One Door Closes

CSU - I

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CHAPTER 1

"A brother?" Kevin asked in complete shock.

"Yes, according to the call I got from your dad's lawyer, we're Kenny's only living relatives."

"Mom, you said dad died when I was a baby and you never said I had a brother." Kevin said with tears forming in his eyes.

"I know Kevin, and I don't have time to tell you the whole story. Your father and I had a nasty divorce, your dad got Kenny and I got you. We were so hateful with each other that the judge decreed that we have no contact. Since each of us had one of you and we earned about the same money, there was no alimony or child support. He moved away and that's the last I heard of him until yesterday. His lawyer called and said that your dad had died and we were Kenny's only living relatives." She said without emotion.

"So when is he coming?" Kevin asked slowly, trying to take it all in.

"He'll be here in about three hours. He'll just have a suitcase. He left the rest of his things with a friend of his dad's and we'll worry about that later." She said seriously.

"Okay... where is he going to stay?" Kevin asked as he tried to gauge his mother's emotions... finding none.

"He'll have to share your room. You can get the winter blankets out and make a pallet on the floor by your bed. I'll let you two work out who sleeps there." She said, then looked at her watch.

"Listen, I've got to get ready for work so you need to get ready to go to the airport and bring him back here. His flight will arrive at three. Meet him at the baggage claim." She said and handed him money for bus fare.

"But... how will I know him? I've never seen him before." Kevin said with panic in his voice.

"He's your twin, your identical twin. That means he looks like you. God! No wonder they put you in the 'special' class." She said and hurried out of the room.

Kevin remained seated as he stared into a place only he could see.

* * * * *

Kevin watched the people claiming their luggage, trying to see a familiar face.

Three plane loads of people had come and gone since he'd been watching and his apprehension only grew.

Finally he noticed someone looking around, someone close to his age.

Kevin raced across the room and said "Kenny? Is that you?"

The boy stared at Kevin in wonder and finally said, "Yeah... I thought you were supposed to look like me."

Kevin assessed the boy in front of him. He was nearly two inches taller than he was. Kenny's dark brown hair was spiked and stood straight up unlike Kevin's straight, nearly shoulder length hair of exactly the same color. Kenny wasn't only taller, he was much heavier, not fat but sturdy... muscled. And his skin was a healthy tan.

Kenny looked at this smaller version of himself. The boy was skinny. The first thing he thought of when he saw Kevin was a scrawny weed, fighting to grow. The boy's skin was nearly white as milk and he looked like he'd shatter into pieces if you touched him too hard. His hair needed serious trimming, adding tremendously to the 'weed' effect. Although Kenny knew that Kevin was eleven... almost twelve, the boy in front of him looked to be nine years old at the most.

"We do kinda look alike in the face, but you look older than me." Kevin said as he stared into Kenny's brown eyes.

"Yeah. Maybe we're the other kind of twins, not identical." Kenny said as he picked up his suitcase.

"I guess. Come on, we've got to get to the train station to get home." Kevin said, leading the way.

"Where's mom?" Kenny asked in surprise.

"She had to work. I'm here to show you the way home. Don't worry, I know all the trains and busses in town." Kevin said with a smile and led the way.

* * * * *

"How far are we away from your house?" Kenny asked cautiously.

"I don't know in miles, but once we get off the train, we'll have to take two busses then walk a few blocks." Kevin said seriously.

"Okay, uh, why don't you tell me about you?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Nothin to tell. I'm me. That's it." Kevin said with a shrug.

"Come on, there's got to be something to tell. What do you do for fun? What games do you like to play? How's your school? Who are your friends?" Kenny prompted.

"Um, I dunno. I just mess around town for fun... I go to the park or the river. I'm not really good at games and stuff. I hate school, it's boring... and I don't have any friends." Kevin finished in almost a whisper.

"Sounds like a fun place." Kenny muttered as he noticed the town passing outside the train becoming less colorful and more depressing and concrete.

"I guess. Florida sounds nice. What's it like there?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"I had fun. We lived right on a lake and I'd go swimming all the time. I only have a couple close friends but we had a great time. I love to play basketball... even though I'm not that good at it... I'm kinda short for it." Kenny finished with a shrug.

"I've never played basketball, I wasn't allowed. I don't have to play in gym anymore. I kept falling over so the coach said I could just sit and watch." Kevin said quietly.

"Why'd you fall over?" Kenny asked curiously.

"I don't know. After I'd play for a few minutes, my knees would just go funny and then I'd be on the floor." Kevin said shyly.

"Did you go to a doctor for it?" Kenny asked with concern.

"The school wanted me to, but mom said 'if he falls down when he plays, and you don't want him to fall down, don't let him play.' and she said it real nasty and they didn't make me play in gym anymore." Kevin said quietly.

"That don't sound right, but whatever. Tell me about your classes, what subjects are you taking?" Kenny asked, trying to push away the uneasy feeling that was growing in him.

"I don't really have any classes. A couple years ago they put me in the LD class and since then all I do is sit around while the teacher talks." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"What's LD?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Learning Disabled." Kevin said quietly.

"What does that mean?" Kenny asked, he knew but was interested in what Kevin thought it meant.

"It means I'm too dumb to learn stuff like reading and math." Kevin said, sounding like he was about to cry.

"Kevin?" Kenny asked in nearly a whisper.

"Yeah?" Kevin responded, looking up with tears in his eyes.

"It doesn't matter to me if you're in the LD class, okay?" Kenny said seriously, holding Kevin's gaze.

"Really? You don't care if I'm dumb?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"No Kevin, I don't care at all. But can you do me a favor?" Kenny asked quietly.

"What?" Kevin asked with a note of fear.

"Please don't call yourself dumb. It makes me feel bad when I hear you say it." Kenny asked seriously.

"Yeah, um... okay. I can do that." Kevin said with assurance.

"Good. That's what I hoped. Now how much longer do we have to stay on this train?" Kenny asked, hoping to change the subject.

Kevin looked out the window and said, "Two more stops, then we get off and get the number eight bus."

"Okay, you're the one who knows where we're going." Kenny said, watching Kevin closely.

* * * * *

After leaving the train and getting on the bus, there was no more chance for conversation. The busses were too full for anything but trying to stay together.

Finally as they started to walk, Kenny noticed the neighborhood and asked, "Are you sure it's safe here?"

"Yeah, we're almost there. Don't worry, I've lived around here all my life." Kevin said then stopped when he saw someone approaching.

"Hey Trash, who's your friend?" The older boy asked.

"Hi Johnny, this is my brother Kenny." Kevin said timidly.

"You a retard like Trash?" Johnny asked with a sneer.

"We gotta go Johnny. Jake's waiting on us and we can't be late." Kevin said and grabbed Kenny's arm to pull him.

"Go on. I'll catch you later." Johnny said and started walking again.

"Come on Ken, we'd better hurry." Kevin said and continued to pull him toward the doorway of the next building.

"What was that all about?" Kenny asked as he tried to get his suitcase to cooperate.

"I'll tell you when we get upstairs." Kevin said and opened the door.

"You live here?" Kenny asked in horror as the stench of stale urine flooded out the door.

"Yeah. Come on. I wanna try and catch Jake before he leaves." Kevin said and started up the stairs.

"Right behind ya." Kenny said with worry as he tried to breathe only through his mouth.

Up and up they went, each new level of the slum being worse than the one before.

When they reached the third floor, Kevin looked down the hall and called out, "Jake, you got a minute?"

"Yeah buddy, what'cha got for me?" A boy, maybe sixteen years old asked as he remained seated in the hallway.

"Johnny caught me outside and tried to start his shit with me. I told him you were waiting on me." Kevin said as he walked to stand beside Jake.

"He knows he ain't supposed to be around here. If I see him, I'll remind him that he ain't welcomed on our block. If Daddy K sees him first, he ain't gonna bother no one no more." Jake said and started to push a needle into a well used vein.

"I ain't gonna be able to do nothin for a few days, my brother's here and I want to hang with him." Kevin said seriously.

"Yeah, there's plenty of guys around to mule for Daddy K, you two have a good time. Does your bro need anything?" Jake asked hopefully as he withdrew the needle.

"If he does, I'll wait till you get back. I wouldn't let him buy from anyone else." Kevin said with a smile.

"Is he old enough to want... you know?" Jake asked, looking at Kenny questioningly as he released the oversized rubber band that had been tied around his bicep.

"If he does, we'll catch you later. Now you need to enjoy your party and get to work. We're going upstairs." Kevin said with another smile.

"Right. If you hear any noise tonight, keep your head in. Daddy K's been having trouble with Spade. It could blow up tonight." Jake said seriously.

"Gotcha. Have fun." Kevin said and led the way back to the stairs.

Kenny gave one last look over his shoulder to see Jake rest his head back against the wall in apparent bliss.

* * * * *

Another flight of stairs and Kevin led them down a hallway, then another. The twists and turns confused Kenny to the point that he lost all sense of direction and felt like they were heading back to the stairs.

"Are we close?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Yeah, it's two doors past Lupé." Kevin said and pointed to a rail thin girl smoking a cigarette with one hand and holding a phone in the other.

As they got closer, Kenny noticed that she had horrible open sores all over her arms and face.

"Mamacita won't let Lupé smoke in the apartment so she's almost always out in the hall." Kevin said as they passed her

Kevin finally stopped at a door and pulled out a key on a long chain from around his neck.

Kenny looked at the door, hoping that he could see some identifier so he could recognize it if he were on his own... not that he'd want to be on his own here in his worst nightmare.

The door finally opened and they walked in.

What Kenny saw was the last thing he expected. It was a clean little living room. The air smelled of stale cigarette smoke, but everything was clean and tidy.

Kevin locked the door efficiently, and began to walk away.

"Our room is over here." Kevin said quickly and walked down the hallway.

Kenny hurried to follow and was shocked again. The room they entered was nearly empty. There was a beat up dresser, a bed and a pile of blankets made to serve as a bed in the floor. Besides that, there was no furniture, nothing on the walls, just an empty room.

"This is your room?" Kenny finally asked.

"Yeah. We're going to share it. I hope you don't mind. But we've only got two bedrooms." Kevin answered in an apologetic tone.

"No problem. It's just so clean... I kinda thought you'd have toys or magazines or something." Kenny stammered in response.

"Mom can't afford that stuff. Besides, I don't like to have a lot of stuff in case we need to move quick." Kevin said seriously.

"Does that happen often?" Kenny asked with worry.

"Once or twice a year. If she can't make rent, we have to move in the middle of the night and we can only take what we can carry." Kevin said then walked to the closet.

"There's plenty of room for your stuff in here." Kevin said and gestured into the open closet door.

Kenny walked over to look inside and saw two shirts hanging in there... nothing else.

"Do you want to share my dresser or should I move my stuff so you can have a drawer of your own?" Kevin asked as he pulled open first one, then a second dresser drawer. There were two pairs of threadbare Y-front cotton briefs and five pairs of socks in the top drawer. There were two T-Shirts and a pair of short pants neatly folded in the second.

"What's in the bottom drawer?" Kenny asked carefully.

"That's my pictures. I'd kinda like it if you wouldn't look in there." Kevin said shyly.

"I won't look unless you tell me it's okay. I promise." Kenny said seriously.

Kevin gave a wide grin that was amazing given his apparent existence.

"So you wanna unpack now?" Kevin asked as he looked at the suitcase by the door.

"You mind if I wait. I'm really hungry. The only food they gave us on the flight was like a little mini sandwich thing and I'm starving." Kenny said hopefully.

"Yeah, come on. I'll show you the kitchen." Kevin said with enthusiasm.

* * * * *

"Would you like a peanut butter sandwich?" Kevin asked as he looked first in the refrigerator, then the cupboards.

"Yeah. Okay." Kenny said slowly.

He had seen that there was almost nothing in the cupboards as Kevin had quickly gone through them.

"Here." Kevin said as he handed Kenny a sandwich of peanut butter and bread.

"Um, do you have any jelly?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Mom said she couldn't get it this pay. We could get peanut butter OR jelly. I'm glad she picked the peanut butter, the jelly tastes good but I don't stay full." Kevin said as he carefully washed off the knife that he used to spread the peanut butter, then dried it and put it back in the drawer.

"You got any milk to drink?" Kenny asked, feeling like a complete burden.

"No. Mom only gets milk when she needs it for cooking." Kevin said as he filled a glass of water from the tap.

Kenny accepted the glass of water and watched as the milky looking water swirled in the glass. He sniffed the water before he attempted to drink any and smelled a strong chlorine aroma.

After finishing his second bite of his sandwich followed by a second small drink of water, Kenny asked, "Aren't you going to eat anything?"

"I don't think I should. If mom don't make enough tips to buy us food tonight, we'll have to make this last. Besides, I already ate today." Kevin said and watched Kenny carefully.

"Then will you share this with me?" Kenny asked, suddenly feeling less hungry.

"Yeah, tear off a piece and we'll share it." Kevin said happily, like it was the most special thing in his whole life.

Kenny carefully pulled off a piece of the sandwich which was approximately half of the original sandwich.

"That's too much. You're bigger, you need more food." Kevin protested.

"We're brothers. Twins. We get the same." Kenny said firmly.

"Okay." Kevin said reluctantly but accepted the sandwich.

"Um, what do you want to do now?" Kenny asked as he took another bite of his half sandwich.

"Can you tell me about Dad? Mom always told me he was dead and never told me I had a brother till today." Kevin asked hopefully.

"She... I can't believe that." Kenny said in wonder.

"Did Dad tell you about me?" Kevin asked quietly.

"Yeah, all the time. He was always planning to wait till we were fourteen and then come and find you because when you're fourteen, you can choose which parent you live with." Kenny said seriously.

"Really? He wanted me?" Kevin asked in wonder.

"Yeah. I guess you kinda grew up as an only child. I grew up as a brother. Every holiday, everytime we talked about the future, sometimes for no reason at all, Dad would talk about you like you were just out of town for the weekend." Kenny said with a fond smile.

"I wish I coulda known him. He sounds nice." Kevin said as he propped his elbows on the table and rested his chin on the heels of his hands.

"He was great. He was like my Dad, my big brother and my best friend all rolled into one. I don't know how..." Kenny trailed off as tears began to fall down his cheeks.

"How did he die?" Kevin asked as he got out of his chair and stood beside Kenny, putting an arm around his shoulder.

"He got sick. He was sick for nearly two months before he died. He made me promise to come here and be with you. It's the last thing he asked me to do for him. Even though he didn't get to see you for over nine years, he loved you just the same as he loved me." Kenny said, then turned in his chair to pull Kevin into a full hug.

* * * * *

"You wanna watch TV or somethin? We got three channels." Kevin said after washing the water glass and putting it away.

"Um, no. I've got some questions and I was hoping you could answer." Kenny said hesitantly.

"I'll try. I'm not too smart... sorry, it's hard not to say that. What's your question?" Kevin asked shyly.

"Well, I guess I'll work in reverse order. What's wrong with Lupé? Why does she have all those sores?" Kenny asked as he sat on the couch.

Kevin sat on the other end of the couch and said, "That's from meth. She was hookin and makin good money for a while then she started on the coke and the meth. Now that she's all skinny and skanky she can't hardly get anyone to pay her for sex anymore so she's stayin with her mom."

"You said 'hardly', are you saying that there's people who'd pay to sleep with someone who looked like that?" Kenny asked in disgust.

"Yeah. Jake said that when you gotta bust a nut real bad, you don't care as much who you're with. But he also said he ain't never had to bust a nut *that* bad." Kevin said simply.

"I'll have to take his word on that. What about Jake? Was that heroin?" Kenny asked and turned to face Kevin more fully.

"Uh huh. He's been using for almost a year that I know of. He used to live in these apartments. Now he crashes in the hall or on the stairs sometimes. Just about everybody likes him and he don't mess with no one, so no one minds him crashing here if he needs a place." Kevin said and turned to mirror Kenny's position.

"So was that what he was offering to sell me?" Kenny asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. Heroin, meth, weed or whatever else you're into. He's really cool. He doesn't push anyone to use, but if they're going to anyway, he'll sell it to 'em." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"What about that part about me being old enough. What was that?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Sex. Depending on how much you pay him, he'll give you a hand job, blow you or let you fuck his ass. He said he won't fuck no one's ass because he's afraid he'll give 'em AIDS or somethin." Kevin said casually.

"Does he have AIDS?" Kenny asked with worry.

"Maybe. He don't know, but he said he ain't gonna do the stuff to give it to no one else in case he does." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"Have you ever known anyone who had it?" Kenny asked carefully.

"Yeah. I knew four people who died from it and I know about six more who're waitin to get ripe." Kevin said with a sad look.

"Get ripe?" Kenny asked cautiously.

"Um, go from HIV to full blown AIDS. They know they got it and are waiting to get all sick and skinny and stuff. I think that's why Jake don't get tested. If he's got it, he don't want to have to wait to die. He wants to wait till it makes him sick, then he won't have too long." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"So you don't think people who have AIDS are evil or dirty or bad?" Kenny asked cautiously.

"No. They're sick. Germs don't care if you're good or bad or dirty or gay or a hooker or a druggie. It's a germ, it just does it's thing and makes you sick." Kevin said seriously.

Kenny nodded and sat silently for a long moment.

"Why?" Kevin finally asked.

"Cause that's what Dad died from. Pop said I wasn't supposed to tell anyone here because they might think he was bad or something." Kenny said slowly.

Kevin saw the distress on Kenny's face and moved across the couch to give him another hug.

"I'm sorry he's dead. I always wanted a dad." Kevin whispered.

"He always wanted you too Kev." Kenny whispered back.

* * * * *

They held each other for a long while and then Kenny finally asked, "What's the deal with you working for Daddy K?"

"Sometimes I carry stuff for him when he's too busy. I don't sell the stuff, but sometimes I carry it to the people who do... but never off this block." Kevin finished quickly.

"Why not off this block?" Kenny asked slowly.

"Cause Spade wants me to do whorin for him and I don't wanna do it. I stay away from him and his guys." Kevin said nervously.

"You mean he wants to be your pimp?" Kenny asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, and I never done no sex stuff and I don't want to. You see what it done to Jake and Lupé. It was the whorin that started it all. Nothin good comes of it." Kevin said seriously.

"You know, you may be right bro. I never thought about it like that before but I can see what you mean." Kenny said seriously.

"Really?" Kevin asked in wonder.

"What?" Kenny asked in confusion.

"Did I really know something you didn't?" Kevin asked in excitement.

"Kev, you know lots of things I don't. I've never been around drugs of any kind before. I'm guessing that smell on the second floor was weed, but I never smelled it before today. I don't know anything about how to live like this and I'm scared as hell... and I admire you so much because you've lived here all your life and are still a wonderful person." Kenny said seriously.

Kevin blushed and hid his face in Kenny's shoulder.

"Kev, it's the truth. I probably wouldn't have made it to the apartment without you... even if I could find it. I've never lived in a place like this before and don't know how I'll survive." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"It ain't that hard. You just got to get rid of all that stuff about which group is good and which group is bad. They're all people and there's some good ones in every group, and a few bad ones too." Kevin finished sadly.

"You don't look like you want to talk about it. but if you ever do, I'll always listen to you. I love you bro." Kenny finished in a whisper.

"I love you too Ken." Kevin said as he pulled Kenny in tight for a hug.

"It's getting dark. Would you mind if I don't unpack tonight. I'll just get what I need out of the suitcases and get ready for bed. I know it's early, but I'm really tired." Kenny said into his brother's hair.

"Okay. I need to clean up the kitchen before we go to bed." Kevin said and hurried into the kitchen.

"You washed the dishes when I finished using them. What is there to clean?" Kenny asked as he looked around the spotless room.

"There are bread crumbs on the counter and the table. I need to wipe those off and wipe out the sink." Kevin said as he began to clean.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Kenny asked cautiously.

"No. This will just take a minute. Mom says if we keep the place clean, then the roaches won't come back because they won't have anything to eat." Kevin said as he wiped down the tabletop.

"I know how they feel." Kenny muttered to himself as he opened the refrigerator.

"What are you looking for?" Kevin asked as he moved to Kenny's side.

"I just wanted to see what we've got... catsup, mustard, baking soda... maybe I'll make soup?" Kenny teased.

"I made tomato soup out of catsup a few times. Mom don't like me doin that cause it uses up a lot of catsup and she can't always afford to buy more." Kevin said, then started wiping the water droplets out of the sink basin.

"What are we going to eat in the morning?" Kenny asked, hoping there was an answer.

"We'll have to see if mom had enough tips to buy us food tonight. If she did, then we'll have something special for supper." Kevin said with a smile.

"Okay, are you done?" Kenny asked as he watched Kevin put the stopper firmly in the sink.

Kevin looked at Kenny's curious expression and said, "It keeps anything from coming up the drain when the lights are out."

Kenny gave an involuntary shudder and said, "I'm with Jake, there are some things you are better off not knowing."

* * * * *

Kevin automatically went to lay down on the pallet in the floor as Kenny said, "Why don't you come up here and talk to me for a while?"

"Okay." Kevin said and moved to the bed to sit beside Kenny.

"I know you probably don't want to talk about it, but why did Johnny call you 'Trash'?" Kenny asked quietly.

"Oh, that don't bother me. Johnny calls me that cause he's an asshole. He caught me digging through a dumpster looking for food and started telling everyone at school about it. I don't mind because I know I'm better than him." Kevin said, but Kenny could tell that it did bother him.

"Why are you better?" Kenny asked cautiously.

"We all do stuff we don't want people to know about. I dig in trash sometimes and I've stole a few things from the store. Johnny whores for Spade..." Kevin said, but was interrupted.

"So trash digging and shoplifting is better than whoring?" Kenny asked in surprise.

"No. It's all the same. The stuff we do cause we got to. I'm better cause I don't tell no one that Johnny sells his ass. He makes fun of me cause it

makes him feel better bout himself. I don't say nothin for the same reason. I think my reason is right so I think I'm a better person." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"I think you're right." Kenny said with a smile.

"So you ain't ashamed to have a brother who done stuff like that?" Kevin asked hesitantly as he looked into Kenny's eyes.

"No. I'd do the same thing if I had to live like you do. But why don't you get foodstamps or something? You shouldn't have to do that for food." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"Don't never talk about that with mom, okay. It just pisses her right off." Kevin said quickly.

"Your mom don't like to take charity?" Kenny asked in surprise.

"No. They say she makes too much money to get foodstamps. It makes her so mad she'll be screaming, so don't say nothing about it. Besides, she says if she can get the paperwork done right, she's gonna start getting disability checks from Social Security cause I'm learning disabled." Kevin said darkly.

"You don't sound happy about it." Kenny said as he watched his brother closely.

"Once you get on it, you don't get off. I wanna get a job someday and be someone. If I get on the Social Security, it's like, I'll be sitting around and waiting for my government money to come in. That's my job. And if I do anything to earn money, then I lose the Social Security money. I'll never be any better off than I am right now." Kevin finished in a defeated tone.

"I'll do whatever I can to see that it don't work like that Kev. I promise." Kenny said as he pulled his brother close.

"No one ever hugged me like you do. I kinda like it." Kevin said from the embrace.

"Dad and Pop hugged me all the time. I miss them so much." Kenny said, then quickly released Kevin and ran to his suitcase.

"What's wrong?" Kevin asked in surprise.

"I forgot to call Pop to tell him I got here okay." Kenny said as he pulled out his cellphone.

"Oh. Um, who's Pop?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"That was Dad's boyfriend. He's been like my other father for the last three years." Kenny said as he waited for his Pop to answer the phone.

"Pop. I'm here and I'm okay. Call me back when you get this, I really need to talk to you. I love you. Bye." Kenny said into the phone, then hung up.

"He wasn't there?" Kevin asked quietly.

"He probably was. He doesn't leave the house anymore or answer the phone... I think he wants to die so he can be with Dad." Kenny said as he went back to the bed to sit by Kevin.

Kevin gently put an arm around Kenny and they remained silent, each thinking their own thoughts.

CHAPTER 2

Kenny awoke to the sound of firecrackers going off.

"Don't look out the window." Kevin said sleepily from beside him.

"What is it?" Kenny asked, noticing the seriousness in Kevin's voice.

"They're shooting at each other. There's going to be sirens in a little bit. We live too high up for the flashing lights to bother us." Kevin said as he fought to open his eyes.

"Shouldn't we do something?" Kenny asked with worry.

"Yeah, go back to sleep." Kevin said and pulled Kenny close to his side.

* * * * *

Kevin awoke to a wonderful feeling. Kenny was snuggled against him, using his chest as a pillow.

He thought about the talk they had had the previous night and was filled with longing and regret that he'd never had a chance to know his father.

"Good morning bro." Kenny whispered.

"Good morning." Kevin said with a smile.

"I think we fell asleep while we were talking. How are you doing today?" Kenny asked as he sat up and stretched.

"Good. We need to be quiet. Mom works late and doesn't like to be woke up too early." Kevin said in warning.

"Oh, okay. What are we going to do this morning?" Kenny asked in a low voice.

"It's Saturday, so I've got to do laundry. If you want to change we'll go down and do it while mom's sleeping." Kevin said as he got up off the bed.

"Okay, let me hit the bathroom and then I'll be ready." Kenny said as he also got up.

"Don't flush the toilet, it'll wake mom up. And if you leave the seat up, everyone in Chicago will hear her scream." Kevin said carefully.

"Got it." Kenny whispered and hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

After morning business was taken care of, Kenny made a point of checking his cell phone to see if his Pop had called. After that, the brothers were ready to leave the apartment with a pillowcase of dirty clothes in hand.

"So you wear your shorts when you have to do laundry?" Kenny speculated.

"Yeah, it's that or go bare assed to the laundry room." Kevin said with a smile as he fished out his key to lock the apartment.

"*¿Kevin, como eastas?*" A voice said from down the hall as Kevin locked the apartment door.

"*Bien Mamacita. Eso es me hermano, Kenny. ¿Que tal?*" Kevin said as he led the way to Lupe's usual resting place.

Mamacita responded in Spanish and Kenny lost any sense of what they were saying. The conversation seemed to get faster and faster as they spoke.

Suddenly Kenny realized, his brother not only spoke Spanish, he was fluent in it... how 'Learning Disabled' is that?

"Mamacita said she's about to make breakfast and invited us. Do you want to?" Kevin asked, interrupting Kenny's train of thought.

"Sure, sounds great." Kenny said immediately. He could feel his stomach gnawing on his backbone.

"*Si, gracias...*" Kevin began, then Kenny was lost again as they walked into the apartment.

"These are Lupe's brothers Reuben and Riccardo and the baby is Edovina." Kevin said as they passed through the living room into the kitchen.

Kenny glanced at the two boys and estimated them to be three and six years old.

Mamacita said something quickly and Kevin went to the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of eggs.

"Can I do anything to help?" Kenny asked hesitantly.

"No. I'm just going to grab things when Mamacita needs them. There's not much to do, she already made the tortillas this morning so all she has to do is cook the chorizo, potatoes and eggs." Kevin said as he sat down at the table by Kenny.

"What's chorizo?" Kenny asked with a note of worry.

"It's like a spicy sausage. Don't worry, it's really good and the potatoes make them not so strong." Kevin said with a smile.

"Tell her thank you for inviting us." Kenny said quietly.

"Your welcome Kenny." Mamacita said over her shoulder with a thick accent.

"Mamacita speaks some English. It's just easier for her to speak Spanish so we talk that way." Kevin said at Kenny's surprised expression.

"Oh." Was all that Kenny could think to say.

Mamacita rattled off something quickly to Kevin and he said something back.

Finally Kevin turned and said, "Mamacita wants to know what part of Florida you're from."

"Orlando." Kenny said quietly.

There was more talk in Spanish as Kenny turned his head, looking like he was watching a tennis match.

"She says she's been there a few times. It's beautiful." Kevin finally said.

"Yeah." Kenny said and looked down.

Mamacita started putting all kinds of plates and bowls on the table loaded with food.

She said one word into the other room and the young boys raced into the kitchen, a few seconds later Lupe came in carrying the baby.

"Um, could you tell me what... I'm not used to this kind of food." Kenny said hesitantly.

"Yeah. You can see the eggs. The Brown stuff is refried beans. The green stuff is crushed green chilies, don't worry, it's not hot at all. And then we've got the tortillas. Rip the tortilla like this." Kevin said and demonstrated ripping a decent sized piece off the tortilla, "And use it to pick up the eggs or wipe up the beans or dip into the green chilies, then eat it. This way you don't need silverware."

Kenny just looked at Kevin with question as he demonstrated picking up some of the scrambled eggs and chorizo, then dipping the edge in the green chile.

Kevin looked up at Kenny and smiled, "They have silverware, this is just how they're used to eating breakfast where Mamacita is from."

"Oh, okay." Kenny finally said and began to fill his plate.

"Are you gonna live here now?" Reuben asked quietly.

"Yeah, it looks that way." Kenny responded after swallowing some food.

"You need different clothes." Reuben said seriously.

Kenny looked at his T-shirt and short pants before asking, "What's wrong with my clothes?"

"People see you lookin like that and they're gonna think you have money and try to mug you." Reuben said seriously, then before Kenny could respond he asked, "Do you got money?"

Kenny smiled and said, "No. I don't."

"Then you'd better get some old clothes so you don't look like you do." Reuben said in warning.

Mamacita started to say something harshly to Reuben when Kenny interrupted, "He's right. I don't look like I belong here. If he didn't tell me, I might go out like this and get beat up."

Mamacita looked at Kenny questioningly for a few seconds, then nodded and said, "Reuben can get you some of Manny's clothes. They should fit you."

Kenny looked at Kevin in question.

"Manny was her oldest son, he was killed about six months ago. He was my... our age." Kevin said quietly.

Kenny looked at everyone watching and said, "I'm sorry to hear that. Yes, thank you."

"It's a good thing I kept them. I was saving them for Reuben, but there's enough for both of you." Mamacita said in her thick accent before taking a bite of her food.

"I'll take good care of them and give them back when I'm done." Kenny said in the tone of a promise.

"You're a good boy like your little brother." Mamacita said with pride for Kevin.

"How do you like the food?" Kevin asked, causing a much needed change in conversation.

"It's great. I never thought scrambled eggs could taste this good." Kenny said and scooped up some more with his tortilla.

"*Gracias Kenny*." Mamacita beamed with pride.

"And these are the best tortillas I've ever had." Kenny continued.

"It's because she makes them. The one's you buy in the store aren't half as good." Kevin said seriously.

Kenny couldn't respond because his mouth was too full.

* * * * *

After the meal was finished, Kevin insisted on helping Mamacita with the dishes and enlisted Kenny to help too.

Both boys thanked her and as they were leaving the kitchen, Reuben handed Kenny two sets of clothes.

"You can wash them first if you want." Reuben said hesitantly.

"That's alright. I'd rather start fitting in right now. Thanks for thinking of this. You might have saved me a lot of pain." Kenny said honestly.

"You'd do the same for me wouldn't you?" Reuben asked in the tone of a dare rather than a question.

"Yeah, I would. Where can I go to change?" Kenny asked.

Reuben responded by pointing to the bathroom in the hall.

"Thanks." Kenny said and hurried to change.

* * * * *

Kenny walked out of the bathroom wearing very worn jeans and a cubs T-shirt that was grayish-yellow with age.

"You look like you could live here." Reuben said with a grin.

"Thanks, I'll see you later Reuben." Kenny said and walked to his brother who had picked up the laundry resting by the door. They walked into the hall and were followed by Lupe carrying her cigarettes, lighter and the handset to the phone.

"That meal was really great. Mamacita is a really good cook and really nice." Kenny said as they walked at a casual pace.

"She invites me over now and then to eat. Last Christmas she invited me to her Christmas dinner." Kevin said with a happy smile as he led the way down the stairs.

"You need to get back upstairs now." Jake said as he hurried down the hall.

"What's going on?" Kevin asked seriously.

"Crystal got popped last night. Daddy K sent some guys and they popped Johnny and Dylan." Jake said in an incredibly lucid state.

"Are they dead?" Kevin asked thoughtfully.

"Crystal and Johnny are, I don't know about Dylan. But from the looks of him, if he lives, he won't be making any money for Spade for a while."

"Shit. Spade's going to want someone to replace 'em." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, and he's had his eye on you for a while now. The shit's about to hit the fan here, man. I think either Daddy K or Spade is gonna be dead this time tomorrow. You need to get whatever shit you want to keep and have it ready to move. I'll come up and get you as quick as I can." Jake said seriously.

"You're not staying with Daddy K?" Kevin asked in surprise.

"Daddy K is cool and everything, there's a lot of things I'd do for that man. But I'm not going to take the chance of being Spade's bitch for him or no one else. Get upstairs now and I'll be up as soon as I've got us a way out." Jake said quickly and hurried down the stairs.

"Come on, let's hurry." Kevin said and sprinted back up the stairs.

* * * * *

As soon as the door was unlocked, both boys rushed in.

"Mom's already gone, she must have had an early shift today." Kevin said as he hurried through the living room.

"How can you tell?" Kenny asked, not noticing anything different from when they left.

"Her purse is gone. The only place she'd be going this time of day is to work." Kevin said seriously as he opened his dresser drawer, pulled out the few contents, and put them in the pillowcase with the dirty laundry.

"What can I do to help?" Kenny asked as he closed his suitcase.

"Nothing. We've got to wait for Jake. It's better to wait in the living room so we'll hear the door." Kevin said as he snatched the two shirts out of the closet and hurried out the bedroom door.

"Would you mind if I stay in here for a minute, I wanna try and call Pop again." Kenny asked.

"Fine, but if I call you, come quick." Kevin said seriously.

"Yeah." Kenny said and laid his suitcase on the bed.

"C'mon Pop. I need you." Kenny urged as the phone rang.

When the answering machine came on he said, "Pop, pick up. There someone after us and I'm gonna be dead if I don't get some help right now."

As Kenny waited to see if his Pop was going to pick up the phone, he noticed that tears were running down his cheeks.

Kenny hung up the phone and sniffed back his tears, then dialed the next number in his phone book.

"*Hello?*" The female voice answered.

"Tiffy, it's Kenny. I need help." Kenny said as a sob escaped.

"*Ken, what's wrong? What can I do?*" Tiffany asked in panic.

"I need you to get your mom or dad to go over and check on Pop. I've called him twice and he hasn't called back. I'm in trouble..." Kenny stopped at the lump in his throat.

"*Hang on.*" Tiffany said and the phone went dead.

"*You there?*" She asked less than a minute later.

"Yeah." Kenny croaked.

"*Dad's on his way over. Now tell me what's wrong.*" Tiffany said firmly.

"I got here and it's, it's, there's drug addicts living here and shooting and a pimp is trying to get me and my brother..." Kenny said in a rush.

"*What about your mom? Can't she help?*" Tiffany asked, trying to remain calm.

"I still haven't seen her. She wasn't here when I got here and she was gone when we got back from breakfast." Kenny said through sniffles.

"*Why don't you call the police?*" Tiffany asked.

"I don't think they'd come. And if they did, I'd be dead before they left the block." Kenny whimpered.

"*It can't be that bad.*" Tiffany said, trying to sound gruff.

"I saw a guy shoot up heroin last night. There's a crack whore in the hall outside our apartment. In the last twelve hours three people have been killed, I met one of them. It IS that bad!" Kenny said in agony.

"*Okay. Hang on, I'll be back in just a second.*" Tiffany said and the phone went silent again.

"*You there?*" Tiffany said a minute later.

"Yeah! I wish I wasn't!" Kenny said in frustration.

"*Calm down Kenny. We're on a three-way call now. A friend of mine named David is here and he may be able to help.*" Tiffany said, trying to force calm into her voice.

"Sorry, hi David." Kenny muttered.

"*Kenny, tell me what's wrong. Start at the beginning and maybe there's something I can do to help. Tell me your name, then tell me the facts. I'm recording this in case you say something that will let me help you. Do you understand?*" David asked with assurance in his voice.

"Yeah. I'm Kenneth Lanson Waite. I arrived at O'Hare airport yesterday afternoon and met my brother for the first time. My mother wasn't there to meet me because she had to work. We took the train and two buses and finally got here over an hour later. We went into the building and it smelled like pee. When we went upstairs it smelled like pot smoke. On the third floor I saw a guy shooting heroin, then on the fourth I saw a crack whore." Kenny said in as professional a voice as he could manage.

"*Go on.*" David prompted.

"We came in and I said I was hungry and Kevin, that's my brother, said his mom couldn't afford peanut butter AND jelly. There's no food here. The roaches won't even come in here because they'd starve." Kenny rambled.

"*Kenny?*" David asked quietly.

"Yeah?" Kenny answered.

"*I've got enough here for us to get involved. Tiffany said you're in danger. Tell me about that.*" David said calmly.

"There's a pimp called Spade who had two of his guys shot last night. He's kind of at war with some guy on this block and there's a good chance that someone else is going to die tonight, and if it isn't Spade, he's going to try and make me and my brother his whores." Kenny said with the fear evident in his voice.

"*Is anyone else there worried about it?*" David asked quickly.

"Yeah, Kevin's got all his stuff packed and Jake is going to try and find us a way out so we don't get caught." Kenny said more quickly and started gasping for breath.

"*Breathe Kenny, you're doing fine. Help is on the way. I promise. You've got to do something for me. Stay in the apartment. I have your phone number and someone will be there within ten minutes. Don't open the door for anyone unless they have the password.*" David said firmly.

"What about Jake? He said he was coming back for us. Can we let him in?" Kenny asked quickly.

"*Yes. If he's alone, let him come in then wait. When someone shows up with the password, let them in and they'll protect you. Just hang in there, it's almost over.*" David said in his most calming voice.

"What's the password?" Kenny asked desperately.

"*Clan Short.*"

CHAPTER 3

[11:41]

"*Clan Short Headquarters.*" Tommy said professionally.

"Tommy, are Cory or Sean around? I've got some kids in trouble and I need their help." David said in a rush to the study console.

"*Cory's right here, go ahead.*" Tommy said and adjusted the video feed to a wider angle to show Cory holding Timmy in his lap.

"Cory, I just got a call for help. From what he told me his brother may be a victim of neglect and they're in immediate danger from a pimp." David said quickly.

"*Get a team together and go get them.*" Cory said while enjoying a snuggle from Timmy.

"Me? Aaron's the one who does stuff like that..." David began to say.

"*David. You're not the boyfriend of a Clan Short member; you ARE a Clan Short member. The call for help came to you. From everything I've seen I believe that the call comes to the one who has the greatest chance of helping. Now you can either go and help those boys or tell me that you aren't able and I'll get someone else. What's your decision?*" Cory asked in a low, firm voice.

Cory noticed David's apprehensive look and said in a teasing tone, "*You know, that was kind of a blond thing to say. I'm trying to break the stereotype... you're not helping.*"

"*Daddy, stop pickin' on Unca' Davie!*", Timmy said sternly.

David grinned at Timmy's defense of him.

Then in a slightly more serious voice Cory asked, "*Are you up to it?*"

"I'll do it. But... I, I'm afraid I'll mess up." David said weakly.

"*So? You've seen me mess up. I've seen just about everyone else mess up sometime. Do your best. But do you want some advice?*" Cory asked as he watched the console screen carefully.

David nodded.

"*Get a team together, then let them do their jobs. Let them know what you expect of them and leave them to it.*" Cory said then smiled as Timmy stretched up to kiss him on the cheek.

"*You're in charge. Whatever decisions you make, I'll back you up. You have the resources of Clan Short, Vulcan and Starfleet at your command. Do what you need to do.*" Cory said, and then broke into a giggle as Timmy started tickling his ribs.

"Are JJ and Gabe over there? I'm going to need security." David said thoughtfully.

"*Yeah, I'll get them to transport to TerraMain to wait for your team. Do you need anyone else?*" Cory asked as CD walked into view and worked his way into Cory's lap, opposite Timmy.

"I'd appreciate it if you could have Antonio stand by in case we need any medical help." David said seriously.

"*Tommy, can you get in touch with Antonio?*" Cory asked as he put an arm around both boys in his lap and pulled them into a firm hug.

"*I'm thinkin he's with his dad. I could call his dad's communicator.*" Tommy said quickly.

"Thanks, I'd better get my team ready. Time's running out." David said quickly.

"*Call if you need us.*" Cory called out and received a nod before the screen went dark.

[11:41]

Kenny wiped his tears and glanced down at his phone to see the time.

Help should arrive at 10:51.

Ten minutes. That's nothing.

Just wait ten minutes, 'Just hang in there, it's almost over.' That's what his faceless savior had said on the phone.

After taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly to calm himself, Kenny walked out to spend the next ten minutes with his brother.

[11:42]

Kenny walked into the living room to find Kevin sitting curled tightly into a ball in the corner of the couch.

"Kev? Are you okay?" Kenny asked cautiously.

"M'Scared" Kevin mumbled.

"When I used to be scared, Dad and Pop would hold me and it made me feel better. You wanna try that?" Kenny asked quietly.

Kevin gave a slight, barely noticeable nod.

Kenny sat beside him on the couch and was nearly knocked over as Kevin attached to his side.

Kenny scooted to find a comfortable position and put both his arms around his brother as he silently prayed that David, the friend he'd never met, would be able to help them.

[11:43]

After a glance at the phone that was still in his hand, Kenny started to look around the room.

Nothing on the walls. Everything in sight as a specific purpose. No ornamentation or pictures.

Kenny couldn't understand what was bothering him about the barren room, so he began to think about his home in Orlando.

As you walked in the front door, the first thing you saw was a multitude of pictures on the wall.

Every important moment in his life had been documented and displayed for all to see.

Walking into the living room there were things everywhere. Every bowl, ornament, throw blanket or anything else that you saw had a history, a story that made it part of the home.

He realized that they were trophies of his life with his fathers.

Everything scattered throughout the house was evidence that he lived there and that he was loved.

This place had no trophies... no memories.

[11:45]

Kenny thought about his Dad and his Pop and what a different world he was used to.

He thought about the weekend trips they'd take, just to explore and have fun together.

He remembered his last birthday party. Tiffany, Charlie (Charlotte, which she hated) and TJ (Timothy, Junior).

His friends had always been there. He'd never contemplated an existence without them.

Everything he'd ever thought of wanting was given to him by his parents and his friends.

[11:46]

"Jacob, Jamie, come to the study, I need your help. Zac, Mark, stop sucking face and get in here too. We've got a mission." David called into the 'all call' on the intercom.

"What's up?" Jacob said as he rushed in.

"We've got to bring in some guys who are in trouble. I need you guys to serve as intelligence for the team. Grab tricorders and communicators. Have you been trained with phasers?" David asked seriously as Zac and Mark hurried into the room.

"No." Jacob said with wide eyes.

"That's okay. JJ and Gabe will be with us. Zac and Mark, we've got two boys who need help. I know they're scared. You two stick with them and help them to cope until we can get them back here. Oh yeah, sometimes people freak out a little the first time they transport. Can you guys handle that?" David asked hopefully.

Zac and Mark both nodded.

"Grab communicators and get ready, we'll be transporting as soon as I get the coordinates from the workstation." David said quickly and walked across the room to the console he'd used to record the call and trace the cell phone location.

[11:46]

Sounds of voices in the distance caught Kenny's attention.

The voices were too far away to be understood, but the tone was easy enough to understand.

A verbal fight was taking place someplace below them in the building.

Then there was silence.

[11:47]

"Would you do something for me?" Kevin asked, breaking the silence in the room.

"What?"

"If I asked you to do something that you didn't want to, would you do it anyway?" Kevin asked nervously.

"Bro, I can't promise that I'll do 'anything', but if it's something important and I know you really want me to, I'll try."

Kevin pulled a pistol from beside him where it was jammed between the couch cushion and the arm of the couch.

"Where'd you get that?" Kenny asked in shock.

"Mom keeps it in the drawer by her bed." Kevin said quietly.

"Is it loaded?" Kenny asked with a tremble in his voice.

"It wouldn't be much use if it wasn't." Kevin mumbled.

"What did you want me to do?" Kenny asked apprehensively.

"If Jake can't get us out and Daddy K can't keep Spade's guys out... will you... do it?" Kevin asked as he fought to meet Kenny's eyes.

"Do what? Kill Spade's guys?"

"No, kill me." Kevin said in a low voice as his eyes fell to the floor again.

There was a long moment of silence before Kenny said, "Kev, I love you. I can't kill you."

"If you really love me, you will. If Spade gets me, I'd rather be dead than do what he wants me to do. If I killed his guys, I'd get sent to juvi and... it ends up being the same. Please? If you won't, I'll do it myself, but I'm afraid I'll mess it up." Kevin said with pleading in his voice and expression.

Kenny thought about what Kevin said, and what he couldn't bring himself to say. He'd rather die than be raped and whored out for Spade.

After a moment to formulate his response, Kenny took a deep cleansing breath and said, "If it comes down to it, I'll do it. I promise."

Kevin pressed his face into his brother's chest and mumbled, "Thank you. I love you."

[11:48]

"Everyone ready?" David asked as he adjusted his tricorder.

Everyone nodded and took their transport positions.

"TerraMain, this is David Gallagher of Clan Short requesting transport for five to TerraMain." David said in his most professional voice.

"*Clan Short, you're second in line. Stand by.*" A female voice said tonelessly.

A moment later her voice came on the line again and said, "*Clan Short, party of five, we are ready to transport on your command.*"

"Energize." David said, and then closed his eyes as the tickling sensation ran through his body.

[11:49]

Both boys jolted upright at the sound of a knock on the door.

"Come on Kev let me in." Jake called quickly.

Kevin jumped off the couch and pulled the door open as fast as he could.

"Spade's got us boxed in and he knows it. Daddy K's making calls and getting reinforcements. I think this is going to be an all out war." Jake said with apprehension.

[11:49]

"Do you have the coordinates?" JJ asked immediately.

"Yes, right here." David said and handed JJ the tricorder.

JJ took the tricorder to the transporter operator and returned a few seconds later.

"Ready?" JJ asked unsurely.

"As I'll ever be." David said apprehensively.

"Clan Short, ready to transport to your Chicago location on your command." The transporter operator said professionally.

"Energize." David said and braced himself for the electrical tickle sensation again.

[11:50]

Kenny looked at the clock on his cell phone and saw that there was one minute left before the promised rescue.

"Guys, I kinda called for some help. I hope you're not mad at me, but I don't want to be a whore... or to be dead." Kenny said with a fearful look.

"I hope you called the Marines cause they're about the only ones who're getting into this building the way Spade has things set up." Jake said seriously.

[11:50]

"What's that smell?" Zac asked as he brought up a hand to cover his nose.

Mark ignored Zac's question and asked, "Which one is it?"

"Right here. Let's go in, assess the situation and take these guys back to the ranch. I feel like I need a shower and all I've done is stand in the hall." David said as he looked around.

"You're the leader." JJ said and made an 'after you' motion to the door.

[11:51]

A knock on the door made all three in the room flinch.

"Do you think that's the people you're expecting?" Jake asked in disbelief.

"Do you think the people you're expecting would knock?" Kenny answered as he walked to the door.

"Who is it?" Kenny called out as he approached.

"Clan Short." A voice responded.

"That's the password. It's our help." Kenny said with relief and started to unlock the door.

Kenny's relief turned back to worry as he saw the young man, barely an adult, leading a group of children into the room.

The young man looked around the room and immediately started talking to the people who followed him in, "Security, secure the area. Intelligence, survey the apartment, record anything that will justify 'Safe Haven'."

"Who are you?" Jake asked before anyone else found their voice.

"David Gallagher, from Clan Short of Vulcan. Kenny called me and asked for help." David said seriously.

"What kind of help can you be? There's about to be a war here, those kids are going to get hurt." Jake said forcefully.

"Secure." One of the boys, about twelve years old, a strawberry blond with collar length hair said as he walked back into the living room and stood a few feet from the front door.

David nodded, then said, "This is JJ, he's chief of security for Clan Short."

Kevin and Kenny looked at each other, both expressing their disbelief with their eyes.

A boy with shoulder length almost-white blond hair walked in to take a position on the opposite side of the doorway from JJ.

"And that's Gabe, the other head of our security team." David said seriously.

Kevin stared at Gabe for a second, then jumped up off the couch and ran to his bedroom.

"What's that all about?" David asked curiously.

"I don't know, give me a second to find out." Kenny said as he got off the couch and walked to the bedroom.

* * * * *

"Bro? You okay?" Kenny asked through the closed bedroom door.

"I almost forgot my pictures." Kevin said and opened the door.

Kenny looked down to see that Kevin had nearly filled a second pillowcase with papers.

"Oh, I thought you were freakin out or something. You alright?" Kenny asked with concern.

"Yeah. When we get where we're goin, I've got something to show you." Kevin said, then walked past Kenny to the living room.

* * * * *

As the boys walked back into the room they heard what Jake was saying. "I don't know how you got in here, but now you're stuck in here with us. There's no way we're getting out now."

"Let us worry about getting out. By the way, are you Jake?" David asked curiously.

"How did you know that?" Jake asked suspiciously.

"Kenny said you'd be coming back to help him find a way out. I just hadn't been introduced around. Let me introduce you to the rest of the team." David said then continued, "The twins are Jacob and Jamie. They're here to document that you needed help. I doubt that we'll be asked to prove it, but it's best to be safe. The guy with the ponytail is Zac, his shadow is Mark. They're here in case the rest of us are too busy to answer your questions.

Their one and only job is to take care of you guys. Until this is all over, stick with them."

Jake looked around and said, "I'm Jake Samuelson, and this is Kevin Harris and his brother Kenny Harris."

"Waite." Kenny said quietly.

"Huh?" Jake asked in confusion at the request.

"My last name is Waite, not Harris." Kenny said as he wilted under the stares of all the people in the room.

"Okay, let's see about getting you guys out of here." David said seriously.

Just then 'firecracker' sounds erupted from downstairs in the building.

"If you're gonna do it, now's the time." Jake said with a quake of fear in his voice.

"Guys, I would like to take you to a safe place in Florida. When we get there, we'll sort everything out. Are you willing to go?" David asked as the sounds of screaming could be heard from a distant place deep in the building.

"Yes." Kenny said immediately.

"How do we know these guys ain't gonna do the same as Spade and put us to work for 'em?" Jake asked suspiciously.

"I don't have any way of proving it. But from the sounds outside your options are limited, you need to make a decision now." David said urgently.

"I'll take my chances here." Jake said as he held David's eyes, looking for his reaction.

"It's your choice. Kevin? Staying or going?" David asked seriously.

Kevin looked from Jake to Kenny and was obviously torn by the decision he was faced with.

"Can I come back if I don't like it there?" Kevin asked in a small, child voice.

"Yes, I promise. We're just getting you out now so you'll be safe. When this is all done, whatever happens will be up to you." David said as a loud thump was heard from down the hall.

"Yeah." Kevin said and discretely took hold of Kenny's arm that was between them.

"Okay, Kenny and Kevin, stand in front of Zac and Mark and I'll call for transport. Jake, if you'll stand over there, we'll be gone in a minute." David said and indicated a spot by the kitchen doorway.

Kenny picked up his suitcase and stood before Mark as Kevin picked up his two pillowcases and stood before Zac.

David opened a communicator and said clearly, "TerraMain, we have nine persons ready..."

There was a loud 'crack' sound as the door tore away from the door frame.

Two big hulking men walked in and started looking around the room.

Gabe and JJ immediately drew their phasers as the first of the men to enter said, "Looks like we hit the jackpot."

"I'm Ensign Richardson, head of security for Clan Short of Vulcan. Leave these premises now." JJ said with strength.

The first man made a move toward JJ then froze in place as the stun setting of the phaser took effect.

The second man made a slight move and was stunned by Gabe before his gun could be raised.

"JJ, hall." David said seriously, then looked at the twins and said, "Intelligence, full profile for prosecution. Gabe, cover the twins."

Everyone was in awe at what they had just seen and finally Jake said, "You could've just taken us if you wanted to."

"We could, but we wouldn't. Kenny asked for help, Kevin agreed to accept it. We won't force anyone to come with us, it has to be their decision." David said seriously.

"Is it too late to change my vote?" Jake asked hopefully.

David smiled and said, "It's never too late Jake. Let me do something first."

David then rekeyed his communicator and asked, "Tommy?"

"*Yes?*" A voice responded.

"Could you alert Starfleet security that we'll be calling for a team to this location to take two into custody?"

"*They're waiting for your call. TerraMain alerted them.*" Tommy said seriously.

"Good. Do you know if Aaron and Justy are back at Southcrest yet?" David asked with hope in his voice.

"*Not yet, Uncle Josh just called here looking for them.*" Tommy said professionally.

"Thanks Tommy." David said with a smile and closed his communicator.

"JJ?" David called.

"It's clear." JJ called from the doorway.

"Call TerraMain security and let them know what help you'll need from them." David said seriously, then turned to the rest of the group and asked, "Are we ready to try this again?"

Everyone nodded.

"Jake, please stand between Zac and Mark. Everyone, in a minute you're going to feel a little tickle. Just stand still and you'll see that you're in a different room, then keep standing still and you'll end up in Orlando." David said as he made eye contact with Kenny, Kevin and Jake.

"Zac, you do it. I need to stay here." David said and stood aside.

"Um, what do I do? I've never called for a transport before." Zac said apprehensively.

"Fake it. Just try to make it sound like you know what you're doing. That's what I did." David said with a smile.

Zac smiled in return, then got serious as he opened his communicator.

"TerraMain, the Clan Short party has five to beam to the Southcrest Ranch in Orlando." Zac said in a voice filled with false maturity.

"*We've cleared traffic for you. Standing by.*" A female voice responded.

"Energize." Zac said and was immediately enveloped in a shower of sparkles.

CHAPTER 4

As the tingles subsided, Kevin, Kenny, and Jake looked around in wonder, not as much at the beautiful house as the fact that they'd just moved halfway across the country in a few seconds.

"Welcome to Southcrest." Mark said with a smile at the awestruck expressions on all three of his visitors.

"Let's go in the study in case anyone calls." Zac said and led the way.

Everyone followed Zac, not being able to do anything but stare at the new surroundings.

"Do you live here?" Kevin asked in wonder.

"Actually, no... not technically. But I'm here more often than my own home." Zac said with a smile at Mark.

"What's going to happen to us now?" Jake asked as his amazement gave way to suspicion.

"I don't know. What would you like to happen?" Mark asked and gestured to some comfortable chairs.

Jake got an amused expression on his face before saying in a weary voice, "What I'd like ain't never gonna happen so why don't you tell me what's going on here."

Mark was about to give the standard 'Clan Short of Vulcan' history when the tone of Jake's voice made him reconsider and ask, "No, really. If you had one wish to make your life better, what would it be?"

Jake got a disgusted look on his face as he said, "You really want to know?"

"Yeah, I really would." Mark said seriously.

"I'd want the last two years to just go away, like they never happened. I wanna be thirteen again and not have to worry about anything. I wanna have parents and a home and food and be able to go in my room and close the door and listen to my music and forget about everything." Jake said as his voice went from angry to almost a whisper.

"Well, I can't do anything about making you thirteen again... you might talk to Cory about that one, he seems to be able to do just about anything. As far as the rest, we might be able to help you." Mark said thoughtfully.

Jake stood up suddenly and nearly shouted, "You ain't gonna send me to an orphanage or a group home. I been dodging that for over a year and ain't been caught yet."

"I'm not sending you anywhere." Mark said calmly, then when Jake seemed to have settled down, he continued, "A lot of the guys we know are adopted. You won't be placed with anyone, but you may be invited to join a family. If you accept the invitation, you'll have your wish... except for the thirteen thing." Mark finished with a smile.

"It ain't that simple." Jake said with regret.

"Why not?" Mark asked in genuine concern.

"I'm a junkie. I'm hooked. No decent family's going to want someone like me who might steal from them or end up dead in an alley from an overdose." Jake nearly mumbled.

Mark was at a loss for words as a voice came from the doorway. "I wouldn't count on that."

Before anyone could make an introduction, Jake gasped, "You're him... you're Aaron Carter!"

Aaron nodded and watched Jake's reaction carefully.

"Aaron, this is Jake. Jake, I think you know Aaron." Zac said in an amused voice.

"Hi Jake." Aaron said with a smile at Jake's obvious star-struck gaze.

Jake's reaction was the last thing Aaron had expected.

Jake crumbled to the floor crying.

Aaron walked over to Jake's side, then looked around the room and said, "Why don't you take the new guys to the kitchen and see if you can find them something while I talk to Jake for a minute."

Zac and Mark both nodded, then Zac said, "Come on guys, let's give them some time."

Kevin and Kenny both walked hesitantly around Jake who was sobbing in the floor with Aaron crouched by his side.

"Come on." Mark said to coax them out the door, and then closed it.

* * * * *

"What's he gonna do to Jake?" Kevin asked with concern.

"He's just going to see if he can help him." Mark said as he led the way into the kitchen.

"How's it going guys?" JC asked, then saw Kevin and Kenny and asked, "You didn't pull a Cory did you?"

Zac and Mark looked at each other in question for a second before Mark realized what JC was asking, "No Josh, we didn't adopt them. Their apartment wasn't safe so we brought them here to figure out what to do next."

A moment of silence fell over the kitchen as everyone just looked at each other.

"Well, aren't you going to introduce me?" JC asked impatiently.

"Are you JC?" Kenny asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But the family calls me Josh. And the guy at the table engrossed in his game boy is my son, Justy." JC said with a smile, then glanced at the stove and stirred a bubbling pot of sauce.

"I'm Kenny Waite and this is my brother Kevin Harris." Kenny said timidly.

"Nice to meet you. Are you two hungry? I'm making this sauce for lasagna for dinner tonight, but it's almost noon so I can fix us all a nice lunch." JC said as he walked to the refrigerator and looked at the contents.

"Sure." Kenny said immediately.

"No, thank you." Kevin said quietly.

"You're not hungry yet?" Kenny asked with concern.

"I already ate today." Kevin mumbled.

"But you should really eat more than once a day..." Kenny began but stopped at the feeling of a hand on his shoulder.

"Kevin. How long have you been eating one meal a day?" JC asked seriously as he squatted to be closer to Kevin's eye level.

"Um, always." Kevin said with a lost expression.

"Kenny, if Kevin isn't used to eating three meals a day, it would make him uncomfortable, maybe even sick if we pushed him to try." JC said to Kenny, then turned to look Kevin in the eyes and said, "Kevin, you only have to eat as much as you feel comfortable with and only when you want to. We may offer you food if we're having some, or invite you to join us for a meal so

we can enjoy your company, but you don't have to eat if you don't feel like it. Is that okay with you?"

Kevin looked at JC in wonder and nodded slowly.

"Why aren't you on tour with *NSync?" Kenny asked curiously, breaking the serious mood.

JC stood up and walked to the stove again as he said, "We decided to take a few months off before we get back to the studio. Some of us are cooking up lyrics or music..."

"...Or lasagna." Justy said with a smile from the table.

"Did you lose your last Pac-man?" JC asked with a teasing smile.

"Pac-man? Come on Pop, it's time to move into the twenty-first century." Justy said as he shook his head.

"Actually, there's a pretty good Pac-man for game boy. I've got it and it's got really good game action. If I ever get my stuff, I'll show you." Kenny said seriously.

"I've seen it at the store, but I didn't think it'd be any good." Justy admitted.

"Well, I like it." Kenny said with a shrug, then noticed Kevin's lost expression.

Kenny realized that Kevin probably never played a game boy or owned a single video game.

"Can Kevin and I go outside for a minute? I mean, would you mind?" Kenny asked cautiously.

"Sure, the door's right there, just stay close enough to the house that you can hear when I call for lunch."

"Yeah." Kenny said and walked to the door, followed by Kevin.

"Were you still wanting to show me something?" Kenny asked before they reached the door.

"I left it in the hallway." Kevin said quickly.

"Go get it and I'll wait outside." Kenny said and went out the door.

* * * * *

As soon as Kevin and Kenny's group was gone, David walked to stand beside the twins and asked, "Did you guys happen to pick up where Kevin's mother worked?"

"A bar called 'The Flamingo' about five blocks from here, but she calls it 'The Flaming O'." Jamie said as he remained focused on one of the unconscious men.

A transporter beam resolved into the forms of four Starfleet security officers.

"JJ, can I have a minute of your time?" David asked quickly.

"Sure. What do you need?" JJ asked seriously as he approached and Gabe moved slightly away from the twins so he could divide his attention between the twins and the opened door.

"The mother works at a place called 'The Flamingo' about five blocks from here. Get someone to contact her and fill her in on the situation. The prisoners need to be taken into custody and someone will need to stay here until the door is replaced or repaired. We can't leave this place standing open." David said with authority.

"Why not? What could they steal? A twelve year old TV with a coat hanger antenna?" JJ asked seriously.

"When you have as little as this, every single thing is precious. You're head of security, see that this place is secure." David said, matching JJ's serious tone.

"Yeah, sorry. This place is really creeping me out. I can't imagine living like this." JJ said as he looked at the hopeless, barren room.

"I know. Seeing this helps me realize just how lucky I am." David said distantly, then noticed movement from one of the security officers.

"Anyway, notify the mother, transport the prisoners and secure the apartment. Can you handle that?" David asked as he looked into JJ's eyes.

"I've got it. Do you think these guys are going to take me seriously?" JJ asked as he glanced at the security team watching them.

"Let's find out." David said and led the way to the group.

* * * * *

"Jake, can you tell me?" Aaron asked in a quiet voice.

"I was... your music... before my life went to shit. I'd listen to your music..." Jake said through his sobs.

"I'm glad you like it. Come up here on the couch, tell me what's wrong." Aaron said and stood to move to the couch.

Jake got up on shaky legs and took a seat on the couch, the other end from Aaron.

"Jake, you can sit by me if you want. I promise not to bite." Aaron said with a small smile.

Jake scooted over and tentatively touched shoulders with Aaron.

Aaron responded by draping an arm over Jake's shoulder and pulling him into a gentle hug.

"Tell me what's wrong Jake." Aaron said quietly.

"I used to listen to your music when I was at home. My parents would fight and I'd put my headphones on and listen to you and for a little bit, everything was okay." Jake said and slumped down a little in the couch so he could rest his head on Aaron's shoulder.

"I've had my own parent issues. I know how much it can hurt." Aaron said soothingly.

"Then when my mom died... I had to hit the streets. I thought I'd be better off. I've heard about how you get beat up all the time and gang raped in those group homes." Jake said in a distant voice.

"What about your dad?" Aaron asked gently.

"He went to prison for killing mom." Jake said slowly.

"Oh..." Aaron said as he thought.

"Mark was talking about me maybe getting a family but..." Jake pulled back to look into Aaron's eyes.

"I heard. It's okay Jake. We can get you help." Aaron said with assurance.

"There's no help for someone like me. I tried once. God, it hurts. I don't have words to tell you how much it hurt when I tried to kick it." Jake said as tears started rolling down his cheeks.

"I know a Doctor, we call him Doc Austin. I bet if we asked him he could find someone to help you the right way so you don't have to go through so much pain." Aaron said as he began a slight rocking motion to soothe Jake.

"I got no money. No insurance, nothin. The government cut back on the rehab programs so there's a waiting list for a year or more to get into the ones that're still open. Most of the church one's don't want a whore, not a male one anyway, the ones that would take me take longer to get into than the government rehab." Jake said with regret.

"So you've been checking into it?" Aaron asked with hope.

"Yeah." Jake said in a defeated whisper.

"Then I think we'll probably be able to help you. I can't say how yet, but there's a really good chance... But I'd like to know one thing." Aaron said seriously.

"What?" Jake asked, sounding a little scared, as if Aaron was about to withdraw his offer of help.

"Why did you take the drugs to begin with?" Aaron asked slowly.

"To feel good." Jake said thoughtfully.

"I get the feeling that you were using the drugs to fill a spot in your life where something was missing. If you try and quit the drugs and that empty spot's still there, the drugs are probably going to seem like the only thing that will stop the emptiness. If you can figure out what that something is, then maybe we can fill that empty place with something good and all you'll have to beat is the physical addiction." Aaron said thoughtfully.

"How'd you come up with that?" Jake asked in wonder.

"Because I had my own empty spot. I tried to fill it with brooding and self-pity. I pretty much closed myself off from everything and everyone I loved because I was missing that one thing in my life. If I couldn't have that one thing in my life, I didn't feel like I wanted anything." Aaron said distantly.

"What were you missing?" Jake asked curiously.

"A mom." Aaron said in a small voice.

"I heard about that. My life turned to shit about the same time as yours. So did your mom finally take you back?" Jake asked with interest.

"No, I found a new mom. She loves me just the same as if I was born to her. And I love her with all my heart." Aaron said in peace.

"I'm glad. I don't know what mine is, but I don't think it's a mom. We were never close..." Jake said darkly.

"What about your dad?" Aaron asked carefully.

"He's a murderer." Jake said seriously.

"Yeah. But do you miss having a dad?" Aaron asked, seeing a glimmer of something in Jake's response.

"I don't... I mean... yeah, I guess." Jake said in confusion.

"Try to imagine having a dad, not your dad, but the dad of your dreams. What would it be like?" Aaron asked in an almost hypnotic voice.

"He'd want to do stuff with me, I mean like go places and see things." Jake said thoughtfully.

"Tell me someplace you'd go." Aaron said as he shifted back into the couch to be more comfortable.

"Graceland." Jake said with a smile.

"You an Elvis fan?" Aaron asked with surprise.

"A music fan. I'd like to visit anyplace that has to do with music." Jake said frankly.

"I think you ended up in the right place then. Do you know whose house this is?" Aaron asked with a smile.

"I thought it was yours." Jake said seriously.

"Well, I live here... hang on a minute." Aaron said as he disentangled himself from Jake and went to the desk to press the intercom.

"Josh, do you have a minute to come to the study?" Aaron asked into the 'All Call'.

A second later a voice said, "*Yeah, if Zac will watch over lunch for me*."

"Leave some for us, Zac, or you're going swimming." Aaron said with a smile, then went back to the couch.

"Josh?" Jake asked with concern.

"Just wait." Aaron said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Can I go with you guys?" Justy asked as he followed Kevin out the door.

Kenny looked at Kevin with question.

"I guess. But you can't laugh or make fun of me." Kevin said in warning.

"I won't. What do you have in the bag?" Justy asked with excitement.

"My pictures." Kevin said and sat on the grass in the shade of a tree.

Kenny and Justy sat on either side of Kevin, waiting for him to pull out the pictures.

"I need to find the right one." Kevin said slowly and started to dig through the pictures, careful not to let the other two boys see.

"Is that a gun?" Justy asked as he recognized the outline in the side of the pillowcase.

"Yeah." Kevin said as he continued to look for 'the right one'.

"Now I REALLY won't make fun of you." Justy said seriously.

Kenny looked at Justy and smiled.

"Here it is." Kevin said in triumph and pulled the picture out of the bag.

"What is it?" Justy asked in confusion.

"It's Gabe." Kenny said in wonder as he stared at the picture.

"You can see it?" Kevin asked with excitement.

"Yeah... can I touch it?" Kenny asked hesitantly.

"Go ahead. You're the only other person who can see what I see." Kevin said happily.

"It looks kinda like a little dog to me." Justy said as he looked at the picture more closely.

Kenny touched the picture and said, "His name is Gabriel Mark Michaels, he's twelve years old... he has a brother... named... 'Sitting Eagle'?"

"How can you do that?" Justy asked in wonder.

"I don't know. I can sometimes know stuff when I touch something. Like where it's been, who's touched it and stuff like that, but I've never been able to see stuff like this before... do you know Gabe?" Kenny asked as he looked up from the picture.

"Yeah, and all the stuff you said about him is right. What else can you see about him?" Justy asked as he looked into the picture again.

"Lots of stuff, two other brothers... and some stuff he probably wouldn't want anyone to know about him." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"You mean that he's gay and has a boyfriend?" Justy asked curiously.

"Yeah, you knew?" Kenny asked in surprise.

"Sure. Me and Gabe and Trav are good friends." Justy said proudly.

"How did you draw this? I mean, we just met Gabe." Kenny asked in wonder.

"I just drew it. I don't know what it's going to be till I'm done... then I can see things no one else can in the pictures. But I don't see as much as you. I just see Gabe. I can see right now that he's really serious, a little worried." Kevin said as he studied the picture again.

"It's because he's at your apartment. He's trying to stay focused on everything around him." Kenny said as he looked deeply into the picture.

"What other pictures do you have? Can we see them?" Justy asked with excitement.

Kevin thought for a second before saying, "Yeah. But be careful with them, they're important to me."

"I promise I'll be careful." Justy said solemnly.

Kevin carefully pulled out a stack of pictures on various types of paper and laid them on the ground.

"Can you tell me who each one is?" Justy asked as he looked at the top picture and only saw a vague shape of a yellow bird.

"This one is Cathy. She's happy a lot." Kevin said with a smile.

"She lives with her grandmother. The woman adores her and treats her like a princess." Kenny said as he looked into the picture.

"She didn't used to be happy. She was sad most of the time, sometimes scared." Kevin said as he continued to look at the little bird.

"Yeah. Her mom was nuts and treated her really bad. She was finally put in a mental hospital and now Cathy gets to live with her grandmother and grandfather." Kenny said as he radiated contentment.

"When I didn't have any friends, I'd sit in my room and draw these. For a long time, these were my only friends." Kevin said quietly.

Kevin picked up Cathy's picture and sat it aside and said with a giggle, "This one is Ricky."

"That's Sitting Eagle, that's Gabe's brother." Kenny said quickly.

"Yeah, he was born with the name Ricky, his name in the Seminole tribe is Sitting Eagle." Justy explained.

"Oh, that makes sense." Kenny said, then waited for the next picture.

"This one..." Kevin looked at the picture with worry.

"She's dead." Kenny said and looked away from the picture.

"Her name was Janice." Kevin said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Do you know what happened to her?" Justy asked quietly.

Kenny nodded as a tear fell down his cheek and he whispered, "Please don't ask me to tell you. Kev, would you please put her picture in the bag. It hurts to look at it."

Kevin reverently took the picture and carefully put it back in the pillowcase.

As Kevin moved Janice's picture, he revealed then next one in the stack.

Kenny was staring in disbelief at the picture before him.

"I only have a few adults. But he seems nice. His name is Allen." Kevin said as he looked at the picture drawn on a brown paper bag.

"It's Pop." Kenny said in a gasp, then laid both hands firmly on the bag to feel everything he could.

Justy and Kevin shared a concerned look.

"He's alive." Kenny said in a flood of relief.

"I can't feel him, is he okay?" Kevin asked with concern.

"Yeah. Let me see... he's asleep... he's in the hospital!" Kenny said and pulled the cell phone out of his pocket as quickly as he could.

After a long minute of waiting for the phone to be answered Kenny finally said, "Tiffy? How's Pop?"

"*Calm down Kenny. He's going to be fine. Dad found him passed out on his bedroom floor so he called an ambulance. As far as we can tell, he took some sleeping pills...*"

"...was he trying to kill himself?" Kenny asked desperately.

"*No. He took just what he was supposed to. The problem is, he hasn't slept much in the past week and when the pills took effect, they completely*

knocked him out. The doctors say he's going to be fine. He just needs to rest." Tiffany said with assurance.

"Thanks Tiffy. God, I've been so worried about him. Thank your dad for me." Kenny said in relief.

"*Yeah. How are you? Was David able to help?*" Tiffany asked with concern.

"David got us out of there. We're in Orlando." Kenny said happily.

"*Then you need to go and see your Pop. The doctors said he should be waking up in an hour or so*." Tiffany said assertively.

"Which hospital?" Kenny asked quickly.

"*Orlando Regional Medical Center, room 312*."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Thanks again Tiffy. If it wasn't for you, my brother and me would both be dead right now. I owe you my life." Kenny said seriously.

"*Are you being overly dramatic?*" Tiffany asked only half teasingly.

"No." Kenny said without a drop of humor.

"*Do you want to pay me back?*" Tiffany asked in a serious voice.

"Anything Tiff." Kenny said immediately.

"*Be there when someone needs you. That's all I did. If you can do that, we're even*." Tiffany said firmly.

"I will. I promise." Kenny said with a smile.

"*Now get your bony butt over to that hospital and see your Pop*." Tiffany said with a chuckle.

"I'm on my way. Bye Tiff." Kenny said quickly and waited for her 'bye' before turning off his phone.

"Justy, do you think you can get me a ride to the hospital?" Kenny asked hopefully.

CHAPTER 5

JC walked into the study and was surprised to find a stranger held tightly in Aaron's arms.

Silence fell over the room for a split second before Jake exploded, "YOUR JC FROM *NSync!"

