan answered with a chuckle.

"Good. Because I think it's important to remember, bad things happen. It's sad, but it's part of life. You, me, all of us here have learned that, the hard way. But what we've also learned is that to really survive, you have to do something that seems impossible. You have to trust and love and take the chance of being hurt again."

After a moment, Vincent continued, "That's what makes us special. Not that our bodies survived and continue to breathe, but that our souls survived and continue to care."

Vincent motioned to Dylan to take over, then hurried off the stage as applause sprang up from all attending.

"Thanks, Vincent. I know you really don't like public speaking, so thanks for coming out of your shell and talking to us." Dylan said with a teasing grin.

"No problem." Vincent called out as he made his way back to Lehman and Thomas.

"Well, that was my main reason for calling this meeting of the Camp. Vincent's on Earth, so I wanted you to get a chance to meet the guy we've been talking about." Dylan said happily, then added, "I think Chief Tecumseh has something to say before we're finished."

"Yes. Thank you, Dylan." Chief Tecumseh said as he stood before the gathering.

"I just wanted to tell all of you how proud I am of each and every one of you, today. In times of crisis, people tend to show their true colors. During the past week, you've all far exceeded any expectation I may have had of you. There isn't much that I can do, but tell you how sincerely grateful I am for each and every one of you," Chief Tecumseh said as he looked over the sea of faces with admiration.

"As a way to mark the occasion in some small way, cake and ice cream is being served in the cafeteria. Please, do enjoy your evening and some much deserved relaxation." Chief Tecumseh said warmly.

After a moment, to be sure that Chief Tecumseh was done, Dylan waved at Obie, who was standing just outside the arts and crafts classroom.

When he was sure he had Obie's attention, he called out, "Hit it!"

Music suddenly started to play on the public address speakers.

Between one moment and the next, their gathering had turned into a party.

* * * * *

When the music started, Vincent looked around to find Thomas and Lehman both watching him.

He gave a single nod, then started walking to Tan and his brothers.

"Great speech!" Tan said happily.

"Yeah, but I just about freaked, when you said our names." Shayd said with a chuckle.

"I just wanted to be sure that you were listening." Vincent said with a smile, then asked, "Could I borrow MichaelAngelo for a minute?"

"Um, sure." Shayd said with surprise.

"You want to talk to me?" MichaelAngelo asked timidly.

"Yeah. If that's okay with you." Vincent said quietly.

"Sure." MichaelAngelo said quickly.

Vincent guided MichaelAngelo away from his brothers, then glanced over his shoulder to see that Lehman and Thomas were following.

"MichaelAngelo, these are my brothers, Lehman and Thomas." Vincent said carefully.

"Hi," MichaelAngelo said to the other boys, then added, "Wow. Identical triplets."

"Yeah." Vincent said with a smile. "I guess the first thing I wanted to ask is if you listened to what I said?"

MichaelAngelo nodded, then said, "It was kind of hard not to when you called me by name."

"Good. Because I wanted to be sure that you heard it. I was talking to you." Vincent said seriously.

"But you're like, a hero. I'm nothing." MichaelAngelo said in a small voice.

"You weren't listening." Vincent said with a shake of his head.

"I was, but you were talking about kids who've been abused and stuff like that. Nothing bad's ever happened to me." MichaelAngelo said seriously.

"Then why do you think you're nothing?" Thomas asked, simply.

"Because..." MichaelAngelo started to say, then after a moment, gave up and shrugged.

"Am I nobody?" Vincent asked seriously.

"No. You're a hero and a crewman and... everybody knows who you are. You're really somebody." MichaelAngelo said quickly.

"Well, I could introduce you to everyone here. It would only take about a second and they'd all know who you are. Then would you feel like somebody?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No. Please don't do that." MichaelAngelo said in panic.

"Then, what would it take for you to see yourself as 'somebody'?" Vincent asked simply.

"Why do you care?" MichaelAngelo asked defensively.

"Why does anyone care about anyone?" Vincent asked seriously. "I just do. Okay?"

MichaelAngelo looked into Vincent's eyes, then after a moment, he reluctantly nodded.

"Good. So what's it going to take?" Vincent asked simply.

"My thing was that I didn't have anyone who cared for me. Vincent got me a family." Lehman said helpfully.

"My boyfriend, Dylan, went to another dimension and got my pet turtle. That's what did it for me." Thomas said seriously.

"He did?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"Long story. I'll tell you later." Thomas said with a big, toothy grin at finally being able to say the words to Vincent.

"I can't wait." Vincent said with a smile, then turned his attention back to MichaelAngelo.

"So, what would it take? What could we do to prove to you that you really are someone special?" Lehman asked curiously.

"I don't know. I just want to be happy." MichaelAngelo said with frustration. "I can't remember when I was happy, so I can't figure out how to feel that way again."

"Right. Give me a second." Vincent said decisively, then walked away.

"What's he going to do?" MichaelAngelo asked curiously.

"I don't know, but when Vincent puts his mind to something, he usually ends up getting what he wants." Lehman said as he watched Vincent talking with Tan.

"Do you guys do stuff like this all the time?" Thomas asked curiously.

"Pretty much." Lehman said with a smile.

"I guess I'm glad that I'm not a Trach Manja then." Thomas said frankly.

MichaelAngelo looked at them curiously for a moment, then turned suddenly when Vincent approached.

"I can't wait to see what you came up with." Lehman said frankly.

"I just talked to Tan to see if there's any way we can get MichaelAngelo some time with his therapist." Vincent said simply.

"Therapist?" MichaelAngelo asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That thing about not being happy and not being able to remember when you were happy. That's like a big waving red flag that says 'DEPRESSION'. It's nothing to worry about, it happens to a lot of people." Vincent said frankly.

"It's not a big deal?" MichaelAngelo asked slowly.

"Well, not if you go and get it taken care of, now. I bet that within a month or so, you'll be having trouble remembering what you were feeling so down about all the time." Vincent finished with a smile.

"Do you know someone who has it?" MichaelAngelo asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Lehman, do you remember Vince?" Vincent asked casually.

Lehman nodded.

"Vince had really good reasons to be depressed. But the thing with him is, that he got so used to feeling bad that he couldn't remember how to feel good anymore. So he went to this psychologist and took some medicine for a little bit that broke the cycle. The last time I saw him, he was completely off the medication and... well, he had some other stuff on his mind right

then. But he seemed to be thinking clearly and I'll bet that he's completely fine, now."

"You really care." MichaelAngelo said with surprise.

"Well, DUH!" Vincent said with a roll of his eyes.

"I think that's Vincent's way of saying 'Yes, he really does care about you'." Lehman said as he fought to contain his smile.

"Yeah, MichaelAngelo. We care." Vincent finally said.

"You guys can call me Mike." MichaelAngelo said shyly.

"Sure thing, Mike." Vincent said happily.

"Vincent and I are going to be leaving Earth soon, but we'll always be as close as the nearest terminal if you ever want to talk to us." Lehman said seriously.

"Yeah. And I'm going to live here on Earth, so we can visit and stuff all the time." Thomas said happily.

"Do you live here, I mean, in Florida? Because I live on the West Coast." MichaelAngelo asked cautiously.

"You don't have to worry about that. Thomas' boyfriend is a Mikyvis. He can warp time and space." Vincent said frankly.

"What does that mean?" MichaelAngelo asked curiously.

"It means that I can be there as soon as you call me." Thomas said with a smile.

"Or sooner." Vincent said with a grin.

"I think I'd like that." MichaelAngelo said slowly, then gave a small, timid smile.

"Look at that, all it took was a sleepover. No meds required." Vincent said cheerfully.

"Huh?" MichaelAngelo asked in confusion.

"You just smiled. So I think before we start paying someone to go poking around in your head, maybe you should have a sleepover at your house and see if that doesn't help to solve some of your problems." Vincent said happily.

"How? I don't understand." MichaelAngelo said slowly.

"Just try it. If it doesn't work, you can go see the psychologist just like we were talking about. Just as long as you start feeling better." Vincent said seriously.

"Okay. Let me talk to my mom and make sure she doesn't have any other plans." MichaelAngelo said softly.

"Sounds good. You can reach any of us at any time by contacting Clan Short." Vincent said with a smile.

"Do you think we missed out on the cake and ice cream?" MichaelAngelo asked as he looked around.

"Don't worry about it. I've got it covered." Lehman said happily, then looked toward the cafeteria with a look of concentration.

MichaelAngelo looked at him curiously, then jumped when two boys appeared in front of them, both carrying trays filled with cake and ice cream.

"This is my boyfriend, Jordy." Lehman said with a grin.

"And this is my boyfriend, Dylan." Thomas said proudly.

"Wow." MichaelAngelo said in wonder.

"You said it." Thomas said, then leaned down to give Dylan a kiss.

Chapter 55

As Vincent was eating his cake and ice cream, he noticed Dylan Chang approaching with an older teenage boy at his side.

"Hey Vincent, there's someone I want you to meet." Dylan said with a cheerful smile.

"Hey, how ya doin?" Vincent said to the brown haired boy then noticed the heavy dark circles under his eyes.

"Jury's still out on that one." The boy said in a weary voice.

"You remember the guy I went looking for this afternoon? We found him. This is Geoff. He just arrived here this morning." Dylan said quickly, then quietly added, "He's having some problems."

"Anything I can help with?" Vincent asked curiously.

"My mom died, so my dad took me to a psychiatrist to dope me up. Now he's decided that having a drugged up kid is too much trouble, so he dumped me at the front gate of this place on his way out of town." Geoff said bluntly, then in a challenging tone he asked, "Is it anything you can help with?"

"At least you're not bitter about it." Vincent muttered sarcastically.

Geoff seemed to be about to respond to that, but then flinched and suddenly twisted his head to the right.

At Vincent's puzzled gaze, Dylan explained, "Geoff is on something like a dozen different, way heavy duty, antidepressants and anti-psychotics and stuff like that. They caused him to have that tick. I told him that it takes time for it to wear off."

"It doesn't wear off." Geoff said with disgust as he glared at Dylan. "They switched my meds about a hundred times in the past three years to try and make it better, and it only ever got worse."

"It could still get better." Dylan said quietly, but appeared not to believe his own words.

Geoff flinched again, so violently that it nearly turned him sideways where he stood.

"Have you seen Doc Austin yet?" Vincent asked with concern, barely able to imagine what life must be like for Geoff.

"Yeah. And he called in this other doctor named Dan. They pretty much said the same thing that I've been hearing for the past three years. They'll keep trying stuff till something works." Geoff said as he rolled his eyes and made a jerking off motion with one hand.

"***Vincent, if your Federation medical technology does not have a treatment for this condition, there is a possibility that Challen could help. Our medical science is very different from yours***." Manu offered quietly.

"Who was that?" Geoff asked as he looked around for the source of the voice, then flinched and turned his head suddenly.

"That's Manu." Dylan said absently as he watched to see what Vincent was going to do.

After a moment to consider, Vincent said, "Geoff, there's a Soleen-Avalla ship in orbit. I don't know whether they can help you or not, but at least it's something you haven't tried already. They're from really far away and they have a lot different technology from ours. They might be able to do something for you."

Geoff considered for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "Does that mean that I could really go into space... on an alien ship?"

"Sure." Vincent said with a smile at the look of wonder on Geoff's face. "Give me a minute to tell the guys where I'm going and we can do it now."

"You don't need to do that, Vincent. If Manu will beam us aboard, I can stay with Geoff." Dylan said quickly.

Vincent looked at Dylan curiously and noticed the urging look in his eye. He really wanted to be the one to help Geoff.

"Yeah. Sure." Vincent said simply, then raised his wrist and asked, "Manu, will you transport Dylan and Geoff aboard, please?"

"***On your command, Vincent***." Manu responded immediately.

"Let me know how things turn out." Vincent said with a smile at Dylan and Geoff, then said into his bracelet, "Transport."

* * * * *

Once the teleportal beam had cleared, Vincent noticed that everyone seemed to be milling around and chatting, but somehow, the gathering wasn't really a party. Something was missing.

"This music is good. Who wants to dance?" Vincent asked the small group as he approached.

"No one else is dancing. I'd feel funny." Lehman said cautiously.

"Yeah, but if we all go out there, I bet lots of other people will join in." Vincent said in a challenging tone.

Lehman looked at Jordy and received a nod.

"Sounds like fun." Dylan R said with a hopeful smile up at Thomas.

"Shayd, Shadoe, Tan!" Vincent called as he motioned to them.

"What's up?" Tan asked curiously.

"This music is too good to just be standing around talking. Let's dance!" Vincent said cheerfully.

Tan looked around, then hesitantly said, "There's, like, ten or fifteen guys for every girl here."

"Yeah. So? We're going to be dancing, not making out. This is just for fun! Come on!" Vincent said as he took Tan by the hand to draw him into the center of the meeting.

Shayd and Shadoe shared a look, then nodded in unison at each other as they followed.

Dylan, and Thomas went next, closely followed by Lehman, Jordy and MichaelAngelo.

"Come on, Tan! You got a stick jammed up there or something? Move it like you mean it!" Vincent said with a chuckle as he began to dance to the rhythm.

It took a moment for Tan to get into Vincent's unique style of dancing, but soon he was dancing as he had never done before.

Vincent's prediction had been spot on. Before the first song had finished playing, over half the people in attendance had started dancing.

The party took on a life of it's own after that.

* * * * *

"Guys, I should probably be going home. It's getting late." MichaelAngelo said regretfully.

"You live on the West coast, Mike. It's not even nine o'clock out there." Vincent said frankly.

"Oh... yeah." MichaelAngelo said with surprise.

Vincent waved at the dance area to get Jordy and Lehman's attention.

When they finally left the crowd, Vincent asked, "Jordy, where can Mike go to make a call home?"

"We can call from Mr. T's classroom right over there." Jordy said as he pointed at the nearby building.

"Do you still want to have a sleepover, tonight, Mike? I know I kind of pushed you into it and it's okay if you don't want to. It's totally up to you." Vincent said seriously.

"Yeah. I think that would be really great. I just don't know if my mom will let me. I have to go to school tomorrow." MichaelAngelo finished hesitantly.

"Just ask her. If she says 'no', then we'll figure something else out." Vincent said simply.

When MichaelAngelo nodded his agreement, Jordy led the way toward the classroom.

* * * * *

"Hi mom." MichaelAngelo said shyly to the terminal screen.

"*Are you boys having a good time?*" Janet asked hopefully.

"Yeah. We are." MichaelAngelo said in a mumble, then quickly added, "Can I have some friends come over to spend the night?"

Janet broke into a big smile and said, "*I think that would be wonderful! But could you do it this weekend instead? Remember, you've got school in the morning.*"

"Hi, I'm Vincent..." He said as he looked at her from over MichaelAngelo's shoulder.

"*I remember you from last night. You were with Tan.*" Janet said quickly.

"Yeah. That's right." Vincent confirmed. "I promise that we won't keep Mike up too late, but I'm probably not going to be on Earth this weekend. This may be the only chance that all of us are going to have to spend time together for a while."

"*Last night Tan was telling us about you arriving here on a spaceship... who you named Manu*." She finished with a proud smile.

"***Yes, Mrs. Curry***." Manu said seriously from Vincent's bracelet. "***And I would like to take the opportunity to thank you for my name. I like it very much***."

Janet smiled warmly, then said, "*You're welcome, Manu. I'm glad you like it*."

"So, can we have a sleep-over? We won't be up too late and we'll probably be gone before you wake up in the morning." Vincent asked hopefully, then looked at her with wide, hopeful puppy dog eyes.

When Lehman noticed, he nudged Thomas to step forward and they both joined in the begging expression.

Janet started laughing, then said, "*Fine! I suppose, since you're visitors from off-planet, that I can make an exception this once*."

"Thanks mom." MichaelAngelo said with relief.

"*It's going to be dark soon. When do you plan on coming home?*" Janet asked curiously.

"***I can teleport you now, if you like***." Manu said quietly.

"I need to let Tan and the twins know that I'm leaving." MichaelAngelo said quickly.

"My brother Bryce will let them know." Dylan said as he looked up at Mike, then added, "And either Bryce or Jamie and Jacob will make sure that your brothers get home before it's too late."

"How do you know that?" MichaelAngelo asked curiously.

"He's a telepath-plus." Thomas said proudly as he put an arm around Dylan.

Dylan smiled up at Thomas, then looked at MichaelAngelo and nodded.

"Then I guess we can go, if you're ready." MichaelAngelo said uncertainly as he looked around.

"Do we need to get any pajamas or anything?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"*I'm sure we'll be able to come up with enough for everyone*." Janet said from the viewscreen.

"Okay. And we've got the Clan, Manu and the Mikyvis express to help us if we end up needing something else." Vincent said with a grin at Dylan.

After a moment to see if anyone had an objection, Vincent said, "Manu, we're ready to teleport."

* * * * *

Meanwhile, at the Pierce house...

Allen looked up from his book curiously at the sound of a quiet rapping on the side door.

"Who could that be at this time of night?" Billy asked absently as he looked up from the latest panel of images displayed on his laptop and seemed to be about to stand.

"Don't get up." Allen said as he stood. "I'll get it."

* * * * *

As Allen walked toward the door, there was another bout of knocking that was slightly louder.

Allen opened the door and froze at the sight.

"Unc... Mr. Thompson?" The teenage boy asked hesitantly as he brushed a long strand of dark hair away from his eyes.

There was a time when Allen might have been shocked at the sight before him, horrified even. But now, after everything that had happened in the past few months, it was pretty hard to shock him. The skinny teenager was just standing there shivering in the late autumn chill, coming off the lake.

Allen reacted immediately. "Come in out of the cold. You look like you could use a good meal."

"Yes, sir. Th... thank you." The boy whispered and seemed to be fighting back tears.

As Allen ushered the boy into the house, he noticed that a tear was sliding down his cheek, leaving a trail on the boy's dirty skin.

"What's your name?" Allen asked gently.

The boy looked up at him and seemed to be about to answer, then caught himself.

"I have too many kids to be able to call you 'hey you'." Allen said in a gentle teasing voice.

"I'm Ace." The boy said hesitantly, and Allen could tell from the look in the boy's eyes that he was not accustomed to lying.

"It's nice to meet you, Ace. I'm Allen." He said compassionately. "I'm betting that you have quite a story to tell. But you look like you're chilled to the core, so how about I take you upstairs where you can take a nice hot shower while I make something for you to eat?"

Ace's lower lip began to quiver as he fought to keep from crying. All he could manage was a nod.

"Come on, let's go upstairs." Allen said as he gently guided Ace to walk with him toward the stairs.

Ace paused and looked around at the beautiful room filled with antique furniture.

"Come on. I bet you'll feel a lot better once you're warm."

* * * * *

As Ace felt the hot water finally beginning to ease the tension that he had felt for longer than he cared to remember, the sound of movement in the bathroom caused him to freeze in place and listen carefully.

"Don't worry, Ace, It's just me. I'm bringing you some warm clothes to wear." Allen called out, then added, "Come downstairs when you're done and I'll have a hot meal waiting for you."

Ace watched the blurry image through the frosted shower door and could see Allen walking on the other side of the room.

After a moment for the words to sink in, Ace responded, "Thank you. I will."

Ace watched as Allen placed something on the counter, then walked out of the room.

For the first time in what seemed like a very long time, Ace felt a smile on his face.

He was safe.

He was warm.

He was going to have food.

Life was good.

Although he wasn't sure of what was going to happen next, deep down he felt something awaken in him, a glimmer of hope that things might somehow work out.

* * * * *

"Who was at the door?" Billy asked, while keeping the majority of his attention on his laptop.

"A homeless boy." Allen said simply.

Billy looked up slowly and asked, "And?"

"He's upstairs showering right now." Allen said as he enjoyed the disbelieving expression on Billy's face.

"A homeless kid knocks on the door and you just invite him in to shower?" Billy asked slowly.

Allen chuckled and nodded.

"What am I missing here?" Billy asked cautiously.

"Actually, not much. That's exactly what happened." Allen said frankly. "He looks to be about fourteen years old. He said that his name is Ace, but I'm pretty sure he was lying. He looked like he was chilled to the core and I'd be willing to bet that he can't remember his last full meal."

"Shouldn't we call Teri or the Clan?" Billy asked cautiously.

"No. Not yet. I'm going to go in and heat up some of the food that Juana sent over. I'll talk with him while he's eating and try to get a sense of what type of help he needs." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Would you like me to help you with that?" Billy asked with concern.

"No. I don't want to overwhelm him with too many people, right at first. Once he's eaten, I'll bring him in here so we can talk to him together." Allen said gently.

"Kiss?" Billy asked hopefully.

Allen's answer was to lean in and give Billy a firm kiss that conveyed at least some small measure of his love and devotion.

After the kiss broke, Allen quietly said, "I'd better go heat up his food."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

* * * * *

Allen was pouring a glass of milk when he noticed the boy walking into the kitchen and immediately said, "You look like you're feeling better."

"Yes, sir. I am." Ace said quietly with his eyes cast down. Ace was wearing the sweats that Allen had left for him and he looked to be much warmer and more comfortable.

"Why don't you go ahead and have a seat. The food's just about ready." Allen said gently as he gestured toward the kitchen table.

Ace took his seat, then looked around the room curiously.

Allen walking toward him drew his attention, then he froze in shock when he saw the plate of food that was placed before him.

The plate was filled almost to overflowing with enchiladas, refried beans and some rolled up tortillas that were obviously home made.

Allen watched with concern as the boy's lower lip began to quiver again. Tears began falling down Ace's cheeks, then the boy seemed to crumble.

Without thought, Allen scooped the boy into his arms and held him tight.

"It's okay, Ace. You're safe here. We'll make sure that you're going to be fine." Allen whispered. He was sure that Ace wasn't hearing his words, but hoped that the tone of his voice and the warm hug he was giving him would soothe and reassure him.

* * * * *

Finally, Ace's sobs subsided and he whispered, "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about." Allen said gently. "Now, why don't you have something to eat? You look like you could use it."

"Yes. Thank you, sir." Ace said shyly.

"Please call me Allen."

Ace glanced at him uncertainly and seemed to want to say something, but was obviously holding it back.

"You can call me Uncle Allen, if that would be more comfortable for you." Allen offered gently.

Ace's expression was luminous as he answered, "Yes! I'd really like that. Thank you, Uncle Allen."

The reaction seemed disproportionate to Allen, but he set that aside and whispered, "Your food is getting cold."

"Yeah." Ace said happily, then started to eat his food.

Ace took a large bite of the enchiladas, then rolled his eyes in ecstasy at the taste as he moaned his pleasure.

"I guess I don't need to ask if you like that." Allen chuckled.

"This is the best food ever." Ace said emphatically, then looked Allen in the eyes as he sincerely said, "Thank you, Uncle Allen."

"Go ahead and eat your fill. There's plenty more if you're still hungry after that." Allen said happily as he stood.

Ace nodded his response, since his mouth was too full to answer.

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Billy asked as he looked up from his laptop.

"He's eating, right now... God, Billy. It just rips my heart out when I see a sweet kid like that who has no one to care for him." Allen said as he settled on the couch at Billy's side.

Billy chuckled.

Allen looked at Billy with surprise at the inappropriate response.

"He's got someone who cares for him, now, love. I can tell by the look in your eyes that you'd do just about anything for that boy." Billy said frankly. "Face it, he's in your heart."

"In less than an hour, he's as much in my heart as any of my boys." Allen admitted shyly. "Do you think I'm ready to do this again?"

"Don't even waste time worrying about it. Your heart has already made this decision. All that's left is to work out the details." Billy said honestly.

"I love you, Billy." Allen said as he leaned in to give him a kiss.

The kiss was brief, but sweet.

"He's probably finished with his food." Allen said regretfully as he stood.

"Remember, that it's already decided and that I'm right here to back you up all the way." Billy said as he looked deeply into Allen's eyes.

"Thanks, Billy. I love you."

* * * * *

As Ace was finishing his plate of food, he noticed Allen walking back into the kitchen.

"Are you full?" Allen asked quietly.

"That food was so good that I wish I could eat more, but I feel like I'm gonna bust." Ace said honestly.

Allen chuckled, then said, "I tell you what. Why don't you let that settle for a while, then if you're hungry again later, you can have some more."

"Yeah. Okay." Ace said as he stood and looked Allen in the eyes. He seemed to want to say something more but was holding it back.

Allen held Ace's gaze and waited, knowing from experience with his own boys that if he waited long enough, Ace would eventually give voice to whatever was bothering him.

"Can I..." Ace began to say, then seemed to think better of it.

"What is it, Ace? You can ask me anything." Allen said gently.

"Can I hug you?" Ace asked timidly.

Allen chuckled, then said, "You sure are in the right house."

At Ace's look of confusion, Allen said, "Of course you can hug me; As often as you like and for as long as you want."

Having received permission, Ace pulled Allen into his arms and gave him a bone crushing, desperate hug.

"It's okay, Ace. You're safe here." Allen whispered as he gently stroked Ace's back.

After a moment, Allen realized that Ace was crying into his shoulder.

"Come into the study with me where we can sit comfortably. I think we need to talk about some things." Allen said quietly.

Allen smiled as he felt Ace nod into his shoulder.

"Come on." Allen said as he coaxed Ace to walk with him down the hallway past the staircase.

* * * * *

Allen kept an arm around Ace's shoulders as they walked into the study.

"So, Allen, who's your new friend?" Billy asked, just to give Allen a chance to properly introduce them.

"Billy!" Ace said happily, then ran across the room.

Fortunately, Billy was able to get his laptop out of the way just in time to make way for the teenager who was barreling toward him.

Allen and Billy exchanged a surprised look as Ace tried to hug the stuffing out of Billy.

"This is Ace." Allen said hesitantly.

"It's nice..." Billy began to say, but was stopped with a kiss.

Allen's eyes went wide at the action, but then he relaxed a little when he recognized that the kiss wasn't one of passion, but one of pure and innocent love.

"I'm guessing that you two know each other." Allen said hesitantly.

"No. I'm pretty sure I would remember a greeting like that." Billy said slowly.

Ace seemed to finally realize what he was doing and pulled away from Billy suddenly.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Ace said as he stood and backed away.

"It's fine, Ace." Allen said as he moved to Ace and put an arm around him. "Why don't you sit down with us so we can talk about some things?"

Ace searched Allen's face with concern for a moment, then seemed to be relieved by what he saw and nodded.

Billy moved his laptop to the end table, then patted the seat beside him. "I get the feeling that you wouldn't mind sitting next to me."

Ace looked at Allen with question and received a nod that it was okay.

With a little hesitation, Ace sat down on the couch next to Billy. A moment later, Allen sat down beside Ace, sandwiching him between them.

"From your reactions so far, I get the feeling that you're not going to answer all our questions." Allen said in prelude.

Ace looked at him nervously and nodded.

"So, why don't you tell us as much as you want to share about yourself, then we can ask about what else we need to know." Allen said as he looked into Ace's eyes, conveying his sincerity.

Ace glanced at Billy and saw that he seemed to agree with Allen. He took a deep breath to brace himself for what he needed to do, then slowly began to speak.

"I can't tell you everything because... well, first of all, you'd probably think I was nuts if I did." Ace said frankly.

"I don't know about that. I have some nephews who have evolved into a new species. And just last night I had dinner guests from another dimension. I think you'd have to go a long way to find something that I wouldn't believe." Allen said honestly.

"Another dimension?" Ace asked with surprise.

Allen nodded, then asked, "Does your situation have something to do with traveling across dimensions?"

Ace slowly nodded as he looked at Allen warily.

"You can tell us. And if you want, we'll promise not to tell anyone else." Billy said as he put an arm around Ace's shoulders.

"Thank you, Uncle Billy." Ace said as he cuddled into Billy's side.

Allen watched the scene for a moment, then asked, "What happened to you, Ace?"

"My da wouldn't tell me everything. He said that I had to be really careful not to pollute the timeline." Ace said quietly.

Billy and Allen exchanged concerned looks at Ace's words.

"What I know is that something really bad was about to happen. Da and Ma knew about it, but they couldn't tell anyone else." Ace said distantly as tears began to fall down his cheeks.

Billy hugged Ace a little bit tighter as Allen picked up a box of tissues from the end table and relocated it to Ace's lap.

"Thanks." Ace whispered gratefully to Allen, then wiped his eyes.

"So what happened next?" Billy asked gently.

"Da used to be kind of a... diplomat, I guess. He was mostly retired from that, but he still knew a lot of people and had, like, diplomatic privileges and stuff. Somehow he was able to sneak me onto a ship without anyone knowing." Ace said carefully.

"Why did he need to smuggle you away from Earth?" Allen asked gently.

Ace looked at him nervously, then whispered, "There were only a few people who knew about the big secret and everyone who knew was being watched... I guess to keep them from doing what my da did."

"Okay. So what happened next?" Billy prompted gently.