JC took an involuntary step back at the volume and felt the urge to run and hide as the fifteen year old boy bounded off the couch and nearly tackled him.

"He's a fan." Aaron said with an impish grin.

"Really?" JC asked with full sarcasm.

"I'm sorry!" Jake said quickly and released JC, then took a step back.

"It's okay. And call me Josh." He said with an amused smile.

"And this is Jake." Aaron said with amusement.

"Wait... Zac, that was Zac Hanson wasn't it?" Jake asked with disbelief.

"Yep." Aaron said with a full smile.

* * * * *

David and JJ walked to the security team and David asked, "Who's in charge?"

A tall woman with her red hair cut so short it was nearly a military crew cut stepped forward and said, "Lieutenant Mira Kelly."

"Lieutenant Kelly, this is Ensign Richardson. He's a security officer assigned to the Starship *Enterprise* and the Head of Security for Clan Short of Vulcan. You'll be following his instructions. Any questions?" David asked seriously.

"Who are you, sir?" Lieutenant Kelly asked respectfully.

"I am David Gallagher, a member of Clan Short and I am in command of this mission." David said as he held her gaze.

"Thank you, sir." Lieutenant Kelly acknowledged.

JJ pulled out his Starfleet ID and showed it to Lieutenant Kelly before saying, "I need one security officer to accompany Mr. Michaels, my intelligence team and the prisoners to TerraMain. I need one to contact the

superintendent of this building and get the door replaced while the other two keep this area secure."

"Right away sir." Lieutenant Kelly said seriously and started issuing orders to her officers.

"It looks like you have this under control. Let me know if anything develops," David said in a quiet voice to JJ.

"Yes sir." JJ said in a playful whisper.

David smiled and said, "You're doing a great job."

JJ beamed with pride at the compliment before saying, "You too."

David smiled and opened his communicator before saying, "TerraMain, I have one to transport to the Southcrest Ranch in Orlando."

"Standing by," a woman's voice said.

"Energize." David said, still wearing his smile.

* * * * *

"Where's Pop?" Justy asked as he entered the kitchen, followed by Kenny and Kevin.

"He's in the study with Aaron and Jake. Did you need something?" Zac asked with concern for the worry showing on Kevin and Kenny's faces.

"Yeah, a ride to the hospital." Justy said seriously.

"Why do you need to go to the hospital?" A voice asked from behind them.

Kenny, Kevin and Justy turned to see David standing in the doorway.

"My Pop's in the hospital and I need to be there when he wakes up." Kenny said in an urging tone.

David set his other questions aside and said, "Which hospital? I'll take you."

"Orlando Regional Medical Center." Kenny said with relief.

* * * * *

"*Flamingo. This is Lori, how may I help you today?*" A woman's voice answered pleasantly.

"I need to speak with a Ms. Harris regarding an emergency with her son." JJ said as professionally as he could.

"*I'm sorry, but Gloria doesn't work here anymore*." Lori said over the phone.

"When did she quit?" JJ asked in surprise.

"*Last night. She came in about an hour ago and picked up her last check*." Lori said, sounding considerably less pleasant.

"I'm Ensign Richardson of Starfleet Security. Do you happen to know where I might be able to find her?" JJ asked in his most mature voice.

"*No. But did you say this was about her son?*" Lori asked hesitantly.

"Yes." JJ responded slowly.

"*What's his name? I might have something here for him*." Lori said seriously.

"Kevin Harris." JJ said immediately.

"*She left a letter here for him*." Lori said, sounding a little worried.

"Would you mind reading it to me? Maybe it tells us where she went." JJ asked, having a feeling it told anything but.

There was a long moment of silence before Lorie muttered, "*That Bitch!*"

"Excuse me?" JJ asked carefully.

"*I always knew she was a bitch but listen to this*."

Kevin and Kenny,

Sorry boys, you two are on your own. I did my best to keep you going this long but there's no way I can afford two of you. By the time you come looking for me and find this I'll be a few states away, so don't bother looking.

Go down the hall and ask that Mexican woman if she'll take you in. She always thought you were her business for some reason. If not, the cops can put you in a home somewhere. Face it, we'll all be better off this way. For what it's worth, I'm sorry, but at some point you've got to cut your losses. By the way, I left your birth certificate and stuff in the top drawer of my dresser.

Mom

"I can't believe any mother could do that." JJ said in disbelief.

"*I worked with the bitch for almost seven years and I didn't know she had a kid. I thought she left this letter for a boyfriend she was dumping. I'm sorry I can't be any help Ensign but that's all I know.*" Lori said quietly.

"Don't worry Ma'am, Kevin and Kenny are under the protection of Clan Short of Vulcan. What that means is that they won't be separated, they'll have plenty to eat and they'll never have to wonder if someone cares about them. Honestly, if their mother is that kind of person, they're a lot better off with us." JJ said with certainty.

"*Thanks Ensign Richardson, I feel a lot better knowing that they'll be okay... are you single?*" Lori asked hopefully.

"No ma'am, I'm not. Thanks for all your help. Someone will be down soon to get that letter." JJ said and hung up the phone.

The two security officers stationed in the hall looked at each other with question at the roar of childish laughter that came from inside the apartment.

* * * * *

As the twins completed their mind meld with T'Prang, the Vulcan woman sent to assist them, she asked, "May I ask a question."

"Of course." Jacob answered immediately.

"You seem distracted. Are the memories you retrieved causing you distress?"

Jacob shared a look with Jamie and glanced at Gabe before answering, "No, we were trained to compartmentalize those memories. In human terms, we can distance ourselves from them by looking at them as 'part of our job'."

"Your statement seems inconsistent with the evidence at hand. You are in distress." T'Prang said firmly.

"I noticed it too. What's wrong?" Gabe asked as he walked to stand between the twins.

"It's Kevin. We saw what his life has been like and... it really bothered me." Jacob said thoughtfully.

"Is that not part of your job, just as it was with these two?" T'Prang asked curiously.

"No. It's not the same. The constant attacks on his self image, the degrading remarks from everyone whose opinion he's supposed to trust and the almost constant teasing that he had to put up with make me... us feel bad." Jacob said quietly.

"I do not understand." T'Prang said thoughtfully.

"I guess it's because we tease people sometimes. Not in a mean, hurting way, but still..." Jamie said introspectively.

"It makes us feel like we're somehow responsible for hurting him." Jacob said darkly.

Silence fell over the room until it was broken by Gabe, "I understand what you're saying. If it was me feeling this way, what advice would you give me?"

Jamie and Jacob stared into each other's eyes for a long moment before Jamie said, "We would tell you to talk to Dan and get help dealing with it."

"There you go." Gabe said simply.

"Fascinating." T'Prang said as she watched the exchange.

All three looked at her in question.

"Dealing with emotions is unfamiliar to me. It is fascinating to see the process of introspection, identification of the emotion causing the distress and the resolution to the problem." T'Prang said seriously as she raised both her eyebrows, which was the Vulcan equivalent of bouncing and clapping like a school girl.

"Glad to help." Jacob said as he saw the humor in the situation.

"A copy of the report will be forwarded to your Clan's headquarters. Do you require any further assistance?" T'Prang asked, back in full Vulcan control.

"No thank you. We are done here. You performed your duties perfectly as expected. Live long and prosper, T'Prang of Vulcan." Gabe said as he gave the appropriate salute.

"Live long and prosper, Gabriel, Jacob and James of Clan Short." T'Prang said as she returned the salute.

* * * * *

"Kenny, could you tell me about your Pop? This is the first I've heard of him." David asked as they left Southcrest.

Kenny looked at David hesitantly, but finally said, "He was my Dad's boyfriend. He's been a father to me for the past three years."

David glanced at Kenny and recognized the apprehensive look on his face. "It's okay, Kenny. Aaron's my boyfriend. No one's going to think twice about your dad being gay." David said with assurance.

Kenny visibly relaxed before saying, "Good, I was worried that you wouldn't let me see Pop."

"I'd never do that. Kenny I need to ask you something really serious, okay?" David asked carefully.

"Okay." Kenny said hesitantly.

"I'm the one whose in charge of what happens to you and your brother. I need to know about your Dad and your Pop so I can make the best decision for you. Can you tell me about them?" David asked seriously.

"Yeah." Kenny said and thought for a minute before continuing.

"Dad and Pop were great most of the time, but sometimes, usually late at night they used to fight. I could hear what they said, so I know more than they think I do. When they'd fight, it wasn't the bad kind of fighting, but like arguing. Pop was trying to make Dad understand that he loved him. Dad and Pop knew each other for about eight years. Pop always loved Dad, but after Mom, Dad didn't want to be married or anything like that. Pop got to be his friend, but wouldn't sleep with him because he did want someone to marry. He wanted to marry Dad, but Dad swore that he'd never get married again." Kenny said distantly.

"So how did they finally get together?" David asked with interest.

"When Dad found out he had HIV, the only person he could talk to about it was Pop. They talked and cried all night and Pop stayed at our house for about a week before he finally went back to his apartment. About three days later he came back and asked Dad if he could stay the night. I guess Dad was scared enough or lonely enough or something that he said 'yes'. It was about a week later that Pop moved in and lived with us for the next three years." Kenny finished with a smile.

"How was it living with your Pop?" David asked casually.

"Pop's cool. He wanted me to stay with him after Dad died, but then he said I couldn't." Kenny finished sadly.

"Did he say why?" David asked as he tried to keep at least *some* attention on his driving.

"He said that no one would let a boy live with a gay man who wasn't related to him. He said that even if he wasn't gay, because he's single, they probably still wouldn't let him have me." Kenny said sadly.

David nodded thoughtfully as he made the turn into the hospital parking lot.

* * * * *

"This has got to be a dream. Aaron Carter, JC and Zac Hanson." Jake said to no one as he stared into space.

"I think you broke him." Aaron teased.

"I've seen this before, 'Celebrity Overload'." JC said thoughtfully.

"What can we do for him?" Aaron asked in a half-serious voice.

"Invite Backstreet over? That should either cure him or kill him." JC said with a smile.

"Seriously, Jake's got some problems and I was hoping that maybe you could think of some way to help him." Aaron said as he dropped the playful expression completely.

"Give me the short version and I'll see what I can do." JC said and took a seat on the couch, the other end from Jake.

Aaron took a seat beside Jake and said, "His Dad killed his Mom and was sent to prison. Since then he's been living on the streets and got hooked on drugs... the hard kind."

"I see. What do you think we should do?" JC asked thoughtfully.

"Honestly, I think he needs a Dad, the same way I needed a Mom. I know he has to go through Rehab and all that, but I can just feel inside me that the only way it's going to do any good is if he knows without a doubt that he's got a dad waiting on him when he's done." Aaron said tensely.

"Trust your instincts, Aaron. Do you have any likely candidates for fatherhood?" JC asked as he shifted to face Aaron fully.

"Not yet, but do you remember how it happened with Jamie and Jacob... or Justy for that matter? Didn't it just, I don't know, feel right?" Aaron asked with difficulty.

"It really did. I hope you can pull this off, Aaron. Your friend looks like he's going to need a lot of support." JC said as he looked at Jake who seemed to be coming back to reality.

"He'll never have to worry about that. I'll be here for him whenever he needs me and I'm sure David will too." Aaron said confidently.

"What?" Jake asked as he looked at Aaron and JC.

"Aaron was just saying that whatever happens next, he's going to stick with you. And you can count me in on that too. I'm sure as soon as Chip gets back to Earth, he'll sign on too." JC said with a smile.

Jake looked from JC to Aaron and tears began to flow again.

"Come here buddy, let it out." Aaron said and pulled Jake into another hug.

"This is where I came in." JC said and got up off the couch.

"Any advice?" Aaron asked as JC walked toward the door.

"Talk to David." JC said seriously, then closed the door behind him.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, the guys in the hall said you're in charge?" A police officer said incredulously.

"That's right. I'm Ensign Richardson from Starfleet Security, I'm here in my capacity as Head of Security for Clan Short of Vulcan." JJ said and showed his ID.

"Okay... I was just wondering what happened here. Did you break in the door?" The police officer asked in a disbelieving voice.

"Officer..." JJ looked at the officer's name badge and continued, "Officer Chase, there were two children left unattended in this apartment. They were made aware that they were targeted by an individual known as 'Spade' and became concerned. One of the children contacted my Clan and requested assistance. We arrived and surveyed the situation, then while we were preparing to transport the children two large men who I'm assuming worked for the aforementioned 'Spade' broke down the door and attempted to cause bodily injury. Both were subdued and are now in custody of Starfleet Security at the Terra Main facility."

Officer Chase blinked twice before asking, "What happened to the kids?"

"They are in Clan Short's custody." JJ said succinctly.

"What about their parents?" The officer asked.

"The father is dead, the mother abandoned them last night. She left a letter at her place of business stating that she would not be returning." JJ said in nearly Vulcan calmness.

"It sounds like you've got it all handled, I'd just like a few details for my reports. What were the children's names?" Officer Chase asked as he pulled out a notepad.

"Kevin Harris and Kenneth Waite." JJ said quickly.

"And their ages?"

"They are eleven." JJ said seriously.

"And your age?" Officer Chase asked with a smile.

JJ couldn't help but smile in response as he said, "I'm twelve."

"Can I see that ID again?" Officer Chase asked suspiciously.

JJ handed over his ID and waited as Officer Chase looked at it carefully.

"I just had to see for myself that it was real. The guys at the station aren't going to believe this." Officer Chase said with a chuckle.

"The custodian is here to replace the door." One of the Starfleet Security officers said from the doorway.

"Good. When the apartment is secure, your services will no longer be required. I will be leaving soon, but I will be sure to make note in my report of your professionalism." JJ said, then turned his attention back to Officer Chase.

"I think that's all I need, where can I get in touch with you if I need any more details?" Officer Chase asked seriously.

"You may contact me through either Starfleet or the Vulcan Embassy." JJ said with a matching serious tone.

Officer Chase nodded and started to walk away.

"Where should I send a copy of our reports so that you'll get them?" JJ asked quickly.

"The eleventh precinct." Officer Chase said.

"Be expecting a large report. Telepathic testimony tends to yield a lot of information." JJ said with a smile.

Officer Chase's eyes got wide as he realized the implications of the statement.

"Thank you Ensign, I'll put the information to good use." Officer Chase said gratefully.

JJ smiled and nodded.

"Ensign Richardson?" One of the security men called from the door.

"Yes?" JJ responded.

"This woman is concerned about one of the boys. Would you like to answer her questions?"

"Of course, send her in." JJ said and walked to the door to greet the new arrival.

* * * * *

"What's his name?" David asked as he stood at the nurses station on the third floor.

"Allen Thompson." Kenny said quickly.

"Is Mr. Thompson allowed to have visitors yet?" David asked hopefully.

"Let me see... no. But give me a second, his doctor is right over there, I'll ask him." The nurse said and hurried away.

"She likes you." Kevin said with a smile.

"What?" David asked in surprise.

"Did you see the way she was checking you out? She likes you." Kevin said as he started to giggle.

David looked up from Kevin in time to see the nurse looking back... and not at his eyes.

Kenny broke up into laughter at David's 'deer in the headlights' expression as the nurse and doctor approached.

"I'm Doctor Reynolds. Aren't you David Gallagher?" He asked hesitantly.

"Yes, I am." David said with a smile, not quite used to being recognized.

"I think my daughter has every picture of you that's ever been published. What can I do for you today?" Dr. Reynolds asked pleasantly.

"We're here to see Mr. Thompson. Your nurse said he wasn't able to have visitors yet." David said in a business-like tone.

"That depends, is one of you two Kenny?" Dr. Reynolds asked the two boys.

"I am, Sir." Kenny said quietly.

"Then we'll all go see him together." Dr. Reynolds said as he led the way down the hall.

"Is my Pop going to be okay?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"He sure is. He just needed to get some sleep. That's why I wouldn't let him have any visitors. He took some sleeping pills yesterday that knocked him out. He woke up for a while this morning, then fell into a natural sleep. He's been sleeping all day, so it's time for us to wake him up and see how he's feeling." Dr. Reynolds said as they reached the door to the room.

David's cell phone rang and he stopped just outside the door.

"I'll stay out here and take this." David said to the others as he answered the call.

"This is David."

After a minute of listening David said, "That's it, I tried to give her every benefit of every doubt. I wanted to believe that she had Kevin's best interests at heart. But for her to abandon them like this... Pull out all the stops. Take every bit of evidence we've collected and nail her for every single thing she's ever done. Start with child endangerment and criminal neglect then add anything else you can think of."

After another moment of silence David asked, "Really? Do you think so? Yes, I'd like to talk to her..."

* * * * *

"Mr. Thompson, it's time to wake up. You have some visitors." Dr. Reynolds said in a soothing voice.

"Where am I?" Allen asked in confusion.

"In the hospital Mr. Thompson. You've been sleeping for approximately twenty-two hours." The Doctor said quietly.

"Have you heard from Kenny? He must be worried." Allen said groggily.

"Hi Pop." Kenny said as he approached the bed.

"Hey cute stuff, what are you doing back? I thought you had a new family in Chicago." Allen said as he leaned off the bed to hug Kenny tightly.

"I didn't like it there... this is Kevin." Kenny said and pulled his reluctant brother to the side of the bed.

"Hi Kevin." Allen said with a gentle smile.

Kevin looked carefully at the man. He had dark brown wavy hair and hazel eyes that looked miles deep and spoke of love and devotion.

Kevin hesitantly put out his hand to shake.

"I'm Kenny's Pop, so that means I'm your Pop too. Come here and give me a hug." Allen said warmly.

Kevin's resistance couldn't hold up to the warm smile and he fell against Allen as if he'd been hugging him all his life.

"You too cute stuff." Allen said and pulled Kenny in to make it a three-way hug.

After a long and much needed hug, Allen finally asked, "What happened? Why are you guys here?"

Kenny and Kevin looked at each other for a second and neither could think of where to begin.

"Would you guys mind if I told him?" David asked from the doorway.

Kenny and Kevin gave identical shakes of their heads.

"Doctor Reynolds, is there someone who could take the guys down to the cafeteria for some ice-cream? I'd like to have a few minutes to tell Allen their story." David asked hopefully.

"I could do with a cup of ice cream myself." Dr. Reynolds said with a smile.

David pulled a twenty dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to Kevin.

"This is for ice cream for both of you. Eat it in the cafeteria and when you're done, buy some for me and your Pop. Can you do that?" David asked as he looked into Kevin's eyes.

"Yes sir." Kevin said quietly.

"Go have fun." David said and watched as the boys left the room.

CHAPTER 6

David pulled a chair to the bedside and said, "I'm David Gallagher and I'm in charge of seeing that those boys get a good home."

"Are you from Child Protective Services?" Allen asked with concern.

"No, but I'll explain about that later. You know Kenny better than I do, I need your advice." David said seriously.

"I'll do anything I can to help." Allen said in concern.

"The boy's mother abandoned them when Kenny arrived. She left a note at her job and said that she was leaving... The boys don't know yet." David started.

"Oh God. Kenny never could understand why she didn't call him or send him Christmas cards. They've lost both their parents now." Allen said with a devastated expression.

"You see my problem. The boys have no relatives that want them and at their age, Child Services will probably try to find someplace to hide them till they're old enough for prison." David said frankly.

Allen looked at David in shock.

"The boys were targeted by a pimp in Chicago. If we hadn't gotten to them when we did they'd either be dead or wishing they were right now." David said firmly. "Now I have these boys who have no one in the world who cares for them..."

"I care!" Allen said desperately with tears in his eyes.

"Do you want them?" David asked quietly.

"Yes! God yes. I just can't think of any way to get CPS to allow it." Allen said desperately.

"Let's say for the sake of argument that I can arrange that. Are you able to financially support two growing boys?" David asked hopefully.

"Yeah, money's no problem. Carl and I saved quite a bit over the past three years and I've got a good job." Allen said with hope in his voice.

"Is there someone to be there with the boys while you're working?" David asked curiously.

"I could hire someone, a live in housekeeper and baby-sitter." Allen said quickly.

"Just a suggestion, you don't EVER want to use the word babysitter around eleven year old boys." David said in prelude, then asked, "Do you know anyone that you could hire?"

"No. I'd probably have to go to an agency for something like that." Allen said thoughtfully.

"I may know someone..." David said with a smile.

"I'm open to any suggestions." Allen said as he sat up in his bed.

"I spoke with Kevin's neighbor, a Mrs. Vasquez, and we discussed Kevin's situation. She was genuinely worried for him and was reluctant to believe what I told her at first. After I assured her that Kevin was going to be alright, we got on the subject of the neighborhood where Kevin lived. The drug dealer who's been, basically protecting the residents of the block is dead. Fortunately, the pimp who was out to get Kevin is also dead. The bad news is that every dealer and pimp in the area is going to try and claim that area as their own. The police advised Mrs. Vasquez that she should consider moving her family out of there. I believe it would be an ideal situation if you could employ her as your housekeeper. Kevin already knows her and she obviously cares for him. I'll see to it that she and her family are moved to Orlando regardless of your decision, but it seems the perfect solution to both your problems." David said thoughtfully.

"I see what you mean. I hope you don't mind, but I'm reluctant to hire someone sight unseen. I'll keep an open mind on the subject and once I've had a chance to talk to her in person, I'll make a definite decision." Allen said seriously.

"That sounds good. I'm glad to know that you're being cautious." David said with a nod of approval.

"Why is Kevin so small? Is he sick?" Allen asked with concern.

"What I'm about to tell you came from a telepathic scan that was done without his knowledge or consent." David said in prelude, then continued, "I don't think that boy knows what a full stomach feels like. During the school year, he would eat his free school lunch and that would be the only food he'd have all day. When school was out for weekends or holidays, he'd sometimes go days without eating. Occasionally his mother would bring home peanut butter and bread or a can of soup and crackers. During the summer months it was worse. More times than not, he'd have to find the food for himself. He's dug through garbage trying to find edible food. He's stolen food from convenience stores and he's carried drugs for drug dealers

to earn enough money to buy the necessities to keep him alive." David said darkly.

"It's a miracle that he's still alive." Allen said in wonder.

"I have to agree. And from the small amount of time I've spent with him, he seems to have come through it with his innocence and his joy for life intact." David said with a look of admiration.

"So do you think it's really possible that I could get custody of the boys?" Allen asked with hope.

"There's a chance. I have to consider what's in the best interest of the boys. I know Kenny loves you, and I believe that you love Kenny, but sometimes love isn't enough." David said with regret.

"Is there anything I can do to help my chances?" Allen asked hopefully.

"You could go with us to Southcrest to help sort out what's going to happen to the boys. I'm going to ask for advice from a few people with more experience at these kinds of things than I have." David said humbly.

"I believe that's one of the traits of a wise man." Allen said gently.

David smiled and pulled out his cell phone.

* * * * *

"David told me to do it." Kevin said firmly.

"You've got two ice creams and there's two of us. I should carry one." Kenny said reasonably.

"Okay, but if David is mad, you have to tell him it was because you made me." Kevin said and handed one of the cups of ice cream to Kenny.

Kenny and Kevin walked into the room to find David and Allen smiling.

A moment later Dr. Reynolds walked in behind them and stood inside the door.

"We brought your ice cream." Kevin said proudly and presented the ice cream to Allen.

"Thank you Kevin." Allen said with a smile.

"And thank you Kenny." David said as he received his own ice cream.

"Doctor Reynolds, when will I be able to leave here?" Allen asked hopefully.

"I see no reason that you can't leave right now." Doctor Reynolds said with a smile.

Kenny got a downcast look as he asked, "Where am I going to go?"

"You're going back to Southcrest with me." David said quietly.

Kenny hung his head and nodded in acknowledgment.

"And me." Allen said with a smile.

"What?" Kenny asked as his head snapped back up.

"I'm going to Southcrest with you two so we can sort out what's going to happen to you." Allen said gently.

"Is there some way that maybe we can live with you?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"It's too early to be able to promise you anything like that, cute stuff, but I'm going along so if there's any possible way, I'll be there to volunteer." Allen said with assurance.

"Then let's get you signed out." The Doctor said with a smile.

* * * * *

David glanced in his rear-view mirror and saw Allen sitting in the middle of the back seat with a twin on each side, both cheerfully chattering away.

"Are you sure giving them ice cream was such a good idea?" Allen said with a teasing smile as the two boys rattled on about meeting Aaron Carter and JC from *NSync.

"I just wanted to be sure they'd be in a good mood when we got them back to the Ranch." David said with a smile.

"I don't see that being a problem." Allen said and shifted his arms so he could pull both boys into a full hug.

"I really missed you Pop." Kenny said into Allen's chest.

"I missed you too cute stuff." Allen said and kissed Kenny on the top of the head.

"And I've heard about you for years little one, and I'm glad that I'm finally getting to meet you." Allen said and kissed Kevin on the top of the head.

"I'm not that little." Kevin said in a small voice.

"And I'm not that cute." Kenny said with a smile.

Kevin laughed and snuggled tighter into Allen's side.

* * * * *

Kevin, Kenny, Allen and David walked into the study to find the whole crew waiting for them.

"Did you call Cory?" David asked JJ as he took a seat.

"Yeah, he should be here any minute." JJ said happily.

"Everyone, this is Allen Thompson, he's Kevin and Kenny's Pop." David said in introduction.

"Shouldn't you explain that?" Allen asked cautiously.

"I will if I need to, I think I hear Cory." David said and looked to the door.

Cory walked in with a troop of young kids surrounding him and older kids following.

A young blond boy broke from the group and ran across the room to jump on JJ at full speed.

"I missed you, Pop." Harley said as he hugged JJ closely.

"I missed you too, son." JJ said with love.

Adam walked over to sit beside JJ and pulled both JJ and Harley into a lose hug. Sean and Cory took their seats and were immediately covered by their sons.

David decided it was a good idea to make the rest of the introductions.

"Kenny, Kevin, Jake and Allen. I know you've already met some of these guys, but I'll go ahead and introduce everyone just in case. Beside you is Aaron Carter, my boyfriend. On the next couch we have Teri Short, Director of Federation Youth Services and the mother of many of the others you'll meet. On the floor in front of her is Jacob, and Jamie Dodds, intelligence for Clan Short and their boyfriend Beau Wagner. Up on the couch again we have Sean Short, Clan Short historian and Cory Short, the Patriarch of Clan Short. In their laps are their sons CD, Calen, and Timmy Short. On the next couch we have JJ Richardson and Adam Short of Starfleet and Clan Short Security and their son Harley Short-Richardson. Beside them we have Josh Chasez-Dodds, the father of Jacob and Jamie as well as Justy Dodds who is Clan Short's liaison with Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan and last but not least, Mark Owens and Zac Hanson of Clan Short." David said, then took in a dramatic inhale of air.

"I guess you don't need to explain about me being their Pop." Allen said with wide eyes.

"No, it's not a problem around here." Sean said with a smile.

"Now, if no one objects, I'd like to get the situation with Kenny and Kevin sorted out. JJ did you make that call I asked you to?" David asked carefully.

"They're here aren't they?" JJ asked with a grin.

"No, the other call, doofus." David said in an aggravated tone.

"Yeah, it's a done deal." JJ said with a smile.

"Director Short. We were called to help two boys who were in a dangerous situation. Their custodial parent was not on the premises and had in fact quit her job and abandoned them. Jamie and Jacob can fill you in on the conditions, but suffice it to say that there were more than enough grounds for child endangerment, criminal neglect, and abandonment. For those reasons Kenny and Kevin were taken into the custody of Clan Short." David said, trying to maintain his formal demeanor.

"The boys' father passed away recently and the mother is unfit. The only logical course of action is to place them in an environment that is supportive and nurturing. I've asked you all here today to help me decide where that is." David said to the group.

"Why don't they live with their Pop?" Harley asked loudly enough for all to hear.

"It does make sense." JJ said seriously.

"David, I'm guessing that you approve of Mr. Thompson, otherwise he wouldn't be here." Teri said plainly.

"Yeah, why'd you call us all here if you've already got it figured out?" Cory asked playfully.

"Okay, okay. You guys never let me have any fun. Allen, do you want Kenny and Kevin as your sons?" David asked in the tone of a minister at a wedding ceremony.

"Yes." Allen said reverently.

"Kenny, do you want Allen to be your father?" David asked as he looked in Kenny's eyes.

"Ask Kevin first. I want to, but if he says no then so do I." Kenny said firmly.

"Okay, Kevin, do you want Allen to be your father?" David asked seriously.

Kevin walked to stand before Allen and asked, "Would you still want to be my Pop if I was dumb and couldn't read or write and I used to do bad stuff because I had to?"

Allen knelt before Kevin and said, "No matter how smart you are or what you can or can't do and no matter what you did before, I still want you to be my son."

Kevin gave a luminous smile and turned to David and said, "Yes, I want him to be my Poppa."

David smiled and looked at Kenny.

"Yes." Kenny said happily, then joined his brother.

"Teri, do you want to make it official?" David asked and stood aside.

"Consider it done. I'll get in touch with Judge Robison and let you know when we can do the name changes, but as of now, you are officially a family." Teri said happily.

"What about Jake?" Kevin asked as he pulled out of the hug.

"What about him?" David asked carefully.

"Don't you have a Poppa for him too?" Kevin asked in worry.

"It's not that easy in Jake's case. We have other things to consider." David said seriously.

"Poppa, can you please be Jake's poppa too?" Kevin asked as he looked into Allen's eyes with a pleading expression.

David knelt down to look in Kevin's eyes and said, "Kevin. Jake has some problems that he needs to deal with. I promise that we'll try to find him..."

"I'll do it." Allen said firmly.

"What?" David asked in confusion.

"My son obviously loves Jake enough to want him as a brother. If Jake has problems, then he needs a family to help him work them out." Allen said reasonably then turned to face Jake who was sitting with a stunned look on his face.

"Jake? What do you say? Would you like to be my son?" Allen asked hopefully.

"Really? I mean, what if I mess up?" Jake stammered.

"If you mess up, I'll help you fix it, whatever it is. All these people heard me say it. I want you to be my son and no matter what happens, I won't give up on you or leave you." Allen said as a vow.

"Yes." Jake said in a whisper as he got up off the couch.

"Come here son." Allen said as he pulled Jake into a hug and held him close.

A golden glow surrounded Allen and Jake as they hugged and Jake began to shake.

"It's okay. I've got you son." Allen said soothingly.

"What's happening to me?" Jake asked in a trembling voice.

"Unca Mikey!" Timmy shouted happily.

Mikey became fully visible and picked up Timmy. Within a minute he also had Calen, CD and Harley surrounding him wanting to be held.

"What did you do to me?" Jake asked shakily from Allen's arms.

"I removed all traces of drugs and disease from your body. I can't fix the problems that caused you to use drugs in the first place, but what kind of saint would I be if I couldn't do a miracle now and then?" Mikey asked with a smile as he alternated between picking up one then another of the giggling boys and hugging them.

"You mean it? It's for real?" Jake asked and looked at his arms to see them smooth and unblemished.

"Yeah. Really for real. This doesn't solve all your problems Jake. You're still yourself and you've got all of your experiences and insecurities to deal with. Allen, I'm recommending therapy and lots of it. You included. You all need some one on one time with a professional and some group time to learn healthy ways to interact. Let's face it guys, some of you have had some seriously bad examples." Mikey said, then turned quickly when he felt a tug on his wing.

"Hey little guy, that's attached." Mikey said to Kevin.

"Are you really an angel?" Kevin asked with an awed expression.

"I sure am. You look like you've got a question. Go ahead." Mikey said as he turned his full attention toward Kevin.

"Is Janice in heaven?" Kevin asked slowly.

"Yes Kevin. She's in heaven and she isn't in any more pain. She's happy, I promise." Mikey said with assurance.

Kevin gave a watery smile and whispered, "Thank you Mikey. Thank you for helping Jake and thank you for letting me know Janice is okay."

"Anytime my friend. Do you know what?" Mikey asked as he sat down Harley and pulled Kevin close to his side.

"What?" Kevin asked curiously.

"If you pray to me, I can hear you. You'll never, ever be alone again. What do you think of that?" Mikey asked with a smile.

"I think your the best angel ever." Kevin said as he hugged Mikey as hard as he was able.

"Don't let the other angels hear you say that, they'll start picking on me." Mikey said with a smile.

"Okay, I'll only say it to you." Kevin said joyfully.

"Mom, do you want to do the honors and make Jake official?" Mikey asked as he enjoyed children hugging him from every direction.

"Well, after a miracle, anything I can do is pretty much a let down, but here it goes. Jake, you are now officially Allen's son. Come with him when he visits Judge Robison and he'll change your name too." Teri said happily.

"Thanks." Jake whispered from his Pop's arms.

"I assume all the official paperwork will be on my desk tomorrow with legal names, birth dates and the like?" Teri asked David sternly.

"Yes ma'am." David said with a smile.

"Everyone. It just so happens that I've been working on a home made lasagna all day and I'd be happy if all of you would join us for dinner." JC said to the group.

Kevin, Kenny, Jake and Allen gathered together again and shared a family group hug.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Kenny asked Kevin as they sat at the huge dining room table.

"Yeah. Josh said I don't have to eat if I don't want to." Kevin mumbled as he leaned close to Kenny's ear.

"If anyone gives you any trouble about it, I'll take care of 'em." Kenny said with assurance.

"Thanks Ken." Kevin said in a whisper as JC brought a large pan of lasagna into the room.

* * * * *

"How is it that you were making a meal big enough to feed all of us?" Teri asked as Justy brought a basket of garlic bread to the table.

"I was making enough to freeze some for when I'm on tour. The guys shouldn't have to do without just because I'm on the road." JC said as he cut the lasagna into sections.

"No!" Sean said firmly.

"Just a little?" Cory asked in a whine.

"If you eat one piece of that garlic bread, you're not coming home with us." Sean said playfully.

"Daddy. You don't love the garlic bread more than us do you?" CD asked with puppy dog eyes.

Cory looked at CD and stopped trying to fight the basket away from Sean.

"No baby, I love you boys more than anything." Cory said quietly.

"Told'ja." Timmy said, not quite as quietly as he thought.

* * * * *

"Allen?" Jake asked hesitantly from beside Allen at the table.

"You can call me Dad or Pop if you want, Jake." Allen said seriously.

"Okay, Dad. I was just wondering where we're going to live?" Jake asked cautiously.

"To tell you the truth, I've been wondering about that too, son." Allen said with a slight look of worry.

"What's wrong?" Teri asked from across the table.

"Our house is a two bedroom. It's small but was just fine for the three of us. Now we'll need a four bedroom, so I guess we'll have to go house hunting." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Hold up on that. Let me check around the family first. Maybe someone knows of something for you." Teri said in a considering voice.

JC spoke up, "And you can stay here tonight, we have plenty of room. Tomorrow we'll make a few calls, buy some clothes and see about physicals for the boys."

"I couldn't ask you to..." Allen began to say.

"You'd better just go with it Allen. When Uncle JC gets that look, there's no stopping him." Cory said with a smile.

"Unless you're Uncle Chip." Sean said teasingly.

As if on cue, a man in a Starfleet uniform walked into the room. "Is someone having a party without me?" Chip asked in surprise.

"Daddy!" Justy said with excitement as he ran to hug his father.

Jacob and Jamie were out of their seats next and clustered into a tight family hug.

"Go over and hug him too. I want to see the look on his face." JC said in a whisper to Kenny and Kevin.

The boys looked at each other for an instant, then ran to gather into the hug.

"You too, Jake. I want to see his reaction." JC said with a smile.

* * * * *

Chip was enjoying the hug, then noticed that something was different.

He could identify the top of Justy's head easily. Even though he couldn't tell them apart from this angle, he could identify Jacob and Jamie, but no matter how he did the math, the head count kept coming up three over.

All six boys were hugging him tightly, so he looked over at JC to find him looking back innocently.

"What did you do?" Chip asked accusingly.

"What makes you think *I* did anything?" JC asked with an angelic expression that Mikey would envy.

"Because whenever you look *that* innocent, you're definitely guilty of something." Chip said playfully.

JC laughed, then said, "Chip, I'd like to introduce you to some new friends. This is Allen, and mixed in with our boys is Jake, Kenny and Kevin. I've invited them to stay with us a few days until they find a big enough house for their new family."

"You had me worried. If you start doubling our offspring every time I'm off planet, we'll overrun Florida inside a year." Chip said with a grin.

"Just visiting, I promise." Allen said with a smile.

"And what's your name, young man?" Chip asked Jake, who had pulled out of the hug.

"I'm Jake, Sir." Jake said in a shaky voice.

"I'm off duty now. You can call me Chip, or Uncle Chip if that makes you more comfortable." Chip said warmly.

"Nice to meet you Uncle Chip." Jake said with a hesitant smile.

"Would you introduce me to your brothers?" Chip asked kindly.

Jake put a hand on Kenny's shoulder to draw his attention.

"This is my brother Kenny Waite." Jake said proudly.

"Nice to meet you Kenny." Chip said with an inviting smile.

"Nice to meet you, Uncle Chip. This is my twin brother Kevin." Kenny said and pulled his brother to his side.

"Twin?" Chip asked in concern.

"Yeah, he's been living with his Mom and they didn't have a lot of food and stuff." Kenny said, trying to say it without making Kevin feel bad.

Chip knelt down to look into Kevin's eyes and asked, "How old are you, Kevin?"

"I'm almost twelve." Kevin said as he looked deeply into Chip's blue eyes.

Chip couldn't help himself as he looked at the skinny, frail boy. He pulled him into a hug and said, "I bet you've got quite a story to tell."

"You'd win that bet." Kevin said seriously.

"Are you hungry, Love? We were just serving the food." JC asked from Chip's side.

"Yeah." Chip said with distraction as he pulled out of the hug and looked at Kevin, then Kenny.

"Come and sit down. Homemade lasagna tonight." JC said with a smile.

"Your home cooking is one of the reasons I'm home two days early." Chip said as he stood and pulled JC into a hug.

"What's the other reason?" JC asked playfully.

"You'll find out later, Angel," Chip said with an obvious leer.

CHAPTER 7

Chip's attention kept going back to Kevin who was sitting and talking to his brother, but not eating anything.

"Aren't you going to have any of Josh's home made lasagna?" Chip asked curiously.

Kevin glanced at Chip then shook his head.

"He's never eaten more than one meal a day before. I told him he didn't have to try and eat if he wasn't hungry." JC said quietly from Chip's side.

"Has he been seen by a doctor yet?" Chip asked with concern.

"No, we were going to call Doc Austin tomorrow. They arrived here less than an hour ago." Teri said from JC's other side.

"I'd like to have Doc look at him now." Chip said in a commanding tone.

"At ease, 'Commander'." JC said in a teasing voice, then said, "I know Dr. McCoy can treat a civilian in an emergency, but this might be stretching the definition of emergency a bit, even for you."

"I'm a civilian employee of Starfleet, I get full Starfleet medical coverage." Allen said, hoping it would ease JC's concerns.

"That settles it. As soon as we're finished, I'll take you and your family to the *Enterprise* and get these boys checked out." Chip said firmly.

Teri looked at JC in question.

"He's been in Commander mode for over a week, I only know of one way to break him out of it." JC said in explanation.

"How's that?" Allen asked naively.

"Is he talking about that cowboy stuff?" Jacob asked Justy loudly enough that everyone could hear.

JC blushed and tried to think of an appropriate response.

Teri was the first to laugh and soon it spread around the table.

* * * * *

When the meal was finished, David walked hesitantly to Chip's side and said, "I've got some reports from my team about the conditions that Kevin was living in. Maybe that would help?"

Chip looked at David's hesitant expression and said, "If you'll gather the reports, you can accompany us to the *Enterprise*. I think there are a few people who'll be interested in hearing the whole story."

David nodded and left the room.

* * * * *

"Can I have a minute?" JC asked Chip quietly.

Chip looked into JC's hopeful eyes and said, "You can have anything I have to offer... anything at all."

"Oh, we don't have time for that. I just had an idea I'd like to discuss with you." JC said as a flush of desire crept up his face.

"Okay, but remember, I'll be home tonight." Chip said with a smile.

"I won't be able to think of anything else." JC said with wide eyes.

"What was your idea?" Chip asked as he lost himself in JC's gaze.

* * * * *

"David, do you think you can fill me in on the basics now?" Chip asked as he drove the group to the spaceport where the shuttlecraft was waiting.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to fill you in while the guys are having their physicals." David said and looked in the back seat where Jake, Kenny, Kevin and Allen were engaged in their own conversation.

"That bad?" Chip asked with concern.

"Worse." David said darkly.

* * * * *

"No way!" Kenny said with excitement.

"We're going to ride on a Starfleet Shuttlecraft?" Jake asked in wonder.

Kevin held tightly to Allen's side as he stared at the shuttlecraft, not fully understanding what it was.

"That's right." Chip said with a smile at the boy's excitement.

"Justy!" Kevin said quickly.

"What about him?" Chip asked in confusion as they walked to the shuttle.

"Is there any way we can call him? I forgot something and I need to talk to him now." Kevin said in panic.

"Sure, you can call him from the shuttlecraft." Chip said hesitantly.

Kevin calmed slightly but still looked worried.

* * * * *

"Kevin, come here and I'll place the call to Justy for you." Chip said once everyone was in.

"Thank you Uncle Chip." Kevin said, feeling a little ashamed for his earlier outburst.

"No problem... Here." Chip said as the screen came alive.

"*That didn't take long*." Aaron said from the screen.

"We haven't left yet. Kevin needs to talk to Justy." Chip said with a smile.

"*I'll get him. Hang on*." Aaron said and hurried out of the room.

"I'll do the preflight while you're talking to him." Chip said and got to work.

A moment later Justy came running into view of the screen.

"My pictures. I left them in the hallway. Could you put them away somewhere?" Kevin asked in a rush.

"*I already put them in my room. I didn't want any of the little kids getting into them*." Justy said with assurance.

"Thank you Justy. I just remembered what else was in that bag and it scared me." Kevin said in relief.

"*It's safe. No one will go in there*." Justy said as a promise.

"Thanks Justy." Kevin said again.

"*You need to get rid of it*." Justy said firmly.

"I will. Tonight, I promise." Kevin said honestly.

"*Okay. It looks like Daddy's ready to go. You need to make sure everyone's got their seatbelt on, since I'm not there*." Justy said seriously.

"Okay Justy, I'll do that." Kevin said with a smile.

"*Have a good flight, and don't be afraid of the doctor, he acts growly, but he's really nice*." Justy said assuringly.

Kevin nodded.

Both boys said their goodbyes, then Kevin went back and made sure all the seatbelts were fastened.

* * * * *

"There she is, guys." Chip turned the shuttle so that the guys could see their destination: the Starship *Enterprise*. They were awestruck.

Kenny spoke up first. "She's beautiful!!!"

"Look up on the back of the nacelles and on the back of the landing bay," Chip replied.

Jake looked up at the warp nacelles and read off the lettering. " 'NCC-1701-A'. 'United Federation of Planets'."

Looking at the back of the landing bay, Kenny read out the name. "'*Enterprise*'."

Kevin asked Chip, "Uncle Chip, what do you do on the *Enterprise*?"

"I'm the Chief Helmsman." Chip said proudly.

"What's that?" Kevin asked curiously.

"It means I'm the one who drives the ship." Chip said with a smile at the innocent question.

"Really?" Kenny asked in amazement.

"Really. If you'd like, I'll see if the Captain will let me show you around when you're done with your physicals." Chip said as he brought the shuttle around to get a better look at the ship.

The boys noticed that Chip was taking the scenic route. He was going along the length of the box dock so that the guys could see more of the *Enterprise*.

Chip brought the shuttle around, heading back towards the dock. The boys could see the ship at a better view, from directly ahead. The shuttle started to rise above the saucer of the starship. Kenny noticed the lettering on the saucer hull, and read it aloud. "'*USS Enterprise*'. 'NCC-1701-A'."

Kevin looked over at Chip. "Holy smoke! She's huge!!!"

"She's the second largest ship in the Fleet, second only to the Excelsior."

The shuttle was making its way between the huge warp nacelles, heading down towards the open doors of the landing bay. Chip opened a channel. "*Enterprise*, this is Copernicus, we are requesting permission to come aboard."

"Copernicus, this is Enterprise. Permission granted. Stand by for landing maneuvers."

"Copernicus standing by."

The guys looked at Chip. Jake spoke up. "What happens now, Uncle Chip?"

"I shut down our engines, the controller locks a tractor beam on us, and guides us into the landing bay."

Within minutes, Copernicus touched down gently onto the deck of the *Enterprise*. The massive bay doors are still open; the forcefield holding in the ship's atmosphere still in place in the landing bay.

Chip stepped up first, making his way to the back hatch and opened it, motioning to the guys. "Gentlemen, welcome aboard the *Enterprise*."

"This is gonna be so cool. TJ is never gonna believe I really got to visit the *Enterprise*." Kenny said in complete joy.

"Who's TJ?" Kevin asked carefully.

"He's one of my friends from school. You're gonna like him. He's really nice. He's a twin like us, but his twin is a sister, her name is Charlie." Kenny said seriously.

"A girl named Charlie?" Kevin asked with an incredulous look.

"Well, it's really Charlotte, but she'll kick your a... butt if you call her that." Kenny said, then glanced at Allen to see if he was about to be scolded.

* * * * *

"Requesting permission to come aboard, sir." Chip said as he exited the shuttlecraft.

"Permission granted. I see you have a fresh batch of junior crewmen with you today." Captain Kirk said with a smile.

"Yes, Sir. With your permission, I'd like to have Dr. McCoy examine them." Chip said formally.

"We're in dock, Commander, relax." Captain Kirk said firmly.

"Is that an order?" Chip asked playfully.

"Does it need to be?" Kirk responded.

"Sir, I'd like you to meet Allen Thompson and his sons Jake, Kenny, and Kevin, and of course you know David." Chip said in a much more relaxed tone.

"Nice to meet you. Good to see you again David. Let's see if McCoy has left the sickbay yet." Kirk said as he led the way out of the shuttle bay.

"Sir, I'd like to have a meeting while the boys are being examined." Chip said seriously.

Kirk caught on to the tone in his voice and said, "I'll ask Christine if she'll watch after them until we're finished.

"Good thinking. Guys, I'm going to have a meeting with your Pop, so if you're finished before we are, I want you to stay with Dr. Chapel." Chip said seriously.

"Yes sir." Kenny said firmly.

Chip got a smile on his face as he turned to Kirk and asked, "I was doing it again, wasn't I?"

"Yes Mr. Dodds, you were." Kirk said with a smirk.

* * * * *

"Who else are you going to need in this meeting?" Kirk asked as the men left Sickbay.

"David, I assume you were representing Clan Short on this mission?" Chip asked over his shoulder.

"Yes, I was appointed as leader of the mission by Patriarch Short." David said in his Vulcan demeanor.

"Then if Mr. Spock is available, I'd appreciate his input." Chip said thoughtfully. "Did you use any Starfleet resources in this mission?" Chip asked over his shoulder again.

"We required the use of TerraMain's transporters, holding facilities as well as four of their security officers." David answered efficiently.

"You don't need to act like a Vulcan when I ask you a question." Chip said with assurance.

"When I'm acting as a Vulcan representative, it's kind of automatic... It's logical." David finished with a smile.

Kirk rolled his eyes as they entered the Briefing Room. The Captain pressed a button on the wall beside the door and said, "Uhura, ask Mr. Spock and Lieutenant Thompson to join us in briefing room one."

"Aye, Captain." Uhura said efficiently.

"So what's this all about Chip?" Kirk asked as he relaxed into a chair.

"You saw Kenny and Kevin. I became concerned when I found out that they're twins." Chip said seriously.

"But they're at least two years different in age." Kirk said in confusion.

The door opened and Lieutenant Thompson and Mr. Spock walked in and took their seats.

"Okay, tell me the whole story." Kirk said to Chip.

"David, you're on." Chip said as he turned to face David.

"I received a call for help from Kenny through a mutual friend. The story Kenny told indicated neglect and an immediate physical threat. We went to the apartment where Kevin had been living and found it to be devoid of food. I believe all Kevin's clothing is being carried in a single pillowcase. His physical appearance and subsequent comments lead me to believe that he has been neglected and malnourished all his life." David said seriously.

"What was the threat?" Kirk asked, already sold on the point that the boy had been neglected.

"A pimp in the neighborhood wanted to 'recruit' Kevin, and probably Kenny, too. Two of his associates broke down the door of the apartment while we were there. They were stunned, telepathically interrogated and are currently in custody at TerraMain." David said efficiently.

"I heard something about that." Lieutenant Thompson said thoughtfully.

"Go ahead." Kirk said.

"I received a report that two of the *Enterprise* security officers called for assistance from TerraMain. Comment was made of their efficiency and professionalism. Frankly, they were impressed that they were able to subdue two fully grown men and only required TerraMain security to replace a broken door and escort the prisoners." Lieutenant Thompson said with a little pride in his voice.

"Who was that?" Allen asked the group.

"JJ and Gabe." David said to Allen.

Chip looked at Allen, then back at Lieutenant Thompson.

"Are you two related?" Chip asked curiously.

Allen and Lieutenant Thompson both gave Chip an identical disbelieving look before saying, "No." in unison.

"Look at their eyes." Chip said as he compared their features.

"Identical." Kirk said as he looked from one to the other.

"I don't have any living relatives." Lieutenant Thompson said seriously.

"Neither do I, that I know of. I was adopted and I'm not even sure if Thompson is my real name." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Gentlemen, I believe that when we're done here, you both should go to Sickbay for a comparative genetic analysis." Kirk said firmly.

Both men nodded, then turned their attention back to David.

"That's it for the history. Now to Kevin's current situation." David said and paused to collect his thoughts.

"Kevin has been told that he's learning disabled. From what the twins gathered from his memories, it's likely that he couldn't concentrate on his school work because his brain simply didn't have enough energy to function properly. I doubt that he really is learning disabled, but the starvation and malnutrition that he's endured have caused him to be eleven years old with the body of a nine year old and the education of a six year old." David said seriously.

"It's going to take a lot of work to deal with that kind of deficiency." Allen said apprehensively.

"I believe Camp Little Eagle will be the best environment to help Kevin. Camp Little Eagle tests each child to determine their grade level and teaches according to that level, not their age. I believe it would be less traumatic for him to attend classes there because they have the resources and staff to meet his individual needs without putting him in a special class." David said seriously.

"What kind of camp is it?" Allen asked hesitantly.

"It was set up by my Clan to provide a safe and encouraging environment for abandoned and abused children." David said calmly.

"I've been meaning to ask about that. You're not Vulcan, yet you seem to take on Vulcan mannerisms when you talk business. And I don't know what you mean by Clan." Allen said with interest.

"Commander Dodds was adopted into the House of Sarek, Captain Spock's family. A group of children formed a bond of brotherhood which included Commander Dodds sons. By Vulcan custom, the brothers of Ambassador Sarek's grandsons are eligible to be given status as a sub-clan of the family of Sarek... if it is logical to do so." David finished in full Vulcan control.

"When an act was committed against some of my brothers, Ambassador Sarek saw the logic in giving us clan status so we could have access to the resources of Vulcan and ensure the well being of our brothers." David continued slowly, careful of the wording.

"When the clan encounters a child in need of assistance, we do whatever we can to see that the child is placed in a safe environment where he will receive whatever help is needed for him to grow and develop to his fullest potential." David said without inflection.

"Kenny called for assistance. We came, evaluated the situation and offered what assistance we could. Now, the matters before us are Kevin's health and finding a suitable house for Allen's new family." David finished, then turned his attention to Chip, indicating he was done.

"Well spoken, Nephew." Spock said contemplatively.

"Before we left, Josh suggested a solution to the problem with your house." Chip said thoughtfully.

Allen turned his attention fully to Chip.

"Josh and I own a house near Lake Nona. It's the one we lived in before we moved to Southcrest. I couldn't stand the thought of putting it on the market and selling it to strangers. And I definitely don't like being a landlord. It should be big enough for your family and you could move in immediately, that is, if you like it." Chip finished quickly.

"I'd like to see it." Allen said thoughtfully.

"And there's nothing to discuss about the boy's physical conditions until McCoy has finished examining them." Captain Kirk said to no one in particular.

"Did I hear my name?" McCoy asked as he entered the room.

"Report, Bones." Kirk said firmly.

"Let me sit down first. What's your hurry?" McCoy asked as he took his seat.

"How are my boys?" Allen asked in worry.

"No surprises. Jake and Kenny are perfectly healthy. Kevin is obviously malnourished and underdeveloped for his age. Thankfully this was caught before the onset of puberty or it might have caused lifelong developmental problems. As it is, he just has to do some catching up. I've prescribed a nutritional supplement three times a day. It's in a milkshake form so he shouldn't object to it too strenuously. Besides that, he should eat when he feels like it. His appetite should start to kick in when he has some proper nutrition going into his system. I'd like to evaluate him again in two weeks and adjust the supplements if a change is indicated." McCoy said professionally.

"So three milkshakes a day and he'll be fine?" Allen asked incredulously, knowing that nothing was ever that easy.

"No, that's all that can be done for now. Aside from being deficient in nearly every vitamin, the boy has almost no muscle mass, his metabolism is running about three to four times slower than normal, he has less than 2% body fat. I don't see him becoming the mirror image of his brother in anything less than two years, but you should be able to see improvement almost every day. His energy will increase, his appetite and his strength will grow as his body starts to awaken from it's natural reaction to prolonged starvation." McCoy said passionately.

"Is the person or persons responsible for this being dealt with?" Spock asked calmly.

"All the relevant information will be provided to the appropriate Earth authorities. It would be illogical for us to expend resources on her apprehension when the existing law enforcement agencies can do the job adequately. I promise that a day of judgment will come to Gloria Harris." David said as a firm vow.

Spock nodded.

"Anything else?" Kirk asked as he looked around the room.

"Jake." David said seriously.

Everyone turned their attention to David.

"I'm not sure how his experiences are going to effect his behavior, but since his father killed his mother in a fit of rage and was sent to prison, Jake's been living as a drug addict and a prostitute." David began and noticed shocked expressions on everyone except Spock.

"Despite all that he's been through, he's watched after Kevin to the best of his ability. His only thought when he found out about the possibility that Spade was coming was to get Kevin to safety." David said with admiration.

"Both these boys have been through hell." Allen said with a shake of his head.

"I'm only telling you this because Jake may behave in ways you don't expect. Try to realize that he's been on his own for nearly two years without anyone to support him financially or emotionally. What may seem crude or disrespectful at first glance may be the only way he knows how to relate what he's thinking or feeling." David said with concern.

"Thanks David, I'll remember that." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Anything else?" Kirk asked and looked around the room.

"No? Then we have another job for you, Bones." Kirk said quickly.

"I'm busier in Spacedock than I am when we're on a mission." McCoy muttered.

"I'd like a comparative genetic analysis done on Mr. Thompson and Lieutenant Thompson." Kirk said seriously.

"What am I looking for?" McCoy asked as he looked at the two men.

"We need to know if they're related." Kirk responded seriously.

"Just look at them." McCoy said in disbelief.

"Just do the test. We need to know *how* related they are." Kirk said in frustration.

"We'd better go ahead and do it now so maybe I'll have a chance to get off this bucket before we have to head out again." McCoy muttered as he led the way out of the conference room.

"Shall we join them in Sickbay?" Kirk asked as he stood.

No one answered, but everyone stood to follow.

* * * * *

The group of men walked into the Sickbay to a bizarre sight. Christine Chapel had the three boys sitting around a table as she dealt playing cards.

"Dr. Chapel, is this your idea of how to entertain children?" Captain Kirk asked in a mock stern voice.

"I don't know about entertaining children sir, but my friends and I enjoy playing cards. If you'd rather I talk down to these boys and treat them as less than thinking beings, of course, I will. After all, you're the Captain." Christine said challengingly.

"She was a lot easier to get on with when she was a nurse." McCoy said offhandedly.

"Easier to dominate, you mean?" Dr. Chapel asked playfully.

"Are you in trouble?" Kevin asked with worry.

"No sweet pea, we're just playing at being gruff." Christine said with assurance, then asked the men, "Are you ready to take these young men on a tour?"

Chip smiled at Christine's no nonsense attitude and said, "That's what some of us are here to do. Boys, I'd like you to meet Captain Spock and Lieutenant Thompson."

Kevin stared at Spock with wide eyes.

"Kevin, do you have a question?" David asked, noticing his look.

"Is he sick? I mean, Captain Spock. He looks..." Kevin trailed off, at a loss for words.

McCoy got a great smile at the question and everyone was waiting for what was sure to be a, no doubt, classic explanation of Spock when he was precluded by Spock's own explanation.

"I am not from your world, therefore I do not look the same as people from Earth. You have no need to be afraid." Spock said carefully, trying to be brief and keep his explanation understandable for a child.

Kevin broke into a smile and said, "I'm not afraid. I learned a long time ago that where you're from don't make you who you are. I was just worried that you might be sick."

Spock's eyebrows rose in surprise as he said, "I thank you for your concern."

"Now we'll leave the Doctors to perform their tasks while we take these young men on a tour of the ship." Chip said, breaking the moment.

Jake walked to Allen and quietly said, "Dad?"

"Yes son?" Allen responded with concern at Jake's tone.

"I'm feeling... like it's too much. Can I just stay here with you for a while?" Jake asked hopefully.

"Of course. The guys can tell you all about it when they get back." Allen said and pulled Jake into a hug of assurance.

"Are you guys ready for a tour of the *Enterprise*?"

Kevin and Kenny responded with enthusiasm and followed Chip, Kirk, David and Spock out of the Sickbay.

* * * * *

"What do I need to do, Doctor... Doctors?" Allen asked, still holding Jake at his side.

"Just lay on that bed. Lieutenant Thompson, you lay on the next one. This isn't going to hurt a bit. I just need you to lay still for a minute while the bed scans your genetic codes, then compares them." McCoy said as he started pressing some buttons at the head of the bed.

Dr. Chapel was doing the same on Lieutenant Thompson's bed as Jake asked, "What are they doing? Is something wrong with you?"

"No son. They're just checking to see if Lieutenant Thompson and I are related, that's all." Allen said in a calming voice.

"Why?" Jake asked in confusion.

"Chip says we look alike, and since we have the same last name, I guess it's worth checking out." Allen explained carefully.

"If he's related to you, does that mean he's related to me too?" Jake asked carefully.

"We'll have to wait and see if we're related, but if we are, then yes." Allen said softly.

"Is that okay with you?" Lieutenant Thompson asked from the other bed.

Jake took a step away from Allen to look at Lieutenant Thompson before saying, "I didn't have any family before today. It'd be cool to have another person in my family."

"Jake, I don't have any family at all. If it is true, I'll be very happy to have you as a relative too." Lieutenant Thompson said seriously.

"Get ready to be happy then." Dr. McCoy said with a smile.

"What does it say Doctor?" Lieutenant Thompson asked with anticipation.

"The test shows a 98% match for close relation." Dr. McCoy said clinically.

"Does that mean there's a 2% chance we're not related?" Allen asked in confusion.

"No. Anything beyond 60% on this test is considered proof that the individuals being tested are blood relations of some kind. The closer the relationship, the higher the percentage." Dr. McCoy said carefully.

Allen and Lieutenant Thompson shared a look of confusion.

"What Doctor McCoy is so eloquently not saying is that you two are brothers. You both have the same parents. In fact, the only way you two could have a higher percentage is if one of you was a clone of the other." Dr. Chapel said plainly.

"Thank you Doctor, I was getting to it." Dr. McCoy said gruffly.

"I just wanted to get you to it before it was time for us all to retire." Dr. Chapel snipped back.

"Brothers?" Allen asked weakly.

"You mean it?" Lieutenant Thompson asked in disbelief.

"Starfleet doesn't pay me to lie to you. They have a whole diplomatic corps to do that. You're brothers without a doubt. Now go on and figure out how this happened."

* * * * *

"Is your first name Lieutenant?" Jake asked as he followed Lieutenant Thompson and Allen out the Sickbay door.

"No Jake, my name is Brady, you can call me Uncle Brady if you want to." He said warmly.

"Brady? Do you know how... I mean, I don't know anything about my family." Allen said with difficulty.

"I'm sorry. I really don't know. Mom and Dad never said anything to me about having a brother." Brady said with regret and led the group into a turbolift.

"The woman I grew up with never made any secret of the fact that I was adopted, but she didn't know where I came from. From what she said, Cecil showed up one night with me, a 3 or 4 month old baby and said I was going to be their son." Allen said as his mind drifted into the past.

The turbolift stopped, then Brady led the way into the hall.

"When I was about 4 years old, Cecil didn't come home one night and we never heard from him again." Allen said slowly.

"How did you end up with the name Thompson?" Brady asked curiously as he led the way through the maze of corridors.

"Cecil had a birth certificate made for me listing him and Mona as my parents. I thought he gave me the last name Thompson because it was his." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Cecil Thompson? From Fort Lauderdale?" Brady asked as he opened a crew cabin door.

"Yes. We lived there till I was about fifteen." Allen said with excitement at the possibility of a connection.

"I don't know what happened but dad hated Uncle Cecil with a fiery passion. He would never tell me about what happened but he cursed the name of Cecil Thompson every day of his life until the day he died." Brady said as they entered the living room area.

"Can I get you anything?" Brady asked as he gestured to his guests to have a seat.

"No thanks, do you need anything Jake?" Allen asked as Jake took a seat beside him.

"Can I have a drink?" Jake asked quietly.

"Sure, just a second." Brady said and went to a small area that looked like a breakfast bar.

"So Lieutenant Thompson, what do you do on this ship anyway?" Allen asked carefully.

"Security, I'm kind of like third in charge." Brady said shyly.

"Really? I bet that's interesting." Allen said as he relaxed into the couch.

"I have a few stories to tell." Brady said with a small smile.

"Thank you." Jake whispered as he accepted the soft drink from Brady.

"What about you Allen, what do you do?" Brady asked with interest.

"I'm working on Project Libra. It's a Federation project that's trying to incorporate the functionality of Vulcan programming with the user friendly aspects of Human programming in one uniform programming language that has the best aspects of both world's programming styles." Allen said with a smile.

"It sounds like a tall order. Vulcan programming is notorious for it's spartan disregard for the user." Brady said frankly.

"The same way human programming is notorious for being unstable and fraught with 'undocumented features'." Allen said with a smile.

There was a lull in the conversation which was broken by Jake timidly asking, "Where do you live Uncle Brady?"

"Right here when I'm off planet." Brady said and made a 'here it is' gesture to the room in general.

"When I'm on Earth, I keep a little apartment in a secure apartment building in San Francisco." Brady finished seriously.

"Oh." Jake said with disappointment.

"What's wrong sport?" Allen asked carefully.

"I was hoping Uncle Brady could visit us sometimes and we could go and do stuff." Jake mumbled.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea. Do you have anything planned for tomorrow Brady? I think I'm going to be looking at a new house and it'd be great if you could look at it with us." Allen asked hopefully.

"And if you help us decide to get it, then it kind of makes it your home too." Jake said with excitement.

"A home? Jake, I haven't had a home for several years. It would be an honor to look at your house with you." Brady said with hazel eyes, shining with moisture.

"And if we get it, then it will be your home too." Allen said as a promise.

* * * * *

Chip led the two boys off the Bridge as he heard the snickers erupt from behind him.

Kevin's endless questions like, 'What does that one do?', 'Can I push that one?', 'Can you make them all blink at once?' and Chip's personal favorite, 'Where's the steering wheel?', won the hearts of everyone on the bridge.

Kenny's comment, 'I thought it would be bigger', nearly made Scotty fall out of the command chair as he tried to hold in his laughter.

Chip looked at the tired boys and felt the desire to get home to his own sons. Spending time with Kevin and Kenny had reminded him again of how

precious and special children are and how much he missed spending time with his own.

CHAPTER 8

"So how did things go with your new brother?" Chip asked casually to Allen who was riding in the passenger seat on the way back from the spaceport.

"Great. I wish he could have come back with us, but he said he had to get some things done so he could take tomorrow off and look at the house with us." Allen said seriously.

"I don't know every detail of what he has going on, but I do know that he never takes leave and has his duties planned months in advance. I suspect that for someone like Lieutenant Thompson to take an unexpected day off from his duties will be like... well, like you unexpectedly moving." Chip said frankly.

"I just want to get to know all about him. I've always wanted a real family... Carl was the closest I've been able to manage up until today." Allen trailed off quietly.

"Forgive me if I'm prying, but I've only overheard a few comments along the way. I've been through quite a few things and might be able to give some advice if I understand your situation." Chip said thoughtfully.

Allen looked into the back seat and saw that David and Jake were chattering away a mile a minute, oblivious to all that was going on around them. Kevin and Kenny were talking in hushed whispers very seriously.

Chip waited, knowing that Allen was trying to put his thoughts and feelings into words.

"I don't like going to clubs and things like that. It just seems... sleazy, I guess. Some friends of mine dragged me out to a club one night and I saw him for the first time." Allen said with a faint smile.

"God, he looked good. Tall, dark and handsome... My friends noticed my interest and warned me away immediately. 'If you're wanting to get laid, Carl's your man, but if you're wanting something that will last, you'd better look somewhere else'." Allen said with a shake of his head.

"I didn't listen. I was hooked. I chased after him for weeks and he finally agreed to go out on a date. As soon as I tried to do anything even remotely romantic or loving, he'd shut me down. That date ended with him telling me in no uncertain terms that he'd never love me, he'd never marry me, and that I'd be better off with just about anyone else." Allen finished with a chuckle.

"So how did you two end up together if it started out that badly?" Chip asked with interest.

"I never gave up on him. I stopped trying to get him into a relationship and worked on just being his friend. I figured that if he couldn't love me, maybe my loving him was enough." Allen said weakly.

"I guess I'd known him almost five years when he found out that one of his regular sex partners had been diagnosed HIV positive." Allen said with pain in his voice.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know." Chip said sincerely.

"I know. It's okay, that was over three years ago. After he got the call, he came to me. All I can think of is that I'm the only person who he could call a friend that he'd never slept with. We talked all night long about... just about everything. When he finally slept, I held him in my arms and swore to myself that he'd never be alone... and he never was." Allen said in distant memory.

"So did he finally fall in love with you?" Chip asked curiously.

"Yes. But he couldn't say the words. He only told me he loved me one time. That was two weeks before he died." Allen said with pain.

"So how does Kenny figure into all this?" Chip asked cautiously.

"I met Kenny the first time about five years ago. Carl was very careful to protect Kenny from his nightlife. I took one look into those big beautiful brown eyes and my heart was his. I think one of the reasons that Carl let me move in was because Kenny and I got along so well. He was concerned that if he got sick, that Kenny wouldn't have anyone to comfort him. From what I've heard about his ex-wife, I have to say he was right." Allen finished with a shake of his head.

"Are you up to raising three boys as a single father?" Chip asked with concern.

"If I can't have a husband, the next best thing is a house full of growing boys to raise. I've loved Kenny for years, Kevin inspires all the same love I have for Kenny and sets off every protective instinct I have besides. And Jake... If I had the chance to go out and choose the perfect son for me to raise, Jake would be it." Allen said with a watery smile.

"I lost my first husband many years ago. Some people tell you it gets easier with time. Those people haven't gone through what I've been through. Some days it still hurts as fresh as the day I lost him... And there are some days when I wrap myself in the memories of the good times. Josh

understands and let's me have those times when I need to." Chip said with a smile of love at the thought of JC.

"So here's my sage advice. Don't try to forget, you can't. Don't try to get over it, you won't. You have the right to feel every single thing that you feel and no one else has any say in it. But the one thing you have to do is keep going. Laying around, stewing in it doesn't make anything better. Every day, find the will to get out of that bed and do the things that need to be done." Chip said seriously.

Allen nodded as a tear trailed down his cheek. "You want to hear something funny?" Allen asked in a shaky voice.

"What's that?" Chip asked carefully.

"When he died I was there. I was holding him when he just... stopped. One minute he was alive, the next, he wasn't. And at the moment I realized that he was really gone the only thing I could think was, 'I was supposed to have four more months'." Allen said with a dark chuckle.

"The doctors said he had six months to live. He was supposed to have four more months, so he couldn't be dead." Allen said, as if he were pleading his case before a court.

"We're here." Chip said quietly as Allen broke down into full sobbing.

"David, take the guys in. We'll join you in a minute." Chip said into the back seat where everyone was watching Allen cry.

"Yeah." David said quietly and opened his door.

* * * * *

"What's wrong with Poppa?" Kevin asked in a small voice.

"He's missing Dad." Kenny said with certainty.

"Is there anything we can do to make him feel better?" Kevin asked as he followed David into the house.

Jake put his hand on Kevin's shoulder and said, "No Kev, I know how it felt when I lost my mom and dad. Nothing anyone says will make it better. The best thing you can do is try to give him what he needs. If he needs a hug, give him an extra special hug. If he needs to be left alone, then try to do it without making him feel bad."

"How will I know what he needs?" Kevin asked as he looked up into Jake's eyes.

"Ask him. Just don't bug him about it. If he says he needs to be alone, then leave him alone for a good long while. When he's done, he'll come to you." Jake said seriously.

"Okay... " Kevin said thoughtfully.

"Us three can take care of each other when Dad's out of it." Jake said with assurance.

"Not just you three." David said seriously.

All three boys turned to look at David.

"Come on in the game room and I'll show you." David said with a smile.

* * * * *

After twenty minutes, Chip and Allen finally finished their talk and walked into the house.

"I hope that didn't bother the boys too much." Allen said as they came into the entry hall.

"I'm sure David handled it if they had any problems. I'm really impressed with how he's taking charge of things." Chip said, then stopped to listen.

"What is it?" Allen asked in concern.

"Do you hear that?" Chip asked as he looked around.

"I don't hear anything." Allen said in confusion.

"Exactly. We have at least six boys in the house and it's perfectly quiet. Something's wrong." Chip said and started walking quickly toward the game room.

Allen followed, unsure what was happening.

* * * * *

Chip and Allen stood in awe at the sight before them. There were no less than twenty boys sitting in the room all listening in perfect silence as Kevin and Kenny were telling their story. They spoke in alternating sentences as if they'd been doing it all their lives.

"Come on." Chip whispered and led Allen back into the hall.

When the door was shut, Allen asked, "What was that all about?"

"The Clan is having a meeting. From the sound of it at least two of your sons are about to become full members of a Vulcan Clan." Chip said seriously as he led the way to the kitchen.

"What does that mean exactly?" Allen asked with concern.

"It means that every boy in that room will look at your sons as their brothers. If they ever need help of any kind, the members of Clan Short will see that it's provided. In return, they'll be expected to provide what support they can to their brothers." Chip said and walked into the kitchen to find a group of adults.

"Allen, you've already met Teri and Josh. I'd like for you to meet Dan, Kayla, Sara, Helen, Angela, Brian, and Matt. Some of the kids in the game room belong to them." Chip said with a smile.

"Hi." Allen said shyly.

"We'll fill you in on which kids belong to which parents later. We've pretty much accepted that all the kids belong to all of us anyway." Helen said with a grand smile.

"Okay." Allen said with a smile at Helen's friendly nature.

"So you're starting out with three. That's courageous of you." Brian said frankly.

"How many do you have?" Allen asked quietly, still feeling like he was the center of attention.

"One... two... yeah, let's just call it two." Brian said uncertainly.

Allen looked at Brian in question, prompting him to continue.

"I've got one son of my own, but my new boyfriend, Justin, we just call him Curly, has a son too." Brian said hesitantly.

"Oh. Okay. I guess that makes sense." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Josh was telling us you're going to look at the house tomorrow. I think you're going to love it." Brian said happily.

"I hope so. I think it will be the best thing for all of us to start our new family in a new house." Allen said contemplatively.

"Yes. It somehow makes the changes in your life seem official." Teri said thoughtfully.

"So who wants to help me make some cookies for when they're finished?" JC asked the group, trying to lighten the mood.

Helen and Teri immediately stood. Kayla and Matt joined them a little more slowly.

"Just relax Allen. I have a feeling that your sons are going through something that will improve their lives." Chip said assuringly.

"How so?" Allen asked apprehensively.

"Because they're about to become part of something bigger than all of us." Chip said dramatically.

"You mean because they'll all be brothers?" Allen asked slowly.

"No, that's an important part of it. When they come to understand what it truly means to be a member of a Vulcan Clan, they'll discover that it comes with a certain level of esteem. If someone disrespects a member of the Clan, they disrespect the entire Clan. Being accepted as part of the Clan means that they are worthy of respect." Chip said thoughtfully.

"I hope they can handle it." Allen said with concern.

"From what I've seen and heard the past few hours, they can." Chip said in a definite voice.

* * * * *

"Thank you for sharing your story Jake." Cory said as Jake held his brothers tightly.

"Now that you've heard our history and we've heard yours, I'd like to invite you to become official members of Clan Short." Cory said seriously.

"What does that mean?" Kevin asked quietly.

"It means that we're all your brothers. If anyone messes with you, they mess with all of us." JJ said firmly.

"And if you find someone in need of help, you have all of us to back you up in giving them the help they need." Sean interjected.

"Like you did for us?" Jake said with surprise.

"Exactly." David said with a smile.

"So let me see if I got this right?" Kenny asked and waited to see if the group was listening.

"I called my friend Tiffany, she called David who's a member of Clan Short. And because he's a member of the Clan, he was able to do all that stuff and save us from Spade?" Kenny asked in confirmation.

"Basically, yeah." Cory said with a considering nod.

"And if I join, then I could be like David and help people?" Kenny asked, trying to be sure if he was understanding it correctly.

"That's right." Aaron said with a smile of pride as he hugged David tightly to his side.

Kenny turned to Jake and Kevin and asked, "What do you think guys? Do you want to be part of this?"

"I could really help people?" Kevin asked in wonder.

"And we'd have all these guys to help us if we get into trouble." Jake said thoughtfully.

"I want to. But I've got to do something first." Kevin said slowly.

"What's that?" Kenny asked in concern.

"I've got to get rid of the gun. When I join, I don't want to take the chance of doing anything that will make my brothers look bad." Kevin said seriously.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Kenny asked quietly.

"No. I'll need Justy to show me where he put it. Then I've got to do it myself. If anyone is going to get into trouble, it'll just be me." Kevin said firmly.

"But we're all your brothers Kevin. You don't have to face things like this alone." Gabe said as he held Ricky on his lap.

"It's important that I do this alone. If I can do it, then I'll be ready to join you." Kevin said considering his words.

"We'll wait here for you. Do what you need to do." Cory said, and the discussion was ended.

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"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?" Justy asked quietly.

"I'm sure. If I'm going to be like David and Uncle Chip someday, I have to be able to do stuff like this myself." Kevin said seriously.

"We'll be in the game room if you need us." Justy said, then on impulse, hugged Kevin before leaving him standing outside the kitchen full of adults.

* * * * *

"Uncle Chip?" Kevin asked in a small voice with his pillow case full of pictures held close to his chest.

"Is the meeting over already?" Chip asked with surprise.

"No. The guys are waiting on me. I, um, I just have to give you something." Kevin said as fear boiled inside him.

Chip noticed the fearful expression on Kevin's face and said, "Go ahead. I have four sons. Nothing you can do will surprise me."

Kevin gave a small nod, then reached into his pillow case and pulled out the gun by the pistol grip, holding it with his thumb and forefinger.

There was a blazing moment of silence in the kitchen as everyone saw the young boy holding the weapon out to Chip.

After a long moment of shock, Chip accepted the gun and pointed it toward the floor as he released the cartridge of the revolver and removed the bullets.

Chip then looked at Kevin who was frozen in fear before him.

"Kevin, please tell me why you have a gun." Chip said as he laid the pistol on the table beside him.

"I was scared and Spade and his guys were coming. I'm sorry I didn't give it to you before but... Everything was so big and different, I kinda forgot." Kevin rambled.

Chip pulled Kevin in for a hug and said, "Thank you for giving it to me. If it's alright with you, I'm going to put it away where it can't hurt anyone."

Kevin nodded into Chip's chest.

"I'm so proud of you for doing this. I know you must have been scared of how we'd react." Allen said as he moved to Kevin and Chip's side.

Kevin nodded again.

"It's alright. You're not in any trouble. You did just the right thing." Allen said with assurance.

"Thanks Poppa." Kevin said into Chip's chest.

"Now, didn't you say that the guys were waiting on you?" Chip asked in a much more lighthearted tone.

"Uh huh." Kevin said and sniffed back the evidence that he'd been crying.

"You go on back to the meeting and I'll take care of this for you." Chip said as he gave a final squeeze in his hug.

"I love you Uncle Chip." Kevin said, then released the hug.

Kevin quickly turned to face Allen and said, "Is it okay if I hug you Poppa?"

"Of course. I could really use a hug right now." Allen said with a tender smile.

Kevin hugged Allen tightly, doing his best to make it as extra-special as he could for his new Poppa.

Finally the hug broke and Kevin said, "The guys are waiting for me, but I want to finish that hug later."

"I'll remind you where you left off." Allen said as he watched Kevin hurry from the room, holding his pillow case with one hand.

"What was that about kids not being able to surprise you anymore?" JC asked with a chuckle.

Chip looked at JC and broke into an involuntary grin.

"Would you believe it if I said I was expecting that?" Chip asked hopefully.

"Not a chance." JC said as he worked on mixing cookie dough.

"Allen, you've got some special boys. I hope you're up to the challenge." Chip said with a smile.

"I've got to be, because I wouldn't trade them for any other boys in the world." Allen said as he thought about his special children.

"You'll fit in fine around here." Helen said in a definite voice.

* * * * *

"Did everything go okay?" Kenny asked with worry.

Kevin nodded and took his seat beside Jake, the other side from Kenny.

"Then I guess we can do this now. Do you three want to join us?" Cory asked plainly as he held CD and Timmy in his lap.

Jake looked at Kevin, then at Kenny to receive their nods of approval.

"You're our big brother, you can speak for us." Kevin whispered.

Jake broke into a broad smile as he announced, "My brothers and I would be happy to join you."

"Great. Then it's done. You are now officially members of Clan Short of the Family of Sarek of the House of Surak of the planet Vulcan. You are our brothers and we are yours." Cory said dramatically.

"Daddy, William says Kevin should show us his pictures." Timmy said quickly.

Cory smiled and looked to Kevin, "Would you mind?"

Kevin got a timid look, but when he looked around the group, he didn't see anyone who looked like they would make fun of him.

"Okay." Kevin said quietly and pulled the stack out of his pillow case.

"Gabe, this one is you." Kevin said as he looked at the top picture.

"It looks kinda like a dog." Benji said as he leaned over to look at the picture.

"It's Tippy." Gabe said as he saw the vague shape.

"Who's that?" Travis asked quietly.

"When I was really little, Tippy was the neighbor's dog. I'd play with her through the fence when no one else was around. Our neighbors moved away one day and took Tippy with them. I felt so alone." Gabe drifted off in memory.

"Let's see another one." JJ said with interest.

"This one is Cathy." Kevin said happily.

"So you can see these people in your pictures?" JJ asked curiously.

"Yeah. Kenny can see them too." Kevin said as he looked at JJ to see his reaction.

"Cathy's happy. She's telling her Grandmother how much she likes her new school." Kenny said as he gently ran his fingertips across the picture.

"Can you really see that?" Robbie asked as he tried to get a better look at the picture.

"I can see all sorts of things." Kenny said and sat the picture aside.

The next picture was just a shadow in a doorway.

"It's Mr. Grimes." Ricky said as he pointed at the picture.

"Who's that?" Gabe asked carefully.

"He used to live in the apartment across from my old mommy. He was really nice, but he didn't want me to look at his face cause it was burned real bad. Then one day I went to visit and he wasn't there no more." Ricky finished sadly.

"Who's next?" Gabe asked, not wanting to dwell on his brother's past any longer than necessary.

"This is Chok." Kevin said with a smile.

"What kind of a name is Chok?" CD asked Cory curiously.

"I don't know, Chinese maybe?" Cory answered quietly.

Kenny laid his hand on the picture and said, "His name is really Charles, but somehow he got the nickname Chok. He's always had it and it seems to fit."

"Dad's name is Charles and his nickname is Chip." Justy said into the group.

A few considered the statement and finally it was accepted as Kevin moved to reveal the next picture.

"Kenny, what's wrong with him?" Kevin asked quickly.

"What?" Cory asked as he leaned forward.

Kenny touched the picture and felt a flood of emotion.

"He's hurting inside... he doesn't want to leave... his father is going to send him away." Kenny said as he tried to sort through the emotions.

"Where is he being sent?" Antonio asked as he moved closer beside Kenny.

"To Vulcan... his name is Xain. His father has been trying to make him be like Captain Spock." Kenny said in confusion.

"Kenny, if you'll let us, maybe we can help." Jacob said seriously.

"We can help you sort through the emotions so you can see more clearly." Jamie finished.

"Thanks." Kenny said as he kept his hand firmly on the picture.

Jamie and Jacob each laid a hand on Kenny's arm and concentrated to sort through the flood of emotions.

"I can see now. His father is Solak of the house of Suvak. Xain's mother was human. Solak wants Xain to be just like Captain Spock because he is also half human." Kenny said in a much more relaxed voice.

"Is the father hurting him somehow?" Cory asked darkly.

"No, no... yes. Only by keeping constant pressure on him to learn perfect control of his emotions. Xain hasn't been able to master emotions the way a Vulcan does. He tries to behave as a Vulcan, but is in constant fear that he will be discovered." Kenny said in a distant voice.

"Now his father has given up on teaching him the Vulcan disciplines himself and has announced that he is going to send Xain to live with his grandfather on Vulcan. His grandfather won't even call him by his name, he calls him 'the abomination' because he isn't a pure Vulcan." Kenny said with a disturbed look.

"Kenny, what do you think Solak would say if Xain were invited to join a sub-clan of the family of Sarek?" Cory asked carefully.

"I think Solak would believe it to be a beneficial experience for Xain. It would be another step in attaining the goal of making Xain to be like Captain Spock." Kenny said in a semi-Vulcan tone.

"Does Xain have any skills that we might be able to use as an excuse to ask him to join us?" Cory asked thoughtfully.

"He is adept at database construction and maintenance. That is his greatest skill." Kenny said as he looked through the vast expanse of Xain's mind.

"Well, we have a few computer users here who can handle a database, but any of them would rather handle a porcupine if they were given the choice. That means that we could honestly use his help. How soon is Xain going to be sent away?" Cory asked as he looked around.

"Thirteen hundred hours tomorrow, Federation standard time." Kenny said with a note of confusion.

"That gives us time to do this right. Kenny, where is he?" Cory asked as he motioned for Justy and Sean to come to him.

"The Vulcan Embassy in San Francisco." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"Uncle Brady lives in San Francisco." Jake said quickly, then continued, "And he's coming here tomorrow."

"Then we do this tonight." Cory said, then looked to Justy.

"Contact Ambassador Sarek and assess him of the situation. We need to be sure that we aren't breaking a Vulcan custom by inviting a member of another house to join our Clan." Cory said, then turned his focus on Sean and said, "We need someone to talk to the adults. We're not rescuing him exactly or adopting him. We need to be sure that we'll have a place for him to stay that Solak will approve of."

"We've got a problem." Jacob said as he concentrated on Kenny's thoughts.

"What's that?" Cory asked as he froze in his tracks.

"He doesn't speak English." Jacob said grimly.

"How? Why would he be living on Earth and not speak English?" Cory asked in confusion.

"Xain's father moved him here less than a year ago. Since then, Xain has been trying to learn English, but his father and his teachers keep him so overwhelmed with Vulcan studies, that he can't absorb the language. He's only been able to pick up a few words and phrases. Since he can't speak the native language, his father hasn't allowed him to leave the embassy since he's been here." Jamie said thoughtfully.

"So who do we have that speaks Vulcan?" Cory asked weakly.

"Kevin can speak Vulcan." Jacob said seriously.

"He can?" Kenny asked with disbelief.

"I can?" Kevin asked in an identical tone.

"Kevin can speak the language that is native to anyone in any of his pictures. Currently he holds six Earth languages and Vulcan standard." Jamie said thoughtfully.

"What about Kenny?" Sean asked curiously.

"I think while he's touching Xain's picture, he should be able to understand him. I'm not sure if he'll be able to speak to him." Jacob said with difficulty.

"Well, I guess your family is our only option. I hope you have room in your new home for our foreign exchange student." Cory said with weak humor.

"Do you think Poppa will have a problem with us inviting someone to live with us?" Kevin asked with concern.

"Do you want me to find out?" Jake asked carefully.

"That's a good idea. Aaron can go with you, adults seem to like him for some reason." Cory said with a teasing smile.

Jake smiled at Aaron and headed for the door.

"How old is he?" Jake asked thoughtfully before reaching the door.

"He's twelve." Kenny said quickly.

"Okay, I'll see what Dad has to say and let you know." Jake said as he and Aaron walked out of the room.

CHAPTER 9

"Dad? Do you have a minute?" Jake asked hesitantly with Aaron standing at his side.

"Of course son. Come here." Allen said with an inviting smile at Jake.

Jake walked closer to Allen and was pulled into a warm hug.

"What's on your mind Sport?" Allen asked as he reluctantly released the hug.

"There's this kid who needs our help..." Jake began.

"Uh oh." Teri said as she looked around at the other adults.

"I was wondering, I mean, we all were, if we could invite him to move in with us?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"Son, we haven't even seen the new house yet. I don't think..." Allen began but was interrupted.

"If we don't do this now, he'll be sent to Vulcan and then we probably won't be able to help him." Aaron said desperately.

"Vulcan?" Allen asked in confusion.

"He's half Vulcan. His dad is always pushing him to be like Captain Spock. He makes him study all the time and now is ready to send him away because he isn't Vulcan enough." Jake said with pleading in his voice.

"And he needs someplace where he can grow up and be Vulcan and Human without being pushed to be something he's not." Aaron interjected.

"And he really wants to stay on Earth." Jake said imploringly.

"Guys, maybe it would be better if he came to stay with us." Teri said, noticing Allen's overwhelmed expression.

"He can't. He needs to stay with us. He can't speak English, but Kevin can speak Vulcan so he can talk to him." Jake said quickly.

Allen held up his hand in a 'stop' motion and asked, "Chip? How many bedrooms does your house have?"

"There are three bedrooms and an apartment over the garage." Chip said with a smile, knowing that the decision had already been made.

"Jake, I don't think Kevin and Kenny will have a problem sharing a room, but what about you? If we invite this mystery boy to live with us, will you be willing to share a room?" Allen asked carefully.

"Yes Dad. He can have the bed if he wants it, I'll sleep on the floor. Please don't make him have to go someplace where he won't be loved." Jake asked as a plea.

Allen closed his eyes and thought for a minute before saying, "You'll each have a bed. You don't have to worry about that. He can stay as long as it's what he wants. If he wants to go back to his father or to Vulcan, I don't want you or your brothers trying to change his mind."

"Thanks Dad." Jake said with joy and turned to run out of the room.

"One more thing." Allen said quickly.

Jake stopped and turned cautiously.

"As part of my job, I've also learned to speak Vulcan." Allen said with a smile.

Jake's face lit up and he continued out of the kitchen followed closely by Aaron.

"He's got you wrapped around his little finger." Chip said with a shake of his head.

* * * * *

Jake walked into the game room to see Kevin talking to the picture in a language he'd never heard.

"What's he doing?" Jake asked no one in particular.

"He's soothing Xain. It is not exactly telepathy, but it's not empathy either. He seems to be speaking to his sub-conscious mind." Jamie said in concentration.

"What did Pop say?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"He said 'yes'." Jake said as he listened to Kevin's calming words.

Justy walked in and said, "Grandpa Sarek said that he would make the invitation personally. He said that Solak would be most accepting of the idea if he presented it. He is waiting for our call to proceed."

"Now we need to get Uncle Brady to bring him here when he comes." Jake said to the group.

"Dad could arrange that. Let's go ask him." Jamie said as he looked at Jacob.

After a single nod from Jacob they hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Do you do this often?" Jake asked Kevin quietly.

"I used to do it every night." Kevin said as he kept his attention focused on the picture before him.

"He's feeling better. Not exactly happy, but he feels like things might work out for him." Kenny said thoughtfully.

Kevin nodded and looked up at Jake.

"I used to take out my pictures and if any of them was afraid or hurting, I'd talk to them and try to make them feel better." Kevin explained.

Jake pulled Kevin into a hug and asked, "Did you ever do that for me?"

Kevin shyly nodded.

"Was it the second night after my mom was killed?" Jake asked in a small voice.

Kevin nodded, then pulled out of the hug and started going through his pictures.

"This is yours." Kevin said and presented the picture to Jake.

"It's Midas." Jake said with a smile of delight.

"Who's Midas?" Kenny asked curiously as he looked at the vague shape of a mouse-like creature.

"Midas was my hamster. I had him when I was about seven years old." Jake said fondly.

"Why did you call him Midas?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Why not call him Midas?" Jake asked back challengingly.

"How long have you two been brothers?" Sean asked with a smile as he watched the exchange.

"Sorry Kenny." Jake said shyly.

"You don't need to be sorry Jake, you were doing it right. If Kenny wants to know something, he's going to ask. If he asks you something that you don't feel like sharing, you let him know it. That's what you two just did." Sean explained carefully.

"And you did it like you've been doing it for years." Cory said from Sean's side.

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"Dad, we've got something to ask you." Jacob said quietly.

"Jake said his Uncle Brady is coming to visit tomorrow from San Francisco." Jamie said, matching his brother's tone of voice.

"And we were wondering if you could ask him to bring our new friend here with him." Jacob asked as he looked at his dad with large eyes.

"That way no one would have to make a special trip to bring him..." Jamie said more quickly.

"...and he wouldn't have to travel by himself." Jacob said, increasing the pace even more.

"Boys!" Chip said, trying to stop their tag-team verbal assault.

Both boys looked at Chip with wide, hopeful eyes.

"I'll call him now and I'll let you know where and when your friend should meet him." Chip said in resignation.

"Thanks Dad!" Both boys said in unison and hugged their father gratefully.

"Yeah, and Jake's got me wrapped around his little finger." Allen said with a chuckle to JC and Teri.

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"He said yes. He's calling Lieutenant Thompson now." Jacob said happily.

"Good. Come on in. I can smell cookies baking, so we have one more thing to do, then we'll hit the kitchen." Cory said happily.

Jacob and Jamie took their seats on either side of Beau and pulled him into a warm hug.

"Everyone. You know that when one of us does something as a representative of Clan Short that it reflects on all of us?" Cory asked the group who were giving their full attention.

'Yeahs' and nods went around the circle of boys.

"David, JJ, Gabe, Jacob, Jamie, Mark and Zac. I've talked to a few people who you've come in contact with today." Cory said as he looked at each of the team members in turn.

"Each of them told me the same thing in their own way. You all behaved professionally and represented Clan Short well." Cory said dramatically.

"David, when you first called me you were uncertain and thought it would be best if someone else went to help Kenny. How do you feel now?" Cory asked with a small grin.

"I didn't do much. You told me to get my team together and let them know what needed to be done. That's all I did." David said humbly.

"Talk to Uncle Chip about that sometime. I think that's his job description when he's in command." Cory said with a smile.

David blushed and pulled Aaron tight against his side.

"JJ, there's a Starfleet Security Lieutenant that you impressed to the point that she called me so I'd be sure to know what a capable man I have as my head of security." Cory said happily.

"Just doing my job." JJ said while trying to hide his smile of pride.

"Gabe, Jacob and Jamie. T'Prang sent a personal message informing me that my intelligence team was properly skilled and worthy of any house of Vulcan." Cory said in a Vulcan tone.

Everyone chuckled as Travis, Eli, Benji and Ricky surrounded Gabe in a hug.

"Mark and Zac." Cory said and turned his gaze to the pair.

"We didn't do anything." Mark said quietly.

Cory looked from the pair to Kevin, Kenny and Jake.

"You helped us not be scared." Kevin said seriously.

"You stayed with us, even after we were safe when we got here." Kenny said quietly.

"You were there when we needed you." Jake said with true respect for the pair.

"You see? And thanks to all of you, Kenny, Kevin and Jake are safe, have a family and have more brothers than they could have dreamed of." Cory said happily.

"Daddy, my tummy wants some cookies." Timmy said in a whiney tone.

"Mine too." CD said immediately.

"I guess we're done. Let's go raid the kitchen, then we can start the nest when we get back." Cory said to the group as he stood.

"What does that mean?" Kenny asked Justy quietly.

"We're all going to sleep in here tonight. It's really neat." Justy said happily.

"All of us?" Jake asked as he looked at the group of boys funneling out the door.

"Yeah. Have you ever seen a litter of puppies sleep?" Justy asked as he moved toward the door.

"Um, yeah, once." Jake said slowly.

"We kinda do that. A puppy pile. We just all snuggle in and go to sleep." Justy said as he finally made it to the door.

"It sounds like fun." Kenny said with a smile.

"I don't know. I never slept with anyone before." Kevin said nervously.

"It'll be fine. Kenny and I will be right there with you." Jake said with assurance.

Kevin looked at Jake's earnest expression and broke into a smile as he said, "You're a great big brother Jake."

"And you two are great little brothers... unless you make me miss out on cookies by keeping me in here." Jake teased.

Kevin and Kenny took off at the same time to follow the group to the kitchen.

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"Really?" Kevin asked in wonder as he was handed a glass of milk to go with his cookies.

Helen looked at Kevin in confusion, then at Kenny.

"You've had milk before haven't you?" Kenny asked slowly.

"Yeah, but I only ever got to drink it at school before. You mean we get to drink milk whenever we want?" Kevin asked in disbelief.

"Yes honey, whenever you want a glass of milk you can either ask for it or help yourself." Helen said as she tried to hold in her welling emotions.

"Do you think Poppa will let me have milk to drink too?" Kevin asked Kenny seriously.

"I know he will. In fact, he's always trying to get me to drink 'more' milk." Kenny said with a smile.

* * * * *

Aaron showed the boys to a bedroom where they could keep their suitcases, or pillow cases as the 'case' may be.

"With this many of us, we shower in teams. Those with boyfriends usually shower with them. Those without usually go with their brothers or best friends." Aaron said to Kenny, Kevin and Jake.

"Shower... together?" Kevin asked shyly.

"Yeah. It's no big deal. We're all guys and all we do is wash... well, except the couples sometimes. When your turn comes, just go in and shower. I'm guessing you three will want to go together." Aaron said in a considering voice.

"Yeah." Kevin said nervously.

"I'll come get you when it's your turn." Aaron said and walked away.

"What's wrong Kev?" Kenny asked quietly.

"Back when I used to have to play in gym I had to shower with other guys and they'd make fun of me and call me names." Kevin mumbled.

"Why did they do that?" Kenny asked quietly as he pulled Kevin into a hug.

"Cause I'm so little and skinny." Kevin whimpered.

"So? I know you're skinny and I don't make fun of you. Do you think Jake will make fun of you?" Kenny asked and looked up at Jake with a 'you'd better not' expression.

"No. Jake wouldn't make fun of me. I guess I'm being stupid." Kevin said weakly.

Jake knelt down so he was closer to Kevin's eye level and said, "No you're not Kev. In your head, showering with other guys leads to getting hurt because that's what's always happened before. But you know we won't do that. We'd never kid you about something that we know bothers you. And if we say or do something to hurt your feelings, then tell us and we'll stop. Just remember that we love you Kev."

"He's right bro. We wouldn't be talking to you about this if we didn't love you. If you're really scared or really don't want to, we'll let you go in by

yourself and we'll wait till you're done." Kenny said and looked at Jake to see a nod of approval.

"No. I'll try. Just as long as you don't laugh at me, I'll be okay." Kevin said seriously.

"I promise Kev. No laughing... well, not unless you do something funny." Jake finished with a smile.

"Ken? Do you have something I could wear, my stuff's kind of..." Kevin trailed off.

"Sure. You can look in my suitcase with me and pick something out. My boxer's will probably almost fit you." Kevin said as he moved the suitcase to the bed.

"I don't think so." Jake said, looking at Kevin seriously.

"Maybe he could borrow something from someone else?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"I bet Jacob or Jamie could give you something to wear. It might be big on you, but not as big as something of Kenny's." Jake said thoughtfully.

"What about you?" Kevin asked seriously.

"Oh, um, maybe Aaron could loan me something." Jake said as he considered who else might be close to his size.

"Did I hear my name?" Aaron asked as he walked into the room.

"Yeah. We need something to sleep in. Do you think Jamie or Jacob would loan Kevin something and maybe you could loan me something?" Jake asked hopefully.

"Well, you really don't need to wear anything to sleep in if you don't want to. Most of us sleep nude. But if you really want to borrow something I'm sure the twins won't have a problem, and neither will I." Aaron said with a smile.

"We have to sleep naked?" Kevin asked in terror.

"No. Just if you want to. Like I said, most of the guys sleep nude. But if you'd rather wear something to sleep in, it's fine. No one will mess with you about it either way." Aaron said with assurance.

"Jake? What are you going to do?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"I'm probably going to borrow something. I'm just kind of used to wearing something to sleep. All my naked time is spent awake." Jake said absently.

"Me too. I never slept naked, ever." Kevin said with wide eyes at the thought.

"I do." Kenny said hesitantly.

"What?" Kevin asked in shock.

"I usually sleep naked. I tried pajamas and boxers to sleep in and they always got twisted around while I was sleeping." Kenny finished with a shrug.

"Are you going to sleep naked tonight?" Kevin asked slowly.

"Not if you don't want me to. If me being naked will make you uncomfortable, I'll wear something to sleep in." Kenny said as a vow.

Kevin thought about the statement and finally said, "I want you to sleep good. Just as long as I don't have to sleep naked, I'll be okay."

"No problem. And Jake will be wearing something too, so no one will even think anything about it." Kenny said with a smile.

"Good. Now that that's settled, I came to tell you that the shower should be free any time now. Give me a minute to get some clothes for you and I'll be right back." Aaron said and hurried away.

"He's really a great guy." Kenny said conversationally.

"Yeah. I always thought he'd be nice, but I never thought we'd have stuff in common. It's really cool." Jake said thoughtfully.

"Do you want him to be your boyfriend?" Kenny asked curiously.

"No. Aaron already has David. I think I'll stick with having brothers for now. Dating and stuff like that can wait till later. For now I'm just going to enjoy my brothers and my Dad." Jake said happily.

"Yeah. I like that plan." Kevin said with a grand smile.

* * * * *

Aaron handed out boxers for Kevin and Jake, then asked, "Are you guys ready now?"

"I guess." Kevin said hesitantly.

"Can I shower with you?" A small voice asked from the doorway.

Everyone turned to see CD standing in just his underwear.

"Does your Dad know where you are?" Aaron asked in a parental tone.

"Uh huh. He said it was okay cause they're new. Timmy and Ricky got to shower with everyone else when they was new so I get to shower with you... if you say it's okay." CD finished hopefully.

"I don't mind, but you'll need to ask Kenny and Kevin." Jake said with a smile directed at CD.

"Can I? Pleeeeeeease!" CD begged shamelessly.

Kenny laughed and nodded.

Kevin smiled and said, "Okay."

* * * * *

Kevin watched apprehensively as Jake and Kenny began to undress.

"You look ascared." CD said seriously to Kevin.

"People used to make fun of me when I showered in school. I'll be okay." Kevin said and reluctantly began to undress.

"That was wrong of them. If anyone makes fun of you here, I'll tell my Daddy and he'll make them stop." CD said firmly.

Kevin smiled and took the final step of pulling down his shorts.

Kenny had been watching and turned quickly away to face the wall as Jake walked to the shower to turn it on.

"Kenny? Are you trying not to laugh?" Kevin asked accusingly.

Kenny shook his head 'no' but didn't answer.

"Then what are you doing?" Kevin asked apprehensively.

Kenny slowly turned to face his brother with tears shining in his eyes.

Kenny felt a fresh stab of pain as he looked at his brother standing before him, every bone in his scrawny frame clearly visible through ghost pale skin.

"I'm sorry Kev, I wasn't ready..." Is all that Kenny could manage to say.

"What's wrong?" CD asked in confusion.

"I think it would take longer to explain than it would take to shower. Come on, the water's just right." Jake said from the shower.

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"Can you wash me?" CD asked Kenny hopefully.

"Um, I don't know. You're Dad might not want me doing stuff like that." Kenny said hesitantly.

"Daddy and Poppa says it's okay. Please? It feels good. It shows me that you really like me." CD said earnestly.

"Sure. Come over here." Kenny said with a smile.

"Jake, you should wash Kevin too so he'll not be ascared and know you like him too." CD said firmly.

Jake looked at Kevin's timid expression and said, "I'd like to if you wouldn't mind Kev."

Kevin was ready to say 'no' but looked into Jake's eyes to see the honest caring within.

A nod was all Kevin could manage, he couldn't find words to express how much he wanted to be shown that someone loved him.

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"Relax Kev, I'm not going to do anything but wash you. I'd never do anything to hurt you." Jake said as he felt the tension in Kevin's body.

"I never had anyone do something like this before. It feels weird." Kevin said apprehensively.

"Do you want me to stop?" Jake asked with concern.

"No. It's nice. I'm just not used to it." Kevin said quickly.

"Okay. But if it feels too weird, just let me know and I'll stop." Jake said quietly.

"Jake, can you wash me now? Kenny needs to show Kevin that he likes him too." CD said as he watched the exchange.

"Um, is that okay with you Kev?" Jake asked carefully.

"Yeah." Kevin whispered.

* * * * *

"Is everyone clean? I think we've taken longer than we should." Jake asked the group.

"Yeah. All clean." CD said happily.

"Come on, out you go." Jake said as he stepped out of the shower.

"You got a big one like Unca Aaron." CD said as he looked at Jake's penis.

Jake couldn't think of anything to say in response to that, so he grabbed a towel and started to dry CD.

"Daddy says that someday I'll have a big one too." CD said happily as he enjoyed being dried.

"And Timmy says that when I have a big one I'll be able to make spermies and do stuff to my weenie that feels good." CD said as he held up his arms for Jake to dry under them.

"You have plenty of time to wait on that CD. That stuff that feels good is just for the big guys to mess with." Jake said, trying to keep his voice even.

"Yeah, that's what Daddy and Pop said. Thanks for washing me Unca Jake." CD said with a smile.

"Anytime CD, I know that sometimes being told that someone likes you just isn't the same. It's better to be shown." Jake said with a grin.

"Yeah. It's nice." CD said with joy as Jake dried his feet.

* * * * *

As all the boys left the bathroom dressed only in underwear, Allen walked up and asked, "Guys, do you think we could talk for a minute before you go to bed?"

"Sure Dad." Jake said immediately.

"I'll go find Daddy and Pop now." CD said and ran off down the hall.

"Come on in here, I just want to talk about a few things." Allen said and led the way into a bedroom.

* * * * *

"What's up Pop?" Kenny asked with concern.

"I just wanted to cover what's going to happen over the next few days so we all know what to expect." Allen said as he took a seat on the bed.

Jake took a seat on Allen's right as Kenny took a seat on Allen's left.

Kevin looked hesitantly at Allen, not knowing what to do.

"Come here Kevin." Allen said gently.

Kevin took a step forward and was pulled into a hug, then lifted to sit on Allen's lap.

"Guys, everything is happening really fast and I need to know if you're having any problems with anything." Allen said with concern.

"Everything's great Pop." Kenny said as he hugged into Allen's side.

"How about you Jake?" Allen asked as he turned to his right.

"It's... like it's not real yet." Jake said honestly.

"I know. It's the same for me. We've all been through a lot today and it's going to take some time for it all to sink in. If you have any problems or questions, just come to me and ask." Allen said gently.

Jake nodded and leaned against Allen's side.

"Kevin? Are you okay?" Allen asked with concern.

"I'm scared." Kevin said in a small voice.

"So am I. Change is scary. If we all stick together and tell each other what we're feeling, I think we'll be okay. Will you tell me if you have a problem?" Allen asked quietly.

"Yeah. I don't know what I'm feeling yet. It's all mushed up together right now." Kevin said seriously.

Allen smiled and said, "When it gets unmushed, let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Kevin nodded and hugged Allen as he put his head on Allen's shoulder.

"I took some personal time off from work, I still have another week. I'm going to enroll you all in school this week and you'll start next week." Allen said carefully.

Kevin got a look of fright as he sat upright.

Allen turned to look at Jake as he felt a wave of tension come over him.

"Don't worry. Kevin and Jake are going to a school called 'Camp Little Eagle'. David told me that your Clan started the school and they'll take good care of you." Allen said with assurance.

"What if we don't like it?" Kevin asked in a small voice.

"Then we'll find you something else. I never want you to be hurt again Kevin. If you don't like your new school, we'll find someplace else that you will like. Please just give it a chance." Allen asked hopefully.

Kevin nodded and put his head back on Allen's shoulder.

"What about me?" Kenny asked quietly.

"You get to choose if you want to go to your old school or to 'Camp Little Eagle' with your brothers." Allen said seriously.

Kenny got a big smile and said, "Thanks Pop. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to go to school with Tiffy and Charlie and TJ."

"We'll all go to 'Camp Little Eagle' this week and visit. Then you can decide what you want to do for sure." Allen said with a smile.

"I also need you three to do something for me." Allen said seriously.

All three boys pulled back to look at Allen in question.

"We have a week off, I think we need to go do something as a family next weekend. You all be thinking of where you'd like to go and let me know as soon as you've decided." Allen said with a smile.

"Really?" Jake asked with delight.

"Really. Make sure you include your new friend... what's his name?" Allen asked curiously.

"Xain." Kenny said quietly.

"Right. Make sure you include Xain in your plans and try to find a place we'll all enjoy going. Depending on what you come up with, we'll probably leave Friday night and spend Friday and Saturday nights in a hotel. You have all week to work it out, but as soon as you've decided, let me know so I can make reservations if I need to." Allen said to the group.

"This is going to be soooo cool!" Kenny said with excitement.

"Yeah. Where do you want to go first?" Jake asked with glee.

"Boys! Calm down. You have all week to figure it out. We have a lot to do tomorrow, so you'd better get to bed now." Allen said with a smile at the happiness of all the boys.

"Okay Pop. Thanks." Kenny said and gave Allen a kiss on the cheek.

"Yeah, thanks Dad. You're the greatest." Jake said and hugged Allen tightly.

"I love you Poppa." Kevin said with a smile and gave Allen a quick kiss on the mouth, then hugged him tightly.

"You boys go on and get to bed. I'll be in this room tonight if you need anything." Allen said with a smile of delight.

"Goodnight Pop." Kenny said happily as he hopped off the bed.

"Night Dad." Jake said with a smile as he stood.

"Good night Poppa." Kevin said as he wiggled down from Allen's lap and joined his brothers by the door.

"Good night boys. Have sweet dreams. I'll see you in the morning." Allen said with a glowing smile.

"You too." Kenny said as he led the boys out the door.

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"Jake, you got a second?" David asked as the three boys entered the room.

"Sure." Jake said with wide eyes as he looked at David standing naked before him.

"I've got all the information Teri needs about Kenny and Kevin. I just need to know a few things so we can get all your paperwork settled tomorrow." David said as he tried not to react to Jake's inspection of his body.

"Um, okay. What do you need to know?" Jake asked hesitantly as he brought his gaze up to meet David's eyes.

"Your full name." David said as he picked up a notebook from beside the door.

"Jacques Marcel Labrideaux Samuelson." Jake said quietly.

"Okay." David said, then handed the notebook to Jake and asked, "Could you just write that down for me?"

Jake smiled and wrote his name out.

"Where were you born?" David asked as he accepted the notebook back from Jake.

"Yarmouth, Nova Scotia... that's in Canada." Jake said shyly.

"We're going to need to sit down and trade stories sometime." David said with a smile as he wrote down the information.

"My mom was Canadian. I was born there while she was visiting my Grandma. I grew up in Chicago, I don't even remember Canada." Jake said with a shrug.

"Is your Grandmother still alive?" David asked quietly.

"No, she died about ten years ago. She choked to death on a poppy seed roll." Jake said seriously.

David looked at Jake blankly, blinked, then shook his head and asked, "Do you have a social security number?"

"Yeah." Jake said and put out his hand for the notebook.

Jake wrote down his social security number and handed the notebook back to David.

"That should be everything I need. I'll give this to Teri so she can record everything in the official records.

"Do you think Aaron would mind if I hugged you?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind." David said with a smile.

Jake pulled David into a hug and quietly said, "Thank you for saving us."

"I'm glad I could help." David said as he held Jake tightly.

"I guess I'd better get back to my brothers." Jake said as he reluctantly released David from his arms.

"And I'd better get back to Aaron." David said with a smile.

* * * * *

After Cory made the announcement that everything was in place for Xain to join them in the morning, the group settled in to sleep.

"You okay Kev?" Kenny asked quietly.

"Yeah. I was worried before, but now I'm fine. This don't seem weird at all. I like this." Kevin said as he snuggled between Kenny and Jake.

"Me too. Have a good sleep Kev. I love you." Kenny whispered as he placed a light kiss against the side of Kevin's head.

"Yeah. I love you Ken, you too Jake." Kevin said in a sleepy whisper.

"I love you both, now go to sleep." Jake said with a smile as he draped an arm across both his brothers.

CHAPTER 10

Allen was laying awake in the dark, replaying the events of the day in his mind. It wasn't surprising that after twenty-two hours of sleep, he was having trouble drifting off at his normal bed time. The bedroom door opened and a figure crept inside before closing it again. Allen remained still, wondering what was going on. He felt the bed shift as someone climbed on and crawled under the covers. Allen was about to say something when he felt a gentle kiss on his chest. 'One of the boys.' Allen thought to himself with a smile.

Then a hand started to stroke him through his boxers and he froze in panic. The hand started to work it's way under the waist band as the mouth began to trail down his belly. Allen reached down to grab whoever was in his bed by the shoulders and pull him away.

"Let me." A voice whispered.

"Come up here first." Allen whispered back and urged his unexpected bed partner up into his arms.

There was enough moonlight coming into the room that he could recognize Jake when his head emerged from under the covers. "What are you doing Sport?" Allen asked in as gentle a tone as he could manage.

"I got to thinking about how you made me your son and how nice you're being and I wanted to show you how much I love you." Jake said honestly.

Allen was shocked for an instant, but then he saw the honest love in Jake's eyes and smiled.

"Thank you Jake. I love you too, but this isn't the way a son should show his father that he loves him." Allen said, trying not to sound harsh.

Jake got a fearful look on his face and his eyes began to fill with tears as he said, "But I don't know any other way. It's... it's all I've got to give..."

"I know Sport. I know. How about this? When you want to show me that you love me, just hug me as tight as you want as long as you want to show how much. That other way of showing love belongs between lovers." Allen said quietly.

"It doesn't seem like enough." Jake said in a small voice of defeat.

"Let's try it now. You give me a hug that shows me just how much you love me and I'll do the same." Allen said in a whisper.

Jake pulled close to Allen's side and held him with a vice-like grip.

Allen responded in kind and held Jake with all the love that he felt.

The two remained in the embrace for five minutes without saying a word.

"How's it working?" Allen asked with a smile.

"I love you, Dad. My old dad wouldn't let me hug him after I was about six years old." Jake said distantly.

"Some men are like that. They're taught that showing love is wrong. Some are taught to show love in other ways, like buying presents or working hard to provide the best home possible. They don't love any less, they just show it in different ways." Allen explained.

"You're not mad at me for trying to do sex stuff are you?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"No, Jake. I'm flattered that you love me enough to want to show me." Allen said and kissed Jake on the cheek.

"But if you *were* mad, what would you do?" Jake asked apprehensively.

Allen caught the tone of Jake's voice and thought about what he knew about Jake's past before answering, "It depends on how mad I am. If I'm a little bit mad, I'd probably tell you why I'm mad and try to find out why you did whatever you did."

"But what if you're really really mad?" Jake pressed, obviously needing to know.

"Then I would probably leave the room for a few minutes until I got over my anger. After that I'd come back in and talk to you about it." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Is that it? I mean... what if I wrecked your car?" Jake asked, desperately trying to think of the worst case scenario.

"Why would you have my car?" Allen asked curiously.

"What?" Jake asked in confusion.

"I'd need to know why you had my car. If you borrowed my car to take one of your brothers to the hospital, then I wouldn't be mad at all. If you borrowed it because you were going to go out and take your friends out to joy-ride and do illegal things, then I'd be very mad." Allen said seriously.

"Okay, the second one. What would you do?" Jake asked with concern.

"Would you ever do that?" Allen asked quietly.

"What?" Jake asked in confusion.

"Take my car to go joy-riding and do illegal things?" Allen asked seriously.

"No. I just want to know if you'll hit me!" Jake finally said in frustration.

Allen pulled Jake even closer in a hug and said, "No matter what happens. No matter what you or your brothers ever do. I swear I'll never hit any of you."

"Really?" Jake asked with disbelief.

"Well, there is one way." Allen said thoughtfully.

"What's that?" Jake asked suspiciously.

"In self defense. If you hit me or your brothers, then I'll defend myself or defend them. But besides that, there's no way I'll ever hit any of you." Allen said as a vow.

Jake nodded seriously, accepting the statement.

After a moment of silence, Allen asked, "Can you make the same promise to me?"

"What do you mean?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"I've just promised that I won't hit you or your brothers, no matter how mad I get. Can you promise the same thing?" Allen asked seriously.

Jake opened his mouth to answer, then closed it slowly as he thought.

Allen waited as Jake considered the promise he was about to make.

"I don't think I can." Jake said in a defeated whisper.

"Why not?" Allen asked gently.

"Sometimes I get so mad that I do stupid things. When I'm like this I'm okay, but when I get really mad... it's like I can't think at all. I can't promise that I won't hit you if I get really really mad." Jake said in an ashamed voice.

"There's something we can do about that." Allen said as he reconfirmed his hug.

"What?" Jake asked, not ever considering that something could be done about it.

"Tonight I talked with the other adults. One of them was named Dan and he's a child psychologist. He talked with me about what I could expect with you three. He said that since your dad had problems with his anger, you

might too. He said that if you'd be willing to talk to him about it, he might be able to teach you different ways to express your anger." Allen said carefully.

"Like you just showed me a different way to show my love." Jake said thoughtfully.

Allen smiled and said, "Exactly. From being on your own so early you've had to learn a lot of things by yourself. You got most of them right, but there are one or two things that you need to relearn so you don't end up in trouble."

"So I don't end up like my old Dad." Jake said, matching Allen's tone.

"I wasn't going to say it, but yeah." Allen said regretfully.

"Thanks Dad. Thanks for seeing to it that I'm not going to end up like him... I've been scared of that." Jake finished in a whisper.

"Don't worry Sport. We're in this together now. We'll get this fixed before it's a problem." Allen said and held Jake closely.

"Dad? Can I sleep here tonight?" Jake asked in a small voice.

"Of course. Just relax. You've had a long day." Allen said gently.

"Thanks Dad, I love you." Jake whispered as he scooted down to use Allen's shoulder as a pillow.

"I love you too son. Now go to sleep." Allen said in a whisper.

Before two minutes had passed, Allen heard Jake's breathing become slow and even as he fell asleep.

Allen smiled to himself and closed his eyes and let consciousness drift away.

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"Where's Jake?" Kevin asked in sleepy concern as he sat up.

Kenny opened his eyes and looked around.

"Maybe he got up early and didn't want to wake everyone else up." Kenny said in a whisper, so he didn't disturb the others sleeping around him.

"Maybe he ran away." Kevin said with full worry.

Kenny heard the concern in Kevin's voice and was fully awake.

"Let's go find him." Kenny said and got up to find his shorts where he left them.

Kevin nodded and stood.

Kenny and Kevin walked from the game room to the kitchen. Finding no one, they went to the living room and the study to find them equally empty.

"Let's go get Poppa." Kevin said as his worry increased.

"Yeah." Kenny said, his own worry growing with every silent minute.

The pair walked through the house quickly with their worry turning to panic. They then headed up the stairs to the room their father was in.

Kenny and Kevin walked into the bedroom and froze just inside the door.

Jake was snuggled into Allen's side, sound asleep.

Kenny smiled at the sight and motioned to his brother to 'come on'.

Quietly the two boys crawled into the bed and snuggled in. Kevin snuggled against Jake's side as Kenny snuggled into Allen's.

* * * * *

Allen awoke to a wonderful feeling of being snuggled from every direction. Slowly he opened his eyes. The sleepy fog finally gave way to the light of pre-dawn coming through the window. Allen looked around the bed to find all three of his sons snuggled in, fast asleep. Allen gave a sigh of contentment and rested his head on the pillow again as he smiled.

"Good morning Dad." Jake whispered.

"Good morning son. Did you sleep well?" Allen asked happily.

"I think it's the best I've ever slept." Jake said with a smile.

"Me too. We seem to have company this morning." Allen said quietly.

"I guess they missed us." Jake said as he looked around.

"Is it time for breakfast?" Kenny asked sleepily.

"Just about, cute stuff. Did you sleep well?" Allen asked, enjoying the carefree feeling of laying in bed.

"Yeah. We woke up and noticed that Jake was gone so we came to find him." Kenny said as he shifted to rest his head on an elbow.

"I needed to talk to Dad about some stuff." Jake said shyly.

Kevin sat up, looked around the room quickly, then raced to the bathroom. A minute later Kevin returned to the bed and crawled up beside Jake again.

"Good morning Kev." Jake said with a smile.

"Good morning." Kevin said slowly as he blinked his eyes, obviously not fully awake yet.

"Guys, we have a big day ahead of us. I'm going to need your help looking at the new house." Allen said seriously.

"What can we do?" Kevin asked slowly.

"I need you to look it over and tell me what you really think of it. Let me know if you really like it or not. Your Uncle Chip wants to sell it to us, but it's our decision. This is going to be your home so you have to be happy with it." Allen said as he looked around to find comprehension on all the boys faces.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in." Allen called, just loudly enough to be heard.

JC stuck his head in the door and said, "Breakfast will be ready in about ten minutes."

"Thanks, we're just getting up." Allen said with a peaceful smile.

JC smiled in return and said, "That's one of the best ways to wake up in the morning. It's much better than a pounce."

"A what?" Allen asked curiously.

"You'll find out." JC said with a mischievous smile and pulled the door closed as he left.

"When do we have to be there?" Allen asked as they got into Chip's Ford Explorer.

"He should be arriving about the time we get there." Chip said seriously.

"How's he doing?" Justy asked Kenny curiously.

Kenny put his hand in his pocket where Xain's picture was. "He's okay. A little nervous." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"Do you guys think you're ready to meet Xain?" Allen asked carefully.

"I don't know. Captain Spock is the only Vulcan I ever met." Kevin said slowly.

"But he needs our help. We've got to try." Jake said seriously.

"I know, Sport. I just want you to be ready to deal with someone who was raised differently from you." Allen said with concern.

"What are you worried about, Pop?" Kenny asked as he watched his brothers.

"When you're not used to being around Vulcan's, they can seem... like they don't care. Sometimes you get your feelings hurt because they don't react the way a human would." Allen said thoughtfully.

"How do you mean?" Chip asked with interest, curious to hear Allen's point of view.

"If you say 'good morning' to a human. It's natural to expect a 'good morning' or something similar in return. To a Vulcan, the statement is meaningless and not worthy of comment." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Why is it meaningless?" Jake asked with interest.

"Because in Vulcan thinking, morning is simply the rotation of the planet and the location of the local star. It happened yesterday and it is logical to assume that it will happen again tomorrow. 'Good' or 'bad' judgments concerning this regular event make no sense. It is morning, that is obvious and expected, therefore it is unworthy of comment." Allen explained.

"So he's not really being rude by not saying 'good morning'." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"But we're kind of being rude if we say something stupid like 'good morning' to begin with aren't we?" Kevin asked curiously.

"That's between you and him, little one. Some Vulcans understand the human need to make nonsensical comments and greetings and aren't offended. Others simply ignore it completely without giving a thought as to why it was said." Allen said carefully.

"So how can we talk to him without saying something stupid?" Kevin asked in concern.

"Short answer, you can't. Just talk to him normally and if you say something that you think he might have a problem with, explain it to him or avoid saying it again." Allen said simply.

"Allen's right. Be yourself, just don't get your feelings hurt if Xain's behavior makes you feel like he doesn't like you. Vulcan emotional control sometimes appears to Humans as not being interested or even brooding." Chip said seriously.

"I think I understand. He doesn't know how to show things like love and anger the way Humans do." Jake said as he looked at Allen conveying the deeper meaning of his question with his eyes.

"Exactly. Vulcans don't show their emotions obviously, sometimes they don't show them at all." Allen said with a smile at Jake's understanding.

"We're here." Chip said and pulled the Explorer into a parking place.

* * * * *

"There they are." Jake said as he spotted his Uncle Brady walking with a Vulcan boy.

"Hey guys. How you doing?" Brady asked happily.

"We're good. How was your flight?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Fine. Strangely quiet." Brady said and glanced at Xain.

"*T'nar pak sorat y'rani*." Allen greeted Xain formally and held out his hand in the appropriate salute.

"*T'nar jaral*." Xain said, giving the customary reply.

"We will speak English while we are among those who do not speak Vulcan. If you require clarification of what is being said either my son Kevin or I will be able to assist you." Allen said.

"Acceptable." Xain said flatly.

"I am Allen, these are my sons Jake, Kevin, and Kenny. You traveled here with my brother, Brady. This is my friend Chip and Chip's son Justy." Allen said slowly.

Xain glanced at each as they were introduced, then said, "Xain."

"Nice to meet you. If you'll come with us, we'll look at where you might be living." Allen said with a smile.

"My Clan?" Xain asked as they walked.

"Justy, Kevin, Jake and Kenny are members of Clan Short of the house of Sarek." Allen said carefully.

"Human." Xain said with a curious look.

"Yes. Chip, I mean Commander Dodds, was adopted into the house of Sarek. Captain Spock is his brother, Justy and his brothers make up the clan." Allen said, trying to be brief and understandable.

The group reached the Explorer and stowed the luggage efficiently. Once the group were settled into the Explorer, Xain asked, "Patriarch Short?"

"He knows you're here. We will see him later today. Now we are going to view a house that Allen is considering buying." Justy said seriously.

"Please, inform he who is my father of safe arrival." Xain asked carefully.

"Yeah, in just a few minutes." Justy said seriously as the car drove on.

"Is the new house like yours, Uncle Chip?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"Not exactly. But it's really nice." Chip said with a smile.

"But I like your house." Kevin said in a small voice.

"I'm glad you like it, but there's one thing about this new place that I think you're going to love." Chip said as the car started down the driveway.

"What's that?" Kevin asked hesitantly.

"It'll be yours." Chip said with a smile.

Kevin looked at Chip with confusion.

Allen turned and said, "We won't be living in someone else's house, we won't be renting it from someone else. If we decide to get this house, I'm going to *buy* it and it will belong to us."

Kevin looked at Jake to find a look of confusion staring back at him.

"Just trust us guys. It feels really good to have a place that's your home that no one can take away." Chip said as he concentrated on his driving.

"It's an adult thing. What's *really* cool is the swimming pool." Justy said with a dismissive look at his father.

"Swimming pool?" Kenny and Jake said simultaneously.

"Yeah. It's really neat. You'll like it." Justy said happily.

"And I've been paying to keep it maintained, so you can use it right away." Chip said happily.

"Can you guys swim?" Allen asked casually.

"I can some. Not really good." Jake said quietly.

Kevin shook his head.

Xain noticed that they expected an answer from him and he shook his head.

"Then it looks like I'm going to get to teach you. Guys, no swimming unless there's an adult at the pool with you. Once you've all learned how to swim, we'll talk about relaxing that rule a little." Allen said firmly.

"We're almost there." Chip said as they turned onto the block.

"We're going to live here?" Kevin asked in wonder as he looked at the beautiful houses in the neighborhood.

"That's what we're here to decide." Allen said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Holy God!" Allen said in a gasp as they pulled up in front of the home.

"It's beautiful!" Brady said in amazement.

Jake and Kevin stared in disbelief at the house before them.

"I can't afford this, it has to be worth a million-two at least." Allen said with disbelief.

"Not quite that much, but I've had it appraised recently. After you've seen inside, we can talk money. It's not as bad as you're thinking." Chip said honestly.

"I guess it won't hurt to look." Allen said with a note of worry.

"Daddy. Can I?" Justy asked as they approached the door. Chip smiled and handed Justy the keys.

"Poppa, can we really live here?" Kevin asked in a timid voice from Allen's side.

"That's what we're here to decide." Allen said as he saw Justy open the door.

* * * * *

Everyone walked inside and waited for their eyes to adjust to the much dimmer light inside the house. Chip walked to a panel and punched in a code to disarm the alarm system.

"Poppa look! Someone drawed pictures all over the walls!" Kevin said as he pointed to the mural on the stairway wall.

Chip smiled as Brady explained, "That's called a mural. It's okay, it's supposed to be like that."

"The living room's over here." Chip said and led the way to a door on the right.

"It's bigger than our whole apartment." Kevin said as he looked at the large living room.

"I bet two Vulcan Clans could sleep in here." Kenny said as he looked around.

Allen walked to the double doors at the far end of the room and saw that they opened onto a beautiful terrace overlooking the lake. "It's like a dream." Allen said as he looked at the breath-taking view.

"I'd forgotten just how beautiful it was." Chip said from Allen's side.

"What's in here?" Kevin asked and opened double doors to reveal another room.

"It's the family room." Justy said as he followed Kevin in.

Allen looked at the three double doors that led to the balcony and couldn't take his eyes off the view.

"Through here we have a bathroom, the kitchen and the dining room." Justy said as he led the way out of the family room.

Allen walked into the kitchen and said, "I didn't think anyone really had a kitchen like this. It's huge."

"Do you cook?" Brady asked curiously.

"Not really. I can make something if I have a recipe. But I'm not a real cook." Allen said, sounding a little apologetic.

Brady looked at Jake curiously.

"Not me. I can boil a brick of Ramen Noodles, that's about it." Jake said, laughing at the thought.

"I burn toast." Kenny said as Brady's glance fell to him.

Brady looked at Kevin next. The boy barely knew what food was.

"I can cook." Xain said quietly.

Everyone looked at Xain curiously.

"I prepare meals for me and for he who is my father." Xain said carefully.

"Humans don't always have the same tastes as Vulcans..." Allen began to say.

"I cook Human food. I have a book from she who was my mother." Xain said with difficulty.

"Thank you Xain. If you want to cook a meal for us sometime, I'm sure we would all enjoy it. But I'm going to hire a housekeeper to prepare meals for us when we're all in school and at work." Allen said seriously.

Xain nodded in understanding.

"This is where we used to eat most of the time. The dining room was for when we have company." Justy said as he led the group into the next room.

"Nice." Allen said as he glanced at yet another set of double doors leading onto the terrace.

"There's just laundry stuff in there." Justy said and walked back into the kitchen.

"And past the utility room is a walkway that leads into the garage... and out to the pool." Chip said as he followed the group back into the main hall.

"There's the dining room." Justy said as he passed the closed door.

"Let's look at it." Kenny said and opened the door.

"That's a big room." Kevin said as he looked at the room in awe.

"It's beautiful." Allen said as he looked around.

"Come on, I want to show you upstairs." Justy said anxiously.

* * * * *

The group followed Justy back into the entry hall and up the spiral staircase past the mural.

"I never dreamed of owning a house like this." Allen said in wonder.

"I don't think your boys have either." Chip said with a smile as the boys were looking at every detail.

"This used to be my room." Justy said as he raced ahead of the group.

"Lookit." Kevin said as he looked into the bathroom.

"That's a really nice bathroom." Allen said as he looked around the spacious area.

"This closet is bigger than my old bedroom." Kevin said from the walk-in closet beside the bathroom.

"There's plenty of room in here." Allen said as he looked at the spacious closet.

"There's more." Chip said happily and led the way to the next room.

* * * * *

Allen stopped in his tracks when he saw the three huge windows overlooking the lake.

"It's amazing." Allen said as he gazed out over the water of the lake.

"It's got a great view." Chip admitted.

"Another bathroom!" Kevin said in surprise.

"Yeah. Each bedroom has it's own bathroom." Justy said as he enjoyed everyone's excitement.

"There's still one more to go." Chip said and led the way out of the bedroom and around the stairway to the master bedroom.

* * * * *

Chip stood aside and waited for Allen to open the door. "What?" Allen asked in confusion as he stared at a vanity with two sinks and two doors.

"This is the dressing room. The bathroom is through that door and the closet is through the other one." Chip said with a smile.

Allen opened the bathroom door and was surprised to see how large the room was.

"It's even got a bidet." Allen said with a smile.

"What's that?" Kevin asked as he looked at the funny looking toilet.

"It washes your butt." Justy said with a giggle.

"No." Kevin said in disbelief.

"Really... come on Daddy, tell him." Justy said seriously.

"He's right, Kevin." Chip said with a smile and walked through the dressing room and out to the bedroom.

"It's beautiful, it's all so beautiful." Allen said, lost in the moment as he walked around the huge bedroom.

"Can we get it Poppa?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"Guys. Let's go downstairs and talk about this... somewhere that I'm not looking out over the lake." Allen said as he tried to turn his back on the breathtaking image.

* * * * *

"Chip, if you'll excuse us for a minute I need to talk this over with my family." Allen said and gestured for the boys to precede him into the dining room.

"We'll be right here." Chip said with a smile.

"Come on, Xain. If we get this place, you'll be living here too so you're in on this decision. You too, Brady." Allen said as he stood by the doorway.

Brady got a smile as he was included in the decision making.

* * * * *

"Okay guys. It's time to decide, do you want to live here?" Allen asked as he looked around the group.

"It's got my vote." Brady said immediately.

"I love it." Kenny said seriously.

"Can you afford it?" Jake asked with worry.

"Don't worry about that Jake. If I need to, I can afford it. I just need to know if you could feel comfortable living here." Allen said seriously.

"Are you kidding? It's like a palace. I never even dreamed of anyplace this nice." Jake said quickly.

"Kevin? Do you still want to live here?" Allen asked with a smile.

Kevin nodded quickly.

"Xain, would you like to live in this house with us?" Allen asked seriously.

"I do not understand. I am not of your family." Xain said carefully.

Allen looked at Xain and was surprised to see a flicker of emotion in his eyes. Something that looked like hope.

"Xain, are you a member of Clan Short of the family of Sarek of the house of Surak of Vulcan?" Allen asked formally.

"I am." Xain said as he regained total control.

"Are the other members of Clan Short to be regarded as your brothers?" Allen asked, maintaining his formality.

"They are." Xain said without inflection.

"Then logic suggests that the brother of my sons is also my son. Would you agree?" Allen asked seriously.

"That is logical." Xain said without hesitation.

"Then tell me, my son. Would you like to live in this house with us as part of our family?" Allen asked in a softer tone.

"Yes Father. I would be honored to share your house and family." Xain said and nearly betrayed a smile.

"Good. Then if there aren't any questions, I'll tell Chip that I'm going to do it." Allen said with a smile.

"Poppa, who gets what room?" Kevin asked carefully.

"Well, I was thinking that you and Kenny could have Justy's old room." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Awesome." Kenny said with a great smile.

"Jake and Xain, you can have the bedroom with the bidet." Allen said with a fond smile at Kevin.

"But that's the master bedroom. I don't want to take your room." Jake objected immediately.

"Don't worry about that Jake. I'm going to get the room with those huge windows that looks out over the lake. It's the room I really want anyway." Allen said with a great smile at the thought of his room.

"Where's my room?" Brady asked playfully.

"Your room is the family room. When we get furniture, you're going to pick out a day bed or sofa bed that you like and we'll put it in the family room for when you come to stay with us." Allen said happily.

"I was only kidding." Brady said hesitantly.

"I wasn't. Brady, you're my brother. My only blood relative. This is your home. Don't make me have to go to your Commander about this." Allen said mock-sternly.

"Yes sir." Brady said with exaggerated resignation.

* * * * *

"We'll take it." Allen said with a smile as he walked out of the dining room.

"Aren't you going to ask how much?" Chip asked with disbelief.

"You already said it's less than $1.2 million. I trust you. So, no. I'm not going to ask. Whenever you're ready to sit down and talk business, we'll work out those details but for now. It's settled. We're buying the house." Allen said firmly.

Chip nodded and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. He pressed a few buttons and held the phone to his ear. "He said 'yes'." Chip said seriously.

"Uh huh." Chip said a moment later. "Four-thirty." "Where?" "Okay." "Would you tell Xain's father that he arrived safely?" "Yes, I'll be sure."

"I love you too. Bye." Chip said, then hung up the phone. "Allen and Kenny, I'm supposed to take you to your old house. Clan Short and their parents are headed to your place right now with enough boxes to move three families." Chip said with a smile.

"Kevin, Jake and Xain; David and Antonio are going to take you shopping for things for your new rooms and for new clothes. Josh wanted to go but he's not allowed to go clothes shopping without adult supervision anymore. Ask him about it sometime." Chip finished with a smile.

"Brady, if you wouldn't mind doing a little security work on your day off, I have a job for you." Chip said seriously.

"Yes, Commander?" Brady asked curiously, expecting a punch-line any second.

"Soon about fifteen cars are going to be moving all Allen and Kenny's things into this house. Can you stay here and direct traffic and keep the place safe for those rare moments when no one is carrying things in?" Chip asked in a friendly tone.

"Of course, Sir." Brady said with a smile.

"And there will be a furniture delivery soon. Accept it." Chip said, glancing at Allen.

"Furniture?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Yes. We had the majority of it put in storage when we moved out. There were a few pieces that had sentimental value that we kept, but most of it didn't fit at Southcrest. Josh is having it delivered as soon as they can. It'll be here today sometime." Chip said with a smile.

"You're starting to scare me. How much *are* we talking about with the furniture added?" Allen asked in worry.

"No extra charge. It's of no use to us in storage, it's costing us money to keep it there. It belongs with this house." Chip said frankly.

"Thanks." Allen said in a bewildered tone.

"Let's get moving." Chip said to the group gathered around him.

And they did.

CHAPTER 11

"I hope you don't mind, but I have an errand to run. I'm going to drop you off at your house and the others will help you pack things." Chip said as he drove.

"I don't mind, but I'm a little overwhelmed by how fast things are moving. Two days ago I had just seen my son leave for what I thought might be the last time. I thought my life was over. Now I have four sons, a new house and so many things going on I can't keep up with them all." Allen said in an overwhelmed tone.

"That's why we're doing all this for you. I have no doubt that you could arrange the move and everything yourself. But you'd also stress yourself out in the process. Everyone wants to help and has been delegated a job. All you have to do is be there to sort through your personal effects and decide what stays and what goes. We'll take care of the rest. If all goes as planned, you and your family will be able to spend tonight in your new home and all the moving nightmare will be over with." Chip said happily.

"I don't know how I can ever repay you, all of you, for what you've done the past two days." Allen said in wonder.

"That's easy Pop." Kenny said from the back seat.

Allen looked at Kenny curiously.

"Help someone else when they need it." Kenny said with a smile.

"He's right." Chip said seriously.

"That's what all this is about, isn't it?" Allen asked thoughtfully.

"That's right. One good deed breeds other good deeds until you have an entire community of close friends willing to look out for each other." Chip said as he pulled into Allen's driveway.

"How did you know where I live?" Allen asked curiously.

"I don't know. Either Kenny told someone or someone looked at David's paperwork or someone looked it up on the computer or one of the telepaths picked it up along the way. However it happened, Josh gave me your address before we left today." Chip said as he parked the car.

"Come on Pop. Let's get started." Kenny said with enthusiasm.

"I'll see you at your new house later. Make sure you're there by four-thirty." Chip said seriously.

"What's happening at four-thirty?" Allen asked as he got out of the car.

"Let it be a surprise. Just be there." Chip said with a smile as he backed away from the house.

* * * * *

"Come on guys. I was told to get posters, toys, games, and lots of clothes." David said happily.

"Why are you getting all that stuff?" Kevin asked in confusion.

"It's for you guys. You need to decide if you want any special kind of theme or anything for your room. Aaron already suggested something for Jake's." David said happily.

"Really? What's that?" Jake asked with surprise.

"For you, we're going to get posters of every band that you like. We're going to cover the walls of your room with everything you enjoy." David said with a great smile.

"That sounds totally awesome." Jake said, then noticed Xain looking at him curiously.

"What kind of things would you like in your part of the room Xain?" Jake asked curiously.

Xain tilted his head thoughtfully before saying, "Earth."

"I don't understand." Jake said as he tried to make sense of the single word response.

Kevin leaned over and asked Xain something in Vulcan, and Xain responded quickly.

"He wants pictures of different places on Earth... but no deserts. He wants trees and valleys and mountains and snow. Stuff like that." Kevin said seriously.

Jake thought about it for a second before saying, "Why don't we get some real plants too. And maybe a little fountain or waterfall. Could we do that?"

"I think that's a great idea. Xain, what do you think?" David asked with a smile.

"Acceptable." Xain said simply, but his tone wasn't rigid Vulcan discipline. Beneath it was a note of warmth and happiness.

* * * * *

"Where do you want this?" A large man asked as he carried a crate through the door on a dolly.

"What is it?" Brady asked curiously.

"There's a list on the top. I don't read 'em. I just carry 'em." The man said with a hint of anger in his voice.

Brady ignored the man's anger and read the list on the top of the crate.

"It goes in the dining room, right through that door." Brady said and stood aside.

"Where do you want this?" Another man asked.

Brady looked curiously at the second man, and then glanced at the list on the top of the crate.

"In the family room, past the stairs and on your right." Brady said pointing the way.

The man got his crate balanced on the dolly and started away.

Brady watched him go then shook his head as he said, "You're other right!"

"Where do you want this?" Brady heard from behind him and turned to see a third large man, carrying the headboard to a bed.

Brady noticed a piece of paper taped to the back of the headboard and read it quickly.

"This goes to the room at the top of the stairs on your... that way." Brady finished, not feeling like teaching these men the difference between right and left.

The man was walking up the stairs when Brady heard the first man say, "Where do you want this?"

Brady took a deep breath before answering, knowing that this was going to be a very long day.

* * * * *

Allen and Kenny walked back into their home and hadn't got the door closed when they heard a car pull up outside.

"Are you guys ready to pack?" Teri asked as she parked the car.

"Sure, I guess." Allen said without enthusiasm.

"Here's how we've got it planned. Cory and Sean are going to walk with us from room to room. You tell them how you want things packed, what needs special care and what, if anything, you want left behind. As the others arrive, Sean and Cory will see that things are packed the way you want them. Dan and I are going to help you pack your room." Teri finished quietly.

Allen began to nod, then he caught the significance of what she just said.

"You think I'm going to lose it when I have to pack Carl's things?" Allen asked weakly.

"I think it's a distinct possibility." Teri said honestly.

"I guess I hadn't thought about having to do that. God, I don't think I can." Allen said as his eyes welled up with tears.

"Allen. We're going to be there with you. All you have to do for now is go through the things that you want to take to the new house. Someone will come in behind us and pack what's left and it will be put in storage." Teri said quietly.

"So I'm choosing what I'm keeping, not choosing what I'm leaving?" Allen asked in a dubious tone.

"Okay, maybe it's like a little mind game, but it helps." Teri said with a shrug.

"Either way, I'm glad you and Dan are going to be there with me. I don't think I could face this alone." Allen said in a timid voice.

"You're not alone." Teri said seriously.

"Yeah, and don't forget us." Sean said with a smile.

Allen looked at Sean and Cory curiously.

"We're seen as adults in the eyes of the Federation and we've got three kids. There's some stuff that Mom and Dan will be better at helping you with, but I bet there's things we can help you with better than they can." Cory said with a sincere look.

Allen didn't ask, but his curious look prompted Sean to continue.

"We can see things from a kids point of view, so we'll be able to help you understand what your kids are going through. We're parents, so we can relate to your point of view as much as theirs. You're not the only one who's facing this." Sean said, then glanced at Kenny who was standing in the entry hall, looking at pictures of his father.

"Yeah. Thanks guys. I see what you mean." Allen said as he stared at Kenny for a moment longer then said, "I guess we'd better get started before everyone else gets here."

Teri, Cory, Sean and Kenny fell into line as Allen started looking around the room and commenting on what was fragile and how he wanted certain things packed.

* * * * *

"Come on Kevin. You need to pick something so we can make your bedroom feel like 'your' room." David said with concern.

"But I don't like stuff like this." Kevin said as he looked at the posters.

"Then what kind of stuff do you like?" David asked seriously.

"I don't know." Kevin said in frustration.

"What about your pictures?" David asked quietly.

"What about them?" Kevin asked in a cautious voice.

"Would you like to put your pictures on your walls?" David asked thoughtfully.

"Yeah. That would be nice. But my pictures are on bags and food wrappers and stuff. Poppa won't want stuff like that on the walls." Kevin said with disappointment.

"Sure he will. Come on. Let's go get some art supplies and everything made of paper that we can find. By the time we're finished, your pictures are going to be the most normal things hanging on your walls." David said with a grand smile.

"Are you sure?" Kevin asked hesitantly.

"Well, if your Poppa has a problem with it, tell him that it was my idea. That way you're not in any trouble." David said happily.

Kevin thought about that for a minute, then smiled.

"Now let's see if Jake's finished, then we'll look for some blank Chinese lanterns." David said as he led the way.

* * * * *

"This one's nice." Antonio said as he pulled out a poster matted on cardboard.

Xain looked at the tall picture of a waterfall and tilted his head thoughtfully.

"Yes." Xain finally said.

Antonio picked up the poster and carried it to the checkout.

"May I help you?" A young woman asked.

"Is there some place where we could stack a few posters till we're done looking?" Antonio asked shyly.

"Sure, why don't you put that over here." The woman said and pointed to a spot beside the checkout.

As Antonio was putting the poster in place and making sure it wouldn't fall, the woman asked, "Are you looking for anything special?"

"Xain is looking for nature scenes for his new room. Landscapes, Oceans, snow, anything but desert." Antonio explained as he led her to Xain.

The woman looked at Xain curiously then said, "The ones you're looking at are the discontinued prints that have been reduced. Over here we have a better selection and there's an entire nature section that I think you'll be interested in."

The boys followed her back to another rack and started looking at a fresh selection of posters.

"I'm Rina, just call if you need anything." She said as she walked away.

Both boys looked up in time to see her staring at them.

"Which one of us do you think she's looking at?" Antonio asked with a smile.

"Vulcan." Xain said in a low voice.

"Oh. Yeah, I guess you're right. I forgot." Antonio said as he started looking at a new stack of posters.

"You forgot?" Xain asked in disbelief.

"Yeah. You're one of my brothers. Most of my brothers are different somehow. I don't really think about it." Antonio said with a shrug.

"Tony?" Rina asked hesitantly.

Antonio looked at the woman cautiously.

"But you can't be. That was ten years ago... but you look *exactly* like him." She said as she looked him over carefully.

Antonio battled within himself as to whether he should acknowledge this link to his past and possibly put himself in danger, or deny knowing her. The deciding factor was the look in her eyes.

"It's me Bree." Antonio said in a small voice.

"But how? No one's called me Bree since I was twelve. You haven't changed..." Rina said with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"I age a little differently than most people. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tell anyone. It could cause me a lot of trouble." Antonio asked hopefully.

Rina looked at him and smiled.

"Don't worry Tony, back then I knew there was something different about you. Is that why your family wouldn't let you have any friends?" Rina asked curiously.

"Yes. And that's why we moved." Antonio said quietly, not enjoying that particular memory.

"If you age slowly, I guess it makes sense for you to be friends with a Vulcan, I mean, don't they age differently from Humans?" Rina asked curiously.

Antonio looked at Xain with surprise.

"Correct." Xain said slowly.

"I've got another customer, don't worry Tony. I'll never talk to anyone about you, but be sure and come in sometimes. I always wanted to be your friend, that hasn't changed." She said quickly.

"I will, thanks Bree." Antonio said carefully.

Rina hurried to speak with her new customers.

"What is your rate of aging?" Xain asked curiously.

"I age one year for every four." Antonio said with distraction.

"In adulthood, I will also age at that rate." Xain said with difficulty, trying to find the correct words.

Antonio looked at Xain with undisguised discomfort.

"Let us discuss this again later." Xain said, not wanting to cause Antonio unnecessary distress.

Antonio nodded thoughtfully.

"In one hundred years?" Xain asked with a raised eyebrow.

Antonio looked at Xain in surprise, and then broke into a smile.

"It's a deal. One hundred years from today we'll sit down and discuss how we age." Antonio said with delight.

Xain nodded and went back to looking at nature scenes.

* * * * *

"Aaron? I'm going to need your help." David said into his cell phone.

"What's wrong?" Aaron asked with immediate concern.

"Kevin and Jake's stuff has almost filled my trunk. We still have to get Xain's and we haven't started looking at clothes." David said in frustration.

"Where do you want me to meet you? I'll get someone with a big truck to come." Aaron asked carefully.

"We're at the Skyview Plaza. Why don't you call me when you get here and I'll tell you where we are." David said thoughtfully.