"There was this guy, he was a part of our family. But I don't think I ever met him before. Anyway, he was waiting when my ship arrived. He was... let's just say that this guy was a living legend. Everyone knew who he was... Everyone! I never, ever thought that I'd even get to meet him, and there he was, waiting just for me." Ace said in a voice of wonder.

Allen nodded that he understood the enormity of what Ace felt.

"He had a ship of his very own and we had to travel for weeks to get... um, where we were going. We spent the time talking and he was... he was every bit as incredible as his legend said he was. I don't think I'll ever meet another person as good as him."

Billy smiled at the words, recognizing the hero worship for what it was and was happy that Ace had been able to meet the man he admired so much.

"I promised him that I'd never talk about where we went or what happened next. He made me swear to never tell anyone." Ace said timidly.

"We understand that there are things you can't talk about." Billy said assuringly, "Just tell us what you can."

Some of Ace's tension seemed to be relieved by Billy's words and he relaxed a little bit more into Billy's side.

"I guess the next thing I can really talk about is being here. I kind of just... appeared, in Idaho. God, it's really cold there." Ace muttered distantly, then said, "That was about a month ago. I've been working my way here, ever since."

"Here, to this house?" Allen asked quietly.

Ace seemed hesitant to answer, but finally reluctantly nodded.

"I'm guessing, from your reaction to us, that you know our counterparts in your home dimension." Billy said speculatively.

"Yeah. You're my Uncle Billy and my Uncle Allen." Ace said timidly.

"Why didn't you call us? You wouldn't have had to explain anything. All you would have had to have said is that you needed help and someone would have come and got you." Allen said frankly.

"Da told me not to talk to anyone in the family before last Saturday. It's some kind of a big timeline thing that he didn't tell me about. But now that it's past Saturday, I'm allowed to talk to you and Uncle Billy. I thought about calling you on Sunday, but I made it so far on my own and was so close... I

don't know why, but I guess I just wanted to finish what I started." Ace said shyly.

"Just me and Allen?" Billy asked cautiously.

"Well, my Da told me that I could be around other people if I really needed to, but you and Uncle Allen would be best for me to talk to first." Ace said shyly, then added, "He said that I should try to keep my head down for a week or so to let things settle into place. It'd also be a good idea for me to take the time to get used to this new place and learn about how things are different from what I'm used to."

"So, let me see if I've got this straight. You're from a parallel dimension in our future, is that right?" Billy asked cautiously.

Ace nodded.

"And your parents smuggled you away from Earth and made arrangements for you to be sent here to protect you from something bad that was about to happen."

Ace nodded again.

"And for some reason, that you were never told, you had to wait until last Saturday to make contact with us." Billy asked slowly.

"Yeah. That's about it." Ace said quietly.

"I have no problem with that." Billy said honestly, then looked to Allen and asked, "How about you?"

"I'm good." Allen said with a smile.

"I was afraid that you'd think I was crazy and stick me in the nut house." Ace chuckled.

"No, Ace. It really isn't that out of the ordinary around here." Allen said with a smile.

"I've done everything that my Da told me to do... I'm kinda scared because I don't know what to do next." Ace said honestly.

"I guess what happens next depends on what you want to do." Allen said frankly.

"What I *want* to do is be with my Da and my Ma and all the rest of my family. But my Da is just a little kid here, and I don't think my Ma is even born yet." Ace said quietly.

"I'm sorry about that, Ace, but maybe it won't be so bad for you here with us. I mean, you said that Billy and I were your uncles. We can still be that for you." Allen said gently.

"I always loved visiting with you. Sometimes when Da and Ma would have to leave Earth for their work, they'd let me stay with you for two or three weeks. I always loved that." Ace said with a distant smile.

Billy looked at Allen imploringly and received a nod in response.

"Ace, how would you like to stay here with us and be our son?" Billy asked gently.

"Really?" Ace asked with surprise, then backpedaled and said, "You don't have to. I mean, that's not why I came to you. I was just hoping you'd give me a safe place to stay for a while."

"I know we don't *have* to. But honestly, it just feels right. From your point of view, you're already a part of our family. Knowing that, there's no way that I could stand it if you were sent away to live with someone else." Billy said gently.

"He's right. I know in my heart that you belong here with us. We both want you to be here." Allen said frankly.

"I want to be here, too." Ace said quietly as tears began to well in his eyes.

"If we're going to do this, we're going to need to know a few details." Allen said, wanting to redirect the conversation to something a bit less emotionally charged.

Ace took another tissue and wiped his eyes, then looked at Allen, signaling that he was ready.

"What's your name?" Allen asked gently.

"I can change it if it's going to be a problem... I mean, it might be hard to explain and Da warned me about telling stuff that will pollute the timeline." Ace rambled nervously.

"I can understand that, but I doubt that we'll be able to list you as just 'Ace' in the official records. You're going to need a name." Allen said frankly.

"My real name is Allen Vasquez." Ace said quietly.

Billy seemed to be about to ask a question, but Allen cut him off. "And I think that's as much as we need to know on that subject."

After a moment, Billy nodded his agreement.

"Would you be terribly offended if we made Vasquez your middle name and gave you the last name 'Thompson'?" Allen asked hesitantly.

Before Ace could answer, Billy asked, "Or 'Pierce'?"

Allen looked at him curiously.

"I just think 'Pierce' would be less confusing in the long term." Billy said honestly.

Allen nodded, then turned to Ace and asked, "What would you think of being named 'Allen Vasquez Pierce'?"

"You really mean it? You'd adopt me?" Ace asked Billy happily.

"Of course I will." Billy said as he hugged Ace to his side. "Besides, I can't let Allen have all the fun."

"It's not like you've been left out. You've already got Deacon and Lawrence." Allen said frankly.

"But they're living here with me. I'm not their 'Dad', I'm their brother." Billy said with a little pain in his voice. "I think, that if Ace was willing to accept me that way, I'd really like to be his father."

Ace thought about it for a moment, then said, "My Da was the best father that anyone could ever ask for."

Billy slowly nodded.

"He never had a father. But he told me that he had the best uncles that ever lived and that they showed him how to be a man and a father." Ace said as he looked from Allen to Billy. "If you're really sure that you want me, I'd like to be your kid."

"We'll make some calls tomorrow to find out what needs to be done to make it all legal, but let's just consider it settled for now." Billy said gently.

"So, does that mean that I'm going to live with you?" Ace asked Billy hesitantly.

"Yes, of course you're going to live here. Right now, I have a few house guests, so you may have to bunk in with someone else, or sleep on the couch, but as soon as they're on their way you'll have your own room." Billy said happily.

Ace was grinning from ear to ear as he said, "I think I'm going to like it here."

"I hope so, Ace. I really do." Billy said sincerely as tears of happiness welled in his eyes.

"Where did the name Ace come from, anyway?" Allen asked gently.

"That's what you... the other you, used to call me." Ace said as he cuddled into Billy's side.

"I did?" Allen asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Just like you always called Uncle Jake 'Sport'." Ace said happily, then looked around and asked, "Where is Uncle Jake?"

"Across the street at my house. Most nights, I'd probably be over there, too, but Billy and I couldn't pass up the opportunity to spend a little quality time together." Allen said frankly.

"Am I interrupting something? I'm really sorry! Just tell me where I can go so you two can be alone." Ace said as he started to stand.

Billy pulled Ace back onto the couch and said, "Ace, we're not a couple of horny teenagers who need to be making out every minute that we're alone together. We were spending a quiet night together enjoying each other's company. You're not interrupting anything at all by being here."

Ace looked at him anxiously, then turned to look at Allen with question.

"It's true. When you knocked on the door, all we were doing is sitting together on the couch. I was reading a book and Billy was looking through some pictures on his laptop." Allen said frankly.

"Back when I was little, you two were always happy to see me. You acted like I was so special and so important... I was too young to know back then just how lucky I was." Ace said distantly.

"Well, you *are* special, and you *are* important, so you'd better get used to feeling that way again." Allen said with a grin.

"Thanks, Uncle Allen. I was really scared that when I came here that you wouldn't be like the Uncle Allen that I remembered." Ace said shyly.

"Just be sure to let us know if there's anything that you need, to be happy here." Billy said gently.

"I don't know what it's going to be like when I see Gran... Mamacita." Ace corrected quickly.

"It may be a little difficult at first, but I'll just explain to her that she reminds you of your grandmother. I'm sure that will be enough to cover for any accidental slips that might happen." Allen said gently.

"Ma says that I look kinda like my da. Do you think Gran will notice?" Ace asked nervously.

Allen took a moment to look at Ace carefully, then said, "I really don't think she will. If I were going to take a guess at your ethnicity, I'd guess that you're Greek from the coloration of your skin and hair."

"Yeah. I've been called everything from Native American to Hawaiian. Hardly anyone guesses that I'm half white and half Mexican." Ace said with a grin.

"Come here." Billy said as he stood.

Ace looked at him curiously, then stood and followed Billy across the room.

"Father and son." Billy said then pointed at the mirror.

Ace looked at himself in the mirror, then at Billy beside him.

"Well... I think you're too young to *really* be my father, but I guess since we have almost the same color hair and skin, someone might think that we're related." Ace said cautiously.

"As soon as we get the paperwork all filled out and filed, we *will* be related; legally related." Billy said simply.

"I suppose if you're getting Billy as a father, you'll also be getting Deacon and Lawrence as uncles." Allen added cheerfully.

"Lawrence is already my uncle." Ace said as he turned to look at Allen.

"He is?" Billy asked in surprise.

"Hold on." Allen said quickly. "Your father was probably right about not polluting the timeline. Us knowing what happened in your dimension in the future could cause us to try and alter events to bring about or prevent a certain outcome in this one. I think we'll need to bring Cory and Teri in on this to get their help in getting your identity established, but other than them, no one should know the whole truth."

"Do we really have to? I'm scared that I'm going to say the wrong thing to the wrong person and mess everything up." Ace said nervously.

"Your dad said that you should keep quiet and stay low for a week to let things settle, and so you can acclimate, right?" Billy asked thoughtfully.

Ace nodded slowly.

"So let's assume that he knew what he was talking about, and do just that." Billy said gently, "We'll ask Deacon and Lawrence to keep quiet about you for the next week and from as little as I've seen of the triplets, they might not even notice that you're here."

"Triplets?" Ace asked with confusion.

"I'll explain it to you when they turn up." Billy said with a grin, then added, "They might even be quadruplets by then."

"I won't know what to say when I meet them. I mean, what should I tell people?" Ace asked cautiously.

Allen thought for a moment, then said, "I think it's going to be up to you to use your best judgment about that. I'm not going to encourage you to concoct an elaborate lie just to make things easier in the short term. I really think the best thing is going to be to do what you did with us. Share what you're comfortable sharing and explain that you can't talk about certain things."

"Yeah." Ace said quietly.

"Don't worry, Ace. It's going to be GREAT!" Billy said as he pulled the boy into a hug.

"Yeah. I think so, too." Ace said shyly.

"It's getting late. Do you want a snack before you go to bed?" Allen asked gently.

"Do you have any of Gran's empanadas?" Ace asked hopefully.

"I'm not sure. When we told her that we wanted to have a quiet night alone, she sent over enough food for an army." Allen said with a grin. "It wouldn't surprise me if there were some empanadas in there somewhere."

"Do you want to have some empanadas with me, Dad?" Ace asked Billy gently.

Billy hugged him a little tighter and responded, "Sure, Son."

* * * * *

Modesto, California

Within minutes of arriving at MichaelAngelo's house, Vincent was overwhelmed by Livvy and Jess vying for his attention.

The two little girls rattled on incessantly and the moment his attention drifted elsewhere, they immediately said or did something to draw it back to them.

"Where's MichaelAngelo?" Lehman asked as he looked around.

"He went to his bedroom." Dylan said as he tried to fend off Livvy's grasping hand pulling him closer to listen to her story about a white pony named Snowflake.

"Anyone want to take a guess about what's bothering him?" Jordy asked loudly, speaking over Jess's insistent chatter.

Before anyone could answer, Tan, Shayd, Shadoe and Bryce appeared in the room.

All of them were laughing and trying to talk over each other about what a good time they had.

"Dylan, could you please do a time freeze for me?" Thomas asked hopefully.

Between one moment and the next, silence fell over the room.

"Thank you." Thomas whispered with relief.

"Anything for you." Dylan said with a loving smile.

Vincent looked at all the siblings frozen in the room around them, then asked, "So does anyone have any ideas how to fix this?"

"Maybe we could have the sleepover someplace else so MichaelAngelo doesn't have to compete for our attention." Thomas suggested carefully.

Vincent shook his head and said, "That might be nice for tonight, but tomorrow Mike would be right back where he started."

"I guess the first step is to really define the problem. I mean, it seems pretty obvious, but I think it would be good to put it into words." Jordy said frankly.

"If you guys don't need me, I'd like to get back to the Camp." Bryce interjected.

"We've got this. Thanks for bringing the guys home." Dylan said as he walked over to hug his brother.

"Yeah. Thanks, Bryce." Thomas said with a smile at his boyfriend's brother.

"Just yell if there's anything I can do to help." Bryce said, then vanished.

"I think I've got it. I can sum up the problem in three words." Jordy said seriously.

Everyone looked at Jordy expectantly.

"Marsha! Marsha! Marsha!" Jordy said with a smile.

Dylan, Thomas, and Lehman looked at Jordy with confusion.

Jordy ducked his head and muttered, "Never mind."

When Vincent was finally able to get his chuckles under control, he said, "So, what does everyone think?"

After a moment, Lehman said, "I'd probably be depressed too if my family was like this."

"Yeah. MichaelAngelo is a middle kid. It looks like the older kids probably get more freedoms and privileges and the younger ones seem to suck up all the attention." Jordy said frankly.

"And MichaelAngelo is stuck in between, not being young enough for his parents to be too worried about him or old enough to go out and do much on his own. He can't compete. That's probably why he feels like he's nothing." Thomas said speculatively.

"So how do we fix it?" Vincent asked as he looked around the group.

"I think Thomas and I should talk to Livvy and Jess, you know, let them know what a good brother they have so maybe instead of trying to draw all the attention away from him, they might *give* him some attention." Dylan said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, and Jordy and I could talk to the older guys to let them know that MichaelAngelo is having a problem. They're good guys and I bet that if they knew what was going on, they'd want to help." Lehman said seriously.

"That leaves me to talk to Mike." Vincent said simply.

"It sounds like we've got a plan. Are you ready for me to undo the time freeze?" Dylan asked as he looked around.

"Can we have just a few more seconds of silence. This is so nice." Thomas asked hopefully.

Dylan smiled and said, "Anything for you."

* * * * *

"Can I come in?" Vincent asked from the bedroom doorway.

MichaelAngelo looked up from where he was sitting on the edge of his bed and shrugged, signalling that he didn't care.

"Mike, you know all that stuff I was telling you about depression before?" Vincent asked gently.

MichaelAngelo nodded slightly.

"Forget about it. I was wrong." Vincent said seriously.

MichaelAngelo looked at him with surprise.

"I judged you before I got to know you... and your family." Vincent said quietly. "But now that I've met your brothers and sisters, I'm pretty sure that your problem isn't something that's wrong with you. It's something wrong with them."

"So you don't think I need to see a counselor?" MichaelAngelo asked cautiously.

"Actually, I think your whole family needs to see one. From what I've heard from Tan and Rad, I think everyone in your family has some issues that they need to deal with and, because of that, it's causing all kinds of stresses on all of you." Vincent said slowly.

"So you don't think I'm nuts?" MichaelAngelo asked, to be sure.

Vincent chuckled and said, "No, Mike. I think you're probably the least nuts person in your family. Any sane person living in this madhouse would probably be depressed."

"Oh. Um, thanks... I think," MichaelAngelo said with a smile.

"The guys are out there, talking with your brothers and sisters. It's not going to fix everything, but maybe it'll make things a little bit better for now." Vincent said seriously.

MichaelAngelo nodded.

"I'm going to talk to some people when I get back to Orlando, you know, adults. I'll tell them what's going on and see if they can talk to your mom and Brad about getting your family some help." Vincent said quietly. "I really doubt that your parents would listen to me."

"How do you know so much about this stuff?" MichaelAngelo asked curiously.

"Because I've been seeing a counselor for a while. We've talked a lot about what was wrong with my family and what could have been done to make things turn out better. Tony made me see that when you're in a family,

you're not just yourself, but you're part of something bigger that you don't have control over, especially when you're a kid. When something starts going wrong with the family, it feels like it's you that's causing the problem and that you should be able to fix it." Vincent said gently.

MichaelAngelo slowly nodded.

"It's going to get better, Mike. I promise." Vincent said sincerely.

Before MichaelAngelo could respond, Livvy and Jess came running into the room. They both ran to MichaelAngelo and hugged him tightly.

Vincent smiled as he slowly stood.

"Guys, give Mike some room to breathe." Tan said as he walked into the room, slowly followed by his brothers.

Vincent discretely made his way out of the room and found the others waiting for him in the living room.

* * * * *

"How'd it go?" Vincent asked as he approached.

"I think we got it through to the girls that MichaelAngelo has been feeling a little left out." Thomas said seriously.

"Yeah, I think Tan and the twins understand it too." Lehman said quietly.

"Who's ready for some pizza?" Janet asked as she walked into the living room carrying a stack of pizza boxes.

Tan was the first one out of the bedroom, but was soon followed by the rest of his siblings.

"Mike gets to pick first!" Livvy called out.

Vincent smiled at Thomas and Dylan, appreciating that they had done a good job in their talk with the girls.

Everyone stood back and allowed MichaelAngelo to have first choice of the pizza.

"I have drinks." Brad said as he walked into the room with a tray loaded with plastic cups of soda.

"I'll get one for you, Mike." Livvy said as she raced away.

MichaelAngelo looked around uncertainly for a moment, then put two slices of pepperoni pizza on a paper plate.

"It's going to be okay, Mike." Vincent said quietly, as he drew MichaelAngelo off to the side, "I'm sure they won't treat you like you're the center of attention for very long, but hopefully they'll be more likely to include you in things from now on."

After a moment, MichaelAngelo gave a small smile and mumbled, "Thanks."

"Like I said before, this isn't going to fix everything, but maybe things will be a little bit better for you for a while. That'll give me time to talk to some people and try to arrange some things." Vincent said seriously.

"I heard about what you did for Tan, you know, over where he's living now." MichaelAngelo said quietly.

"He told you about that?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"Well, he told me some stuff. I don't think it's all of it. But he said that you figured out what was wrong and helped make it right." MichaelAngelo said quietly.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "Sometimes it just helps to have someone who's outside of everything that's going on to spot what needs fixed."

"Yeah. I can see that." MichaelAngelo said timidly.

Vincent glanced around and could see that everyone was watching them, but keeping a respectful distance so they could talk.

"I'd better not hog all your time. It looks like there's lots of people who want to talk to you." Vincent said with a grin.

MichaelAngelo shyly looked around the gathering, then smiled at Vincent.

* * * * *

"Are you boys having a good time?" Brad asked as he walked into the living room.

Vincent looked around the living room with an appraising eye, noticing that MichaelAngelo was the center of attention, then smiled as he said, "Yeah. I think we are."

Chapter 56

When Vincent opened his eyes, he wasn't as much surprised by his surroundings as he was interested. He had almost expected to awaken in the meadow in the Realm of Blades.

When he went to sleep, he had been snuggled into a nest of boys and girls in Tan and Mike's living room. But as he looked around, he found himself in a bedroom. It wasn't exactly familiar, but he knew he had seen it before.

Just as he heard movement outside the bedroom door, his sleep fogged mind finally recognized it to be the bedroom in Brakkii's palace.

"I'm glad to see that you're finally here. I was sorely tempted to slip into your realm and just take you." Brakkii said gently as he walked into the room.

"Why? Is something wrong?" Vincent asked curiously as he sat up in bed.

"Wrong? Yes, I think that is a succinct and accurate description." Brakkii said with an uncharacteristic serious expression on his young teenage face.

"What is it? Is it something I can help with?" Vincent asked with concern, as he stood.

"That remains to be seen. But before anything else, we're going to need your physical body here. If this could be done by a spirit form, I would have taken care of it myself." Brakkii said frankly, then extended his hand.

"Can you just tell me? I've had, like, no sleep and I'm really not in the mood for guessing games right now." Vincent said as he placed his hand in Brakkii's.

"It's about your friend, Vince. He's in trouble." Brakkii said simply.

The world seemed to swirl around Vincent, then he felt his head fall forward as if he were nodding off to sleep. He jerked his head up and felt noticeably different. He felt heavier and more substantial.

"That's good. Except..." Brakkii trailed off as he looked down at Vincent wearing only Scooby Doo pajama bottoms.

"They're MichaelAngelo's. I didn't know I was going to be traveling." Vincent said frankly, then asked, "What's wrong with Vince?"

"Because this dream realm is attuned to you, I am always aware of how you are doing; you and Thomas and all the other versions of you who have

access to this realm. I'm not watching you or anything like that, but I'm always aware of the hum of your energies." Brakkii said carefully.

Vincent nodded that he understood, then smiled when Brakkii produced the clothes he had left at MichaelAngelo's house, seemingly out of thin air.

"Almost two hours ago, Vince's energy disappeared and I felt it happen. He wasn't killed or anything like that, it was more like he was suddenly shifted to a place beyond where I can sense him." Brakkii said slowly as Vincent dressed.

"So where's that?" Vincent asked cautiously as he pulled his shirt on over his head.

"As you know, I am a multidimensional being. I exist on multiple planes and in multiple realities at the same time, that's my natural state." Brakkii said slowly as Vincent sat on the edge of the bed to pull on his shoes.

"Yeah. I sort of get that." Vincent said as he stood.

"Well, there is a nexus, a sort of... vortex that separates the realities here from equal and opposite realities on the other side." Brakkii said gravely as he led Vincent out of the room.

"So, it's like an anti-universe?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"More like an anti-multiverse." Brakkii said frankly.

"And you're telling me that somehow Vince got yanked through the nexus and into that place." Vincent said slowly.

"Yes, exactly. When he disappeared, I went looking for him. There was enough dimensional disruption that I had a trail to follow. Although it was possible for me to track him, my physical form can't traverse the nexus and therefore can't manifest in the anti-multiverse. So there's no way I could retrieve him on my own." Brakkii said regretfully.

"Hold on, do you mean anti- as in anti-matter? Because I really don't want to go there if me touching something will cause everything to blow up." Vincent said frankly.

"Oh, no. That's why there's a nexus. You can't possibly cross through it without being adapted. And due to my multi-dimensional nature, I can't physically cross it at all." Brakkii said seriously.

"So, it sounds like, if I go after him, that I'll be stuck there, too." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"No, of course not. I would never send you on a one way trip. While you're on this side of the nexus, I can attach spiritual strands to your essence that I'll be able to use to pull you back." Brakkii said quickly.

"So I go where Vince went, grab him, and you pull us both back. Is that the plan?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"In it's simplest terms, yes. But we also have to consider the possibility that this might not have been an accident." Brakkii said with concern.

"You mean they might have taken Vince to get someone to follow; like a trap?" Vincent asked as he stopped to look Brakkii in the eyes.

"That's not very likely. You've got to understand, it's exceedingly rare for beings to cross the nexus. The universe that you find there may bear little resemblance to yours. From what I've heard, the physical laws don't always operate the same way on the other side. And due to those inconsistencies and variations, I may not be able to place you *exactly* with Vince. But you should arrive relatively close by." Brakkii said frankly.

"But what about the trap?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I can't be sure that it is a trap. What concerns me more is that I don't know how they managed to draw Vince across the nexus. If it was intentional, they may be experimenting with a transit device so they can cross the dimensional nexus to invade or raid our multiverse."

"So, how do we prevent that?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I don't know that we can. But it's imperative that you find out HOW Vince was pulled across the nexus." Brakkii said firmly.

"Yeah. I'll do what I can. That's about all I can promise." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"And that's all I can ask." Brakkii assured, then looked deeply into Vincent's eyes as he said, "Remember, Vincent, you're a Trach Manja. Regardless of what universe you're in, you carry your gifts with you."

"Yeah, about that. I may have this mystical power, but I don't know how to use it. Can you tell me anything about what I'm supposed to do?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Be yourself. You were born with your gift, it's a part of your essence. There aren't any mysterious incantations or rituals that you have to perform to activate it. Your power is in your presence." Brakkii said thoughtfully.

"Well, that's about as clear as mud. I guess that's what I get for asking." Vincent muttered sourly.

Brakkii smiled briefly, then his look became serious as he quietly said, "You don't have to do this, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But you knew I would even before you asked me." Vincent said with a grin, then asked, "So are you going to tie some spirit strings on me or something like that? Because I want to get this done before I have to wake up in the morning."

"I've already done it. My spirit strands are firmly bound to your essence. I will be aware of what you're doing at all times. Just let me know when you're ready and I'll pull you back." Brakkii said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then nervously said, "I guess I'm ready. How do we do it?"

Brakkii made a sweeping gesture with his arm and indicated a full length mirror standing in a corner.

"Through the looking glass?" Vincent asked with a reluctant grin.

"I do my best to visualize these concepts in ways that are easy for you to comprehend. But if you prefer, I could make it a rabbit hole." Brakkii said frankly, then watched with concern as Vincent slowly stepped through.

* * * * *

Vincent couldn't be sure if he was falling, floating or flying.

He lost any concept of up or down as he felt like he was hurling through vast empty space. But at the same time, Vincent had the sense of being very still, like he was the only thing not in motion as the entire universe appeared to be coming undone all around him. Slowly he became aware of his body. It felt as though it was being warped and stretched out of shape. The sensation wasn't painful at all, just a bit strange and somewhat unpleasant.

All the strange sensations suddenly ended and Vincent dropped heavily into a heap on a dirty wooden floor. He slowly raised his head and looked around to find a hallway in what looked to be a run down office building. The lighting was harsh, and even though it seemed to be uncomfortably bright, the shadows around him seemed miles deep and filled with menace.

"I'll see..." A voice sounded from not very far away, then a door opened.

Vincent forced himself to stand and looked around quickly, trying to find someplace to hide, but it was already too late.

"It's another one!" An enormous Vulcan called out as he walked menacingly toward Vincent.

Before Vincent could even think about moving away, the Vulcan grabbed the top of Vincent's head with one of his massive hands and clamped on with an iron grip.

As Vincent half walked and was half dragged toward the doorway, he saw another version of himself, dressed in dark clothing and with a dire look on his face.

"Not good." Vincent's doppelganger said ominously before walking back into the room.

* * * * *

"Put him down, Destroyer. If he's anything like the other one, he's no threat." Vincent's somber clone said wearily as he settled in behind a large desk cluttered with papers.

"But what if he isn't like the other one?" The large Vulcan asked, not relaxing his hold on Vincent's head for an instant.

"Then I have you, my trusty body guard, to keep me safe, don't I?"

After a moment, the Vulcan released Vincent, half pushing, half throwing him into one of two chairs before the desk.

"I don't suppose you know how you got here." Vincent's doppelgänger said in a weary tone.

The boy looked tired. His skin was too pale and there were dark circles etched under his eyes.

Vincent knew better than to mention Brakkii, so he answered quietly as he rubbed his head. "I went to bed last night. Then light, dark, crash, boom. Here I am."

"We need to find out why this is happening before we have to get a whole new planet just for my clones." Vincent's double said irritably to his bodyguard.

"We could kill them." The Vulcan said simply, and Vincent felt a chill run up his spine at the absolute seriousness of his suggestion.

"We could, but that would serve no purpose."

Vincent wanted to ask about Vince, but felt that both he and Vince might be safer if he held off for the moment. Instead, he decided to pry for information.

"Do you know how I got here?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Before he knew what had happened, the large Vulcan had backhanded him hard enough to knock him out of the chair.

"You'll speak when spoken to!" The Vulcan snarled.

"Val, go stand by the door." the doppelgänger Vincent said impatiently.

"He needs to show you proper respect, Vindicator." The large Vulcan said reverently.

"And so do you. Over there, by the door. If he makes any threatening moves, I'll let you kill him." Vincent's doppelgänger said seriously.

Reluctantly, the large Vulcan relocated himself to stand beside the door, but his intense gaze was fixed firmly on Vincent.

"Sorry about that. The Destroyer didn't get his name for being a cute and cuddly kind of guy." Vincent's doppelgänger said as he walked around the desk and offered his hand to help Vincent to stand.

Vincent watched for any reaction from the Vulcan as he slowly and tentatively accepted the hand.

"What's your name?" The doppelgänger asked as he helped Vincent to his feet.

"I'm Crewman Vincent Winters." Vincent said quietly as he probed the side of his face, which felt like it was beginning to swell.

"Crewman? So does that mean that you're a member of a military organization?" Vincent's clone asked curiously.

"Yes, I suppose so. I'm a member of Starfleet." Vincent said cautiously, feeling that anything he said might end up sending him to his doom.

"Would that be a force in the United Federation of Planets?" Vincent's doppelgänger asked with interest.

"Yes. You've heard of the Federation?" Vincent asked with a sinking feeling.

"I've read a few reports... actually, it makes sense."

"I'm glad it makes sense to you. I'm still in the dark." Vincent said carefully, hoping that it would prompt his counterpart to reveal some useful information.

"I can imagine." Vincent's double said as he walked around the desk to take his seat again, then said, "By the way, I'm known as the Vindicator."

"So, you don't have a name?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Of course, I was born with a name, but Vindicator is the name that I earned. Well, actually, it was awarded to me when I was named as one of the five oracles, the servants of fate." The Vindicator said seriously.

Vincent slowly nodded.

"And how you got here... well, some Axis scientists have developed a new transporter that can operate via subspace to transport us great distances. Only high level officials are 'lucky' enough to be able to use it so far." The Vindicator said as he rolled his eyes on the word 'lucky'. "For some reason, when I transported here from Vulcan, another version of myself appeared a minute or so later. And now you make three... I really hate new technology."

"So it was just a transporter accident?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"It looks that way. I contacted one of the scientists who developed the thing and he said some gobbledygook about messed up quantum frequencies or something. I swore him to secrecy about all of this because I honestly don't have the time to deal with anything more." The Vindicator said frankly.

Vincent nodded that he understood.

"I think I'll just stick to old fashioned space flight and transporters until they get all the bugs worked out." The Vindicator said tiredly.

"What happened to the other you... I mean, us?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"He's resting in my room, next door. Unfortunately, the Destroyer scared him and he ran outside without a mask. We've been under a code purple smog alert for nearly three months and he appears to have no tolerance to the contaminated air. The doctor says that he's going to be fine." The Vindicator said simply.

"What planet are we on?" Vincent asked curiously. From the style of the building and the furnishings, he had assumed that they were on Earth. But as he looked around, he noticed that even though the room they were in seemed perfectly normal, there were no windows at all.

"This is Earth. And before you can start spouting a bunch of tree-hugging crap at me, we did what we had to do. We're a major force in the universe. If we hadn't exploited ALL our resources, the Axis would have been crushed before it was ever started." The Vindicator said firmly.

Vincent raised his hands in supplication and said, "It's your world. Your choice."

"Actually, I didn't choose. It was chosen for me, a long time before I was born. But at this point all we can do is deal with it." The Vindicator said tiredly.

Vincent nodded, then asked, "So, do you think your scientists can get me back home?"

The Vindicator shook his head, then said, "Thanks to me being an oracle, I can answer that with some certainty. There is no way that any scientists working on the project right now will be able to recreate the ID transporter accident to send you home. I'm sorry to say, it was a one way trip."

"You can see the future?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. Not really. But sometimes if I look at something or someone, I can see what's fated to happen. That's why I've been given such a position of authority. By knowing the fates of various people, groups and even worlds, I can guide the Axis to work with or around fate and assume complete control of the lesser races in our dominion." The Vindicator said frankly.

As Vincent opened his mouth to ask another question, a yawn suddenly escaped.

The Vindicator's somber expression broke briefly and revealed a restrained smile as he waited for Vincent to speak.

"Sorry. It's the middle of the night where I'm from." Vincent explained timidly.

"It is here, too." The Vindicator said simply. "Most people have adapted to working during the night because the smog eases somewhat after dark. It's best to not even try to go out during the day anymore."

Although Vincent had about a million questions that he'd like to ask, he felt that just about all of them would be likely to rub the Vindicator the wrong way. So in an effort to change the subject, he quietly asked, "Can I see Vince, now?"

"Who?" The Vindicator asked curiously.

"The other me... I mean, us. You said he's hurt. I'd like to check on him, if you don't mind." Vincent said quickly, realizing that he had just made, what might end up being, a fatal slip.

"The doctor just finished with him a few minutes ago. He's through here. " The Vindicator said as he indicated a side door.

Vincent got up and noticed that the Destroyer walked immediately to the Vindicator's side.

* * * * *

"Vincent? Is that you?" Vince asked blearily from his place on the bed.

"Hey Vince. I see that you're letting your hair grow out... I like it." Vincent said gently, then asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Um, thanks. I felt like I was burning and suffocating before, but the doctor took really good care of me and I feel better now." Vince said quietly, and Vincent noticed that he sounded like he had a sore throat.

"When you're feeling up to it, the three of us need to sit down and talk so we can decide what we're going to do about you." The Vindicator said frankly.

Vincent took firm hold of Vince's hand, then said, "I'm sorry, Vindicator, but I wasn't completely honest with you. I didn't come here by accident. I came so I could take Vince back to his own dimension."

The Destroyer took a step forward, but stopped when the Vindicator raised his hand.

"Your people have the technology to cross dimensions into alternate realities?" The Vindicator asked cautiously.

"No. At least, not as far as I know. But I happen to have a really good friend who is a being from an ancient race. He has the ability to cross dimensions. He noticed that Vince was missing and asked me to come and get him." Vincent said frankly.

"What about your 'Federation'? Do they know about this?" The Vindicator asked cautiously.

"They don't know anything about what I'm doing and they'll never hear about it from me." Vincent said seriously, then quietly added, "They're not ready."

"*That*, I understand." The Vindicator said frankly.

Vincent looked into the Vindicator's eyes and was surprised to realize that he and his 'equal and opposite' self held the same belief to be true.

"Who are you '*really*'?" The Vindicator asked suspiciously.

"Crewman Vincent Winters, petty officer second class, Son of Clan Short of the family of Sarek of the House of Surak of Vulcan, and the thirty-seventh heir in succession of the Family Euchamaut of Greater Andoria. I am also a Trach Manja, one of the five masters of fate." Vincent said as he held the Vindicator's gaze.

"You're a 'master' of fate? What does that mean?" The Vindicator asked cautiously.

"I guess your gift is to foresee what is fated to happen. I can't do that. My gift is to be able to... sort of spin the wheel and reshuffle fate." Vincent said quietly.

"You can CHANGE fate?" The Vindicator asked with surprise.

Vincent slowly nodded.

"Destroyer! Get Lawrence! Bring him here **NOW**!" The Vindicator barked.

"I can't leave you alone with..."

"I SAID NOW!" The Vindicator screamed so forcefully that the veins bulged out in his neck.

"Yes. I'll... be right..." The Destroyer stammered, then rushed out of the room.

"Crewman... Vincent. If you can really change fate, then please help my brother." The Vindicator begged.

"What's wrong with him?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"SCPD." The Vindicator said with regret.

"What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Systemic cardiopulmonary degeneration. Lawrence isn't responding to the treatments anymore. The doctors keep jerking me around, telling me that he's going to be fine but... I can see his fate. My mom and dad are already dead. Lawrence is the only family I've got left. Please... help him."

"I'll do what I can." Vincent said weakly, wishing once again that someone *anyone* would tell him how to use his abilities.

"Every time I look at Lawrence, I can see his sealed fate. I can't make myself tell him the truth, but I can't look him in the eye and lie to him either. I do my best to see that he's comfortable and taken care of but..." The Vindicator trailed off in anguish, then whispered, "He's all that keeps me from being consumed by my work."

Vincent slowly nodded that he understood.

"He hasn't even earned his name yet." The Vindicator said distantly.

Before Vincent could think of what to say, the Destroyer carried Lawrence into the room. Vincent was shocked by the sight. Lawrence looked so weak and frail that Vincent knew that the image would haunt him in his nightmares for years to come.

"I told you, I can walk, you big ox." Lawrence said breathlessly.

"Yes. You can. But not fast enough." The Destroyer said as he gently placed Lawrence on the foot of Vince's bed.

"What..." Lawrence began to ask, but seemed to run out of air as he looked from his brother to two more people who looked just like him.

"We're from alternate dimensions." Vincent said quickly, wanting to forestall any lengthy explanations.

Lawrence hesitantly nodded that he understood, then looked at his brother curiously.

Vincent looked at Lawrence, then at the Vindicator, not sure what he should do.

"Please." The Vindicator whispered as his eyes welled with unformed tears.

"Lawrence." Vincent said and offered his hand.

After a hesitant moment, Lawrence accepted the offered hand and held it weakly.

"Back in my dimension, I've been spending time with my brother. It seems like the first time I ever really talked to him. The whole time we were growing up, we never got along... mostly my fault. But now I'm spending time with him and his boyfriend and... I found out that I really like him."

Lawrence flashed a nervous look at his brother at the word 'boyfriend', then turned his full attention back to Vincent.

"What I'm really trying to say is, that I hope you and your brother can have lots of time to do that, too. You know, really get to know each other." Vincent said as he looked deeply into Lawrence's eyes.

"I'd like that, but... since he's become an oracle, he's always so busy." Lawrence said regretfully, then a look of panic filled his eyes. Vincent watched with concern as Lawrence released his hand and fumbled to get an inhaler from his pocket.

After a moment for the medicine to take effect, Lawrence looked somewhat relieved and nodded that he was okay to continue.

"Lawrence, all you need to do is let your brother know when you want to talk and I know he'll make time." Vincent said gently, then turned to the Vindicator and asked, "Won't you?"

The Vindicator stared at his brother in wonder as his mouth fell open.

"I think that means 'yes'." Vincent said to Lawrence with a grin.

"You did it." The Vindicator gasped as he continued to stare at Lawrence..

"For this to work, he's going to need his brother." Vincent said as he turned his full attention to The Vindicator. "Will you be there for him?"

The Vindicator blinked, which dislodged a single tear that slowly fell down his pale cheek. Finally, he looked Lawrence in the eyes and quietly said, "Yes. I'll always be there for you. Whenever you need me."

Vincent smiled at the answer, then turned to Vince and said, "I think now would be a REALLY good time for us to go."

Vince nodded his wholehearted agreement.

"It was nice meeting all of you. Thank you for taking care of Vince when he was hurt. I'll see that he gets home safely." Vincent said as he urged Vince to stand.

"I can get you access to a communication array if you need it. Just let me know what you need and I'll get it for you." The Vindicator said quickly.

Vincent could feel a tugging sensation and realized that it was Brakkii, signaling that he was ready to bring them back. He looked toward where he was being pulled and smiled.

"No thanks. We're just going to borrow your mirror for a minute. That's all we'll need." Vincent said as he led Vince by the hand, toward the mirror that was on the back of the Vindicator's closet door.

"Seriously?" The Vindicator asked incredulously.

Vincent grinned at his expression, then held tight to Vince as he felt Brakkii's strands pulling them into the vortex in the mirror.

* * * * *

This time through the vortex, Vincent was more aware of Vince in his arms than he was of what was going on around them. Before he could give name to the odd sensations washing over him, Brakkii's living room in the palace began to form around them.

"How are you doing?" Vincent asked Vince with concern as he tentatively released him from their hug, making sure that he could stand on his own.

"I... I think I'm alright." Vince said in a raspy voice.

"There's nothing wrong with either of you that a little time won't cure." Brakkii said reassuringly, then walked to Vincent and pulled him into a firm hug.

"What's that for?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I just wanted to give you that for what you said to the Vindicator." Brakkii said as he released Vincent from the hug. "I think of you as a good friend, too."

Vincent smiled, but the expression fell away as he thought of something, "What about Vince's quantum resonance frequency? If that's what caused them to lock in on him, then isn't this going to happen again the next time The Vindicator uses the ID transporter?"

Brakkii smiled, then said, "A valid concern, except that your trip through the nexus had the added bonus of restoring and cementing both your quantum frequencies back to those of your native dimensions."

"Can you do something for Vinny?" Vincent asked quickly, then added, "I don't think he could handle it if he ended up face-to-face with The Vindicator."

"Or The Destroyer." Vince said quietly.

"Not to worry, my young friends. By morning, Vinny will be sorted and that will be the end of any concerns that any of you should have about quantum resonance frequencies." Brakkii said with a gentle smile at the pair.

"Good." Vincent said with relief, then quickly added, "Vince, this is Brakkii. He's the queen of this dimensional realm."

"Queen?" Vince asked curiously.

"You can thank Vincent for that." Brakkii said as he looked askance at Vincent.

"It's not like I knew I was forming a dream dimension when that happened." Vincent said frankly.

"If you say so." Brakkii said playfully.

"So this is the same dream place, you know, with the mountains and stuff, where we met before?" Vince asked timidly.

"That's right. The Mountains of Despair are just about a fifteen minute walk from here." Vincent said pleasantly.

"Although I can think of more cheerful places in the realm that you could visit." Brakkii said honestly.

"Do we have time?" Vincent asked hopefully, then added, "I mean, I know that I need to get some sleep tonight."

"It's not as much of a concern for you now. As soon as you sleep, your dream selves can spend days or even weeks here and it will only be a scant few minutes in your waking worlds." Brakkii said to both boys.

"Oh, good. Because there's lots of stuff that I've heard about that I haven't seen yet. And I'd really like to introduce Vince to Pipi and Peiron and all the others." Vincent said with a smile.

"That sounds like a good idea. And after that, you could go and visit with Thomas and Lehman in the Valley of Cuddles and Snuggles. They've been asking about you." Brakkii said frankly.

Vince was watching the exchange but only understanding about half of what they were talking about.

"Let me get you two tucked safely into bed in your own dimensions, then I'll bring your dream selves here so you can run and play and relax for as long as you want." Brakkii said warmly.

Vincent turned to Vince and quietly said, "Remember, if you ever need me, all you have to do is dream yourself here. You'll never be alone or without help."

"Okay." Vince nodded, then quietly said, "And if you need me, I'll be there for you, too. I may not be a crewman or an Andorian heir, but I can be there to listen if you ever just need to talk about stuff."

Vincent smiled and said, "I'll remember that. Thanks, Vince."

"You two are going to have an entire dream world of time to talk to each other, so you need to get to sleep." Brakkii said seriously.

"Yeah." Vincent said with a smile at Brakkii, then added, "But there are some things that need to be said for real, in person."

Brakkii nodded, then held out his hand as he asked, "Who wants to go first?"

"I will." Vince said quietly, then turned to Vincent and said, "I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Yeah. Have a good sleep." Vincent said with a smile.

When Vince took hold of Brakkii's hand, he started to fade away. Vincent waved at him as he watched him go.

Once Vince was completely gone, Vincent quietly asked, "Is there any way you could send me to my brother's house instead of back to MichaelAngelo's?"

"Certainly, I sent Thomas there last night, so I know right where it is." Brakkii said pleasantly, then asked, "But won't the others wonder about where you went?"

"No. I told them last night that I'd probably be gone before they woke up. I had planned on going up to the ship to work out in the morning. Besides, I can tell Thomas and Lehman when I see them in the realm." Vincent said frankly.

"I wish there was something I could do for your eye." Brakkii said with concern.

Vincent probed his swelled cheek for a moment, then said, "Don't worry about it. I've had worse."

"Are you ready?" Brakkii asked as he offered his hand.

"Yeah. I don't want to keep Vince waiting."

* * * * *

Vincent woke in the morning, feeling completely rested.

His time in the realm had been joyous and free. Thomas and Lehman had accepted Vince without hesitation and all of them had a wonderful time exploring the realm.

During the course of their adventures, Vincent found out that Vince had contacted his brother and that they now shared a room together at Camp Little Eagle. And even though Vince's Lawrence seemed to have some problems that he was going to have to work through, Vince seemed confident that they would be able to work things out together.

Before they left, Brakkii had asked all of them, including Vince, to be sure to return the following night and to be ready for a party.

Vincent slowly stretched, feeling completely relaxed and at peace with the universe.

As much as he enjoyed the sensation, a rumble from his stomach announced that it was time for him to get up and begin his day.

He smiled to himself as he tried to imagine what comment Lehman would have made about his stomach growling.

"***Vincent***." A quiet voice said, and it took Vincent a moment to realize that it was Manu's voice coming from his bracelet.

"Yeah. What's going on, Manu?" Vincent asked curiously.

"***I didn't want to disturb you while you were sleeping, but last night I noticed that you moved outside my scanning range. I was concerned for you***." Manu said carefully.

"Yeah. Everything's fine. I just had some Trach Manja stuff that I had to do in an alternate dimension." Vincent said as he walked into the bathroom.

"***You have the ability to cross dimensions at will?***" Manu asked with surprise.

"No. But I guess the Great Spirit makes sure that I have a way to get to where I'm needed, when I'm needed." Vincent said frankly, then reluctantly added, "Excuse me, but I need to pee."

"***Of course, Vincent. I'm simply relieved to know that you are well***." Manu said quietly.

"Thanks, Manu." Vincent responded, then noticed his reflection in the bathroom mirror. His cheek looked none the worse for wear. His eye, on the other hand, could only be described as a full-on 'shiner'.

* * * * *

When Vincent reached the bottom of the stairs, he noticed a stranger sleeping on Billy's couch.

He took a moment to look at the boy, drawn by the handsome chiseled features and the combination of dark hair and fair skin.

Finally, Vincent's need for coffee asserted itself and he continued on to the kitchen.

* * * * *

As Vincent waited for the coffee maker to finish, he noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye and saw the boy from the couch standing in the kitchen doorway.

"I'm sorry if I woke you." Vincent said quietly.

"That's fine. I just smelled the coffee and wondered who was up." The boy said as he looked at Vincent curiously.

"Yeah. Well, I'm just going to have some toast and coffee, and then I'll be leaving. So you can go back to sleep if you want." Vincent said frankly.

The boy considered for a moment, then slowly said, "No. Maybe I'll take a nap later if I have a chance, but I'm awake now."

"Do you want some coffee or some toast?" Vincent asked pleasantly, then added, "Everything's out, so it's no trouble."

"Um, yeah. Sure." The boy said uncertainly, then hesitantly asked, "What happened to your eye?"

Vincent put slices of bread in the toaster and smiled before answering, "I sort of got beat up in a dream last night."

The boy looked at Vincent curiously, but didn't ask for clarification.

"Oh, I guess I should introduce myself. I'm Lawrence's brother, Vincent." Vincent said as he took another coffee cup down from the cupboard.

"You're..." The boys said in a gasp, then stared at Vincent in wonder.

Vincent looked at him for a moment, but when the boy didn't seem to be inclined to continue, Vincent said, "It looks like you've heard of me. Before you ask, yeah, I'm the one from the Kimber IV rescue and, no, I didn't die."

The boy snapped out of his trance-like state and smiled, then said, "I'm glad to hear that, otherwise I'd be talking to a ghost."

Vincent chuckled, then started pouring coffee.

"By the way, I'm Ace." The boy said as he accepted a cup.

"It's nice to meet you, Ace." Vincent said pleasantly, then asked, "Are you new here? I don't remember seeing you before and I know that no one's mentioned you."

"Yeah, I just got here last night." Ace said uncomfortably, "But who I am and where I'm from is kind of a long story."

Vincent chuckled, then said, "Believe me, I know a little bit about long stories."

"I guess you would." Ace said with a grin.

"Well, since you just showed up last night and were sleeping on the couch... Well, um, do you have a place to live?" Vincent asked cautiously, then heard the toaster pop up.

Ace nodded, then shyly said, "I'm going to be living here. Billy said something about me having my own room as soon as 'the triplets' leave."

Vincent giggled, then said, "I should have invited Vince to come home with me last night. It would have been priceless to see the look on Deacon's face when he saw four of us."

Ace looked at Vincent with confusion at the statement.

Vincent noticed and said, "Long story. Doesn't matter."

Ace nodded that he accepted that.

"So, is everything okay? I mean, usually when someone shows up out of nowhere, they've got all kinds of problems and stuff that they need help with. You don't have to tell me about whatever made you come here, but, is there anything you need?" Vincent asked with sincere concern as he handed some buttered toast to Ace.

Ace thought for a moment, then said, "No. I mean, a lot of things are still up in the air right now. But I'm pretty sure that Billy and Allen will take care of all that."

Vincent nodded, then quietly said, "I wasn't being nosy, really. I just wanted to be sure that you weren't in trouble, because if you were, I know lots of people who I can call to help you out."

Ace smiled, then said, "Thanks, Vincent. I'm kind of adrift right now, waiting for what's going to happen next. I mean, it's all good, but I just don't really have any... control or... plans, or anything like that."

Vincent nodded, then asked, "How would you feel about visiting a ship that's in orbit?"

"Sure." Ace said without concern, then asked, "What would we be doing up there?"

"It's still pretty early, so I thought I could go up there and work out, then maybe have some breakfast. You could come with me to keep me company, if you want. It's nothing but something to do." Vincent said frankly, then finished off his piece of toast.

"Yeah, that sounds nice. But I'm going to need to change." Ace said as he looked down at himself, dressed in a t shirt and sweat pants.

"What you're wearing will be fine. It's not like we're going to be doing any 'official' business or anything." Vincent said honestly.

"I at least need to get my shoes." Ace said frankly.

"You can if you want to. But I walk around the ship barefoot all the time. We're just going up to kill some time until Lawrence and Deacon get up." Vincent said frankly.

"Oh. If you're sure that I don't need anything." Ace said uncertainly.

"I'm sure you won't, but if you do end up needing something, we can always come back and get it." Vincent said simply.

"Then I guess I'm ready." Ace said as he stood beside the table.

Vincent quickly drank the last of his coffee, then said, "Manu, two to transport to my cabin."

"***On your command***." Manu said immediately.

"Transport."

* * * * *

Once the transportal beam cleared, Vincent walked directly to one of the honeycombs at the side of the room and took down a pair of soft linen pants.

"This doesn't look anything like any of the crew cabins that I've seen before." Ace said slowly as he looked around.

"It's a Soleen-Avalla ship." Vincent said simply as he sat on the edge of the bed and started to take off his boots.

"Soleen-Avalla? I don't think I've ever heard of them." Ace said slowly.

"Most people on Earth haven't. Their space is really far from here and they don't make contact with Earth very much, except to talk to Starfleet

sometimes." Vincent said casually, then added, "Maybe Manu could tell you about it while I'm working out."

"Manu?" Ace asked cautiously, and was surprised to see that Vincent was taking off all his clothes.

"Yeah, he's the ship's AI." Vincent said simply, then looked upward and said, "Manu, this is Ace. He's a new friend of mine."

"***It's a pleasure to meet you, Ace. Please let me know if there's anything you need while you're visiting***." Manu said courteously from above them.

"Oh, um, yeah. I will. Thanks." Ace said into the air, and noticed that Vincent had pulled on the soft linen pants.

"By the way, Manu, how did things work out with Geoff last night? Was Challen able to help him?" Vincent asked curiously as he folded the clothes that he'd just taken off. Ace was surprised that Vincent seemed to be intending to go barefoot and bare chested.

"***Yes. The treatment Challen chose to employ has a very high probability of restoring Geoff to normal function. Geoff is in the medical bay and is awake if you would like to visit with him***."

"Would you mind?" Vincent asked Ace curiously.

"What's wrong with him?" Ace asked cautiously.

"His psychiatrist put him on some heavy duty drugs that really messed him up. I'll let him tell you about it if he feels like it." Vincent said frankly, then waited for Ace's decision.

It took a moment for Ace to realize what Vincent was waiting for, but when he did, he said, "Yeah. I'm sure that if he's a friend of yours, that he's okay."

"Well, I just met him for a few minutes yesterday, so I don't know if I'd say he's my friend. He seemed like a decent enough guy... a little bitter, but like I have room to talk." Vincent finished with a grin as they walked out of Vincent's cabin.

* * * * *

"Good morning Geoff, would you like some company?" Vincent asked as he led the way into the room.

After a moment of hesitation, Geoff said, "Yeah. I guess."

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked with immediate concern.

"Life sucks. But other than that... not a thing." Geoff said darkly.

"I thought you'd be happy that Challen was able to find a treatment for you that would work." Vincent said honestly.

"Yeah. I am." Geoff said with a sigh, then added, "But that only makes me look 'normal'. I'm still just some throw-away that got dumped off at a boy's ranch by his dad."

"Okay. Tell me what *would* make you happy." Vincent said frankly.

Geoff chuckled, then said, "That's the big question, isn't it?"

"C'mon. What would it take? You have to have some idea." Vincent prodded.

"You really want to know?" Geoff asked indignantly, "I want to be away from the lying, pitying, back-stabbing people. I'm sick of false sympathy and empty promises."

"How are you with Vulcans?" Vincent asked quietly.

Geoff looked at Vincent strangely for a moment, then broke into a smile. "You're really gonna try to fix things, aren't you?"

"It's kinda what I do... at least, when I can." Vincent said frankly.

"Well, Vulcans are alright, but I probably wouldn't do well living with them full-time. I think that part of my problem is that I'm too high strung." Geoff said honestly, then added, "I think being around people who are so controlled might make me even more emotional."

Vincent thought about what Geoff had said, then turned when he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Good morning, Trach Manja Vincent. I hope you are well today." Challen clucked, then his words came out as English speech from a pendant he was wearing.

"Good morning, Challen. I'm fine. I'd like to introduce Ace, a new friend of mine from Earth." Vincent said diplomatically.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance." Challen said graciously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then asked, "Who's voice is that? It sounds familiar, but I can't place it."

"***The actor's name is Stephen Fry***." Manu said seriously, then asked in a softer voice, "***Is it acceptable?***"

"Yeah. It sounds great, and it's perfect for Challen. I just couldn't figure out where I had heard it before." Vincent said quickly.

"I'm pleased that you like my voice." Challen said pleasantly, then looked at Vincent curiously and asked, "Did you alter your coloring?"

"What?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"This new marking on your face. I find it pleasing." Challen said consideringly.

"My black eye?" Vincent chuckled, "No, I didn't do that on purpose, it just kind of happened."

"Oh, I understand now, it's an injury... a bruise." Challen said with a nod, then said, "I can repair the damage if you would like."

"Don't bother. It doesn't hurt and it'll be fine in a day or two." Vincent said dismissively, then turned his attention to Geoff on the bed.

Challen followed his gaze and said, "Good morning, Geoff. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, I guess." Geoff said noncommittally.

Challen looked over the readings on the Soleen-Avalla biobed, then happily said, "It appears that the restorative technique has worked exactly as anticipated, so, if you're ready, we can begin the next phase of your treatment."

"I'm kinda hungry, can I eat something first?" Geoff asked hesitantly.

"Although I can't be sure, it's possible that the treatment will cause some dizziness and nausea. It would probably be better to do it with an empty stomach." Challen said gently.

"How long is it going to take?" Vincent asked curiously.

Challen considered for a moment, then said, "If all goes to plan, just over half an hour."

"That'll work out great." Vincent said with a grand smile, then turned to Geoff and said, "I'm going to go do my morning workout. As soon as you're done with your treatment, Manu can call me and then we can have breakfast together."

Geoff looked from Vincent to Challen and back before quietly responding, "Yeah. Okay. I guess."

"Just have Manu call me if you need me for anything." Vincent said cheerfully as he started walking toward the door.

Ace noticed a slightly overwhelmed expression on Geoff's face, and could clearly see that Geoff didn't quite know how to deal with people treating him as a friend.

"Don't worry. Everything is going to be fine." Ace said with certainty, then once he had Geoff's attention, he added, "Vincent, wouldn't settle for anything less."

"You coming?" Vincent called from the door.

Ace gave Geoff one last smile, then hurried to Vincent's side.

* * * * *

"***Vincent, the cargo bay is currently in use, being filled with supplies that we will ferry back to the New Hope colony. There should be sufficient room for you to perform your work out in the lounging hall***." Manu said seriously, then casually added, "***I could ask the members of the crew to leave the lounging hall to afford you privacy, if you would like***."

"No. That's alright, Manu. I work out in front of other people all the time, back on the *Yorktown*." Vincent said as he walked down the hall at a slow, casual pace with Ace at his side.

"What are you going to do to help Geoff?" Ace asked curiously.

"I don't know yet. Maybe we can come up with something at breakfast." Vincent said simply.

Ace froze in his tracks and nearly stopped breathing at the sight of a seven foot tall, biped reptile walking down the hallway toward them.

"Greeth, I'd like for you to meet Ace, a friend of mine from Earth." Vincent said pleasantly as he walked up to the enormous humanoid dinosaur.

The dinosaur made some growls and hisses that made the hairs on Ace's neck stand on end.

"He says that it's a pleasure to meet you, Ace." Vincent said casually, then said to Greeth, "I'm on my way to work out. You're welcome to come with us, if you want."

Greeth made a few more growls, then bowed slightly to the boys before continuing down the hall.

"He has to be on duty in a few minutes." Vincent said casually before leading the way into the lounging hall.

"What was he?" Ace asked in a whisper.

"Soleen. It's really hard for them to speak our language, but most of them have learned to understand it. If you want to talk to any of the crew, they'll probably be able to understand what you're saying. If not, Manu will translate for you." Vincent said simply, then added, "You can work out with me if you want. Or you can sit down over there or you can go up on one of those platforms and lay out and relax for a while if you like."

Ace looked around and noticed two other Soleen in the room with them. Without a word, he walked to the bench that Vincent had indicated.

Ace sat for a few minutes, just silently watching as Vincent began to move through the stances of his workout. Finally his thoughts were interrupted by Manu saying, "***If you have any questions about the Soleen-Avalla, I would be happy to answer them for you***."