"You should have taken them to the 'Florida Mall'." Aaron said in a teasing voice.

"We're going there next, it's not even a half-mile from here. You'd better hurry, Antonio and Xain were talking about getting a waterfall or fountain last time I saw them." David said with a laugh.

"I'm on my way." Aaron said quickly.

* * * * *

"Are you alright?" Dan asked with concern.

"I guess. It's... I didn't think it would be this hard. I guess a part of me still can't believe that Carl's gone." Allen said as he looked at the bedroom.

"I know what you mean. It's been less than two months since I lost Sharon. It nearly killed me to have to pack her things. Thankfully Teri and John were there for me." Dan said quietly.

Allen picked up a pillow from the bed and clutched it to his chest.

Dan walked to Allen's side and put a hand on his shoulder. "Why don't you tell me about Carl? What was he like?"

Allen smiled and sat the pillow back on the bed.

"Carl always reminded me of a big beautiful cat. Free and wild, cautious of anyone he didn't know, but fiercely protective of his family." Allen said as he walked to the dresser and started pulling things out.

"These are yours?" Teri asked as he handed her a stack of T-shirts.

Allen nodded and continued to pull things out of the dresser.

"Carl worked hard, played hard, he never did anything half-way or without a good reason." Allen said as he absently handed clothes to Teri.

"He sounds like he was a driven man. Someone with that type of personality can be a challenge to get to know." Dan said as he folded clothes and put them into a box.

Allen nodded and walked to the closet.

"He made me work for it, but it was worth it." Allen said as he started pulling clothes out and handing them to Teri.

"Is there one thing you miss the most?" Dan asked as he folded the hanging clothes and put them in another box.

"His snoring." Allen said with a chuckle.

"Really?" Teri asked.

"Oh yeah. Carl's snoring could rattle the glass in the windows. I tried to get him to go to a doctor about it a few times." Allen said in fond memory.

"Snoring like that must be hard to live with." Dan said in comment.

"It's harder to live without." Allen said as he handed the last of his clothes from the closet.

"Maybe you can find a recording of something that sounds similar so you can play it while you're sleeping?" Dan suggested.

Allen smiled and asked, "Do you happen to have a recording of a litter of hungry piglets riding a bulldozer?"

Dan laughed and said, "No, but I might be able to find one. I know enough people in the music business that someone should be able to mix some effects for you."

"No, that's alright." Allen said as he walked to the bathroom and started going through the cabinets.

"Is there anything in there that you don't want to keep?" Teri asked from the doorway.

Allen looked around and finally said, "No, I'll keep it all."

"Then just leave it and someone will come in later and pack it. Look around the bedroom and see if there's anything else you want to bring with you, if you miss something, all the rest will be in storage and you can get it whenever you want." Teri said seriously.

Allen looked around and finally said, "No. I think I'll leave the rest."

Teri and Dan looked at each other, then Dan finally said, "Why don't you pick something of Carl's to take with you? It'll make it easier, I promise."

Allen looked at Dan with surprise.

"In the bedroom I share with John, there's a jewelry box that was Sharon's. I keep it there to remind me of her. She's still part of my family, now her part is in the family history." Dan said seriously.

"I still have a pair of my husband's shoes under my bed. When it was time to move to Florida, I brought them." Teri said quietly.

Allen looked around the room and his eyes were drawn to the bedside lamp with a murky green lampshade.

"I hated that lamp the moment I saw it." Allen said as he walked over to it.

"Carl wanted the god awful thing for some reason. I was able to steer him away from it before he bought it. The next day while he was at work, I came back and bought it for him." Allen said with a smile.

"So you're going to keep something you hate?" Teri asked, looking at the lamp.

"He treasured it because he knew I didn't like it but I bought it for him anyway. So, as hideous as the thing is, I'm going to keep the lamp." Allen said with a smile.

"Grab it and let's go. We need to get to your new house to start the unpacking." Teri said with an amused smile.

Allen smiled as he unplugged the lamp.

* * * * *

"Did you say you've already got a load?" Aaron asked in amazement, as all the boys were loaded down with bags.

"Yeah. The car's full. And we still have to go back for the tree." David said as he handed off a few bags to Aaron.

"Tree?" Aaron asked in disbelief.

"Xain wanted it for his room. It's not very big." Antonio defended.

"Yeah, and it's going to be nice with the waterfall we bought..." David trailed off as he saw Aaron's look of disbelief.

"Waterfall?" Aaron asked as he led the way out to the truck.

"Oh good. You brought the hummer, I was afraid we wouldn't have room for the plants." David said with relief.

"Plants?" Aaron asked.

"Is that it?" Matt asked as he climbed out of the hummer.

"I've heard something about a tree, a waterfall and plants... is that it?" Aaron asked as he turned to face David again.

"Yeah. Then we need to go clothes shopping." David finished shyly.

"You still haven't got the clothes? What's all this?" Aaron asked as he looked at the multitude of bags.

"Just a few things to brighten up their rooms. Really, it's not that much." David said in his defense.

"Kevin? Did you get everything you wanted?" Aaron asked carefully.

"Yeah, we got a whole bunch of stuff to draw and paint with. David says my room's going to be my art studio." Kevin said happily.

Aaron nodded then asked, "What about you Jake? Did you get everything you wanted?"

"Well, almost." Jake said shyly.

"What do we still need to get?" Aaron asked curiously.

"Um, I kind of wanted to get some posters of you and *NSync, but they didn't have any left." Jake said with disappointment.

"I bet Josh and I can take care of you. Do you need any Backstreet while we're at it?" Aaron asked with a smile.

"Sure, but why Backstreet?" Jake asked cautiously.

"Oh, didn't anyone mention that? Some of your new brother's parents are in Backstreet and Brian Littrell is Chip's cousin." Aaron said happily.

"Oh wow. No they forgot to tell me that." Jake said with wide eyes at the thought.

"Xain, did you get what you wanted?" Aaron asked slowly.

"Yes." Xain said simply.

"Come on, let's get your stuff in the car, then we'll go clothes shopping." Aaron said to the group.

"Who wants to ride with me?" David asked as he loaded his things into the car.

"I do." Kevin said immediately.

"With Antonio." Xain said at Aaron's questioning look.

"I think we'll ride with Aaron, he's got more room." Antonio said with a smile directed at Xain.

"Okay Aaron. I'll show you where to go so we can get the tree, then you can drop us at my car." David said with a smile.

"The tree." Aaron said with a shake of his head, then got into the passenger's seat.

* * * * *

"We are here to install the communications terminal." A Vulcan man said as he walked in.

Brady looked at him curiously, then said, "This is the first I've heard of it."

"Patriarch Short of Clan Short requested that a communications terminal be installed at this address." A second Vulcan man said without inflection.

"Oh, for the Clan. Then I suppose it should be installed in the family room. Down that hall, to your right." Brady said and pointed.

Brady watched the Vulcan technicians walk down the hall as someone said, "Excuse me?"

Brady turned to see a well-dressed black man standing before him.

"Yes?" Brady asked, not having any idea of what to expect next.

"I'm looking for Mr. Thompson." The man said cautiously.

"I'm Brady Thompson, can I help you?" Brady asked in return.

"I'm sorry, I was told that this was Allen Thompson's house." The man said in confusion.

"It is, I'm his brother." Brady said with a smile at being able to say the words.

"He never mentioned having a brother." The man said dubiously.

"We just found each other yesterday. And you are?" Brady asked, still smiling.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Wallace Stevens. And this... Tiffany? Where are you?" Wallace asked as he looked around.

"I'm right here daddy." Tiffany called out and ran in through the front door.

"This is my daughter Tiffany. She's friends with Kenny." Wallace said with a smile.

"Oh. Well Allen and Kenny should be back soon. They're at the old house packing." Brady said as he assumed a more relaxed posture.

"Someone named Josh called us and asked us to come over. He said to be here at four-thirty, but we happened to be in the neighborhood sooner so we thought we'd stop by." Wallace said with a chuckle.

"No problem. Like I said, they should be back soon. You're welcomed to hang around here till they get back." Brady said with an inviting smile.

"Well, it wouldn't make much sense to leave and come back. Is there anything we can do to help?" Wallace asked as he looked around.

"I'm not sure. I've been directing traffic for movers." Brady said and noticed movement outside the door.

"Where's the kitchen? I've got a ton of food to bring in." Helen said from the doorway.

"It's right over there. Let me help you." Brady said quickly.

"No Brady. You need to direct traffic. Tiffany and I can help this young lady." Wallace said with a gentle smile.

"Thank you." Helen said with surprise.

"Helen, this is Wallace and Tiffany, they're friends of Allen and Kenny." Brady said in introduction.

"Nice to meet you. Let's go, I've got ice cream melting in the back seat." Helen said and hurried back out.

Brady watched them go with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"Can I ask you something?" Kevin asked quietly.

"Anything." David said as he waited for the traffic light to change.

"Does Poppa and Kenny really like me or do they just feel sorry for me?" Kevin asked in almost a whisper.

"What makes you ask that?" David asked carefully.

"Cause sometimes I see them looking at me and looking sad, like they're hurting. The way you look when you see a dog that's been hit by a car." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"I know that they love you. Do you want to know how I can tell?" David asked as traffic started moving.

"How?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"Because when I told Allen about you, he wanted you to be his son. He didn't ask who else could help you, he didn't even want to think about someone else adopting you. He wanted to be your father. And Kenny proved he loved you when you two were adopted." David said seriously.

"Cause he said he'd only say yes if I did." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"That's right. If he didn't love you, he would have said yes and waited to see what you wanted to do." David said as he followed Aaron down the road.

"Okay. I was just worried that if they were feeling sorry for me, and I started growing, then they wouldn't want me cause I wasn't little and skinny anymore." Kevin said in a disturbed tone.

"Don't worry about that little guy. They want you to get big and strong. That's why you get to have milkshakes three times a day." David said with a smile.

"Yeah, and that one I had for breakfast was really good." Kevin said with a smile.

"You had about twenty brothers watching you at breakfast all wishing they were little and skinny so they could have milkshakes too." David said happily.

"Really?" Kevin asked in wonder.

"Sure. Those eggs and hashed browns were delicious, but they would have tasted just a little bit better with a milkshake to wash them down." David said with a smile.

"I love you David." Kevin said seriously.

David caught something in the tone in Kevin's voice.

"Kev? Really?" David asked, not knowing what else to say.

"I know Aaron's your boyfriend. But I still love you." Kevin said shyly.

"I love you too but I love you as a brother, I love Aaron as a boyfriend. I'm sorry if that hurts." David said seriously.

Kevin nodded and whispered, "It's cause I'm little and skinny ain't it?"

"No Kevin. It's because I fell in love with Aaron before I met you and we're going to get married. Please try to be happy for me. If you find someone to love I promise that I'll be happy for you." David said carefully.

"Okay. I'm sorry." Kevin mumbled.

"You're my little brother, I'll always love you Kevin. Don't worry, you'll find someone else to love as a boyfriend." David said with a gentle smile.

"I'm always going to love you." Kevin said seriously.

David couldn't think of any response as he pulled into the parking lot.

* * * * *

"Living room." Kelly said as he walked in with a box.

"That way." Brady said and pointed.

DJ and Timmy walked in next, apparently carrying a couch.

"Isn't that a little heavy for you guys?" Brady asked as he watched the boys carefully.

"Unca Eli is helping." Timmy said with a giggle.

"Where do you want it?" Eli said as he floated in with Bastian at his side.

"Try in the living room over there, if it's full, try the family room through the double doors." Brady said as he watched in disbelief.

Tommy and Tyler ran out of the kitchen as Helen called out, "Come back here you two!"

"How are things going Brady?" Allen asked as he walked in with Kenny close at his side.

"It's a madhouse." Brady said honestly.

"As soon as I said 'wash the dishes' those two took off like they were on fire." Helen said with exasperation as she walked out of the kitchen.

"Do you need some help Helen?" Allen asked curiously.

"Yeah. Thanks Allen. If those two see you doing their job it'll shame them into coming back." Helen said with a chuckle.

"Come on Ken, let's help Helen." Allen said as he walked toward the kitchen.

"I just wanted to rinse all the dishes before we put them up in the cabinets in case something got on them in the move." Helen said as she led the way.

"Was that Allen?" Chip asked in a whisper from the doorway.

"Yeah, he's in the kitchen with Helen." Brady said, matching Chip's whisper.

"What about Kenny?" Chip asked as he looked around.

"He's in there too. They're doing dishes." Brady said quickly.

"Good. Come on in." Chip said behind him.

"Brady Thompson, this is Juana Vasquez. And these are her sons Reuben and Ricardo. The little girl in her arms is her granddaughter Edovina." Chip said with a tender look at the baby.

"Nice to meet you Mrs. Vasquez." Brady said formally.

"I'm going to take them into the living room. Try to keep Allen and Kenny out of there until four-thirty." Chip said as he led the way.

"Aye sir." Brady said with a smile.

"Am I late?" A man asked from the doorway.

"I don't think so. You probably need to be in the living room over there." Brady said and pointed the way.

"Thanks." The man said and walked to the living room.

"Is this Allen's house?" A woman asked, leading a boy and a girl.

"Yes. I think that whatever's going to happen is going to be a surprise. You'll probably need to be in there." Brady said and pointed at the living room.

"You mean they didn't tell you either?" The woman asked.

"No. And I'm the one who's supposed to be directing traffic in here." Brady said with a smile.

"Is Allen here?" She asked carefully.

"Yes. He's helping in the kitchen. He doesn't know anyone else is here." Brady said with a chuckle.

"Are we too late?" Aaron asked as Jake, Antonio and Xain hurried in behind him.

"No. Go in the living room and wait." Brady said and pointed.

"We have something to do upstairs first. We'll go in there in a minute." Aaron said and hurried upstairs.

David walked in the door with Kevin and before they could say a word Brady pointed and said, "Living room."

"We've got to go upstairs first." David said and motioned for Kevin to follow.

"Are we late?" A young boy asked as he rushed in ahead of a group of people.

"Living room." Brady said in a tired voice and pointed without looking.

Teri walked in to see Brady standing and pointing.

"I'm sorry you got stuck with this. Why don't you go in the living room and take a break. I can direct traffic for a while." Teri said with a gentle smile.

"I don't know if there's anymore room in there. I lost count of how many people have already gone through here." Brady said as he glanced at the door.

"Is Allen here?" Teri asked quietly.

"Yeah, in the kitchen helping Helen." Brady said.

"What about Josh?" Teri asked.

"No, I haven't seen him yet." Brady said thoughtfully.

"Good. He should be here any minute, then we'll be ready to start. Go on in and get comfortable." Teri said happily.

"Thanks Teri. By the way, there were three movers in here a while ago, but in the chaos, I didn't notice them leave. If they turn up, you'll need to show

them the way out, they don't understand verbal instructions." Brady said as he walked to the living room.

CHAPTER 12

JC walked into the kitchen to find Allen and Kenny doing dishes as Helen was putting the finishing touches on platters of snack foods.

"Are you having a party?" JC asked in surprise.

"I decided that it would be a good idea to feed all the people who were helping Allen move in." Helen said as she went to the refrigerator and pulled out two gallons of fruit punch.

"Allen, do you think I could borrow you and Kenny for a few minutes in the living room?" JC asked carefully.

"Sure. Just give us a second to dry our hands." Allen said quickly.

"I'll meet you in there." JC said and hurried out of the kitchen.

"If you see Tommy and Tyler, ask them to come in here and help me serve the snacks." Helen said with a smile.

"Sure thing Helen." Allen said and led the way out of the kitchen.

* * * * *

"What?" Allen gasped as he saw the living room filled with people.

"Justy, go get the boys upstairs. It's time." Chip said quietly.

Justy nodded and ran out of the room.

"What is this?" Allen asked as he looked around the room.

"Josh thought we'd make this a special occasion." Chip said with a fond smile at JC.

"What's wrong?" Jake asked as he hurried into the living room.

"Nothing's wrong. Allen, Brady, Jake, Xain, Kenny and Kevin. Please come over here." Chip said in his commanding tone.

"I'd like for you to meet Judge Jamie Robison. Josh somehow talked him into coming over here on his day off and performing the name change." Chip said with a smile.

"You mean they didn't know?" Judge Robison asked with a note of disapproval.

"We wanted it to be a surprise." JC said quickly.

"A surprise is a wonderful thing at the proper time. But this is a serious matter that should be considered carefully. I won't do the name changes until I've had a chance to talk to each of these young men and know within myself that this is what they want and why they want it." Judge Robison said seriously.

"I'm sorry Your Honor." JC said meekly.

"It's my day off, call me Jamie. Is there someplace where I can talk to these young men individually so I can be sure of their motivations?" Judge Robison asked in a dignified manor.

"Yes. The family room is right through those doors." JC said as he pointed at the double doors.

"Jake, do you want to be first?" Judge Robison asked in a gentle voice.

Jake nodded hesitantly and followed the Judge out of the room.

* * * * *

"Please sit down and relax." Judge Robison said in a warm voice.

Jake sat on the nearest chair at attention.

"Close enough." Judge Robison said with a chuckle.

"What do you want to know?" Jake asked in a timid voice.

"I just want to know if you want me to change your name." Judge Robison said simply.

"Yes. Please." Jake said, trying to relax.

"Why do you want it changed?" Judge Robison asked as he relaxed into a wing back chair.

"I know Allen wanted to adopt Kev because he's Kenny's brother and Allen loves Kenny. But he wanted to adopt me too and he didn't have to. He said it in front of everyone that no matter what problems I had that he still wanted me to be his son. I want my name changed so I can say in front of everyone that I want him to be my dad." Jake said thoughtfully.

"I have your name in my paperwork, how do you want your new name to be?" Judge Robison asked casually.

"I haven't really thought about that. I guess I'd like to keep my real first name because my grandmother picked that out for me. But I don't like the rest. It takes forever to fill out on official forms." Jake said, then looked up at Judge Robison's laughter.

"I can imagine. So what would you like your final name to be?" Judge Robison asked again.

Jake thought for a minute and finally asked, "Is there any way I can think about it for a few minutes?"

"I still need to talk to your brothers, you can tell me when I come back into the living room." Judge Robison said with a smile.

"Thank you Judge Robison." Jake said seriously.

"Please call me Jamie. Now would you send Kenny in to talk with me for a minute?" Jamie asked with a smile.

"I will. Thanks again Jamie." Jake said with a smile and hurried out.

* * * * *

Kenny walked slowly into the room and waited for Judge Robison to tell him what to do.

"Come on over here Kenny and have a seat. I just want to talk to you. There's nothing to be afraid of." Judge Robison said warmly.

"Okay." Kenny mumbled and took a seat.

"I just wanted to know if you really want to have your name changed to match Allen's." Judge Robison asked in a friendly tone.

Kenny squirmed and said, "I guess. I mean, yeah."

"You don't sound too sure. Maybe if you talk to me about it I'll be able to help you decide for sure." Judge Robison suggested.

Kenny thought about the suggestion for a second, then said, "I want Allen to be my Pop and I want to have his name, but if I take Allen's name, then I have to give up my Dad's name and that's like saying I don't love my dad anymore."

"Oh, I see." Judge Robison said thoughtfully.

"But I don't want Pop to think I don't love him, so I gotta change my name." Kenny said, letting his conflicting emotions show through his voice.

"That's a tough spot, but I think there are a few things I might be able to do to help you." Judge Robison said with a smile.

"Really?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Yes. There are a few choices that I can give you that you may like. But you don't have to change your name at all. This is 'your' name. I'm sure your Pop will love you just as much if you decide to keep your dad's name." Judge Robison said carefully.

"Please. I really want to have Pop's name. How can I do it?" Kenny asked anxiously.

"Well, first, you can consider having a hyphenated name. You could be Kenneth Lanson Waite-Thompson or Kenneth Lanson Thompson-Waite. Which would make you Kenny Waite-Thompson or Kenny Thompson-Waite." Judge Robison said slowly.

"Really? That would be so cool!" Kenny said happily.

"Another choice is taking one of the names as a middle name. Either Kenneth Lanson Waite Thompson or Kenneth Lanson Thompson Waite. Which would make you Kenny Thompson or Kenny Waite." Judge Robison said carefully.

"That sounds good too." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"And you could drop your middle name of Lanson and that would make you Kenneth Waite Thompson or Kenneth Thompson Waite." Judge Robison continued.

"Yeah." Kenny said as he thought seriously about the choice he had to make.

"If you'd like a few minutes to think about it, I could talk to Kevin and see what he wants to do." Judge Robison offered.

"Yeah. I'd like that. Thank you for being so nice." Kenny said with a big smile.

"I do what I can. Would you ask Kevin to come in and talk with me?" Judge Robison asked kindly.

"Uh huh." Kenny said and hopped up to hurry out of the room.

* * * * *

"Hi?" Kevin asked from just inside the door.

"Hello Kevin. Why don't you come in and talk with me for a minute?" Judge Robison asked quietly.

"Am I in trouble?" Kevin asked in a trembling voice.

"Not at all. I'm Jamie, come in here and have a seat. I'm just going to help you decide what name you'd like to have." Jamie said gently.

Kevin hesitantly walked in and took a seat.

"Do you want to have your name changed?" Jamie asked carefully.

"Yes sir." Kevin said quietly.

"Can you tell me why?" Jamie asked as he sat forward to hear Kevin's quiet tone.

"Will I get in trouble for using bad words?" Kevin asked with a note of fear in his voice.

Jamie was stunned at the question, but answered, "Why would you use bad words?"

"Cause I don't know how to say it without using bad words." Kevin said reasonably.

"Alright. While it's just the two of us talking, I won't be upset if you use a bad word or two. Now can you tell me why you want to change your name?" Judge Robison asked carefully.

"Cause I don't want to be a bastard." Kevin said in a fearful voice.

Judge Robison was stunned yet again, but quietly asked, "Could you explain how changing your name will make you not be a bastard?"

"Cause if you got a different name from your dad, then you're a bastard." Kevin said reasonably.

Judge Robison let that sink in for a second before saying, "There's a lot more to it than that, but I don't think we need to discuss that now. Do you want to have Allen's last name as yours?"

"Yeah. Poppa is nice and he wants me to be his son, just like if I was born to him. So I want that too. If I have the same last name as him, then I'll really be his son." Kevin explained.

Jamie nodded and said, "I think that's the best reason I've heard for having a name change. Do you know what you want your name to be?"

"Kevin Thompson." Kevin said as if it were obvious.

"What about your middle name?" Jamie asked with a smile.

"I don't have one." Kevin said simply.

"Yes you do. Your full name is Kevin Lawson Harris." Jamie said carefully.

"Really? Mom told me I didn't have a middle name." Kevin said seriously.

"Well, you do. Do you want to keep it? We can change it or leave it out if you want." Jamie said carefully.

"Um. Can I think about it?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"You three certainly are brothers." Jamie said with a chuckle.

"Four." Kevin said seriously.

"Four?" Jamie asked cautiously.

"Yes. Xain is our brother too. He just isn't adopted. His dad is letting him stay with us." Kevin said quickly.

"Really? I didn't know about him. Is that the Vulcan boy who was standing by you?" Jamie asked slowly.

"Yes. He's really nice. I'm glad he's my brother." Kevin said with excitement.

Jamie got a look of surprise and asked, "Would you ask Xain to come in and talk with me while you think about which name you want?"

"Yeah." Kevin said and jumped out of the chair.

As Kevin reached the door he said, "You're really nice. I always heard that Judges was mean and hated kids."

"It depends on the kids." Judge Robison said as he tried to restrain a smile.

* * * * *

Judge Robison walked into the living room with Xain at his side.

"Thank you all for being patient. I need to get my briefcase and talk to the boys for just a moment, then we'll be ready to proceed." Judge Robison said as he walked to the front of the room.

After a moment talking to each boy, Judge Robison said, "Now to business. Allen, would you gather your family so I can do this properly?"

Allen motioned for the boys to join him in front of the judge.

"Allen, first I'd like to say that you have some remarkable boys here. You must be very proud." Judge Robison said with a smile.

"I am Your Hon... Jamie." Allen finished with a timid grin.

"Good. May I present to you and everyone gathered, your son Jacques Allen Thompson." Jamie said with a grand smile.

Applause spread through the room as Allen pulled Jake into a crushing hug and whispered, "Thank you."

"Next Allen, I would like to present to you and everyone gathered, your son Kenneth Waite Thompson." Jamie said with a gesture to Kenny.

Applause sprang up again as Allen hugged Kenny tightly.

"And now Allen, may I present to you and everyone gathered, your son Kevin Charles David Thompson." Jamie said with a smile at Kevin.

Allen pulled Kevin in for a full hug and ended it with a kiss on the top of his head.

"And finally Allen, may I present to you and everyone gathered, Xain Thompson son of Solak of the House of Suvak of Vulcan." Jamie said with delight at the shocked looks from everyone in the room.

"Since you are Xain's guardian, I asked him if he would like to have his name changed as well. I made use of the terminal in your family room and explained to his father that it would be helpful if Xain had a last name since he would be dealing primarily with Humans. Solak accepted the reasoning and gave his permission." Jamie said in a voice of accomplishment.

Allen finally got over his shock and pulled Xain into a hug as he whispered, "You're really part of my family now."

"Thank you father." Xain said from the hug.

Judge Robison walked to stand beside Chip and JC and said, "That was the proper time for a surprise."

* * * * *

Chip walked into the crowd and came back a moment later followed by a Hispanic woman wearing a timid expression.

"Mamacita!" Kevin said with excitement and ran to hug her.

Jake looked at Mamacita with surprise which changed to apprehension.

"Allen, this is Mrs. Vasquez." Chip said with a smile as he finally was able to maneuver her to the front of the room.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Allen said with a warm smile.

"It is a good thing you do. To adopt Kevin and Jake. It makes my heart warm." Mrs. Vasquez said as she barely restrained her tears.

JC joined the group and said, "We thought that since you needed a housekeeper, you might consider hiring Mrs. Vasquez."

Allen looked at Kevin clung to Mrs. Vasquez's side and her rubbing his back with one hand.

"Mrs. Vasquez obviously cares for Kevin. But I'm not sure how we'll work it out. I originally intended to hire a live in housekeeper. But we don't have enough rooms." Allen said thoughtfully.

"There is a very nice apartment built above the garage. It has been remodeled and should be fine for the Vasquez family if you want to give it a try." Chip said with a smug smile.

"Well, what do you think about this? If you want, we can give it a try for two weeks and see how it goes. If we're all happy with the situation then, we'll make it a permanent job." Allen said to Mrs. Vasquez seriously.

"Si, I mean, yes sir. We would be happy to accept." Mrs. Vasquez said with difficulty.

"Then the first thing you have to do is call me Allen, I couldn't stand being called sir or Mr. Thompson in my own home." Allen said with a smile.

Mrs. Vasquez nodded and quietly said, "If you would like, you may call me Juana or Mamacita as the children do."

"Thank you Juana, let's go look at your apartment." Allen said with a smile.

"Allen, if you don't mind, I'll show her the apartment so you can stay here with your guests." JC said quickly.

Allen looked around the room and nodded.

JC led Juana away to collect her children as Chip said, "We invited some of your friends to witness the name change. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all, I noticed some familiar faces in the crowd." Allen said with a smile.

"Maybe you could introduce me? JC is the one who handled contacting everyone." Chip asked hopefully.

"Sure, come on." Allen said and led the way into the crowd.

* * * * *

"Wallace, I'd like you to meet Commander Chip Dodds of the Starship *Enterprise*. Chip, I'd like you to meet Dr. Wallace Stevens DDS." Allen said, and noticed Jake's curious look.

"He's a dentist." Allen said to Jake in a quiet voice.

"And this young lady is his daughter Tiffany." Allen finished in a normal tone of voice.

"Nice to meet you Dr. Stevens. I'm glad you could be here to witness the name change." Chip said happily.

"Seeing Allen alive and well makes me happier than anything. He gave me quite a scare when I found him." Wallace said with a smile.

Chip looked at Wallace and Allen curiously.

"Wallace found me passed out on my bedroom floor. He's the one who saw to it that I was taken to the hospital." Allen said timidly.

"Oh, I see. I guess Allen needs someone to watch over him." Chip said in a teasing voice.

"I think we've got that covered with Juana and the boys." Allen said with a smile.

All the adults noticed a squeal come from one of the children as Kenny was the center of attention in a group of children.

"It looks like Kenny's in his element." Wallace said with a fond smile.

"Tiffany isn't doing too bad either." Chip said as he motioned to a group of boys gathered around Tiffany.

The door opened and Helen walked in carrying a tray of snacks.

"That was brave of her, I would have worried about being stampeded." Chip said as people flooded toward Helen.

"It's okay, she found her helpers again." Allen said as Tommy and Tyler walked in carrying more snacks.

"While the kids are feasting, let's go talk to Trish." Allen said and indicated a woman watching the kids from a distance.

* * * * *

"Trish, I'd like you to meet Commander Chip Dodds. Chip, this is Trish Atkins. Her kids are friends with Kenny too." Allen said quickly.

"Nice to meet you Trish. I'm glad you could make it." Chip said with a warm smile.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw the house. This place is beautiful. I thought TJ was going to explode." Trish said in delight.

"Yeah, I couldn't believe it either when Chip showed it to me. I think the boys are going to love it here." Allen said with a smile.

"I'm glad you could get Kevin to live here. From what Kenny was telling the kids, he expected to be living in Chicago with his mother." Trish said casually.

Allen looked at Wallace, Chip and Trish before quietly saying, "Their mother abandoned them. I'd like to stay off the subject of Kevin's mother as much as possible around the kids."

"How horrible. It's wonderful that you were able to get custody of them. I know that couldn't have been easy." Trish said seriously.

"I can't even tell you all of what happened. It's been like a whirlwind since I left the hospital yesterday." Allen said honestly.

"You were in the hospital? What happened?" Trish asked with concern.

"Everything just caught up with me and I collapsed from exhaustion. Wallace found me Saturday morning and I woke up in the hospital with two sons." Allen said with a smile.

"Two? I thought you had four." Trish said slowly.

"I met Jake after I left the hospital and Xain this morning. I'll tell you the whole story sometime. Right now, I don't think I could, so many things have been going on so quickly around me that I'm not sure of everything that's happened." Allen said helplessly.

"Well, as soon as the mountain of snacks have been conquered, we're going to enlist everyone's help in getting you unpacked. When that's done, we'll all be leaving you to your family and you'll have some time to let it all sink in." Chip said with a smile.

"That sounds like a good idea, what do you say we help them conquer the mountain?" Wallace said with a grin.

"Lead the way." Allen said happily.

* * * * *

A group of the adults gathered into a huddle before Chip called out to the crowd.

"Everyone. May I have your attention. It's time to start unpacking so Allen and his family can relax in their new house tonight. Kids, you're first." Chip said loudly.

David walked to stand beside Chip and said, "Kids 11 and under follow me, 12 and over follow Aaron."

With that, David walked out the door and a long line of children followed.

A moment later Aaron took his troop out of the room too.

"Allen, you'll be in your bedroom with Brady and Dan." Chip said, then continued, "Helen, Robin and Matt in the kitchen. John..."

* * * * *

JC watched as Juana, Reuben and Ricardo looked over every square inch of the apartment.

"This is far bigger than where we were living." Juana said as she noticed him watching.

"I hope it will work for your family." JC said kindly.

"It will be wonderful. But... como se dice?" Juana paused thoughtfully.

She shook her head in frustration and said, "Our things from the old apartment..."

"Oh, we hired a moving company to bring your things. They should be here in about a week. You brought the clothes you'll need didn't you?" JC asked in concern.

"Si, yes, Mr. Chip said to leave them in the car for now." Juana said as Edovina began to fuss in her arms.

"Well, you have the basic furniture for now. If you need anything else, I'm sure someone can help you." JC said seriously.

"Are we going to live here?" Reuben asked in a small voice.

"Yes. Is that okay with you?" JC asked with a fond smile directed at the small boy.

Reuben nodded hesitantly.

"Kenny, Kevin, Jake and Xain are going to be living in the house so you'll have plenty of company." JC said gently.

Reuben's eyes got wide, then he broke into a smile.

There was a knock on the door.

Juana opened the door a crack to see who was outside.

"We have your things from the car. Once you're unpacked, we're going to take you to the store for food and whatever else you need." A woman's voice said from outside.

Juana opened the door to let Kayla in.

She was followed by Sara and Carrie, each carrying luggage from the car.

"Do you need some help with that?" JC asked quickly.

"There are a few more suitcases in the car." Kayla said, then turned to Juana and asked, "Where would you like me to put this?"

* * * * *

David led his group of kids out to the cars and said, "Okay guys. Let's do this the simple way. Kenny and Kevin, you take everyone who's nine and under and head up to your room. The rest of us will carry things up to you."

Everyone agreed and went to their appointed tasks.

Aaron led his group out and said, "That sounds like a good idea. Xain and Jake, you guys take the 12 and 13 year olds upstairs and unpack what the rest of us bring up to you."

As the boys got into their groove, adults started streaming out of the house to unload cars.

* * * * *

"How in the world are you keeping track of all this?" JC asked Chip who was standing in the entry hall.

"I'm not." Chip said seriously.

"What?" JC asked in disbelief.

"I'm just trusting that everyone labeled their boxes clearly enough that the right things end up in the right place." Chip said as he watched another group of boys head down the stairs and out the door.

"What are you doing then?" JC asked in confusion.

"Looking like I'm in charge." Chip said seriously.

"What?" JC asked in confusion.

"It makes people think that everything is going to work out if someone seems to be in control. It brings a sense of calmness to the whole operation. People see me here and assume that I'm overseeing that everything is running smoothly, and because of that, everything is running smoothly." Chip explained reasonably.

"So you're standing here doing nothing while everyone else is working?" JC asked in disbelief.

Chip shrugged and said, "Someone's got to."

"What do you want me to do. Juana is getting unpacked and has plenty of help." JC asked as he watched David and Aaron carrying a small tree in the door and up the stairs.

"Why don't you check in on Allen and his boys and make sure they're holding up?" Chip asked thoughtfully.

"Good idea love. You're doing a great job. Keep it up." JC said, then gave Chip a quick kiss before heading upstairs.

* * * * *

JC walked into Kenny and Kevin's room to find pandemonium.

"How's it going guys?" JC asked as he looked around.

"Great. Kevin bought some really cool stuff. We're just about to start hanging his pictures on the wall." Kenny said happily.

"How are you doing Kevin?" JC asked gently.

Kevin looked at JC and said, "I'm fine."

JC was surprised by Kevin's cold response, but decided to let it go.

"I'll be by to check on you again later, just let me know if you need anything." JC said hesitantly.

Kevin nodded and went back to looking at his pictures.

* * * * *

"Hey Jake, how are you doing?" JC asked as he walked in to find a flurry of activity.

"I'm not sure whose this is." Jake said in confusion as he looked at the large cardboard box without a label, not sure if he should open it.

"Oh, well, I think you should ask Aaron about that. I think I saw him with it earlier." JC said as he tried to conceal a smile.

Jake nodded and hurried out of the room.

"How are you doing Xain? Have you had the chance to meet Cory, your patriarch?" JC asked curiously.

"No, not as yet." Xain said carefully.

"Cory, can you come over here for a minute?" JC yelled across the room.

After a moment to unload the posters from his arms he walked to JC's side.

"Xain Thompson, I'd like to introduce Cory Short, Patriarch of Clan Short." JC said formally.

"It's nice to meet you Xain. When we have our next meeting I'll introduce you to everyone formally. How do you like what you've seen so far?" Cory asked in a friendly voice.

Xain considered for a moment, then gave a ghost of a smile before slowly answering, "The ways of Clan Short are unconventional. I approve."

Cory smiled, then adopted a Vulcan demeanor and said, "I am pleased. At times we behave in a non-Vulcan manor, but we adopt the appropriate attitude when the situation calls for it. Should you be in need of assistance or clarification of any kind, either I or any of our brothers will be willing to assist you."

Xain raised an eyebrow in surprise at Cory's display of Vulcan mannerisms, then said, "I will endeavor to bring honor to Clan Short."

Cory considered Xain's statement, then said, "I will contact you later in the week regarding your duties for Clan Short. In the interim, it would be beneficial to familiarize yourself with your new surroundings and brothers."

"I will do so. May I ask a question?" Xain asked respectfully.

"You are free to ask any of your brothers a question at any time, what is it?" Cory asked seriously.

"Is my deficiency in English a concern?" Xain asked slowly.

"No. Your guardian Allen and your brother Kevin are both able to speak Vulcan. You can go to them and ask for their assistance should you find yourself unable to find the proper English words. Your current level of

knowledge of the language is adequate and will increase with prolonged exposure." Cory said carefully.

"Thank you Patriarch Short." Xain said reverently.

"Xain, it is appropriate to use my title when addressing me in a formal ceremony. As my brother, it is your right to address me and any of your other brothers by their first names and we will address you by yours. Is this acceptable?" Cory asked, trying to see if Xain understood.

"It is acceptable Cory." Xain said quietly.

"Good. Then let's get back to unpacking." Cory said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Oh that!" Aaron said happily as he walked into the bedroom.

"Who does it belong to?" Jake asked curiously.

"You." Aaron said with a smile.

"I didn't get anything like this." Jake said in confusion.

"Just open it." Aaron said, then tapped JC on the shoulder to get his attention.

Jake carefully pulled back the tape on the top of the large box and opened it.

"It's filled with other boxes." Jake said in surprise.

"Yeah. Open them." Aaron said with excitement.

Jake pulled the largest of the boxes free and saw what was written on the side.

"No way!" Jake exclaimed as he tore open the box.

"Look, it's a stereo!" Jake said as he pulled the main stereo unit free from it's packing materials.

"It's got a CD changer and everything." Jake said and held it out for JC and Aaron to see.

"Go ahead and open the others." Aaron said with a grand smile.

Jake carefully sat the stereo on the bed and opened another box.

"These are yours, it's all your CDs!" Jake said with surprise, then turned to look at Aaron with tears in his eyes.

"You did this, didn't you? Because of what I said." Jake asked Aaron quietly.

"Yeah, you'll also find a complete collection of Backstreet, *NSync and Hanson in there and a set of headphones." Aaron said with a smile.

Jake sat the box of CDs on the bed, then pulled Aaron into a hug.

"I can't believe you did this. Thank you Aaron." Jake said as he continued to hug Aaron tightly.

"Well, it wasn't just me. You also get to thank David, Mark and Zac, it's from all of us to welcome you to the family." Aaron said happily.

Jake pulled away from Aaron and spotted Mark and Zac watching them.

"Thank you, guys." Jake said and hurried to hug them.

"We were glad to do it." Zac said with a chuckle.

"How does it feel to have a wish come true?" Mark asked quietly from the hug.

Jake stopped for a second to consider, then said, "It's better than I could have dreamed. I don't have anything else to wish for."

"I know that feeling Jake. But it gets better." Mark said with a smile.

"How can it get better than this?" Jake asked in disbelief.

"Trust me. If you get the chance to help someone else get their wish, it's better." Mark said with complete joy.

* * * * *

"How are you guys doing?" JC asked as he walked into Allen's bedroom.

"Pretty good, actually. I'm almost done. Have you seen the boys? Are they okay?" Allen asked as he hung up the clothes that Brady was handing him.

"All fine. I think if Jake was any happier he'd float away." JC said with a smile.

"What about Xain? How's he fitting in?" Allen asked cautiously, then took the shirt Brady was holding out for him.

"He's doing fine. I think that since he's met with Cory, he feels a little more secure." JC said thoughtfully.

"Good, I can relate to what he's feeling. I was nothing but nerves the first time I visited Vulcan." Allen said as he hung up a pair of pants.

"I was a little worried about him calling you 'Father'. His father might not like it." JC said thoughtfully.

"I had a second to talk to him about that. There isn't an exact English equivalent for the word he was wanting to use, so he chose Father." Allen said simply.

"I'm not sure I understand." JC said carefully.

"The word he wanted to use was "*k'war'ma'khon*" which roughly means 'of my family though not related by genetics'. But he didn't know an English equivalent that expressed that thought. The only word he could think to use was 'father' so he used it. We both agree that it is logical and acceptable." Allen said absently as he worked.

"Oh, that makes sense." JC said thoughtfully.

"If his father finds it unacceptable, we can find an alternative. It works for now." Allen said casually.

"I guess I'll go downstairs and see how the others are doing." JC said as he looked around.

"I'll probably be down in a few minutes, we're just going to unpack the bathroom." Allen said with a smile.

JC nodded and left the room.

* * * * *

"I think we're done down here." Chip said seriously.

"Really? That was quick." JC said as he looked around.

"Well, there were a few problems to overcome. We ended up with a little extra furniture." Chip said with a smile.

"How's that?" JC asked curiously.

"Allen's things and the furniture from the house. It worked out fine. It turns out that there was room for an extra couch in the apartment, so Mrs. Vasquez will have plenty of room to entertain." Chip said happily.

"Is someone cooking?" JC asked as he took a deep inhale.

"Helen decided to make dinner for them tonight." Chip said as he led JC into the living room.

"This turned out well." JC said as he looked around the room.

"It did. And Allen had a sofa bed, so we put it in the family room for Brady. Everything just came together." Chip said happily.

"Where is everyone?" Allen asked as he walked into the living room.

"Most of them are gone. Helen and a couple of the boys are in the kitchen and there are still a few upstairs with your boys." Chip said as Dan and Brady walked into the room.

"I think it's time we got out of here. I'll go gather up ours." JC said quickly.

"Send mine down if you find them up there." Dan said quickly.

"I'll stop by tomorrow around 11:00 and we can get all the legal stuff done for the house. And I'm supposed to give you this." Chip said as he picked up an envelope from a nearby end table.

"What is it?" Allen asked as he accepted the envelope.

"All the boys' paperwork. Birth certificates, adoption papers, guardianship papers, name changes... stuff like that." Chip said seriously.

"I can't believe you did all this." Allen said as he looked slowly through the paperwork.

"Teri and Jamie handled all that, I'm just the messenger." Chip said honestly.

"No, I mean *all* this. You changed my life." Allen said in an overwhelmed voice.

"I did my part, so did everyone else. Don't be surprised if we call on you one day soon to help us do the same thing for someone else." Chip said with a smile.

"We'll be there whenever you need us." Allen said as a vow.

"I'm going to go and see how close Helen is to being done." Chip said quietly and walked out of the room.

Allen and Brady looked around the living room in amazement.

"Your home is beautiful." Brady said as he looked around.

"Our home Brady." Allen said as he walked to look at the family room.

"Thanks." Brady said in a whisper as he followed.

* * * * *

"Dad?" Jake called out as he walked down the stairs.

"In the family room." Allen called out.

Jake walked past the kitchen and into the family room.

"Is everyone gone?" Jake asked in confusion.

"Yes. They just left. How are you doing Sport?" Allen asked as he casually pulled Jake into a one armed hug.

"Great isn't a big enough word." Jake said honestly.

"I know what you mean." Allen said as he looked out the door at the view of the lake.

"What's Uncle Brady doing?" Jake asked curiously.

"Checking out his new bed. This is going to be his room when he's in town." Allen said with a smile.

"Cool. I hope that's a lot." Jake said as he watched Brady unfolding the sofa bed.

"Thanks Jake, I hope so too." Brady said as he lay down.

"How is it?" Allen asked hopefully.

"Perfect." Brady said as he closed his eyes.

"What's that sound?" Jake asked curiously.

"I don't know, let's investigate." Allen said as he walked for the door.

"I'm coming with you." Brady said as he hopped up.

* * * * *

Allen turned off a kitchen timer that was sitting on a note.

"It's a note from Helen. She made us dinner." Allen said with surprise.

"Great, I'm starving. Those snacks earlier only made me hungrier." Brady said quickly.

"Jake, go get your brothers while I get dinner put on the table." Allen said as he walked to the oven.

"Brady, she said she put a salad in the refrigerator, would you grab it and put it on the table?" Allen asked as he carried the casserole across the room.

"I got it." Brady said and hurried to the refrigerator.

All the boys hurried into the room as Allen carefully sat the casserole on the kitchen table.

"Kenny, would you grab the dishes? Kevin and Xain, would you get drinks for everyone?" Allen asked as he picked up a basket of bread from the kitchen counter.

After everyone completed their tasks, the new family settled down into their first meal.

CHAPTER 13

"What is this?" Kenny asked as he spooned a large helping onto his plate.

"I'm not sure. It's a casserole of some kind, it smells wonderful." Brady said before taking his first bite.

"Is that all you're going to have Kevin?" Allen asked gently.

"Uh huh. It makes my stomach hurt if I eat too much." Kevin said shyly.

"Okay, but just remember that there is plenty so you can eat as much as you want." Allen said with assurance.

"Thanks Poppa, I will." Kevin said with a small smile.

"This food is pleasing." Xain said with a look of thought.

Allen smiled and said, "I'm glad you like it Xain. I'm sure if you ask Helen, she'll tell you how she made it."

Xain got a speculative look, then said, "I will. It is my wish to compile a collection of food preparation instructions."

The others at the table looked at each other, not sure if they should comment on Xain's choice of words.

Finally Allen said, "The word 'recipes' can be used in place of the phrase 'food preparation instructions'."

Xain nodded and looked at his plate as if he'd been severely scolded.

"Xain, I'm not criticizing you. What you used were proper English words and you used them correctly. I'm only suggesting an alternative word that will convey the meaning more efficiently." Allen said carefully.

"Thank you father." Xain said quietly.

"How does this sound? When you are talking with any of those of us at this table, we will offer suggestions like I just did, for the purpose of improving your English. None of us will do it if there is anyone else around. Is this acceptable?" Allen asked slowly.

Xain considered for a moment before saying, "It is acceptable."

"Good. Then let's enjoy this meal." Allen said happily before taking another bite.

* * * * *

"What do we do now?" Kenny asked as they finished putting the last of the dinner dishes in the dishwasher.

"I don't know, it feels strange to be here all by ourselves. Let's look around." Allen said thoughtfully.

Kenny led the way out of the kitchen and opened the dining room door.

"Pop, look at this!" Kenny said loudly.

Everyone walked into the dining room to see it set up in regal splendor.

"It's beautiful." Brady said in an impressed voice.

"I only seen stuff like this on TV before. I didn't think there was places like this for real." Jake said as he hesitantly looked around.

Allen got a smile as he walked to a china hutch and said, "Kenny, these dishes are from Carl's family. They've been handed down for generations. He told me that when you move out on your own, they are to be yours."

"Shouldn't they be Kevin's too?" Kenny asked hesitantly.

"No. I have a quilt from Carl's grandmother that's for Kevin." Allen said quietly and led the group out of the room.

"That's really cool Kev. You'll have something that your great-grandmother made, and it's something that was your father's that he wanted you to have." Jake said quietly.

"Well, I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you about this. Wait in the living room while I get something." Allen said before going upstairs.

* * * * *

Allen walked into the living room carrying a small box.

"I was adopted too. Mona, the woman who raised me, couldn't have kids so I was her only child. When I moved to Orlando, she sent a few things with me that belonged to her family." Allen said quietly and opened the top of the box.

"This is a shaving kit that belonged to Mona's grandfather. She gave it to me in hopes that I could pass it on to my eldest son when he was old enough." Allen said with a smile.

"For a long time, I didn't think I was going to have anyone to pass it on to. But now I do. Jake, when you move out on your own someday, this is going to be yours." Allen said as he looked at Jake.

"But I can't. I'm adopted, I can't have a piece of your family history." Jake said with wide eyes.

"So am I Jake... and so was Mona. This isn't a symbol of blood ties, it's a symbol of family. Teri made you legally my son, the piece of paper the judge signed today gave you my name. By giving you this, I'm giving you more than the family in this room, I'm giving you my family history too. Don't worry if you don't understand it now. It took me a long time to understand how important it is."

After a long silent moment, Brady said, "I'll be right back." And walked into the family room.

A minute later Brady returned and stood before Allen.

"This belonged to my... our grandfather." Brady said seriously and held out a pocket watch.

Allen accepted the watch and looked at it carefully.

"I'm going to give this to Allen right now, I just feel that it should be his." Brady said, then glanced at Xain.

"But when Xain is ready to move out on his own, I think it should be passed on to him." Brady said carefully.

"I could not. It is your family history." Xain said with a startled expression.

"Xain, *you* are a part of our family history now too. This will be a symbol to show that you are forever a part of our family, no matter where your life takes you in the future." Allen said seriously.

"I am honored." Xain said reverently.

"Come on guys, one quick family hug, then let's check this place out. I still haven't seen your rooms." Allen said cheerfully.

* * * * *

"What is it supposed to be?" Allen asked as he looked at all the different paper shapes on the walls.

"David said it was my art studio. He said I can paint and draw on all the different pieces of paper any way I want." Kevin said happily.

"Well, it looks like you'll have plenty to keep you busy for a while." Brady said as he noticed a paper chef's hat and apron just below a Chinese lantern.

"Look at this." Kevin said as he pointed to his easel and huge sketchpad.

"That paper's nearly as big as you are." Allen said in surprise.

"Yeah. I want to draw something before I go to bed tonight." Kevin said joyfully.

"Okay, but be sure to show it to me when you're done." Allen said with a peaceful smile.

"Why don't you show me what you've got Kenny?" Brady asked quietly.

"I have a whole bunch of models, but I couldn't think of any way to put them out where you could see them." Kenny said seriously.

"Where are they? Maybe I can come up with something." Brady said thoughtfully.

"I put them in the closet." Kenny said and hurried away.

Brady followed and stood in the closet doorway.

"I've got mostly ships in this box. Cars in those two." Kenny said and opened the largest box in the closet floor.

Brady walked closer to see what Kenny had.

After a long moment of looking at the contents of the box, Brady said, "I think I know how we can display all your models."

"How?" Kenny asked with surprise.

"We'll need to go to a hardware store for some supplies, but we can make a shadow box to house all your models. If you wanted to, we could work on it together." Brady asked hopefully.

"Really? I could help?" Kenny asked with excitement.

"More than help. This will be a team effort. We'll work together on every phase of the project, starting with design." Brady said thoughtfully.

Kenny hugged close to Brady and said, "Thank you Uncle Brady, I'm glad you're my uncle."

"I am too Ken." Brady said happily.

* * * * *

This has to be the most peaceful place I've ever been." Allen said as he looked at the beautiful scenes of nature all around the room.

"I was afraid my posters were going to make it feel wrong, but then we decided to mix them." Jake said happily.

Sure enough, there were posters of popular bands interspersed among the nature scenes.

"I never would have thought that *NSync would fit between a snowfield and a forest path but somehow they look right at home." Brady said as he looked around.

"I like the tree and the plants. It smells alive in here... in a good way. Not like most teenager's bedrooms." Allen finished with a smile.

"It smells like Earth." Xain said simply.

"And I see that you have a nice stereo... nicer than mine in fact." Allen said as he walked to examine the stereo.

Jake picked up the remote control and pressed play.

Sounds of wind rustling through trees and water trickling in the distance filled the room.

"That's nice. But I kind of expected some of Aaron or Josh's music." Allen said as he listened to the peaceful sounds of nature.

"I have them in there too along with Backstreet and Hanson. It's got a five disk changer." Jake said with pride.

Allen smiled at Jake and said, "As long as you're respectful of everyone else, enjoy your stereo. It's beautiful."

"I'll only play the things that Xain likes out loud. I'll use my headphones when I want to crank it up." Jake said and held up a pair of very nice headphones.

"Well, I suppose you'll be wanting to see my bedroom." Allen asked the group curiously.

Everyone nodded.

"Come on."

* * * * *

"Wow. This is pretty." Kevin said as he walked to the large windows.

"Yeah. Now you see why I wanted this room." Allen said as he stood beside Kevin.

"Your room has many admirable qualities." Xain said as he walked to Allen's other side.

"I thought you were just being nice when you took the smaller room, but now I see that you really did get what you wanted." Brady said from beside Xain.

"It's a lake. What's the big deal?" Kenny asked curiously.

"They like it cause it's pretty." Jake said with a shrug.

"Yeah, I guess." Kenny said as he walked up to peek out the window.

"So what are we going to do now?" Kenny asked after five seconds of looking at the water.

Allen smiled and said, "We're in our own house. You can watch television, play games, do something with your brothers. We're home, we can do whatever we want."

"Uncle Brady? Can we work on the thing to hold my models now?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Sure Ken, let's go to your room and start designing it." Brady said happily.

"I'm going to draw a picture." Kevin said quickly and hurried out.

"How about you guys?" Allen asked Xain and Jake.

"I think I'd like to put on my headphones and listen to some of Aaron's music for a while." Jake said consideringly.

"That sounds nice." Allen said with a smile.

"May I contact he who is my father?" Xain asked carefully.

"Of course Xain. And for future reference, you don't have to ask my permission. You may call your father at any time." Allen said seriously.

"Thank you father." Xain said with a smile.

* * * * *

"He who is my father wishes to speak with you." Xain said from the double doors of the family room.

Allen got up from the couch and walked in the family room to find a surprisingly young looking Vulcan man on the terminal.

"*T'nar pak sorat y'rani*." Allen greeted Solak formally and held out his hand in the appropriate salute.

"*T'nar jaral*." Solak said, giving the customary reply.

"*He who is my son has summarized the events of the day.*" Solak said formally.

Allen waited, not seeing any need for a response.

"*Due to his inexperience in dealing with Humans, I wish to verify his observations.*" Solak said simply.

"Proceed." Allen said without emotion.

"*I have given permission for him to accept your family name on the pretext that it will aid in his interactions with Humans. Is this true?*" Solak asked, betraying a note of suspicion in his voice.

"Correct. There are many situations when a surname is desirable when interacting in Human society." Allen said without inflection.

Solak raised an eyebrow at the response, then proceeded, "*He claims to be regarded as part of your family. Is this true?*"

"That is correct. The brother of my sons is to be regarded as my son." Allen said in slow calmness.

Solak nodded then asked, "*When his work for Clan Short is completed, will his status be changed in your family?*"

"My sons are members of Clan Short, I am not. Therefore I cannot speak as to their actions. However, regardless of his status in Clan Short, Xain will be regarded as *k'war'ma'khon* and have status equal to my sons hereafter." Allen said calmly.

Solak sat silently for a moment before saying, "*My efforts to provide for his education have proven futile. Perhaps immersion in Human culture will be beneficial for him.*"

"Perhaps. I have personal experience with existing in the area of intersection between Vulcan and Human culture. Xain will have choices to make and I will be here to offer guidance when it is necessary." Allen said properly.

"*She who was his mother claimed that his place was on Earth. After her passing, I accepted a position at the Vulcan consulate on Earth in hopes that it would be of benefit to him.*" Solak said pensively.

"When dealing with children, one can only present opportunities and encouragement. The child will embrace or reject what he will for his own reasons." Allen said thoughtfully.

Solak nodded at the statement.

"Will you be remaining on Earth now that Xain has been accepted by Clan Short?" Allen asked curiously.

"*No decision has been made on that point as of yet. It is my wish to return to Vulcan, but it is also my wish to have contact with he who is my son.*" Solak said seriously.

"My work for the Federation requires my occasional presence on Vulcan. If you were to return to Vulcan, I could bring Xain with me so you might have contact. If you choose to remain on Earth, you will always be a welcomed guest." Allen said respectfully.

Solak reached for something before him and began to press a sequence of keys. After a moment he said, "*I will return to Vulcan. I approve of Clan Short's choice of guardian for he who is my son. It would be possible to be at your location at 18:00 hours federation standard time tomorrow so I might give he who is my son those of his possessions that he left in San Francisco. Would that be acceptable?*"

"Perfectly acceptable. There is one other matter of concern." Allen added quickly.

Solak raised an eyebrow as a prompt to continue.

"The English language does not have an equivalent word for *k'war'ma'khon*. Xain used the word 'father' to explain our relationship to others. Is this acceptable?" Allen asked with a feeling of dread.

Solak thought for a moment, then said, "*To call two men father seems illogical.*"

Xain walked to stand at Allen's side and said, "You are 'he who is my father', Allen is 'father', the distinction is clear."

"*I understand. It is acceptable. I will deliver your possessions tomorrow. Live long and prosper, he who is my son.*" Solak finished simply.

"Live long and prosper, he who is my father." Xain said with peace and reverence.

The screen went blank as Allen and Xain remained still.

"How much were you listening to?" Allen asked as he turned to face Xain.

"All. Please to forgive that I remained within concealment." Xain said quickly with frustration.

"Calm down. I'm not angry. Even though it is not proper to listen to someone else's private conversation, this conversation had to do with you. Come here." Allen said as he stood.

Xain walked to Allen cautiously.

"Jake can probably explain this better than I can, but sometimes it's easier to show your feelings than speak them." Allen said as he hugged Xain tightly.

After a full minute of hugging Xain said, "I believe I understand. When is it appropriate for me to express feelings in this manner?"

Allen was surprised at Xain's wish to express feelings, but responded, "With those in this house and those of your clan. Others might not understand."

Xain pulled out of the hug and assumed his full Vulcan control as he said, "Thank you for your guidance, Father."

Allen smiled and said, "I'm always here for you whenever you need me."

Xain gave a shy smile before leaving the room.

* * * * *

Allen walked into Kenny and Kevin's room to find Kenny's bed covered with models of every shape and size.

"What are you guys doing?" Allen asked curiously.

"We're trying to figure out how we want to build the display case for Kenny's models." Brady said happily.

"How's it going?" Allen asked as he looked more carefully at the collection.

"Well, Kenny's trying to decide what order to put them in right now. Once he has them arranged how he wants them, we'll design the shelf." Brady said seriously.

"That sounds like a good idea. Maybe you could use Kevin's help with that part." Allen said thoughtfully.

"What can I do?" Kevin asked in surprise.

"Well, you've got that great big pad of paper. When they're ready, maybe you could draw the shelf that they're wanting to build." Allen said speculatively.

"Would you Kev? That would be a big help." Kenny asked with excitement.

"You'll have to tell me how you want it to look." Kevin said slowly.

"Yeah. As soon as we've got them all in order just right, I'll tell you how we want the shelf to be and you can draw it." Kenny said with a grand smile.

Allen smiled at the interaction and turned for the door as he said, "Kevin, come downstairs in a few minutes for your milkshake."

"Okay Poppa." Kevin said happily as he looked at the collection of models with interest.

* * * * *

Xain walked into the bedroom he shared with Jake to an unusual sight.

Jake was laying on his bed with tears streaming down his face.

"Brother? Do you require assistance?" Xain asked with hesitation.

Jake's eyes opened at the sound and said, "I was just remembering things Xain. I'll be okay."

"Your memories cause pain?" Xain asked curiously.

Jake considered the question for a moment as he removed his headphones and turned off the stereo with the remote.

"I guess they do. Everything is just starting to catch up to me." Jake said and wiped his eyes quickly.

"I do not have words to offer comfort. Perhaps I could 'show' my support?" Xain asked hesitantly.

Jake looked at Xain for an instant, then gave a watery smile and nodded.

Xain sat beside Jake and pulled him into a gentle hug.

Jake felt the warm arms wrapped around him and smiled in contentment as he carefully returned the hug.

* * * * *

"Poppa?" Kevin asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Right here Kev. Your milkshake is almost ready. Have a seat at the table and I'll bring it to you." Allen said from the refrigerator.

After a moment, Allen emerged with a milkshake, topped with whipped cream and a cherry on top.

"Wow. That looks great!" Kevin said happily.

"Dr. McCoy says you have to have milkshakes, but I just thought I could make them extra special for you." Allen said with a smile as he presented the milkshake to Kevin.

After drinking through the straw for a second Kevin said, "I love you poppa. I'm really glad I'm here with you."

"I'm glad you're here too, little one. Carl always wanted you to live with us. I only wish you could have known him." Allen said as he sat across from Kevin with a glass of fruit punch.

Kevin thought about that and finally said, "You're the only poppa I ever had. He was Kenny's dad, not mine. Just like my momma ain't Kenny's momma cause he never knew her."

"Kevin?" Allen asked in a quiet voice to draw Kevin's attention from the milkshake before him.

After a moment, Kevin looked up to meet Allen's gaze.

"Please don't deny your father. I know you never knew him, but I'm sure if you ask Kenny, he'll show you the pictures and tell you all about Carl. I'd never ask you to try and feel something that you don't, but please don't deny him as your father. He loved you and it broke his heart that he couldn't share in your life." Allen said seriously.

Kevin looked back at his milkshake for a moment, then said, "I won't say he ain't my Dad no more, but I can't love someone I never knew."

"Fair enough, little one. That's all I'm asking." Allen said with a gentle smile.

A long minute of silence fell over the kitchen as both thought their own thoughts.

"Poppa? Can I ask you something?" Kevin asked in a small voice.

"Of course. Anything you want." Allen said with concern at the tone in Kevin's voice.

"How do you know if you're in love?" Kevin asked seriously.

"Oh. That's a tough one. I've been in love one time and I'm not sure if it's the same for everyone, or even if it would be the same for me if I fell in love with someone else." Allen said thoughtfully.

"What did it feel like when you fell in love with my Dad?" Kevin asked, sounding desperate.

Allen thought about it for a minute before answering, "It was like being in a dream. Whenever I'd see Carl or talk to him my world seemed to be brighter. I would find myself thinking about him all the time and wanting to talk to him."

Kevin took another drink of his milkshake and thought about the words.

"It's funny. You're a lot like your Dad, even more than Kenny." Allen said with a smile.

"I am?" Kevin asked in surprise.

"Sure. You have the same strength that he had. When you've made up your mind about something, nothing in the universe is going to change it." Allen said with a smile.

"Is that good?" Kevin asked hesitantly.

"It's not good or bad. It's just the way you are. And just like with your Dad, I'd never want to change it. Not too many people have your kind of determination and strength." Allen said with admiration.

Kevin took his final drink of the milkshake and smiled.

"Was that okay for you?" Allen asked as he picked up both their empty glasses.

"Yeah. It was even better cause you made it extra special." Kevin said with a smile.

"Why don't you go up and work on your picture for a while? I'm going to unload the dishwasher and I'll be up to visit in a few minutes." Allen asked as he sat the glasses in the sink.

"Can I help?" Kevin asked seriously.

Allen smiled and said, "I'd like that son."

* * * * *

"How do you like living here?" Jake asked Xain quietly.

"I am... these words are difficult." Xain said with frustration.

"Maybe you can show me. Dad and I figured out that it works better than words sometimes." Jake said as he renewed his hug.

Xain considered the words, then increased the strength of his hug.

"I'm glad. Because we like you living here too." Jake said honestly.

"I do not understand why." Xain said as he relaxed his hug.

"Have you ever put together a puzzle?" Jake asked casually.

"I have." Xain said hesitantly, confused by the non-sequitor.

"We're all pieces of the puzzle that makes up this family. You complete us. There would be an empty space in our family without you." Jake said thoughtfully.

Xain thought about the words and finally said, "I can see no evidence to support your assertion."

"You like to cook. None of the rest of us do. You made our room into a peaceful haven. I would have had a music museum. When I was remembering, you held me and made me feel better..." Jake trailed off.

"You have accepted me as I am. Given freely of advice and touch... My words fail." Xain said with frustration.

"Then show me." Jake said quietly.

Xain immediately hugged Jake tighter and expressed his feelings through touch.

"I understand. Xain, I'd like you to be more than my brother, I'd also like you to be my friend." Jake said thoughtfully.

Xain didn't even consider trying to find the words, he just increased his hug into a crushing grip.

Jake smiled at the response and hugged Xain just as tightly.

* * * * *

"How goes the project guys?" Allen asked as he and Kevin walked into the bedroom.

"We're just about ready to plan the shelf." Kenny said happily.

"So you decided to separate them by type I see." Allen said as he looked at the intricate arrangement on the bed.

"Yeah. I have cars on top and ships on the bottom cause I have the most of them. On the sides I have motorcycles and the other things I only have a few of." Kenny said seriously.

"What's that big spot in the middle for?" Allen asked curiously.

"It's for my best model. I don't want to take it out of the box cause it's got a lot of little parts and I don't want it to get banged up." Kenny said as he looked over his arrangement again.

"Are you ready to start drawing Kevin?" Brady asked with a smile.

"Uh huh. Just let me move this." Kevin said and carefully moved his easel so he was facing the bed.

"I'll leave you guys to it. Have fun." Allen said as he walked out of the room.

* * * * *

Allen walked to Jake and Xain's room and noticed that the door was closed.

He carefully knocked and waited for a, 'Come in.' before entering.

"How are you guys doing?" Allen asked and noticed that they were both sitting on Jake's bed.

"We were just talking about stuff." Jake said simply.

"So you're getting along okay?" Allen asked curiously.

"Jake is my brother and friend." Xain said seriously.

Allen smiled and said, "Then I'm glad you two ended up sharing a room. How would you two feel about making some cookies for everyone?"

"That sounds great." Jake said with a smile.

"I am not familiar with that... recipe." Xain said carefully.

"There's a recipe on the bag of chocolate chips. Jake or I can help you if you get stuck on any of the words." Allen said with a smile.

"I would like to try to make cookies." Xain said seriously.

"Great, then come on downstairs and we'll get started." Allen said with a smile.

Xain got a curious look, then walked up to Allen and pulled him into a hug.

"That means he doesn't have the words for what he wants to say." Jake explained with a tender look.

"I know exactly what he's saying... and I don't have the words either." Allen said as he returned the hug.

* * * * *

Allen sat at the kitchen table and watched as Jake and Xain worked in the kitchen.

After mixing the cookie dough, Xain took a taste and considered carefully.

Allen became curious as Xain began to look through the cabinets, obviously looking for something.

"What are you looking for?" Allen asked curiously.

"She who was my mother explained that to follow another's instructions... recipe, is much like buying preprepared food. The preferable way is to follow the instructions, then add or alter ingredients to adapt the food to one's own taste." Xain said and pulled a spice container from the cabinet.

"The resulting product is unique, perhaps an improvement." Xain said as he carefully added a small amount of the spice.

"Maybe I'll get you to show me how to do that. I've only ever followed a recipe before." Allen said as he watched Xain add something else to the dough.

"I would be honored to share my experience." Xain said as he mixed the cookie dough again.

"This is fun. I'd like to learn too." Jake said as he watched Xain work.

"Perhaps we could prepare tomorrow's meal to welcome he who is my father." Xain said and handed the bowl to Jake.

"What do you want me to do?" Jake asked cautiously.

"Spoon the dough onto the pan." Xain said simply.

"Oh, okay." Jake said and began to work.

"I think that's a good idea Xain. If you'll get a list together of what you'll need for the meal, I'll go to the store and get it. I'd like to invite Juana and her kids too." Allen said thoughtfully.

Xain looked at Allen curiously.

"They're going to be like part of the family, so I'd like to start making her feel welcomed." Allen said carefully.

"That's a good idea. She's invited me to eat with her a few times, it'll be nice to be able to repay her." Jake said as he started scooping dough onto a second cookie sheet.

"I'll ask her in the morning." Allen said with a smile.

* * * * *

Kevin, Kenny and Brady walked into the kitchen, led by their noses.

"That smells really good. Are you making cookies?" Kenny asked as he walked over to hug Allen.

"Not me. Xain and Jake are making the cookies, I'm just keeping them company." Allen said warmly as he hugged Kenny.

"I drawed a big picture of the shelf Uncle Brady and Kenny are going to build." Kevin said with pride.

"We should be able to start on it tomorrow. We've got the design figured out and just need to make some measurements." Brady said as he took a seat at the table.

Xain walked to the oven, and after a moment to consider, pulled the first pan of cookies out and sat it on the stove.

"While the cookies are cooling you can scoop out the ice cream." Allen said with a smile.

Jake nodded and carried a stack of plates to the sink where the ice cream had been left to soften.

"Those cookies smell wonderful guys. I can't wait to try them." Brady said with a smile.

"Yeah. I'm going to have some too." Kevin said with delight.

Allen leaned over in his seat to put an arm around Kevin and give him a quick hug.

* * * * *

"These are the best chocolate chip cookies I've ever had." Brady said in ecstasy.

"Yeah, whatever you added to the recipe made them taste even better." Allen said, then took another bite of cookie.

"I simply added spices I believed would accentuate the taste." Xain said with a tone of pride in his voice.

"I never tasted nothing this good before." Kevin said as he took a second cookie from the plate in the middle of the table.

"Thanks for thinking of the ice cream. It's really good with the cookies." Jake said, then savored a spoon of the vanilla ice cream.

"It is the perfect compliment." Xain agreed, then took a bite of his own cookie.

"I guess this means that tomorrow's meal is going to be incredible with you three making it." Brady said with a smile.

"We will endeavor to prepare a satisfying meal." Xain said gently.

"That's Vulcan for 'it's gonna kick ass!'." Jake said with a grand smile.

After a chuckle Allen said, "And I thought Kevin and I were the translator's here."

"You translate the words, Jake translates the sentiment." Xain said with a ghost of a smile at Jake.

Laughter and good cheer were in abundant supply as the family began to recount the events of the day.

CHAPTER 14

As Brady was giving his dramatic retelling of the antics of the movers, a knock on the door was heard.

"I'll get it!" Kenny said as he launched himself from his chair and bounded for the front door.

A moment later Kenny came back into the kitchen leading Mamacita and her family.

"Hello Juana, we were just enjoying some cookies and ice cream. Would you like to join us?" Allen asked kindly.

"Thank you, no." Juana said shyly.

Reuben and Ricardo both looked at their mother with their most pitiful and hungry looks turned on full blast.

"Would it be okay if the boys had some?" Allen asked, trying to hide his smile at the boys' hopeful looks.

Mamacita looked at her sons and said, "We have late dinner. Boys may not be hungry..."

"Por favooooooooooor Mama!" Reuben begged shamelessly.

"I don't need a translator to understand that." Brady said with a chuckle.

Juana smiled and nodded at the boys.

Reuben and Ricardo both jumped up on chairs and grabbed cookies from the plate in the center of the table.

"Jake, would you get the boys some ice cream? Kenny, would you get Ricardo and Reuben some milk? Xain and Kevin, would you pull some chairs in from the dining room?" Allen asked gently.

The boys didn't answer, but instead went to work on their appointed duties.

"Can I get you some coffee or anything?" Allen asked Juana carefully.

"Leche... Milk, milk would be good." Juana said with difficulty.

"Kenny? Would you get some milk for Juana while you're at it?" Allen asked toward the kitchen.

"I got it Pop." Kenny said as he lined glasses up on the kitchen counter.

"I'm guessing you're here to find out about your job." Allen said conversationally.

"Si, yes. Please excuse. I do not speak the English often." Juana said in a mix of frustration and shame.

"That's fine, Xain also has difficulty with English." Allen said as Xain and Kevin carried chairs into the room.

"Come on, let's sit down and we can talk about the details of your job." Allen said seriously.

Juana nodded as she took her seat.

"The main thing I need is for an adult to be here with the boys when I'm at work. Sometimes I have to go to San Francisco for a few days and two or three times a year I have to go off-planet for a week or more." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Kevin, Kenny and Jake are good boys. Xain will be good as well, I believe. It will be a pleasure to stay with them." Juana said as she cast fond looks at the boys.

"I'm glad to hear it. Besides being here with the boys, I was hoping that you could do the basic housekeeping. I expect the boys to pick up after themselves and clean their own bedrooms and bathrooms. The most you should have to do is to remind them to clean or to teach them how to do it properly." Allen said, then noticed the sour look on Kenny's face.

"Come on cute stuff. You need to learn how to do this stuff for yourself. I wouldn't be doing you any favors if I hired someone to clean up your mess." Allen said seriously.

Juana nodded but remained silent.

"So that just leaves the main rooms of the house. We'll pick up after ourselves, so all you'll really have to do is vacuum and dust. I'd also like for you to take care of the laundry. And I'd appreciate it if you'd show the boys how to do the laundry for themselves." Allen said thoughtfully.

"I been washing my own clothes for years and years." Kevin said seriously.

"Me too." Jake said quietly.

"Good, but let Juana show you how she does it. Maybe she knows some tricks that you haven't discovered yet." Allen said in a parental tone.

Jake and Kevin nodded.

"I am also experienced with laundry." Xain said in a broken meter, carefully choosing his words.

"It looks like Kenny is the only one you'll have to teach then." Allen said with a smile directed at Xain.

Juana looked at Xain curiously, then turned her attention back to Allen.

"And the only other thing I can think of is the cooking. On the days when I'm working and the boys are at school, I'd like for you to make dinner for us." Allen said in a professional voice.

"Yes, of course." Juana said simply.

"And of course you and your children will be expected to join us for dinner whenever you cook." Allen added, maintaining his serious tone.