"I don't think I have any questions right now, but thanks for offering." Ace said quietly.

"***You seem overwhelmed. Please keep in mind that whether we're Soleen, Avalla, AI, or Human, we're all just people***." Manu said frankly.

Ace considered the words for a moment, then smiled as he looked up and said, "Thank you, Manu. That really helps."

* * * * *

"***Challen has completed Geoff's treatment. He should be recovered enough to join you for breakfast shortly.***" Manu said quietly into the lounging hall.

"Thank you, Manu." Vincent said as he properly disengaged from his stance routine, then started to cool down.

Ace watched Vincent's movements with appreciation. He could see the beauty in the graceful and powerful movements. It gave him an insight into the 'larger than life' person he'd grown up hearing about.

Even in this different dimension, so many years in the past, he could see that Vincent was someone to be admired.

"Ready to go?" Vincent asked as he finished his cool down exercises.

"Sure. Lead the way." Ace said simply.

"Let's swing by and get Geoff, then we can go to the dining hall together." Vincent said casually.

"Don't you want to get a shirt?" Ace asked curiously.

"The Soleen-Avalla don't care how you're dressed... they might not care *if* you're dressed." Vincent said with a grin, then added, "Well, except at dinner. That's kind of their formal meal, and everyone who can be there dresses up... I don't mean fancy, or anything, but I mean, they dress up in decent clothes. Dinner is as much about socializing as it is about eating." Vincent said as they walked at a casual pace.

"That sounds nice." Ace said with a smile, and noticed a huge Soleen lumbering toward them in the hall.

"How much longer, Greer?" Vincent asked happily.

The enormous reptile growled something at Vincent, which made him laugh, then he started walking again.

"What was that about?" Ace asked as he hurried to catch up.

"Greer is pregnant. I asked her how much longer and she said 'Too long'." Vincent chuckled, then turned to walk into the sickbay.

"That was a *she*?" Ace muttered in disbelief.

* * * * *

"Are you ready for breakfast?" Vincent asked cheerfully as he walked into the room.

"I think so." Geoff said uncertainly as he looked at Vincent from his position, laying on the bed.

"Did your treatment make you not hungry?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. I'm still hungry, it's just that the treatment made me really dizzy, and I'm not sure how my stomach will react to food right now." Geoff said honestly.

"If you're anything like me, your stomach will probably be fine just as soon as you smell the food." Vincent said frankly.

"And if you're feeling dizzy, you can walk with me and I'll help you if you need it." Ace said with concern.

"Thanks." Geoff said uncertainly, then quietly asked, "What's your name again?"

"Ace."

"Thanks, Ace. I have a really hard time remembering people's names." Geoff said shyly as he climbed down off the biobed and fought for balance.

Immediately, Ace was by his side, steadying him.

"Are you alright? We can wait if you need to." Vincent said with concern.

"I'll be fine. It's just kind of like being drunk." Geoff said unsteadily.

"I hate to sound like a little kid, but I have no idea what that feels like." Vincent said frankly.

"Neither do I." Ace said honestly.

Geoff rolled his eyes, then said, "Okay, then I feel like I just rode the tilt-a-whirl, three times in a row."

"Okay, I know what *that* feels like. Come on, let's get you fed." Vincent said with a grin.

"Are you going to be okay?" Ace asked from Geoff's side.

"Yeah, I've got it." Geoff said as he started to walk toward the door.

"I'll be right here if you need me." Ace said as he walked close to Geoff's side.

* * * * *

"Wow, Taryn must have heard that we had company!" Vincent said as he walked into the dining hall.

Geoff and Ace both gawked at the elaborate table filled with an impressive variety of foods, all laid out very artistically to also be a feast for the eyes.

"This is for us?" Ace asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. You know how it is when you have company coming over, you want to do something nice." Vincent said as he took a place at the table.

The other two were slower to join him, but eventually took their places.

"Good morning, Trach Manja Vincent. I'm happy to see that you are well." Captain Rasch said as he walked into the room.

"Yes, I am." Vincent said with a smile up at the jovial Saurian, then said in a somewhat formal tone, "Captain Rasch, may I present Ace and Geoff."

"A pleasure to meet you both. Please, enjoy your meal." Captain Rasch said as he made a sweeping gesture to the banquet before them.

The silence that followed caused Vincent to turn to see the two frozen and staring teenagers.

"Think 'Barney'." Vincent whispered.

Geoff blinked with surprise, then had to fight to contain a chuckle.

Ace was brought out of his shock more by Geoff's muffled laughter than Vincent's words.

Captain Rasch gave Vincent a quick smile of thanks for putting the boys at ease.

"Taryn made a point of providing something special for your meal this morning."

Vincent broke into a wide grin as Captain Rasch moved a cup and a carafe of coffee toward him.

He quickly poured himself a cup. Then, after a moment to appreciate the aroma, Vincent took a long, slow sip of his coffee.

"Was it prepared to your satisfaction?" Captain Rasch asked hopefully.

"It's perfect." Vincent said peacefully, then looked upward as he said, "Manu, would you please thank Taryn for me and tell him that I really appreciate this?"

"***I will relay your message***." Manu said warmly.

"Hey, this is good!" Geoff said with surprise.

Vincent looked over at his plate and noticed what he was eating.

"Yeah. The yellow stuff is good, too. I like just about everything that I've eaten here." Vincent said happily.

Ace nodded his agreement, since he was too busy eating to speak.

Conversation stopped as a smaller Soleen man approached the table.

{"Forgive my interruption. Challen said that his patient would be staying on board for treatment for at least another day, so we prepared a change of clothing for him."} The Soleen growled timidly.

"Geoff, the crew made a change of clothes for you, since you'll need to stay on board for a while." Vincent translated.

After a moment for the words to register, Geoff turned and accepted a brilliant green robe, trimmed in gold, and a pair of plain white pants like Vincent's.

"Thank you." Geoff said, past his shock.

The Soleen man smiled and gave a timid bow before withdrawing.

"If there is anything else that my crew or I can do to make your stay with us more pleasant, please let me know." Captain Rasch said warmly.

"I will." Geoff said quietly, as he held the stack of clothing reverently.

"If you want, we could take a bath after breakfast." Vincent said casually to Geoff.

"Take a bath... together?" Geoff asked cautiously.

"Yeah. The Soleen-Avalla have a big bathing room, kind of like a swimming pool. They all bathe together instead of everyone having a little tub or shower of their own. But if you don't want to, it's fine." Vincent said seriously.

"I don't really understand Human modesty, but if exposing yourself to others is distressing to you, I will ask the members of the crew to avoid the bathing room while you make use of it." Captain Rasch said frankly.

"No. Thank you. You don't need to do that." Geoff said quickly to the captain, then turned to Vincent and continued, "I can do it. I just didn't expect you to say that you wanted to bathe with me."

"Yeah. I guess that sounded weird." Vincent said with a grin, then added, "Sorry."

After a moment, Geoff nodded in reply.

"How about you, Ace? Would you like to take a bath before we go back to Earth?" Vincent asked casually.

"Sure. It's not a problem for me, I grew up with stuff like that." Ace said casually, between bites of food.

Geoff looked from Vincent to Ace, then over at Captain Rasch curiously.

Vincent noticed and quietly asked, "Is something wrong?"

Geoff seemed to be lost in thought, but finally absently responded, "No, not wrong."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No. There's nothing to talk about. It was just a feeling. Kinda like when you feel like you're going to sneeze, and then you don't. It was like that, but with an idea." Geoff said distantly, then suddenly realized what he must sound like.

"Well, if you *do* want to talk, it'd be okay." Vincent said quietly as he looked Geoff in the eyes.

"Yeah. I got that." Geoff said with the closest thing to a smile that Vincent had ever seen on him. Something in Geoff's expression or tone of voice told Vincent that Geoff took the offer more seriously than his casual response would imply.

"That was so good! I don't think I could eat another bite!" Ace said as he pushed his empty plate away.

Vincent finished off his last few bites of breakfast before saying, "Are you two ready to go?"

"I'm in no rush. All I'm doing today is going for more medical treatments." Geoff said as he stood.

"I'm going with my brother to sort through the stuff in our house, to see if there's anything that we want to keep since our parents are dead." Vincent said back to him frankly.

"I have no idea what I'm going to be doing. I arrived last night with the clothes on my back and Billy was nice enough to take me in." Ace said thoughtfully.

"You win." Vincent said to Ace, then added, "But Geoff and I were pretty close."

Ace chuckled, then said, "Yeah. I think it was close enough to call it a tie. It sounds like we're all in store for some uncomfortable and unpleasant things today. So let's go enjoy our bath, so we can go and do our stuff and get it over with."

"Yeah. I'm for that." Vincent said with a nod, then looked at Geoff with question.

"Let's go."

* * * * *

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" Vincent asked as he led the way into the bathing room.

"Yeah. The way you asked me just seemed a little creepy. I'm fine." Geoff said quietly as he looked around and saw two Avalla and one Soleen lounging in the bathing pool.

"You can just leave your clothes on the bench, here. I'm going in." Vincent said as he skinned out of the pants he was wearing.

By the time Geoff had sat down to take off his shoes, Vincent was already walking toward the pool.

"Vincent didn't tell me anything about you, or why you need to have medical treatments. Are you okay?" Ace asked as he started to undress.

"I'm feeling better than I have in years. I just need to complete the medical treatments so that I'll keep feeling that way." Geoff said as he watched Ace pull the t shirt off over his head.

"That's good. I just got the feeling that you're worried about something." Ace said frankly, then pulled down his sweat pants.

"From what you said before, I'm worried about pretty much the same things that you are. My mom is dead. My dad dumped me off in front of a boy's ranch as he left town. Even though the alien doctor seems to be fixing me up, I've got no one and nothing... no future, that I can see." Geoff said as he took off his shirt.

Ace chuckled, then said, "You've got it all backward. You've got a future that can be anything you want it to be. The entire universe is open to you. All you have to do is decide what it is that you want."

"That's the big trick, isn't it? Deciding what I want." Geoff said as he stood and pulled down his pants.

"What do you think would make you happy?" Ace asked curiously, standing naked before Geoff, waiting for him to finish.

"Honestly? To be away from Earth... from people." Geoff finished quietly.

"You don't like people?" Ace asked with surprise.

"No. I really don't." Geoff said distantly, then hurried to say, "I mean, you and Vincent seem to be okay."

"It's okay." Ace assured him, then quietly asked, "But what do you mean?"

"There's just the constant push and pull, it's like other people are bombarding me with their attention and pity and... I don't know how to describe it. I just know that it's exhausting." Geoff said tiredly.

Ace looked at Geoff curiously for a moment, then had an idea.

Drawing on some of the lessons he had learned from his 'uncles' as he was growing up, Ace forced himself to bring up a strong feeling. He fought to keep himself from revealing the emotion in his expression as a profound and consuming rage built within him.

Geoff's eyes went wide and he seemed to pale as he backed away from Ace like a frightened animal.

"You're an empath." Ace announced, as he let go of the anger within him and it dissipated like a puff of smoke.

"I'm a what?" Geoff asked cautiously as he tried to get his fear to subside.

"You're empathic. When you said that thing about being bombarded and that it made you tired... that's what I've always heard that it's like for an untrained empath." Ace said seriously, then gestured for Geoff to walk with him toward the bathing pool.

"So I can feel what other people feel?" Geoff asked uncertainly.

"I don't know how it all works. Some empaths can feel other people's feelings as if they were their own. Some can just sort of *see* other people's feelings, you know, like when you read the expressions on their faces. All I know about it is that it just takes some training and you can block it out. I'm sure the clan has a lot of people who can help you with that." Ace said as he eased himself into the water.

A giggle drew their attention to the other side of the bathing pool where Vincent was animatedly talking with the Soleen and Avalla crew members who were bathing.

Ace was about to say something when he noticed the look of concentration in Geoff's eyes.

"What is it?" Ace asked quietly.

"I can sense Vincent... and you're right. Even though he's turned away and I can't see his face, I know *exactly* what he's feeling. But the other three... I can't feel them at all." Geoff said distantly.

"I never heard of the Soleen-Avalla before today, so I don't know anything about them. Maybe they're so different from Humans that you don't get telepathy from them." Ace said thoughtfully.

Geoff slowly nodded as he thought about the words.

"I bet that Vincent could talk to some people to find someone to help you learn to control your gift." Ace said hesitantly.

"Gift?" Geoff scoffed, "How much of a *gift* do you think it is to know how everyone thinks and feels about you?"

"I'm probably not the best person to ask about that. I grew up with a family... no, more like a community, that loved me. I don't have any doubt that if I had been empathic, that I would have felt just as loved." Ace said distantly.

Geoff could feel the sincerity behind Ace's words and couldn't help but ask, "Really? If they loved you so much, then how are you here, now?"

"It's a long story that I'm really not allowed to talk about, but what it boils down to is, that something was about to happen and they knew that they were going to die. Instead of doing stuff for themselves, they worked together to make sure that I would survive... they loved me *that* much."

Geoff felt the tears welling in his eyes. He was unprepared for the swell of emotions emanating from Ace and couldn't do anything but pull Ace into a hug to try and ease his suffering.

"I'll be fine." Ace said as he pulled his emotions back under control. "Dwelling on that only wastes their gift to me. I have to make every minute that they gave me count, so that all they sacrificed wasn't in vain."

Geoff chuckled bitterly, then said, "Here we are, in basically the same situation, except that everyone you ever knew loved you and everyone I ever knew... well, they didn't hate me. But they only put up with me because it was their job or their duty or something like that."

"I'm sure they must have loved you." Ace said quietly.

"Hello? Empath here, remember?" Geoff said in an insistent voice, then explained, "For years I've been believing that I was feeling sorry for myself and making it all up or I was somehow misreading their feelings toward me, but the whole time it was my empathy telling me what they *really* felt. They didn't love me. They NEVER loved me!"

After a moment, Ace whispered, "I'm sorry, Geoff."

"I know." Geoff sighed, then looked Ace in the eyes as he quietly added, "But I wish I didn't."

"Are you guys about done? Everyone should be awake at Billy's house by now." Vincent said as he started his way slowly across the bathing pool.

Ace nodded, then said to Geoff, "Vincent and I are going back down to Earth to get started on our stuff. So, once we're gone, you'll be here with a whole ship full of people that you can't sense, right?"

"Yeah. Right." Geoff said with the slightest hint of an honest smile.

Vincent looked from Geoff to Ace, then asked, "Did I miss something?"

"Yep." Ace said with a grin, then turned away and climbed out of the pool.

"What?" Vincent asked Geoff curiously.

Geoff smiled at Vincent, then turned and followed Ace.

Vincent shook his head as he muttered, "I turn my back for five minutes and all of a sudden, I'm out of the loop."

Chapter 57

"If it's okay with you, I'm going to talk to some people and probably later today I'll be back with someone who can help you with your... um, gift." Ace said quietly, so only Geoff could hear.

After a moment of consideration, Geoff quietly asked, "Could you not do that?"

Ace looked at Geoff with surprise at the request.

"I mean, it'd be great if you could find someone to help me, but could you not bring them here? It's so quiet here, I really don't want it to be spoiled by people." Geoff asked desperately.

Ace smiled at his new friend and said, "Sure. That's no problem. It'll probably take me a little while to find someone who's free to help you. But when I do, I'll contact you and we'll work it out."

"Thanks, Ace." Geoff said quietly.

"What are you guys talking about?" Vincent asked from in front of them.

"We're talking about you!" Ace said with a mischievous grin.

Vincent stopped and looked at the pair of older boys with a considering look, then shrugged and led his way into his cabin.

* * * * *

After dressing in some of his new clothes, Vincent walked with Ace and Geoff to the medical bay so Geoff could begin his next treatment.

"Are you going to be alright on your own?" Vincent asked with concern.

Geoff smiled at Vincent and said, "Yeah. That's how I'm best."

Vincent's look of concern intensified at the statement.

"Don't worry. Everything is fine." Geoff assured.

"If you need me for anything, any time at all, just ask Manu to call me. This bracelet I'm wearing is a communicator so Manu can call me whenever you need me." Vincent said seriously.

"I'll be fine. You guys go and do the things that you need to do and I'll be here when you're done." Geoff said with a warm smile. He could clearly feel the emotions of the two people in front of him and was comforted by their honest concern and affection for him.

"Will it be okay if I come to visit you?" Ace asked uncertainly.

Geoff could feel Ace's wave of uncertainty as clearly as he could see it written on his expressive face.

"Yeah. You can come visit whenever you want." Geoff said with a genuine smile at Ace, then climbed on the Soleen-Avalla biobed to lie down.

"If you will be at the Pierce household, you may contact me on their terminal whenever you wish to speak with Geoff or visit with him." Manu said gently.

"Thank you. I'll do that." Ace said as he looked upward.

"Come on. We've both got things to do." Vincent said as he started walking toward the doorway.

"I'll see you again soon, Geoff." Ace said before turning to leave.

Geoff could feel the wave of regret from Ace, regret that he couldn't stay and visit.

In the end, all that Geoff could say was, "Thanks."

* * * * *

When the sparkles of the teleportal beam cleared, Vincent and Ace found themselves looking at Billy, Deacon and Lawrence, all sitting in the living room.

"We're back." Vincent said with a shy smile.

"Welcome back." Deacon said cheerfully, then added, "Billy was just telling us about our new nephew."

"You scared me, Ace. I thought you'd run off." Billy said as he stood from his place on the couch and walked directly to Ace to pull him into a firm hug.

"No chance of that." Ace said as he closed his eyes and returned the hug firmly.

"Good. I'll hold you to that." Billy whispered in relief, then glanced at Vincent and asked, "What happened to your eye?"

"Bad dream." Vincent said dismissively, then walked to the couch to stand in front of Lawrence before asking, "Do you still want to go to the house today?"

"Honestly, I think I'd rather do just about anything else. But since it needs to be done, I guess we'd better get it over with." Lawrence said in a pained voice as he looked into his younger brother's eyes.

"Yeah. It's gonna suck." Vincent said quietly, then dutifully added, "I'm ready to go whenever you are."

"I'm going with you." Deacon said as he put an arm around Lawrence's shoulders.

"No, Deke. It needs to be just the two of us." Lawrence said quietly.

"But what if you need me?" Deacon asked cautiously.

"I will need you. There's no doubt about that. But this is something that Vincent and I are going to have to face alone. As soon as we're done, I'll come back here and I'm probably going to be a wreck, so you'd better brace yourself." Lawrence said as he looked deeply into Deacon's eyes.

Deacon smiled slightly, then said, "I'll make sure to have the hot chocolate ready to pour and a 'Mary Tyler Moore Show' tape queued up in the VCR."

"You know me too well." Lawrence said with a tender smile, then leaned in to give Deacon a firm kiss.

"Do you need me to go somewhere for, like, twenty minutes or something so you guys can finish that?" Vincent asked uncomfortably.

"No. We'll save that for when we get back." Lawrence said decisively, then forced himself to let go of Deacon and stand from the couch.

Vincent nodded, then held up his bracelet and asked, "Manu, if I give you a street address can you teleport us there?"

"Yes. Proceed with the address when you are ready." Manu said professionally.

After receiving the address, Manu responded, "Ready to teleport on your command."

Vincent looked at his brother to be sure that he was ready, then calmly said, "Teleport."

* * * * *

As the fountain of sparkles cleared, Vincent was surprised at how dark it was.

"I thought we'd arrive outside." Lawrence said in a mildly surprised voice.

"Yeah, me too. But since I don't have my house key with me, this works out a lot better." Vincent said frankly.

"Oh, yeah." Lawrence said distractedly as he looked around.

"It's stuffy in here." Vincent said as he walked to the window by the front door to open it.

"Yeah. But it always was." Lawrence said quietly, still standing in the spot he had arrived in.

"That's better." Vincent said as he breathed in the fresh, clean air.

"What are we doing here?" Lawrence asked in a small, lost voice.

Vincent walked to his brother and put an arm around him as he said, "We're looking for the good memories that we want to keep so that when we're done here, we can let all the rest of it go."

Lawrence returned the hug for a moment, then said, "Thanks, Vince."

"Come on. Let's get it done and get the hell out of here." Vincent said as he stood a little straighter, signaling that he was ready to go.

"Right." Lawrence said in resignation.

* * * * *

Vincent and Lawrence each automatically walked to his own bedroom. Apparently they both instinctively knew that the search for good memories needed to start there.

As Vincent walked into his room, the first thing that caught his attention was that the furnace vent cover had been removed and that there was something in the vent.

Vincent pulled the chair from his desk over in front of the vent and stood on it to see what it was.

It took a moment for his mind to process what he was seeing. It was a small video camera.

Vincent walked across the hall to his father's study and immediately saw the empty space where his father's computer had once been.

As he walked back into his room, Lawrence called out, "Vince, come here, you need to see this."

Before Vincent could respond, Lawrence walked into the room and immediately looked up at the missing vent cover.

"You, too?" Lawrence asked quietly in a bewildered voice.

"Yeah." Vincent said with a sigh.

Vincent thought for a moment, then walked past Lawrence and out of the room without a word.

* * * * *

"What is it, Vince?" Lawrence asked as he stopped in the bathroom doorway, where Vincent was looking at another camera.

Vincent looked from the camera to the shower, where it was pointed and fought to control his emotions and think logically.

"What?... I don't understand." Lawrence said as his mind raced.

"Dad." Vincent said with resignation, then looked up at his brother with dread.

"What?" Lawrence asked in confusion.

"Come into the living room. There's something I need to tell you." Vincent said quietly.

Lawrence stood motionless until he felt Vincent's hand come around his waist and guide him to walk out of the bathroom.

* * * * *

"Sit down." Vincent prompted his brother.

"What's going on, Vince?" Lawrence asked in confusion.

"A while back, Daddy Joe told me some stuff. I don't know everything, but I'll tell you what he told me, so maybe you can understand, at least a little bit." Vincent said carefully.

"Stop dancing around it, Vince. Just tell me." Lawrence said quietly.

"Okay. It looks like Dad had the hots for you and that's why there were cameras hidden in your bedroom and in the bathroom. So he could see you naked and stuff." Vincent said seriously.

Lawrence froze in place and was silent as he tried to get his brain to accept the new concept.

"Daddy Joe thinks that Dad was having gay feelings for you, but because he hated gays so much, that that's what made him hit you and hate you. He couldn't deal with having those feelings, so he tried to make everything he

was feeling your fault." Vincent said carefully, hoping that his explanation was making some kind of sense.

"But, there was a camera in your room, too." Lawrence said cautiously.

"Yeah. I think that after you left... I mean, after he threw you out, I think that... Just because you were gone, didn't mean that he stopped having gay feelings. With you not here, he started thinking that stuff about me... and blaming me for it."

"Oh my God! That's how you ended up in the hospital, isn't it?" Lawrence asked as tears fell down his cheeks.

"Yeah. I think so." Vincent said quietly.

"I'm sorry he hurt you." Lawrence said as he pulled his younger brother into a hug.

"I know. I'm sorry he hurt you, too." Vincent said quietly as he held his brother tightly.

After a long moment of silence, Lawrence cautiously said, "It wasn't even about me being gay, was it?"

"What's that?" Vincent asked from his place in his brother's arms.

"The reason he hated me. The reason he threw me out. It wouldn't have mattered if I was the most hetro-butch guy in Florida, he would have treated me just the same way." Lawrence said quietly.

"Lawrence, it was never your fault." Vincent said as he pulled back to look into his brother's eyes.

Vincent waited for his brother's reaction, but when there wasn't one, he continued, "I've spent a lot of time talking with a counselor about this stuff. It took a while, but he made me realize that none of this was our fault. Dad was the adult. We were the kids. There's nothing... absolutely NOTHING we could have ever done to ever deserve what he did to us. It wouldn't matter if you were the biggest flaming 'mo in the world. He was your DAD!"

After a moment, Lawrence hesitantly nodded.

"I know that back then, when we were living in the middle of it, that we couldn't see what was going on, but now that we're out of it, we can look back at the whole thing and it's a lot easier to see things." Vincent said carefully.

Lawrence looked at his brother curiously.

"Dad was NUTS. None of it was your fault. Not one single thing." Vincent said firmly.

Reluctantly, Lawrence finally nodded his acceptance of the words.

"Me, I listened to Dad. I believed him and wanted to be like him. Nothing that happened to you was your fault, but I did stuff, I hurt people, most of all I hurt you. I could try to blame dad for the stuff that I did, but... I still did it." Vincent finished in a defeated whisper.

"Vince, I forgave you a long time ago for all of that. You don't ever even have to worry about it." Lawrence said gently.

"Thanks, Lawrence. But it's not just you. I was mean to a lot of people." Vincent said frankly.

"All you can do is say that you're sorry and try to be better." Lawrence said as he held his brother gently.

Vincent chuckled as he said, "You make it sound so easy."

"No. It's not easy. But I know you can do it. You're strong like that." Lawrence said with an honest smile, then added, "I'm really proud of you."

"Yeah. Well, I'm proud of you, too. After all the shit that Dad put you through, you ended up finding a really great guy and falling in love. If I had only one wish for you, that would have been it." Vincent said frankly.

"What? You wouldn't have wished for me to fall in love with a girl?" Lawrence asked playfully.

"Naw. You and a girl? Could you even imagine that?" Vincent said with a chuckle.

Lawrence laughed and said, "No. I really couldn't."

After a moment for their chuckles to subside, Vincent finally said, "We need to start going through stuff and find what we want to keep."

"What do you want to do with the house when we've got our stuff?" Lawrence asked quietly.

"You mean, besides burn it down?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Do you want to keep it so you and T'Lani could have a place of your own on Earth?" Lawrence asked carefully.

"No." Vincent said immediately, then reiterated, "No way! There's too many bad memories here, too much pain."

Lawrence nodded his understanding, then quietly asked, "So what do you want to do with it?"

"I think the best thing we could do is turn it over to the Clan. Cory and Sean will see that it ends up being used for something good." Vincent said seriously.

"I like that." Lawrence said with a gentle smile.

"Good, then lets get our stuff so we can get the hell out of here. After today, I never want to see this place again." Vincent said as he stood.

* * * * *

"Um, Vince?" Lawrence called from the hallway.

Vincent walked to his bedroom doorway carrying a yellowish brown teddy bear under one arm.

"You might want to see this." Lawrence said in a disturbed voice.

"Oh God! What now?" Vincent asked as he walked to his brother's side.

"I wanted to see if there was anything like family albums that we should take with us..." Lawrence trailed off as he slowly led the way into their parents' bedroom.

"What did you find?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

Rather than answer verbally, Lawrence gestured to the closet where a secret panel had been moved away to reveal a small hidden room.

"What..." Vincent began to ask, then saw the stacks of gay porn magazines.

"Eww! Gross!" Vincent said as he backed away.

"I just thought you'd want to know." Lawrence said with a shrug.

"Seriously, I could have gone the rest of my life without seeing my dad's gay porn stash!" Vincent said as he stopped with his back against the bedroom wall.

"Sorry, Vince. I just thought you'd want to know all of it." Lawrence said quietly.

After a deep breath to calm himself, Vincent said, "Thanks for thinking about me, Lor. I guess it's better to know the truth, even when it's not a happy truth."

Lawrence smiled at his brother, then said, "At least you have Mr. Thornton with you to protect you."

Vincent looked at the teddy bear he was now clutching to his chest with a smile, then said, "I was wondering if you'd mind keeping Mr. Thornton for me."

"I don't mind at all." Lawrence said with a smile at his brother.

"I've been through my stuff, and I can't find anything else that I'd like to keep. All the clothes are too small for me now. Everything else... there's no happy memories..." Vincent said as he continued to hold the teddy bear close to his chest.

"Well, if you're done, maybe you can help me find the family albums. I know they've got to be around here somewhere, but I don't know where mom kept them." Lawrence said frankly.

"I'll check the garage if you'll look in the attic." Vincent said frankly.

Lawrence looked at his brother with surprise and said, "Two very good ideas!"

"Yeah. Well, I always was the smart one." Vincent said with a teasing grin.

Lawrence looked at his younger brother with surprise.

"And you were always the pretty one." Vincent said with a smile.

Lawrence considered for a moment, then said, "I can accept that."

Vincent chuckled and gave his brother a quick hug before walking away to search for the family albums.

* * * * *

"Is this everything?" Lawrence asked as he looked at the two boxes on the living room floor.

"Yeah. Kind of sad, isn't it?" Vincent said frankly.

"Sad." Lawrence confirmed with a nod.

"Manu, will you transport these two boxes and my brother back to my brother's house?" Vincent asked into his bracelet.

"Wait! You're not coming with me?" Lawrence asked quickly.

"No. I've got some stuff to do. You go home and spend time with Deacon." Vincent said, then realized that he was still carrying his teddy bear.

"Are you sure you'll be alright?" Lawrence asked with concern as he watched Vincent place Mr. Thornton on top of one of the boxes of photo albums.

"Yeah. Doing this, going through the house, it feels like we finished something that we'd left undone. I've thought of something else that needs to be finished." Vincent said frankly.