"I cannot. It would not be proper." Juana immediately countered.

"Nonsense. It makes more sense than doing double work. Why should you cook a meal here, then go to your apartment and cook another?" Allen said reasonably.

Juana nodded slowly, but didn't look convinced.

"What I'd like to happen is for your boys to be included with my boys whenever possible. They can travel to school together, go clothes shopping, in fact, I was thinking of taking my boys for haircuts in the morning before they visit the schools. I could take Reuben with us if you'd like." Allen said thoughtfully.

Juana's look of surprise turned to one of tenderness as she said, "It will be good for the children to have a man in their lives. Mi Carlos, he leave when I was pregnant with Ricardo. The boys are better off not to have him as example. He leaves the children, you take in the children."

Allen blushed at the praise and whispered a shy, "Thank you."

"Can Reuben come up and see my room?" Kevin asked quickly.

"If it's okay with his mother. And you should take Ricardo too. It's no fun to be left out because you're the youngest." Allen said seriously.

"Can I momma?" Reuben asked hopefully.

"Si, go and play with your friend." Juana said with a contented smile.

"Vamanos Ricardo." Kevin said as he hopped off his chair and headed for the door.

Ricardo looked at his mother. At her nod, he took off to follow Kevin and his brother.

"Can I go too?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Sure. Go have fun." Allen said with a smile.

Kenny jumped up and gave Allen a quick hug before hurrying out of the room.

* * * * *

"That's about all I've come up with. Do you have any questions?" Allen asked Juana seriously.

"Si, I may need help to get Reuben into school. Mi Inglés es... is no good." Juana said with frustration.

"That's no problem Juana. I'll be taking the boys to get them enrolled on Tuesday. You can come with us and I'll help you." Allen said gently.

"Do you have a driver's license Juana?" Brady asked curiously.

"Si, pero es... is from Chicago." Juana said as she turned to face Brady.

"I was just thinking that Juana is going to need to be able to drive to buy groceries and to pick up the boys." Brady said carefully.

"I hadn't thought of that... it actually works out though. Dan drove Carl's car over while I drove my SUV. All we'll have to do is get Juana a Florida driver's license and get her put on my insurance." Allen said seriously.

"If you'd like, I can take Juana over to the DMV in the morning while you're getting the boys' hair cut." Brady said thoughtfully.

"Don't you have to work tomorrow?" Allen asked curiously.

"No. I don't have to report back until Tuesday morning, I'll return to the ship tomorrow night." Brady said with a smile.

"Then it sounds like we have a plan." Allen said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Poppa, can Reuben and Ricardo call you Pop? I told them they could but they didn't believe me." Kevin asked as he ran into the kitchen.

Reuben, Ricardo and Kenny came in more slowly to hear the answer for themselves.

Allen thought about the question and motioned for Reuben to come to him.

"Reuben, you're old enough that you can choose what you want to call me. If you want to call me Pop or Poppa or even Dad, I wouldn't mind." Allen said as he looked into Reuben's eyes.

"You're not my father. Even if I want you to be, you're still not. But can I... may I call you Uncle?" Reuben asked carefully.

"I think that's a great idea Reuben. And since Brady is my brother, he'll be your Uncle too." Allen said with a smile.

"¿Que?" Ricardo asked in a small voice.

"Esos es Tio Allen y Tio Brady." Reuben told his brother carefully as he pointed.

Ricardo got a smile and ran to give Brady a big hug.

Brady hugged Ricardo for a second, then picked him up to sit him in his lap.

Ricardo snuggled against Brady's chest and hugged for all he was worth.

"Ricardo does not usually like strangers." Juana said with a note of surprise.

"They're not strangers, they're Uncles." Reuben said seriously.

Juana nodded as she watched her youngest son soaking in Brady's attention.

Reuben watched his brother for a moment, then inched his way toward Allen.

As soon as Reuben was within easy reach, Allen scooped him up into a full hug and said, "You're my nephew now. Do you know what that means?"

Reuben pulled back from the hug slightly and shook his head.

"It means that you're part of the family, so when I take the boys on a trip or buy them things, you're included." Allen said as he pulled Reuben back into the hug.

"Thank you." Juana said in a whisper.

"Juana, I'm not doing this just for the boys. It's a reward for me whenever I see one of the boys happy. Including your boys with mine will only increase the reward." Allen said seriously.

"I understand. It is why I would invite Kevin and Jake to eat with my family at times. To see them happy is a joy for me as well as for them." Juana said quietly.

"Thank you Mamacita." Jake said and walked to Mamacita's side to give her a hug.

"You always were a good boy Jake. You do what you must to survive and walk the hard path like my Lupe. But when you have a chance to take the right path, you take it. Lupe would not. She run away when she hear that we are to move." Juana said as her eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry Mamacita. I know Lupe is a good person inside, the drugs just messed her up so she can't see things right." Jake soothed.

"Si, I know. To see you here. It gives me hope for my Lupe." Mamacita said as a tear slowly fell down her cheek.

Jake renewed his hug, careful not to wake Edovina in Juana's arms.

"Well, if everyone is done with their cookies, I'd like to move into the living room." Allen said to the group.

"We must be going. It is time for Ricardo to go to bed." Mamacita said as she pulled out of Jake's hug and smiled at him fondly.

"Too late." Brady said in a low voice.

Allen looked at Brady curiously.

"He's asleep." Brady whispered.

"Wake him and we will go." Juana said with a smile at Ricardo.

"I wouldn't mind carrying him up to his bed. It seems a shame to wake him up, then try to get him to go back to sleep." Brady said as he looked fondly at the boy in his arms.

Juana smiled and nodded.

"Can Reuben stay here with us tonight?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"Really?" Reuben asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Come on. It'll be fun." Kevin said in a pleading voice.

"We both want you to stay." Kenny said as he looked into Reuben's eyes to show his honesty.

"And that way you wouldn't have to get Reuben up in the morning to get a haircut. It would actually be easier for everyone." Allen said with a smile.

"Yes, yes. You behave for Mr. Allen." Juana said seriously.

"Please just call me Allen. After all, we've already decided that Reuben and Ricardo are my nephews. You can't call your family Mr." Allen said frankly.

"Si, yes. Allen. Reuben? Will you behave for Tio Allen?" Juana asked in her serious 'mother' voice.

"I'll be good." Reuben said with an angelic expression.

"Then come and give a kiss." Juana said as she scooted her chair out from the table.

Reuben squirmed off Allen's lap and ran to his mother to give her a kiss.

"Reuben, I'll pick up some clothes for you to wear tomorrow while I'm up there." Brady said quietly as he stood.

"Thank you Uncle Brady." Reuben said with a satisfied smile.

Juana also stood with Edovina in her arms.

"Have a good night Juana... Oh, I forgot. Can you have dinner with us tomorrow? Xain's father is going to be in town and I wanted for him to meet you." Allen asked hopefully.

"Yes. I would like that. May I help in the cooking?" Juana asked hopefully.

"Xain and Jake are going to prepare the meal, but I'm sure they could probably use some extra help." Allen said, then glanced to see Xain and Jake's approval.

"Good, now you'd better get your sleeping kids to bed." Allen said as he walked with Juana and Brady to the door.

"Thank you for everything Allen." Juana said as tears began to fill her eyes again.

"You're welcome. Goodnight." Allen said tenderly and watched them go.

* * * * *

"You boys go on and get ready for bed. I'm just going to tidy up the kitchen before I call it a night." Allen said to the group behind him.

"But it's still early." Jake said hesitantly.

"You don't have to go to bed now. I just want you to go up and take your showers and tidy your rooms. That way when it's time for bed, you're ready." Allen explained as he walked back into the kitchen.

"May I help to clean the kitchen?" Xain asked quietly.

"If you'll take the extra chairs back to the dining room, that's all the help I'll need." Allen said as he began to gather the dishes from the kitchen table.

Jake automatically helped Xain as Kenny, Kevin and Reuben left to go upstairs.

* * * * *

"If we help you put away your models, will you shower with us?" Kevin asked carefully as they entered the bedroom.

Kenny looked at Kevin curiously, then at Reuben.

"If Reuben doesn't mind. You know how you felt funny about it when we showered together yesterday." Kenny said hesitantly.

Kevin nodded, then turned to face Reuben.

"Last night we showered together and it was really cool. It made me feel really special and like they love me and I want you to feel that way too." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"But... I'd be scared. You'd be looking at me naked." Reuben said in a trembling voice.

"Yeah, that part was scary until we started washing. Then it wasn't scary at all. If you'll try it you can stop whenever you want. It's really nice, I promise." Kevin said in the tone of a solemn vow.

"Okay. But if I say I don't want to you won't try and make me?" Reuben asked cautiously.

"I swear. All we're going to do is wash each other. It's a way to show that we like you being our... if Poppa is Reuben's Uncle, what does that make us?" Kevin asked curiously.

"He'd be our cousin." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"Then we'll be showing you that we like you being our cousin. I was scared until I tried it. Now I don't want to take showers alone no more." Kevin said seriously.

Reuben hesitantly nodded.

"Then lets get these models put away. And Reuben, if you change your mind just tell us. We'll still like you and we won't be mad at all." Kenny said quietly.

Reuben gave a slight smile and nodded at Kenny.

All three boys started gathering the models and putting them carefully into their boxes.

* * * * *

"Do you wish to shower now?" Xain asked as he and Jake walked into their room.

"No, go ahead." Jake said quietly as he stared off into the distance.

Xain looked at Jake curiously, then gathered the things he would need and went to shower.

* * * * *

Brady walked into Kenny and Kevin's bedroom to find it tidy and devoid of children.

He sat Reuben's clothes down on Kevin's bed and was about to leave when he heard a giggle from the bathroom.

Brady walked to the bathroom door and gently knocked before asking, "Are you guys alright in there?"

Kenny opened the door and said, "Sure Uncle Brady, we're just about to take our shower."

"All three of you?" Brady asked carefully as he looked at the three naked boys.

"Yeah. That's okay isn't it?" Kevin asked hesitantly.

Brady thought carefully before he said, "Yeah, that's fine. I just figured you'd be showering alone."

"This way we can show Reuben that we like him cause we'll let him be naked with us." Kevin said seriously.

Brady smiled at the answer and said, "You guys have fun showering then. Reuben, I left your clothes on Kevin's bed."

As Brady turned to leave the bathroom Reuben asked, "Do you want to shower with us Uncle Brady?"

Brady stopped in his tracks and thought seriously before answering.

"It's probably not a good idea. If we go to a gym sometime or go camping then I will, but it's better if I don't now." Brady said carefully.

"Why not?" Reuben asked curiously.

Brady walked to Reuben and knelt before him so he could look him in the eyes.

"Because there are bad people in the world who hurt kids. If I took a shower with you, then the good people who want to protect kids might think I was one of those bad people. Does that make sense to you?" Brady asked carefully.

Reuben thought seriously about it, then asked, "So if you shower with us there's people who'll think you want to fuck us?"

Brady thought for an instant about telling Reuben about swearing, but thought that it was more important to be sure that Reuben understood what he was saying, "That's right. And if any adult tries to talk you into getting naked, you need to come to your mother or Allen or me and we'll figure out if it's right or wrong. Can you do that?"

Reuben nodded shyly with tears starting to form in his eyes.

Brady pulled Reuben into a hug and said, "You're not in any trouble and you didn't do anything wrong. Thank you for inviting me to shower with you guys. It was really great of you to do that."

Reuben nodded into Brady's shoulder.

"Now it's probably best that you three get in the shower." Brady said in a gentle voice.

As Brady pulled out of his hug with Reuben, he was promptly hugged by Kevin, then Kenny.

"If being an adult means we can't shower together no more, then I don't want to grow up." Kevin said seriously.

"Growing up doesn't mean that at all. Growing up means that you get to shower with whoever you want... as long as it's other grownups." Brady finished with a smile.

Brady let loose of Kenny and said, "Now you guys had better get to showering before it's bedtime."

All three boys hurried into the shower as Brady walked out of the bathroom.

* * * * *

After completing his shower, Xain walked into the bedroom to find Jake with tears streaming down his face.

"You are distressed." Xain said quietly.

Jake nodded his head.

"May I be of assistance?" Xain asked carefully.

Jake considered the question for a minute before saying, "I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know what I'm feeling. It's like something is screaming inside me, wanting to claw it's way out. I... I don't know what to do."

Xain looked at Jake curiously, then sat on the bed beside Jake.

"Perhaps. If I may touch. It is possible for me to help." Xain said with difficulty.

Jake turned to look at Xain and nodded slightly.

Xain lifted his right hand to Jake's face and carefully placed his fingers.

In nearly a whisper Xain began to say, "My mind to your mind..."

* * * * *

"Is this okay Reuben? Do you want us to stop?" Kenny asked as he slowly washed Reuben's back.

Reuben looked over his shoulder at Kenny and said, "It feels good. I usually bathe with my brother. I always thought I was just helping him get clean. Next time I bathe with him, I'll know it's a way of showing him that I like him."

"That's right. So now you know that we really like having you here and we aren't just saying it." Kevin said seriously as he gently washed under Reuben's arms.

"Yeah. That tickles." Reuben finished with a giggle.

* * * * *

Allen walked upstairs and decided to check on Xain and Jake to see how they were doing.

After a few knocks on their door and receiving no answer he cautiously opened it.

Allen walked into the bedroom to find both boys sitting silently.

Xain had both his hands on Jake's face in a familiar position.

Allen resisted the urge to pull them apart and took a seat on Xain's bed.

He knew that interrupting a mind meld could cause damage to both boys so all he could do is wait for them to finish.

* * * * *

"How come you can speak English so well?" Kenny asked Reuben as he toweled him dry.

"Mama sent me to a preschool that taught us English, then I went to first grade and learned some more. It's not so hard." Reuben said as he enjoyed being dried.

"Does Ricardo speak any English?" Kenny asked as he stood.

"Not much. I've taught him a few words, but he knows mostly Spanish." Reuben said as he followed Kenny and Kevin into the bedroom.

"Do you think Mamacita would mind if we tried to teach him some English?" Kenny asked as he went through his dresser and pulled out a pair of boxers to wear.

"She'd like that. She worries that Ricardo won't fit in because he doesn't speak English." Reuben said seriously as he pulled on his briefs.

"What Pop said about him feeling bad about being left out made me think. If we try and teach Ricardo English, then he'll know we want to have him around." Kenny said and took a seat on the side of his bed.

"Are you guys ready for bed?" Brady asked from the doorway.

"Sure Uncle Brady. We're all showered and the room is cleaned up." Kenny said with a smile.

"That's good. Kevin, did you finish your picture yet?" Brady asked as he walked further into the room.

"Not yet. It's a really big piece of paper." Kevin said as he walked to his easel and pulled the cover of the pad back to reveal the picture underneath.

"What is it?" Brady asked curiously at the blurry images rendered in charcoal.

"I don't know. I never know till I'm finished." Kevin said as he also looked at the picture.

"Well, let me know when you're finished. Whatever it is, it's coming along well." Brady said as he took a final look at the ghost images beginning to form on the paper.

"Can we play some computer games before we go to sleep?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"That sounds like a good idea. It's about an hour before you need to go to bed. You guys enjoy your game and I'll come up and tell you when it's bedtime." Brady said with a smile.

"Thanks Uncle Brady." Kenny said as he turned on his television and video game console.

Reuben hopped off Kevin's bed where he had been sitting and ran to give Brady a hug.

"I really like it here with my cousins." Reuben said as he hugged Brady tightly.

"We're all glad you're here." Brady said as he hugged Reuben in return.

"Who wants to play first?" Kenny asked as the game came to life.

"You can show Reuben how to play and I'll watch." Kevin said as he moved to sit on the edge of Kenny's bed.

"Come on Reuben. I want to show you how to play." Kenny said happily.

Reuben gave Brady one final squeeze, then ran to sit at Kenny's side.

Brady gave one final look at the boys before leaving the room.

* * * * *

Xain let his hands drop from Jake's face and turned to see Allen staring at him.

A moment later Jake opened his eyes and looked at Allen curiously.

"Come down to the living room, we need to talk." Allen said in a low, firm voice then stood and left the room.

"He's pissed." Jake whispered as he stood.

Xain raised an eyebrow in inquiry.

"I don't know why, but he is." Jake said, answering the unasked question.

* * * * *

Jake walked into the living room followed closely by Xain.

"Sit down." Allen said as he looked out at the lake.

Jake and Xain sat side by side on a sofa.

"It didn't occur to me that you would even think of trying something so dangerous or I would have talked to you about this when you arrived." Allen said as he turned and directed his comment toward Xain.

"I attempted to..." Xain began to say before Allen cut him off.

"Listen to me for right now. When I'm done I'll listen to what you have to say." Allen said in a tone of voice that was firm and final.

"To start with, you are not to attempt telepathic contact of any kind without my permission. Do you understand?" Allen asked as he looked directly at Xain.

"Yes Sir." Xain said in nearly a whisper.

Allen paused to collect his thoughts for a moment before he continued, "This goes beyond a simple error in judgment, this is an issue of trust. If I can't trust you to behave in a responsible manner, then I may have to rethink you're staying with us."

Jake's eyes went wide as panic welled up in him.

"What was irresponsible was your choice to perform a mind meld without permission or supervision. It was every bit as dangerous as playing with matches and gasoline. Xain, if you're going to stay here you're going to have to think about the consequences of your actions." Allen said firmly.

Jake stood and took a step forward to look Allen directly in the eyes.

"Do you want us to leave?" Jake asked in a growl.

Allen took an involuntary step back in surprise.

"You're pissed, I get that. But if you're going to threaten to throw us out when we screw up, then we might as well leave now. You said that if we had problems you'd help us. You didn't say nothin bout throwing us out if we screw up." Jake said as his face began to redden.

"Jake, I didn't mean..." Allen tried to say before Jake cut him off.

"Bullshit! If you can threaten to kick Xain out, that means you'll do the same to me next time I fuck up. Is this the way it is for all of us or just me and Xain? Cause if you're going to throw Kevin and Kenny out too, they should be down here to see this!" Jake asked in a snarl.

Allen froze thoughtfully.

"And just in case you even care, I was thinking about doing drugs when Xain helped me. Everything I was feeling was making me crazy until Xain helped me see what was happening." Jake said in frustration.

Allen's gaze drifted into a distant place only he could see.

"Can we stay tonight or should we leave now?" Jake asked as he forced Allen to look him in the eyes.

Allen looked deeply into Jake's eyes and asked, "What if I screw up?"

"Huh?" Jake asked in confusion, his anger temporarily derailed.

"I screwed up. I don't want either of you to leave. I'm sorry I said it. I didn't mean it." Allen said in a serious voice.

Jake looked into Allen's eyes to see the true emotion within.

"Guys. This parent thing isn't as easy as it looks. I don't have all the answers and I'm doing the best I can. If you can take it easy on me when I screw it up, I'll try and do the same when you guys screw up. Will you give me another chance?" Allen asked with hope in his voice.

Jake blinked and looked away without saying a word.

"Xain, I'm sorry. I don't want you to leave and I promise that I won't say that again. It's just that I've heard about what happens when a mind meld goes wrong and it scared me. I don't want to see either of you hurt." Allen said quietly.

"Saying you're sorry doesn't make everything better. Dad said he was sorry. Mom's still dead." Jake said thoughtfully.

"You're right Jake. It doesn't make everything better. I can't unsay the words and I don't know what I can do to fix this." Allen said as he took a seat.

Jake sat beside Xain and said, "Yeah. I know that feeling. Let's just forget it ever happened."

"There's a few problems with that. If we don't deal with this right now, we'll always have this standing between us. And besides that, you don't learn anything by forgetting." Allen said seriously.

Jake and Xain watched as Allen picked up the small box on the coffee table.

"How about this?" Allen asked as he opened the box and pulled out the shaving kit.

"I already told you what this means to me. If you'll agree to accept it now it can be a symbol of my promise that I'll never throw you out, no matter what happens." Allen said hopefully.

"Then you should give it to Xain." Jake said seriously.

Allen reached into his pocket and pulled out the pocket watch.

"Both of you. This is my promise that I'll never ask you to leave." Allen said as he stood and held out the shaving kit and the watch.

"Okay." Jake said and accepted the shaving kit from Allen.

"Thank you Father." Xain said quietly as he looked at the watch.

Allen carefully gathered both boys into a hug and whispered, "I really am sorry guys. This is as new to me as it is to you. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do sometimes."

"That's what Xain made me understand." Jake said as he enjoyed the hug.

"What did you find out?" Allen asked quietly as he continued hugging the boys.

"I'm used to taking drugs when I start to feel something. When I would start to feel bad, I'd take drugs to make me feel better, when I'd feel happy I'd take drugs to celebrate. Every time I felt something, I'd take some more drugs. Today, when I had a few minutes to stop and think... I didn't know how to deal with it, how to just feel what I'm feeling. I wanted to take drugs to make the feelings go away because I don't know what else to do." Jake said thoughtfully.

"Xain, what did you do to help Jake?" Allen asked curiously.

"Jake had difficulty identifying the source of discomfort. We merged and identified the root of the problem. Once identified, there was no longer a desire to quell the emotions." Xain said thoughtfully.

"Thank you for helping Jake. Please just talk to me before you try anymore telepathy. Okay?" Allen asked quietly.

"Yes Father." Xain said into Allen's chest.

"Then it's done. Our first family dispute has been settled." Allen said in a semi-cheerful voice.

Jake pulled back and looked at Allen in surprise.

"What's wrong?" Allen asked curiously.

"You did what you said you'd do." Jake said in realization.

"What did I say?" Allen asked in confusion.

"You remember when I asked you what you'd do if you got mad?" Jake asked with excitement.

"Oh, yeah. I guess I did." Allen said thoughtfully.

"You left the room, then worked it out. And you didn't hit us." Jake said with a smile.

Allen's look fell as he said, "I did something as bad as hit you. Guys, I swear, I'll never throw you out. Jake, I'm proud of you for standing up for Xain like you did. You're a good brother."

"This is one of those feelings I don't know how to handle." Jake said in a shaky voice.

"Father, may I ease his distress?" Xain asked carefully.

"What are you going to do?" Allen asked cautiously.

"I will lend of my control until the emotion can be accepted." Xain said carefully.

"Okay, but don't let it go too far." Allen said reluctantly.

Xain reached toward Jake then stopped suddenly.

"What was that?" Jake asked with concern.

"Unknown. The link should not exist without touch." Xain said as he held his hand ten inches from Jake's face.

* * * * *

"Am I interrupting?" Brady asked cautiously from the living room door.

"No, maybe you can help us figure this out." Allen said with worry welling in his features.

"What's wrong?" Brady asked as he walked to Allen's side.

Xain got a distant look in his eyes, then said in a whisper, "We are bonded."

"What!?" Jake asked in a voice between a gasp and a yelp.

Xain looked at Jake curiously.

Allen and Brady looked at Jake and Xain trying to comprehend the ramifications of the statement.

"Did we... Are we?" Jake sputtered.

Xain raised an eyebrow to prompt Jake to continue, not understanding Jake's apprehension.

"I don't know about Vulcan stuff but... Did we just get married?" Jake asked in a fearful voice.

Xain tilted his head slightly and said, "No. Not married. I do not know of human terms to describe what we have achieved. We are... bonded."

"Oh. Okay. I'm sorry. It's not that I'd have a problem getting married, it's just... It's a little too soon for something like that." Jake tried to explain.

"I am not offended. The bond means that we share ourselves... our lives. How we choose to share them is up to us." Xain said in peace.

Jake thought about the statement, then broke into a smile.

"So it just means we'll be friends forever? We'll always be a part of each other's lives?" Jake asked, cautiously.

"Yes, from what I've read on the subject, that's what it means." Allen said in deep thought.

"We have both fully accepted the bond. There is no harm." Xain said seriously.

Allen nodded in confirmation, then said, "I don't have a problem with the fact that you've bonded. I'm happy for you. I'm just concerned. You shouldn't have formed a bond. You've only known each other one day."

"I understand. But I did not choose to form the bond, it formed... instinctively." Xain said, searching for the right word.

"I see." Allen said quietly.

"What did he do?" Jake asked nervously.

"Nothing bad, I promise. He touched your mind. Now you carry a part of him with you and he has a part of you. Done correctly, it's a beautiful thing. I'm just worried that Xain is not an experienced telepath. I wouldn't want to see you two hurt if the bonding was done incorrectly." Allen said quietly.

"Oh. I guess that's okay." Jake said thoughtfully.

"Do you regret our bonding?" Xain asked betraying a note of apprehension in his voice.

Jake's expression became tender as he said, "No, I was just surprised."

Allen looked at the two curiously, then asked, "Xain, would you feel comfortable talking to your father about this? I'd feel better if an experienced telepath could see that it was done right."

Xain looked at Jake for a moment, then said, "He who is my father has the necessary skill to examine our bond. I believe he will approve."

Allen smiled with relief and said, "Then we'll ask him about it when he comes tomorrow."

Xain and Jake both nodded simultaneously.

Allen pulled both boys back into a hug.

"I really am happy for you both. I just have to worry, it's my job as a father." Allen said as he held them tightly.

"I thank you for your concern Father." Xain said seriously.

"Yeah, thanks Dad." Jake said into Allen's chest.

Unable to resist the pull of the scene of caring, Brady approached and was pulled in to make it a four way hug.

* * * * *

"Why don't you guys go up and visit with your brothers for a few minutes? I need to make a call." Allen said when the hug finally broke up.

"Wait a minute." Jake said quickly and ran out of the room.

"Xain. Are you really okay?" Allen asked with concern.

"Be assured *K'war'ma'khon*, I understand the reason for your concern. He who is my father would have had similar concerns... though he would have expressed them differently." Xain said carefully.

"I'm sure you're right. I think you're English has improved since you've been here. You're expressing yourself much better." Allen said seriously.

Xain looked at Allen hesitantly and quietly said, "I have received language skills through the bond."

Allen looked at Xain thoughtfully for a moment before Jake ran into the room carrying the shirt he had been wearing the day before.

"What do you have there son?" Allen asked as a tingle of dread crawled up his spine.

"Take this. If Xain hadn't been there... I might have..." Jake said as he handed the bundle to his father.

Allen opened the bundle carefully and found a small travel case. Inside were a tablespoon, some cotton balls, two syringes and a lighter.

"The stuff is in the zippered pouch." Jake said in a whisper.

"Allen, I can take care of that if you want." Brady said carefully.

Allen nodded and handed the case to Brady.

"I wasn't... I mean, I forgot that I had it in my pocket. I'm sorry Dad. I should have given it to you yesterday." Jake said in a defeated whisper.

"No son. You gave it to me when you were ready to. Some of what happened yesterday wasn't by your choice. This was. I'm so proud of you right now that I don't have words." Allen said in an increasing voice.

"Then show him." Xain said in a fully Vulcan tone of reason.

Allen smiled and pulled Jake into a tight hug.

* * * * *

"I really need to make that call now. I'll be upstairs in a few minutes when I'm done." Allen said as he released Jake.

"Yeah, I still need to take my shower." Jake said as he dried his cheeks.

"Go on. I'll be up in a few." Allen said as he pulled out his cell phone.

After pressing a speed dial number on his phone Allen hesitantly said, "Mona?"

"*Allen, oh, thank God. I've been worried sick about you. How are you baby?*" Mona asked with relief.

"I'm fine. A lot of things have happened the last few days." Allen said as he took a seat.

Brady started walking toward the family room but Allen waved and motioned for him to stay.

"*I've been trying to call you for two days but kept getting your answering machine. I was afraid something had happened to you.*" Mona said with worry evident in her voice.

"Well, I was in the hospital for a little bit, but I'm fine now." Allen said cautiously.

"*Hospital? What happened? Please tell me you didn't do something stupid over that no good...*" Mona started to say before Allen cut her off.

"Please Mona, he's dead, let it go." Allen said in a weary voice.

"*I'm sorry. It's just that I could see how you were wasting yourself on someone who didn't love you. It hurt so much, I couldn't keep quiet.*" Mona said in a repentant voice.

"I know. Just like Grandpa couldn't keep quiet about Cecil." Allen said seriously.

There was a long silence before Mona whispered, "*Yeah. Just like that.*"

"Mona, when I left the hospital I met someone..." Allen began to say as he looked at Brady.

"*Oh no, it's too soon baby. You need to stop and think.*" Mona said in a desperate, begging voice.

Allen's face expressed wide eyed surprise before he quickly said, "No, Brady's not my boyfriend, he's my brother."

"*What?*" Mona asked in confusion.

"My brother. We had a DNA test and everything. His name is Brady Thompson and he's in Starfleet." Allen said, then waited for her reaction.

"*Your brother? Really? Oh Allen, I'm so happy for you. I know you always wanted a brother.*" Mona said in relief.

Allen looked at Brady warmly and said, "Yes Mona, I've always wanted a brother."

Brady's face broke into a wide smile.

"*When can you come and visit? I'd like to meet him.*" Mona asked quickly.

"Well, I'm not sure. I'll have to get back to you on that. Um, do you remember that I told you about Carl's son, Kenny?" Allen asked cautiously.

"*Didn't you say he was going to live with his mother?*" Mona asked, straining to remember.

"When he arrived she abandoned him and his brother..." Allen trailed off, listening for a reaction.

There was a long silence on the phone.

"...Brady's commanding officer and some others were able to help me adopt them..." Allen trailed off again, not knowing if the silence was a good or a bad sign.

"...And two others." Allen finished and waited.

Silence was Mona's only response.

"Mona? Are you still there?" Allen finally asked.

"*Yes. Just... You've adopted four children?*" Mona asked with disbelief.

"Yeah. I know it's a lot to take in, but I really need to know how you feel about me adopting Carl's kids. If you're going to hold it against them..." Allen started but Mona cut him off.

"*Allen Terrance Thompson! You can just stop right there*." Mona said in a stern, authoritative voice.

"*I may have thought Carl was a no good son-of-a-bitch, but his kids aren't any part of that. When you say adopt, what exactly do you mean by that?*" Mona asked cautiously.

"I mean adopt. Kenny, Kevin and Jake are legally my sons. And I am Xain's guardian. The four of them have had their names changed to Thompson. I am their father and they are my sons." Allen said seriously.

"*Well I don't know how you managed it, but I'm happy for you. I know how it felt when Cecil brought you home to me. Having kids... God, you gave my life a reason when I didn't have anything else. It would have killed me when Cecil left if you hadn't been there*." Mona finished in a distant voice.

"I know. My boys. Mona, I can't wait till you can meet them. You're going to love them." Allen said with a smile in his voice.

"*I'm a grandmother!*" Mona said in realization.

"Do you want them to call you Grandma?" Allen asked with a giggle.

"*Of course. And I'm going to exercise my right to spoil them rotten when I get to see them. Tell me about them*." Mona said with excitement.

"Well, Kenny and Kevin are eleven..."

CHAPTER 15

As Jake and Xain arrived at the top of the stairs they heard a whimpering cry.

Both hurried to Kevin and Kenny's room to find Kevin on his bed crying softly as Reuben and Kenny sat on either side of him trying to comfort him.

"Kev buddy, you want to tell me what's wrong?" Jake asked as he sat on the edge of the bed and began to rub Kevin's back.

"I'm... I'm stupid!" Kevin wailed with his face buried into the bed.

"Why do you think you're stupid Kevin? Please tell me." Jake said in a soothing voice.

"I can't even play a game cause I'm so stupid." Kevin cried in agony.

"I never noticed it before but the game I was showing Reuben and Kevin how to play had a lot of reading in it. I said I'd read it to him, but he just started crying and won't stop." Kenny said in a whisper.

"I can't do nothin. I'm so stupid, I don't know why you would even want me around." Kevin said and started crying even harder.

"You know a bunch of stuff that I don't. If you're stupid, then I'm really stupid." Reuben said quietly to Kevin.

"You're not stupid... you're only six... You're not supposed to know stuff." Kevin said through hitching breaths.

"Kevin, you are smart. I couldn't have lived in Chicago like you did. I felt so stupid with all the trains and buses and being around people that I didn't understand. It was just everyday stuff to you but I was lost there and you were the smart one." Kenny said seriously.

"It's just because I always lived there. If you'd lived there you would be like me..." Kevin trailed off as his tears began to fall again.

"Kev, do you know why I've always been nice to you?" Jake asked as he stopped rubbing Kevin's back and pulled him into a hug.

Kevin looked at Jake and shook his head 'no'.

"Because when I look at you, I see someone who is everything I wanted to be. Your life was just as hard as mine but you didn't crack. You didn't give into Spade and his guys and you didn't do drugs. In my book that makes you smarter than me." Jake said seriously.

"Kevin." Xain called in a firm voice to gain his attention.

Kevin looked away from Jake to see Xain's serious, composed expression.

"I am also unable to read English. By your logic, I am also stupid. Do you believe this to be true?" Xain asked with intensity.

Kevin thought a moment before saying, "No. You're probably smarter than all of us put together. You don't know how to read English because you never learned how. That don't make you stupid."

Xain didn't respond, but kept his gaze fixed on Kevin.

There was nothing but tense silence until Kevin finally said, "Okay. Maybe I'm not stupid, I just can't read."

"Kev, if it really bothers you that much, all of us can help you learn. You and Xain can learn together." Jake said quietly.

"Yeah, and I can only read a little bit. I can learn with you too." Reuben said happily.

"Thanks guys." Kevin said as he wiped his eyes.

"Kev, we're all going to have to depend on each other a lot for a while until we get used to this. What Kenny was saying about how he felt in Chicago is how I feel here. I'm going to have to try and listen to Dad and Uncle Brady and Kenny until I know how I'm supposed to act here. That's going to be really hard for me because I'm used to being on my own." Jake said thoughtfully.

"I have never lived among Humans before. I am unfamiliar with Human interaction and customs. I too will have to follow the advice and example of Father, Uncle and Kenny." Xain said seriously.

"Guys, I may be used to living here but I was just a kid. Dad and Pop did everything for me, I never had to think about serious stuff or make any decisions. It feels like that was a hundred years ago..." Kenny trailed off as he thought.

"So we're all kind of lost here. That's why we need to stick together. Think about it guys, each of us is strong in some ways and weak in others. If we can just agree to ask for help when we need it and give help when it's asked for, we can get through this." Jake said firmly.

"And if it's something bigger than we can deal with, we can get help from Pop or the Clan." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, good thinking." Jake said with a nod.

"When can we start teaching Kevin how to read?" Reuben asked curiously.

"Right now if you want. You can teach Kevin and Xain what you know, then Kenny and I can take over and teach all three of you." Jake said seriously.

"I will observe. I have translated some things from she who was my mother, so I have some basic understanding." Xain said informatively.

Kenny ran to his bookcase and pulled out a few small books.

"Here, these are good ones that aren't too hard." Kenny said as he handed the books to Reuben.

"I'm going to go shower now. You guys have fun." Jake said as he turned.

"We will." Kevin said with a smile, then turned his attention to Reuben.

* * * * *

"Are you sure I won't be in the way?" Mona asked cautiously.

"Completely sure. Brady is leaving tomorrow night. We have a spare bed in the family room that you'll be able to use. I know the boys are going to love you. Just call me when your bus gets in." Allen said happily.

"I will. I love you, my sweet boy." Mona said tenderly.

"I love you too Mona." Allen said quietly.

Allen looked at Brady as he ended the call.

"Thanks, I didn't know if she was going to get nasty about me adopting Carl's kids and thought I might need some support." Allen said shyly.

"Why didn't she like Carl?" Brady asked as he shifted in his chair to get more comfortable.

"She thought that he was using me. She thought I was giving him everything without receiving anything in return." Allen said darkly.

"Was she right?" Brady asked carefully.

Allen looked up in surprise at the question, then took a moment to think about the answer.

"Maybe a little. But what Mona didn't take into account was what I needed from the relationship." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Which was?" Brady asked, prompting Allen to continue.

"I needed someone to care for. I felt a need to give of myself. I didn't expect, or even want, someone who would be 'fair' or 'even'. My need was to give to someone who needed it. All I expected in return was the occasional acknowledgement that I was appreciated." Allen said carefully.

"Did he?" Brady asked, truly interested in the answer.

"Yes. He had rare moments when he expressed his gratitude, even his concern that he didn't offer me the same encouragement and support that I gave him. I told him that he was exactly what I wanted him to be and I didn't have any complaints." Allen said quietly.

"So even though the relationship appeared to be one-sided to someone like Mona who was outside it, you were where you wanted to be doing what you wanted to do?" Brady asked in confirmation.

"Exactly. We were just what each other needed." Allen said frankly.

"Then I'm glad you found each other. I can't say I fully understand it, but as long as you two were happy, that's all that's important." Brady said with a smile.

"Yeah, my feelings exactly. Let's go check on the boys." Allen said and hefted himself off the couch.

Brady stood and followed Allen from the room.

* * * * *

"Tr... Tr... Tree?" Kevin asked uncertainly.

"Yes. You got it. That was a hard one." Reuben said with excitement.

"Tree. Wow, I did it!" Kevin said happily.

"I was in school for half a year before I learned my first four letter word. You're doing great." Reuben said seriously.

"The combination of the multiple consonants and a double vowel makes the word challenging. Your success is a notable achievement." Xain said in his Vulcan demeanor.

Kevin hugged Xain quickly and said, "Thanks Xain, when are you going to start learning with me?"

"I believe I have adequate knowledge of pronunciation, I will begin to participate when we reach sentences and paragraphs. My difficulty is with sentence structure and comprehension." Xain said calmly.

"How are you guys doing?" Allen asked from the door.

"Great!" Kevin said with excitement and raced to Allen carrying the book.

"Reuben is teaching me to read... see that word there? It's tree! I read it for real without anyone telling me!" Kevin said with excitement.

Allen squatted down to pull Kevin into a hug and said, "That's so wonderful little one. I'm proud of you."

Reuben and Kenny watched the scene with tender smiles as Xain watched impassively.

Brady walked to the three boys and said, "Thanks for helping him guys. I can't even imagine how he must feel but I know you just made this one of the best days of his life."

"Okay guys. It's time for bed." Allen said as he released Kevin and stood.

"But I wanted to learn to read some more." Kevin said with a pleading whine.

"If you really want to learn, you need to get plenty of sleep. Tomorrow after your haircuts you'll have all day to do what you want." Allen said seriously.

"Okay." Kevin said with disappointment.

"Now get into bed so I can tuck you in." Allen said and gently swatted Kevin on the butt.

Kevin scurried to his bed and crawled under the covers.

"Where should I sleep?" Reuben asked, looking back and forth between Kenny and Kevin's beds.

"You can share a bed with me or Kevin." Kenny said as he pulled off his shirt.

Reuben looked at Allen to see if he was going to say anything.

"It's your choice Reuben." Allen said with a smile.

Kenny slipped off his boxers and climbed into bed.

Reuben noticed that Kenny was naked and hurried into Kevin's bed.

Allen straightened the blankets for a moment, then bent down and kissed Kevin and Reuben on the foreheads.

"Sleep well boys. I love you. I'm glad you're here." Allen said quietly.

"I love you too Poppa." Kevin said with a smile.

"I love you Uncle Allen." Reuben said with a giggle as he snuggled in.

Allen walked to Kenny's bed as Brady walked to Kevin's.

"I love you Kevin, you too Reuben." Brady said as he kissed each boy gently.

"We love you too Uncle Brady." Reuben said as Kevin nodded his agreement.

"I love you Cute Stuff, sleep well." Allen said as he fussed with the blankets and gave Kenny a quick kiss.

"I love you too Pop." Kenny said with a smile.

"Good night Kenny, I love you." Brady said as he also gave Kenny a kiss.

Allen and Brady walked to the door and turned out the light.

* * * * *

After a moment of standing in the doorway and watching the boys settling into sleep, Allen and Brady walked into Xain and Jake's room next.

"Are you guys ready for bed?" Allen asked quietly.

"Not really." Jake said honestly.

"Well, since you're older, I think you should be allowed to stay up a little later. How's this? You two can stay up for another hour if you like. Just keep it quiet so you don't disturb your brothers. If you'll promise to be in bed by eleven, I won't come back and check on you." Allen asked carefully.

"Thanks Dad." Jake said with a smile.

"I know you're probably too old to be tucked in and kissed goodnight, but would you mind a goodnight hug?" Allen asked cautiously.

Jake smiled as he walked to Allen and pulled him into a hug.

"I really love you Dad. Thank you for everything." Jake said, then made a show of giving Allen a big smacking kiss on the mouth.

Allen and Brady laughed.

"I love you too son. Have a good night." Allen said with a chuckle, then moved to Xain.

Allen wasn't sure if Xain would accept a goodnight hug, but decided to give it a try.

"Goodnight Xain. I'm glad you're here with us." Allen said as he hugged Xain firmly.

Xain looked at Allen curiously, then gave him a quick peck of a kiss on the lips.

Allen smiled and said, "You two have a good night. I'll see you in the morning."

Brady hugged each of the boys in turn and followed Allen out of the room.

* * * * *

"Father! Come quickly! Jake is in distress." Xain called as he shook Allen by the shoulder.

"What?" Allen said sleepily.

"Come now! Jake needs help!" Xain said as he pulled Allen from his bed.

Allen stumbled behind Xain being led by the arm.

As Allen walked into Jake and Xain's bedroom he heard a horrible gasping sound.

Allen ran to Jake's side to find him staring in wide eyed panic as he fought to breathe.

In Vulcan Allen said, "Bring me a paper bag from above the refrigeration unit in the kitchen. Do it now."

Xain ran as fast as he could to the kitchen.

"Jake, it's Dad. You're hyperventilating. I need you to sit on the edge of the bed and lean forward. It will help." Allen said in English as calmly as he could.

Xain ran into the bedroom carrying a paper sack.

Allen fumbled to open the sack. Time almost stood still as he frantically tried to get the brown paper to separate.

Finally the bag was open and Allen placed the open bag in front of Jake's face.

"Breathe into this bag and you'll start to breathe normally. Don't worry son, you're going to be fine." Allen soothed.

Jake held the bag over his nose and mouth as he fought for breath.

The brown paper bag expanded and contracted with each of his exaggerated breaths.

"You're doing fine. Can you feel it? You're breaths are coming more normally now." Allen said in an assuring voice.

Jake nodded shakily.

Allen got up from the floor and moved to sit on the bed beside Jake.

Xain had been standing and watching. He took a step closer to Jake but stopped when Jake huddled into Allen with a look of terror in his eyes.

"Xain, would you mind going to the kitchen and fixing a glass of warm milk? Heat it on the stove, I'm not sure why but it doesn't seem the same when it's heated in the microwave." Allen asked in a steady voice.

"Yes Father." Xain said hesitantly and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

"Can you tell me what caused this?" Allen asked as he rubbed Jake's back gently.

"I had a nightmare." Jake mumbled.

"I thought so. Will you talk about it? Whatever scared you so badly to cause this must have been pretty bad." Allen said quietly.

"Yeah... I... Um... It's kind of... It's about sex." Jake said uncomfortably.

"That's okay Jake. Whatever it is, I'll still love you. If you tell me about it maybe I can help you to deal with it." Allen said with a serious note in his voice.

"Okay Dad. It's just... you know how I used to make money, right? I mean besides the drugs..." Jake trailed off.

"Yes Jake. Don't worry about it. I know and I love you. Go ahead." Allen said with assurance.

"Well, my dream started out like, I was with a guy, but I couldn't see his face." Jake said as he turned slightly and pulled Allen into a hug.

Allen returned the hug and kissed Jake on the top of the head before saying, "Go on."

"I was on my back... with my legs up... Well the guy was really plowing into me, hurting me, trying to hurt me and I was getting scared that he was going to really hurt me bad." Jake said as tears started flowing down his face and onto Allen's bare chest.

"It was only a dream, go on, you can tell me." Allen said soothingly.

"Well, then I could start to see his face... and it was me." Jake said in a shaky voice.

Allen kissed Jake on the top of the head again and started rocking him.

"Then it was all switched around and I wasn't on the bottom. I was the guy doing the fucking." Jake said as his voice started to tremble.

"It's okay. I love you son." Allen said in a whisper.

"I was fucking Xain... I was hurting him..." Jake said through sobs before breaking down into full crying.

"Shhh. It's okay. It was a dream. It'll be okay, I promise." Allen soothed as he continued the rocking motion.

After a moment to think, Allen asked, "Do you want to know what I think your nightmare means?"

Jake's crying had lessened and he nodded into Allen's chest.

"I think that somewhere in your mind some things got confused and you're trying to work them out." Allen said carefully.

"Because of the things you used to have to do, things like love and sex and pain and a lot of other stuff all got to be associated together." Allen said thoughtfully.

"You've never had to think about it before, you just did what you had to do. Now you're in a whole new situation and all that stuff is tangled together." Allen said seriously.

"Can you help me? I don't want to hurt Xain. That's what really scared me." Jake said with a tremble in his voice.

"I'll call Dan today and get an appointment for you as soon as possible. If you'll talk to him honestly, I'm sure he'll be able to help you get all this straightened out." Allen said as he hugged Jake extra tightly.

"But what if he doesn't want to help me because I'm gay?" Jake asked suddenly.

"Well, if that happened I think his boyfriend John would be very disappointed in him." Allen said, trying to keep a chuckle out of his voice.

"Father." Xain said quietly, holding a steaming mug.

"Thank you Xain. Set it on the nightstand. As soon as Jake's ready to try and sleep again, it will help him sleep." Allen said quietly.

Jake looked at Xain with tear-filled eyes, then buried his face in Allen's chest again.

Xain looked at Jake with confusion.

"Jake had a nightmare and dreamed that he hurt you. He knows he didn't but he still feels like he did." Allen tried to explain.

Xain considered the statement then said, "If you will permit it, I can assure him through our bond that I am well."

Allen looked at Xain consideringly, then hesitantly said, "That sounds like a good idea."

Xain made no outward show of establishing their bond, but Jake's reaction was immediate.

Jake looked at Xain curiously, as his tension seemed to flow away.

"Thank you. I don't think that there's anything you could have said that would make me feel better, but now I know, I mean I really know in my heart, that you're okay." Jake said with relief.

"Perhaps tomorrow, with Father's permission, I may show you how to initiate contact through our bond." Xain said as he looked at Jake, then Allen.

"How about we wait until after your father's visit? Depending on how that goes, we'll see." Allen said cautiously.

Xain gave a single nod of acceptance.

"Okay Sport, are you ready to try and sleep again?" Allen asked as he combed his fingers through Jake's hair.

"Yeah. I'll try." Jake said quietly.

"I'm going to go tuck Xain into bed while you drink your warm milk." Allen said and gave Jake one final squeeze before standing.

"Okay." Jake said and picked up the milk.

* * * * *

"Are you okay with everything that just happened?" Allen asked with concern as he fussed with Xain's bedspread.

Xain was quiet as he tried to find the words to describe his feelings.

Allen noticed the look of concentration and waited.

Finally Xain responded in Vulcan, finding it easier to describe what he was feeling.

"Jake's distress evoked an emotional response within me that I do not understand." Xain said carefully.

Allen considered the statement before asking, "Try thinking of other people that you know in the same distress that Jake was in. Do you believe that you would have had the same emotional response?"

Xain considered the question and did his best to consider his emotional response to several different people if they had awakened hyperventilating.

"I believe I would have had a similar response if any of my family or clan brothers were in distress, but not with equal intensity. I do not understand." Xain said and looked at Allen with an almost pleading expression.

"Kenny, Kevin, Brady and I are all your family just like Jake. But you and Jake have become more than family. By your own statement you have become friends. I believe that is the key. Am I right in assuming that you haven't had any friends before?" Allen finished quietly.

"Correct." Xain said thoughtfully.

"Well, you've just experienced one of the attributes of friendship. Friends are concerned about each other's well-being. When you saw Jake in trouble it caused you to respond more emotionally than if someone else had been in the same situation. It is appropriate and normal." Allen said seriously.

"It would not be so were I a full blooded Vulcan." Xain said quietly.

"I disagree. I work with several Vulcans and so far as I know all of them are full blooded. Although their emotional responses are more guarded than yours, they do express emotions. There is one on my team, Sopek who I consider a friend. If he were to see me in pain or distress of some kind I know he would come to my aid and perhaps even display an emotional response." Allen said in a considering voice.

Xain thought for a moment before saying in English, "I will consider what you have said. I thank you for your guidance Father."

"I'm here whenever you need me Xain." Allen said and leaned in to kiss Xain on the forehead.

* * * * *

"Are you feeling any better?" Allen asked as he sat on the edge of Jake's bed.

"Yeah. I think I'll be able to sleep soon. Were you two talking about me?" Jake asked suspiciously.

"Not really. We were talking about Xain's feelings when he woke up and heard you gasping for breath." Allen said gently.

"Oh. I heard you talking in Vulcan and figured it was because you didn't want me to understand." Jake said quietly.

"I don't think that had anything to do with it. Xain is just more comfortable talking in Vulcan and he was trying to understand his feelings." Allen said with a small smile.

"What kind of feelings did he have?" Jake asked with a note of concern.

"You'll have to ask him. He didn't ask me not to tell you, but I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to you about it without his permission." Allen said with an apologetic voice.

"Does that go for the stuff I tell you too?" Jake asked curiously.

"Yes. The only person I might tell would be Dan, so he'll be able to help you. Other than him, if it's something I don't think you'd want people to know, I won't tell." Allen said seriously.

"Thanks Dad. I guess I never had someone I could talk to and really trust before." Jake said as he snuggled into his bed, getting more comfortable.

"Well you do now. Go ahead and try to get some sleep. If you have any bad dreams, just come and get me, I don't mind at all." Allen said as he leaned over to kiss Jake on the forehead.

"Goodnight Dad." Jake said happily.

"Goodnight Son." Allen said as he left the room.

* * * * *

Allen woke and looked out over the lake.

He sat on the window seat and enjoyed the peaceful scene for a few minutes before giving into the inevitable.

He pulled on some sweat pants and walked down the hall to wake Xain and Jake.

He noticed that the bedroom door was closed and gently knocked on it.

There was no answer so he opened it a little and poked his head in as he said, "It's time to get up, I'll be making breakfast in a few minutes."

Xain opened his eyes immediately.

"Breakfast will be ready in about twenty minutes. Will you wake up Jake?" Allen asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes Father." Xain said quietly.

Allen smiled more broadly and left the room.

* * * * *

"Come on Cute Stuff, it's time to wake up." Allen said as he sat on the edge of Kenny's bed.

Kenny yawned and stretched, then looked up at Allen and smiled.

"Good morning Pop." Kenny said happily.

"You look like you got a good nights sleep. How are you doing this morning?" Allen asked gently.

"I feel good. I think I was asleep before you left the room last night." Kenny said with a considering look.

"Well, we have a few things to do this morning, so I'm going to need your help. Will you wake Reuben and Kevin and get them to get dressed. I'm going to try and have breakfast on the table in about twenty minutes." Allen asked hopefully.

"Sure Pop. I'll take care of it." Kenny said as he looked at the clock beside his bed.

"Thanks Cute Stuff." Allen said as he leaned in and gave Kenny a kiss on the forehead before standing to leave.

* * * * *

Xain sat on the edge of his bed and looked at Jake.

After a moment of indecision, Xain opened the link of their bond and gently guided Jake from sleep to wakefulness.

Jake opened his eyes and smiled. He didn't' need to turn his head to know where Xain was in the room, he could feel his presence clearly.

"Good morning." Jake said with a smile.

Xain considered the statement, but said nothing.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Dad warned us about that. Thanks for waking me up that way, that was great." Jake said as he stretched.

"I find it to be the preferable way." Xain said as he stood.

"Um, why did you wake me up?" Jake asked curiously as he sat up.

"Father said breakfast would be ready in approximately twenty minutes." Xain said as he pulled some clothes from his dresser.

"Oh, thanks... And thanks for helping me last night. That was really scary." Jake said shyly.

"It is what friends do." Xain said without emotion.

Jake smiled at the statement and said, "Yeah, I guess it is."

* * * * *

"We need to get up so we can go get our hair cut." Kenny said as he shook Kevin's shoulder.

"Go? Isn't Poppa going to cut our hair?" Kevin asked groggily.

"No. He's going to take us to get it cut. Pop's making breakfast now so you two need to get up." Kenny said firmly.

"When we get back from getting our hair cut we can probably do some reading." Reuben said from Kevin's shoulder where he had been sleeping.

Kevin's eyes opened fully.

"Good call, Reuben." Kenny said with a smile as Kevin nudged Reuben off of him so he could get dressed.

* * * * *

"Did Kenny tell you who was going to be cutting your hair?" Allen asked as he drove his Dodge Caravan toward downtown.

"No. He just said you were going to take us to get it cut. I never had anyone cut my hair but my momma before." Kevin said as he looked out the window.

Everyone in the car looked at Kevin's shaggy mop of hair and shared a look with each other but didn't say a word.

"Well the guys you're going to meet are some good friends of mine. I want you to meet them, and besides, Reuben, Kevin and Jake *do* need haircuts." Allen said seriously.

"Are you going to pick how I get my hair cut?" Jake asked cautiously.

"Not exactly. You choose whatever you want, but if I don't like what you choose, you may have to pick something else." Allen said as he turned off the main street into a side street.

After a second, Allen looked in the mirror to find Jake looking back at him angrily.

"Relax Jake, I'm fairly easy going. Chances are whatever you pick, I'll approve of." Allen said, then spotted a parking place along the street.

"Jake, pay attention. You'll be driving soon and have to parallel park this beast." Allen said as he eased into the space.

"It doesn't look that hard." Jake said as he watched the graceful maneuver.

"It never does until you're the one doing it." Allen said, then checked his mirror for oncoming traffic before getting out of the car.

* * * * *

"Okay, before we go in. Remember that these are my friends. You don't have to like them, but I'm asking you to be respectful to them." Allen said and looked at each boy to see them agree before continuing.

"Xain, I need for you to cover your ears until I signal you to uncover them." Allen said as he reached for the door handle.

Allen noticed a surprised expression fall across Xain's face, followed by an almost imperceptible expression of hurt before the Vulcan facade fell into place.

"Just do it and I think you'll thank me later." Allen said quietly and opened the door.

* * * * *

"IEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" Rang out in a shrill falsetto voice as the slightly chubby hairdresser barreled toward Allen.

Xain clamped his hands tighter over his ears at the sound.

"Oh Cupcake, how are you? We've been worried sick about you. We've been trying to call since we got back from Tampa." The man said as he hugged Allen tightly.

"I'm fine Bobby. Need air." Allen finished with a gasp.

"What's set you off this time?" A voice came from the back room.

"Eric, come out here this minute. Allen's here!" Bobby said in a scolding tone.

All the boys followed the voice and saw a tall thin man walk out of the back room.

"I'm glad to see you're alright Allen." Eric said softly.

"I'm fine. Kenny? Would you like to introduce everyone?" Allen asked as he made a 'stop' motion to Xain, indicating for him to keep his hands over his ears.

"Uncle Eric, Aunt Bobby, this is my brother Kevin." Kenny said proudly.

"IEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee..." Bobby squealed with delight.

Xain winced again as he clamped his hands tightly against his ears.

"Kevin? You're here? Both of you?" Eric asked in amazement as he looked at the two brothers.

"I've adopted them." Allen said and waited for the next squeal.

Bobby opened his mouth to squeal but nothing came out.

Xain clamped his hands even tighter and Allen noticed.

"I think Bobby went ultrasonic." Allen said with a note of sympathy in his voice.

After a moment for Bobby to collect himself Allen continued, "Kenny and Kevin are legally my sons now."

"Oh Pumpkin, how did you manage that?" Bobby asked with delight.

"It's a really long story Bobby and I've got a bunch of boys here needing haircuts." Allen said and motioned for Xain that it was safe to put his hands down.

"Who all do you have here?" Bobby asked as he looked at the group of boys.

"Kenny?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Okay. This is my brother Kevin, my brother Jake, my brother Xain and our cousin Reuben." Kenny said carefully.

Bobby stood with his mouth hanging open as Eric said, "It's wonderful to meet all of you. Who wants to be first to get their hair cut?"

"Can you cut Kevin's hair to look like mine?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Sure thing Cute Stuff. Is that okay with you Kevin?" Eric asked with a gentle smile.

Kevin nodded uncertainly.

"Come with me. I'm going to wash your hair before we cut it." Eric said as he gestured to a chair before a sink.

"I washed my hair last night." Kevin said quietly.

"Well it's easier for me to cut your hair if it's wet and besides that it feels good, doesn't it Kenny?" Eric asked gently.

"It feels really nice. Can I wash Kevin's hair for you Uncle Eric?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"If that's what Kevin wants." Eric said with a smile.

"Who do you want to wash your hair?" Kenny asked hopefully.

Kevin pointed at Kenny shyly.

Kenny beamed a sunny smile and took his brother by the hand to the chair.

* * * * *

"Okay. Who wants to be next?" Bobby asked, finally over his shock.

"Can I?" Reuben asked hopefully.

"Of course you can. Oh you're just adorable. How old are you sweetie?" Bobby crooned.

"I'm six." Reuben said proudly.

"Well Reuben, come with me and I'll wash your hair." Bobby said as he held out his hand for Reuben to take.

Reuben immediately ran to Bobby and took his hand as he said, "You're pretty."

"Well thank you. You're one of the sweetest most wonderful children I've ever met." Bobby said as he lifted Reuben into his seat.

"As well as one of the most perceptive." Bobby said as he started the water.

* * * * *

"Have you decided on the hair style you'd like?" Allen asked Jake as he led Jake and Xain to take a seat.

"Well, I was thinking... I really like Xain's hair. I think I'd kind of like mine cut something like his." Jake said hesitantly.

Allen looked at Jake and Xain speculatively, then said, "I think so... but maybe with a part in the middle. Xain, can I comb your hair a different way to show Jake what I mean?"

Xain nodded hesitantly.

Allen walked over to the nearest hairdresser's station and picked up a comb.

"What I'm thinking is to get your hair cut just like Xain's... maybe with slightly longer bangs and part it in the middle like this." Allen said as he carefully combed a part into Xain's hair.

"I think that would compliment your face. What do you think?" Allen asked as he looked at Xain then Jake.

"I don't know. Xain, will you look in the mirror and tell me what you think?" Jake asked hopefully.

Xain nodded and walked to look in the mirror.

"What do you think?" Allen asked carefully.

"May I use the comb?" Xain asked and held out his hand.

Allen gave Xain the comb and watched as Xain combed a part high on the right side of his head.

"I believe this is more aesthetically pleasing." Xain said when he was finished.

"I want that. It looks great." Jake said as he looked at the new style.

"I agree. Good choice son." Allen said happily.

* * * * *

"Do you know what kind of hair style you'd like Reuben?" Bobby asked as he carefully shampooed the boy's hair.

"I like Kenny's hair, can my hair look like his?" Reuben asked hopefully.

"Of course it can. Anything you want. Let me rinse your hair and we can get started." Bobby said with a bubbly voice.

* * * * *

"That feels really nice." Kevin said as he relaxed in the chair.

"I'm doing it the way Uncle Eric always does mine. I can show you how at home if you want." Kenny said as he slowly rinsed the shampoo out of Kevin's hair.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Kevin said in an almost dreamy voice.

"Uncle Eric, did I do it right?" Kenny asked hopefully as he turned off the water.

"You did it just perfect Cute Stuff. Let me wrap him up and we can get started." Eric said happily.

* * * * *

"Okay Allen. Now that the hair washing is done, I want to hear the whole story of how you got these five wonderful boys." Eric said as he got Kevin settled into the chair.

"Wait for your beloved to get over here and I'll tell you both. Until then, tell me what's been going on with you." Allen said with a smile.

"Oh, well. Saturday we received a summons from the High and Mighty Agnes, himself." Eric said as he started to comb Kevin's hair into submission.

"They were invited to dinner with Bobby's mother." Allen whispered to Xain and Jake.

"She even had her rat groomed specially for the occasion." Eric said as he took a few short snips of Kevin's hair.

"Agnes has a poodle named Rasputin." Allen said to the boys.

"Well, the most appetizing thing on the table was the skin on the rice pudding. I think she actually microwaved TV dinners and scooped them into serving dishes." Eric said as he began to cut the hair above Kevin's collar.

"Agnes doesn't like Eric." Allen whispered.

"Then the old harpy had the gall to tell Bobby that he was still young enough to find a 'nice girl' and settle down." Eric said as he worked toward Kevin's ear.

"Eric, I think you'd better ease up there before you scare Kevin into a heart attack." Allen said loudly.

Eric looked quizzically at Allen, then noticed the terrified look in Kevin's eyes.

"Please forgive me my little prince. I promise that I would never do anything to hurt you..." Eric said and noticed that Kevin was nearly shaking with tension.

"Come over here Cute Stuff. I need you to hold your brother's hand and tell him that I won't hurt him." Eric said softly.

Kenny went to Kevin's side and held his hand tightly.

"We're back!" Bobby said with a grand flourish as he led Reuben to the second chair.

Allen looked around and said, "Now that the gang's all here I can tell you how the boys came to be with me..."

CHAPTER 16

"So how did it go?" Allen asked hopefully as Brady walked in the door.

"Juana now has a Florida Driver's license." Brady said in an exhausted voice.

"You look tired, what happened?" Allen asked with concern as he led Brady into the living room.

"Ricardo." Brady said as he slumped into a chair.

"Was he misbehaving?"

"No. Not really. He was just full of energy and wanting to play. Next time we do something like that, someone will need to stay home with the kids. Ricardo and Edovina were miserable, I was miserable and if it weren't for Juana being so happy about getting her Florida License, I'm sure she would have been miserable too." Brady finished in an exhausted whisper.

"Dad?" Jake called from the doorway of the living room.

"It's okay, you can come in and show your Uncle Brady." Allen said with a smile.

Jake and Xain walked into the living room and stood anxiously.

Brady looked at the two boys, then shook his head to be sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him.

Xain had his jet black hair styled a little differently from normal. Nothing drastic, but different. Jake had his dishwater blond hair cut in the exact same style as Xain's.

"Well, what do you think Uncle Brady?" Jake asked hopefully.

"I think it looks great guys. I guess you look like twin brothers from different planets." Brady said as he broke into a genuine smile.

Allen looked toward the door and said, "Come on in guys."

Kenny, Kevin and Reuben walked into the living room with identical hair styles.

Brady broke into an involuntary laugh before he caught it and said, "You three look great. When I saw Kenny's hairstyle the first time I thought it was one of a kind, but you've proven me wrong."

"Stair-step triplets." Allen said with a smile.

"You guys really do look great. All of you. How was your trip to the barber shop?" Brady asked as he relaxed back into the chair.

"Father asked that I cover my ears." Xain said before anyone else could say anything.

"I believed that he was trying to conceal the fact that I am Vulcan. However, he was protecting me." Xain said and gave a look of appreciation toward Allen.

"I figured that Bobby would let out one or two squeals of delight and thought that it might be painful to Xain's more sensitive hearing." Allen said in explanation.

"I take it you were right?" Brady asked with a smile.

"I was sure the mirrors were going to shatter before he was finished." Allen said with a chuckle.

"Uncle Brady, can we work on the shelf for my models now?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Sure, we'd better get started if we're going to finish before I leave tonight." Brady said as he got up from his chair.

"I need to call Dan, then I'd better get my things together for my meeting with Chip and Josh. What are you guys going to do?" Allen asked as he also stood.

"Reuben is going to teach me some more reading." Kevin said quickly.

"That sounds great. Maybe you could show your Uncle Chip what you've learned when he gets here?" Allen suggested.

"That would be cool. Let's go so I can learn some more." Kevin said with excitement and ran out of the room followed by Reuben.

"I believe we should investigate the available supplies for meal preparation." Xain said seriously.

"That's a good idea. Let me know what you need me to buy." Allen said with a smile.

Xain turned to Jake and asked, "Would you assist me?"

"Yeah." Jake said with a smile and followed Xain out of the room.

Brady looked down to see Kenny's pleading and impatient expression.

"Okay, I'm ready." Brady said with a smile and followed Kenny out of the room.

* * * * *

Allen walked into the study and closed the door.

After less than a minute of looking he found the business card that he wanted and dialed the number.

"Dan?" Allen asked hopefully into the phone.

"*Allen?*" Dan asked, a little worried about the tone in Allen's voice.

"I may have a problem and I need your advice." Allen said apprehensively.

"*Well you caught me at a good time. What's on your mind?*" Dan asked in a casual manner.

"Jake had an anxiety attack last night, I think he scared about ten years off my life." Allen said with weak humor.

"*Was he able to talk about it?*" Dan asked with concern.

"Yeah. It was a nightmare about when he was prostituting himself. He was scared half to death." Allen said seriously.

"*I didn't expect this so soon, but believe it or not, I think it's a good sign.*" Dan said with assurance in his tone.

"A couple more good signs like that and I'm going to need intensive therapy." Allen said, hoping it sounded like a joke.

"*I think it means he's trying to heal on some level. Of course I'll need to talk with him to be sure, but I believe it's a step in the right direction.*" Dan said seriously.

"Good. I think all the boys are going to need help dealing with things, but Jake seems to need it the most." Allen said with full worry in his voice.

"*When would be a good time for me to come over and talk with the boys? I'd like to talk to them in an informal setting for the first few times to put them at ease, then later we could have the more structured meetings at my office.*" Dan said thoughtfully.

"Well, Xain's father is coming over this afternoon. After that I don't have any firm plans, so whenever you'd like." Allen said, thinking about all the things he needed to get accomplished.

"*Would you mind if I came over this evening? I could spend a few minutes talking to Jake about last night and then just hang around and talk with you and the boys for a while. I could get some general information so I'd have an idea of what to pursue in the 'official' meetings*." Dan said professionally.

"That would be great. I don't know when Solak will be leaving, but if he's still here when you show up I don't see a problem. Seeking assistance in dealing with emotional difficulties is logical." Allen finished in a Vulcan tone of voice.

Dan chuckled and said, "*I hope so. It's what I base my livelihood on*."

"So you can come by anytime this evening. As far as I know we're just going to have dinner and talk with Solak." Allen said speculatively.

"*I'll see you tonight then. Don't worry Allen. Kids are tough, we'll get them through this*." Dan said with assurance.

"Thanks Dan. I feel a lot better." Allen said, feeling much relieved.

"*Hey, that's what I do. Until tonight*." Dan said and rang off.

* * * * *

Jake and Xain walked into the kitchen and Xain immediately began looking through cabinets.

"What can I do to help?" Jake asked curiously.

"It would be most efficient if you could read for me. Although I am able to translate ingredient listings and preparation instructions for myself, the process is time consuming." Xain said and handed a box to Jake.

"Whoa, you're not going to fix your dad 'Hamburger Helper' are you?" Jake asked in disbelief.

"From your reaction, I believe I will not." Xain said and put his hand out for the box.

"Then why did you want me to read it for you?" Jake asked as he gave the box back to Xain.

"I am unfamiliar with the product and the picture was appealing. If you would read the preparation instructions and ingredients to me, I would be able to determine it's suitability for our meal." Xain said as he continued to look through the cabinet.

"Give it back to me and I'll read it to you. Maybe you can make something out of it." Jake said thoughtfully.

Xain pulled the box out of the cabinet again and handed it to Jake.

"I have a feeling that this is going to be a meal to remember." Jake said with a smile before getting down to the business of reading.

* * * * *

"How are you guys doing today?" Allen asked as he answered the door.

"Great. Are you ready to talk some business?" Chip asked casually as he preceded JC into the room.

"I sure am. I think I've got everything I'll need set up in the family room." Allen said as he escorted his guests toward the hallway.

"Uncle Chip!" Kevin screamed in delight as he barreled down the stairs.

Chip braced himself as Kevin launched into his arms.

JC took a step aside to avoid being hit by a stray limb.

Allen watched with a warm smile as Kevin nestled into Chip, hugging him with a vise-like grip.

"I missed you so much Uncle Chip." Kevin said as he snuggled for all he was worth.

"I missed you too Little One." Chip said gently then kissed Kevin on the top of the head.

JC smiled at the tender scene.

Kevin tilted his head up and stretched to kiss Chip on the mouth.

Chip looked at Allen in surprise as JC got a look of realization.

With a shrug Allen said, "I think he likes you."

"At least." Chip said hesitantly.

"Are you ready to talk business?" Allen asked as he continued toward the family room.

"Can I come too?" Kevin asked as he resisted Chip letting him go.

"It's up to your Uncle Chip." Allen said with a mischievous smile.

Chip gave Allen an aggravated 'thanks a lot' look before saying, "As long as you can stay quiet while we discuss our business it's fine with me."

"I'll be good." Kevin swore and hugged Chip even tighter.

JC followed silently, deep thoughtfully.

* * * * *

"Hello Jake, how are you this morning?" Juana asked with happy surprise.

"Hi Mamacita. I was, I mean Xain and I were wondering if you have a few minutes to come downstairs." Jake asked nervously.

"Of course, what can I do to help?" Mamacita asked as she checked on Edovina who was happily drinking her bottle.

"We just need you to look over what we're going to fix for dinner. Xain knows how to cook, but hasn't cooked for this many people before and thought you could make sure he's not forgetting something." Jake said seriously.

"Si, yes. If you will hold Edovina. I will get Ricardo and we can go." Mamacita said quickly as she handed Edovina to Jake.

"Thanks Mamacita." Jake said quietly as he looked at the little girl in his arms.

After a minute Mamacita returned with Ricardo in tow.

"She likes you. Edovina does not like many." Juana said fondly.

"I guess she's used to seeing me." Jake said softly as he looked at her eyes darting around alertly.

"Come, we will go." Mamacita said as she headed for the door.

* * * * *

"Father, please pardon the interruption." Xain said from the door of the family room.

"It's okay Xain, come in." Allen said as he looked up from his paperwork.

"We have completed the list of supplies we will need to prepare this evenings sustenance." Xain said seriously as he handed Allen the list.

After a long moment of reading Allen said, "I can't begin to guess what you're fixing from this list of ingredients, but I should be able to get everything you need."

Xain nodded once and turned to leave the room.

"Did you take into account that we're going to have Juana and her family here for the meal?" Allen asked with concern.

"Yes Father, I sought Mrs. Vasquez' advice before compiling the list of ingredients. She agrees that there will be sufficient food for all attending." Xain said efficiently.

"It is logical to seek the advice of those with greater experience in a situation such as this. Good work Xain." Allen said in his Vulcan demeanor.

Xain nodded again and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

"That wasn't nearly as difficult as I thought it would be." Allen said as he looked over the papers he'd just finished signing.

"It helps when you don't have to do a lot of negotiation or watch out for hidden traps. Even though I can play head games and do legal maneuverings with the best of them, I still prefer to do straightforward business when possible." Chip said as he gathered his paperwork.

"Uncle Chip. Can I show you something?" Kevin asked quietly from Chip's lap.

"We're finished Kevin. Go ahead." Chip said with a smile.

Kevin pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and held it out so Chip could read it with him.

"The... boy... sat in the... red... c... car." Kevin read slowly with full concentration.

Chip hugged Kevin tightly and whispered, "That's incredible Kevin. You read that perfectly."

Kevin closed his eyes and soaked in the wonderful feeling of love and pride.

JC looked on passively as his thoughts solidified.

A ringing cell phone interrupted the moment.

"Yes, this is Allen Thompson." Allen said seriously.

"Oh, well I just moved yesterday and haven't put in a change of address yet. If I give you the new address, can you bring it over here?" Allen asked slowly.

After getting a positive response, Allen gave the address and rang off.

"It was a courier service. He says he has something for me from Carl's lawyer." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Is that a problem?" Chip asked with concern at Allen's expression.

"I don't know. It just seems strange. We had everything prepared before his death and I thought it was all taken care of. I don't know what this could be about." Allen said with concern.

"Well it won't do any good to worry about it until whatever it is gets delivered." Chip said as he held Kevin tenderly.

"I guess not. Would you like to go up and see what Kenny and Brady are up to?" Allen asked as he stood.

Chip urged Kevin off his lap and stood, automatically wrapping an arm around JC.

"That sounds like a good idea. I haven't seen the upstairs since you've moved in." Chip said as he prepared to leave.

Kevin took hold of Chip's hand before he could take two steps.

* * * * *

"We can prepare the midday meal." Xain said seriously.

"Si, I am sure you can. But if I prepare..." Juana paused to think of the correct English word, "...Lunch. Then you are free to work on dinner."

Xain considered the statement and finally said, "The division of labor you propose is logical. While you prepare the midday meal, Jake can do the necessary preparation for the fruit salad and I can prepare the marinade for the meat."

Since everyone was in agreement, they went to work.

"Mama?" Reuben called from the kitchen doorway.