"Will you promise to be careful?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"Don't worry. Manu will be listening and will transport me out if there's any trouble." Vincent chuckled.

Lawrence didn't seem to be reassured in the least by Vincent's words.

"I need to do this for the same reason that you couldn't let Deacon come with us. It's mine and I need to deal with it." Vincent said seriously.

"Okay. Just... will you stop by the house and let me know that you're okay when you're done?" Lawrence asked hopefully.

"I will, I promise." Vincent said with a smile.

Lawrence nodded his agreement to the arrangement.

"Manu, would you please transport the boxes and Lawrence to Lawrence's house?" Vincent asked into his bracelet.

"On your command." Manu responded immediately.

"Teleport."

Vincent stood silently for a moment, staring at the place Lawrence had been standing.

"Would you like for me to teleport you to another location?" Manu asked quietly.

"No. Thank you, Manu. I'm going to walk." Vincent said as he walked to the front door.

"If you feel the need to talk, I can be a very good listener." Manu said gently.

Vincent closed the front door behind him and smiled a bittersweet smile before saying, "Thank you, Manu. There's really not much to talk about. When I was younger, I behaved a lot differently and was really mean to Lawrence and a lot of other people. I think that Lawrence and I are fine now, so I just wanted to apologise to some of the other people that I've hurt."

"I have no experience in dealing with regret, so I have no advice to give you. But if there is any way that I can help you, simply let me know of your needs and I will do my best to provide for you." Manu said seriously.

"You've already helped me, Manu. Just knowing that you care means a lot." Vincent said as he walked down the sidewalk.

* * * * *

As Vincent walked down the street, he felt a little bit nervous about his upcoming confrontation, but, at the same time, he also felt a certain sense of peace. Even though it might be uncomfortable for him, he knew that he was doing the right thing.

"Vincent." Manu said quietly, breaking the long silence.

"Yes?" Vincent responded immediately.

"I have just finished analyzing your last statement to me. I felt it important to tell you that knowing that you and Lehman care for me, means a lot to me, too." Manu said gently.

"That's what friends do!" Vincent said with a smile as he turned onto another street.

After a bit of a pause, Manu quietly said, "Yes, friends."

* * * * *

As Vincent walked into the school, he noticed a larger boy walking toward him.

"I need to see your hall pass." The boy said seriously.

"I don't have one." Vincent said frankly.

"Then you'll need to go to the office." The boy said firmly.

"That's where I wanted to go, anyway." Vincent said simply. In the past, such a hostile confrontation would have caused Vincent to react with anger, but he was surprised to feel nothing but a slight amusement.

"Why aren't you in class?" The boy asked as he ushered Vincent to walk with him.

"Because I don't go to school here anymore." Vincent said frankly.

"Then what are you doing here, all by yourself?" The boy asked curiously, and finally seemed to be letting go of his hostility.

"I used to go to school here. I just wanted to see if it would be okay if I stopped by to talk to my old class for a few minutes." Vincent said honestly.

As they approached the office, the older boy said, "That sounds like a pretty cool thing to do."

"Yeah. I guess it could be. We'll just have to see how it goes." Vincent said with a grin up at his companion.

The boy smiled, then gestured toward the office door.

* * * * *

"Can I talk to Principal Silva?" Vincent asked with a smile as he walked to the reception desk in the office.

"Name?" The woman behind the desk asked, sparing him little more than a glance.

"Vincent Winters." Vincent said as his smile fell away.

"Grade?" The woman asked as she wrote on her clipboard.

"None. I don't go to school here anymore." Vincent said seriously.

The woman finally looked up from her clipboard and stared at him blankly.

"Mrs. Keegan, I went to school here ever since I was in kindergarten. I got sent to the office about once a month. Don't you remember me?" Vincent asked in surprise.

"Have a seat and I'll see if Principal Silva will speak with you." Mrs. Keegan said as she picked up her phone.

Vincent huffed a sigh, then walked across the room to sit in the small waiting area.

* * * * *

"Vincent! What a surprise! It's so good to see you!" Principal Silva said as he walked out of his office.

"I'm glad someone thinks so." Vincent said as he spared a glance at the secretary.

"I had no idea you were back on Earth. What are you doing here?" Principal Silva asked curiously.

"I'm only here for a few days and I remembered what you said and thought I'd stop by to see my old class... if that'd be okay." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Yes, of course." Principal Silva said with a smile, then turned and said to the secretary, "Nelda, I'll be out of the office for a few minutes. Call me in Mrs. Kleinmann's room if you need me for anything."

The woman behind the desk nodded without looking up as she jotted a note to herself.

* * * * *

"What happened to your eye? Are you having some sort of trouble?" Principal Silva asked with concern as he led the way out of the office.

"What? No, it's nothing. I kind of did it in my sleep." Vincent said dismissively.

Principal Silva stopped and looked at Vincent dubiously.

"Seriously. If I was going to lie about it, I promise that I could come up with something better than that." Vincent said with a grin.

"So, what brings you back to Earth?" Principal Silva asked as he slowly walked down the hall with Vincent at his side.

"My Clan was attacked and they wanted for me to come back to Earth." Vincent said simply.

"Yes. I heard about that. Tragic." Principal Silva said with a shake of his head.

Vincent nodded, then stopped when they reached his classroom.

Principal Silva knocked lightly, then opened the door and said, "Mrs. Kleinmann, I have a visitor for you."

Vincent took a deep breath to brace himself, then walked into the room.

* * * * *

There was a long moment of silence, and Vincent could see the frozen stares on him from nearly everyone in the room.

"Vincent, I'm surprised to see you here. Principal Silva told us that you were on a Starship, establishing a new colony." Mrs. Kleinmann said carefully.

"Yes, Ma'am. It's listed as SA-14 on the star charts. I got called back to Earth on an emergency, but I'll be leaving to go back to my ship in a few days." Vincent said shyly.

"Thank you for stopping in to visit with us." Mrs. Kleinmann said in a more gentle voice, then turned to face the class and said, "We don't have much time left in this class period. Does anyone have any questions for Vincent?"

Vincent felt a hand on his shoulder and realized that Principal Silva was letting him know that he was leaving.

"Damon?" Mrs. Kleinmann said and Vincent followed her gaze toward the class, many of whom had their hands raised.

"Are you really in Starfleet?" A boy asked hesitantly from the third seat in his row.

"Yes. When my parents died, I was adopted by Clan Short. When they found out that I was interested in Starfleet, they worked it out so I could be in the mentoring program, so I could learn how to be a Starfleet officer." Vincent said seriously.

"Oh! Okay, so you're not really in Starfleet. You're just on a ship, learning how to do the job someday." Damon asked carefully.

"No. I'm really a crewman on my ship. I've even been promoted since I've been there, I'm a petty officer, second class. After I've done my work as a crewman each day, I do my school work. I'm taking classes by subspace at the Vulcan Academy of Science. When my school work is done, that's when I study my Starfleet stuff, so I'll be ready when I take my officer's exam." Vincent said as he looked Damon in the eyes.

"Kelly?" Mrs. Kleinmann called.

Vincent turned his attention to his former classmate and waited for her question.

"I remember hearing it on the news, but I wasn't sure if it was you or someone else named Winters... Were you at Kimber IV?" Kelly asked timidly.

"Yes. That was me." Vincent said shyly.

"Why don't you tell us about it, for those who didn't hear the story when it was on the news?" Mrs. Kleinmann asked gently from Vincent's side.

"I don't like to talk about it much. But, I guess the big thing is that there was this reactor that was damaged and about to blow up. The only way to get in and shut it down was too small for any adult to fit through. Since I was the smallest crewman on the ship, I went down to the planet, crawled through the underground pipe and shut it down." Vincent said as he tried to keep his voice loud enough so that everyone could hear him.

"The story I heard said that you almost died." Kelly said quietly.

Vincent nodded, then said, "The reactor was leaking radiation. I don't know for sure that I would have died, but I really thought for a while that I was going to. A lot of people worked really hard and did everything they could think of to save me, and I ended up being fine."

"Lindon?" Mrs. Kleinmann called out.

"What happened to make you stop being such a jerk?" Lindon asked as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"That's not a very nice thing to say!" Mrs. Kleinmann scolded.

"No. It's a fair question." Vincent said to his former teacher, then turned to Lindon and said, "I was a jerk because I was taught a lot of wrong stuff. Everything that I knew was true and had always believed in turned out to be lies."

Vincent could see that everyone in the classroom was listening closely to his every word, so he thought carefully before continuing, "I was mean to you, Lindon, because I liked you. I thought that you were nice, and since I wasn't, I knew that we couldn't be friends and that made me angry. I guess I was mean and pushed you away before you could see what a bad person I really was and could not like me for who I really am."

Vincent then looked around the rest of the class as he said, "I was mean to most of you for the same reason. I teased you and made fun of you and acted like a big jerk because at least then you'd hate me because I wanted you to. I chose for you to hate me. So it didn't hurt as much."

"What changed?" Lindon asked quietly into the ensuing silence.

"My life fell apart. My parents died. And my half-brother's biological father decided that... I don't know... I guess he saw something in me that was worth fighting for. He started teaching me right from wrong, love from hate, and a lot of other stuff. So now I look back on how I was and I'm really ashamed and sorry. But I can't hide from it. That's why I'm here. If you or someone you know is like I was, I'm here to tell you that they can change. You can give them a reason to want to be better." Vincent said seriously.

"Are you?" Lindon asked, then clarified, "Better?"

"Better than I was. I feel like I'm still a long way from being as good a person as my Daddy Joe... um, that's my brother's father. But I guess that doesn't happen overnight. I have a job and a wife and lots of friends. I'm happier than I ever was before." Vincent finished with a shrug.

"A wife?" Lindon asked with surprise.

There were a few whispers going around the room and Vincent smiled. "Yes. I got married a little over two months ago. But it's not as creepy as it sounds. We love each other and we got married. That doesn't mean that we're doing anything more when we're together than you would do if you went out on a date with someone you loved."

A class bell ringing jolted Vincent out of his thoughts.

"I'm sorry I used up your class time." Vincent said as he turned to Mrs. Kleinmann.

"I think it was time well spent." Mrs. Kleinmann said with a smile.

"I'm also sorry that I was such a pain in the butt when I was here before." Vincent said quietly.

"I'm just glad that you're better now." Mrs. Kleinmann said gently.

Vincent nodded as he turned to leave.

Standing by the door was Lindon, who seemed to be waiting for him.

"Hi." Vincent said quietly as he approached.

"Did you mean that? That you liked me?" Lindon asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I always thought you were kind of cool." Vincent said frankly.

"I used to think that if I got to know you, that we could be friends. But then whenever I'd get anywhere near you, you'd attack. You were just so mean to me." Lindon said as they walked out of the classroom side by side.

"Yeah. I'm sorry about that. I was mean to everyone, but I was a little bit extra mean to the people I liked." Vincent said shyly.

"You must have liked me like crazy." Lindon said as he bumped Vincent's shoulder playfully.

"You tried a lot harder than most people. Everyone else just left me alone after the first couple times. You kept trying to be nice to me and I kept on attacking you when you did." Vincent said frankly.

"What happened to your eye?" Lindon asked with concern.

"Some big guy hit me. But it's nothing to worry about. I don't expect to ever see him again." Vincent said frankly.

"You're only going to be on Earth for a couple days, huh?" Lindon asked regretfully.

"Yeah. But I'll be back, and until then, you can email me if you want to. Just send it to Crewman Vincent Winters on the USS Yorktown." Vincent said with a smile.

"That'd be okay?" Lindon asked hopefully.

"It'd be great! I'll tell you all about what's going on wherever I am at the time and you can tell me all about what's going on around here." Vincent said happily.

"Yeah. I'll do it." Lindon said with a smile.

As Vincent saw the outer door ahead of him, he quietly said, "I've got to be going. My brother will get worried about me if I'm gone too long."

"Okay. I'm glad things are better for you." Lindon said honestly.

"Better every day." Vincent said with a smile, then raised his wrist and said, "Manu, can you transport me to my brother's house?"

"On your command, Vincent." Manu responded immediately.

Lindon looked at Vincent curiously.

"Transport." Vincent said as he waved 'goodbye'.

Lindon's eyes went wide as the fountain of sparkles erupted around Vincent and whisked him away.

* * * * *

"Is everything okay?" Vincent asked as he saw Billy holding Ace to his side.

"Yes. Everything is fine. Ace just needed to take a little break from things." Billy said gently.

"Where's Lawrence?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"He and Deacon are up in Deacon's room, supposedly drinking hot chocolate and watching Mary Tyler Moore." Billy said with a smirk.

"Sucking face. Got it." Vincent said with a grin, then quickly added, "Will you tell him that I came back and that I'm fine? I promised him that I'd check in so he wouldn't worry."

"Where are you off to next?" Billy asked curiously.

"The Short Compound. I need to stop in and see what's going on and then I want to see what's going on with Lehman and Thomas." Vincent said frankly.

"It's kind of strange only seeing one of you." Billy said with a smile.

"I know. It's weird for me not having Lehman with me all the time, but he needs time with Jordy, so it's okay." Vincent finished with a smile.

"Billy, I mean, Dad, called Aunt Teri and she's going to work on getting me adopted." Ace said happily from Billy's side.

"Hey! That's great!" Vincent said happily.

"Yeah. I was afraid that she'd ask a lot of questions that I didn't want to answer, but she was really cool about everything."

"Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help." Vincent said quietly as he watched Billy holding Ace so gently.

After a moment to consider, Ace renewed his hug on Billy and said, "I think I've got everything I need."

* * * * *

When the teleportal sparkles faded, Vincent found himself being watched carefully.

"What happened to your eye?" A boy only slightly bigger than Vincent asked with concern.

"Nothing."

"Come on. You can tell me." the boy coaxed.

"It's nothing. By the way, who are you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I'm Ian. And I'm also one of your guardians, so I'll decide for myself if it's nothing or not." the boy said, then firmly asked, "Who hit you?"

"It doesn't matter, okay?" Vincent said impatiently.

"No. It's not okay." Ian responded firmly, then quietly added, "And it does matter. You matter. Come on, Vincent. Who hit you?"

Vincent withered under Ian's concerned gaze and finally said, "A big huge monster Vulcan in an alternate universe at about two o'clock this morning. Alright?"

"Why didn't you just say that to begin with?" Ian asked with a roll of his eyes.

Vincent chuckled, then asked, "Have you seen Thomas or Lehman around lately? I kind of wanted to check and be sure that they're doing alright."

"Um, yeah. I think I saw one of them in the game room, but I don't know which one. I can only tell them apart by who they're with." Ian said frankly.

Vincent chuckled as he said, "I didn't think of that."

"Come on. They're probably still close because lunch will be ready soon. After lunch, there's no telling where they'll be off to." Ian said as he led the way down the hallway.

Vincent nodded as he followed.

* * * * *

"Hey guys! How are you doing?" Vincent asked as he approached Dylan and Thomas in the game room.

"Everything's great! What happened to your eye?" Thomas asked with concern.

"I am soooo sick of everyone asking about that." Vincent said in a huff, then continued, "I went to bed, got beat up in my sleep, and woke up with a black eye. The End."

"I can fix it if you want." Dylan offered quietly.

"It doesn't hurt or anything. You don't need to worry about it." Vincent explained slowly.

"It's fixed." Dylan said simply.

"Oh! Well, thanks." Vincent said with surprise as he reached up and probed his perfectly healthy cheek.

"Isn't he great!" Thomas asked with a big, toothy grin.

"Yeah. I think he's a keeper." Vincent said with a warm smile at his newest brother.

"Lehman?" A familiar voice asked quickly.

"I haven't seen him yet today." Vincent said as he recognized the anxious look in Rory's eyes.

"We saw him at breakfast. Him and Jordy said that they'd see us at lunch." Thomas offered quickly.

"I can call him telepathically if you need me to." Dylan offered as he looked at Rory curiously.

"Yes. I need him to change to look like Kennon. There was this reporter who called my house and she said that if we wanted to tell Kennon's side of the story, we needed to hurry because the police would be there soon." Rory said in a rush.

"Calm down and tell us what's going on." Vincent said in a soothing voice.

Rory took in a slow, deep breath, then continued more calmly, "I'm not sure how it happened, but I think that when Kennon sent an email to his mother to let her know that he's doing okay, she somehow got the idea that we were holding Kennon captive. Now there's reporters and probably the police all wanting to get to Kennon. And I thought that if Lehman could look like Kennon and talk to them and tell them that he's okay, then maybe there wouldn't be any problem."

"No." Lehman said as he rushed into the room with Jordy following a step behind. From the awkward fit of their clothes, it appeared that they had dressed while running down the hall.

"What?" Rory asked in surprise as he turned in his wheelchair.

"Dylan sent me what you were saying as you were saying it. I won't take Kennon's form to lie to the reporters or the police. Whenever you do something like that, it always goes wrong and makes things worse." Lehman said as he stopped to look Rory in the eyes.

"But I don't know what else to do." Rory said in a begging tone.

"Get Solak to do the neural alignment on Kennon, then he can speak for himself." Lehman said simply.

Rory looked at Lehman with surprise at the suggestion.

"Remember when I touched you yesterday? I got a flash imprint of everything you knew at that moment. Solak told you that Kennon was stabilized, but wanted to wait to be sure that the trip to Earth didn't cause his condition to change before doing the alignment. I think that this is important enough that Solak can go ahead and do his thing a day or two ahead of schedule so that Kennon can speak for himself." Lehman said reasonably.

"Where's Kennon, now?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"At Camp Little Eagle. I had us transported there because I knew it would be safe and the people at the hospital can take care of him if he needs something and I'm not around." Rory said slowly as he thought about what Lehman was saying.

"You know I'm right. Lying isn't the answer. The only thing that's going to make all of this right is the truth." Lehman said frankly.

"Can you help me? I'm afraid that I'll do the wrong thing or make the wrong decision and end up hurting Kennon." Rory asked Lehman hopefully.

"We'll all help you." Vincent said assuringly.

"Then, I think the first thing that we need to do is go to Camp Little Eagle, to be sure that Kennon agrees with our plan. It's his life we're talking about." Lehman said frankly.

Rory smiled with relief and said, "Yeah. That sounds good."

Before Vincent could lift his wrist to call Manu, the whole group was instantaneously relocated to Kennon's hospital room at Camp Little Eagle.

* * * * *

"Thanks, Dylan." Thomas said with a grin at his boyfriend.

Dylan smiled shyly, then said, "I contacted Solak and filled him in on what's going on. He and Xain will be here in a few minutes."

"Kennon, I filled these guys in on what's going on and we've come up with a plan. Of course, it's your choice, we'll handle this however you want. But we were thinking that if we could get Solak to do the neural alignment so you can talk and stuff, then you could talk to the reporter or the police and tell them that you weren't kidnapped and aren't being held prisoner." Rory said seriously.

Kennon mumbled something that most of the boys in the room couldn't make out.

"Don't be stupid!" Lehman exploded.

Rory grinned at him, then turned to Kennon and said, "I think what Lehman was trying to say is that helping you is no 'bother'. It's what we do. If you really don't want to have the neural alignment treatments, then we'll do what you want. We won't like it, we won't be happy, but we won't force you. On the other hand, if you'll let us help you, then you'll be able to speak up for yourself and we'll feel like we did everything we possibly could to help you. We'll all be a lot happier. It's your decision."

"Yeah. That's what I meant." Lehman said with a shy smile at Rory.

After a long, silent moment, Kennon finally muttered something that, from the reactions of Rory, Lehman and Dylan, was obviously his agreement.

* * * * *

"Is there anything we can do?" Thomas asked no one in particular as he watched Xain and Solak standing silently with their hands on Kennon.

"To help Solak? No. I don't think so." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"But if Rory remembers the name of that reporter, we could contact her and set things up so Kennon could be interviewed." Dylan said seriously.

Rory looked up at the sound of his name, then seemed to be searching his memory.

Finally, he shook his head and said, "I know that Dad told me, and I've seen her about a billion times on the local news, but I don't remember."

"Maybe your parents would remember." Jordy suggested.

"Yeah. Probably. I'll call them. They'll want to know what's going on, anyway." Rory said as he moved his wheelchair to the phone by Kennon's bed.

"While Rory's doing that, maybe we should talk to someone about allowing a reporter inside Camp Little Eagle. I mean, with the gates and the guards and stuff..." Thomas trailed off with a shrug.

"That's an excellent idea. I can handle that." Jordy said happily, then turned to Lehman and asked, "Do you want to come with me?"

The blush that rose up Lehman's cheeks immediately announced where his mind had been when the question was asked.

Vincent chuckled at the reaction, then said, "I think we need to do something about the cops. I mean, from the way it sounds, they haven't tried to talk to Kennon yet, but maybe we can stop things from getting ugly if we talk to them first."

"I bet Matt would know who we should talk to." Thomas said quickly, then turned to Dylan and asked, "Do you know where he is?"

"At the Short Compound." Dylan said with a grin at Thomas.

"And I guess that I'll go talk to Sean and Cory to fill them in on what we're doing. I don't think they'll have any problem with it, but they'll probably want to know what's going on." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"I'll drop you off on the way." Dylan said with a smile at Vincent.

Before Vincent could say 'yes', 'no' or 'what?', Dylan had relocated him to a large office in the Short Compound.

* * * * *

"Captain Rasch?" Vincent said with surprise as he suddenly appeared.

"Trach Manja Vincent. It is good to see you." Captain Rasch said in his heavily accented translator voice.

"I'm sorry if I'm interrupting something, Sean. Dylan just kind of dropped me off here..." Vincent said as he looked at Sean uncertainly.

"It is good that you are here, Trach Manja Vincent. Please, join us." Captain Rasch said happily.

Vincent looked at Sean with question, not sure what he should say.

"If Captain Rash doesn't mind you being here, I sure don't." Sean said frankly.

Before Vincent could respond, Captain Rasch said, "Considering the significance of my announcement, it is fitting that the Trach Manjai be present."

"Would you like for Lehman to be here, too?" Vincent asked seriously.

"If he is not attending to other, more urgent matters, I believe it would be appropriate if he witnessed these events." Captain Rasch said thoughtfully.

"Manu, would you ask Lehman if he can join us?" Vincent asked into his bracelet.

There was a pause, then Manu responded, "He will be joining you in just a moment."

"There's no need to rush. We were actually waiting on someone else when you arrived." Sean said frankly.

"So, what's going on?" Vincent asked as he looked from Sean to Captain Rasch.

"The Elders have made some decisions. I am here as their representative to carry out those decisions." Captain Rasch said slowly.

"That sounds ominous." Vincent said with a teasing smile at Captain Rasch. If it were anyone else, Vincent might be worried, but he felt completely at ease.

A slight smile and a twinkle of mischief in the black, reptilian eyes was Captain Rasch's silent response.

"I'm sorry, Sean. I didn't know. I mean, Xain only finished training us yesterday and we didn't know we might be called..."

"It's fine, Kenny. We're waiting on someone else to arrive before we begin, so you're not too late." Sean said comfortingly.

"Hi. I'm Kevin Thompson." the smaller of the two boys said as he looked up, and up... and up some more at Captain Rasch.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Captain Rasch, here representing the Soleen-Avalla empire." Captain Rasch said in a formal tone.

"I'm Kenny Thompson, and we're here representing the Clan, I mean, we're um..."

"We're members of the clan's diplomatic corps." Kevin finished for his brother.

"Yeah. That." Kenny said quickly.

A shower of sparkles erupted, and less than a second later, Lehman was standing right next to Vincent.

"I think everyone is here, Captain Rasch, if you'd like to begin." Sean said calmly.

"For many years there has been debate within the Counsel of Elders and also among the greater population that the Soleen-Avalla empire should open itself to our neighbors in the universe, the Federation." Captain Rasch said slowly.

Everyone else in the room froze at the words, understanding just how important the coming announcement was going to be.

"Ultimately, it has been decided that, while the Federation does many good things and has many worthwhile goals that, in the end, removing the barriers between our people would not be of benefit." Captain Rasch said regretfully.

Everyone was silent, and the only acknowledgement of understanding was Sean's slow nod.

"However, we have found something that would be of benefit to our people, and to yours, should you agree." Captain Rasch continued, and smiled at the interested looks from everyone in the room.

"The Soleen-Avalla elders have examined the Federation's Safe Haven Act and find it to be worthwhile. Therefore, I am pleased to announce that the council of Elders has voted unanimously to adopt the Safe Haven Act and immediately put it into effect on all Soleen-Avalla worlds and colonies." Captain Rasch said formally.

"I'm very happy to hear that." Sean said with a grand smile.

Vincent and Lehman smiled at the announcement and felt that the announcement was the completion of something that was meant to be.

"Further, the Soleen-Avalla elders have come to admire Clan Short for the principles it lives by and the good works that it performs. So, as a token of our esteem, the Soleen-Avalla government has chosen to formally recognize Clan Short of Vulcan as an independent diplomatic entity." Captain Rasch said formally, then turned to Kenny and Kevin and continued, "The formal recognition will allow our diplomats and yours to, hopefully, work together to achieve common goals. By being your own independent diplomatic entity, we will be free to pursue agreements that we might not feel comfortable pursuing with the Federation."

"On behalf of the entire clan, I would ask that you thank the elders for me. It's a great honor." Sean said as he stood and offered his hand to Captain Rasch.

"Do the Trach Manjai have any feelings about this development?" Captain Rasch asked as he turned to look at Vincent and Lehman.

"It's perfect." Lehman said simply.

Vincent nodded, and added, "Just like it should be."

After a long moment to see if anyone had more to say, Sean quietly said, "If we're done here, there's a memorial service that we need to attend."

"Before you do that, I wanted to let you know what's going on with Kennon." Vincent said quickly.

"What? Is there a problem with his condition?" Sean immediately asked with concern.

'No. He's fine. But his family decided that he's being held captive by the Clan. So there's reporters and probably going to be cops trying to get to him. Solak is doing his neural alignment thing, so Kennon will be able to talk for himself. And we were thinking that if Kennon talked to the cops and reporters and stuff, then he can let them know that we didn't kidnap him." Vincent said quickly.

Sean slowly nodded as he considered what Vincent was saying.

"Thomas is talking to Matt, so he can talk to the cops for us. We just wanted to be sure that you don't have a problem with a reporter being let into Camp Little Eagle, to talk with Kennon." Lehman said frankly.

"It sounds like you've got the situation under control. I need to be leaving soon for the memorial service, so I'll leave the details up to you. Do whatever you need to, you have my complete support." Sean said seriously.

"Thanks, Sean." Vincent said with a relieved smile.

"It sounds like we all have things to do. We'd better get to it." Sean said as he looked around the group.

Everyone seemed to be in agreement and filed out of the room to go their separate ways.

* * * * *

"I didn't realize that there'd be so many of them." Lehman said from in front of the security monitor.

Vincent looked at the nearly two dozen reporters, all gathered by the front gate of Camp Little Eagle and asked, "Do we know which one we want for Kennon to talk to?"

"The gray haired man in front is a pulitzer prize winning journalist. It might give the interview an aire of legitimacy if you have Kennon talk to him." Matt said slowly.

"Yeah, but no one under thirty probably knows who he is." Vincent said absently.

"The woman in blue has her own nationally syndicated weekly news program. I'm pretty sure that everyone is familiar with her, even if they don't watch her show." Matt said seriously.

"What about the rest of them? Who are they all?" Lehman asked slowly.

"I'm surprised at how many have shown up. I see reporters from television, newspaper, and one or two serious investigative journalists." Matt said as he looked carefully at the screen.

"Who's that one, the one with the big... um... chests." Thomas finished shyly.

"I think her name is Candy... something. She's a local news anchor. I don't think she's actually a journalist, she just sits in front of the camera and reads a teleprompter." Matt said frankly.

"Does it really matter which one we pick?" Lehman asked curiously.

"I suppose not. It's not like there's any in-depth story for them to investigate. Kennon just needs to tell them that he's not a prisoner." Matt said simply.

"So, who are we going to pick?" Lehman asked as he looked at the monitor again.

"Who do you think Kennon would want to talk to?" Matt asked slowly.

After a long moment of silence, Vincent decisively said, "The one with the tits."

Chapter 58

The looks of shock on the faces of all the other journalists and reporters was priceless when the security guard had announced that she had been chosen to interview the kidnapped boy. But those looks slowly changed to anger because everyone assumed that she was unqualified and only chosen on the basis of her appearance.

If anyone had ever bothered to look deeper and find out about her education, they would have found that she had the training and studies to be fully qualified to conduct an interview. What she lacked was any practical experience. She had done her share of 'day at the beach' stories and other equally mundane things.

She hadn't ever done anything remarkable during her career, that was because no one had ever trusted her enough to give her a real chance... until now.

She had only recently come to the point where she was past needing to prove to her contemporaries that she was competent. She knew by now what people thought of her and that no matter how she tried, their opinions would not easily change. The years since college had finally taken enough of a toll that the only one left that she had to prove anything to was herself.

"I didn't have any idea that this was here." Her driver and cameraman said as he pulled into the visitor parking, where the security guard had instructed.

"It's beautiful. It looks brand new." She said as she looked at the large hospital before them.

"Do you think it's going to be dangerous? I mean, with the fence and the guards..."

"If you want to play it safe, work in the studio. Out here, we need to be willing to get our hands dirty."

"Candy, do you think you could do up the buttons on your blouse before you start trying to act all butch on me? It spoils the effect."

"Don't try to pretend that this cleavage didn't get us the interview. Face it, Irv, this is the price of admission. Just do me a favor and remind me to button up before you start the camera." Candy finished in a softer tone of voice.

"Whatever you say, Candy."

* * * * *

When Candy walked through the main door of the hospital building, she was greeted by a single little boy, staring up at her with wide eyes.

"Miss, um, Candy... I'm sorry. I don't know your last name. But I'm Vincent. I'm here to take you to Kennon." Vincent said as he stared at her enormous breasts.

"Would it be alright if we wait just a minute? My cameraman is on his way." Candy asked in a demure, slightly pouty voice.

"Yeah. There's no rush." Vincent said to her cleavage.

"Vincent, you're acting like a dork. Dylan said that I should come out here and help..." Thomas said as he walked down the hallway.

At the sudden pause in his speech, Vincent turned and saw Thomas staring in amazement.

"Candy said that there's a cameraman coming. He might need our help." Vincent said slowly, hoping to snap Thomas out of his wide-eyed, gawking state.

"Those things are freakin' HUGE!" Thomas exclaimed.

Vincent's mouth dropped open with surprise, then he turned and hurried to say, "I'm sorry, Candy. This is Thomas. He really isn't rude like that all the time."

"That's alright. I've had people say a lot worse things to me." Candy said with an amused smile.

"What's up with you guys? Dylan said that you're being rude to our guest." Lehman said as he dashed down the hall.

"We're trying to be nice. Honest. It's just not working too good at the moment." Vincent explained.

Lehman stopped and looked at Candy in wonder before cautiously asking, "How do you not tip over?"

"Yeah, way to be polite, Lehman." Vincent said with a roll of his eyes.

Just then, the outer door opened, revealing the cameraman carrying several different cases and a tripod.

"Let us help you with that." Vincent said quickly as he hurried to the struggling man's side.

It took a moment, but Thomas and Lehman also joined him, each taking one of the cameraman's bags.

"Is that everything?" Candy asked as she looked around.

"Yeah. Kennon's room is right down here." Vincent said as he started to lead the way.

"How many of you are there?" Candy asked as she looked at the three nearly identical boys.

"What?" Thomas asked curiously.

"It looks like you're identical triplets. Or are there more of you?"

"It's just us three, so far." Thomas said with a smile.

"This is it. Now, don't be too loud at first. Kennon's just had a treatment and it makes him sleepy. He's just waking up." Lehman warned as he stopped by the door.

"What kind of treatment?" Candy asked curiously.

"It'd be better if you asked Kennon. Come on." Lehman said quietly, then opened the door.

* * * * *

Candy walked into the large hospital room to find it nearly filled to capacity with a variety of people.

"Everyone. This is Candy. She's here to do the interview." Lehman said as he motioned for her to come further into the room.

"We just wanted to be here to see that Kennon's treatment went okay. We'll get out of your way now." A young boy with violet eyes said with a smile at Candy.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" A redheaded boy in a wheelchair asked the young man on the bed gently.

"No. I need to do this by myself."

"I'll be right outside if you need anything."

"Thanks, Rory." Kennon said gratefully, then watched as the majority of the people slowly walked out of the room.

"If he becomes fatigued, please suspend your interview and continue it at a later time." A Vulcan man said to Candy firmly.

"Sure. I'll try not to take too long." Candy said cautiously. She realized that the Vulcan man didn't seem to even notice her breasts.

"This is Solak. He's the Vulcan healer that's taking care of me." Kennon said from the bed.

"It's nice to meet you." Candy said as she looked at Solak carefully, trying to detect any reaction.

"Likewise. I believe you have an interview to conduct, so I will take my leave." Solak said simply, then left the room.

Candy turned her attention to the boy, no, the young man, on the bed. From the press release that the family had given, she had expected him to be much younger.

"No one introduced us. My name is Kennon Werner. I would shake your hand, but Solak wasn't able to get that part of the treatment done before you got here." Kennon said frankly.

"I'm sorry, what do you mean?" Candy asked curiously.

"I don't know how much you know about me, but I haven't been able to use my hands or legs or talk normally for about three years. Up to now, Solak's been working to heal what's wrong with me on a cellular level, but he wasn't able to do the adjustment so that I could talk until today. I wasn't well enough, yet. In fact, if you weren't coming to interview me, I think he was going to wait a couple more days to be sure that me being here on Earth wasn't going to cause me problems." Kennon said frankly.

"I can't even imagine how that must have been." Candy said quietly.

"Solak said that, this afternoon, or maybe this evening, after I've had a chance to rest, that he's going to do the treatment so that I'll be able to use my hands and arms again... well, maybe. It's not for sure that it'll work. My condition was pretty advanced." Kennon said as the tears welled in his eyes began to fall.

"Let me get that for you." Candy whispered as she walked to his bedside and dabbed his eyes with a tissue.

"Thanks. It's just that I've been sick for so long. I've been losing one thing after another until there was almost nothing left of me. Now, for the first time in years, I'm getting something back. I can't seem to stop crying about it." Kennon chuckled past his tears.

Candy smiled, then glanced behind her to see how Irv was doing.

"It looks like we'll be set up in just a minute. I'll try not to make this take too long." Candy said gently.

"I've never done anything like this before. What am I supposed to do?" Kennon asked as he looked at the camera.

"Just talk with me normally. I'll ask you a few questions and you do your best to answer them. If you don't know the answer, don't worry about it. Anything that isn't important will be cleaned up in the edit." Candy said assuringly.

"Thanks. It's just that I'm not used to talking to people anymore. In fact, Rory's the only person who I've really been able to talk to at all."

"Who is that?"

"The redheaded boy in the wheelchair. He has a condition similar to mine and he's receiving the same treatment that I am. So he knows what it's like and knows to be patient and to listen carefully. It's just been too hard for anyone else to understand me, so I stopped trying to talk to them."

"Once we see how this interview is received by the public, I could do a followup interview with him. From the sound of it, I bet he has an interesting story to tell."

"Rory and I will be going back to Vulcan in a few days. They don't have the medical equipment to treat us on Earth." Kennon said frankly.

"I may ask you more about that when the camera is rolling."

"Sure. You can ask me anything you want." Kennon said as he smiled at her.

"Irv, are you about ready?"

"I'm having trouble with the lighting. I'd really like to get one or two lights from the truck. After that, all that's left is your microphones."

"Open the curtain if you need to, but we need to get this finished so they'll have time to edit it. We don't want to have this held for the 11:00 broadcast."

"If I'm using natural light, you'll need to move to the other side of the bed or we'll have terrible shadows."

"Fine. Whatever. Just hand me the mics."

"Sure. And don't forget to button your blouse."

* * * * *

"This is Candy Borrits with an Action-4 News exclusive. I'm at Camp Little Eagle just outside of Orlando, speaking with Kennon Werner, who was supposedly abducted by Clan Short. Let's hear his side of the story." Candy said, then looked at Kennon expectantly.

"I wasn't kidnapped. I was being held against my will by my family and I asked for help. The Clan didn't abduct me, they rescued me." Kennon said honestly.

"According to court records obtained by Action-4 News, your family has had you declared *non compus mentus*, or incompetent and unable to make your own decisions. So why should we believe anything that you have to say?"

"Oh. I didn't know about that. But, I guess that if you believe the court, you shouldn't believe me. It's funny though, I never talked to a lawyer or a judge or even a psychiatrist. It's weird that they can declare that I'm incompetent without ever examining me or asking me anything." Kennon said seriously.

"Tell me, if you weren't kidnapped, what have you been doing since you left your family's house?"

"I've been focusing all my attention on the treatments that I've been receiving and trying to get well enough so that I feel like a real person again."

"How do you mean?"

"Since I got sick, and I mean, even before I lost the ability to speak, my family has treated me as a 'thing' to be taken care of. The doctors treated me as a case number and the nurses looked at me as a part of their job. It's literally been years since anyone treated me like a person. In fact, it wasn't until I got in touch with my cousin Xain, that anyone even considered that I might need help."

"Your family asserts that you were kidnapped. What do you have to say about that?"

"I don't mean for it to sound like my family were mistreating me. With my medical condition being the way it was, they were taking the best care of me that they could. But from my point of view, all I knew was that I was stuck in a little room in my family's house, unable to feed or dress myself. My condition was getting worse every day and I was nearly to the point where I just wanted it to end. But when I found my cousin online and told him what was wrong with me, he told me that his mother, my aunt, had died from the same thing, and that it was genetic. Ever since Xain's mother

first got sick, his father has been working on a treatment and has recently been having some success with it."

"So couldn't you have told your doctors about the new treatment and avoided the abduction?"

"I tried. But you have to understand that my grandfather is a doctor. He's been taking care of me since I got sick. I know that he did the best that he could for me, but he absolutely hates Vulcans. When I told him about the treatment, he wouldn't even discuss it."

"Vulcans?"

"Yes. My cousin Xain is half Vulcan. His father is a Vulcan Healer."

"So, if I may summarize; you developed a genetic condition. Your family took care of you, but would not consider allowing you to receive treatment because that treatment was administered by a Vulcan healer. Is that accurate?" Candy asked carefully.

"Yes. And I guess that since they had me declared incompetent, they even took away my right to request the treatment for myself. If it hadn't been for my cousin and the Clan, I would still be in that little room in my grandfather's house, withering away without any hope of recovery."

"I'm not here to judge, only to give you the chance to tell your story. But it seems to me that you're exactly where you need to be, so that you can get the treatment that you need, to improve your life." Candy said warmly.

"That's the best part. This isn't just a treatment to help me live better or give me a few more years of life. It's really a CURE. It fixes what's wrong with me, completely and forever." Kennon said happily.

Candy turned to look directly into the camera and said, "I'm at Camp Little Eagle outside Orlando with Kennon Werner, a young man who was abducted, or rescued, depending on who you ask. This is Candy Borrits for Action-4 News."

A few seconds later, Irv said, "We're clear."

"Did I do okay?" Kennon asked hopefully.

"You did great." Candy said with a smile.

"I really appreciate you being so nice to me. Thank you." Kennon said sincerely.

"Was I? I thought I might have stepped over the line once or twice." Candy said honestly.

"No. I just thought you were being professional." Kennon said frankly, then asked, "Were you serious about my family having me declared incompetent? Did they really do that?"

"According to the court documents, they did." Candy said simply as she took her microphone off.

"I always tried to believe the best about my family and give them the benefit of the doubt. But for them to do something like that... I'm just glad I'm out of there."

"I am, too." Candy said with a smile, then asked, "So you're going back to Vulcan, soon?"

"In a couple days. Rory and I can't be away for too long or we'll start losing ground on the treatments. From what they've told me, it'll probably take about a year to completely cure me." Kennon said regretfully, then quickly added, "But we'll still be able to come to Earth now and then for visits."

"I'd like it if you'd keep in touch and let me know how you're doing." Candy said gently as she leaned in and removed his microphone.

"Really?" Kennon asked with surprise.

"Sure. Maybe, if you're feeling up to it, the next time you're on Earth, we could go out and you could catch me up on how things are going with you." Candy said with a grin.

"Oh! Wow! That sounds great! Now I want to get better more than ever!" Kennon said with a grand smile.

"I have to go now. Besides, your doctor says that you need your rest." Candy said as she glanced over to see that Irv was nearly done packing up.

"Yeah. I am tired. But it's a happy kind of tired."

Candy walked to the bed and gave Kennon a slow, gentle kiss.

Kennon lay, frozen. Not that he could have moved that much if he wanted, but still, he was stunned into immobility.

When the kiss finally broke, Candy moved her lips to his ear and quietly whispered, "Sweet dreams."

Kennon couldn't say a word as he watched Candy walk over to Irv, then leave the room.

* * * * *

"So, how was the interview, did everything go okay?" Rory asked as he wheeled into the room, followed by about a dozen other people.

"Excuse me, everyone, could I talk to Rory alone for just a minute?" Kennon asked hopefully.

There were some concerned and confused looks as everyone but Rory turned and filed back out of the room.

"Is something wrong? Is there trouble?" Rory asked from Kennon's bedside.

"No. I mean, yes. But it's not what you think." Kennon stammered nervously.

"What is it?" Rory asked with concern.

"That reporter, Candy, she kissed me." Kennon said as he looked Rory in the eyes.

"Way to go!" Rory said with a grand smile.

"Yeah. Well... when she did that, I kind of, um... went off." Kennon muttered shyly.

"Huh?" Rory asked in confusion.

"I had an orgasm. I came in my pants." Kennon said in frustration, then quietly asked, "Can you help me get cleaned up, so no one else finds out?"

"Sure thing, Kennon. You know you can always count on me." Rory said with a smile, then asked, "Was the kiss really that good?"

"Oh yeah!"

* * * * *

"Kennon seems fine. I just remembered something that I need to take care of, so If you guys don't need me here for anything, I'm going over to the short compound." Vincent said, mostly to Lehman and Thomas, outside Kennon's door.

"Is it something you'll need help with?" Lehman asked with concern.

"No. It's just something that I meant to do, then forgot, and now I just remembered. So I'd better hurry up and do it before I forget it again." Vincent said honestly.

"Yeah. You'd better hurry up and go." Lehman said with an understanding smile.

"Have Manu call me if you need me for anything. You guys have fun." Vincent said as he stepped away to prepare for transport.

"We will." Lehman said as he glanced at Jordy with a grin.

"Manu, would you please transport me to the Short compound?" Vincent asked into his bracelet.

"On your command." Manu responded immediately.

"Transport."

* * * * *

When the sparkles cleared, Vincent found himself alone in the entry hall. He immediately felt like something was wrong or out of place. It took a moment for him to realize that the thing that seemed so unusual was that the house was quiet.

When he had visited before, the house had always been a bustle of activity, but now it was absolutely eerie in its silence.

Just as he was considering leaving, a noise down the hallway alerted him to the presence of another person in the building.

He cautiously walked down the hallway until the noise repeated. Finally, he found himself entering the kitchen.

* * * * *

The woman wasn't familiar to him. He had seen her around before, but didn't recall if they'd ever been introduced.

As he walked further into the kitchen, he finally remembered, "Helen."

She jumped and spun with a gasp at the softly spoken sound of her name.

"Sorry." Vincent shyly said.

"You just about gave me a heart attack." Helen said as she tried to catch her breath.

"I didn't mean to. I just wanted to ask you something." Vincent said as he tried to stay focused on his immediate task.

"Have a seat. I'll get you a cookie." Helen said as she turned to the countertop behind her.

"I probably shouldn't. I haven't had lunch yet." Vincent said in a conflicted tone.

"I bet you'll still be able to find room for lunch, when it's time." Helen said with a smile, as she placed a single cookie on a paper towel before Vincent at the kitchen table, then asked, "What's up?"

"I don't know if you can help me with this, but I've got this friend named MichaelAngelo. He's having kind of a hard time right now, him and his whole family." Vincent said before taking a small bite off the edge of the cookie. He smiled at the flavor. Nothing tastes like homemade.

"What are they having a hard time with?" Helen asked as she placed a small glass of milk on the table before Vincent.

He scrunched up his nose when he saw the milk, but rather than complain, he answered, "I don't know all of it, but the mom's been married a couple times, so some of the kids have different dads, and not all the dads treat their kids the same."

Vincent stopped long enough to take a bite of his cookie and drink a single swallow of milk.

"I can see how that could cause problems." Helen said with a nod.

"Well, MichaelAngelo is the middle kid. He's not old enough to do things on his own, but he's too old to be babied. And with all the other kids running around, I guess he feels left out." Vincent said honestly.

"When you have a large family, that can be a problem. With as many children as we have running around here, I'm always on the lookout for anyone who's looking left out or depressed."

After finishing his next bite of cookie, Vincent said, "I was kind of hoping that maybe Aunt Teri or someone could talk to the parents and let them know that it doesn't have to be like this. If they'll do some family counseling, maybe everyone can be happy and get along and... feel included and stuff."

"This sounds like something that I might be able to handle for you. If you can get me their contact information, I think us grown ups can have a chat about things." Helen said confidently.

"Do you have something to write on?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"Just a second." Helen said as she got up from the table.

Vincent took the opportunity to finish his cookie and take another drink of the milk. He didn't quite finish it, but he drank most of it.

"Here you go." Helen said as she placed a spiral bound notebook and pen before him.

"Manu, can you give me MichaelAngelo's contact information?" Vincent asked as he picked up the pen.

Helen watched and listened as Vincent wrote down the information.

When Vincent was done, Helen quietly asked, "I'm curious. With as long as you've been away from Earth, how did you get to know someone on the West Coast?"

"MichaelAngelo's oldest brother, Rad, is a friend of mine, back on my ship." Vincent answered simply.

Helen smiled, then said, "Well, just leave this in my hands. I'll see that the family has everything that they need."

"Thank you, Helen."

"That's Aunt Helen, to you, young man." Helen said with playful sternness.

"Yes, ma'am, Aunt Helen." Vincent said, playing along with her, then thought to ask, "Is everyone else gone?"

"Yes. They're all at the memorial service in Charleston, except for Seth. He stayed behind to watch over Command and Control, just in case someone needs help." Helen said as she got up from the table and started working again.

"I'm going to go talk to Seth for a minute. Thanks for the help... and the cookie." Vincent finished with a smile.

"Please feel free to come and see me any time you're needing help... or needing cookies." Helen added with a grin.

"I'll do that." Vincent said with a smile as he left the room.

* * * * *

After a short visit with Seth to see how things were going and to get an idea of when the Clan members were expected back, Vincent decided to go back to Billy's house.

As the transportal sparkles began to fade, he was surprised to find Ace, sitting on the couch, looking at him.

"Hi, Ace. What's going on?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Nothing, right now. Everyone else went to South Carolina to a memorial service. But since I'm trying to keep a low profile, I thought it'd be best if I stayed here." Ace said simply.

"Bored out of your mind yet?" Vincent asked with a chuckle.

"Not really. The past month has been so crazy for me, such a struggle for survival, that being able to sit here where it's warm and dry with a full belly... It's been nice to have the quiet time to sit and appreciate it." Ace said thoughtfully.

"Would you like me to leave you alone for a while?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Ace smiled at the offer and said, "No. I think I'm done."

"Then how would you like to go up to the ship with me and visit with Geoff?" Vincent asked happily.

"Oh! Crap! I was going to talk to someone about helping Geoff..." Ace stopped suddenly, then looked at Vincent uncertainly.

"...helping Geoff..." Vincent said in a leading tone.

"If Geoff wants you to know, then he should be the one to tell you about it." Ace said with an apologetic look in his eyes.

"But maybe it's something I could help with." Vincent said cautiously.

"From what little I know about Geoff, he doesn't have many, or maybe any, people that he feels like he can trust. I really don't know if he'd mind if I told you or not. But I'm not going to take that chance." Ace said honestly.

"Yeah. I wouldn't want him to feel betrayed, even if we were trying to help him." Vincent said with a nod.

* * * * *

As Ace and Vincent appeared in Vincent's cabin on the ship, Vincent suddenly had a thought.

"Would you mind going to visit Geoff on your own? I just thought of something that I'd like to do, and it could take a few minutes." Vincent asked slowly.

"Sure. I guess. If I need you, Manu can call you for me." Ace said casually.

"Thanks." Vincent said with a smile, happy to know that Ace wasn't bothered.

"Please be aware that we will be having the midday meal shortly. As I understand Challen's treatment schedule, Geoff should be able to join you, if he so wishes." Manu said from above them.

"Thank you, Manu." Vincent said with a smile upward.

"I'll see you at lunch." Ace said before leaving the room.

Vincent walked to the terminal at the side of his room and sat quietly for a moment before he finally said, "Manu, I think it's time that I know about what's going on."

"What information would you like, Vincent?" Manu asked curiously.

"Start at the beginning. I need to know everything that you know about what happened to the Clan last weekend." Vincent said as he braced himself for what he was about to learn.

"The first reports have to do with a religious organization..."

* * * * *

Ace walked into the sickbay to find Geoff on the bed, with his eyes closed.

"How's he doing?" Ace asked quietly as he walked to Geoff's bedside.

"Although I am unaccustomed to working with Human physiology, it appears that the treatment is having the desired effect." Challen said with his translator voice.

"He looks different." Ace said cautiously, not able to pin down exactly what had changed.

"Yes. The purge of toxins has caused a persistent swelling in Geoff's lymph nodes to subside, giving his neck a more conventional appearance."

Ace looked at Geoff's neck and realized that it looked quite a bit smaller than it had. Although the swelling hadn't been noticeable before, the absence of it caused Geoff to look more slender.

"My treatment is concluded for now. We will have another session later in the day." Challen said as he walked to Ace's side to also look at Geoff.

"I don't know what to do to help him." Ace whispered as he looked at Geoff on the bed.

"Be a friend. The rest is up to him." Challen said frankly.

"I just want for him to be happy. And I don't see any way that's going to happen with the way that things are." Ace said as he looked at Challen with concern.

"Ace, if you would step outside for a moment, there is a matter I would like to discuss with you privately." Manu said from above him.

"You want to talk to me?" Ace asked cautiously.

"Yes. I have an idea, but I would like to discuss it with you before I present it as a viable option to Geoff." Manu said seriously.

"Call me if Geoff needs me for anything." Ace told Challen before walking to the door.

* * * * *

"As you may or may not know, the Soleen-Avalla people have no telepathic abilities." Manu said to Ace, who was standing in the hallway.

"Yeah. So?" Ace said cautiously.

"I overheard you talking in the bathing room when you discovered that Geoff is empathic." Manu continued.

"Yeah." Ace said slowly, prompting for Manu to continue.

"Given that Geoff feels so bombarded by the feelings of others, perhaps he would be more at ease and happier if he were to live on Soleena, the Soleen-Avalla homeworld." Manu said carefully.

"I guess he might." Ace said thoughtfully.

"I thought that I might submit to the elders the idea that if we had an empath amongst us, that we could call upon when dealing with other species, that it might level the playing field, so to speak." Manu said carefully.

"So, you're saying that Geoff's job would be to attend meetings with other species to tell if they're lying when they're negotiating." Ace said carefully.

"That is what I am proposing, yes. All of this is speculation on my part. I do not know if the elders, or even if Geoff would be receptive to the idea. But if everyone agreed, it might make Geoff's life quite a bit easier."

"Not having to block out everyone else's emotions all the time." Ace said with a nod.

"Do you think the idea has sufficient merit to warrant considering it seriously." Manu asked carefully.

"It might. But either way, Geoff's going to need training. " Ace said thoughtfully.

"I see no reason that he should be limited by that fact. He would be able to go to the New Hope colony whenever he wished and return to Earth from there to receive as much or as little training as he desires." Manu said seriously.

"And the elders could just call him home when they need him to sit in on some negotiations." Ace said with a nod.

"Yes. Were all to go according to our plans."

"I guess that we should talk to Geoff about all of this. If it's something that he's interested in, then maybe we could try. I mean, if the elders or Geoff says 'no', we're really no worse off than when we started, are we?" Ace asked as he looked upward.

"Might I suggest that you discuss it with him over lunch." Manu said quietly.

"Why at lunch?" Ace asked curiously.

"In the short time that I have known Vincent, I have come to greatly respect him. I believe that he should be included in the conversation, not only as a courtesy to him, but also to gain his valuable insights into the matter." Manu said frankly.

Ace smiled at the suggestion, then quietly said, "I've had a lot of time to talk to Vincent and get to know him. I agree with you. Including him in our plan might be the best way to make it work out in the long run."

"Geoff is awake, if you would like to speak with him now." Manu said quietly.

"Yeah. Thanks."

* * * * *

"How are you feeling?" Ace asked as he walked into the sickbay.

"Sad." Geoff said as he fought to hold back his tears.

"Why? Is something wrong?" Ace asked with immediate concern.

"Nothing new. But I don't think this is me... I'm feeling such despair. I don't know where it's coming from." Geoff said as a tear started falling down his cheek.

"Well, I'm right here, and I'm not feeling anything like that, so that only leaves Vincent." Ace said frankly.

"I don't know. It doesn't feel like him. It's so dark... so hopeless." Geoff said distantly as he tried to identify what he was feeling.

"We're the only humans on the ship. I don't know who else it could be." Ace said seriously.

"The Terra Main station, the McKinley station, one of the ships in orbit... It could be any of them. I can feel them all." Geoff said honestly.

"Can you tell how close the dark feelings are? I mean, can you tell if they're coming from here on the ship?" Ace asked cautiously.

"It doesn't work that way. They kind of tune in, like radio frequencies. I think those that are closer come through easier, but if the more distant ones are on just the right wavelength, they could come in just as loud and clear as you being right here in the room with me." Geoff said thoughtfully.

Ace nodded, then looked to Challen and asked, "Is it okay if Geoff goes with us to have something to eat?"

"Allow me a moment to scan him, first. Then you may go." Challen said as he programmed the biobed to do the requested scan.

"It is Vincent." Geoff said in realization.

"The dark feeling?" Ace asked to confirm.

"We've got to help him. He's giving up." Geoff said as he looked at Ace with watery eyes.

"Geoff, please be careful. You may be unsteady on your feet for a short time. But otherwise, you seem to be well. You may go and eat if you like." Challen said professionally.

"I'll be careful. Thank you, Challen." Geoff said as he carefully stood, with Ace's help.

"Let's go find Vincent." Ace said as soon as Geoff seemed to be stable enough to walk.

"Hurry."

* * * * *

"I have notified Vincent that you are coming to invite him to go with you to lunch, and he wishes for you to meet him in the dining hall." Manu said as Geoff and Ace hurried down the hallway.

"If he's feeling bad, then we need to be there for him. He'd do it for us." Ace said decisively.

"Would he also consider your feelings and allow you a moment to compose yourself?" Manu asked seriously.

Ace stopped and looked at Geoff for a moment, then said, "Okay. But if he's not in the dining hall in just a few minutes, we're going to come down here and drag him out of his cabin."

Geoff looked away, then smiled.

"What?" Ace asked when he noticed.

"I could feel the change in his mood when Manu told him what you said." Geoff said with a smile.

"So, he's feeling better?" Ace asked cautiously.

"No. At least, not down deep in his core. But up on top, he's doing better." Geoff said thoughtfully.

Ace started leading them back toward the dining hall as he said, "I don't know how much training you're going to need. You seemed to be doing a pretty good job."

"Now that I know what it is that I'm feeling, it's not too hard to understand what the feelings mean. But before... I thought I was going nuts." Geoff said frankly.

"I can really understand that." Ace said as they arrived at the dining hall and entered.

* * * * *

As soon as they had taken their seats, Ace quietly asked, "Would you like to learn how to shield yourself from strong emotions?"

"Sure, but you're not an empath, are you?" Geoff asked cautiously.

"Nope. I don't have any special gifts like that. But I grew up around a lot of people who did and they taught me how to defend myself. So I know how to shield." Ace said frankly.

"So, if a telepath tried to read your mind, you could stop him?" Geoff asked cautiously.

"It depends on the telepath. I couldn't stop a really strong one. But I could at least put up a pretty good fight so he'd have to work at it." Ace said with a smile.

"Have you ever had to do that?" Geoff asked with concern.

"I've had to block a few low level telepaths, but no one's ever really tried to overpower me." Ace said casually.

"So, how can you teach me?" Geoff asked cautiously.

"Just look at me and try to feel what I feel. When I put the wall up, look at how I do it, then try to do the same thing." Ace said seriously.

Geoff nodded as he looked at Ace carefully.

A wash of benevolent emotions washed over Geoff and he smiled at the sensation.

Ace returned the smile, then very slowly and carefully began to erect a wall to contain his emotions in an internal place, closed off from public view.

"Wow." Geoff whispered as he fought to understand what he was seeing.

"My wall keeps things in, but if I understood it right, you can do exactly the same thing to keep things out." Ace said carefully.

"I'll try." Geoff whispered.

"Let me know when you're ready, and I'll give you something to feel." Ace said quietly, so as not to interfere with Geoff's concentration.

Internally, Geoff did 'something'. He couldn't tell if his barrier was keeping other emotions out or if he was so focused on maintaining it, that he couldn't hear them.

"Ready?" Ace asked quietly.

Geoff slowly nodded, not wanting to take the chance of breaking his concentration by speaking.

After a moment, Ace carefully asked, "Can you feel anything?"

"I don't think so." Geoff said weakly.

"Trust me, if you weren't shielded, you'd feel it." Ace said with a smile.

At that, Geoff let his concentration slip and his shields went down. He was immediately flooded with arousal and outright horniness.