Juana sat the pan she was holding on the stove and walked to her son.

"Mijo, su pelo... hair is..." Juana sputtered before pulling Reuben into a hug.

"Do you like it Mama?" Reuben asked in a small voice.

"Si, yes. Very handsome." Juana said, then kissed Reuben on the cheek.

Ricardo ran from the kitchen table where he'd been coloring and held up his arms, wanting to be hugged and kissed too.

Of course Mamacita hugged him and fussed over him so he didn't feel left out.

"Ricardo." Reuben said to get his brother's attention.

Ricardo looked at Reuben curiously.

Reuben held his arms out, much as Ricardo had done.

Ricardo moved into Reuben's arms cautiously but was soon happily wrapped in a tight hug.

After a long minute of hugging, Reuben led Ricardo back to the kitchen table and began to tell him all about the night before.

* * * * *

"How's it going guys?" Allen asked as he led Chip, JC and Kevin into the boy's room.

"Kenny's going to get out his best model, and once we're sure it will fit in the space we've made for it, we'll go to the store to get the supplies." Brady said with a grand smile.

"It took me four months to make this." Kenny said with pride.

He carefully opened the box and pulled back a covering of tissue paper to reveal his pride and joy.

Chip stared in disbelief as Kenny gently lifted his prize for all to see.

"It's the Reliant." Brady said with an expression close to shock.

"What in God's name? ...I mean, it's nice Kenny, but why don't you have a model of the *Enterprise*?" Chip sputtered as JC discretely rubbed the small of his back to calm him.

"I used my birthday money and my Christmas money last year to buy this. The really nice *Enterprise* model cost nearly twice as much as this one so I couldn't get it. Look at this." Kenny said and flipped a switch on the underside to light the fiber optic lights throughout the ship.

"Lieutenant Thompson, are you ready to go get those supplies?" Chip asked in a serious voice.

"Yes Sir." Brady said, coming to attention.

"Then I'll drive you where you need to go. I have some paperwork that needs to be filed." Chip said and turned to leave.

"Can I go with you too?" Kevin asked hopefully.

Chip looked at Kevin and his expression softened noticeably.

"Ask your Poppa if it's okay." Chip said with a small smile.

Kevin looked at Allen with his most pitiful begging expression and asked, "Can I, pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeese?"

Allen couldn't restrain himself and hugged Kevin before he said, "Of course you can, Little One. Go and have fun with your Uncle Chip."

"Thanks Poppa." Kevin said with a grand smile and ran to take Chip's hand again.

"Come on Kenny. I can't do this without you." Brady said as he noticed that Kenny was standing, looking unsure of what to do.

JC watched as the others left the room, then said to no one, "I think I'll stay here, but thanks for asking."

* * * * *

"I'm done with all the fruit. What do you want me to do now?" Jake asked as he watched Xain covering a pan of meat with plastic wrap.

"Open the bottle of wine by the sink and pour two cups of wine over the fruit." Xain said as he moved the pan of meat to the refrigerator.

"Isn't that going to make people drunk?" Jake asked as he picked up the wine bottle.

"There will be insufficient alcohol content per serving to intoxicate. The wine will serve as a cleansing agent for the pallet." Xain said as he moved to the sink and began to wash vegetables.

"Come to the table. The lunch is soon to be ready." Juana said as she carried a tray of sandwiches to the kitchen table.

Jake carefully pulled the cork from the wine bottle using a corkscrew and began to pour the wine into a measuring cup.

"This stage of preparation will be completed momentarily." Xain said as he continued to wash vegetables.

"Okay, what now?" Jake asked after pouring the wine into the bowl with the fruit.

"Stir the fruit to coat it with wine." Xain said as he turned off the water and dried his hands.

Jake took a slotted spoon from the utensil drawer and stirred the fruit, careful to see that all of it was coated.

Xain picked up a canister of sugar and moved to Jake's side.

"Now I will add sugar to accentuate the natural flavor of the fruit and wine." Xain said and began to sift a handful of sugar over the top of the fruit.

"That looks good." Jake said with a smile.

"Hey everyone, is there anything I can do to help?" JC asked hopefully.

"If you would like, you could taste the fruit to be sure the flavors are complimentary." Xain said as he put the sugar canister back in it's place, then moved to wash his hands.

JC took a fork and speared a chunk of mango.

Xain watched as JC slowly chewed the mango and considered it's flavor.

"It tastes great. But I think you need to taste it to see if it's what you're expecting." JC said with a smile.

Xain accepted a fork from Jake and speared a thick slice of kiwi fruit and tasted it critically.

"Yes. The combination of flavors is satisfactory. Jake, if you will cover the bowl and refrigerate, this stage of preparation is complete." Xain said thoughtfully.

Jake nodded and went to work.

* * * * *

"You will join us?" Juana asked JC as more of a command than a question.

"I suppose so. No telling how long Chip will be gone." JC said absently as he sat at the kitchen table.

"Thank you for everything you did yesterday Uncle Josh... or should I call you JC?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"Whatever you're comfortable with Jake. I'll answer to either. How are you adjusting to your new family?" JC asked as he picked up a sandwich from the platter in the middle of the table.

"Fine. I still have to check every so often to see if it's for real." Jake said with a smile.

"I know that feeling. I'm glad it's working out. How about you Xain?" JC asked casually.

Xain considered the question carefully before answering, "Father has given valuable guidance, Jake has given insight into the family dynamic and my contribution to the family unit. Kenny has been providing support and serving as an example to us of what is considered to be 'normal' in this social situation. Kevin seems to be the embodiment of tenacity and Reuben seems gifted with uncommon wisdom for one so young."

JC blinked, stared, then blinked again before saying, "It seems you've overcome your language barrier since yesterday too."

Jake smiled and said, "He's a quick learner."

Xain quirked an eyebrow at Jake, then turned his attention back to JC.

"So, what have you been up to Reuben?" JC asked before taking a spoon of tomato soup.

"I was telling Ricardo about Kenny's models and the shelf he's making." Reuben said seriously.

"Yeah. It's gonna be cool. I never learned to do stuff like that." Jake said seriously.

"Well I'm sure if you asked, Brady would be happy to show you." JC interjected.

"No way. With all us new guys showing up, Ken's been kind of left out." Jake said seriously.

"How so?" JC asked curiously.

"We're getting all kinds of new stuff bought for us and everyone's trying to make sure we're okay. And Ken's been standing back, watching it all happen. It's cool that Uncle Brady is doing something just with him. I'm not going to horn in on the only thing that's making him feel special." Jake said seriously.

Xain tilted his head thoughtfully as JC said, "That's really good of you Jake. Your brothers are really lucky to have you."

Ricardo whispered into Reuben's ear, then Reuben whispered back.

Jake looked curiously at Reuben, prompting him to share.

"Ricardo wanted to know if Xain is your boyfriend." Reuben said with a timid blush.

"What did you tell him?" Jake asked hesitantly, not sure what answer he wanted to hear.

"Not yet." Reuben said with a smile and a full blush on his face.

Jake glanced at Xain and JC as he felt his own face blushing.

Allen walked into the kitchen and said, "All the paperwork is safely put away now. How is everyone doing?"

"We're find Dad." Jake said timidly as he felt his blush rise again.

Allen looked at JC curiously, but didn't ask.

JC decided to change the conversation and said, "I like the new haircuts."

Jake continued to blush, Xain looked on impassively and Reuben beamed at the praise.

After a long silence Allen finally looked to Xain and asked, "What are we going to be having for dinner tonight?"

Xain considered carefully before answering, "It will be a combination of cuisines and cooking styles. There will be sufficient variety to satisfy the eclectic tastes that I anticipate."

Allen blinked, then tilted his head before saying, "You aren't going to tell me are you?"

Jake smiled at Allen's reaction and said, "It's going to be good. Let Xain surprise you. Besides, I think he's making most of the recipes up as he goes along so nothing has real names anyway."

The sound of a doorbell interrupted the meal.

"I'll get it. It's probably the package from the lawyer." Allen said as he got up from the table.

He returned a minute later with a package that was slightly larger than a shoebox.

"What is it Dad?" Jake asked curiously.

"I have no idea." Allen said as he sat the box on the kitchen counter and started to open it.

"Well, at least it comes with instructions." Allen said with a chuckle as he showed everyone the envelope which said 'Read First'.

Dear Allen,

If you're reading this, then I'm dead. I told the lawyer to hold this for a few weeks until you've had a little time to deal with things.

There's a lot I want to say, but you know me. Oh well, I'm going to try anyway. I love you. There, I said it. Hopefully I'll be able to tell you in person before I die, but at the writing of this letter, I can only hold the words in my heart.

Anyway, on to the real point of this letter. The whole time we were together, you did everything for me and never asked for anything in return. Whenever I tried to talk to you about it, you just said that you loved me the way I am and changed the subject. Thank you for that. You knew me better than I knew myself. Your unconditional love is what I needed to heal me from the rest of my life. My time with you and Kenny has made the rest of my life worth it.

The lawyer tells me that Kenny will be living with his mother and there's no way to prevent it... I tried, I swear. He was your son in everything but blood and it isn't fair that you can't continue to be his father. Hmmm... Newsflash, Life's not fair.

So what comfort can I give you from beyond the grave? Not much, but this is the best that I can do under the circumstances. Look in the box that came with this letter. It's all I could think of to get you. I hope it brings you some comfort.

With all my love,

Carl

With tears streaking down his cheeks and shaking hands, Allen carefully opened the box.

CHAPTER 17

After a long, disbelieving minute looking into the box, Allen shook his head and began to chuckle.

"What's wrong?" JC asked, worried by Allen's strange combination of tears and laughter.

"It's from Carl; Kenny and Kevin's dad." Allen said as he walked to the table carrying the box.

"What is it?" Jake asked, trying to get a peek.

"Xain will probably be able to explain it better than I can." Allen said as he carefully pulled the delicate object from the box.

"It is a replica of an ancient *asenoi*." Xain said speculatively.

"What's that?" Jake asked as he studied the thing that looked like a clay oil lamp.

"It's used to center one's thoughts during meditation, but I'm willing to bet that it isn't a replica." Allen said quietly.

"To remove such an artifact from Vulcan is illegal." Xain said as he moved his gaze from the *asenoi* to Allen.

"I know." Allen said quietly, then looked Xain in the eyes as he said with an ironic chuckle, "You'd just have to know Carl to understand."

Xain raised an eyebrow as a prompt for more information.

"If I had told Carl that I admired the beauty of the American Bald Eagle, he might go out and kill one and have it stuffed for me, believing it would please me. It wouldn't matter to him that it's endangered or illegal. Things like grace, freedom and symbolism were lost on him. He saw the surface of things and took everything at face value." Allen said carefully.

"Such an amoral mindset is difficult for me to understand." Xain said carefully.

"It's just as difficult for me Xain. But by understanding that his motive was to give me a gift that he thought I'd cherish, I can't be mad at him. Carl was blunt, honest and sometimes misguided, but because of that, there's no denying that this was a true expression of his love." Allen said as tears began to form in his eyes.

"I believe I understand. What are you going to do with the *asenoi*?" Xain asked quietly.

"I'll notify the Vulcan authorities and return it to where it belongs. This is a piece of Vulcan history and doesn't belong here." Allen said seriously.

"That is logical." Xain said calmly.

"Come into the family room and let's call them now. Your father may be able to take it back to Vulcan with him when he leaves." Allen said as he stood and picked up the *asenoi*.

Xain and Jake followed Allen out of the kitchen.

* * * * *

Allen composed his features carefully before establishing a link with Vulcan High Command.

"*How may I be of assistance?*" A young Vulcan woman asked in passable English without expression.

"I have come into possession of an object which I believe to be an ancient Vulcan artifact. I wish to report it's location and inquire of proper procedure for it's return." Allen said carefully in formal Vulcan.

The woman gave a single nod, then the screen changed to show an elderly Vulcan gentleman in civilian clothing.

"Greetings. I have come into possession of what I believe is an ancient *asenoi*. It is my wish to return it to it's rightful place." Allen said in calmness.

"*May I see the object?*" The man asked in an unusual dialect of the Vulcan language.

Allen held up the *asenoi* and rotated it slowly so it could clearly be seen.

The man looked at the object carefully, then started pushing buttons on his terminal.

Finally the Vulcan man looked at Allen and said seriously, "*There is no match in our archive of this object. But given it's probable age, it may predate visual archive records. Your terminal ID reports that you are of Clan Short, located on Earth. How did you come into possession of this artifact?*"

"I am not of Clan Short, my children are. The artifact was delivered to me by a courier as part of the estate of my deceased partner, therefore I cannot speculate how it came to be on Earth." Allen said carefully.

"*May I speak with a member of Clan Short?*" The Vulcan man asked without inflection.

Allen was a little surprised by the question, but motioned for Xain to take his place before the terminal.

"Greetings. I am Xain Thompson, Son of Solak of the House of Suvak, and a member of Clan Short." Xain said formally.

The elderly gentleman's eyebrow went up in an expression of surprise, but his voice didn't reflect it as he asked, "*Can you verify the claims that the Human made regarding the asenoi?*"

"The Human's name is Allen Thompson, he is my legal guardian and acknowledged as *k'war'ma'khon*. I was witness to him receiving the *asenoi* and verify all claims he has made to you." Xain said with a firm voice.

The elderly gentleman sat motionless for a moment, then said, "*The artifact must be returned to Vulcan. Instruct the Human to have the artifact delivered to this office and to exercise the necessary precautions for the artifact's safety.*"

Xain pressed the keys on the terminal to record the location of the transmission before responding, "*K'war'ma'khon* Allen has heard your instructions and will act diligently."

"*Your Clan will be recognized for restoring this piece of our physical historic record*." The elderly gentleman said seriously.

"You are in error. *K'war'ma'khon* Allen has stated that the *asenoi* was given to him. The only service Clan Short has provided in this circumstance is the use of the terminal we are using to hold this conversation. Any recognition is due him alone." Xain said firmly.

"*Acknowledged. I will await receipt of the artifact*." The elderly gentleman said and terminated the transmission.

Silence filled the room until it was broken by Jake asking, "I couldn't understand what was being said, but was that a Vulcan thing or was that guy an asshole?"

Xain looked at Jake questioningly.

"It's a Human figure of speech..." Allen began to say.

"I believe I understand the metaphor." Xain said, preempting Allen's explanation.

"The expulsion of feces from the anus is analogous to the purposeful inaccuracies expelled by the official who did not exhibit the courtesy of identifying himself." Xain said thoughtfully.

Allen smiled and said, "You're exactly right Xain, although I have to say that this particular figure of speech is considered crude and offensive and is not to be used in polite company."

Xain nodded once in acceptance.

"Sorry, Dad." Jake said shyly.

"It's okay Jake. I'd rather you not use language like that when we have company, but I think we're old enough to be able to speak freely amongst ourselves. Just take it easy around the younger guys, they may not be able to tell when it's inappropriate to swear." Allen said gently.

"Yeah. I'll watch it. Thanks." Jake said with gratitude.

Xain thought seriously for a moment before asking, "May I ask a question for the purpose of clarification?"

"Proceed." Allen said, slipping flawlessly into his Vulcan demeanor.

"I am closer in age to Kevin and Kenny, yet you treat me as you do Jake. Will you explain your reasoning?" Xain asked slowly.

"I choose to think of you as individuals rather than by your ages. You and Jake appear to me to be at a similar level of maturity in most things. Kevin is close to Kenny in some ways and close to Reuben in others. Do you believe that I am mistaken?" Allen asked with concern.

"No. Now that I understand your reasoning, I find your logic to be sound. Thank you for your clarification." Xain said seriously.

"Does that mean I'm immature or that Xain is grown up for his age?" Jake asked cautiously.

"I don't have those answers. Honestly, I believe that there are some adults that haven't reached your level of maturity and age has nothing to do with it. But if you're worried about it, ask Dan when he comes over, he's the expert." Allen said frankly.

"Yeah, I can live with that." Jake said with a considering nod.

"I should return to meal preparation. Father, the time is nearing when I will need certain of the listed ingredients." Xain said seriously.

"I'll go now. Would either of you like to go with me?" Allen asked casually.

"I must prepare the vegetables." Xain stated tonelessly.

"Do you need my help with anything?" Jake asked Xain without pretense.

"No. The preparation of the vegetables will complete those tasks that must be accomplished before cooking." Xain said seriously.

"Okay, we won't be gone long. If Chip and Brady get back before we do, let them know that I'll be right back." Allen said as he checked to see that he had his car keys.

Xain nodded once and left the room.

"Then let's go shopping." Allen said and led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

"Jake, I'm glad we've got a few minutes to talk privately." Allen said as they pulled out of the driveway.

Unknowingly, Jake gave a Vulcanesque raise of one eyebrow, prompting Allen to expound on his statement.

Allen smiled at the gesture and said, "A lot of things have happened all of a sudden and I don't want you to get the feeling that I'm too busy to listen to you."

Jake thought about the statement before saying, "I don't feel that way. It's just... I don't know... It's like I'm in a whole new world. Maybe that's why Xain and I are getting along so well."

"Maybe it is. I'm glad you're becoming friends. You two will be discovering this new world together, but if you find out that you need some help, I want you to know that I'm here for you, no matter what it is." Allen said seriously.

Jake turned his head and stared at the passing scenery as he thought.

"Does that mean you have something you'd like to talk about?" Allen asked quietly.

Jake hesitantly nodded.

"Whenever you're ready to talk about it, I'm here for you son." Allen said seriously.

Jake nodded again.

Silence fell over the car as Allen turned his attention back to the traffic.

"Why are you doing this?" Jake asked quietly.

"Which this are you talking about?" Allen asked seriously.

"Taking us in. Being a father to all of us."

Allen considered the question as he pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store.

Jake opened his door and started to get out of the car when he noticed that Allen wasn't moving.

"Because you needed me." Allen said in deep thought.

Jake pulled his legs back into the car and turned his attention back to Allen.

"I grew up without a father. Even though Mona was as good a mother as anyone could ask for, I always felt like I missed out on something by not having a father. I guess I wanted to give you guys something I never had." Allen continued.

"So it doesn't have anything to do with trying to hold on to part of your lover by taking in his kids?" Jake asked seriously.

Allen looked at Jake with surprise, then looked off in the distance as he considered the question.

"No, I don't think so. If that were the case I think I'd feel closer to Kevin and Kenny than the rest of you." Allen said in a distant voice.

"Yeah, I noticed that you don't play favorites. Thanks for that." Jake mumbled.

Allen broke out of his deep thought and smiled as he focused on Jake.

"No problem, Sport. I feel so incredibly blessed that I'm being given this opportunity. Even though I've only been a father for a few days... It's like everything before was leading to this." Allen said quietly.

Jake looked at Allen with question.

"Everything I went through before, the money I earned, the lessons I've learned, everything was just preparation for being your father. It's like when I adopted you guys, my life officially started." Allen said with a grand smile.

Jake looked into Allen's eyes for a long moment, then looked away.

"Something's really eating you up. If you can't tell me, I'll understand. But I promise that whatever it is won't change things between us." Allen said seriously.

Jake closed his eyes as he took a deep inhale.

Allen cautiously put an arm around Jake's shoulder, sensing that he needed some assurance.

Jake turned and pulled himself into Allen, burying his face into Allen's chest.

"Whatever it is, I'll help you however I can. If you can't tell me, maybe you can tell Dan. He'll be coming over tonight." Allen whispered.

"No. I think I can tell you. It's just hard... I've never said the words." Jake said into Allen's chest.

"Go ahead. Whatever it is, I can handle it." Allen said as he rubbed Jake's back.

"I think... I mean, I'm not sure but... there's a chance..." Jake stammered.

"Just say it. It's okay." Allen soothed.

"Edovina might be my daughter." Jake said in a barely audible voice.

Allen froze and sat stunned at the statement.

"Dad?" Jake asked with a note of fear.

Allen snapped out of his shock and started rubbing Jake's back again.

"What am I going to do?" Jake asked with a whimper.

"I don't know son. But whatever it is, I'll be right there with you to help you however I can." Allen said as his mind whirled.

* * * * *

"Look what I got!" Kenny said with excitement as he raced into the kitchen carrying a huge box.

"What is it?" Reuben asked, ignited by Kenny's excitement.

"Uncle Chip bought me a model of the *Enterprise*!" Kenny said with unrestrained glee.

Chip walked into the kitchen more slowly with his arm around Kevin.

Brady walked in next and asked, "Where's Allen?"

"Father and Jake have gone to purchase supplies for this evenings meal. Father requested that I tell you that he does not intend to be away for an extended period of time." Xain said, not moving his gaze from his vegetable slicing.

"Oh. Well, I guess we can get to work on the shelf. Are you ready to work Kenny?" Brady asked, not sure if Kenny even remembered that he existed after receiving the model.

"Um... Yeah. Let me put this in my room, then I'll be ready." Kenny said quickly.

"I'll meet you at the car." Brady said as he headed toward the front door.

"It is a good thing you do. You make the child happy." Juana said as she mixed a bowl of dough.

"It's worth the price of a model to see him so happy." Chip said with forced cheer.

Xain stopped his slicing and gave Chip a knowing look.

Chip turned in time to see the exact same look on JC's face.

"Yeah, well... It was the one he really wanted." Chip said weakly.

Xain raised an eyebrow, then turned and continued his vegetable slicing.

JC nodded, then went back to loading the lunch dishes into the dishwasher.

* * * * *

Allen and Jake had been shopping in silence for nearly five minutes when Allen asked, "What do you want to do?"

Jake considered playing dumb and avoiding the true meaning of Allen's question, but one look into Allen's eyes made him think otherwise.

"It depends." Jake said and looked away.

"On what?" Allen asked and stopped in the aisle to await a response.

"On whether she's mine or not." Jake said thoughtfully.

Allen nodded and started pushing the cart again.

After a minute of silence, Allen asked, "What if she isn't?"

Jake turned to answer Allen and was caught off guard by the look of intensity in his eyes.

After a moment to think about it, Jake finally said, "It doesn't matter, does it?"

"That's up to you son. I can't tell you how you should think or feel." Allen said seriously.

Jake nodded and began thinking in a way he hadn't considered before that day.

Finally Jake asked, "What should I do Dad?"

"I can't answer that. This is a decision that you have to make for yourself. Whatever you decide, I'll be right there with you." Allen said seriously.

"I guess I should talk to Mamacita about it... she may not even want me to have anything to do with Edovina." Jake said apprehensively.

"This isn't about Juana. You need to decide what you want to do first. Once you've decided, then you can discuss things with Juana." Allen said firmly.

"I'm fifteen, I can't support a child." Jake said helplessly.

"That isn't part of this decision. Edovina will be taken care of no matter what you decide. If you decide that you want to be her father, then you can talk with Juana about how's the best way to do that. If not, then be her cousin and let Juana raise her alone. I'm not going to push you one way or the other and no matter what you decide, I'll support you completely. The question you have to answer is, do you want to be a father to this little girl who may or may not be your child?" Allen asked seriously.

Jake looked off into the distance thoughtfully.

"Come on, we've got everything on the list. Let's check out. You don't have to decide this minute." Allen said, forcing cheer into his voice.

Jake nodded and followed silently.

* * * * *

"Are you ready to go?" Chip asked quietly, causing JC to jump in surprise.

After a second to catch his breath, JC looked around and asked, "Where's Kevin?"

"Upstairs teaching himself to read. It took some doing, but I finally distracted him enough to get away." Chip said seriously.

JC smiled, then the smiled dropped and he shook his head.

"What's wrong Angel?" Chip asked with concern.

"Sneaking out isn't a solution. That boy has a crush on you and you need to deal with it." JC said firmly.

"But he's been through so much. If we just leave him be, maybe it will die down in its own time." Chip said with hope.

"Or maybe it won't. Causing him a little heartbreak now may prevent a much bigger heartbreak later." JC said with compassion in his voice.

"I understand what you're saying. Can we give it a week to see what happens? If his feelings don't die down naturally, we can sit down and have a serious talk with him." Chip said hopefully.

JC looked into Chip's eyes and said, "I think that's a good idea. Let's say our good-byes and go home... if we hurry, we'll have some time before the boys get home from school."

"Mmmm, I like the way you think." Chip said in a low voice filled with desire.

* * * * *

"I think we've got everything you asked for." Allen announced as he walked into the kitchen carrying shopping bags.

Xain nodded in acknowledgment as he arranged sliced vegetables on a platter.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Jake asked as he walked into the kitchen, carrying more bags.

"Perhaps Mrs. Vasquez can use your assistance with the desserts she is preparing. All preparation for the meal is complete." Xain said as he moved the platter to the refrigerator.

"Is there anything I can do to help you Mamacita?" Jake asked shyly.

"No. All is good for now. *Muchas gracias*." Juana said with a smile.

"*De nada*." Jake said, then walked to Allen's side.

"Did Josh and Chip leave already?" Allen asked as he looked around.

"Yes. I believe they left in anticipation of engaging in intercourse before their children return to their home." Xain said as he rinsed off his cutting board.

Allen stood stunned at the statement as Jake chuckled to himself.

"Um... Xain, that's kind of a private thing that they probably wouldn't want you to share." Allen said carefully.

Xain tilted his head thoughtfully for an instant before saying, "Yes, I recall the taboo of discussing sexual intimacy. My apologies Father, I did not intend to cause offense."

"That's fine Xain. The more you're around Humans the easier it will be to know what is inappropriate to discuss. Do you know what time your father is going to arrive?" Allen finished quickly, hoping to change the subject.

"No. However, I can access his itinerary if you would like." Xain said as he dried his hands.

"Yes. If you can find out when he's going to arrive, we can go pick him up." Allen said with a smile.

Xain nodded and walked out of the kitchen.

"I'm going to go check on Kev." Jake said as he followed Xain and Allen out of the room.

"Thanks Jake." Allen said as they parted company outside the kitchen.

* * * * *

"How are you doing?" Jake asked as he walked into the bedroom.

"I'm stuck... I can't get this word." Kevin said in frustration.

"What do you think it is?" Jake asked as he took a seat beside Kevin on his bed.

"When I tried to put the sounds together it was 'sayer' but I don't think that's right." Kevin said in frustration.

"Well, the 'ch' sounds different when it's put together." Jake said, then made the appropriate sound.

"Oh... ch... ah... no, ay... r... chair." Kevin finished suddenly.

"That's it Kev. You got it. That was a hard one." Jake said happily.

"Yeah. This is really tough. 'C' sounds like 'S' sometimes and sounds like 'K' sometimes and now it sounds different when it's with an 'H'. It's a lot to remember." Kevin said seriously.

"I know. But it gets easier with practice. Pretty soon you'll be reading without even thinking about it." Jake said with assurance.

"That's what Uncle Chip said too."

"Have you already been through this one?" Jake asked as he picked up a book from beside Kevin on the bed.

"Yeah. That one wasn't as hard as this one." Kevin said as he glanced at the book Jake was holding.

"Why don't you read this one to me so you can get some practice on what you've already learned?" Jake asked quietly.

Kevin smiled and said, "Okay."

Jake moved farther onto the bed and rested his back against the wall.

Kevin snuggled in beside Jake and began to read.

"The... boy sat in the red... car..."

* * * * *

"Good, it looks like we have plenty of time before your father arrives at the spaceport." Allen said as he read the screen over Xain's shoulder.

Xain nodded in acknowledgement.

"How are you doing? Do you need to talk about anything?" Allen asked slowly.

Xain considered the question, then said, "Logically, I know that he who is my father is coming to deliver the remainder of my possessions. However I have a feeling that I do not understand."

"Can you describe it?" Allen asked as he rested a hand on Xain's shoulder.

"Not precisely. It seems to originate in my abdominal cavity and gives the sensation of vibration." Xain said thoughtfully.

"I think that's the sensation Humans describe as 'butterflies in the stomach'." Allen said slowly.

Xain thought about the statement, then said, "An apt description, can you identify the source of the sensation?"

"I can't be sure, but I think it's anticipation of your father's arrival. Regardless of species, I believe all children want to feel the acceptance and approval of their parents. In a situation such as this, your father's reaction is uncertain and may be causing a little anxiety." Allen said thoughtfully.

Xain got a distant look before saying, "He who is my Father would not approve."

"From what I understand of the process of Vulcan control, when an emotion is recognized, it is consciously isolated and restrained, then the subconscious processes the emotion with little or no outward manifestation. Upon reaching a certain level of control, the process becomes so automatic that the conscious mind no longer plays an active role." Allen said carefully.

"A succinct and accurate description." Xain said as he devoted his full attention toward Allen.

"I think that since you're part Human, the subconscious process may not work the same. I'm just guessing, but I think you may need to identify and process the emotion consciously when you encounter it, as Human's do. If that's the case, you may need to accept the emotion and 'deal with it' before you have control over it." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Upon what do you base your supposition?" Xain asked curiously.

"Observation. When I see you evoke an emotional response, you seem to struggle with it until you understand what it is. Once you achieve understanding, you quickly regain control." Allen said seriously.

Xain considered the statement, then said, "It is an intriguing idea. I will consider what you have said."

"I hope it helps. Back to the subject of your father. You said that your father would not approve. Maybe if you outline your accomplishments since you arrived, you could find some things that your father would find acceptable." Allen said carefully.

Xain nodded and thought.

"You've learned to speak English." Allen said seriously.

"That was accomplished through a mind-meld and therefore is not a notable achievement." Xain said seriously.

"I think you're underestimating your achievement. If it were so easy to do, why doesn't everyone learn languages via mind-meld?' Allen asked in challenge.

"The process requires understanding of the mnemo complex structures of the mind and the skill to isolate the proper complex in both individuals. It is not common to develop the skill since it is only used by elders who specialize in memory transference and restoration." Xain said carefully.

"Then how do you have this skill?" Allen asked quietly.

"My mental structure is not typical of Vulcans. It was necessary for me to understand the mnemo complexes of Humans and Vulcans to begin to understand the organization of my own mind." Xain said as if it were nothing.

"So you've developed a specialized skill that is uncommon to Vulcans and probably unheard of in Humans. Am I correct?" Allen asked carefully.

A glimpse of a surprised expression fell across Xain's face as he said, "Correct."

"Earlier you understood the colorful metaphor that Jake used to describe the gentleman from the Vulcan Historical Archive. In case you weren't aware of it, that was a leap of reasoning that most Vulcans could not have made."

"When you asked me to cover my ears this morning, I felt something. It was an emotion that I do not have a name for. When the official treated you as a lesser being because you are Human, I felt the same sensation on your behalf. When Jake made his statement, the thoughts seemed to fall into a logical progression until I found a probable meaning to his metaphor." Xain explained slowly.

"I'm not sure, but I think the emotion you were feeling was 'indignity'. I'm sorry if I made you feel that way." Allen said quietly.

"I understand your true motive and thank you for your foresight." Xain said seriously.

"You're very welcome. Now tell me what you think about being part of our family. I think your father might have reason to be proud of the way you've been able to fit in here." Allen said carefully.

Xain considered the question and finally said, "With the exception of the preparation of food, I can think of no significant contribution that I've made."

"Then tell me how you think Jake would be doing right now if you weren't here?" Allen asked firmly.

"Perhaps he would spend more time interacting with Kevin and Kenny." Xain said speculatively.

"Or he might be listening to his stereo, drowning in his own thoughts." Allen said in return.

Xain remembered the distress that he had witnessed and nodded slowly.

"You give him someone on his own level to share with. This place is as alien to him as it is to you. Without you to share this experience, he'd have to face it alone. I don't know if you've noticed, but the other boys look at you and Jake equally as their big brothers. They respect and admire you. You may still have occasional difficulties in social etiquette, but in all the ways that count, you've been accepted. I believe that's an achievement beyond what anyone could expect, your father included." Allen said seriously.

"How is it you were able to attain such knowledge and insight?" Xain asked curiously.

Allen smiled and said, "Because I've had ten years of working among a group of Vulcans and Humans to see the similarities and differences. Almost any difficulty you could have, I've probably been through myself or witnessed over the years. It's something that comes with age, it's called experience."

"I thank you once again for your guidance Father." Xain said with appreciation.

Allen gave into his illogical urge and pulled Xain into a hug.

After a moment of hugging, Xain said, "I have one further question."

"What is it son?" Allen said automatically.

"I am unsure if I am behaving appropriately when I engage in physical displays of affection such as hugging. In a circumstance such as this, it seems to be the proper way, but I am Vulcan and should not behave so." Xain said with concern.

"Xain, you are an individual. Not just because of your mixed heritage, but because of who you are. Here, among your family, you aren't expected to behave as a Human or a Vulcan, but just be yourself. We will accept you for who you are and support whatever choices you make." Allen said sincerely.

Xain pulled out of the hug and nodded before saying, "He who is my father expected me to behave as a Vulcan. It was his wish for me to be other than who I am."

"I disagree." Allen said as he looked into Xain's eyes.

Xain tilted his head and waited for Allen's explanation.

"If that were truly your father's motivation, you would not be on Earth." Allen said as he tried to put his thoughts into logical order.

"His decision to present Captain Spock as a role model was to give you an example of another person of mixed heritage who has achieved great things. And if he were determined for you to behave as a Vulcan he would not have allowed you to legally take my family name. I believe that the culmination of his decisions gives evidence to the fact that he has the same expectation that I have of you." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Which is?" Xain prompted.

"To grow into a stable and self assured adult." Allen said with certainty.

Xain nodded slowly and said, "I find your logic to be sound. But if that is the case, why did he try to force me to master the Vulcan disciplines?"

"What tools can a Vulcan man give his son to assure his success?" Allen asked quietly.

"Logic, control and knowledge." Xain said without hesitation.

"He provided the things he thought you would need to the best of his ability. Tradition and his own upbringing were his only clues on how to properly raise a son into a successful man. I believe he did what he thought was best." Allen said softly.

"Your insights have provided me much to consider. If you will excuse me, I believe meditation would be beneficial at this time." Xain said thoughtfully.

"You're probably right. I'll be ready to leave for the spaceport at 2:25."

"I will join you then." Xain said and left the room.

Allen gave a sad smile before walking to the front door to check on Kenny and Brady.

* * * * *

"Hey guys, how's it going?" Allen asked as he saw Brady standing aside while Kenny drilled a small hole through a long piece of finished wood.

"I'm making the holes that we're going to use to screw the shelf together." Kenny said in deep concentration.

"I'm supervising." Brady said with a smile.

"Are you going to have enough time to build it before you have to leave?" Allen asked as he looked around at the wood and tools scattered around the lawn.

"It won't be a problem. As soon as Kenny's done with the pilot holes, it will only take a few minutes for us to assemble all the pieces. And since we

bought finished wood, all we'll have to do is hang it when it's done." Brady said happily.

"Well, it looks like you have it under control. I can't wait to see the finished product." Allen said with a smile.

"It's going to be great. This is so cool." Kenny said as he looked across the wood for the pencil mark to start the next pilot hole.

"I think you're right. Let me know when it's done." Allen said as he turned to leave.

* * * * *

"Dad, Kevin's got something to show you." Jake said quickly as he and Kevin ran down the stairs.

"Hmmm. Could this something have anything to do with the book he's holding?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Come on." Kevin said as he took hold of Allen's hand and led him into the living room.

Allen sat in a wing back chair and promptly had Kevin perched in his lap.

Jake was all smiles as he took a seat on the nearby couch.

"The boy sat in the red car." Kevin said with confidence as he ran his finger along the page to each word as he said it.

CHAPTER 18

"The time is now 2:23." Xain announced as he walked into the living room.

"Thanks Xain. I lost track of the time. Who wants to go with us to pick up Xain's father?" Allen asked Jake and Kevin.

"I will." Jake said immediately.

"I want to try and read my other book again." Kevin said with excitement.

"Okay, Little One. If you get stuck on any of the words, Brady and Kenny will be here to help you." Allen said as he gave Kevin a tight hug.

Kevin gave Allen a peck of a kiss on the cheek before hopping off his lap and running out of the living room.

"He's really learned a lot in one day." Jake said with admiration in his voice.

"I think he just needed someone to care if he was learning or not. Come on guys, let's get going." Allen said as he got up.

* * * * *

"Um... what if your dad doesn't like me." Jake said into the nervous silence of the ride to the spaceport.

"You are my brother and friend. The opinion of he who is my father will not alter that fact." Xain said calmly.

Allen smiled at the statement and said, "Don't worry Jake. I can't imagine a better person to be Xain's brother or friend. If Solak doesn't see it, then it's his problem, not yours."

Xain looked into the back seat at Jake and gave a single nod to show his agreement with Allen's statement.

"I don't even know why I'm nervous about meeting him." Jake said in a helpless voice.

"Perhaps it is because the situation is unfamiliar and you have insufficient experience to formulate reasonable expectations." Xain said speculatively.

Jake thought about the statement for a minute before saying, "Yeah. That's probably it. But... does that mean you're feeling nervous too?"

"I am experiencing a sense of apprehension. Due to Father's counsel earlier, I am able to recognize the source of the feeling and experience the emotion within manageable boundaries. The sense of control that this new

way of containing emotions provides is satisfying." Xain said in a considering voice.

"I'm glad it's working for you. Dan's going to be coming by the house tonight. You should consider asking him about different techniques for dealing with emotions. His training and experience in dealing with emotions may be able to provide you some alternatives you haven't considered before." Allen said as he took the off-ramp to the spaceport.

"Thank you Father, I will speak with him." Xain said seriously.

"Jake, maybe you could think about anything you'd like to discuss with him." Allen said as he looked at Jake in his rear-view mirror.

"I kind of figured I'd just talk to him about my nightmare and the stuff you said."Jake said uncomfortably.

"If that's what you want, that's fine. Dan's just going to be there to talk to you and offer advice. He's not there to judge you and he's bound ethically and legally never to tell anyone what you tell him. He's been to college and has years of experience so he'll be more likely to be able to help than just about anyone I can think of." Allen said seriously.

"I think I'd rather have you help me." Jake said as the SUV came to a stop.

"Jake, I know enough of the basics to do minor maintenance on this car but it would be foolish of me to refuse to take it to a mechanic periodically and dangerous not to take it in when it's having a problem. Sometimes you need a professional. Right now, Dan just wants to talk to all you guys to see how you're doing. It's like maintenance. If he feels that one of you needs some extra help, he'll tell us about it and what type of help he recommends."

Jake nodded but remained silent.

"It's your body and your mind. If you say 'no' that's the end of the discussion. I'll respect whatever decision you make. Now let's go get Xain's father." Allen said as he opened his door.

* * * * *

"Greetings." Xain said in full Vulcan calmness as he approached his father.

Solak inclined his head in a gesture that was half a nod of agreement and half a bow.

"May I introduce Allen Thompson who I accept as *k'war'ma'khon* and Jake Thompson who is my brother in Clan Short as well as the family of

Thompson. *K'war'ma'khon*, Jake, this is he who is my Father, Solak of the house of Suvak of Vulcan." Xain said with flawless diplomacy.

Solak raised an eyebrow at his son's proper introduction and said, "A pleasure to meet you."

"For us as well. We have secured a cart to transport Xain's belongings." Allen said in Vulcan.

"While among Humans, we may speak your language. I am fully versed." Solak said with dignity.

"As you like." Allen said with a gentle smile.

"The belongings of 'he who is my son' are here." Solak said and pointed to a small pile of suitcases and boxes at the back of the shuttlecraft.

Xain and Jake soon had the cart loaded and were on the way to the SUV.

* * * * *

The ride from the spaceport was uncomfortably silent until Allen finally said, "I didn't think to ask before. What is your vocation?"

"I am a cellular biologist specializing in Genetic Disorders. My current position at the Vulcan Consulate is as a medical liaison between the medical communities of Earth and Vulcan." Solak said simply.

"From what I've heard, Vulcan geneticists are pioneers. The rest of the Federation are benefiting from the breakthroughs that you've made." Allen said seriously.

"The process of discovery presents rewards on many levels. May I inquire of your vocation." Solak asked courteously.

"I'm working on Project Libra. We're trying to integrate Human and Vulcan programming styles into one uniform language." Allen said in a tone of voice that said he was used to saying the phrase.

"A worthwhile endeavor." Solak said seriously.

"We like to think so. My experience on the project certainly has been a help with Xain." Allen said as he glanced into the rear-view mirror to see Xain and Jake hanging on their every word.

"In what way?" Solak asked curiously.

"Well, besides the fact that I learned the Vulcan language, my experiences interacting with a group of Humans and Vulcans has given me insights into the similarities and differences we share." Allen said seriously.

"I can see the advantage of having such knowledge." Solak said with a slight nod of his head.

"And it seems that the areas that I'm least able to help Xain are the areas that Jake excels at." Allen said with a grin into the mirror.

Solak raised an eyebrow in question.

"Jake and Xain are alike in some fundamental ways and yet are polar opposites in others. They're both in unfamiliar surroundings and having to make adjustments. Together they can develop their problem solving skills, social skills and establish their own personalities drawing on each others strengths. With Jake and Xain being peers, I just have to offer supervision and guidance when they need it." Allen said as he took the off-ramp to take them home.

Solak gave Allen a considering look, but remained silent.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of silence, Allen pulled into his driveway.

"Solak, I'd like to introduce you to my brother Lieutenant Brady Thompson of the Starship *Enterprise* and my son Kenny Thompson of Clan Short." Allen said and walked to stand by the shelf.

"You are constructing furnishings?" Solak asked curiously.

"We're making a shelf for my models." Kenny said happily.

Solak raised an eyebrow in question at Xain.

"Miniature replicas of vehicles." Xain said simply.

Solak got an expression of understanding and nodded.

"Would you boys get the stuff out of the back of the car and take it up to Xain's room?" Allen asked casually.

"Sure Dad." Jake said hesitantly and went to the car.

"Come in and I'll show you around." Allen said as he walked to the front door.

Solak nodded once to acknowledge his acceptance of the invitation.

* * * * *

"Juana, I would like for you to meet Xain's father, Solak. Juana will supervise the boys when I'm at work." Allen said with a smile.

"At the table are her son's Reuben and Ricardo and in the stroller is her granddaughter, Edovina." Allen said as he gestured toward the kitchen table.

"A pleasure to meet you." Juana said carefully.

"For me as well." Solak said respectfully.

"Your son, he will prepare a meal for you, for all of us." Juana said proudly.

Solak raised an eyebrow at Allen in question.

"Xain volunteered to cook the meal in honor of your visit. Most days Juana will do the cooking while we're at work and school." Allen said with a smile.

Solak nodded, then said, "He who is my son has shown interest in culinary arts."

"I hope to encourage him in his interest in cooking, as well as any other interests he develops." Allen said, then thought to ask, "Would you like a drink?"

"Water would be acceptable." Solak said simply.

Allen walked to the refrigerator and poured them each a glass of water before returning to Solak.

"If you'll follow me, I'll show you the family room." Allen said and led the way out of the kitchen.

* * * * *

As they walked into the family room, Solak's gaze was drawn immediately to the *asenoi* sitting by the terminal.

"Is this authentic?" Solak asked in surprise.

"We believe it to be so. I received it this morning. The proper authorities have been notified and are awaiting it's return to Vulcan. I was hoping that you could take it with you when you return." Allen finished shyly.

"Yes. I would be honored." Solak said as he carefully examined the artifact.

"Xain can tell you where it needs to be delivered. He spoke with the Vulcan Historical Archive this morning." Allen said as he watched Solak's examination.

"He who is my son was given this duty?" Solak asked with surprise.

"They asked to speak to a representative of Clan Short, so Xain was the logical choice to speak to them. He represented his Clan and his family well." Allen finished with a proud smile.

Solak stood away from the *asenoi* and looked at Allen expectantly.

"Through here we have the living room." Allen said and led the way.

* * * * *

After arriving in the living room Allen said, "I know it's not like a Vulcan home, but Xain hasn't shown any difficulty adapting to it."

"On the contrary, she who was my wife fashioned our home to the style of Humans. These surroundings are more familiar to me now than those of Vulcan." Solak said seriously.

"I'm glad. I've done my best to make this a comfortable place for all of us." Allen said quietly.

Xain and Jake arrived at the living room door and peered in, unsure of their welcome.

"Would you boys like to show Solak your room?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Yes, *K'war'ma'khon*." Xain said formally.

"Go ahead and I'll meet you in Kevin and Kenny's room when you're done." Allen said with a smile at 'his' boys.

* * * * *

Solak walked in to find an aura of tranquility in the room.

"Your dwelling seems well suited to meditation." Solak said as he looked at the unusual collection of posters covering the walls.

"I find it to be so. Jake has an audio selection that has particularly soothing properties." Xain said and glanced at Jake who was already holding the remote.

The sound of rustling leaves and trickling water began to pour through the room.

"She who was your mother would have approved." Solak said in a considering voice.

"Do you approve?" Xain asked firmly.

Solak turned his gaze to his son and looked curiously.

"It has been brought to my attention that I have been misinterpreting your motives regarding me. I have based my conclusions about our interactions on these misconceptions and believed that you did not approve of me or anything that I have achieved. It would take considerable time for me to review our past interactions and reach new conclusions. You could negate that need by simply answering my question and telling me directly if you approve of the choices I make. Do you approve?" Xain asked again.

Jake got the sense that Solak didn't approve, so he hurried to say, "Xain and I worked together to make this room a combination of the things that make us comfortable."

"To fashion your dwelling in such a manner is logical." Solak said without betraying his own feelings about the room.

"It is sufficient." Xain said thoughtfully.

Solak gave a half-nod of acceptance of the statement.

Xain looked from Solak to Jake and said, "*K'war'ma'khon* Allen awaits us in the next room."

Solak gave another half-nod/half-bow and indicated for Xain and Jake to lead the way.

* * * * *

"Solak, I'd like for you to meet my son Kevin Thompson of Clan Short." Allen said proudly.

Kevin looked up from the book he was reading and an expression of anger came over his face.

"You hurt Xain." Kevin said in a low voice that was almost a growl.

"Kevin!" Allen said in a voice of warning.

"You made him feel stupid and like he wasn't good enough to be your son." Kevin continued, ignoring Allen completely.

Solak looked at Kevin with an expression of true surprise.

"He who is my father did not cause me to feel as you describe." Xain said seriously.

"Why are you lying? I felt it! You were hurting. You were feeling little and alone and like you couldn't do anything right!" Kevin said with tears in his eyes, turning his anger on Xain.

"You are correct in your description of my emotional distress. However, you are in error as to the source. He who is my father made every effort to provide the knowledge and training I would need in my later life. The source of my distress was my misconception of his motives coupled with traditional Vulcan techniques being less than effective in my hybrid physiology. Neither issue was caused by he who is my father, and with the counsel of *K'war'ma'khon* both issues have been resolved." Xain said in full Vulcan control.

Kevin sat silently, thinking for a moment, before he said, "I'm sorry Mr. Solak. I thought you hurt Xain and it made me mad. I promise I won't yell at you no more."

Solak noted Kevin's repentant expression and said, "You have provided understanding of he who is my son. There is no harm."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room until Allen finally said, "Xain, I think there's something that you and Jake need to discuss with Solak. Would you like to talk with him in your room or the living room?"

"Our room will be acceptable." Xain said seriously.

"Come on Kevin. Let's get you a milkshake, I think you're overdue." Allen said with a gentle smile.

Kevin looked up at Allen with tear streaked eyes and nodded slowly.

"Come here Little One." Allen said as he walked to Kevin and picked him up.

* * * * *

As soon as the bedroom door closed, Xain said, "Yesterday I noted that Jake was in emotional distress and sought to give aid."

Xain paused to see if his father had any reaction to the statement.

He didn't.

"I performed a mind-meld to identify the source of the distress for the purpose of aiding Jake in emotional control." Xain continued slowly, carefully picking out his words.

"I followed the steps without variation as I have been taught for the past five years, however, in this instance a bond was formed. The only word that could adequately describe the sensation of the bond's formation was 'instinctive'." Xain said as his look became more thoughtful.

"*K'war'ma'khon* suggested that you might examine our bond to see that it is appropriately formed." Xain finished and looked into his father's eyes.

"A wise precaution. Establish your link and allow me to observe." Solak said without expression.

Xain noticed a look of fear in Jake's eyes and said, "He who is my father will verify that the bond is complete. There is no cause for apprehension."

Jake took a deep breath and nodded.

Xain reached out through the bond and made connection with Jake's mind.

"We are prepared." Xain announced in a tranquil voice.

Solak raised a hand and closed his eyes in concentration.

Jake felt panic starting to well inside him, but just as suddenly, he felt a calming force begin to sooth his soul.

"I had not considered this possibility." Solak announced, drawing Xain and Jake's attention to him.

"The bond you have is fully formed, yet distinct from any other I have seen... save one." Solak said thoughtfully.

Xain and Jake raised matching eyebrows in question.

"...the bond I shared with she who was your mother." Solak said as his mind drifted back into his past.

"Um, you aren't going to, like, get rid of the bond or be mad at Xain for bonding with me are you?" Jake asked nervously.

"No. The choice to maintain or reject the bond is yours. If you wish, I will instruct you in the attributes of your bond that you might understand the choice you face." Solak said seriously.

"It is time to prepare the evening meal, would it be preferable to postpone your instruction until the evening meal has been consumed?" Xain asked gently.

"It would be acceptable." Solak said with an expression of deep thought.

* * * * *

As Jake, Xain and Solak left the bedroom, they saw Brady and Kenny carrying the completed shelf up the stairs.

"That looks great." Jake said with a smile.

"It's exactly like we planned it. We're going to hang it on the wall now, then I'll put my models on it." Kenny said happily.

"Do you need any help?" Jake asked as he looked over the finished product of their work.

"Yes. Once we have the wall anchors in place, we could use some help hanging it." Brady said seriously.

"Will you be okay without me for a few minutes Xain?" Jake asked carefully.

"Yes. I do not have need of assistance at this stage of preparation. However, should I need assistance, I believe Mrs. Vasquez will be available." Xain said in a voice of calmness.

"Okay, I'll be down to help you as soon as we're done hanging the shelf." Jake said, then followed Kenny and Brady into the bedroom.

* * * * *

"Is everything alright?" Allen asked with concern from the kitchen table.

"Yes. He who is my father has verified that our bond is well formed and has offered to share his knowledge of the attributes of the bond." Xain said as he walked to the refrigerator.

"Solak, would you like to go into the living room while Xain cooks dinner?" Allen asked, then glanced at Kevin who was drinking his milkshake.

"No. It would be preferable to observe he who is my son preparing the evening meal." Solak said as if it were the most logical thing in the universe.

"Mamacita? Where's Reuben and Ricardo?" Kevin asked as he finished his milkshake.

"In our apartment. It is time for Ricardo to nap." Mamacita said as she pulled a pan of pastries out of the oven.

"Can I go up and visit with Reuben?" Kevin asked Juana hopefully.

"If your father agrees. It is good. Please to be quiet so Ricardo may sleep." Juana said as she shifted the pastries from the pan to a cooling rack.

"Poppa, can I?" Kevin asked as he turned to face Allen.

"That's fine Kevin. Just be quiet so Ricardo can take his nap." Allen said with a gentle smile.

"I'll be good. I'm just gonna get Reuben's help with my book." Kevin said as he hopped out of his chair and ran to hug Allen.

"Have fun Little One, just remember to be quiet." Allen said as he enjoyed the hug.

Allen and Solak watched as Kevin ran out of the room.

"His quest for knowledge is an admirable quality." Solak said speculatively.

"Yes. He's been told all his life that he's learning disabled and discouraged from trying to learn. For the first time in his life, he's being given encouragement. By paying attention to how he's progressing and acknowledging his accomplishments, we're inspiring him to achieve things he never thought he was capable of." Allen said with a distant look.

Solak continued to look at the door Kevin had passed through for a moment, then said, "I was unaware that Human children required such attentions."

"Kevin needs that kind of attention. Kenny, his twin, is self-assured and doesn't need the same type of attention. Each child is an individual and it's my job to determine what those needs are and provide for them to the best of my ability." Allen said as he turned his gaze to Solak.

"What needs have you determined for he who is my son?" Solak asked, looking especially serious, even for a Vulcan.

"There's no clear cut method for determining a child's needs, but in Xain's case I believe that his greatest needs are guidance and acceptance. Both needs stem from the fact that he is of mixed heritage." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Several tutors were employed to facilitate his need for guidance and he resides on Earth to fill his need for acceptance." Solak said seriously.

"I know. And that's worked for the most part. The problem is that his tutors were Vulcan and tried to fit him into the mold of other Vulcan children. I suspect that he would have had just as much difficulty if he had had Human tutors. Xain is unique and therefore needs instruction tailored to him rather then trying to change him to conform to prearranged lessons." Allen said with concentration.

"What you say is logical. What do you recommend to provide for his educational needs?" Solak asked as he glanced at Xain working in the kitchen.

"Well, he's used to learning from Vulcan tutors. I think that he should continue to be taught by a Vulcan tutor if you have no objection." Allen said as he looked Solak in the eyes.

"Would we not continue to have difficulty with conformity issues?" Solak asked with interest.

"Yes. But the key to working around those issues is to have regular discussions with the tutor regarding Xain's progress. If the tutor will make some concessions for Xain's need for flexibility in the methods being used, I can guide Xain to find alternative ways to achieve the desired results. If the approach works, not only will Xain have the skills and knowledge that he will need, but he will also have the problem solving skills and a better understanding of himself to fall back on when he faces challenges as an adult." Allen said thoughtfully.

Solak considered the words, then said, "It seems a logical course of action. Would you like to interview the tutors to determine if any have the flexibility he who is my son requires?"

"I think it would be best to ask Xain's opinion before we talk to the tutors. He may have a favorite or he may not want special accommodations." Allen said in a considering voice.

"We are to speak following the meal. I will inquire of him at that time." Solak said as he turned to look at Xain.

Juana walked to the table and placed a tray of cookies between Allen and Solak.

"A snack to have before dinner. Would you like milk or coffee?" She asked in her most polite and controlled voice.

"Coffee." Solak said without emotion.

"Coffee for me too. Will you join us Juana?" Allen asked with a smile.

"No. There is much to do. But thank you." Juana said quickly as she went to get the coffee.

"I find the attitude of cooperation and respect in your home to be acceptable." Solak said slowly.

"Thank you. I agree with your assessment of my home. I hope you'll consider visiting when your duties allow it." Allen said, then smiled as Juana sat a tray with coffee, cream and sugar on the table.

"My return to Vulcan will allow me to resume my genetic research. I do not foresee a significant quantity of unstructured time. However, should the opportunity arise, I will accept your hospitality." Solak said in an unusually considerate tone.

"The last of my own unstructured time will end this week. But when my job requires me to travel to Vulcan, I'll bring Xain with me so that he can visit with you." Allen said quietly.

"That is acceptable, and it would be logical for you to accept accommodations with us during your stay." Solak said with a more formal tone in his voice.

"I will accept your hospitality." Allen said respectfully.

Solak made a half-nod gesture to Allen, then took a bite of one of the cookies from the plate between them.

"'He who is my son' prepared this." Solak said as a statement of fact.

"Yes. He and Jake made cookies for all of us last night. How did you know?" Allen asked curiously.

"In Vulcan households, nourishment is served at regular intervals to provide for the dietary needs of the occupants. In the dwelling I have shared with he who is my son, meals were served. He who is my son strives to make the flavor, texture and appearance of each menu item into an artistic work. He surpasses his mother in food preparation abilities." Solak said carefully.

"Then why haven't you encouraged him to pursue a career where he can put his talent to use?" Allen asked in a tone of curiosity, free of accusation.

"I wish to provide the knowledge and skills at this point in his development so that in adulthood, he may have a variety of vocations to choose from." Solak said consideringly.

"I see the logic in your approach. Although I intend to encourage his interest in cooking, it won't be to the exclusion of any other interest he might have." Allen said seriously.

Solak gave a half-nod of acknowledgement.

* * * * *

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Jake asked as he hurried into the kitchen.

"Fill a pot with water and bring it to a boil." Xain said as he was stirring various powders in a large bowl.

Jake went to the hanging rack of pots and pans and pulled one down.

"Is this one big enough?" Jake asked quickly.

"It is adequate." Xain said after a glance.

Jake took the pot to the sink and began to fill it.

"If there is no objection, it is possible to give you the recipe through our bond." Xain said carefully.

"Um... okay. Just let me get this on the stove." Jake said as he turned off the faucet.

After a moment to move the pot and start the burner of the stove, Jake stood by Xain expectantly.

"It is done." Xain said without altering his stirring.

"I thought I'd hear you in my head or something. What did you do?" Jake asked curiously.

"What are you going to do with the water once it boils?" Xain asked as he stopped his stirring.

"I'll put the pasta into the boiling water. Then I'll wait six point two minutes..." Jake trailed off with disbelief as he realized that he knew exactly how to prepare the pasta dish Xain wanted him to make.

"This is the extent of my abilities with the bond. He who is my father will instruct us further at the conclusion of the meal." Xain said as he sat the bowl of dry ingredients aside and went to the refrigerator.

"I guess I'd better get the basil washed and chopped before the water boils." Jake said absently and walked to the sink.

"Jake." Xain said seriously, gaining his full attention.

"I will not make use of this ability without your prior consent." Xain said as a vow.

"I trust you Xain. You wouldn't do anything that would hurt me." Jake said shyly as he carried a bundle of fresh basil to the sink.

Xain nodded as he started to clean several cloves of garlic.

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"Do you like living here?" Kevin asked Reuben quietly not looking at the open book in his lap.

"I'm kinda scared. It's so different from home." Reuben said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Me too." Kevin said as he looked around the apartment.

"It's quiet." Reuben said in a distant voice.

"Yeah. It's hard to get to sleep with everything being so quiet." Kevin agreed.

"I slept good last night." Reuben said with a cherubic smile.

"Me too. I'm glad you're my cousin now. How come we weren't friends before?" Kevin asked seriously.

"Because you're older than me. I always thought you wouldn't like me so I didn't talk to you too much." Reuben said quietly.

"I was so lonely there. Nobody talked to me, well, nobody but Jake. And he was like my big brother, not like my friend." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"Now he is your big brother." Reuben said with a smile.

"Yeah. It's really great. It's like I was able to bring all the best things and best people from Chicago with me and leave all the bad stuff behind." Kevin said with a smile.

"I'm glad I was one of the best people because I do like it here. After Manny was killed, I was kinda scared all the time. I don't feel scared here." Reuben said distantly.

"I know what you mean. I'm used to spending my time trying to make money or find food or just being quiet so Momma wouldn't yell at me. Now I don't have to worry about none of that and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do." Kevin said as he looked into the past.

"I didn't think about that before. But that's what's really weird here. I mean, I still have to watch Ricardo when Mama's working like before, but it's different. I can go outside the apartment if I want to. I have you and Kenny and Xain and Jake to talk to whenever I want. I can go outside..." Reuben said in realization.

Kevin looked at Reuben with surprise.

"We can go out and play in the yard... our yard. We don't have to wait for Mama to have time to take us to the park and we don't have to worry about druggies or perverts. We have a yard where we can play whenever we want to." Reuben said with delight.

"Can we go now?" Kevin asked hopefully.

Reuben looked at the clock and said, "It's almost time to wake Ricardo up. We can take him outside with us." Reuben said with excitement.

"Yeah. Kenny has a Frisbee, I'll ask him if we can borrow it." Kevin said in a rush.

"I'll wake up Ricardo while you get it." Reuben said as he jumped up off the couch.

Kevin's only response was to make a mad dash for the door of the apartment.

* * * * *

Juana was wiping down the area where she had been working and loading dishes into the dishwasher.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Juana asked Xain as she watched him adding ingredients to the hot skillet.

"If you will heat the grill portion of the stove to the desired temperature, you may begin cooking the steaks." Xain said as he lifted the lid off a skillet of green beans and checked their texture.

Juana nodded and set the control for the grill.

"Will you check the pasta to see if it's right?" Jake asked as he pulled a single piece of the tubular pasta from the boiling water with a slotted spoon.

Xain took a single bite of the pasta and considered.

"Thirty seconds more, then drain the pasta and add it to the skillet." Xain said seriously.

"You got it." Jake said and put the colander into the sink so it would be ready when he needed it.

"That smells great!" Kenny said as he walked into the kitchen, followed closely by Brady.

Xain's only response was to give a nod of acknowledgement.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Brady asked as he enjoyed the various aromas filling the room.

"Yes. The dining room table needs to be set." Xain said succinctly.

"We can do that, what do you say, Champ?" Brady asked Kenny with a smile.

"Yeah, let's go." Kenny said and hurried to the dining room.

Less than a minute later Kevin rushed into the kitchen and looked around.

"Where's Kenny?" He asked breathlessly.

"In the dining room, setting the table." Jake said as he carefully stirred the pasta into the hot skillet.

Kevin turned on his heel and ran to the dining room.

* * * * *

"Can me and Reuben borrow your Frisbee so we can play in the yard?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"Sure. But I think Xain's about done with dinner. If you'll wait till after dinner I can play with you guys too." Kenny said as he walked around the table with a handful of dinner forks, placing one at each place setting.

"Um, okay. I'll go tell Reuben." Kevin said quickly and ran out of the room.

"I think he's happy here." Brady said as he finished putting the plates on the table.

"I think he is too. It's like being in another world for him. He's happy, but he's scared too." Kenny said as he continued to lay out silverware.

"What's scaring him?" Brady asked as he started to place glasses around the table.

"A lot of things. He's scared that he'll do something to mess up and get sent back to Chicago. He's scared that he'll wake up and find out that this was all a dream. He's scared that me and Pop are going to realize that he's stupid or something and stop loving him." Kenny said absently as he continued his work.

Brady froze in his tracks and thought about what Kenny was saying.

Kenny looked at Brady curiously, wondering why he stopped.

After a moment of thought, Brady asked, "Did Kevin tell you that?"

Kenny thought about what he just said and shook his head.

"Then how did you know?" Brady asked quietly, not doubting the truth of Kenny's words.

Kenny shrugged his shoulders and said, "I just know."

Brady decided not to press the issue and went back to setting the table.

* * * * *

Kevin, Reuben and Ricardo walked into the kitchen and went to the kitchen table where Solak and Allen were sitting.

"It looks like someone just woke up." Allen said with a smile at Ricardo's rumpled sleepy expression.

"It was his nap time. Mama says he needs to have a nap in the afternoon because he's little." Reuben explained.

"Your Mama's right..." Allen began to say, but was interrupted by Edovina's cry.

"I guess someone else's naptime is over." Allen said in a gentle voice.

Reuben walked to Edovina, and stopped a foot away.

"Mama, Edovina needs to be changed." Reuben said as he backed away.

Juana looked at the steaks in front of her, then around at all the people, trying to decide what to do.

"I'm done with this, I can change her if you want." Jake said hesitantly.

"Si, yes, thank you Jake." Juana said quickly as she turned a steak on the grill.

Xain glanced at Jake and said, "I will transfer the pasta to a serving dish while you attend to Edovina."

"Thanks Xain." Jake said quickly and hurried to Edovina.

* * * * *

Allen watched Jake pushing Edovina's stroller out of the room and became lost thoughtfully.

"Your eldest son provides much assistance to those of your household. To have such an individual with an altruistic mindset is beneficial to the family unit." Solak said speculatively.

Allen was broken out of his thoughts by the statement and said, "Jake takes being a big brother very seriously. I just have to be careful to see that he isn't giving so much of his attention to others that he's denying his own needs."

"He who is my son will see that Jake's needs are provided." Solak said as a statement of fact.

Allen looked at Solak in question.

"As his bond-mate, he who is my son will recognize any need that Jake has as his own and will strive to provide for it." Solak said simply.

"Then you think they should keep their bond?" Allen asked carefully.

"My opinion is irrelevant in this instance. They are bonded. If both parties find it to be beneficial, it is logical to continue the bond." Solak said, falling into practiced formality.

Allen thought about the statement, then said, "From what I've heard, not everyone on Vulcan has the same attitude toward bonding with a Human."

Solak gave a half-nod of acknowledgement, but said nothing.

"Help?" Jake called in a weak voice from the kitchen doorway.

"What is it son?" Allen asked as he stood.

"Um, I thought I knew how to change a diaper, but... can you just help?" Jake asked frantically.

"I am experienced in the process. I will demonstrate." Solak said firmly as he stood.

"You're our guest. I can take care of it." Allen said quickly.

"Are you experienced?" Solak asked in a tone that sounded almost like a challenge.

"Well, no..." Allen began to say.

"I am." Solak said and walked to help Jake.

Allen looked around and decided to check on Xain.

"Xain, how are you doing?" Allen asked compassionately.

"The food preparations are nearly complete. Dinner will be served in six point seven minutes." Xain said professionally.

"That's not what I mean Xain. How are you?" Allen asked slowly.

Xain looked up from the gravy-like substance he was stirring and said, "Before joining your family, the opinion of he who is my father was of foremost concern to me. With your guidance I have seen that I have worth, I have abilities and that it is my opinion of myself that must guide my actions. It would be desirable to receive the acceptance of he who is my father, but it is not necessary."

"I think that there are quite a few adults who haven't come to that realization. I'm very proud of you Xain. I was worried that this meal with your father was going to be traumatic for you. With your new realization, I

think it's going to be the first day of your independence." Allen said with a smile.

Xain considered the statement carefully before saying, "I will not be independent as such, I will continue to need guidance and education. However, now I will strive to achieve the goals I have set for myself and live up to my own expectations."

Allen gave Xain a quick one armed hug around the shoulders and said, "I can't think of a better, more honest motivation for one's future. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help you accomplish your goals."

"Be assured, *K'war'ma'khon*, I have found your insights to be most helpful and will seek your guidance in future." Xain said seriously.

Allen smiled and said, "I'll do my best to live up to your expectations of me."

Xain nodded and turned his attention back to his sauce.

* * * * *

"I just thought I'd take off the old diaper and put on the new one. I didn't even... it's everywhere." Jake said helplessly.

"It is not uncommon." Solak said as he laid out a towel on the vanity beside the sink.

"What should I do?" Jake asked as he watched Solak's preparation.

"Remove the soiled diaper from the child and place her on the towel." Solak said as he pulled a fresh diaper from the diaper bag.

"Oh, jeeze. That's just nasty." Jake said as he pulled off the old diaper.

"Do your complaints lessen the odor?" Solak asked as if he truly wanted to know.

Jake thought for a second, then smiled as he said, "I guess not. It just seemed like the thing to do."

"I understand, she who was my wife made similar comments when changing the diaper of my 'he who is my son'. It is a typical Human response to adverse situations." Solak said as he efficiently cleaned Edovina.

Jake looked curiously at Solak, trying to determine if he'd just been insulted or complimented.

Solak noticed Jake's pensive expression and said, "I am Vulcan, I behave as a Vulcan, to attempt to do otherwise would be illogical. You are Human, you will behave as a Human. I have no other expectation."

Jake thought about the statement, then asked, "What do you expect from Xain?"

Solak finished the diapering process and began to put things away as he thought about the question.

He handed Edovina to Jake, then said, "My expectations have been patterned after the expectation he who is my father had of me."

Jake was about to confront Solak about the statement when he realized that Solak already knew.

"He fits in here." Jake said seriously as he cradled Edovina on his shoulder.

"I had not considered that he who is my son would be able to integrate into a Human family so fully. It was my belief that his Vulcan manner would distance him from Humans." Solak said thoughtfully.

"You were probably right. Allen made us part of this family. If anyone else had been our dad, Xain and I would just be people who live here but we wouldn't be part of it." Jake said seriously.

Solak gave a half-nod of acceptance and gestured toward the bathroom door.

* * * * *

As Jake walked into the kitchen, still carrying Edovina, Solak followed with the stroller.

"How's it going?" Jake asked as he looked at Xain.

"The last of the food items will be completed momentarily. It would be desirable for the adults to take their places in the dining room and for our brothers and cousins to help carry in the food." Xain said as he combined two skillets ingredients into one serving dish.

"I'll get everyone where they need to be." Jake said as he settled Edovina into her stroller again.

"I guess you'll be with the adults this time, Little Angel." Jake said into the stroller before pushing it into the dining room.

* * * * *

"The children say I am to come and sit." Juana said with confusion.

"They want to serve the meal to us. Try to relax and let them do this for us." Allen said as he sat back in his chair.

Juana took her seat, but didn't look comfortable.

"Whatever they're cooking smells great so I'm willing to sit here and be waited on." Brady said with a smile.

All the adults waited expectantly to see what Xain and Jake had created for them.

CHAPTER 19

Kenny walked into the dining room carrying a pitcher of juice that was dark red in color.

"What is this?" Allen asked as Kenny walked from place to place filling glasses.

"You'll have to ask Xain, but I don't think he'll tell you... he wouldn't tell me." Kenny said as he continued his rounds.

The dining room door opened to Jake carrying a platter of steaks, Kevin followed closely behind with a pitcher of water. Reuben came in next with a large bowl of green beans and Ricardo brought up the rear carrying a basket of breads and rolls.

"Look at them go." Brady said with a grand smile as the boys placed their items on the table and Kevin started filling water glasses.

Jake walked out with his empty pitcher as Xain walked in carrying a large bowl of pasta.

A moment later all the boys were back in the kitchen as the adults looked at the selection before them.

"Everything looks good, I can hardly wait." Allen said with anticipation.

Xain led the boys back into the room carrying a bowl of sauce. Jake and Kevin each had a full pitcher which they placed on the table.

Reuben carried in a large platter of sliced and chunked vegetables, Kenny carried the bowl of fruit salad and Ricardo was carefully carrying a small tray with bowls of dips and dressings on it.

The adults held their breath as they watched the young boy carry the tray.

Xain took the tray from Ricardo and placed it on the table without incident.

All the boys took their places at the table and waited expectantly.

Allen stood and said, "Before we start, I'd like to welcome Solak to our home and thank Xain and Jake for preparing this meal."

Jake looked slightly embarrassed as Xain and Solak looked on impassively.

"If no one has anything else..." Allen began to say, but was interrupted.

"I believe this is the appropriate time to make a statement." Solak said as he stood.

Everyone turned their attention to Solak and the level of tension in the room increased dramatically.

"He who is my son has been accepted into Clan Short and into the family of Thompson. He has stated that he has accepted Allen Thompson as *k'war'ma'khon* and uses the English word 'father' to explain their relationship. After a discussion with Mr. Thompson and learning of his philosophies I would like to recognize Allen as *k'war'ma'khon* to my family and *a'nirih* to he who is my son." Solak said seriously, then sat down.

Allen saw the looks of confusion around the table and said, "*A'nirih* is a Vulcan word for father which implies caring or nurturing. The more common word for father is *sa-mekh* which means biological male parent."

"Correct, although both words are translated as father in English, the meanings are distinct." Solak said seriously.

"Thank you Solak. I realize that your acceptance of me as *a'nirih* to Xain makes me a legal parent to him by Vulcan law. I will be honored to accept the responsibility and do my best to provide Xain whatever support I can." Allen said in a tone of great reverence.

A moment of silence fell over the gathering until Kenny finally asked, "Can we eat now?"

Allen smiled at Kenny and said, "Yes son. Let's enjoy this wonderful meal."

The family began to pass platters and bowls around the table as if they had been rehearsing the process for years.

Kenny was looking at the food before him and asked, "Xain, what is this gravy for?"

"That sauce may serve as a topping for the meat. It is optional." Xain said seriously.

Kenny looked at the sauce, gave a shrug and spooned a little onto his plate.

"This syrup in the fruit salad is incredible. What did you put in it?" Brady asked as he looked to Xain.

Xain looked at Jake and raised an eyebrow as a prompt for him to answer the question.

"Some white wine and sugar." Jake said quietly, feeling uncomfortable with all the attention directed at him.

"Well, it's great." Brady said with a smile.

"Since we're asking recipes, what's in this pasta dish?" Allen asked curiously.

This time Jake didn't need any prompting to respond.

"Pasta, basil, olive oil and butter." Jake said, much more comfortably than before.

"That's it? The flavor is wonderful. You guys can team up in the kitchen anytime you want." Allen said appreciatively.

Jake smiled at Xain as he began to blush from the praise.

Feeling that there needed to be a change in subject, Xain turned to Kevin and said, "Brother, earlier you stated that you could feel my emotional distress. Though your description was accurate, the feelings you described occurred before my arrival. Would you explain?"

Kevin looked up like a deer caught in headlights.

Kenny noticed Kevin's fearful expression and tried to explain, "When Kevin draws a picture it's usually about someone. He can feel what that person's feeling when he's looking at it."

Xain looked at Kenny curiously, then at Kevin.

"An intriguing ability. May I inquire, when you created a picture of he who is my son?" Solak asked with interest.

"Um, I guess it's been about a year ago." Kevin said uncomfortably.