Ace saw the blush rise up his face and stopped the flood of emotions.

"I've never felt anything like that." Geoff said breathlessly as he fought to get himself under control.

"What can I say? I'm a teenager." Ace said with an unrepentant grin.

"So am I, but I've never felt like that." Geoff said in wonder.

"I don't know what to tell you." Ace said honestly.

"Oh, my god. The medicine." Geoff said in realization.

"What medicine?" Ace asked in confusion.

"All that crap the psychiatrist was giving me. I think that on top of everything else, it also killed my sex drive." Geoff said angrily.

"Well, if that's the case, then by the time Challen's done with your treatments, you're going to have something new to play with." Ace said with a grin.

"How can you joke about this? Don't you see what this might mean?"

"I'm sorry, no. I don't."

"All those drugs they were giving me, supposedly to 'fix' me. It was all a lie! They were never trying to make me better. They were trying to make me calm and quiet, willing to do anything that they wanted."

"Do you really think so?"

"Well, they never figured out that I was empathic, so they weren't treating me for that. So far, everything that Challen's checked hasn't shown that anything else is wrong with me. So what were they treating?"

After a moment to think it through, Ace quietly said, "You may be right. And you may not. It's possible that they were honestly trying to treat what they saw as symptoms of a mental disorder. And the side effect of one of those treatments might have been a loss of sex drive."

"That's an awful lot of what ifs." Geoff observed.

"I'm just saying, it's over. Move on. I mean, yeah, I get that it sucked for you, but instead of being some drugged up, impotent zombie, you're healthy and have the entire future ahead of you. Why waste a minute of it being pissed off at people who didn't really care about you to begin with?" Ace asked belligerently.

"You know, if I couldn't feel how passionately you meant what you just said, I might want to fight with you about it. But, I can see your point. I guess it's just hard for me to deal with stuff like this. I feel like my emotions have been on hold since they started me on the drugs. Now, it's something like five years later, and I don't know how to deal with anything."

"I think you're doing okay. I'll let you in on a little secret. No one else knows much more about how to deal with their emotions than you do. All of us are kind of making it up as we go along." Ace said with a conspiratorial grin.

Geoff was surprised by the statement, but felt strangely reassured.

"Hey guys." Vincent said as he walked into the dining room.

"Vincent! How are you doing?" Ace asked anxiously.

"I'll be okay." Vincent said quietly as he took a seat at the table.

"What happened?" Geoff asked as he watched Vincent's expression carefully.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it." Vincent said as he fought to keep a neutral expression.

"Vincent, you're about two seconds away from breaking into tears. Whatever it is, you don't have to face it alone. We'll help you." Geoff said sympathetically.

"It doesn't matter, okay? What's been done is done. Now we just have to deal with it." Vincent said firmly.

"What's been done? What do we have to deal with?" Ace asked cautiously.

Vincent looked from Ace to Geoff and seemed to come to a decision.

"I don't know how much you guys know about what happened on Saturday, but I just asked Manu to tell me everything. It was a lot to take in and I'm still trying to make sense of it. There was so much pain and death for no good reason." Vincent said darkly.

Geoff felt a stab of emotional pain emanate from Vincent and worked to construct a barrier to protect himself.

"I don't know much about what happened. I've been on the road, trying to make my way to Florida for most of the past month." Ace said frankly.

Vincent nodded, then looked at Ace and quietly said, "I never imagined anything like this could happen..."

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"Come on in." Vincent said quickly, then turned to his companions and asked, "Have you both met Treep?"

"Maybe, I don't know. I can't remember." Geoff said to Vincent, then turned to Treep and quickly explained, "Everything's been moving so fast and I've been meeting so many new people all at once..."

"I understand. And, to my knowledge, we have not been introduced before." Treep chirped and his pendant translated in a surprisingly sympathetic voice. As he was talking, he was also filling a plate.

"Treep's the first officer on the ship." Vincent said seriously.

"I don't know how it is on one of your ships, but where I'm from, that's a really big job. There are lots of people who work their whole careers trying to get a job like yours." Ace said in an impressed voice.

Treep smiled at the words, then gently clucked, "There isn't nearly so much competition for positions on Soleen-Avalla ships, but personnel are still held to the highest standards. When I was younger, it was determined that my interests and talents suited me to be in a position such as this. So all my subsequent training was tailored toward that specific goal."

"Does that mean that you're going to be a ship's captain, someday?" Geoff asked with interest.

"Yes. My current position is to allow me to observe a seasoned captain at work and learn from him. When my training is complete and a position comes available to captain a starship, then I will be put forward for consideration." Treep said contemplatively.

"You look so young." Geoff said cautiously.

Treep smiled affectionately at him, then said, "In relation to other starship captains and first officers, I am. I have been promoted by virtue of my knowledge and skills, rather than by seniority."

Geoff watched Treep eating for a moment, then quietly said, "I always thought that being on a starship, going from place to place, would be so wonderful. I'd feel so free. But I don't have any talents or interests that I could use on a starship."

"Perhaps you have talents that you have not yet recognized." Treep said frankly.

Geoff gave a defeated shrug as he turned his attention back to his plate.

"You two should take some time to really talk about it. I bet that if you really tried, Treep could figure out something that you'd be good at doing on a starship, so you'd have a reason to be there." Vincent said honestly.

Ace looked at Vincent with surprise, then quickly added, "Actually, if you think about it, that would solve a whole lot of problems, all at once."

Geoff looked at Ace curiously at the unusual statement.

Ace looked Geoff in the eyes and said, "The Soleen-Avalla aren't telepathic."

It took a moment, but Geoff suddenly realized what Ace was suggesting.

"Huh?" Vincent asked in confusion.

Geoff smiled at Vincent's befuddled look and said, "Since I've been on the ship, we've figured out that I'm an empath. That's been the cause of most of my problems. The Soleen-Avalla aren't telepathic and I can't read their emotions, so being around them is really relaxing for me. I think Ace was saying that I should try to get a job on a Soleen-Avalla ship, so that I could be away from the constant barrage of emotions that's always hammering away at me."

Vincent stared at Geoff with surprise for a moment, then quietly said, "If you had told me, I would've shielded my emotions from you. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

Geoff smiled at the sincere words and said, "Like I said, we've only just figured it out. I know that you weren't trying to hurt me. And, if I'm going to be around people, I need to learn how to identify and process other people's emotions."

"Okay. But I'll shield my emotions from you when I'm around you, from now on." Vincent said gently.

Geoff looked at Vincent curiously and was surprised to sense an impenetrable barrier shielding him.

"Wow. NO emotion could get through THAT." Geoff said in awe.

"The only shielding I know is what I learned to protect me from telepathic scans. It's kind of an all or nothing thing." Vincent said simply.

"Doesn't that take a lot of concentration?" Geoff asked cautiously.

"No. It's like an on/off switch. When it's up, I feel it. But that's about it." Vincent said casually.

"Maybe the telepaths or empaths could teach you to do something like that." Ace suggested quietly.

"This is a Vulcan technique that my wife taught me. I'm sure the Clan knows about it and could teach you if you wanted." Vincent offered helpfully.

"Would you really like to be a member of our crew?" Treep asked thoughtfully, not aware that he was interrupting the prevailing conversation.

"Yeah. I've always loved space and starships. The part about being away from people's screaming minds would just be a bonus." Geoff said honestly.

"Treep, there is a matter that I would like to discuss with you privately, when you have the time." Manu said quietly into the room.

"I am free to speak now." Treep said simply.

Ace smiled, knowing what Manu wanted to discuss as he watched Treep leave the table.

Geoff looked from Ace to Vincent, then quietly said, "It's weird. You two are both shielding without even trying. It takes everything I've got to shield for even a few seconds."

"I learned my shielding from my wife, through our telepathic bond. So I didn't ever really have to practice with it or anything. It's always just been there, waiting for me to switch it on or off when I need to." Vincent said frankly.

"Where I grew up, most of the people I knew were telepaths or empaths. Before I even started kindergarten, my parents were teaching me about basic shielding. That was just something you did to prepare your kids for school." Ace said somewhat distantly.

"That sounds amazing. Where did you grow up?" Geoff asked curiously.

Ace blinked with surprise at the question and only just realized what he had let slip out.

"Ace is from a place that he can't talk about." Vincent hurried to explain.

"Why not?" Geoff asked as he looked from Vincent to Ace curiously.

Ace let his eyes drop to the table, but didn't answer.

"I'm sorry." Geoff whispered, then quietly added, "I guess I'm used to knowing what people are feeling and when to shut up. With you being shielded, I didn't get that I was hurting you by asking sensitive questions."

"It's okay, Geoff. This is my home now. I have to accept that things have changed and that no matter how much I don't like it, that's the way things are." Ace said as he worked to suppress his emotions.

Geoff stared at Ace for a long, silent moment, then quietly said, "I guess I should do that, too."

"No." Vincent said firmly, drawing both boys' attention.

At their combined, curious stares, Vincent explained, "Ace's stuff happened, and there's nothing he can do about it. It sucks, but he's right. He has to accept it. Geoff's situation is nothing like that. He doesn't have to accept anything. He can choose what he wants, and we can help him to get it."

"Vincent's right. The only thing you're really committed to doing right now is finishing your treatment so you'll be healthy and drug-free. After that, anything that happens is up to you." Ace said confidently.

"It's not as easy as that..." Geoff began to say, but Vincent interrupted.

"No one said anything about it being easy. We're saying it's 'possible'. No matter what you choose, you're going to have to want it and work for it. Life doesn't hand you very many opportunities. The ones it does, you gotta grab onto and hold on for dear life. For everything else, it's up to YOU to make it happen." Vincent said firmly.

"Last night, at the meeting, they talked about how you were out there doing the stuff that the rest of us are dreaming about... that's why, isn't it?" Geoff asked cautiously.

"Mostly, yeah. I mean, life handed me an opportunity. That was when I was given the chance to enter the Starfleet mentoring program. I didn't earn that or try for it or anything. It just happened. But what I did is took hold of that opportunity and since then I've done everything I can to make the most of it. I work hard and don't give up, even when things look impossible at first. You've just gotta keep at it until you find a way to make it happen." Vincent said with conviction.

"But what if life never hands me an opportunity like that?" Geoff asked cautiously.

The door opened to admit Treep, who had a gloriously happy expression.

"Geoff, I just talked to the council of elders and they approved my request to offer you a job." Treep chirped excitedly.

Vincent moved close to Geoff's ear and whispered, "Grab it."

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Geoff stared in astonishment for a moment, then tentatively asked, "What kind of job?"

"Most of the time, you'd be a member of the crew, doing whatever needs to be done. But whenever we're dealing with mammal species, you'd be asked

to attend meetings and let us know if we're being deceived or manipulated." Treep clucked cheerfully.

"But I don't know how to use my abilities." Geoff said anxiously.

"The elders understand that. You can take all the time you need to learn. We don't have contact with other species very often, so there's no need to rush your training." Treep said reasonably.

Geoff looked to Vincent and Ace to see their reactions.

"Unfortunately, there is a restriction that the elders have imposed." Treep said regretfully.

"What do I have to do?" Geoff asked anxiously.

"As a member of the crew, you would be allowed to visit Soleena when the ship returns to port. But since you are Human, they will not allow you to make a home there." Treep clucked quietly.

"Then where would I live?" Geoff asked in a small voice.

"You could consider your cabin on the ship your home." Treep said unenthusiastically.

"Or you could get a home at the New Hope colony." Vincent interjected cheerfully.

"But then I wouldn't be any better off than if I stayed here." Geoff muttered thoughtfully.

"Before you leave earth, we can be sure that your shields are strong enough so that you can be around people without it hurting you. So it won't be the same." Vincent said seriously.

"And you can expect to be spending the majority of your time on the ship. We make frequent trips to our outposts and colonies, so you won't be spending much time at New Hope." Treep said encouragingly.

"I live on a ship most of the time. It's not bad. But I think it'll be nice if you have a place, on a planet, that you can think of as 'yours'." Vincent said honestly.

"I don't know... I mean, it sounds kinda nice." Geoff said in a conflicted tone.

"If you accept the job, then change your mind, you'll be under no obligation to remain with us. We can take you to the New Hope colony and you can

return to earth from there, if that's what you want to do." Treep informed him.

"So you've got nothing to lose and everything to gain." Ace said cheerfully.

"It's just hitting me. You're saying that I could live in space. I've always wanted to do that." Geoff said absently as he considered.

"Look at it this way, if you don't go for this, what else are you going to do?" Vincent asked reasonably.

"Live at the camp and dream about... doing exactly what you're offering me." Geoff said in realization.

"Right." Ace said with a smile.

"You're going to do it, aren't you?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I am." Geoff said in resignation.

"Good. Then we need to get with Challen to find out when you have time to go to earth." Vincent said seriously.

"What for?" Geoff asked in surprise.

"So we can get you some intensive empath training. We don't have a lot of time and you've got a lot to learn." Vincent said frankly.

"Yeah. I guess I'd better get started." Geoff said with a smile.

Ace looked from Geoff to Vincent and said, "Let's do it!"

* * * * *

After checking in with Challen to be sure that Geoff could leave the ship for a while and when he needed to be back, the three transported down to the planet.

"It sounds like everyone's back. Remember that they just went to a funeral." Vincent said seriously.

"A funeral? For who?" Geoff asked cautiously.

"You don't need that on your mind right now. Ask me later and I'll tell you what I know." Vincent said seriously as they walked into the family room.

"Hey guys. How are you doing today?" Aaron asked in a subdued tone.

"Hanging in there." Vincent said automatically.

"Hey! Aren't you Aaron Carter?" Geoff asked suddenly.

Aaron gave a weary smile and quietly said, "Yeah."

"I'm sorry. I just didn't expect to be seeing someone famous here!" Geoff rushed to explain.

"That's fine." Aaron said gently, then walked to Vincent and put an arm around him and pulled him into a quick hug.

Geoff was surprised by the action, but could feel the soothing comfort that emanated from their embrace.

"I'm glad you're here, Vincent. David and I worry about you." Aaron said gently.

"I know. And I can't even tell you how good it is to know that. For a long time I thought that no one cared about me at all." Vincent said as he returned the hug.

"Who are your friends? Would you like to introduce me?" Aaron asked quietly.

Vincent pulled out of the hug, then said, "Aaron, I'd like for you to meet Ace and Geoff."

"It's nice to meet you. I know that it can be intimidating being around all these people, but if you start feeling overwhelmed, come and find me." Aaron said, mostly to Geoff, since he wore such an anxious expression.

"We're just here to find someone to help Geoff with his empathic gift. Once we've got him all set up, we'll be leaving." Vincent said casually.

"We're having a clan meeting and a sleepover tonight. Aren't you guys hanging around for that?" Aaron asked cautiously.

"I can, but I don't know about the guys." Vincent said honestly, then looked at Geoff and Ace with question.

"Challen said that he doesn't need me back until tomorrow morning." Geoff said uncertainly.

"I should stay at Billy's. I'm supposed to keep a low profile." Ace said regretfully.

"I can talk to Cory and Sean and let them know not to draw attention to you or ask you a lot of stuff. They probably won't even ask why." Vincent said frankly.

"They already know, at least, some of it. They were there, this morning, when I talked to Terry about getting adopted." Ace said quietly.

"Then there's no problem if you stay. Just hang back and enjoy the party." Vincent said happily.

"And I can get Eli to help Geoff with his empathy thing right now, if you want." Aaron interjected cheerfully.

"Why Eli?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Because he looks bored." Aaron said frankly as he looked across the room.

Everyone followed his gaze to find Eli sitting alone on a couch with a distinctly bored expression on his face.

Eli turned his head and looked back at them, then smiled and nodded.

Geoff stared in confusion as he watched the boy, who had only one leg, somehow approaching unassisted.

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"Who is Geoff?" Eli asked casually.

"I am." Geoff said timidly.

"You're straining your shields. Relax, I'm not going to scan you." Eli said gently.

"I just... Vincent and Ace thought it would be good if I got some training... but I don't know what to do." Geoff said nervously.

"Relax. Let's go into another room where it's more quiet and I'll help you get that shield of yours more stable and help you master some of the basics. Then, as soon as he's free, Tyler is going to join us. He's the head empath and he's the best one to give you the more intensive training that you'll need." Eli said with a smile.

Geoff nodded, then followed Eli across the room, occasionally glancing at him, trying to determine how he was able to 'walk' with only one leg.

"Well! Come on!" Eli called back toward the couch impatiently.

A prosthetic leg hopped up from beside the couch, seemingly of it's own accord, and bobbed it's way toward Vincent, Ace and Aaron.

"Don't worry, Leg. He's right over there." Ace said with a smile as he pointed toward the side door.

Leg immediately turned itself and started hopping toward Eli and Geoff, who were waiting in the doorway.

Vincent and Aaron looked at Ace with surprise, not even knowing what question they would ask if they hadn't been stunned into speechlessness. Both knew that Ace hadn't visited before and didn't understand his casual reaction to Eli and Leg.

Before they could recover, Ace quietly said, "I need to call Billy and let him know that I'll be staying here. I wouldn't want him to worry."

"Come on. I'll show you where you can make a call." Aaron said pleasantly.

Vincent smiled as he watched them go.

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"How's Billy?" Vincent asked as Ace returned.

"Fine. I got the impression that him and Allen are going to have a 'date night'." Ace said with a smile.

"Good for them. Did you lose Aaron?" Vincent asked curiously.

"David needed him for something. He said he'd talk to me later." Ace said casually.

Vincent nodded, then smiled as he looked past Ace at someone approaching.

"Did you get all your stuff done?" Lehman asked as he walked up, with Jordy at his side.

"Yeah. Lehman, this is Ace. He just arrived here last night." Vincent said pleasantly.

"Wow. I didn't know that you had a twin." Ace said in surprise.

"A triplet, actually. You'll probably be meeting Thomas at some point today." Vincent said with a grin.

"Dylan and Thomas said that they have some stuff to do, but they'll be back." Jordy said casually.

"Good. I want for Ace to meet everyone while we've got the chance." Vincent said happily.

"Vincent and Lehman, would you mind if we copied your language skills into a telepathic language dump? We won't be scanning your thoughts at all, just language skills.." A voice called into their minds.

Vincent looked around and finally spotted Jacob looking back at him with question.

"As long as you give Geoff a copy. He's with Eli right now." Vincent said in Jacob's direction.

Jacob nodded and smiled that he had received the message.

"What are you talking about?" Ace asked in confusion.

"Sorry, Ace. Jacob just asked me something telepathically and I answered him aloud. I feel like it's rude to talk telepathically when I'm around other people, unless it's something really important." Vincent said quietly.

"And Jacob just asked if we'd share our language skills, so the whole Clan can use all the languages we've learned." Lehman added helpfully.

"Yeah. I want to make sure that Geoff get's Gorn and Eagle so he can talk with everyone on the ship without needing translation crystals." Vincent said happily.

"You can really do that?" Ace asked in wonder.

"Yeah. The Clan gave me a language dump before I left on the Yorktown. It really helped a lot." Vincent said seriously.

"I've always wanted to learn other languages, but when I tried, I didn't have much luck with it." Ace admitted weakly.

"Well, by the end of the night, you're going to know more languages than you'll ever need." Vincent said cheerfully.

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"Ace! I'm glad you're here!"

After a moment to look around, Ace broke into a smile at Cory and Sean approaching him.

"I remember you saying that you were wanting to keep a low profile, so I didn't know if you'd be here today." Sean said with a smile.

"Vincent kinda talked me into it." Ace shyly admitted.

"Good job, Vincent." Sean said with a smile and a wink at him.

"If you've got a few minutes, we'd like to talk with you." Cory said seriously to Ace.

"Yeah, I guess." Ace said uncertainly.

"It's nothing bad, I promise. All the legal stuff is going fine and there aren't any problems at all, we just need for you to make a few decisions so that

there won't be any surprises when you assume the official identity that we're creating for you." Cory said frankly.

"Go on. We'll be hanging around here all day. Just find me if you need me for anything." Vincent said with a grin at his new friend.

"Yeah. Okay." Ace said with a smile at Vincent, looking less nervous than a moment before.

"Jordy was just about to start introducing me around to all the people that I haven't met, yet." Lehman said cheerfully, then added, "Would you like to join us?"

"Sure." Vincent said without concern, then started walking with Jordy and Lehman toward the largest concentration of people, gathered around the video games.

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Vincent felt an internal pulling and wasn't sure what it meant. The feeling was so vague that he dismissed it at first as being his imagination.

When the pulling happened again, he couldn't ignore it and closed his eyes to focus on the sensation.

A smile crossed his face as he realized what it was.

"How are you doing, Joel?" Vincent asked as he walked up to the timid boy.

"I felt that. Thank you." Joel said shyly.

"Felt what?" Vincent asked curiously.

"When you recognized our bond, it made you happy." Joel said past barely restrained tears.

"I guess it did." Vincent smiled in return.

A cheer erupted from the video game area and both boys looked to see what was happening.

When the cheers died down, Vincent quietly asked, "Would you like to go somewhere more quiet so we can talk?"

"Yeah. I'd like that." Joel said peacefully.

"You probably know this place a lot better than I do by now. You can lead the way." Vincent said warmly.

It took a moment for Joel to decide where he wanted to go, but he finally led the way out of the room.

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It wasn't until they were inside the room that Vincent realized that it was the same room where he and Lehman had spoken to Joel before.

The same large animal was still there, apparently asleep.

Joel cuddled up to the animal and gave it a long hug, before looking back to Vincent and asking, "Is this alright?"

"It's great." Vincent assured him as he took a seat on a nearby sofa.

"I wanted to tell you again that I'm sorry about what happened with the Telan t'Kanlar. I didn't mean to do that." Joel said quietly.

"If anyone should be sorry, it's me. I reacted without thinking and I scared you. There's no excuse for that." Vincent said sincerely.

"I'm scared a lot, so don't worry about it." Joel said as he cuddled a little more into the big animal's fur.

"You know, out of all my brothers and fathers and friends, all over the universe, you're the only one I share this type of bond with. I think that if we'd chosen to bond, it would still be special, but since it happened by accident, like it did, that makes it even more." Vincent said with a smile.

"I think so, too." Joel smiled.

"Are you happy here?" Vincent asked curiously.

Joel blinked at the sudden change in subject and had to think for a moment to formulate an answer.

"Yes. I'm happy. But it's a lot more than that. I'm starting to feel 'safe', I think. My old life feels like a horrible nightmare that's slipping away in the light of day." Joel said distantly.

"Mine wasn't as horrible as yours, but it's fading, too. I'm glad that we were both able to get second chances." Vincent said honestly.

"I'm still scared, sometimes. I'm scared that I'll wake up and find that 'this' was a dream." Joel said quietly.

"I know that feeling." Vincent quietly admitted, then gently added, "But being around people that love you makes it easier to deal with it, when that happens."

Joel smiled and nodded his agreement.

"This is nice. I've been running around, trying to remember to do a hundred different things all day. It's nice to be able to just stop and talk and not have to worry about what else needs to be done." Vincent said frankly.

"I don't know everything that's going on, but from what I've heard, you do a lot of good. You make the universe a better place, wherever you go, just by trying to help when you can." Joel said thoughtfully.

"I bet it's no different than what you'd do if you had the chance." Vincent said warmly.

"But I don't help people. Everyone helps me." Joel said regretfully.

"Life is full of peaks and valleys. When you're on a peak, you can help others up to join you. When you're in a valley, sometimes you need someone else's help to pick you up and help you out. It's not you, it's life. The secret is to accept the help being offered, and to offer help when someone else needs it. If you'll do that, then no one stays stuck in a valley." Vincent said seriously.

Joel seemed to ponder that for a moment, then quietly repeated, "It's not me, it's life."

"Yeah. There's no reason to beat yourself up if you ended up in a crappy place for a while. Look at everyone in the Clan, all of them have been there, too. They either dug themselves out, or had someone help them out, but when it was all done, they went back to find other people who were struggling and helped them." Vincent said frankly.

"But what if I'm never strong enough or good enough to help other people?" Joel asked quietly.

"You don't get it. You don't have to be anything but yourself. You don't need to be stronger or better. But sooner or later you're going to see someone who needs help. When that happens, you'll either decide to try and help them or you'll move on, trusting that someone 'stronger' or 'better' will take care of it." Vincent said seriously.

"I wouldn't ever do that." Joel said in a trembling voice.

"Maybe not. But if you tell yourself that you're not good enough, you're not strong enough, you're not old enough... whatever... you can justify just about anything." Vincent said as he looked Joel in the eyes.

Joel thought for a moment, then quietly asked, "Do you think that I do that?"

"No. I'm just saying that that's what some people do. They don't even realize it when they're doing it, but they end up defeating themselves. And the funny thing is that when it comes to helping, all you have to do is just do your best. Even if it isn't enough, other people see what you're doing and join in, and before you know it, the problem that seemed too big to handle, is completely handled. So all that stuff about being 'strong enough' and 'good enough' doesn't matter. The only way you can fail is to choose not to try." Vincent said honestly.

Joel thought about the words, then slowly said, "I'll remember."

Vincent smiled, then quietly said, "I just wanted to share with you the stuff that I wish someone had shared with me. I had to learn a lot of this stuff the hard way."

"Thank you." Joel said with a warm smile.

Vincent smiled in return, then quietly asked, "So, now that you've had a little time to settle in and get used to things, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing very well. But so many things have happened, I've been a bit overwhelmed by it all." Joel said honestly.

"If you want, you could tell me about it. If there's something you don't understand, I might know what to do or who to ask or something to help you make sense of it." Vincent said honestly.

"That'd be great, but shouldn't you be spending time with the Clan? I mean, from what I heard, you don't get to visit earth that often." Joel said hesitantly.

"Don't worry about that. For you, I've got all the time in the universe."

* * * * *

Vincent and Joel had a nice long chat before Kevin arrived and joyfully whisked Joel away. Finding himself alone, Vincent took the opportunity to explore the short compound and spend a little quiet time, thinking things through.

Even through dinner, amongst all the members of the Clan, Vincent kept mostly to himself as he tried to make sense of the horror and tragedy of the past weekend.

It wasn't until later, when the Clan meeting was about to get underway, that Vincent felt a flutter of nervousness begin when he realized that in all likelihood, the whole group of them would be sleeping in the same room... together... naked.

When Cory started talking, all thoughts of nudity, and being exposed, drifted to the background as Vincent focused on what Cory had to say.

Most of the meeting was what he had expected. He was a little surprised, and happy, when Sean announced that Ace and Geoff were officially being inducted as members of the Clan.

Everyone listened intently as Geoff stood, with Ace at his side, and told his story.

When he was done, both Ace and Geoff sat down. A few curious looks passed around the room, but nothing was said about the fact that Ace didn't reveal his history.

When the meeting was nearly over, Jacob made an announcement about the updated language dump being ready.

Vincent's attention was drawn by two eagles who were squawking about wanting to go outside before the language dump was delivered.

Once the eagles were gone, Vincent felt the presence of a mass mind, a collaboration of telepaths, entering his mind. It was only a gentle touch and he was barely aware of it.

When it was done, Vincent couldn't really tell any difference. He supposed that he had the new language skills, just waiting, ready to be used. But he didn't have any conscious awareness of what languages they were.

As he was pondering about the language dump, a flurry of activity at one side of the room drew his attention.

A stack of pillows and blankets were being handed from person to person in sort of a bucket brigade. It seemed that most of the younger kids were anxious to get their nest set up.

"Is something wrong? You look worried." Joel said honestly, causing Vincent to jump with surprise.

"I um, yeah. I guess I knew that we'd be getting naked, but it wasn't real to me until just now. I don't know if I can do it in front of so many people." Vincent quietly confided.

Joel cautiously hugged Vincent and quietly said, "All that stuff you told me about only failing when you stop trying, did you believe it?"

Vincent took in a long inhale, then let it out slowly before saying, "Yeah."

Joel held Vincent's gaze and waited.

"I'll do it." Vincent said reluctantly.

"You don't have to do it for me." Joel rushed to explain.

"No. I have to do it for me. Thanks for reminding me, Joel." Vincent smiled and gave Joel one more quick hug before walking to join Thomas and Lehman as they were beginning to undress.

* * * * *

When Vincent got to his underwear, he suddenly stopped. Although he was determined to undress completely, for some reason, his nervousness was making him hesitate.

"Aren't you going to get naked?" A young boy asked Vincent curiously as he approached.

"I don't know, yet. Why?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Cause I wanna see your junk!" The boy said simply as he held Vincent's gaze.

Vincent was surprised by the frank statement, but also thought it was just how it should be. The boy was willing to express his honest curiosity without shame, or fear of reprisal.

"Sure." Vincent said, then slipped off his underwear.

The boy looked at Vincent's crotch for a moment, then said, "I bet that's gonna be a monster."

Vincent followed the boy's gaze and realized that while he had been focused on other things in his life, things down below had continued to develop.

He wasn't anywhere near Lehman's 'adult' proportions, yet. But he felt that, even among the older boys, he had nothing to be ashamed of.

* * * * *

"Glad to see you getting into the spirit of things." A familiar voice said from behind him.

Vincent turned to see not only Rory, but also Kennon, in matching electric wheelchairs.

"Hey guys! How is everything?" Vincent asked happily.

"Better and better." Rory said with a smile at Kennon, then glanced at Vincent's crotch before saying, "Vincent, right?"

"Great! So that's how you're going to tell us apart." Vincent chuckled.

Rory smiled and said, "You go with what works."

Vincent shrugged, then asked, "What's going on with you guys?"

"After my interview was broadcast on the early news, I was contacted by the police. All the kidnapping charges and stuff my family started were all dropped. The police asked me if I wanted to press charges against them for false imprisonment or anything like that. I told them 'no', but that I'd like to get a restraining order against them. I don't want to get revenge, but I don't want them thinking that, after what they did, that they'd be welcomed in my life." Kennon said frankly.

"That's good to hear. You look like you're doing a lot better." Vincent said happily.

"Solak was able to do another neural alignment, so I can use my hands. Of course, my arms are as weak as a newborn baby's so it'll be a while before I'm able to move a regular wheelchair like Rory does, but I'll get there." Kennon said confidently.

"Vincent, because of everything else going on, we weren't able to get here until just now. And Kenny is busy with Kevin, at the moment. We seem to be a little overdressed for the occasion. Would you mind helping Kennon get undressed?" Rory asked hopefully.

"Sure, but I don't know anything about... what do I do?" Vincent stammered.

"Kennon will tell you when he needs you to do something. I can help him with most things, but someone else has to help him with dressing and undressing." Rory said honestly.

"Once I get stronger, I'll be able to do it myself, I just need a little help right now." Kennon said timidly.

"Do you want for us to go to a bedroom or the bathroom to do this?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"We might as well do it here. We're gonna be sleeping naked with all these guys, anyway." Rory said frankly.

"Not just guys." Vincent said as he pointed to a small collection of giggling girls across the room.

"That's new!" Rory said with surprise.

"Do you still want to do it?" Vincent asked Kennon curiously.

"Sure. Rory's been telling me about the 'puppy pile' since I first arrived on Vulcan. Even if I only ever get to do it once, I'd really like to experience it for myself." Kennon said frankly.

"Why would you only get to do it once?" Vincent asked curiously, then noticed that Rory was leaning forward and taking off his shoe.

Vincent knelt down and started taking off Kennon's shoe as he waited for an answer.

"The Clan is for kids. I'm not really that much older than you guys, but legally, I'm an adult. I wouldn't even do it now, but I've missed out on so much in my life..."

"It's okay. I already cleared it with Sean and Cory. Tonight, you're just one of the guys." Rory assured him.

* * * * *

Although Vincent thought that he would be self conscious being naked around so many people, it ended up not being a worry.

When everyone started to settle in to sleep, people seemed to automatically team up, or pair off. There was the occasional trio and a few massive jumbles containing untold numbers of kids, but the important thing was that everyone had someone to hold them.

Almost everyone.

When Vincent noticed that Kennon was beside Rory and Ken, he didn't even think before asking, "Do you mind if I sleep here?"

Kennon turned with surprise.

"If you want to be alone, that's okay. I just thought I'd ask." Vincent said seriously.

"I've been alone enough, trust me on that." Kennon said frankly.

Vincent took that as an invitation and took a step forward before asking, "Do you want me in front of you or behind you?"

"In front." Kennon said quietly.

Vincent got down on the cushioned floor and was pulled into a gentle cuddle from behind.

"Do you mind if I hold you like this?" Kennon asked gently.

"No, that's fine." Vincent said as he started to relax, enjoying the feeling of being held, skin-to-skin.

"Thank you." Kennon whispered as he drifted into sleep.

Chapter 59

"All hail, the Queen of the Realms, the Great Mother of us all, Queen Brakkii."

"Can you stop calling me that? I'm no one's mother." Brakkii muttered as he walked past the crier of the court.

Vincent looked around curiously. Although he knew that he was in the dream realm, he hadn't been in this large, open courtyard before.

As big as the place was, it was nearly packed to capacity.

Vincent could see several different races and species native to the realm, but also a surprising variety of people that he was sure were 'travelers' like him.

A low growl sounded that he could feel resonating in his bones.

He looked up to see three enormous dragons perched outside the walls of the courtyard and absently wondered, given their enormity, if the court yard might look like a food dish to them.

"I'm getting there! Be patient!" Brakkii called toward the golden dragon as he walked quickly up the aisle.

"Thank you, everyone in attendance for being here on this monumental occasion." Brakkii called out.

With as large as the courtyard was and the number of people in attendance, Vincent knew that it was absolutely impossible for a voice to carry to everyone, the way Brakkii's seemed to be doing.

"Vincent?" A timid voice asked.

He turned and smiled as he recognized who he was seeing.

"Vince, I'm glad you could make it." Vincent said warmly as he gave his timid, alternate self, a hug.

"What's going on?" Vince asked cautiously as he looked around.

"I'm not sure yet. But it looks like just about everyone is here." Vincent said casually.

"Are Lehman and Thomas here?" Vince asked as he tried to spot them.

"I see Lehman and Jordy over there with a bunch of the other Clan guys, but I haven't seen Thomas yet." Vincent said as he also scanned the crowd.

Another growl drew their attention upward.

"Did you have somewhere more important that you needed to be?" Brakkii asked as he looked at the golden dragon impatiently.

After a moment, he continued, "I didn't think so. Now, if I may?"

"Where am I?" A voice asked from Vincent's other side.

"Vinny? What are you doing here?" Vincent asked delightedly.

"I don't know where here is. What's going on?" Vinny asked shakily.

"It's me, Vincent... you know, Crewman Winters. How are you doing?" Vincent asked happily.

"Okay, I guess. What's going on here?" Vinny asked cautiously.

"Brakkii said there was going to be a big party, but that's about all I know about it." Vincent said seriously.

"Who's Brakkii?" Vinny asked as he noticed the dragons towering above them and scooted closer to Vincent's side.

"That's him, standing up front. He's the queen of this dream realm." Vincent said simply, then thought to mention, "Vinny, I'd like for you to meet one of our other selves, his name is Vince."

Vinny looked past Vincent and stared in wonder at another version of himself.

"Is he like you? I mean, a crewman?" Vinny asked timidly.

"No. He lives on earth, like you do." Vincent said gently, then pointed as he said, "Over there is another one of us, his name is Lehman."

Vinny followed his pointing finger and easily spotted yet another person who was a mirror image of him.

"How many of us are there?" Vinny asked cautiously.

"Let's see, there's you, me, Vince, Thomas, Lehman and the Vindicator. That makes six, that I know of." Vincent said honestly.

"The Vindicator?" Vince asked cautiously.

"Yeah. He's kinda the evil me from a negative dimension." Vincent said hesitantly.

"You lead a really interesting life, don't you?" Vince asked with a barely restrained grin.

"More than you know." Vincent chuckled, then turned to Vinny and quietly said, "This is all a dream. Just relax and enjoy it."

"One and all, our Great Mother, the Queen of the Realm, stands before you now to make an official announcement!" The crier called out to gain everyone's attention.

"I'll show you a mother, you little..." Brakkii muttered, then calmed himself before saying, "Friends and loved ones, residents and visitors, I welcome all of you to this joyous occasion. Never before has the realm seen a day such as this."

Silence fell over the crowd at the serious words.

Even the dragons were silent, paying their full attention.

"Before you all, this day, I declare that the child known as Thomas Winters, will henceforth officially be known as Prince Thomas of the Realm of Dreams and heir apparent to the throne. As you have honored me, I ask that you also honor this, my chosen child."

As everyone watched, Thomas walked down the aisle, then went down on one knee before Brakkii.

An attendant stepped forward, with a small golden crown on a cushion.

Brakkii took the crown and gently placed it on Thomas' head.

"All hail, our new prince, Prince Thomas!" the crier called out joyfully.

A cheer rose up from the crowd that was absolutely deafening, although the dragons had quite a bit to do with that.

"In keeping with the traditions native to Thomas and his people, we are going to celebrate by having the biggest and best party that anyone has ever imagined! So be it!" Brakkii exclaimed, then clapped his hands.

The sound when Brakkii clapped his hands was deafening, and like a soap bubble bursting, suddenly their surroundings had completely changed.

Instead of being in a courtyard, they were in a huge grassy meadow. Bonfires were lit and countless tables of food were filled to overflowing with food beyond imagining.

Vincent looked around to get his bearings and smiled when he saw that the golden dragon had nearly a dozen young kids climbing on her.

"What are we supposed to do?" Vinny asked cautiously.

"Eat, drink, dance, and have fun!" Vincent said happily.

"But I don't know anyone." Vinny said quietly.

"Only one way to fix that! Come on!" Vincent said as he started walking.

Vince and Vinny exchanged an uncertain look before following.

"Hey! Pipi! Hold on! I've got someone for you to meet!"

* * * * *

When Vincent woke, it took a few minutes for him to remember where he was. His mind was still filled with vivid imagery of the coronation and the party that followed.

As he came more awake, he suddenly became aware of something hard and smooth nestled between his butt cheeks. Panic sprang up as he realized what it was, but just as suddenly, he remembered who it was that was snuggled up behind him.

The room was quiet and no light was showing in through the windows. From the way he felt, Vincent was reasonably sure that it was somewhere around four or five in the morning.

He carefully extricated himself from Kennon's embrace and made sure that he was resting in a comfortable position before quietly working to find his clothes in the dim lighting.

As soon as he was dressed, he made his way out and away from the living room so that he could make his call without disturbing anyone.

"Manu, I'm ready to transport up." Vincent said in nearly a whisper.

"On your command." Manu responded, equally quietly.

"Transport." Vincent said, then felt the rush of sparkles consume him.

* * * * *

After a stop by his room to change into some soft linen pants, Vincent went to the lounging hall to do his morning workout routine.

He was surprised to find more crewmembers than usual in attendance, but everyone seemed to be perfectly happy sunning themselves on the upper platforms or sitting and talking quietly on the lower ones.

Vincent moved into his first pose and held it for an extra moment before starting his routine.

As he went through his poses, he noticed that a few of the crewmembers were watching him, not as though they were studying him, but more like

they were observing a theatrical production or a dance recital. Then again, their eyes might just have been drawn to the movement.

Time slipped away as he got lost in the routine. He hadn't realized that he had become so disquieted by learning of what had happened to his clan. Only now, when he was lost in his workout, could he see just how uneasy and pained he was feeling, even when he wasn't consciously aware of it.

He had temporarily lost himself in other tasks, but that had only soothed him on the surface. The turmoil was eating away at him inside, and he wouldn't be able to move past it until he found a way to make peace within himself.

Suddenly, he realized that if he had gone to the funeral the previous day, it might well have been able to give him some solace. However, since he had chosen not to go, he had missed that opportunity and would have to find some other way.

Something seemed to be teasing at the edge of his mind, like the beginning of an idea that didn't want to be explored.

Vincent focused more of his attention on his workout, knowing that if he didn't pay it attention and try to seek it out, then it would probably come forward on it's own.

Finally, a possible solution to his problem popped into his mind, and he very nearly regretted it.

It definitely fell into the category of something that he didn't really want to do, but probably should.

He continued his workout, going over the pros and cons in his mind until he finally gave in and resolved himself that he was going to have to do it.

He moved into his final stance and held it, before gathering his things so he could go to the bathing pool. He had things to do and, as much as he might want to, he couldn't put them off.

* * * * *

"Good morning, Vincent." Geoff whispered as he got up from the floor.

"Good morning." Vincent responded, noticing that most of the clan members were still asleep.

"Where's the bathroom?" Geoff asked as he tried to hide his nakedness behind his hands.

"Come on, I'll show you." Vincent said as he stepped away.

* * * * *

"Why are you up so early? Are you going somewhere?" Geoff asked as he walked out of the bathroom.

"Actually, I've already gone to the ship, had a good workout, a bath, and breakfast. I'm just getting back." Vincent grinned as they walked back to the living room.

"Oh. How late is it? Do you know if I need to go back for my treatment with Challen right now?" Geoff asked quietly as he searched for, and found, his clothes.

"I didn't see Challen when I was on the ship. But I'm sure that when he needs you, he'll call us on my bracelet." Vincent said frankly.

"Right." Geoff quietly said as he dressed himself.

"Did Eli and Tyler help you with your empathy stuff?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yeah. It's going to take a little while before I'm comfortable with it, but they showed me pretty much everything I needed to know. I think all that's left to do is practice."

Vincent nodded and motioned for him to follow.

"Unless you have stuff you need to do here, I can get Manu to beam you up to the ship right now." Vincent said as they stopped in the hallway.

"Yeah. I suppose that since everyone else is still asleep, that now would be the best time." Geoff said consideringly.

Vincent nodded his agreement, then said to his bracelet, "Manu, would you transport Geoff up to the ship?"

"Yes. On your command."

"Have Manu call me if you need anything at all." Vincent said seriously.

"I will." Geoff promised.

Vincent nodded, then said into his bracelet, "Transport."

* * * * *

"Vincent?" Lawrence asked cautiously as he opened his eyes.

"Yeah. I needed to ask you something but I didn't want to wake you up." Vincent said frankly.

"So you were sitting there, watching me sleep?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

Vincent nodded with a smile.

"You're weird." Lawrence said as he forced himself to sit up.

Vincent considered for about a second, then nodded his agreement.

"What did you want to ask me about?" Lawrence asked curiously, then seemed to realize that he was naked.

Vincent fought down a smile at the sight of Lawrence trying to discretely cover himself with a corner of a nearby blanket while trying to act casual.

"This morning when I was doing my workout, I got to thinking about some stuff, and, well, I don't know if you'd want to, but I thought about us, maybe, going over and visiting mom and dad's graves." Vincent said uncomfortably.

Lawrence was obviously surprised by the suggestion.

"It's okay if you don't want to. I just thought... I don't know... I just feel like I need to, and I thought maybe you might need to, too." Vincent said awkwardly.

"Me, too." A small voice said from nearby.

Vincent looked around and smiled when he saw Joel, awake and alert, nestled in Kevin's arms, looking back at him.

"Sure, if you want to go with us, that's fine." Vincent said with a smile, then looked at Lawrence with question.

"I haven't been there since you left Earth. I guess it's probably time." Lawrence said reluctantly.

Vincent nodded his understanding as Lawrence stood, trying to hide his nakedness, then went to find his clothes.

"This is when I get to be strong for someone else, isn't it?" Joel asked quietly.

"Yeah. And I can't think of anyone else that I'd rather have beside me, being strong for me." Vincent said warmly.

* * * * *

As they had requested, the gravestones simply had names and dates.

Although he knew that what he was feeling was completely illogical, he still felt that he was doing the right thing as he approached the graves.

"I don't know what to say." Lawrence said as tears slowly fell down his cheeks.

"This isn't about words." Vincent said as his eyes started to well up.

As Joel pulled Vincent close for a reassuring hug, the dam burst.

Vincent felt the last of his self control give way as great heaving sobs erupted from him.

Joel remained silent as he held Vincent through his pain, and, as he had said earlier, he was able to be strong so Vincent wouldn't have to be.

The most reassuring thing for Lawrence was seeing his brother finally express his grief. Lawrence had grieved his loss at their parents' funeral, but Vincent had kept everything bottled up. Now, he was finally ready to grieve, accept and deal with what had happened.

After Vincent's tears had finally subsided, the three of them stood at the graves silently for a while, not saying or doing anything.

Finally, without anything to trigger it, Vincent turned and started walking away.

Lawrence and Joel silently walked with him.

Reluctantly, Joel quietly said, "I need to get back to the Short Compound. I can feel that they're looking for me."

"Yeah. We should have told someone where we were going." Lawrence said slowly.

"They can feel that I'm okay. It's just... um, well, they're planning kind of a surprise and I don't want it to be spoiled because I'm not there." Joel timidly explained.

"A surprise?" Vincent asked as he glanced at Joel curiously.

"Yeah. For my birthday... mine and Jude's." Joel said reluctantly.

"It's your birthday? Happy Birthday, Joel! I didn't know, I would have got you something." Lawrence said with a smile.

Joel looked at Vincent and quietly said, "You already gave me something really important just by letting me be here with you for this. Thank you."

"Thank you, too, Joel. I don't know if I would've been strong enough to do this by myself. Having you here made all the difference." Vincent said sincerely.

Joel smiled as he felt the depth of emotion through his bond with Vincent.

"Well, if we're all done here, we'd better get to it." Lawrence said, breaking the quiet, introspective mood.

"Yeah." Vincent agreed, then lifted his wrist as he said, "Manu, would you transport us back to the Short Compound?"

"On your command."

* * * * *

The combined birthday celebration started at breakfast and continued on into the morning, with more and more people showing up to offer their congratulations and well wishes for the birthday boys.

Vincent was a little more reserved than usual, but overall was having a good time.

As he was standing back, people watching, someone suddenly caught his eye.

He did a classic double take as he looked back again to be sure that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him.

Although his logical mind told him that the person he was looking at couldn't possibly be who he was thinking it was, he couldn't resist walking up to him to be sure.

"Excuse me." Vincent said cautiously, as he approached.

The boy turned around and looked at Vincent curiously.

"I'm sorry, but for a minute I thought you were a friend of mine. You look almost exactly like him." Vincent said timidly.

"Look who's talking. I've noticed at least two other people here that look exactly like you. How many of you are there?" The boy asked curiously.

"I've lost count." Vincent said with a grin, then asked, "Do you maybe know someone named JonJon?"

"No. That name's not familiar to me." The boy said consideringly.

"It's weird. You could be brothers." Vincent chuckled.

"That's not very likely. You see, I'm an android."

"Yeah. So's JonJon." Vincent said honestly.

"Really? And you say he looks exactly like me?"

"No, not exactly. I mean, it's not like I couldn't tell you apart. But you look so close, with the same hair and eye color and stuff, that it really is like you're brothers." Vincent explained.

"Well, seeing that your friend is also an android, I suppose that it's actually possible that we were created using the same genetic biostructure. That would, in essence, make us brothers on a biological level."

"I'm Vincent, by the way. It's nice to meet you."

"My name is Marc. It's nice to meet you, too. Tell me more about your friend, JonJon. There aren't many of us running around these days and it'd be nice to hear about one of us that's doing well."

"JonJon lives at the New Hope colony. I think that if he really is your brother, that you'd be really proud of him. He's a great guy." Vincent said happily.

"Even if he isn't biologically related to me, it's still good knowing that he's enjoying a good life with good friends." Marc said warmly.

"It's more than that. Just a week or so ago, JonJon was talking to the rulers of an entire star system and telling them about how AI's and androids should be respected and should have rights in their society. So JonJon's not just out there being happy, he's working to make a place where other people like him can be happy, too." Vincent said seriously.

"He sounds really amazing, like someone that I would very much like to get to know." Marc said with a smile.

"Well, there's no problem with that. If we can find an open terminal, I can call him and introduce you." Vincent said frankly.

"I'd feel funny doing something like that." Marc said cautiously.

"Putting it off doesn't make it any easier. Besides, I know that it hurts JonJon to feel like he's all alone in the universe. I can't think of anyone better to prove to him that he isn't." Vincent said with an expectant expression.

"Okay, yes. I'll do it." Marc said decisively.

"Come on. Let's find a place where we can make a call."

* * * * *

Once basic introductions were out of the way, Vincent withdrew from the game room to leave Marc and JonJon to talk.

He had no idea what, if anything, would come from their talk, but deep inside he felt that it was the right thing for both of them.

"Trach Manja Vincent, may I speak with you for a moment?" Sounded from his bracelet.

"Treep? You're being awfully formal all of a sudden. Is something up?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I felt it was appropriate since I was conducting ship's business." Treep said more gently.

"Okay. What is it?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Our repairs are complete and our cargo holds are filled to capacity. Captain Rasch asked that I inform you that we are scheduled to depart in approximately three hours." Treep said quietly.

Vincent was surprised by the announcement, but finally said, "I knew it was coming. I guess that no matter how long we stayed, I'd never be completely ready to go. Thanks for letting me know."

"Given the relationship that Trach Manja Lehman has entered in to, I am reluctant to give him this news." Treep said hesitantly.

"Yeah. I know. Don't worry about it, Treep. I'll tell him." Vincent said decisively.

"Thank you, Vincent." Treep said sincerely.

"Sure. I'll see you in a few hours."

* * * * *

"Guys, hang on." Vincent said as he caught up to Jordy and Lehman, who were walking away from him.

"Oh, Vincent. I haven't seen much of you today. How are you doing?" Lehman asked happily.

"I've been around. Listen... um, Treep just called me and, I guess the ship's all fixed and loaded and... we're gonna be leaving in about three hours." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Oh." Lehman said as he looked down.

"I'm sorry, Lehman." Vincent said sincerely.

"I know. Me, too." Lehman responded as a tear escaped his eye.

Jordy gathered Lehman into his arms and held him firmly as Lehman began to cry in earnest.

Vincent walked away, wishing there was something he could do to allow Jordy and Lehman to have more time together.

* * * * *

"Vincent?" Aaron asked uncertainly as he approached.

"Yeah." Vincent said as he discreetly tried to dry his watery eyes.

"David wanted me to give this to you."

Vincent looked at the 8×10 picture of David, then looked at Aaron curiously.

"It's for a fan of his on your ship." Aaron explained.

Vincent turned the picture over to see a brief handwritten note from David to Treep.

"I'll be sure he gets it." Vincent assured him.

"Good. Now I have to find Jordy. He's needed in CIC." Aaron said as he looked around.

"Can you give him a few minutes? He's saying goodbye to Lehman." Vincent asked quietly.

"Crap! I was supposed to catch him before that happened. Where is he?" Aaron asked anxiously.

Vincent pointed and Aaron hurried away.

Vincent followed, wondering what was going on.

* * * * *

"Seth? Did you need me for something?" Jordy asked as he rushed into the room with Vincent, Aaron and, of course, Lehman, following him.

"Not me." Seth said frankly, then pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

"What'd you need, Cory?" Jordy asked cautiously.

"I'll get to that in a minute. First, how much do you know about the Soleen-Avalla?" Cory asked carefully.

"That they exist... that's about it." Jordy said honestly.

"I suppose that's the most important thing." Cory said consideringly, then looked Jordy in the eyes and continued, "The Soleen-Avalla are going to adopt the Safe Haven act on their world."

"That's great news!" Jordy said with a smile.

"Yes. But it also leaves us with a problem. How can the Clan be there to help them out when they're needed when we're so far away? We've all seen how time seems to slow to a crawl around us when times are difficult. How can we ask someone in trouble to wait for a week or more for help?" Cory said seriously.

Jordy nodded slowly as he thought about the problem.

"I've been in contact with the leaders at the New Hope colony on the Soleen-Avalla border. They have agreed to donate a three-block parcel of land to Clan Short, so that we can start up a Clan compound there." Cory said with the beginning of a smile.

Jordy looked at Cory with surprise as he realized what that might mean.

When Cory saw that he had figured it out, he smiled and asked, "Interested?"

"You mean, I could go there and work at the new compound?" Jordy asked hopefully.

"Not exactly. You'll be running it. You've worked long enough in CIC to know what needs to be done and how things should be organized." Cory said seriously.

"And we'll just be a subspace call away if you need any advice from us." Sean added quickly.

Cory smiled at him and nodded his agreement.

The tears, welled in Jordy's eyes, started to overflow as he turned to Lehman and said, "We can stay together."

"There's that, too." Cory said with a grin.

"So, you'll do it?" Sean asked, just to make it official.

"Yes! Of course I will!" Jordy exploded joyfully.

"Then you'd better go get your stuff packed. From what I've heard, the Soleen-Avalla ship is scheduled to depart early this evening." Cory said warmly.

"Come on, Lehman! We've got a million things to get! And we have to tell everyone!" Jordy called frantically as he ran for the door.

"Thanks, Dad." Vincent said with a contented smile at Cory.

"It was logical." Cory said impishly before coaxing Sean to walk with him out of CIC.

* * * * *

"Jordy said that you're about to leave." Thomas said as he approached with Dylan at his side.

"Yeah. The ship will be ready to break orbit soon." Vincent said regretfully at having to leave his latest new brother.

"I hate that you have to leave, but I guess we'll still be able to see each other every night." Thomas promised.

"That's right, Prince Thomas. I'll be there." Vincent said gently.

"And between Dylan and Brakkii, I'll be able to visit you on your ship whenever I want." Thomas said happily.

"Yeah. I guess you can." Vincent said with a smile.

"Thank you, Vincent. I love my new life and all of it is because of you." Thomas said sincerely.

"All I did was help you out when I could. It was you that made the choices that brought you to today." Vincent said warmly.

Thomas rushed forward and pulled Vincent into a tight hug.

Vincent returned the hug, then noticed Dylan watching them.

"Take good care of him." Vincent said quietly.

Dylan nodded his promise as a solemn vow.

"I need to find Lawrence before I have to leave." Vincent said as he pulled out of the hug.

"See ya later." Thomas said as he stepped to Dylan's side.

"How about in the Valley of Cuddles and Snuggles?" Vincent asked with a grin.

"We'll see you there."

* * * * *

As Vincent walked up to Lawrence and Deacon, he could see that they were both happy. He hated to interrupt their good time.

"My ship's going to be leaving soon." Vincent said without prelude.

"You know, if you ever change your mind about things, we'll always have a place for you." Lawrence said as he held Deacon at his side.

"I know."

"Come here and give me a hug." Lawrence said as he stepped away from Deacon.

Vincent went willingly and couldn't believe how good it felt to be held so affectionately by his brother.

"I don't know if I've said it enough, but I'm really proud of you." Lawrence whispered as he continued the hug.

"Thanks." Vincent whispered into his brother's chest.

"Don't forget that you have some things at Billy's house." Lawrence warned.

"I'll remember." Vincent promised.

Lawrence finally released Vincent from the hug and said, "I love you."

Vincent grinned up at his older brother and said, "Yeah. I still can't get over that."

Deacon broke into laughter at the statement.

"I love you, too, Lor." Vincent said quietly, then turned to Deacon and said, "And I think you're pretty okay. Take good care of him, will ya?"

"Sure. I will. Just because you said so." Deacon grinned, then was surprised when Vincent moved in to give him a quick hug as well.

"Be sure to call me if you need anything." Vincent said as he stepped away.

"We will if you will." Deacon said with a smile.

"Manu, will you transport me up?" Vincent asked into his bracelet.

"On your command."

"Transport."

* * * * *

When Vincent materialized, he looked around the bridge and saw that Lehman, Jordy and Geoff were also there, anxiously waiting for the ship to break orbit.

"Vincent, Seth at Clan Short requested that I transport some deliveries to your cabin." Manu said informatively.

"Really?" Vincent said curiously, then looked to see if Lehman had any idea what he was talking about.

At Lehman's shrug, Vincent left the bridge and went directly to his cabin.

* * * * *

When he walked into the room, there was a fairly large box on the floor and an overnight delivery envelope sitting on his desk. Carefully, he opened the envelope and to his surprise, a single photograph fell out.

Vincent chuckled as he saw the autographed picture of Big Bird, then he suddenly remembered a promise that he had made.

"Manu! Don't let them leave orbit! I need to go back to Earth for one more thing." Vincent said as he scrambled to open the box.

As he had expected, it was the stasis unit that Jimmy had ordered for him.

"We are holding orbit and awaiting further instructions." Manu said calmly.

"Okay, I guess the only thing I need right now is for you to find a McDonalds restaurant, so I can transport down and get something." Vincent said as he set the stasis unit aside.

"I am ready to transport on your command." Manu said efficiently.

Vincent stood straight and said, "Transport."

* * * * *

When the sparkles cleared, Vincent found himself on the sidewalk, just outside a McDonald's restaurant.

Quickly, he walked in and found that he was only second in line for the order window.

"Welcome to McDonald's, what can I get for you today?" The teenage clerk asked professionally from behind a cash register.

"I need a hamburger Happy Meal, no drink and with an extra toy." Vincent said seriously.

"For thirty cents more, you can get a large french fries." The clerk suggested.

"No, thank you. It's not for me. It's for a four year old." Vincent explained as he fought to keep the impatience out of his voice.

* * * * *

Once Vincent had paid his money, he waited by the pickup counter, trying not to fidget, knowing that everyone on the ship was waiting on him.

"One Happy Meal with an extra toy." Another clerk said as she stepped up to the counter and placed the Happy Meal before him.

"Thank you." Vincent said with relief, then said into his bracelet, "Okay, Manu. I'm ready to beam up."

"On your command."

"Transport."

* * * * *

The dining room was silent as everyone watched the rainbow fountain of sparkles fade to nothingness.

Finally, the clerk behind the register turned to his coworker and said, "So it's going to be one of those nights."

The girl gave a weary sigh as her reply, then picked up a damp rag and walked to the dining room to clear tables.

The Adventure Continues...