Everyone at the table was surprised by the statement.

Xain thought carefully, then asked, "Is this how Clan Short became aware of my existence?"

Kevin nodded shyly.

"Sort of. Kevin can only feel emotions. He knew your name but that was it. I'm the one who told the Clan where you were and what was happening." Kenny said seriously.

"So you have the same ability as your brother?" Solak asked slowly.

"No. Kevin can draw the pictures and... talk to the people in the pictures and make them feel better. If I can touch the pictures, I can tell where they are and what they're doing. It's just like when I touch other stuff, I can sometimes know things." Kenny finished with difficulty.

"I believe the ability you are describing is called psychometry." Solak said thoughtfully.

Kenny shrugged.

"The manner in which you use your abilities in concert with the abilities of he who is your brother is uncommon, perhaps unique." Solak said as he looked at Allen who was listening with interest.

Xain was lost thoughtfully. Allen noticed and waited to see his reaction.

"The night of Saturday. I was in distress. He who is my father had announced that we were to return to Vulcan. I recall a sensation of... assurance. I knew within me that I should not despair. Events were to happen that would provide a better future than I envisioned." Xain said in distant memory, then looked into Kevin's eyes and said, "Less than one hour later, he who is my father received a call from Ambassador Sarek inviting me to join Clan Short for the purpose of designing and maintaining a database for the Clan."

Kenny and Kevin nodded as Jake mumbled, "Um, yeah."

"*K'war'ma'khon*, were you aware of this?" Xain asked, not betraying any emotion.

"Jake said there was someone who needed our help and that he only spoke Vulcan. And since Kevin speaks Vulcan, he needed to stay with us. I didn't even know your name until the day you arrived." Allen said seriously.

"You accepted a child into your home on the word of your son without explanation?" Solak asked curiously.

"Yes. Jake has never given me a reason to distrust his motives or judgment. He told me that someone needed our help, and I could see that he believed it. That's all I needed to know. After I agreed and Jake rejoined the Clan meeting, the other Clan members' parents told me that the Clan would make sure that everything was legal and ethical." Allen said in memory.

"You're not mad at us are you?" Jake asked Xain with concern.

Xain opened their bond and let a stream of his inner emotions flow to Jake, letting him know that his questions stemmed from a desire to understand the events that brought him to his new home.

"Well, regardless of how it happened, we're all glad Xain and Solak are part of our family." Allen said, hoping to break the tension.

"Kenny, do you think you could show us that thing you do with touching stuff?" Jake asked, feeling that a change in subject was overdue.

"Yeah, I can try. But it doesn't always work." Kenny said and looked around the room.

"If you would allow it, perhaps he who is your son could use his ability on the *asenoi*." Solak suggested carefully.

"I'll get it. I don't think it will hurt to try." Allen said and got up from the table.

"What's an *asenoi*?" Kenny asked curiously.

"It is an ancient..." Xain began to say when he was stopped by Solak raising a hand.

"It will be a more accurate demonstration of his ability if he has no prior knowledge." Solak said reasonably.

* * * * *

Allen walked back into the dining room carefully carrying the *asenoi*.

"Here you go Cute Stuff." Allen said as he sat the *asenoi* gently by Kenny's plate.

"Alright." Kenny said nervously and put the fingertips of both hands on the *asenoi*.

"It's all jumbled... Hundreds of people... S'Aketh, M'Ambalu, T'Aurin, Ch'M'Kem'Be, S'Ek'Lah..." Kenny said in a trance.

"I'm not familiar with any of those names." Allen said thoughtfully.

"I believe that lends to the veracity of the ability. For a random artifact to be associated with a prominent historic figure would be statistically unlikely and be reason to suspect subterfuge." Solak said thoughtfully.

Kenny looked up with a distant gaze as he said, "There it is. I found the first. The *asenoi* was made by G'uhf'Ik for his own use."

Kevin giggled as Xain, Solak and Allen looked on with matching incredulous stares.

"What is it?" Brady asked at the reaction.

"Well, it may be a coincidence, but the word guhfik is literally translated as 'boring'. Either the maker of the *asenoi* was named before the word 'guhfik' came into common use, or..." Xain trailed off, with a glint of humor barely hiding behind his eyes.

"...or he was so boring that his name was used to describe being boring to the point that it eventually became the word." Allen said with a smile, finishing Xain's thought.

Brady laughed, and said, "No disrespect intended to anyone here, but just how boring would a person have to be on Vulcan for that to happen?"

Solak raised an eyebrow in surprise as Xain said, "I do not believe that English has sufficient words to describe what you are asking."

A contagious laugh went around the table.

"Is there anything else you can tell us about it Ken?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Daddy held this." Kenny said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry Cute Stuff, I didn't even think about that." Allen said as he hurried to Kenny's side.

"It's okay. When he was holding this, he was thinking about us... I feel his love." Kenny said as tears began to fall.

"I'll put this away now. If you want, you can look at it again after dinner." Allen said quietly.

"Thanks Pop." Kenny said and handed the *asenoi* to Allen.

Once again Xain saw a need for a change in conversation and said, "He who is my father explained that he experienced a bond like mine."

Everyone at the table was just as happy to let the change in subject happen without comment.

Solak sat silently for a moment before a resolved expression fell across his face.

"A human, Dr. Phillip Werner, brought his family with him to study Vulcan medical techniques. As a courtesy to Dr. Werner, it was decided that his daughter who had an interest in medicine was to accompany me as I attended to patients. That occurred before my field of study was specialized." Solak said with a look of concentration.

"Mariah Werner, she who was to be your mother, asked many questions regarding mental health and the treatment of specific conditions having to do with the mind. In an effort to demonstrate one of the techniques, I performed a mind-meld with her and our bond formed. We had been acquainted for three point two hours." Solak said distantly.

"It was as you previously described, the formation was 'instinctive'." Solak said to Xain, as an aside.

"Dr. Werner was displeased, and he who is my father insisted that the bond be severed. However, Mariah stated that she and I were of sufficient age to make the decision for ourselves. Within our bond, her free spirit gained discipline without losing freedom and my logical mind was able to envision possibilities that I had never before conceived. In the light of the... completeness... that we felt. It was logical that we maintain our bond and eventually marry." Solak said as he gazed into the distance.

"One point one years following our marriage the birth of 'he who is my son' occurred. Two point three years later, Mariah was diagnosed with a degenerative genetic disorder that is unique to humans. In an effort to save her, I specialized my medical study in the field of cellular microbiology focusing on genetic disorders. Though she passed away seven years ago, I continue the work." Solak finished with a lost tone in his voice.

Jake looked at Xain with question.

"What became of Dr. Werner?" Xain asked and felt through the bond that Jake had expected a different question.

"He returned to Earth. He severed all contact with his daughter. To my knowledge Dr. Werner does not know of your birth or Mariah's death." Solak said quietly.

"So I have family on Earth?" Xain asked in confirmation.

"No. Dr. Werner forbade any further contact when we married. It is logical to assume that his prohibition of contact would include our progeny." Solak said, regaining his formality.

"That sucks!" Kevin said firmly.

Allen, Brady and Juana all broke into laughter at the declaration as Kevin blushed and tried to hide his face in embarrassment.

Solak considered the statement carefully before saying, "Though I might voice my displeasure of Dr. Werner's actions differently, I believe I share the sentiment."

"Can I have some more of that?" Reuben asked, pointing to the fruit salad.

"Sure, have as much as you want." Allen said as he passed the bowl to Reuben.

"But save room. There is to be dessert." Juana said with tenderness.

Reuben nodded, then offered some fruit salad to his brother who was happy to accept.

Edovina began to cry.

Juana and Jake stood simultaneously to take care of her.

"I believe that Edovina is hungry. I must fix a bottle." Juana said as she checked to see that Edovina was clean and dry.

"Will you show me how to do it?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"Si, yes. Come and I will show you." Juana said as she lifted Edovina from the stroller and handed her to Jake.

Allen watched with concern as Juana and Jake left the room.

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"Why is Jake taking care of Edovina so much?" Reuben asked curiously.

Allen snapped out of his thoughts and said, "You'll need to ask Jake."

Xain glanced at Allen, then turned to face the closed dining room door.

"So can Xain read Jake's mind?" Allen asked Solak casually, but noticed Xain's reaction of turning at the question.

"Yes. But not as true telepaths communicate. He who is my son has the ability to access Jake's knowledge or skills and may send his own knowledge, but to communicate directly would require a specific telepathic technique that Xain is unfamiliar with. If the bond is sufficiently formed, I will attempt to teach them the technique after dinner." Solak said speculatively.

"So Xain can see everything Jake remembers?" Reuben asked with wide eyes.

"It is possible." Solak said with a slight nod.

"To do so would be an invasion of Jake's mind." Xain said with a curious look at Allen.

"You're right. Humans hold their privacy as something precious. If asked by someone close, a Human would probably agree to share his memories. But having that choice taken away could be taken as a betrayal or a violation, maybe even an attack." Allen said as he held Xain's gaze.

After a moment of thought, Xain nodded and said, "Thank you for your insights *k'war'ma'khon*. I was not aware of the scale of emotions associated with such an action."

Allen gave a gentle smile and said, "I think it's because telepathy is uncommon and relatively new among Humans. Vulcan culture has had millennia to adjust to the issues of sharing their minds. Humans are just beginning to deal with it. As long as both parties are willing and well-informed, I don't see it being a problem."

Jake and Juana walked back into the dining room. Jake went to his chair holding Edovina on his lap and making sure she didn't lose her bottle.

Juana took her seat and looked at Jake and Edovina lovingly.

Silence fell over the dining room until Reuben asked, "Why do you take care of Edovina so much?"

Jake got a look of fear, then thought and finally resolution.

"Because I may be her father." Jake said quietly.

The silence that fell over the room was thick enough to cut with a knife.

"Have you decided what you want to do?" Allen finally asked in a low voice.

"Yeah." Jake said in a mumble.

"Go ahead. It's best to face it and get it over with while everyone's here." Allen said seriously.

"Okay. Um, I'm sorry Dad. But I've been thinking a lot about the stuff we talked about and... it matters." Jake finished with a defeated whisper.

"What matters?" Kenny asked, barely understanding anything that was going on.

"It matters if Edovina is my daughter. If she is, I want to be a father to her but if she's not... I don't. I know it's wrong of me to feel this way. Allen took us all in even though he's not blood related to any of us, but... I can't help it. It's how I feel." Jake said with tears welling up in his eyes.

"Jake." Allen said firmly, trying to get his attention.

Jake looked at Allen with pain and fear in his eyes.

"I'm not disappointed in you. I'd rather that you be honest about your feelings than do what you think I want you to. I'm proud that you had the courage to tell me something that was so difficult." Allen said, letting the truth of his statement show clearly.

"How are we to know?" Juana asked quietly.

"I can make an appointment with Chip and Josh's doctor..." Allen began to say.

"That will not be necessary." Solak said in a measured tone.

Everyone turned their attention to Solak.

"I am a healer... a doctor. It is standard practice for Vulcan healers to carry a rudimentary medical kit when traveling... it is logical." Solak said seriously.

"But you can't have the equipment for a genetic analysis with you." Brady said, remembering the test Dr. McCoy had performed.

"True. But a blood test can be performed at this time which could exclude Jake from the possibility of being Edovina's father. If Jake is not excluded, then the probability of paternity is greatly increased." Solak said in an instructive tone.

"The test. It will not hurt Edovina?" Juana asked cautiously.

"No. The scanning device will cause no pain." Solak said calmly.

"Can we do it now?" Jake asked with a tremble of fear in his voice.

"Yes. If he who is my son will retrieve my valise from the entry hall, I will perform the test." Solak said seriously.

Xain hurried out of the room and returned a few seconds later with Solak's carry-on bag.

After a moment to find the correct instrument, Solak stood before Jake and Edovina.

Jake gave a nod and closed his eyes.

"Jake, which answer are you praying for?" Brady asked in a whisper.

Jake opened his eyes in time to see Solak pass the scanning device over his chest.

"Um... I don't know." Jake said in confusion.

"Son, I think it's important that you do know before you find the answer." Allen said quietly.

Jake nodded and looked down at a movement from Edovina.

Edovina locked eyes with Jake, and in a moment of clarity Jake said, "I want her to be my daughter."

After pressing some buttons on the device that looked similar to a Federation tricorder, Solak scanned Edovina.

"Are you sure son?" Allen asked carefully.

Jake looked up at Allen with a gentle smile and said, "I love you Dad. Being your son is the best thing that's ever happened to me. Everything that you are for me, I want to be for Edovina."

Solak pressed a few buttons on the scanning device and finally said, "Given the blood type of the child, eighty-four percent of the population can be excluded as possible fathers. Jake is not excluded."

Kevin got a look of confusion as he asked, "Does that mean Jake is Edovina's daddy?"

"Not exactly. It means that there's a much better chance now that he is. We'll need to do a much more complicated test to find out for sure." Allen said carefully.

"We're almost there Vina. One more test and I'll be your Dad for sure." Jake said to the little girl in his arms.

"Jake, everyone, let's sit down. I think there are some things we need to discuss." Allen said to the group that had gathered around Jake.

After a moment for everyone to settle, Allen asked, "Let's assume for a minute that Edovina is your daughter. What would you like to do as far as taking care of her?"

"Well, I was thinking, that since Mamacita is Edovina's grandmother and has been taking care of her that she might want to keep on taking care of her. I could help her out when she wanted me to and maybe keep Edovina with me sometimes..." Jake trailed off thoughtfully.

"What about Xain?" Brady asked curiously.

"What about him?" Jake asked seriously.

"You share a room with him. I think any decision about Edovina staying with you should be discussed with him." Brady said thoughtfully.

Jake looked at Xain and saw the Vulcan facade firmly in place.

For the first time, Jake tried to initiate their bond.

After some mental fumbling and initial resistance, Jake was able to make contact.

"Please Xain, I need to know what you think about this." Jake pleaded audibly as his emotions called through their bond.

Xain gave a single nod and let his emotional defenses fall away, revealing the essence of what he was feeling.

::Sympathy::

::Longing::

::Sadness::

Jake took a moment to sort through the emotions and try to understand their source.

"Xain..." Jake began to say, then froze.

A look of realization came over Jake's face as he said in a whisper, "Because she's not your child."

Xain tilted his head in question as Brady and Allen got matching expressions of concern.

Jake looked at Allen, then turned quickly to Solak and asked, "If Edovina is my daughter, what would I have to do to make Xain her other father, like what you did with Allen?"

"As a citizen of Earth, you would be bound by the laws of your world. I do not know what steps would have to be taken for such a thing to be possible." Solak said seriously.

Jake nodded and looked at Allen as he asked, "If we can prove that Edovina is my daughter, what will I have to do to make her legally mine?"

"I guess we'd have to take the genetic analysis before a judge and ask that he legally recognize you as her father." Allen said carefully.

"And he could still say 'no', right?" Jake asked seriously.

"He could choose to leave Edovina's legal status unchanged. If you were an adult it would be different, but since you're a minor child, it's really his choice." Allen said weakly.

"So even if she's my daughter for real, I might have to wait till I'm eighteen to be a real father to her." Jake said thoughtfully.

"It's a possibility." Allen said in acceptance.

"We are members of Clan Short." Xain said suddenly.

Silence fell over the room as the implications of Xain's realization fell over the room.

"That changes everything." Brady said into the silence.

"Correct. Your status as a member of a Vulcan Clan essentially gives you dual citizenship." Solak said thoughtfully.

"Which means that if the genetic test proves that Edovina is your daughter, you could file the legal paperwork with the Vulcan consulate. As long as your argument is logical and uncontested, you won't even need to see an arbitrator... judge." Allen said with excitement.

"The argument to make Xain a parent to Edovina might be more difficult." Brady said seriously.

"Jake is my bond-mate. Acceptance of the responsibility of his child would be logical." Xain said with certainty.

"There is precedent." Solak agreed.

"Legally there is but realistically, Xain is twelve and Jake is fifteen..." Brady began to say.

"Sean and Cory aren't much older than Xain and I think they said that they have three sons. Adam and JJ have one... Harley. It may not be common by Human standards but it seems to be the norm in Clan Short." Allen said seriously.

"Mamacita? How do you feel about this? I mean, I kinda just figured you'd be okay with it..." Jake trailed off.

Juana gave a small smile, then said, "It is my hope that it is to be true. Edovina should have a parent. It would be better for me to be abuela... grandmother to Edovina."

"Then does anyone know a doctor who does genetic analysis?" Brady asked the group.

"Solak does, he just doesn't practice on Earth." Allen said with regret.

"Were I to take a genetic sample of Jake and Edovina with me, I could perform the test when I arrive in San Francisco." Solak said thoughtfully.

"You don't have to go to that trouble..." Jake began to say, but Solak interrupted.

"It would be logical to expedite this matter." Solak said seriously.

Brady, Allen and Xain all tried to find the reasoning behind the statement, but had no will to dispute it since they all wanted the matter settled.

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Juana's variety of homemade desserts were enjoyed by everyone present.

The remainder of the conversation was light and consisted of general topics. Everyone seemed to need time to deal with the more serious issues that had been discussed earlier.

At the conclusion of the meal, Solak stated, "It is nearing time for me to return to San Francisco. 'He who is my son' and Jake require instruction in the attributes of their bond."

"You can use the family room if you like." Allen said as he stood from the table.

"When are you returning Solak?" Brady asked as he also stood.

"My shuttle is scheduled to leave at 20:15 hours in your local time." Solak said seriously.

"Mine too. I think we're on the same flight." Brady said thoughtfully.

Solak gave a half-nod in acknowledgement.

"Go ahead into the family room and we'll take care of the dishes." Allen said as he began to gather plates.

"No Pop. Let us kids take care of this. Xain and Jake cooked the meal so we can clean it up." Kenny said seriously.

"Thanks, Cute Stuff. We'll be in the living room if you need help with anything." Allen said with a warm smile.

"Come on Juana, the kids are going to clean up." Allen said as he sat the plates he had gathered on the table.

Juana looked uncomfortable, but followed Allen to the dining room door.

CHAPTER 20

"There is a matter we have not discussed." Solak said as he took a seat in the office chair at the desk.

Jake and Xain looked at Solak with matching expressions of question as they sat on the couch.

"It is possible to discontinue the bond if either of you find it undesirable." Solak said without emotion.

Xain and Jake looked at each other but didn't say a word.

"May I suggest that you use the bond to share your preferences on the matter. It is more efficient than spoken language." Solak said calmly.

Jake nodded and opened himself to Xain's initiation of their bond.

After a long silent moment of sharing their emotions and looking into each other's eyes, Xain said, "We both desire the continuation of our bond."

Solak gave a half-nod of acknowledgement, then said, "You have demonstrated the ability to share memories and skills. With practice, it is possible to develop true telepathic communication and even 'real time' sharing of sensory information."

"What does that mean?" Jake asked slowly.

"It would be possible for you to see through my eyes or feel what I touch." Xain said thoughtfully.

Jake nodded as he considered what it would be like to have that ability.

"Have you attempted direct telepathic communication?" Solak asked simply.

"No. There has been no need." Xain said seriously.

"Please do so while I observe. The initial contact can be elusive, so I will guide you." Solak said carefully.

Xain looked at Jake and attempted to send a telepathic message.

"Jake is not telepathic in the manner you have previously encountered, therefore the process of contacting him is different. Instead of calling to him from outside in the traditional manner, you must enter his consciousness and make contact with his primary essence." Solak said in a low voice.

Xain carefully adjusted his telepathic technique and ventured inside Jake's mind to find the cluster of mental activity that made up his consciousness.

'My discipline and your freedom make us complete.' Jake heard clearly in his mind.

"It is good." Solak said as he watched them carefully.

"I heard him. Can I do that too?" Jake asked hopefully.

"Yes, but your role is different. Withdraw from your bond for a moment, then initiate contact." Solak said instructively.

Jake gently let the sense of contact fade and let their bond be silent for a moment. Finally he reached out through the bond and touched the sphere of Xain's consciousness and carefully embraced it.

"Very good. He who is my son should be able to feel not only your presence, but your intent as you touch his barrier." Solak said carefully.

"Yes, I am aware of Jake's desire to contact me." Xain said thoughtfully.

"Jake's consciousness is focused at your barrier. You do not need to reach out to him, you may focus your thoughts to him directly this way. Your awareness of him allows you to hear his thoughts." Solak said calmly.

'My experience and your knowledge make us complete.' Jake said in his mind.

Xain got a look of surprise at the message.

"Well, I had to come up with something better than 'Hey, are you there?' didn't I?" Jake asked with a smile.

Xain gave Jake a brief look of fondness, then looked at his father.

"Experiencing each other's senses may be attempted at a later time, when you have become more comfortable with this level of your bond. The experience can be disorienting at first, but is rewarding in certain circumstances." Solak said seriously.

"For example?" Jake asked, trying to think of a situation when the ability could be used.

"When experiencing intimacy." Solak said without emotion.

Jake's eyes went wide at the statement as Xain looked at his father in confusion.

Solak noticed the reactions and said, "It was a natural progression for Mariah and I to seek physical intimacy as a continuation of the unity we shared mentally. It is logical to assume that your bond may lead you to the same point."

"Is that okay? I mean, Xain is twelve." Jake asked hesitantly.

"As his bond-mate, you will know when it is appropriate to progress to that level. In other circumstances, there might be cause for concern, but since you are able to know each other's true emotions I am assured that you will not take any action until both of you are of sufficient emotional maturity to accept it." Solak said carefully.

"I will never do anything to hurt Xain, I promise." Jake said seriously.

"Of that I have no doubt." Solak said calmly.

"When the time comes to share our physical stimuli, what is the process?" Xain asked curiously.

"She who was your mother likened the sensation to 'putting on a glove'." Solak said seriously.

Xain looked at his father for a more meaningful explanation.

"You will merge your consciousness with Jake's and be able to feel his sensations, however you will not be in control of his actions. As I previously stated, the sensation can be disorienting." Solak said seriously.

Xain nodded in acknowledgement.

"I believe this concludes the aspects of your bond that should be discussed. There are other lesser attributes that you will discover, but they are easily mastered and require no explanation." Solak said in a tone that indicated the end of the session.

"I thank you for your instruction." Xain said formally.

"It was logical to do so." Solak said in a matching tone of formality.

"Yes, thank you Solak." Jake said shyly.

"Jake, you are bond-mate to he who is my son. As such, you are entitled to call me Father." Solak said seriously.

Jake smiled and said, "A few days ago I didn't have any parents. Now I have a biological father, a real father and a father-in-law. Thank you Solak, I will be honored to call you my Father."

Solak gave a half-nod of acknowledgement before saying, "I will now make use of your terminal so I might make official record of the change of status of Allen, Jake, Kenny and Kevin in my family."

"All of us?" Jake asked curiously.

Xain looked at his father, then said, "Allen is to be recognized as *a'nirih* in relation to me and as *k'war'ma'khon* in the family of Solak."

"You will be recognized as *T'hy'la* in relation to me, which has many meanings, friend or soul-brother would be most accurate... correct?" Xain asked his father curiously.

Solak considered the question and said, "Correct. It may also mean soul-mate and life companion."

Xain nodded and continued, "Kenny and Kevin will be recognized as our brothers."

"Your status in Clan Short takes precedence in this matter, so my acknowledgement of Kenny and Kevin does not change their status. This is merely a formality to acknowledge their inclusion in my family." Solak said as he worked the controls of the terminal.

"I wish I knew all these words. I feel kind of stupid with you having to explain everything to me." Jake said in a low voice.

"If you wish, I could give you the knowledge of the Vulcan language." Xain said simply.

"Really?" Jake asked with surprise.

"It would be no different than my acquiring of English from you earlier." Xain said frankly.

"Um, would it take long? I mean, can we do it now?" Jake asked hopefully.

"I can complete the transfer in less than two minutes. Although it may take some time before you are comfortable with Vulcan syntax and pronunciation." Xain said seriously.

"Do I need to do anything?" Jake asked with a smile.

"Establish our bond and I will begin the transfer." Xain said quietly.

Jake felt for Xain's presence and embraced it.

"The process is underway. Please tell me if there is any discomfort." Xain said seriously.

"Is that it? I mean, I don't feel anything." Jake said slowly.

"The transfer is occurring on a sub-conscious level. I do not anticipate any sensation." Xain said casually.

"She who was your mother and I transferred our language skills consciously over a long period of time. You appear to have unique aspects to your bond." Solak said as he turned away from his terminal.

"It is a benefit of mapping my mnemo complexes and studying the mental constructs of Vulcans and Humans. I have no unique ability, only an understanding of a specialized skill." Xain said reflectively.

"A fortunate happenstance." Solak said as he focused on the activity in their bond.

"The transfer is complete. You now have an understanding of the spoken Vulcan language. Mastery of proper pronunciation and inflection will require practice." Xain said calmly.

"You said 'spoken' what about the written language?" Jake asked curiously.

"I do not have the ability to transfer that skill as of yet. When I have identified the mnemo structure that houses written language skills, I will transfer that skill-set for both of us." Xain said carefully.

"That's why you can't read English. You got the spoken language from me, but not the written." Jake said in realization.

"Correct." Xain said quietly.

"Should the inability to read become a hindrance, your bond should prove invaluable." Solak interjected.

Xain nodded in acknowledgement.

"The official record has been appended." Solak said and terminated his transmission.

"Thank you for accepting me Father." Jake said quietly.

"It was logical to do so." Solak said simply.

"And thank you for your language *T'hy'la*. I really feel like a part of your family now." Jake said with contentment.

"I should thank you for the same reason. Not only your language, but also your actions have made me feel as a part of your family." Xain said seriously.

'We are part of the Clan Short family, the Thompson family and the family of Solak. But you are *my* family.' Jake said seriously through their bond.

'As you are mine, *T'hy'la*.' Xain responded quietly.

* * * * *

"Can we go outside and play?" Kevin asked hopefully from the living room doorway with Kenny, Reuben and Ricardo gathered behind him.

Allen glanced outside and considered, then looked at Brady with concern.

"Would you guys mind if I came with you?" Brady asked gently.

Kevin looked at Brady in question.

"We're new to this neighborhood and we live beside a lake. Until we get to know people and you're familiar with the area, I think it's best if you have an adult with you. At least for a while." Allen said seriously.

"Okay. But I thought you trusted us." Kenny said dejectedly from behind Kevin.

"I do trust you guys. It's the rest of the world that has me worried." Allen said frankly.

"Let's go play Uncle Brady." Kevin said with a small smile, obviously accepting the answer.

Xain, Jake and Solak walked into the living room to join Allen and Juana.

"Did everything go alright?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Just fine Dad. Solak said I can call him Father and Xain taught me Vulcan." Jake said happily as he automatically walked to Juana to check on Edovina.

"You learn to speak the language?" Juana asked in astonishment.

"Yes. Xain just... did it. It was easy." Jake said with a smile.

"Perhaps there is a way..." Xain said thoughtfully.

"If you plan to do what I suspect, you would run the risk of forming another bond. It would be necessary for a telepath to facilitate the transfer as intermediary. In this instance, I would be willing to do so." Solak said seriously.

"Mamacita, if you would like, Xain and Solak can give you my English." Jake said carefully.

Juana looked at Jake with astonishment for a moment, and looked as if she were about to agree when she suddenly shook her head.

"Ricardo needs the English the most of any of us. Please to give to Ricardo." Juana said seriously.

Jake looked at Juana with love and said, "I think we can do you both."

"Then you must give to Ricardo first. He has most need." Juana said in nearly a begging tone.

"I'll get him." Jake said with a smile.

* * * * *

After a long silent minute with Solak's hand held gently to the side of his face, Ricardo asked, "When do I learn to speak English?"

"You just did." Allen said in wonder.

"Oh Mijo. Es... it is wonderful." Juana said as tears filled her eyes.

"It's okay Mama. Everything is fine." Ricardo said in a soothing voice as he reached for her.

"Just a few more seconds." Solak said quietly as he kept his contact with Ricardo.

"Is everything okay?" Allen asked with concern.

"Yes. All is well. I am taking the necessary precautions when melding with one so young. The transfer is complete." Solak said and removed his hand.

"*Mijo*. Do you feel well?" Juana asked with concern.

"I'm fine Mama. It's funny to know what everyone is saying." Ricardo said happily.

"My time is short Juana. We have time to give you English as well." Solak said carefully.

Juana looked lovingly at Ricardo and said, "Yes. If it is no trouble to you."

"It is no trouble." Solak said simply.

* * * * *

"Allen, can I talk to you outside for a minute?" Brady asked seriously from the living room doorway.

Every parental instinct Allen had went off like a flare at the words as he hurried out of the room.

"What is it Brady?" Allen asked before they could reach the front door.

"The boys are fine. I just saw something that concerned me and wanted to get your advice." Brady said as they walked outside.

"What is it?" Allen asked with worry as he saw Kenny, Kevin and Reuben playing Frisbee in the yard.

"Follow me." Brady said and walked up the driveway.

Allen followed along looking for any sign of trouble.

"See that boy?" Brady asked, pointing to the house diagonal across the street.

"Yes." Allen said cautiously.

"He was sitting there when we got back from the DMV this morning." Brady said seriously.

"Are you sure?" Allen asked as he looked more closely.

"Yes. I thought it was odd because it's a school day." Brady said in a quiet voice.

"That's been at least six hours... what do you think we should do?" Allen asked with concern.

"He would probably run off if we went over there. I think we should send the boys to check on him and invite him over if he's hungry." Brady said thoughtfully.

"I think that's a good idea." Allen said seriously.

"Let's go talk to the guys." Brady said and started walking toward the boys.

* * * * *

"It doesn't feel any different." Juana said curiously.

"It doesn't for me either. But I just kind of know things I didn't before." Jake said with a smile.

"That's strange. I understood you completely. I'm used to having to listen closely and hope I'm translating correctly." Juana said in wonder.

"I'm glad it worked for you." Jake said happily.

"Thank you Jake, thank you too Solak and Xain. I can't think of any way to repay you for this wonderful gift." Juana said as tears formed in her eyes.

"Your acceptance of he who is my son is sufficient reward." Solak said simply.

"Yes Mrs. Vasquez, there is no need to repay." Xain said seriously.

"Please call me Juana or Mamacita, we are like family." She said shyly.

"Thank you. I will call you Mamacita like Jake does." Xain said quietly.

"I am curious Juana, where does the name Mamacita come from?" Solak asked cautiously.

"My oldest son, Manny, used to call me that. He would bring all the children in the building to play at our apartment... it means 'little mother'." Juana finished with a teary smile.

"Manny was killed less than a year ago." Jake whispered.

"My condolences on your loss." Solak said formally.

Juana nodded as her tears fell and said, "At least I won't have to worry as much for Reuben and Ricardo now that we are here."

Jake looked at Edovina, who was sleeping peacefully, and said, "And Vina won't have to know what it was like to live that way."

Juana followed Jake's gaze to Edovina and smiled.

* * * * *

"Hi." Kenny said hesitantly.

"Hi." The boy replied cautiously.

"My name is Kenny. I live right over there." Kenny said and pointed.

"I'm Deacon, this is my brother's house."

"My Uncle Brady saw you here this morning and wanted me to find out if you're hungry."

"Yeah. I've kind of been waiting here since last night. He didn't come home." Deacon said shyly.

"Well, we have plenty of food and my Pop said that if you're hungry, I'm supposed to invite you over." Kenny said seriously.

"Yeah. I'll just write a note for Billy so he'll know where to find me." Deacon said and picked up a backpack.

"This is my brother Kevin and my cousin Reuben." Kenny said as Deacon wrote the note.

Deacon glanced at Kevin and Reuben and said, "Hi." Then continued to write his note.

After an uncomfortable moment of silence, Deacon wedged his note in the door by the knob where it could be seen.

A moment later, Deacon picked up his backpack and followed Kenny, Kevin and Reuben across the street.

* * * * *

As the boys walked into the yard, Allen and Brady were waiting for them.

"This is my Pop, Allen and my Uncle Brady. This is Deacon." Kenny said happily.

"Hi." Deacon said shyly.

"Come on in and we'll fix you a good meal." Allen said gently as he led the way to the house.

"Um. Can I use your bathroom?" Deacon asked shyly.

"Sure. Kenny will show you where it is while we fix your food." Allen said with a smile.

"Thanks." Deacon said as they walked in the front door.

* * * * *

"Wow. This looks good!" Deacon said with wide eyes when he walked into the kitchen and saw all the food on the counter.

"We all enjoyed it. Have a seat and I'll have your plate ready in just a minute." Allen said happily.

Kenny, Kevin and Reuben all sat down at the table with Deacon.

"Reuben, would you like to get Ricardo, Jake and Xain so they can meet Deacon?" Allen asked gently.

Reuben nodded and quickly ran out of the room.

"Here you go Deacon. If you want more, just ask, we have plenty more of everything." Allen said as he also took a seat.

"Thank you sir." Deacon said quietly.

A moment later Reuben came back into the room followed by Jake, Xain and Ricardo.

"Deacon, I'd like you to meet my sons Jake and Xain and my nephew Ricardo." Allen said with a proud smile.

Deacon nodded with his mouth full of food, then his gaze focused on Xain.

Allen noticed Deacon's stare and quickly said, "Okay guys. Now that you've all been introduced, why don't you go into the living room so Deacon can eat. We'll join you when he's done."

Reluctantly, all the boys left the kitchen, much more slowly than they had entered.

"You have a lot of kids." Deacon said between bites.

"I have four, but Reuben and Ricardo are just like my own kids." Allen said with a smile.

Deacon looked at Allen curiously but didn't say anything.

"I sent the guys out of the room because I need to know one or two things." Allen said cautiously.

Deacon looked at Allen and nodded hesitantly.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" Allen asked in a gentle voice.

Deacon looked at his plate for a second, then nodded.

"Will you tell me about it?" Allen asked quietly.

"Do I have to?" Deacon asked in a fearful voice.

"No. You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. I'm only asking in case it's something I can help you with." Allen said seriously.

Deacon looked at his plate and shifted his food with his fork for a few seconds before asking, "If I tell you, are you going to call the police?"

"Not if you don't want me to. But depending on what you tell me, I might need to call some of my friends to help you." Allen said carefully.

Deacon nodded, then said, "I kind of ran away from home."

Allen nodded and waited for more.

"My brother Billy lives across the street, but I don't know when he's going to be home again. He didn't come home last night." Deacon said in a scared voice.

"That's okay Deacon. We'll see that you're taken care of until he gets home." Allen said with assurance.

Deacon nodded and took a bite of food before saying, "I got a friend of Billy's to buy me a bus ticket to get me here. But I didn't expect him not to be home."

"Well, you're in luck. You'll have food, a place to sleep and a whole crew of guys to hang around with until he gets back." Allen said with a smile.

Deacon went to take another bite of food and found that he had emptied his plate.

Allen noticed and said, "There's dessert if you're ready for it, or you can have another plate of food if you'd rather."

Deacon considered and finally said, "Dessert would be good. Thank you."

"No problem. In fact, if you'll wait a minute, I'll see if anyone else would like some." Allen said as he stood.

Deacon watched Allen walk out of the room, then looked around the room curiously.

* * * * *

"Deacon is finished with his food. Would anyone like to have dessert with him?" Allen asked into the family room.

"I'd love to but I have to be going." Brady said with regret.

"I too must depart." Solak said seriously.

"Oh. I need to drive you to the spaceport." Allen said thoughtfully.

"I can drive them Allen. It wouldn't be any trouble." Juana said with a smile.

"Thank you Juana. I appreciate that." Allen said happily.

"Then all those not going to the spaceport, into the kitchen for dessert." Allen said happily.

Reuben, Kenny and Kevin ran past Allen into the kitchen.

"Do you want some dessert Ricardo?" Allen asked carefully.

"Yes. But I want to be with Uncle Brady more." Ricardo said shyly.

Brady smiled at Ricardo and opened his arms.

Ricardo happily jumped into Brady's embrace.

Allen smiled as he left the room.

* * * * *

"Did you like the food?" Kenny asked as he took a seat beside Deacon.

"It was really good." Deacon said honestly.

"Our brothers Xain and Jake made it." Kevin said with a big smile as he took the seat on the other side of Deacon.

"Is Xain the one that looks funny?" Deacon asked carefully.

"He looks that way because his Dad's Vulcan." Kenny said frankly.

"He's an alien?" Deacon asked with wide eyes.

Kenny thought about the question for a few seconds, then said, "I don't think he's an alien, he's like a half-alien because his mom was Human."

"Oh." Deacon said thoughtfully.

"He's really cool and smart." Kevin said seriously.

"If his father is Vulcan and you aren't, how is he your brother?" Deacon asked carefully.

"Oh, we're all adopted." Kenny said with a smile.

Allen walked into the kitchen and stood in the doorway, not wanting to interrupt the conversation.

Deacon looked at Kenny with confusion and said, "I thought being adopted was a bad thing. Why are you happy about it?"

"Because my mom, our mom, Kevin's and mine, didn't really want us. She was only our mom because she had to be. Allen is our Pop because he wants to be. Nobody made him or nothing. I think that's a whole lot better than having a mother or father just because you were born to them." Kenny said happily.

"I guess so. My parents sound kind of like your mom." Deacon said darkly.

"Well you're here now so everything will be alright. We have lots of friends who can help you." Kevin said happily.

"Really?" Deacon asked cautiously.

"When Kenny and I were in trouble David came and got us and brought us here and made it so Poppa could adopt us. I bet David can help you too." Kevin said with a grand smile.

"That sounds great. I just hope that Billy wants me here..." Deacon trailed off darkly.

"Is everyone ready for dessert?" Allen asked into the silence.

A whoop of affirmation raised up from the table.

"Well Brady and Solak are about to leave, go in and say goodbye while I get your desserts ready." Allen said with a smile.

All the boys, even Deacon hurried out of the room.

Allen stood thinking for a moment, then began to get the desserts ready.

* * * * *

"I'll miss you Uncle Brady." Kevin said as he walked up to Brady and hugged him tightly.

"I'll miss you too Little One." Brady said softly.

"It was nice to meet you Mr. Solak." Kenny said seriously.

"You and your brother may call me Uncle Solak if you wish." Solak said informatively.

Kenny couldn't contain his excitement at gaining a new uncle and hugged Solak quickly.

"Goodbye Uncle Brady." Reuben said sadly as his eyes began to fill with tears.

"I'll be back before you know it Reuben. Take good care of Ricardo for me." Brady said as he hugged Reuben warmly.

"I'm glad you came to visit Uncle Solak." Kevin said with a shy smile.

"As am I Kevin." Solak said calmly.

"Are you going to come back and visit again sometime?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"Yes. When my duties permit." Solak said warmly.

"I have packaged the *asenoi* for travel." Xain said as he walked into the room.

Solak gave a half-nod of acknowledgement.

Deacon watched everything carefully and was surprised when someone placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to spend any time with you Deacon. Hopefully we can visit next time I'm on Earth." Brady said gently.

"You're leaving Earth?" Deacon asked with wide eyes.

"Yes. I am an officer on the Starship *Enterprise*." Brady said with a smile at Deacon's look of wonder.

"Really? The *Enterprise*!" Deacon said with excitement.

"Ask Kevin and Kenny about it when you have a chance. They were able to tour the ship when they visited." Brady said with a smile.

"Awesome!" Deacon said in amazement.

"We have to go now. I hope everything works out for you." Brady said and gave Deacon a squeeze on the shoulder before leaving.

* * * * *

After fastening Edovina's car seat into the middle seat of the Caravan, Brady and Ricardo got into the back seat. Xain and Jake sat either side of the car seat in the middle, Solak sat beside Juana who was driving.

"I discussed your education with Allen and we agreed that it would be most advantageous to hire a tutor to oversee your studies." Solak said seriously to his son.

Xain looked at his father, but did not respond.

"Allen suggested that we ask for your preference in tutor." Solak said seriously.

"I have had the most productive sessions with T'Mal." Xain said thoughtfully.

"I will contact T'Mal tomorrow and inquire if she is interested in relocation." Solak said with a nod.

"If she isn't, I'm sure she could coordinate Xain's studies with one of the teachers at Camp Little Eagle." Brady said from the back where he was holding Ricardo on his lap.

"Would this facility be agreeable to such an arrangement?" Solak asked curiously.

"The Camp was established by Clan Short and is administered by the Seminole Tribe. I think they would be willing to make accommodations so a member of Clan Short can get a proper education." Brady said in a considering voice.

"That being the case, I will propose that arrangement to T'Mal and offer relocation as a secondary option." Solak said carefully.

"I believe that to be the preferable solution. Kevin and Jake will also be attending Camp Little Eagle. The arrangement will allow me to have adequate education as well as social interactions." Xain said seriously.

"I will contact *K'war'ma'khon* Allen with the arrangements when they have been finalized." Solak said calmly.

"Acceptable."

* * * * *

Allen sat in the living room and just relaxed for a while after the incredibly long day.

"Poppa?" Kevin asked from the living room door.

"Come in Little One, tell me what's going on with you." Allen said in a relaxed tone.

Kevin came in slowly and climbed into Allen's lap to snuggle in with him in the wing-backed chair.

"I thought you'd be playing upstairs with the others." Allen said quietly sensing that all was not well in Kevin's world.

"It was boring. I didn't want to look at models" Kevin said in a small voice.

"That's okay Kevin. You don't have to like the same things that Kenny does" Allen said gently.

Kevin snuggled further into Allen's shoulder and said, "I love you Poppa."

"I love you too Little One." Allen said and began to gently rub Kevin's back.

A long moment of silence fell between them as Kevin soaked in the love and attention.

"Are you happy here Kevin?" Allen asked in a distant voice.

"I'm happier than I've ever been. I have lots of brothers and cousins and friends and a bunch of uncles and a wonderful Poppa" Kevin said as he snuggled even tighter.

"And every single one of us love you Kevin." Allen said slowly.

Kevin stretched up to give Allen a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"While Kenny and Deacon and Reuben are looking at models, can I do something with just you?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"That sounds nice Kevin. Would you like to read to me?" Allen asked quietly.

"Yeah!" Kevin said happily and squirmed down out of the chair.

"I'm going to get my book. I'll be right back!" Kevin said with excitement.

"I'll be waiting for you." Allen said with a smile as he watched Kevin hurry out of the room.

* * * * *

Jake looked at Xain curiously, then initiated contact through their bond.

Xain didn't betray any outward sign of the contact, but accepted it and waited.

Jake's contact was on an emotional level and was simply a flood of comfort and well-being.

Xain let a small smile show as he looked at Jake.

A thread of happiness flowed through the emotional link from Jake at the sight.

* * * * *

Kevin hurried into the living room carrying his book and went directly to Allen's chair.

"Before you start, I just want to tell you something." Allen said carefully as he guided Kevin to sit on his lap.

Kevin got a hesitant expression and waited.

"I just want you to understand how proud I am of you Kevin. Not just for your reading but everything. You behaved perfectly with Solak... well, except when you yelled at him." Allen said with a smile and snuggled Kevin warmly.

"I'm so proud the way you get along with your brothers and behave so I don't have to worry about you every minute. I don't know if you know this, but there are some very misbehaved children that I wouldn't want to be in the same room with. I enjoy your company, you're fun to be around." Allen said as he snuggled yet again.

"I love you kiddo. Now let's read." Allen said, then gave Kevin a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I love you too Poppa." Kevin said in a whisper and returned the kiss, then said in a clear voice, "The boy from town sat in the tree..."

* * * * *

Ricardo was clinging tightly to Brady and refused to let go.

"Come Ricardo. It is time for Uncle Brady to leave." Juana said carefully.

"No! He's going to leave like Daddy and never come back!" Ricardo said as he clamped his hold even tighter.

A look of pain fell across Juana's face.

"Ricardo. How does this sound? How about I send you a message when I get back to the *Enterprise*. That way you'll know right where I am. And I can send you a message every day so you'll know that I'm coming back. How's that?" Brady asked carefully.

"Every day?" Ricardo asked in a small, shaky voice.

"Every day. I promise." Brady said seriously.

Ricardo nodded hesitantly and hugged Brady again.

"Okay. I'll send you a message when I get home tonight and it will be waiting on you in the morning. Just ask Uncle Allen to get it for you when you wake up." Brady said gently.

Ricardo nodded again, then stretched up to kiss Brady on the cheek.

"I love you Uncle Brady." Ricardo said quietly.

"I love you too Ricardo. Be good for your mother so she'll let you go and do something with me when I get back." Brady said with a gentle smile.

"Really? Just you and me?" Ricardo said with excitement.

"If your mother says it's okay." Brady said, feeling relief at Ricardo's improved mood.

"Can we go camping?" Ricardo asked hopefully.

"I don't know. Let's both think about what we want to do. If you have any other ideas you can tell them to me when you send me a message in the morning." Brady said happily.

Ricardo smiled a beaming smile and kissed Brady again.

* * * * *

"Earlier you spoke of your desire for my approval." Solak said as he stood with Xain on the shuttle pad.

"Yes." Xain said impassively.

"I approve of your dwelling." Solak said simply.

Xain thought about the words and finally asked, "Do you approve of me?"

A long moment of silence fell between the two as Solak considered the question.

Finally Solak said, "No."

Xain didn't betray any emotion at hearing the statement.

"But I approve of who you are becoming." Solak added seriously.

Xain considered his father's words and said, "It is sufficient."

"Live long and prosper... Xain." Solak said quietly.

"Live long and prosper... Father." Xain said in a neutral voice.

CHAPTER 21

Allen looked up from Kevin's book sensing someone watching them.

After putting a hand on Kevin's arm to gain his attention, he said, "Come in Deacon."

"I don't want to interrupt." Deacon said shyly.

"That's okay, Kevin was reading to me. Did you need something?" Allen asked with a gentle smile.

"I was... Kevin, did I make you mad?" Deacon asked unsteadily.

Kevin looked at Deacon curiously, then shook his head.

"I was just wondering because I went in your room and Kenny started showing us his models, then you were gone. I was just afraid I'd made you mad or something because Kenny was doing stuff with me." Deacon said in a ramble.

Allen smiled and said, "If Kevin were mad at you, you'd know it."

Deacon looked at Allen in confusion.

"When Kevin gets mad, he tells you. If he says he isn't mad, then he really isn't." Allen said with assurance.

Deacon smiled with relief and said, "Thanks Pop... I mean Mr. Thompson."

"Deacon, you can call me Allen or Pop if you want to. I don't mind at all." Allen said gently.

"Thanks... Allen." Deacon said cautiously.

"Would you like to join us? Kevin was just reading to me." Allen said as he snuggled Kevin.

"Um, I wouldn't be, like, messing up your privacy or something would I?" Deacon asked with concern.

"Kevin, would you mind if Deacon listened to you read?" Allen asked quietly.

"As long as he don't laugh at me." Kevin said in a small voice.

Allen nodded, then said, "Kevin wasn't taught to read at his old school so he's just started learning. It would hurt his feelings if he were teased about how he reads. As long as you don't laugh at him, you are welcomed to stay."

"Thank you, I won't laugh, I promise." Deacon said seriously.

"Do you want me to start at the beginning?" Kevin asked as he craned his neck to look at his Poppa.

"I think that's a good idea. That way Deacon will know what's happening in the story." Allen said with a gentle smile.

Kevin nodded seriously, then asked, "Would it be okay if I tried another book?"

"If you like. I'll be happy to listen to whatever you want to read." Allen said as he hugged Kevin gently.

"I'll be right back." Kevin said quickly, and wriggled off Allen's lap.

Allen smiled as Kevin hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Kenny said that Kevin is his twin brother. Why is he so much smaller than Kenny?" Deacon asked as he looked back to Allen.

"All Kevin's life he's had to struggle to get the things he needs to survive. No one provided food for him or watched over him to see that he was learning in school." Allen said carefully.

Deacon thought about the words, then said, "I guess I didn't have it so bad."

"Do you want to tell me what it was like for you?" Allen asked gently.

"It'll sound stupid after everything Kevin's gone through." Deacon said in a small voice.

"Deacon, I have four sons. Each one has had a completely different life. I'm sure you're no different in that respect. If it was bad enough for you to run away, then I know your pain was real. If you want to tell me, I promise that I'll listen and I'll try to help if I can." Allen said sincerely.

Kevin walked into the room carrying a different book.

"Would you mind if Deacon told us a little about himself before you read to us?" Allen asked quietly.

Kevin shook his head and promptly took his place sitting on Allen's lap.

"I, um, I kind of got mad because my parents forgot my birthday." Deacon said quietly.

"When was your birthday?" Kevin asked curiously.

"Four days ago." Deacon said in a mumble.

"Go on." Allen said gently.

"Mom and Dad are busy all the time. About four years ago mom went to work and so there wasn't anyone home when I got out of school. It's got so that lately mom and dad go out at night after they get home from work." Deacon said thoughtfully.

"So they aren't spending as much time with you as they used to." Allen said quietly.

"Before I left, I hadn't talked to either one of them in over a week. I'd hear them come in from work, then I'd hear them leave again. They didn't even look to see if I was there... they probably don't know I'm gone... or care." Deacon said as tears formed in his eyes.

"So you came to live with your brother." Allen said in a gentle voice.

"Billy sent me a birthday card with a hundred dollar bill in it. I used that money to buy a bus ticket to get here." Deacon said seriously.

"Didn't you have trouble buying a bus ticket by yourself?" Allen asked curiously.

"I asked one of Billy's old friends to buy it for me. I told him I was coming to visit Billy." Deacon said seriously.

Kevin hopped off Allen's lap and took a seat beside Deacon on the couch.

"Jake and Xain said that when you don't know what to say to make someone feel better, you can show them like this." Kevin said seriously, then pulled Deacon into a hug.

Allen smiled and said, "That's right Kevin. It speaks much more clearly than words."

Deacon was reluctant for a moment, but gradually accepted the hug and hesitantly put his arms around Kevin to return it.

The tender moment was broken by a knock on the door.

"It's Billy!" Deacon said suddenly and ran to the front door.

Allen got up from his chair and was nearly to the living room door when Deacon walked back in looking disappointed, leading Dan, JJ, Kyle and Harley.

"Hi guys, did you adopt another one while I wasn't looking?" Dan asked playfully.

"Not yet." Allen answered, letting Dan know with his tone that it was a possibility.

"Oh." Dan said quietly and waited.

"Come on in and have a seat guys." Allen said with a smile as he casually put a hand on Kevin's shoulder.

"Thanks. I hope you don't mind that I brought the guys. JJ had some Starfleet business to attend to, so I drove him over there and stopped here on the way back." Dan said as he took a seat on one of the couches.

"That explains the uniform. Not a problem I hope?" Allen asked JJ curiously.

"No. I just had to finalize a few reports and answer a few questions. It took longer to go there than it did to do everything." JJ said honestly.

"So you're really in Starfleet?" Deacon asked with wide eyes.

"Yeah. I'm an Ensign in security on the *Enterprise*." JJ said proudly.

"And the head of security for Clan Short." Dan said with just as much pride in his voice.

"Wow. That's so cool!" Deacon said with excitement.

"Jake and Xain should be home soon... they should have been here by now actually." Allen said as he looked at the clock.

"This is really just a visit more than anything else. I'll talk to Jake for a few minutes to make sure he's okay, but besides that, I'm just here to find out how you're enjoying the new house." Dan said comfortably.

"I love it. Buying it wiped out nearly everything I had set aside, but I don't regret it for a second." Allen said happily.

"Well if you've run yourself short, just give me a call. You guys are family, we'll see that you don't have to do without anything." Dan said seriously.

"It's no problem. I still have a few reserves that haven't been tapped. I've been compulsively saving money for ten years. It's just a shock to my system to spend it all in one go." Allen said with a smile.

"Do you want me to tell Kenny that we have company?" Kevin whispered into Allen's ear.

Allen smiled and kissed Kevin gently on the forehead before saying, "That's a great idea Little One. Thank you for thinking of it."

Kevin beamed a proud smile and gave Allen a peck of a kiss on the cheek before hopping off his lap and running out of the room.

* * * * *

"Ken, we got company." Kevin said as he hurried into his bedroom.

"Okay. We were just putting up my models. What do you think?" Kenny asked as he stood away from the wall.

"It looks just like the picture I drawed." Kevin said happily.

"That's because we used your picture to tell us how to make it." Kenny said simply.

"Kenny let me put the ships on the bottom shelf." Reuben said happily.

"Everything looks really good. All you're missing is the big one in the middle." Kevin said as he looked at the collection before him.

"Yeah. I think I'm going to get Pop to help me with that. I want to be sure it's not going to fall off the shelf. I may need to put a hook in the wall or something to keep it in place." Kenny said thoughtfully.

Kevin nodded, then said, "You need to come downstairs now. JJ, Kyle and Harley are here."

Reuben looked at Kevin curiously.

"Harley is your age Reuben. Maybe you'll like to play together." Kevin said as he walked toward the door.

"Really?" Reuben asked with excitement.

"Come on." Kevin said quickly and headed for the stairs.

* * * * *

"Would anyone like anything to drink?" Allen asked as he stood.

"Do you have anymore of that fruit punch you had when we helped you move in?" JJ asked hopefully.

"Sure, anyone else?" Allen asked as he looked around.

Kyle nodded shyly as Harley nodded enthusiastically.

"How about you Dan?" Allen asked with a smile.

"You don't happen to have any coffee do you?" Dan asked cautiously.

"I will in just a few minutes, I'm going to have some too." Allen said with a great smile.

"Thanks." Dan said with a relaxed smile in return.

Just as Allen left the room, Kenny, Kevin and Reuben ran in.

"How are you guys doing in your new house?" Dan asked casually.

"It's great. Our old house was nice, but this is a lot bigger and nicer." Kenny said happily.

"I love it here." Kevin said, a little bit shyly.

"Me too." Reuben said with a grand smile.

"Well, if you guys are having any problems, I'm here to help you." Dan said seriously.

Kenny, Kevin, Reuben and Deacon looked at each other in confusion.

"Dad means like with feelings and stuff. He's not going to build you a skateboard ramp or anything like that." JJ said seriously.

"Well, I think skateboard ramps are Allen's job." Dan said to JJ with a teasing smile.

"Oh. Um, I'm okay." Kenny said thoughtfully.

Kevin and Reuben looked at each other with unspoken questions in their eyes.

"I know it's really different here and there may be some things you aren't used to. If you just want to talk about it, I'm pretty good at helping people deal with things." Dan said, noticing the looks between Reuben and Kevin.

"We were just talking about it and... it's really quiet here. I mean, at night there's no sound. I'm used to hearing people talking and traffic and music thumping and people in the hallway outside the apartment. That's the weirdest thing." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"The air smells different too." Reuben said seriously.

Dan smiled and said, "That's normal for anyone who's moving from a big city to a suburb. If you have trouble sleeping, ask your father to get you a radio that you can put beside your bed to listen to at night."

Kevin thought about the suggestion and smiled.

"Kenny and Kevin, could you help me for a minute?" Allen asked from the doorway.

"Sure Pop." Kenny said quickly and hurried to the door, followed immediately by Kevin.

"I don't think we were introduced, I'm Dan Richardson."

"I'm Deacon."

Dan looked at Deacon with a look of question, prompting for his last name.

"Deacon Pierce." Deacon said in a quieter voice.

"It's nice to meet you Deacon. These are my sons JJ and Kyle and this is my grandson Harley. The others are at home."

"Grandson?" Deacon asked curiously.

"Harley is my son." JJ said proudly.

"But you're my age!" Deacon said in disbelief.

"How old are you?" Dan asked quietly.

"Twelve... Thirteen." Deacon corrected quickly.

Allen walked in carrying a tray with coffee and cups along with cream and sugar.

Kenny followed with a tray of glasses of fruit punch and Kevin brought in a tray of the pastries Juana had made for dessert.

"Just help yourselves." Allen said after putting down his tray on the coffee table.

"Allen, could I have a minute of your time?" Dan asked seriously.

"Sure, come into the family room." Allen said curiously.

"We'll be right back." Dan said as he walked to the double doors with Allen.

* * * * *

"Could you tell me about Deacon? I have a feeling that he's in trouble." Dan said seriously.

"I don't know too much. I've been trying to make him comfortable before I press for too much information. He ran away from home... I don't know where that is, but he took a bus to get here." Allen said seriously.

"How did you find him?" Dan asked thoughtfully.

"Brady spotted him sitting on the front step of the house across the street this morning, he was still there this afternoon so we sent the boys to see if he was hungry." Allen said quietly.

Dan nodded and said, "He doesn't show any obvious signs of malnutrition or abuse. But he seems to be carrying a large weight of worry. Do you know why he left?"

"He told me, but I don't feel I should share it without his permission. He's not one of my sons and I wouldn't want to break his trust like that." Allen said seriously.

"I understand. That's probably best. It will be best if he can have someone to talk to and trust. I just wanted to be sure what I was getting into before I started dispensing advice." Dan said with a sigh.

"His brother lives across the street, but didn't come home last night. I'll be willing to keep him here for the short term, but I'm not sure what I should do if it becomes long term." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Give it a few days and if his brother doesn't show up, talk to Cory and Sean. They have a good sense of how to handle situations like this." Dan said seriously.

"But they're younger than Jake." Allen said cautiously.

"True, but they either directly or indirectly rescued all their brothers in the Clan from some of the most horrific things you can imagine. They have the experience and the instincts to do what's right. They also have the sense to ask for help when they need it. Please trust me on this." Dan said as he looked into Allen's eyes.

Allen smiled and said, "I will. I guess I was just thinking my boys are the only amazing kids in the universe."

"All our boys are amazing. Now we'd better get back to those amazing boys before they decide we're not coming back and wander off." Dan said with a smile.

Allen nodded and opened the double doors to return to the living room.

* * * * *

"Where did everyone go?" Allen asked as he entered the living room.

"Kenny wanted to show JJ and Kyle and Harley his new model and his shelf." Kevin said as he sat looking at his book.

"Does it bother you that Kenny is getting all the attention?" Allen asked gently as he took a seat on the couch beside Kevin.

Kevin shook his head and said, "He needed some attention. He was feeling a little bit left out cause I got all kinds of new stuff and he didn't."

Dan looked at Kevin with surprise, then glanced at Allen.

"When I get my picture finished, I'll be showing it off like Kenny shows off his models, so it's okay." Kevin said happily.

"That's a very mature attitude Kevin. I'm glad you aren't going to be competing with your brother for attention." Dan said with a smile.

Kevin shook his head again and said, "He's used to getting attention, he needs it more. I'm used to being alone."

"Well, you don't have to be alone here Kevin. I'm here whenever you need me and you have brothers and cousins who can keep you company whenever you want." Allen said with a smile.

"But what if I *want* to be alone sometimes?" Kevin asked seriously.

"Then I guess you'll just need to let us know when you're feeling like you need to be alone. We all need some alone time every now and then, so no one will bother you." Allen said with assurance.

"He's right Kevin. Every now and then it's good to be alone and work things out, just the same as it's good to do things with your brothers sometimes too." Dan said with a smile.

Everyone turned at the sound of the front door opening.

A moment later Jake looked into the living room.

"They're in here." Jake called out behind him.

"Did everything go alright? You seemed to be gone a long time." Allen asked with concern.

"We just had to make a stop." Jake said with a smile.

Allen looked at Jake curiously.

"Kev, would you mind getting Kenny down here?" Jake asked hopefully.

Kevin nodded and raced out of the room.

"What's going on?" Allen asked curiously.

"Just a minute Dad. I want Ken to see this too." Jake said happily.

The thunder of footsteps running down the stairs could be heard before kids started barreling into the room at full speed.

Jake looked at the door and saw Juana walk in holding Edovina with one arm.

"Dad. Xain and I got to talking about all the stuff you've done for us and decided that we wanted to do something for you." Jake said proudly.

Xain walked in leading Ricardo by the hand.

"Give it to Uncle Allen." Xain whispered.

Ricardo ran to Allen, carrying a gift bag.

Allen carefully looked in the bag, then smiled and pulled out a small oil lamp.

"Since you had to send the *asenoi* back to Vulcan, we thought you might like another one that you can keep." Jake said with pride in his voice.

"I don't know what to say." Allen said with astonishment as tears filled his eyes.

"Then show us." Xain said with full Vulcan logic.

Allen smiled and sat the oil lamp on the nearby coffee table.

"Come here Ricardo. Thank you for the gift." Allen said as he squatted to be at Ricardo's level.

Ricardo fell into the hug and enjoyed it for a long minute.

Finally Allen stood and walked to Xain.

"I am so fortunate to have you as my son. Thank you Xain." Allen said as he pulled Xain into a tight hug.

"It is to express the sentiment that we appreciate you and are gratified that you have chosen us as your sons." Xain said in a quiet voice.

Allen moved to Jake and pulled him into a full hug and whispered, "You make me more proud of you every hour that I know you. I love you son."

Then Allen pulled out of the hug and looked at Dan shyly as he said, "Sorry about that, they surprised me."

Dan smiled and said, "It was a wonderful surprise. Any questions I might have had about your family coming together as a unit have been put to

rest. I just need to talk with Jake for a few minutes, then we'll get out of your way."

"Dan. You're not in our way at all, and I hope that you and your sons come over and visit often." Allen said seriously.

Dan smiled and said, "Only if you'll do the same."

"Just say when and we're there." Allen said seriously.

Dan looked at JJ in question and asked, "Do you know if John has anything going on Thursday?"

"No. Not that I know of." JJ said thoughtfully.

"Then come over Thursday for a purely social visit, all of you, that includes Reuben and Ricardo if you want to come and Deacon too." Dan said and glanced at Deacon as he finished.

"Um, I guess. If Billy says it's okay." Deacon stammered.

Dan looked at Jake with question, silently asking if he was ready.

"Can we use the family room?" Jake asked Allen quietly.

"Go ahead. Just relax son, we'll be right here if you need us." Allen said with a gentle smile.

Jake nodded and led Dan to the double doors.

* * * * *

Allen sat on the couch surrounded by boys. Kevin and Reuben were on one side as Harley was on the other. Ricardo was perched in his lap holding the book that Kevin, Reuben and Harley were taking turns reading aloud.

Kenny, JJ, Kyle and Xain were talking, then Kenny motioned for Deacon to join them.

"Deacon, JJ was wondering if you needed any help. I mean, I know you didn't want to talk about that stuff while we were upstairs, but JJ is one of the guys who helped me when I needed it." Kenny said seriously.

"For real?" Deacon asked as he looked at JJ's uniform again.

"Yeah. I was in charge of security for the mission and I even got to talk to a cop and he treated me like an adult." JJ said with a toothy grin.

"That sounds really awesome... I don't know if I need help yet or not. I was a little scared when Billy didn't come home last night and it got kinda cold. But since I met Kenny, everything's been okay." Deacon said honestly.

Kenny smiled at the statement and felt like he was able to help someone else, even if it was only a little.

"So what happens when your brother comes home?" JJ asked seriously, now all business.

"Well, I'll tell him what happened at home and see if he'll let me live with him." Deacon said reluctantly.

JJ nodded and said, "I hope he's okay with that. But if he's not, all you have to do is tell Kenny about it and we'll see to it that you've got a place to stay."

"Father has accepted you; therefore, you will be a part of our lives regardless of the decision of he who is your brother." Xain said seriously.

Deacon looked at Xain curiously. After a moment of thought, he nodded.

"He belongs here." Kyle said seriously.

"Is that from Mikey or the twins?" JJ asked curiously.

"From me." Kyle said firmly.

JJ smiled at Kyle and gave him a quick hug.

A knock on the door stopped all conversation and Deacon looked at Allen nervously.

"Xain, will you get the door? I'm being held captive." Allen said with a gentle smile.

Xain let a brief smile cross his face and went to answer the door.

* * * * *

"Good evening, may I help you?" Xain asked courteously as he opened the door.

The young brown haired, blue eyed man looked at the young Vulcan cautiously and said, "Um, yeah. I got a note on my door saying my little brother was over here... do you have someone name Deacon here?"

"Yes, please come in. You must be Billy, I am Xain."

"Nice to meet you." Billy said as he looked at Xain curiously.

"Deacon is right in here." Xain said as he opened the living room door.

* * * * *

"Billy!" Deacon said with joy and raced over to hug his brother.

"What are you doing here Deke?" Billy asked as he hugged his brother tightly.

"I couldn't stay there anymore. Can I live with you? Please?" Deacon asked desperately.

Allen finally extricated himself from the boys on the couch and made his way over to Billy.

"I'm Allen Thompson, the father of four of these boys." Allen said with a smile as he offered his hand.

"Thanks for watching out for Deke. I just got in from Belgium and I didn't have any idea he was here." Billy said in a lost voice.

"Please come in and sit down. I bet you're hungry." Allen said speculatively.

"Starving." Billy said honestly as he took a seat in a wing-backed chair.

"I will prepare food for our guest." Xain said seriously, then turned to the doorway.

"You don't have to. I'm sure I've got something to eat at home." Billy said quickly to Xain's retreating form.

"Just relax Billy. We have plenty and it's already prepared. Deacon has told me a little of what's going on and I'd like to offer to help if I can." Allen said seriously as he took a seat on the nearby couch.

"What happened Deke? What was so bad?" Billy asked as he looked at his brother.

"You know how I told you that they keep going out every night and I don't hardly see them anymore?" Deacon asked quietly from beside Allen on the couch.

"Yeah, it was like that when I visited last spring." Billy said thoughtfully.

"They didn't see me or talk to me at all last week, not even once. Then when they both forgot my birthday... I knew it was time to go." Deacon said as tears filled his eyes.

"Shit Deke, I didn't know it was that bad. If you would have called me or something I could have come and got you. How did you get here on your own?" Billy asked as he motioned for his brother to join him in the chair.

Deacon climbed into his brother's lap and hugged him tightly.

"Whoa Deke, you're getting heavy. I think this lap is only for 12 and under." Billy said in a teasing voice.

Deacon didn't make any sign of hearing and just held his brother tighter.

"Billy, I have some friends who may be able to help with the legal paperwork if you choose to let Deacon live with you." Allen said carefully.

Billy held Deacon close to his chest as he thought about what Allen had said.

"Here is your food." Xain said as he carried a tray into the living room.

"I could have gone into the other room." Billy said quickly.

"I anticipate conversation during your meal, it is logical to bring the food to you rather than relocate all those who would wish to share in your conversation." Xain said reasonably.

"You'd better just go with it. When Xain has a logical reason for something, it's pretty much going to happen." Allen said with a smile at Xain.

"Um, okay. Thanks Zane." Billy said quietly as he shifted Deacon off his lap.

Xain quirked an eyebrow at the mispronunciation of his name but made no comment.

"So can I live with you?" Deacon asked as he resumed his place on the couch.

Billy finished a bite of his food and said, "It's not that easy Deke. I travel all over the world. I don't know how you'd be able to go to school or have anything like a normal life."

"Maybe we could help with that." Allen said seriously.

"How?" Billy asked curiously before taking another bite of food.

"You're worried about what happens when you have to go out of town for your job. What I'm suggesting is that Deacon could stay with us at those times. You don't have to miss work, Deacon doesn't have to miss school.

"Man, I couldn't ask you to do that..." Billy began to say.

"You're not asking, I'm offering. I've got a house full of boys here around his own age for him to hang around with. This way he'll have something close to a stable home life. See that woman with the baby over there, when I'm not here, she will be. They won't be left unsupervised. I'm not trying to pressure you Billy. It's your choice. I just want you to know that I'm serious about this." Allen finished sincerely.

"I get that." Billy said thoughtfully, then absently took another bite of his food.

After a moment to finish his bite, he said, "This food is really good."

"Xain and Jake made it." Allen said with pride.

Billy looked at Allen with a vacant expression.

"I forgot to introduce you to everyone. I always forget that. Billy, this is Juana, in her arms is Edovina. At the other end of this couch are JJ, Kyle and Kenny. On the other couch are Kevin, Reuben, Harley and Ricardo." Allen said as he pointed.

"There wasn't a Jake in there, was there?" Billy asked curiously.

"No, Jake is in the next room with Dan. Jake is my son and Dan is JJ and Kyle's dad and Harley's grandfather." Allen said with a smile.

"Yeah. JJ's got his own son and he's younger than me." Deacon said, obviously still amazed by the fact.

"Really?" Billy asked and received a nod from JJ.

"We'll have to tell you the whole story sometime. Right now, I need to know what you plan to do about Deacon." Allen said gently, trying to keep the conversation on track.

"Well shit. I'm sorry, I mean... Yeah, I want Deacon to live with me. I just don't know how to make it happen. I mean with court dates and social services and all that sh... stuff. I guess I can reschedule some of my shoots but there are some that I'm contracted to do and I can't get out of." Billy said thoughtfully.

"You're a photographer?" Allen asked curiously.

"Yeah. Weird huh? I left home when I turned eighteen because, I don't know, I guess I just felt like they didn't want me there. Anyway, I came to Florida to try and find a job and ended up going through all my savings in about two months. So here I was, this skater kid who was living on the

streets because I had to choose between a place to live for two more nights or eating for two more weeks." Billy finished with a pained chuckle.

"Next thing I know, this old dude is talking to me in the park, offering me money to take pictures of me." Billy said with a smile.

Allen got a worried look, he'd heard this type of story before.

"No. It's cool. The old dude was really cool. He was legit. He just thought I'd look good in pictures. So anyway, Benny, that's the old dude's name, he took me back to his place, fed me a good meal and let me stay in his guest room that night. I'm pretty sure Benny knew I would've gone down on him for a Big Mac... sorry, you little guys forget you heard that." Billy said shyly.

"We heard worse. What happened next?" Harley asked curiously.

"The next day Benny did some test shots. Mostly close-ups, a few poses and stuff like that. When he gets done processing the prints, he's going apeshit over how they turned out and starts planning all these layouts." Billy said with a smile.

"Well for the next nine months I was spending all my time with Benny, getting my modeling career off the ground, but I was learning stuff too. Benny showed me about cameras and lighting and lenses and shit... I mean stuff. He taught me all about processing the film and how to use all the equipment and chemicals." Billy said, then his mood shifted.

"I woke up one morning and he wasn't up yet which was weird because Benny was always up way before I was. I went into his room to check on him and he was dead... I guess he died in his sleep." Billy said distantly.

"I had some money saved up from my modeling so I was going to be okay, but then Benny's lawyer got ahold of me and said Benny had put me in his will three months before he died. Benny didn't have any family so I got everything, and Benny was loaded. The house across the street was his and I've been living there ever since." Billy finished with a shrug.

"So what about your photography career? How is it going?" Allen asked curiously.

"Oh, it's great. I went through Benny's stuff and decided to go ahead and do the shoots he had scheduled. I guess everyone liked my work because they kept on giving me more jobs. Now I've got jobs lined up all the way through next summer. I'll bring the portfolio over sometime, it's really awesome." Billy said happily.

"Do you go by the name 'William Pierce'?" Xain asked curiously.

"Yeah, how'd you know?" Billy asked as he turned to look at Xain.

"I have posters of four of your photographs." Xain said seriously.

"Cool. Do you mind if I see? It's really awesome to see my work on display." Billy said with excitement.

"Please follow me." Xain said and stood.

"Can I come too? I haven't seen your room yet." Kyle asked hopefully.

Xain gave a nod, then led the way out of the living room.

* * * * *

"Awesome! This is so totally cool. I never would have thought of putting Backstreet in the Amazon Rainforest, but dude, this rocks." Billy said as he looked around the room.

"I am pleased that you approve of the manner in which I display your work." Xain said with a slight smile.

"There's uncle Brian!" Harley said as he pointed to the Backstreet poster.

"That's right, and over there's Uncle Curly and Uncle JC and way over there is Uncle Aaron." JJ said as he walked Harley around the room.

"Uncle?" Billy asked in wonder.

"Oh, um, yeah. They're kind of related to Backstreet, *NSync and Aaron Carter." Allen said shyly.

"And Hanson." Xain said seriously and pointed to the poster beside him.

"Uncle Zac!" Harley said as he pointed.

"And here I thought I had the most awesome life ever." Billy said in amazement.

"I think you do Billy, and this will make it even better. JC was over here today, quite a few of the uncles were here yesterday to help us move in. I'm sure that if Deacon spends time over here, he'll eventually meet all of them, and so will you." Allen said frankly.

"That would be so cool. Okay, if we can find a way to make it work, Deacon can live with me and we'll do like you said and he can come over here if I have to go out of town on a shoot. Of course when school's out, he can come with me... as soon as we can get him a passport." Billy said thoughtfully.

"JJ, you're more familiar with the Clan's capabilities than I am. What do they need to do?" Allen asked curiously.

JJ smiled at being asked for advice, then looked to Kyle.

"Jamie is talking to Teri right now. Jacob is talking to Cory. Justy is with Aaron. I'll let you know when they have something." Kyle said thoughtfully.

"Give us a few minutes, the Clan is already on it." JJ said with a smile.

Billy and Deacon looked at Kyle curiously.

Xain turned to Allen and said, "Jake requires my assistance in the family room."

"Go on." Allen said as he gave Xain a brief hug.

Allen turned to see Billy and Deacon looking at him in question.

"Telepaths." Allen said with a shrug.

CHAPTER 22

Kyle walked to stand beside Billy and asked, "Can you come over here tomorrow morning about ten o'clock?"

"Um, yeah, I guess. Why?" Billy asked in confusion.

"Because Cory and Sean and Teri are going to come over to help you get legal custody of Deacon. They have everything worked out but they need to sit down and talk to you so you can make some decisions." Kyle said with a level of seriousness that was a little freaky coming from an eight year old.

"Sure, I'll be here. Um, was Allen being like for real about the telepathy thing?" Billy asked hesitantly.

Kyle smiled and said, "Yeah, kewl huh?"

Billy smiled in return and said, "It's freaky as hell to tell you the truth."

Kyle crooked his finger to Billy to draw him down so he could whisper.

"Tell him. It's okay, he thinks you're cute too."

Billy stood up quickly and flashed a worried glance at Allen who had his full attention on the boys surrounding him.

Kenny walked up to Billy and hopefully asked, "Do you want to see the shelf me and my Uncle Brady built today?"

Billy smiled and said, "Sure, lead the way little dude."

Kenny happily led Billy and the rest of the group across the hall to show off his new display shelf.

"Whoa, that's awesome! You guys built this yourselves?" Billy asked as he looked over the construction of the shelf.

"Uh huh, me and Uncle Brady decided how we wanted it to be last night, Kevin drew it and we built it this morning." Kenny said proudly.

"That's totally cool. The only thing I ever made out of wood was a birdhouse in shop class, I got a 'D' and threw it away on the way home." Billy said frankly.

"Well, I never built anything before today, but Uncle Brady showed me what to do and I put most of it together by myself." Kenny said joyfully.

Billy looked at Allen and saw the love and pride on his face. The feeling it stirred within him was unexpected and he turned away, trying to focus on something else.

"What's all this?" Billy asked curiously as he looked at all the paper shapes and the strange collection of hand drawn images on one wall of the room.

"That's my pictures." Kevin said quietly.

"You're really good dude. Whoa, that one gives me a creepy feeling right up my spine." Billy said as he looked at the dark image of a house in the country.

Kevin looked at the indicated picture and asked, "Kenny, would you see what's wrong with Chok?"

In a second Kenny was standing before the picture with his hand on it.

"He's feeling lonely. He's alone in his room on the computer... his instant messenger doesn't have any names." Kenny said in a trance like voice.

"It will by the end of the night. Jacob wants his IM... never mind, he got it." Kyle said seriously.

Billy and Deacon watched the scene carefully, in awe at the strange powers their new friends possessed.

Kenny smiled and said, "He just got the invitation. I think Jacob freaked him out by calling him by name."

"He meant to. This way he's more likely to answer." Kyle said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, he did." Kenny said with a smile.

"Jacob and Jamie are going to talk to him for a while, then they're going to start introducing him around the Clan so he can get to know everyone. Where is he anyway?" Kyle asked curiously.

"Germany, about forty five miles northeast of Berlin." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"Wow, how come he speaks English?" Kyle asked curiously.

"He's not from there. He's there with his family, his mom has a job there. They live out in the country and he doesn't speak German and doesn't leave the house. He's been lurking in chat rooms, but has been too shy to really talk to anyone. The only guy he talked to was a real sicko freak and scared him pretty bad." Kenny said as he focused on the picture.

"Well, he's not alone now. We'll see that by the end of the week every Clan member has Chok's IM and has been introduced." Kyle said firmly.

"Pop, we need to get cable modem or something in here so I can get on the net. All we have right now is the terminal in the family room." Kenny said seriously as he looked at Allen.

"The phone will be turned on tomorrow, then I'll go ahead and get cable and things set up. I'll try to have it going by the end of the week." Allen said gently.

"Thanks Pop." Kenny said happily as he took his hand away from the picture.

"Whoa, that's so cool. The picture was like, all dark and gloomy before, now it's like the sun is shining." Billy said as he looked at Chok's picture.

"It hasn't changed." Harley said as he looked at the picture.

"I think Billy sees it like I do." Kevin said as he looked at the picture closely.

"Really?" Kyle asked with surprise, then got a distant look.

"There's one way to know for sure." Kenny said as he looked at Kevin with an apprehensive expression.

"Janice." Kevin said in a whisper as he walked to his dresser and pulled the worn pillowcase holding the rest of his pictures.

"Why do you have those in there?" Harley asked curiously.

"Some of them hurt to look at and some of them are of you guys. I'd feel like I was spying on you if I could see how you're feeling all the time." Kevin said as he looked through the pictures.

"Oh Fuck!" Billy said and turned away from Janice's picture.

"I think that means he can see the pictures like you do Kev." JJ said with a look of concern directed at Billy who was turned away and wiping his eyes.

"Are you okay Billy?" Deacon asked with concern.

"Yeah, it's just... that was just wrong! Warn me next time you're going to show me something horrible." Billy said as he tried to regain control.

"I'm sorry Billy, but people who don't see like we do, don't feel anything when they see that picture." Kevin said quietly.

"It was just a picture of a fuzzy bunny doll." Deacon said hesitantly.

"I think we'd better go downstairs for a few minutes. Billy's had enough shocks for one day." Allen said with a gentle smile.

Billy looked at Allen and felt warmth at Allen's concern for him and smiled in return.

Kyle quickly said, "If you don't mind, I'd like to look at Kenny's new model."

"That's fine, we'll be downstairs in the living room when you're done." Allen said gently.

* * * * *

As Allen and Billy walked downstairs, Allen noticed movement in the kitchen.

"Juana, what are you doing?" Allen asked curiously.

"I was just peeling some potatoes for breakfast in the morning." Juana said as she focused on her work.

"You don't need to do that, I can cook for the boys when I'm home." Allen said seriously.

"I don't mind. It makes me feel good to be able to help." Juana said honestly.

Allen smiled and said, "Well then, I'd be happy to let you cook breakfast for us. Please just remember that I don't expect you to cook all our meals."

"I remember. It feels good to care for the family." Juana said as she remained focused on her potato peeling.

"Billy, would you and Deacon like to come over for breakfast in the morning, I mean, you'll be coming over in the morning anyway." Allen asked with a smile.

"I guess so. I mean, as long as it isn't any trouble. I don't really have any food in the house except for canned and frozen stuff." Billy said honestly.

"There will be plenty for everyone." Juana said quietly.

"So it's no trouble at all." Allen said as he led the way back into the living room.

* * * * *

"Did you really want to see my new model again?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Well, I wouldn't mind, it's really kewl. But the main reason I said that was to give Allen and Billy some time to talk. I think that if they get the chance, they could be really good friends." Kyle said seriously.

"You mean like boyfriends?" JJ asked with a smile.

"Maybe. They both like each other so far. We just have to give them some time to get to know each other." Kyle said thoughtfully.

"Really? Billy and Allen?" Deacon asked with wide eyes.

"That's okay isn't it?" JJ asked Deacon with concern.

"Oh, um, yeah. I just never thought of Billy, you know... with a guy." Deacon said shyly.

"Is Billy straight?" JJ asked Deacon, then glanced to Kyle.

"Billy is just Billy. He doesn't have any hang-ups either way. If someone attracts him, he's open to what happens." Kyle said thoughtfully.

"Wow... I hope I can be that way when I'm ready to start dating." Deacon said as he considered the statement.

"Me too. I mean, I guess I never really thought about it. I grew up with Dad and Pop and they told me about gay stuff and straight stuff, but I never really thought about it having anything to do with me." Kenny said as he sat on the edge of Kevin's bed.

"I'm gay." Kevin said seriously.

"Really?" Kenny asked in surprise.

"Yeah. I mean, I've never done anything about it, but I know I am." Kevin said simply.

"Well, since I've got a boyfriend, I am too." JJ said seriously.

"Me too." Kyle said frankly.

"Really? All you guys are gay?" Deacon said with surprise.

"Yeah. But if you think about it, except when we're doing boyfriend stuff, it doesn't make us any different from anyone else." JJ said as he also sat on Kevin's bed.

Deacon nodded at the statement and looked at Kenny to see a matching look of thought.

"I don't think I'm anything yet." Reuben said speculatively.

"That's okay Reuben. Some guys know as soon as they find out what it means to be gay and some don't know until they're grown up." JJ said seriously.

"It's good to know that if I find out I like guys that no one will be freaked out by it." Deacon said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I think we're all happy about that." JJ said with a smile.

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"I don't know why you're being so nice to me and Deacon, but I really appreciate it." Billy said as he took a seat.

"It started with Deacon. When I saw how he was hurting about how your parents treated him, I had to try and help. Since I've had the chance to talk with him, and now you, I feel like you two are an extension of my family and... honestly, I enjoy your company." Allen finished shyly.

Billy smiled and said, "It's been a really long time since I felt like someone wanted me around... well, except for, you know, sex and stuff."

"Well you and Deacon will always be welcomed here. We're just starting this family and I'd like for you to both be considered as part of it." Allen said with a smile.

"What do you mean you're just starting?" Billy asked curiously.

"When my lover Carl died, I thought I was completely alone. His son Kenny was sent to Chicago to live with his mother. A lot of things happened and I ended up with four sons that I officially adopted on Saturday and I bought this house for our family yesterday, well, officially I bought it today." Allen finished with a peaceful smile.

"Oh, I thought, I mean, I guess I just assumed that Kevin, Kenny and Jake were really your kids, I mean, like you were their father... you know what I mean don't you?" Billy finished with frustration.

"Yes. You thought I was their biological father. I'm not, but I'm trying to be the best father that I can be to all the boys." Allen said seriously.

"Do you think you'll still have time to do stuff, you know, like dating and stuff?" Billy asked nervously.

Allen considered for a moment and said, "You know, I haven't really thought about it, but with Jake and Xain being as responsible as they are and Juana being here, I don't think there would be any problem with me dating... well, except that I don't like clubs and bars where I might meet someone."

"How about me?" Billy asked in a whisper.

"Really?" Allen asked in surprise.

Billy nodded and waited anxiously.

"I mean, yes. Of course. But I have to warn you that it hasn't been very long since I lost Carl. I'm really going to need to go slow." Allen said cautiously.

Billy got a look of relief and said, "That's totally cool Allen. I'm not trying to drag you into bed. I just think I like you and I'd like to take the time to get to really know you."

"Thanks Billy. That's what I want too." Allen said gently.

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"We can go downstairs now." Kyle said suddenly.

"Why?" JJ asked curiously.

"They've said everything they need to. We don't have to hide out anymore." Kyle said as he stood.

"Are they going to be boyfriends?" Kevin asked with a smile.

"They've both said they like each other and want to get to know each other. When they've talked for a while, then maybe." Kyle said seriously as he led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

Dan walked out of the family room followed by Jake and Xain.

"How is everything?" Allen asked with immediate concern.

Dan looked at Jake with question.

"Really good. Dan says that I'm going to be okay." Jake said quietly.

"I'm glad to hear it. You scared me half to death last night." Allen said with a relieved smile.

"I think we've got that covered now." Jake said as he looked around the room.

"Does anyone else need to talk about anything while I'm here?" Dan asked as he looked around and noticed Billy.

"Excuse me Dan, Billy Pierce, this is Dan Richardson. He's a child psychologist. He's just talking with the boys to help them adjust to being in a new place. Dan, this is Billy, he's Deacon's brother." Allen said with a smile.

"Nice to meet you Billy. The offer is open to you and Deacon too if you feel like talking about anything." Dan said seriously.

"Um, I don't know. Do you feel like talking Deke?" Billy asked as he looked at his brother.

Deacon looked at Dan and hesitantly nodded.

"Come into the family room and we'll talk for a minute." Dan said as he gestured to the double doors.

"Can Billy come with me?" Deacon asked unsteadily.

"If you want him to." Dan said with a gentle smile.

Deacon nodded as he looked at his brother.

Billy got up with a look of apprehension and followed Deacon and Dan into the family room.

* * * * *

"Did Mamacita go home already?" Jake asked into the silence that followed.

"No, she's peeling potatoes in the kitchen." Allen said as Ricardo crawled up into his lap.

Xain shared a meaningful look with Jake, then walked out of the room.

"How are you doing Ricardo?" Allen asked quietly.

"I'm getting sleepy." Ricardo said as he laid his head on Allen's chest.

"I'm sure your mother is going to be taking you up to bed soon. It is about your bedtime." Allen said gently.

Juana came into the living room pushing the stroller with Edovina. A moment later Xain walked in and stood just inside the door.

"I just wanted to let you know something." Jake said seriously to the assembled group.

Allen looked at Jake with concern.

"After talking things over with Dan and Xain I figured out some things. I want to be Edovina's father no matter what the test results say. If they come back saying that I'm not really her father, then I want to adopt her like Allen did for me and my brothers." Jake said firmly.

"Are you sure?" Allen asked carefully.

"Yeah Dad. Dan talked to me and I figured out that I really love Vina. The test won't change the fact that I'm already her father in my heart." Jake said seriously.

Allen smiled and said, "I'm proud of you son."

"Thanks Dad." Jake said with a smile, then looked at Xain.

"The child of my bond-mate will also be my child. When Jake has the legalities of his custody in place, I will file the necessary reports to have Edovina officially recognized as Edovina Vasquez Thompson, daughter of Xain Thompson of the house of Suvak." Xain said seriously.

"I'm going to be a grandfather!" Allen said with a great smile.

"Yes Father." Xain said seriously.

"Mona is going to go ballistic when she finds out she's a great grandmother." Allen said as he cuddled Ricardo who was now asleep on his chest.

"So does that make me Edovina's uncle?" Kenny asked curiously.

"That's right, you and Kev will be Vina's uncles. I guess all the guys in the Clan will be Vina's uncles if you think about it." Jake said happily.

"No one had better ever mess with Vina." JJ said seriously.

Jake walked to the stroller and looked at Juana with question.

She gave a small nod and a smile in response.

Jake carefully lifted Edovina to cradle her in his arms with Xain standing at his side.

"I'd like you all to meet our daughter." Jake said quietly to the room full of people.

JJ, Kenny, Kyle and Harley walked over to share in the moment as Kevin and Reuben shared a smile with each other.

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"What's going on?" Billy asked as he walked out of the family room with Deacon at his side.

"I'd like you to meet my daughter." Jake said as he walked to stand before Billy and Deacon.

"Whoa, we weren't in there *that* long." Billy said in astonishment.

Laughter spread around the room at the statement as Billy and Deacon took turns looking at Edovina.

"Xain and I are going to be Vina's parents. Mamacita, Allen and Solak are going to be her grandparents." Jake said happily.

Billy looked from Jake to Xain in confusion for a second then asked, "You two?..."

Xain gave a serene nod as Jake smiled.

"Whoa!" Billy said with wide eyes, then looked at Allen who was still holding Ricardo.

"Get used to it Billy. Things like this seem to happen in my family." Allen chuckled.

"Yeah. Just think about how much your life has changed since you knocked on the front door." Kyle said with a knowing smile at Billy.

After a moment of thought, Billy said, "The little dude's right. This place is totally freaky, but like, in a good way."

"Thank you Billy. That's the best description I've heard of our home so far." Allen said with a smile.

"Well guys, it's getting late and we need to be going. You guys have school tomorrow." Dan said with a smile.

JJ, Kyle and Harley got up to join Dan. Everyone else got up to walk Dan out.

"I'll look foreword to seeing you all on Thursday. Juana and Billy, I hope you'll come too. I'd like the chance for the adults to just sit and talk while the kids play." Dan said sincerely.

"Um, yeah... that sounds great." Billy said slowly, then beamed a full smile.

"Yes. It will be a pleasure." Juana said warmly.

"Well then, good night everyone." Dan said as he led his boys to the front door.

"Good night Dan. Thanks for everything." Allen said as he followed with Ricardo sleeping in his arms.

"Yeah, that goes double for me." Jake said quietly as he followed, still holding Edovina.

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"We should be going too. Thanks for the good food and watching out for Deke and, well, just everything." Billy said quietly.

"We'll see you in the morning Billy. Breakfast will be about eight o'clock, will that be okay?" Allen asked with a smile as he noticed Ricardo shifting in his arms.

"Oh yeah, we'll be here." Billy said with a smile.

"It was nice to meet you Deacon. I'm glad Brady spotted you sitting over there this morning." Allen said gently.

"Me too. I'll see you tomorrow." Deacon said happily.

Allen smiled from the doorway as Deacon and Billy walked up the driveway.

"It is past time for Ricardo to be sleeping." Juana said with a tender smile at her son.

"I'll carry him up." Allen said quietly.

Juana looked as if she were going to argue, but finally just nodded and led the way out of the house followed by Allen carrying Ricardo, Jake carrying Edovina, and Reuben bringing up the rear.

* * * * *

As Allen walked into the front door of the house he said, "Jake, get your brothers together and let them know that we're going to the store."

"What?" Jake asked in surprise.

"I'll explain on the way. It's getting late and we have some serious shopping to do." Allen said as he walked to the family room.

By the time he had returned to the entry hall, all the boys were standing and waiting.

* * * * *

"What do we need to go shopping for?" Kenny asked as Allen pulled out of the driveway.

"It was Deacon's birthday a few days ago and he didn't get any presents. I want us to fix that. Kevin, I want you to pick something from you and Reuben. Kenny can get something from him and Ricardo. Jake and Xain can pick something out together from them and Edovina. I'll pick something out from Juana and I." Allen said as he drove to the nearest shopping center.

"How much can we spend?" Jake asked cautiously.

"Try to keep it reasonable. We want to get him something he will enjoy, but we don't want him to feel strange about it. I mean, it's going to be strange enough to have a breakfast birthday party." Allen finished with a smile.

"You're such a cool Dad. I hope I can be as good a dad to Vina." Jake said with appreciation.

"I'm sure you will be Jake, but if you ever need me, I'll be right there to help you." Allen said seriously.

"Thanks Dad." Jake said happily.

Xain looked at Jake curiously for a moment, then said, "I do not understand the custom of celebrating the occurrence of one's birth. Would you explain?"

"Sure. It's like setting aside a day to show your appreciation for someone and to tell them that you're glad that they are a part of your life." Allen said seriously.

Xain nodded and said, "She who.... My mother would celebrate our birthdays, but I did not understand the significance."

"Well, to be honest, I think a lot of people think of it as an obligation or tradition to be observed and don't treat it as a celebration of the person." Allen said as he pulled into the parking lot of the department store.

"Such is often the case with ritual and ceremony." Xain said thoughtfully as he got out of the car.

"We can split up to make this go quickly. Xain can go with Kenny and Kevin and Jake can come with me. That way Xain and Jake can communicate telepathically to coordinate things. It would be terrible if we all got Deacon the same thing." Allen said with a smile.

As the group entered the store, Allen led Jake toward the cards and wrapping paper as Kenny led his group to the toys.

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"I think Deacon would like this one, but it's kind of small." Kenny said as he inspected a model car carefully.

"Perhaps you should ask Father if you could purchase two of the lower priced items, one from you and one from Ricardo." Xain said reasonably.

Kenny nodded and began to look at the model ships.

"That guy is watching us." Kevin said quietly to Kenny and Xain as they looked at the models.

"Do you think he works here?" Kenny asked after a glance.

"No. I've seen guys look like that before. He's waiting for one of us to be alone." Kevin said seriously.

"Really?" Kenny asked in wonder as he looked at the man who was pretending to look at a board game. As soon as the man saw Kenny watching him, he reached down and suggestively rubbed his crotch.

Kenny quickly turned his back to the man as he felt panic rush through him.

"Jake and Father are on their way. We are to stay together." Xain said without expression.

Kenny looked at Xain with a trace of fear in his eyes, trying to ignore the man farther down the aisle.

"Hi guys. How are you doing?" Allen asked as he walked onto the aisle.

The man at the other end of the aisle quickly put down the box he was pretending to look at and walked away.

"Better now. Thanks Pop." Kenny said with a small smile.

"Shouldn't we do something about him?" Kevin asked Allen seriously.

"I don't know what. The only way he can be arrested is if he does something. Acting strange isn't a crime." Allen said with a shrug.

"I'm glad you sent Xain with us. I feel better knowing I can call you if I need help." Kevin said honestly.

"And I feel better knowing that you can recognize someone who might be dangerous. All three of you behaved perfectly." Allen said happily.

"Did you pick out your presents?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Yes. Jake helped me pick out this hand-held video game. It isn't expensive, but it's nice enough that he should enjoy it. Jake says this one is fun to play." Allen said as he held it out for everyone to see.

"That's great. We were just thinking that instead of getting one of the bigger models, we could get him two of the smaller ones, one from me and one from Ricardo." Kenny said as he held out a small ship and car.

"That sounds good to me. Have you found anything Kevin?" Allen asked with a smile.

"I thought Deacon might like a game that we could all play." Kevin said and pointed to the row of board games.

"That's perfect Kevin. Not only will he have a new game, but it will be something else you guys can do together." Allen said as he gave Kevin a gentle squeeze on the shoulder.

"Did you pick anything out Jake?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Well, I was thinking that Deacon might like something kind of grown-up. I mean, he's officially a 'teen-ager' now. So I thought we could get him a really cool jacket or something. I'll need Xain to help me pick it out, he's got a much better eye for style than me." Jake finished with a smile at Xain.

"Well, go ahead and pick out a game and I'll meet you in the clothing section. Remember to stick together." Allen said before walking toward the front of the store.

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"Come on guys, we're leaving." Allen said darkly.

"What?" Kenny asked in confusion as he looked at Allen.

"Just leave your cart and lets go. We'll shop somewhere else." Allen said firmly.

"What happened?" Jake asked as he hurried to Allen's side.

"I went to tell the store manager that we had spotted a sexual predator following children around the store. He basically called me a liar and insinuated that he would call the police if I harassed his customers." Allen said as he led the group toward the front of the store.

"What about Deacon's birthday present?" Kenny asked with concern.

Allen spotted the store manager standing by a nearby cash register with a line of customers waiting to be checked out.

In a loud voice Allen replied, "We'll go to another store where the management will take warnings about sexual predators stalking little boys in the aisles seriously."

Kenny saw the shocked expressions of the people in the checkout line and realized what Allen was doing.

"All he did was play with himself when I looked at him." Kenny said, more for the benefit of the customers than Allen.

"He's not going to get the chance to do more... well, not with you." Allen said firmly and led the group of boys out the front door.

As Allen was pulling out of his parking place, he noticed a string of customers leaving the store with the store manager calling after them.

Allen smiled as he said, "There's a nice store about a half-mile from here. I bet we'll find everything we need there."

* * * * *

At the sound of the chiming tone Allen walked to the family room to accept the incoming transmission with Jake and Xain right behind him.

"Brady? I'm surprised to be hearing from you. I was expecting Solak." Allen said with a smile of surprise.

"He's here too. I talked with Solak on the way here and we agreed that it would be logical for me to be present while he ran the DNA test." Brady said, trying to maintain a serious tone.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense. What did the test say?" Allen asked anxiously.

"I don't know. Solak asked me to initiate the transmission while he got the final results." Brady said simply.

Solak walked into view of the terminal and asked, "Are Jake and Xain present?"

"Yes, they're right here." Allen said as he adjusted the view to take in the whole room.

"The result of the test is as follows. In the matter of Edovina Juanita Vasquez, Jacques Allen Thompson is the biological father." Solak said seriously.

"Yes!" Jake said happily, then gave Xain a firm kiss and hug in celebration.

"Thank you Solak. That's wonderful news." Allen said happily.

"I will make the necessary notations and reports. The official documents recognizing the changes in status will be sent to your Clan headquarters as is customary in these situations." Solak said seriously.

"Thank you Solak, you too Brady. You just gave us the perfect ending to a very interesting day." Allen said with a smile.

"You're going to be getting a message in a few minutes from me. It's for Ricardo when he wakes up in the morning. Will you make sure he gets it?" Brady asked hopefully.

"No problem. Have a good night, both of you. Thank you again... Live long and prosper." Allen finished with a smile.

"Peace and long life." Solak said in return before terminating the transmission.

"I'm really a father." Jake said in wide eyed wonder.

"We are fathers." Xain said seriously.

"Let's get to bed now, it's really late and we still have a birthday party to set up in the morning." Allen said as he hugged his sons.

"Yeah, make sure to wake us up in time to help you." Jake said with a smile.

"You bet. There's going to be plenty for all of us to do." Allen said as he walked with his sons to the stairs.

"I know he's going to love the presents." Jake said happily.

"I believe he will be most pleased to know that someone thought enough of him to give presents." Xain said seriously.

"I think you're both right. Have a good night guys. I love you." Allen said as they reached the top of the stairs.

After a hug from each of his sons, Allen went to his room to get some much needed sleep.

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"Jake, you kissed me." Xain said seriously as soon as they were in their bedroom.

"I did?" Jake asked thoughtfully, then said, "Oh, yeah. I guess I did. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, I just got caught up in the news."

"The action caused a cascade of emotional reactions, all of them quite powerful... and a physical response." Xain said carefully.

"Oh, well, I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble. Is there anything I can do?" Jake asked with concern.

"Kiss me again." Xain said simply.

Jake looked at Xain and saw no emotion displayed on his face so he reached out through their bond and sought contact.

A flood of emotions washed over Jake as he looked into Xain's eyes.

Slowly Jake bent down to gently kiss Xain's lips.

'I will never hurt you.' Jake whispered in his mind.

'I will always protect you.' Xain responded, just as quietly.

The kiss became more passionate as Jake held Xain more tightly.

'I love you Xain.' Jake said in his mind.

Jake felt something like fingers sifting through his mind, through his soul, before Xain finally responded, 'I love you as well Jake.'

After another long minute of kissing, Jake pulled back to look into Xain's eyes.

"I wish to sleep in your arms tonight." Xain said quietly.

Jake smiled and said, "I think that's a great idea. Come on."

Xain began to remove his clothes and noticed Jake watching him.

"Are you going to disrobe before sleeping?" Xain asked curiously.

"Yeah. I just want to see... I mean, are you going to wear pajamas like last night or what." Jake asked curiously.

"I do not wish to be encumbered by clothing." Xain said quietly.

"Me either." Jake said as he started to undress.

"I am... inexperienced regarding matters of human sexuality. I will require instruction." Xain said carefully.

"I have enough experience for both of us. But tonight, I just want to fall asleep holding you. We can do more when we're ready." Jake said quietly as he finally pulled down his underwear to reveal himself to Xain.

"You are more developed than I would have guessed." Xain said as he focused on Jake's semi-erect penis.

"You're pretty well hung too." Jake said with a long look.

Xain looked into Jake's eyes and reestablished their telepathic link.

Jake felt Xain's emotions wash over him like eddies and currents within his battered soul.

"Come on. Let's get some sleep." Jake said quietly as he climbed into his bed.

Xain crawled into the bed next to Jake and cuddled into his side.

"I love you Xain." Jake whispered as he sent his love through their bond.

"I love you too Jake." Xain said quietly and returned Jake's love along with generous portions of contentment and joy.

CHAPTER 23

Jake awoke to a feeling of apprehension and began to search for the source.

After a moment, he realized that the blanket was pulled down and Xain was looking at his morning erection.

"What's wrong Xain?" Jake asked quietly.

"I was considering the size of your penis." Xain said in a whisper filled with concern.

Jake pulled Xain to rest against him and said, "It's just over six inches, that's okay; I've probably got a little growth left in me."

"But my penis is small in comparison. You said I was 'well hung' and I find that to be inaccurate." Xain said quietly.

Jake gave Xain a quick kiss before saying, "You've got about four inches there when it's hard. That is 'well hung' for a twelve year old. I've seen a lot of naked guys so I know what I'm talking about. Come on."

Jake urged Xain out of the bed to walk to the bathroom.

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The insistent buzzing of the alarm clock shook Allen out of a peaceful sleep.

Reluctantly Allen got out of bed and dragged himself to the bathroom to start his morning ablutions.

Deciding that he could change into something more proper later, Allen pulled on a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt before exiting the bedroom.

After a moment to consider his plan for the morning, Allen decided to wake Xain and Jake.

He opened the outer bedroom door of their room and entered the dressing room that divided the bathroom from the bedroom.

Allen gave a gentle knock on the bedroom door and was surprised when the bathroom door behind him opened.

"Dad, could you come in here for a second? We need your advice." Jake said seriously from the bathroom.

Allen walked into the bathroom to find Jake and Xain standing side by side, completely naked.

"We need you to look at Xain and tell him what you think." Jake said seriously.

Allen had a momentary expression of surprise, but Jake's serious tone drew him fully into his concerned father role.

"What am I looking for?" Allen asked as he looked at his sons standing side by side.

"Jake says that my penis is appropriate for my age and body development. I feel that it may be inadequate." Xain said in his Vulcan demeanor.

Allen nodded at the seriousness of the situation and looked at Xain with a critical eye.

"Considering your age and the shape and size of your body, I'd estimate that you've just entered puberty. I can see the beginning of muscle definition in your chest. As far as your penis, I'd have to say that it's exactly what I would expect for a twelve year old boy. The size and shape seem perfectly normal and in proportion with your body size." Allen said seriously, then looked into Xain's eyes.

"Thank you Father." Xain said with a slight smile.

"It's no problem Xain. It's common for boys your age to be concerned about their development. Just realize that Jake recently went through this himself, if he tells you something is normal, he's speaking from experience." Allen said with a smile.

"Thanks Dad. I just didn't want Xain to feel like he was too small or something like that." Jake said honestly.

"Well, that's obviously not a problem. Xain is perfectly developed for his age. Come into your bedroom for a second, I have something I need to talk to you about." Allen finished in a serious voice as he left the bathroom.

* * * * *

"Don't worry about getting dressed yet unless you want to." Allen said as he sat on the foot of Jake's bed.

"What's wrong Dad?" Jake asked as he and Xain sat beside Allen.

"This is one of those things a father has to do, well, should do, and it's hard to find the right way to say it." Allen said thoughtfully.

"If you're about to tell us about 'the birds and the bees' I think we've got it covered." Jake said with a gentle smile.

"No, I'm not worried about that. What I want to tell you about is how to perform a self examination for testicular cancer." Allen said frankly.

Jake and Xain looked at Allen curiously.

"First off, I'm not going to demonstrate unless you absolutely need me to. Basically what you need to do is get familiar with the shape and feel of your testicles. You can either do this for yourself or each other. The reason this is important is because if there are any dramatic changes, it may be the indication of a problem." Allen said seriously.

"So you want us to feel each other's balls?" Jake asked cautiously.

"Or feel your own, which ever is more comfortable to you. The important thing is to perform the examination occasionally to be sure that everything is normal. Testicular cancer strikes young men and now is the time you start watching out for it. If something is out of the ordinary, we can take you to a doctor to have it looked at." Allen said as he looked at his sons with honest concern.

"So if we find something wrong... what happens?" Jake asked cautiously.

"It may be something as simple as removing a small lump; a simple outpatient surgery. The thing is, that same lump left untreated could kill you. Guys, a friend of mine named Paul had testicular cancer a few years ago. He was always told that touching himself was something wrong and dirty. He had no idea that anything was wrong until the cancer spread to his lymph nodes. By that time it was too far gone to do anything about it. He was twenty-six. Before he died, he told me what the doctors said about how important self-examination is." Allen said seriously.

"So how often should we do it?" Jake asked quietly.

"About once a month should be fine. I'm not trying to scare you guys, I just want you to both have long healthy lives." Allen said frankly.

"Thank you Father." Xain said with a small smile of gratitude.

"I'm just trying to share the things I've learned along the way. But for now, get dressed so you can help me set up Deacon's birthday party." Allen said with a smile as he stood.

Both Jake and Xain pulled Allen into a firm hug.

"I love you guys." Allen said as he returned the hug.

"As we love you Father." Xain said in a voice filled with emotion.

Allen gave each boy a kiss on the cheek before leaving the room to wake the other boys.

Author's Note: For more information about Testicular Cancer and self exam: http://tcrc.acor.org/

* * * * *

"Good morning Juana, I didn't realize you were here already." Allen said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Yes, I wanted to make tortillas to go with breakfast. Reuben and Ricardo are watching a cartoon video in the living room, I hope that isn't a problem.

"No, that's fine, but I think we'll be getting their help in a few minutes. We decided to have a birthday party for Deacon this morning so we'll need all the help we can get decorating and wrapping presents." Allen said as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"It is his birthday? I didn't know, I would have bought him a gift." Juana said with concern.

"I picked up something from the both of us. It's a small video game." Allen said with a smile.

"Thank you Allen, that was very considerate." Juana said with a gentle smile.

"Deacon's birthday was a few days ago... his parents forgot. That's why he ran away from home. I can't understand parents who could forget their child's birthday..." Allen trailed off.

Juana stopped her food preparation and shook her head.

"Such people lose sight of what's important." Juana said distantly.

"You're probably right, they're probably not evil, just misguided." Allen said before taking a sip of his coffee.

Juana nodded at the statement and continued to work on her tortillas.

"What do you want us to do Dad?" Jake asked as he hurried into the kitchen, followed by Xain, Kevin and Kenny.

"I think Jake should be in charge of the decorations, you can ask Reuben and Ricardo to help you with balloons and streamers. Xain, Kenny and Kevin can work on wrapping presents. I'll be here if anyone needs help." Allen said with a smile.

"What about a cake?" Kenny asked with concern.

Juana looked at the clock, then raced to the cabinet to look around.

"Well, I got the candles and things for decorating a cake last night, but I thought we could just have the cake with lunch. I don't know if a birthday cake at breakfast would be a good idea." Allen said seriously.

"There is time to prepare a cake, but it would delay breakfast. Perhaps Xain could prepare the cake." Juana said seriously.

"Yeah Pop, it's not a real birthday party without a cake. Kev and I can wrap the presents." Kenny said in an imploring tone.

Allen smiled at his sons and said, "I guess you guys are right. We *need* a cake to make it a real birthday party. What do you say Xain? Will you be able to get it done in time?"

Xain walked to look at the cake mixes Juana had pulled from the cabinet and froze in concentration.

Allen looked curiously at Jake who was standing between Kevin and Kenny, also frozen thoughtfully.

"There is sufficient time if I begin immediately." Xain said seriously and walked to the refrigerator.

"Then I guess it's time to get to work." Allen said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Good morning." Allen said happily as he opened the front door.

"Hey, how's it going?" Billy asked casually.

"Everything's fine. How are you this morning Deacon?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Um, good. Billy's place is really neat. He's got lots of really old stuff." Deacon said happily.

"Benny collected antiques. It kind of makes it feel like a home." Billy said shyly as Allen led them into the kitchen.

"Is everyone else asleep?" Deacon asked as he looked around the empty kitchen.

"No, they're in the dining room waiting on us." Allen said and indicated the closed dining room door.

Billy started to walk toward the door, but stopped at the feeling of a hand on his shoulder.

Allen held Billy back so Deacon would be the first one through the dining room door.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!"

Deacon froze in his tracks at the sight and sound.

There were balloons and streamers throughout the room and a large banner draped above the windows that said, 'Happy Birthday Deacon'.

"What?" Deacon asked in a small voice.

"Happy birthday Deacon. We decided that since you didn't get to have a party on your birthday, we'd have one for you now." Allen said with a smile.

Tears were falling down Deacon's cheeks as he whispered, "Thank you."

"Go on, your presents are on the buffet, right over there." Allen said as he coaxed Deacon further into the room.

Billy leaned into Allen's side and whispered, "Thanks Allen."

Allen smiled at Billy and nodded, then turned his attention back to Deacon.

"This one's from Allen and Juana." Deacon said with excitement as he looked at the label.

"Go ahead, open it." Kenny said with excitement.

Deacon quickly tore off the paper and looked at the hand-held game.

"This is so awesome! Some of the guys at school used to have this, I always wanted to play it." Deacon said with excitement.

Allen smiled at Jake who was beaming with happiness.

"This one's from Kenny." Deacon said happily and opened the gift to find a model Jaguar.

"Oh, this is so cool, you don't have one like this do you Ken?" Deacon asked with a delighted smile.

"I have an older Jag, but I don't have the new one." Kenny said with a smile.

"Thanks Ken, this is great." Deacon said and walked over to give Kenny a quick hug.

Deacon hurried back to the presents and picked up the next one.

"This one is from Kevin and Reuben." Deacon said with excitement at the large package and opened it to reveal a Monopoly™ game.

"Billy and I used to play this all the time! Thank you!" Deacon said as he put down the game and ran to hug Kevin and Reuben.

"I thought it'd be good to get you something we could all play together." Kevin said from the hug.

"Yeah, all of us can play. Thank you guys." Deacon said as he hugged Reuben tightly.

Allen noticed that Juana's eyes were shining with tears at the happy sight.

"This one's from Ricardo." Deacon said and opened the gift quickly to find a model ship.

"It's great Ricardo. Thank you." Deacon said and quickly hugged the three year old.

Billy smiled at the sight and couldn't help but give Allen a quick hug to express his happiness and gratitude.

"This one's from Jake and Xain and Edovina." Deacon said happily as he opened the strangely flexible present.

Deacon's eyes went wide and he fell silent as he looked at the casual charcoal gray blazer and teal button-up shirt.

"We thought that since you're officially a 'teenager' now, you'd like to have something kind of grown-up to wear." Jake said hesitantly, not knowing how to interpret Deacon's expression.

"It's..." Deacon whispered, then ran to hug Jake.

"No one's ever given me anything like this before. Thank you." Deacon said with joy as he changed from hugging Jake to Xain.

"There's one more thing." Allen said as he walked to the buffet and took out a small box.

Deacon looked at Allen with anticipation.

"This gift is from the whole family." Allen said and handed the box to Deacon.

With shaking hands, Deacon opened the hinged lid to reveal a golden chain with a small angel pendant.

"It's beautiful, thank you." Deacon said in awe.

All the boys gathered around to see the necklace that they didn't know Allen had bought.

"It's Mikey!" Kevin said in surprise.

"That's what I thought too. That's why I bought it." Allen said with a smile.

"Mikey?" Deacon asked curiously as he examined the charm.

"He's our guardian angel. I guess this means he's watching over you too." Kevin said happily.

"Let me put this on you so we can have breakfast." Allen said with a smile and took the necklace from the box.

After fastening the necklace, Allen stood back to look at Deacon.

"It looks great Deke. I didn't realize how grown up you're getting." Billy said in a voice of wonder.

Deacon smiled and hugged Billy tightly.

"Boys, come and help me bring in the food." Juana said quietly.

The boys followed Juana out of the room to get the breakfast food that was keeping warm in the oven.

* * * * *

"That was the best breakfast I've had in... ever." Deacon said in appreciation.

"I'm glad you liked it. It is the type of breakfast we would have when I was a child." Juana said, beaming with pride.

"I've been all over the world and this is the best breakfast I've had." Billy said with a smile as he sat back in his chair.

Juana looked at Xain with question and received a nod in return.

Xain hurried out of the room as Juana moved to the window to draw the blinds.

"What's going on?" Billy asked curiously.

"It's just getting bright outside." Allen said with a smile.

Billy looked at Allen suspiciously, not buying it for a second.

Allen smiled at Billy and glanced at Deacon.

Billy followed Allen's glance and saw Deacon looking at his video game.

Suddenly the lights in the dining room went out and the glow of a cake covered with thirteen lighted candles came into the room.

Allen started singing 'Happy Birthday' and was joined by the rest of his family.

Deacon stared at the cake in wonder as it blazed before him.

"Go ahead Deke, make a wish and blow out the candles." Billy finally prompted.

Deacon closed his eyes for a second thoughtfully, then opened them and blew out the candles in one great gust of breath.

Everyone clapped as Juana turned the lights back on.

"I couldn't eat another bite." Billy said looking regretfully at the cake.

"Me either. I thought we could have the cake after lunch. But we had to bring it out at the official birthday party." Allen said with a smile.

"Thank you." Deacon said with tears of happiness gliding down his cheeks.

Allen walked to Deacon and pulled him into a gentle hug.

"Today is your day Deacon."

* * * * *

Billy, Allen and Juana were standing and watching as the boys were throwing the Frisbee around the yard.

"I've never seen Deke so happy." Billy said in a distant voice.

"Well, we're going to do whatever it takes to make sure he stays this happy." Allen said seriously.

Billy thought about the words and finally said, "The career, bank accounts, fame, and all those other things don't mean anything when you compare them to this... This is success."

Xain left the group and walked to the adults with a hesitant expression.

"What's wrong Xain?" Allen asked curiously.

"I believe I have performed sufficient 'Frisbee' for today." Xain said seriously.

Allen smiled at the statement and said, "I'm glad you got your daily dose. What would you like to do now?"

"May I hold Edovina?" Xain asked and looked at Juana.

"Yes, of course." Juana said and gently transferred Edovina to Xain's arms.

"When Sean and Cory arrive, we will know what steps must be taken for me to become *a'nirih* to Edovina." Xain said seriously as he held Edovina close to his chest.

"A what?" Billy asked curiously.

"*A'nirih*, it means nurturing Father. We got the test results last night and Jake was confirmed to be Edovina's biological father." Allen said gently.

"So Zane and Jake are going to be the baby's parents?" Billy asked curiously.

"Yes. Due to their ages, Juana will probably be taking care of Edovina the majority of the time, but as Jake and Xain grow older, I expect that they will assume more and more of a parental role as Juana and I take on the role of grandparents." Allen said thoughtfully.

"That is so weird, you're what? Thirty?" Billy asked curiously.

"Yes, good guess." Allen said with a smile.

"It's weird thinking of you being thirty and a grandfather." Billy said seriously.

"Deacon is older than Xain, if he adopted a child like Xain's doing... it would basically be the same thing for you." Allen said seriously.

"Yeah, I guess." Billy said thoughtfully.

"What's wrong?" Allen asked in concern.

"I just don't know if I'm ready for the whole parent thing... I mean, you're good at it, but... I still feel like a kid." Billy said helplessly.

"You want to know the secret?" Allen asked in a whisper.

Billy looked at him and hesitantly nodded.

"I still feel like a kid too." Allen said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Billy laughed and said, "That explains how you thought of having a party for Deke... I can't thank you enough for that Allen. I can't believe my parents were such assholes. They still haven't called to tell me he's missing, they might not even know."

The smile fell off Allen's face as he said, "As satisfying as it might be to let them worry when they find out, it would be the wrong thing to do. We'll find out your legal options in just a little while, then no matter which way that goes, you need to let your parents know that he's here."

"I guess you're right. I just feel like I want to hurt them for the way they hurt Deke." Billy said with a hint of anger in his voice.

"I can't think of any way that this could turn out that your parents will feel anything but hurt." Allen said seriously.

"They might not care." Billy said quietly.

"If that's the case, then Deacon being here is the best possible thing that could happen to him." Allen said sincerely.

"It already is. Trust me Allen. Deacon has never been this happy before." Billy said as he looked at the boys throwing the Frisbee.

"Just hang on, in less than an hour Teri and her sons will be here. Then we'll have all the information we need to work out what to do next." Allen said seriously.

"Thanks Allen. I'd be freaking out about what to do right now if you weren't here." Billy said with a smile.

"I'm sure you would have done fine. It's just easier when you have friends to help you." Allen said, thinking of JC and Chip.

Billy gave a grand smile and said, "Yeah, friends."

* * * * *

"How's my little angel doing?" Jake asked in baby talk as he approached Xain and Edovina.

"I am well." Xain said with his Vulcan facade fully in place.

Allen and Billy started laughing at the statement as Jake looked stunned.

"Good one." Jake finally said in amazement.

Xain allowed a small smile to fall across his face as he offered Edovina to Jake.

Jake gently kissed Edovina on the forehead, then whispered, "Thanks."

Xain initiated their link and merged his emotions with Jake's so they could share their love for Edovina.

"Okay, I see it now." Billy said as he watched Jake and Xain.

"They're a family." Allen said simply.

* * * * *

The car pulled into the driveway as all the boys watched.

"Hey guys." Cory said happily as he got out.

"Hi Cory, do you have Clan business today?" Kenny asked as he ran to the car.

"I have a little with Jake and Xain, nothing you guys need to worry about." Cory said as Teri and Sean joined him.

"Then maybe you can play Frisbee with us when you're done?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Mom's already not happy with us taking a day off from school, if it looked like we were having fun... I'm afraid not." Cory said, then glanced at Teri.

"They showed me what needed to be done, so I agreed. But I'm not completely happy." Teri said to Allen and Billy as they approached.

"Teri, Sean and Cory Short, this is Billy Pierce and... over there with Kevin is his brother Deacon." Allen finished, pointing.

"Nice to meet you Billy." Teri said automatically.

"You too." Billy said as he shook her hand.

Kenny immediately noticed what was wrong and said, "Billy, I'd like to introduce Cory Short, the Patriarch of Clan Short and Sean Short, Historian of Clan Short."

"Nice to meet you." Billy said as he shook each boy's hand in turn, then asked, "What does that mean?"

"If we can go somewhere we can sit down and talk, I'll explain it. Thanks Kenny." Cory finished with a smile.

Kenny gave a smile of pride as Allen guided the group into the house.

* * * * *

Billy nervously took a seat at the kitchen table as he looked at the strangers who were about to change his life.

"Billy, we've done some investigation into the matter of Deacon and found that your parents have not filed a missing person's report or taken any

action that would indicate that they know Deacon is missing." Cory said seriously.

Teri then said, "Your brother doesn't show any signs of physical abuse or neglect, but I have been assured by Clan Short's intelligence team that he has been psychologically neglected to a point that is quite dangerous."

Billy considered the words and had to ask, "How? I mean, they ignored him. How is that dangerous?"

"When someone feels ignored, unloved... in the way, there are ways they have of getting attention." Cory said carefully.

"Cries for help." Sean interjected.

"A person in Deacon's situation might easily become suicidal, or abusive. He could resort to just about any type of criminal behavior in an effort to gain attention and acceptance." Cory said firmly.

"Deke wouldn't do anything like that." Billy said seriously.

"He just ran away from home and traveled halfway across the United States by himself. Even though everything turned out for the best, that was his good luck, not his good judgment." Teri said seriously.

"Okay, I'll give you that one." Billy said thoughtfully.

"We're just making the point so you understand what choices you have before you." Teri said seriously.

"Okay. Lay it on me." Billy said seriously.

"I am the Director of Federation Child Services. I have the authority to remove Deacon from the custody of your parents and place him with someone who would look after his interests. I have found sufficient grounds to invoke the Federation's Safe Haven Act stating psychological neglect and abandonment as cause." Teri said seriously.

"Clan Short was charged by Ambassador Sarek with the duty of rescuing and protecting neglected and abandoned children. In accordance with that primary function of the Clan, it would be possible for us to assume custody of Deacon. We founded Camp Little Eagle as a place where boys like Deacon can grow up in a safe and encouraging environment." Cory said as he looked into Billy's eyes.

"You want to take Deacon away from me?" Billy asked with a note of fear.

"No Billy. Just listen. What we're telling you are the choices you have." Sean said firmly.

"That's right. Mom can invoke Safe Haven and name you as Deacon's guardian if that's what you want to do. But it's important that you understand that you have other choices. Think about what you want and what's best for Deacon and then make your decision." Cory said seriously.

"Yeah. So that's it? Me or the Camp?" Billy asked hesitantly.

"Well, there is always the chance that someone might want to adopt Deacon." Cory said and glanced at Allen.

"I would be willing if Billy thought that would be best for Deacon." Allen said seriously.

"Okay. Can I have a few minutes to think about this? It's kind of a big step no matter how it goes." Billy said in an overwhelmed tone.

"Sure. And you might think about asking Deacon what he thinks. It *is* his future we're deciding." Sean said frankly.

"Yeah. Um, thanks for giving it to me like this. I appreciate you being honest about my choices." Billy said as he stood.

"Would you mind sending in Xain and Jake, we need to talk to them for a few minutes." Cory asked quietly.

"Yeah, sure." Billy said absently as he left the room.

* * * * *

Billy walked outside in a daze of thought when he encountered Jake and Xain's concerned looks.

"They want to talk to you guys next." Billy said absently.

"Are you well?" Xain asked Billy with concern.

"I've just got to decide what's best for Deacon. It's a lot of responsibility." Billy said thoughtfully.

Jake looked at Edovina in his arms and said, "I know what you mean. We've got to do the same thing for Vina."

"What are you going to do?" Billy asked, momentarily broken out of his daze.

"We will envision the best possible future for Edovina, then make the choices that are most likely to provide it." Xain said seriously.

"Even if it means you aren't going to be her parents?" Billy asked cautiously.

"I think the most important thing for Vina is to have someone who loves her. I already said that I would adopt her even if the test proved I wasn't her biological father. I *am* her father now, no matter what." Jake said firmly.

"But I'm not Deacon's father... he needs a father, doesn't he?" Billy asked in turmoil.

"When Deacon is hurting, who does he turn to for comfort? When he is in need of guidance, who does he ask for answers? When he is alone, who does he turn to for companionship? Who is his example? Perhaps being a father is not a matter of biology as much as a matter of love." Xain said speculatively.

Billy thought about the words, then gave a big smile as he said, "Thanks guys, that's one lucky little girl you've got there. She's got some smart daddies."

"I think Deacon is pretty lucky too." Jake said as he motioned to Xain that they should be going.

"We're about to find out." Billy said as he looked across the yard to find Deacon watching him apprehensively.

* * * * *

"Can I hold her?" Teri asked with a grand smile.

"Of course." Jake said as he handed Edovina to Teri.

"What a beautiful little girl." Teri said as she looked deeply into Edovina's dark green, almost brown eyes.

"That's my granddaughter." Allen said with pride.

Cory motioned for Xain and Jake to take their seats and opened a folder.

"Xain, he who is your father has appended the official records to reflect Edovina's change in status. As Patriarch of Clan Short it is my duty to see that the steps you are about to take are logical and in the best interest of all involved." Cory said firmly.

Xain gave a nod of acknowledgement.

"I would like for you to define how you see the roles and relationships of the members of your family." Cory said carefully.

"Jake is *T'hy'la* to me as I am to him. I am *a'nirih* to Edovina as Jake is *samekh*." Xain said simply.

Cory looked at Xain speculatively, then asked Jake, "Do you agree with Xain?"

"Yes. In our extended family, Mamacita... I'm sorry, Juana, Allen and Solak will be recognized as grandparents to Edovina. Kenny, Kevin, Reuben and Ricardo will be Uncles." Jake said seriously.

"What do you see as the role of Edovina's mother, should she return?" Sean asked cautiously.

"Right now, I don't think she should have any parental rights. She ran away and left Vina with her mother. If Lupe gets treatment for her addictions... then maybe she could share in Edovina's life." Jake said seriously.

"Is there anything else we need to know before we make everything official?" Cory asked carefully.

"Yes. It would be preferable for Edovina's name to be changed to match that of her father's." Xain said seriously.

Cory arched an eyebrow as a prompt to continue.

"It is Human custom for a child to carry the surname of the father. I believe it will lend to Edovina's emotional well-being to be assured that she is part of our family by carrying our name." Xain said in his most logical tone.

Cory thought about the fact that his own name had been changed to Short and tried to imagine how his life might have been effected if Teri had not taken that step.

"Mom? You get along well with Judge Robison, do you think he can squeeze us in?" Cory asked casually.

"Give me a minute." Teri said as she tried to dial her cell phone one handed.

Xain immediately went to Teri's aid and took Edovina from her, leaving her free to make her call.

Cory and Sean both watched with tender smiles as Xain cuddled Edovina close to his chest.

"That should take care of any doubts you had." Allen said with a smile.

"We didn't have any doubts. We just had to ask the questions to make it official. If Sarek has a question about anything later, we can honestly say that we followed the prescribed method." Sean said quietly.

"Thanks Officer Bridges, I appreciate it." Teri said happily and rang off.

"Good news?" Allen asked hopefully.

"Two o'clock in Judge Robison's chambers. The clerk is going to squeeze us in so we have to have everything ready to go." Teri said seriously.

"No problem. Once we get Deacon's situation sorted out, we just have to swing by Starfleet, the Vulcan Embassy and the bicycle shop." Cory said thoughtfully.

"The bicycle shop?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Calen got a flat tire, so we need to pick up a new tube. It's a dad thing. You understand." Cory said with an impish grin.

"Yes I do." Allen said with a smile.

"I guess we'll give Billy and Deacon a few more minutes, then go get them." Cory said in a considering voice.

"Would you guys like something to drink while you're waiting?"

* * * * *

"The guys said you were going to decide what to do with me." Deacon said in a fearful voice.

"Yeah. But I need to know what you want me to do first." Billy said honestly.

"I want you to let me live with you!" Deacon said desperately.

"I want that too Deke, but this isn't just for a week or two. We're talking about at least until you're eighteen. How are you going to handle it when I have to leave for a few weeks to do a shoot in Venezuela or Australia?" Billy asked with concern.

"Allen already said I could stay with him when you have to go away." Deacon said seriously.

"I know. We can find a place for you to stay. I mean inside, how are you going to feel about it? I don't want you to ever have to feel like you did with mom and dad. If you can't handle me being away sometimes, then it might be best if I let Allen adopt you. He already said he would if that's what we wanted." Billy said with tears in his eyes.

"You don't want me?" Deacon asked in a small voice as tears started falling down his cheeks.

Billy pulled his brother into a tight hug and said, "Of course I want you, you little dipshit. I just want to be sure you're not going to feel like I'm abandoning you when I have to go to work."

Deacon sniffed back his tears and said, "As long as I know that you really want me, and you're going to come back and be with me as soon as you can, I want to live with you... I love you Billy."

Billy hugged Deacon even tighter as he said, "I'll always come back just as soon as I can. I grew up with the same shit you did Deke, I won't ever leave you if I don't absolutely have to, and I promise I'll take you with me whenever I can."

"Thank you Billy. You're the only one who ever loved me. That's why I had to come here." Deacon said as he sniffed again.

"You're the only reason I made all those trips back home. Hell, the last time I visited, I only saw Mom ten minutes the whole week I was there." Billy said quietly.

"You remember what Dan said last night about both of us talking to him?" Deacon asked in a timid voice.

"Yeah." Billy replied, matching his brother's tone.

"I think I need to... I've been, kind of, thinking some bad things." Deacon said hesitantly.

"I know bro. I did too when I was living there." Billy said in a soothing voice.

"No. I mean really bad. Like I thought about killing myself. I thought about it a lot." Deacon said more loudly.

"Shhh. I know Deke. I did too." Billy said as he hugged even more tightly.

"Really?" Deacon asked in a whisper.

"Yeah. You want to know a secret?" Billy asked as he bent a little to be even with Deacon's ear.

Deacon nodded quickly.

"You're the reason I didn't do it. I couldn't hurt you like that." Billy said in a whisper.

Deacon started crying as he said, "Me too."

Billy held Deacon through his tears. When he finally started to quiet, Billy said, "As soon as we're done here, I'll take you home and we'll call Dan."

Deacon nodded into Billy's chest.

"Come on. Let's tell these guys what we've decided to do." Billy said quietly.

CHAPTER 24

"Uncle Allen?" Ricardo asked from the doorway of the kitchen.

"Yes Ricardo?" Allen asked curiously.

"Uncle Brady said he was gonna send me a letter this morning." Ricardo said shyly.

Allen smiled at Ricardo and said, "There's a message waiting for you in the family room. Let me get some drinks for everyone then I'll play the message for you."

Ricardo took this as an invitation and hopped up on a kitchen chair to get his drink.

"Does your mother know where you are?" Allen asked casually as he poured drinks for everyone.

Ricardo nodded seriously.

"Do you like living here Ricardo?" Teri asked gently.

"Uh huh. It's fun here." Ricardo said with a big smile.

"How old are you sweetie?" Teri asked, entranced by Ricardo's youth and innocence.

"I'm this many." Ricardo said as he proudly held up three fingers.

"Oh my, that's old." Teri said with a radiant smile.

Ricardo nodded seriously at her statement, then smiled as Allen placed a glass of fruit punch before him.

"Thank you Allen." Teri said quietly as she also accepted a drink.

"Can we go get Uncle Brady's letter now?" Ricardo asked hopefully.

"As soon as you finish your drink." Allen said gently.

Ricardo dutifully took a long drink of his punch.

Billy and Deacon entered the Kitchen and took places at the table.

"This is my brother Deacon." Billy said with a smile.

"It's nice to meet you Deacon." Teri said warmly, then her eyes were drawn to the necklace he was wearing.

Deacon noticed her interest and proudly said, "Allen and his family gave me this for my birthday."

"It's beautiful." Teri said in a whisper.

Sean and Cory got up from their chairs to get a closer look at the necklace.

"Wow, it looks like Mikey." Cory said in wonder.

"Kenny said that Mikey was our guardian angel." Deacon said cautiously at the interest they were showing.

"Yeah. He is." Sean said quietly as he walked back to his seat.

"I'm finished." Ricardo said happily as he presented his empty glass to Allen.

"Well let's go and get your message." Allen said as he picked up Ricardo.

* * * * *

"Have you decided what you want to do?" Teri asked Billy quietly.

"Yeah. Deke and I both want him to live with me." Billy said with absolute certainty.

"Good. I think that will be best for everyone involved." Teri said seriously.

Billy looked at her curiously.

"It had to be your choice. If we came here and tried to influence your decision in any way, then you might have felt railroaded into it. This way both you and Deacon know that he is here because you want him to be, we're just making it happen." Cory said honestly.

"Yeah. Thanks for that." Billy said thoughtfully.

Teri picked up a folder and opened it.

"I had some paperwork made up in case this is what you decided. If you'll just sign these, you shouldn't have anything to worry about." Teri said in a professional voice.

"What are these?" Billy asked as he looked at the papers.

"Well, the actual custody paperwork is just waiting for me to file it. These papers are to request Deacon's medical and dental records and school records. The last page is a limited guardianship paper for you to keep. Since you're going to basically be a single parent you may need to find someone to care for Deacon while you're away. Just fill in the name and you both sign it and they'll be able to make medical decisions on Deacon's

behalf in the event of an emergency... in fact, I have one for Allen and Juana to sign too." Teri said as an afterthought and pulled another folder from her briefcase.

"Oh, um, Allen and I already discussed it and he's going to take care of Deke when I have to go out of town, so I guess I'll need him to sign this." Billy said thoughtfully.

"That'll work. Cory and Sean can sign off as witnesses. It's as good as having it notarized." Teri said seriously.

"Really?" Billy asked curiously.

"We're Starfleet officers. That's one of the perks." Cory said with a smile.

"So you're head of that Clan thing AND a Starfleet officer?" Billy asked in wonder.

"Yeah, Kenny told me all about it. Cory is an engineer on the *USS Enterprise* and Sean is a helmsman." Deacon said with excitement.

"And the Clan thing is a Vulcan Clan. We are all officially recognized as grandsons to Ambassador Sarek. Cory is the Patriarch of Clan Short, all the other members are recognized as our brothers." Sean said seriously.

"Kevin and Kenny and Xain and Jake are all part of the Clan." Deacon said with a smile.

Billy smiled at Deacon and said, "Then the Clan must be a really good thing because those guys are great."

"Yeah. Do you want to see my birthday presents? They had a birthday party for me this morning, it was like the coolest thing ever!" Deacon said, nearly bouncing with his excitement.

Teri, Sean, Cory and Billy all got up from the table at Deacon's urging as he drew them up by shear will.

"It's in here." Deacon said impatiently from the dining room doorway.

* * * * *

"*Good morning Ricardo. I'm here in San Francisco.*" Brady's image said from the terminal.

"Hi Uncle Brady." Ricardo said with excitement from Allen's lap.

"This is a recording, like a movie. Listen to what Uncle Brady says, then you can record a message back to him." Allen said gently as he paused the video.

"Okay." Ricardo said thoughtfully.

Allen pressed the play button and the message continued.

"*I hope you've been thinking about what you want to do when I visit next time*." Brady said with a gentle smile as Ricardo nodded seriously.

"*I'll send you another message tomorrow and let you know what's been going on. You be good for your mother and take good care of your brother.*" Brady said gently.

Ricardo nodded again.

"*I love you Ricardo. Have a good day.*" Brady said and ended the transmission.

Ricardo turned in Allen's lap to hug him tightly.

"Do you want to send a message to Uncle Brady?" Allen asked quietly.

Ricardo nodded into Allen's chest.

"Okay, sit facing the screen and I'll set it up to record for you." Allen said with a happy smile.

Ricardo sat facing foreword and watched carefully as Allen sat the controls to record.

* * * * *

"Wow, they really went all out." Cory said as he entered the room with balloons and streamers.

"Yeah. It was so awesome. Me and Billy came over for breakfast this morning and I didn't have any idea that they were going to do this!" Deacon said as he raced ahead of the group to proudly display his presents.

"This is from Allen and Juana." Deacon said as he presented the video game to Sean.

"Oh, Justy has this one. In fact I think I remember Uncle Chip saying he had to buy Justy a second one because he wore the first one out." Sean said as he handed the game to Cory.

"These models are from Reuben and Kenny." Deacon said as he handed both boxes to Sean.

"I have this ship at home, but I think this is the new Jaguar. It's really nice." Sean said as he carefully looked at the package.

"Kevin and Reuben bought me this game so we can play it together." Deacon said as he held up the game for everyone to see.

"That's really great. Presents you can share are the best." Cory said with a smile at Deacon's enthusiasm.

"And this is the coolest thing ever. Jake and Xain and Edovina got me some really nice clothes." Deacon said as he handed the jacket and shirt to Teri.

"I think this is the first time I've ever seen anyone excited to get clothes for their birthday." Teri said in surprise.

"It's not the same as getting socks, Mom. This jacket is something really nice he can wear when he goes somewhere. Deacon will have something kind of grown up to wear. It's kind of like when I wear my uniform." Sean tried to explain.

"Oh, I get it." Teri said with a smile at her son.

"And they sang 'Happy Birthday' to me and we even had a cake!" Deacon said with joy as he moved to show off his birthday cake.

"As birthday's go, this looks like a really good one." Teri said as she looked around.

"It was the best ever! I never, ever expected that anyone would ever do something like this for me!" Deacon beamed with absolute joy.

Cory smiled and said, "I've had some really great birthdays Deacon, but I don't think I've ever had one as good as this."

"I doubt that anyone has ever enjoyed a birthday this much." Billy said from behind Cory.

"I'm willing to bet his next birthday will be even better." Cory said over his shoulder.

Billy looked at Cory curiously.

"I have no doubt that in the next year Deacon is going to make lots of friends and by the time his birthday comes around you may need to rent a hall to hold them all." Cory said seriously.

Billy looked at his brother and smiled as he thought about the words.

* * * * *

"Here you are." Allen said as he walked into the dining room, carrying Ricardo on his hip.

"Deacon was just showing us the wonderful birthday party he had this morning." Teri said with a peaceful smile.

Allen smiled at the sight of Cory and Sean showing Deacon how to play the video game.

"I have a few papers for you and Billy to sign. I don't think the guys will miss us." Teri said with a smile at the chattering boys.

"Somehow, I think you're right." Allen said with a chuckle as he led the way out of the dining room.

* * * * *

"Hey Dad, have you seen Vina's stroller? She needs to be changed." Jake asked as he walked into the kitchen carrying Edovina.

"I think I remember seeing it in the dining room." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Thanks." Jake said quickly and detoured into the dining room.

Xain walked into the kitchen a moment later, then after a momentary distant look, walked into the dining room.

"Telepaths." Allen said as he noticed Teri's curious expression.

A nod of understanding was Teri's only response.

* * * * *

Xain held the dining room door open as Jake hurried past him with the stroller.

"Cory, I wish to inquire of my duties to Clan Short." Xain said seriously as he approached Cory, Sean and Deacon.

"Oh, yeah. It looks like you've adjusted to your new family. When I get home I'll talk to the guys about what we need as far as a database and they can send the specs to your terminal." Cory said seriously.

"Would it be desirable for me to be on site to perform my duties?" Xain asked thoughtfully.

"I don't think so. You'll have access to everything you need through the terminal. You can video conference with us if you have any questions about required fields or design specifications. There isn't any urgency so you can work on this project in your spare time. Make sure the needs of your family come first." Cory said firmly.

"As you say, my Patriarch." Xain said reverently.

"*T'hy'la*, Vina needs her *A'nirih*." Jake said as he entered the room.

Xain took Edovina into his arms and held her gently.

"I need to restock her diaper bag. I'll be back in a few minutes." Jake said with a smile.

"Jake seems to have a talent for picking up languages." Cory said speculatively.

"I was able to transfer my knowledge of Vulcan to Jake in the same manner I acquired English from him." Xain said as he shifted Edovina in his arms.

"Jacob said that was nearly impossible to do." Cory said seriously.

"It is a specialized skill that I have acquired. With the assistance of he who is my father, I was able to transfer Jake's knowledge of English to Mamacita and Ricardo." Xain said seriously.

"That's a really handy talent." Sean said thoughtfully.

"With a telepath to facilitate the transfer, it would be possible to repeat the process if there is a need." Xain said seriously.

Cory and Sean looked at each other thoughtfully, looking as though they were communicating telepathically.

"I'll talk it over with the others and see what they think about it. This could actually solve quite a few communication problems. We've had to be really careful about misunderstandings." Cory said thoughtfully.

"Kevin knows a lot of languages, would it be possible for you to transfer those?" Sean asked curiously.

"I have not examined the mnemo structures of my brother, so I cannot say with certainty. But it would be a reasonable assumption." Xain said carefully.

"We'll get back with you later Xain. If this works, you will be able to perform a much needed service for your Clan." Cory said seriously.

"It will be an honor to serve." Xain said reverently.

* * * * *

"Guys, signature time." Teri said from the doorway.

"Okay Mom. We've got to go Deacon." Cory said quickly.

"Thanks for showing me how to play guys." Deacon said as he focused on his game.

"No problem. Maybe you can come over with the guys sometime and check out our game collection, it's pretty cool." Sean said with a smile.

"Yeah, I'd like that." Deacon said as he turned off the game and looked at Cory and Sean.

Cory and Sean left the room and a minute later Deacon followed.

* * * * *

"That's it. As soon as everything is filed, it's all official." Teri said as she gathered her copies of the paperwork.

"Thank you Mrs. Short for all you've done." Juana said with appreciation.

"Please call me Teri. I'm glad to be able to help." Teri said honestly.

"Will you be able to join us for lunch?" Allen asked hopefully.

"I'm sorry but we can't, but if you'll save us a few slices of birthday cake, we'll have some before we go with you to court at 2:00." Teri said as she stood.

"We'll make sure to save three pieces for you." Allen said with a smile.

"What about us?" Cory asked with a wounded expression.

Teri shook her head in exasperation at her son as Cory and Sean giggled at her expression.

* * * * *

As the group walked outside, Billy said, "It was nice to meet all of you. Thank you for all your help."

"We were glad to do it Billy. Remember to call us if you need anything." Teri said seriously.

"That goes for me too Teri. If you ever need my help with anything, all you have to do is ask." Billy said sincerely.

"You'd better be careful, she will." Cory said with a teasing smile.

Billy smiled and put an arm around Deacon as he watched them get into their car.

"So is everything okay?" Kenny asked as he ran up to the group, followed by Reuben and Kevin.

"Yeah. I get to stay with Billy, and when he goes out of town for his job I get to stay with you guys." Deacon said happily.

"Really?" Kenny asked and looked at Allen in disbelief.

"That's right. It's all been settled." Allen said with a smile at the boys' enthusiasm.

* * * * *

"Come on Deke, we've got some calls to make." Billy said quietly.

"Calls?" Deacon asked curiously.

"Yeah. We need to get things set up with Dan... then we need to call Mom & Dad." Billy finished quietly.

"Why?" Deacon asked, refusing to move until he had a satisfactory answer.

"Because they need to know what's going on. It's all settled, you're staying with me... We're just letting them know where you are." Billy said seriously.

"They don't care." Deacon said darkly.

"I wish I could tell you that they did, but I really don't know. This isn't about them, it's about us doing what's right." Billy said reasonably.

"He's right Deacon. It's the right thing to do." Allen said seriously.

Deacon nodded, then suddenly walked to Allen and gave him a tight hug.

"Thanks for my birthday party." Deacon said passionately.

Allen smiled and gave Deacon a gentle hug in return as he said, "Remember that we still get to have birthday cake after lunch. For that to happen, you two have to be here. Will 12:30 be okay?"

"Whatever you say Allen. After all this I know better than to argue. We'll be here." Billy said with a smile.

"I'll see you guys later then." Allen said as he released Deacon from the hug.

As Deacon walked back to Billy's side, Billy and Allen shared a momentary look that assured them both of each other's feelings.

* * * * *

"Will you tell me what is concerning you?" Xain asked Jake in a quiet tone.

"It's something that's kind of tough to talk about." Jake said honestly as he made sure Edovina was sleeping in a comfortable position in her stroller.

Xain took a seat on the couch and watched as Jake finally finished seeing to Edovina.

Jake looked at Xain seriously, then nodded and took a seat beside him.

"I don't know how much you know about my life before I came here, but let's just say I was sexually active." Jake said thoughtfully.

"As evidenced by the presence of your daughter." Xain said logically.

Jake smiled and said, "Yeah, I guess that could be a hint."

Xain quirked an eyebrow as a prompt for Jake to continue.

"Yeah, I'm getting to it." Jake said thoughtfully.

Xain gave a slight nod as acknowledgement.

"Okay, it's like this. I feel like I need to, um..." Jake trailed off in frustration.

"Bust a nut?" Xain asked in his most logical Vulcan tone of voice.

Jake broke out in laughter and quickly restrained it, so as not to wake Edovina.

"Yeah, but... where did you come up with that?" Jake asked through his chuckles.

"I possess your language skills. Some of the phrases you employ are... colorful." Xain said seriously.

Jake nodded then became serious as he said, "Well, like I was saying, I feel like I need to get off, but I don't want to do it without you because... It would just feel like I wasn't really your *T'hy'la*. But you're too young to be doing sex stuff... do you see my problem?"

"I understand your reason for concern. I believe I know of a way to allow you to attain release without adverse consequences." Xain said thoughtfully.

"How's that?" Jake asked hopefully.

"I am familiar with the mechanics of 'self-pleasuring', on an intellectual level. I propose that you instruct me in your preferred method and that we share your experience." Xain said seriously.

Jake looked at Xain for a moment before asking, "So you want me to jerk off in front of you?"

"Yes, initially. When the time comes that I am ready to begin self-exploration, I will also engage in the activity." Xain said carefully.

"Oh. If you're sure it won't upset you or make you feel weird..." Jake said hesitantly.

"We have the ability to share our feelings. If the activity causes any response that is of concern, we can desist immediately." Xain said calmly.

"Yeah. I guess that would be okay... but I think we should let Dad know." Jake said thoughtfully.

Xain quirked an eyebrow in question.

"You remember how he freaked on the telepathy thing? I think this might be kind of like that. He'll want to know what's going on so he can make sure we're both okay with it." Jake said seriously.

"I agree with your logic *T'hy'la*. To my knowledge, we have no scheduled activities at this time, nor any before the midday meal. I would like to pursue this activity immediately. Let us find father now." Xain said with a small smile.

Jake raised an eyebrow, then smiled and stood as he said, "Come on, you horney little Vulcan."

* * * * *

"Hey Dad, do you have a few minutes to talk?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"Sure. Juana, will you keep an eye on the boys while I talk with Xain and Jake?" Allen asked casually.

"It would be my pleasure." Juana said with a smile.

"Would you mind taking care of Vina too?" Jake asked hopefully.

"I would like that Jake. It may be hard to believe, but in the short time you have had her with you, I have missed her." Juana said as she looked into the stroller.

"I believe it." Jake said seriously.

* * * * *

"Is the living room okay?" Allen asked as they walked into the house.

Xain and Jake shared a look and Xain finally said, "Perhaps a place more private to minimize the possibility of interruption."

"How about my room?" Allen asked cautiously.

Jake and Xain nodded simultaneously.

Allen led the way upstairs, feeling the beginnings of concern at their behavior.

* * * * *

"Jake and I would like to engage in sexual intimacy." Xain said as soon as the door was closed.

Allen froze at the words and his mind raced.

"Not like all the way. We just wanted to... explore." Jake said cautiously.

Allen nodded thoughtfully as he walked to sit on the window seat.

"We thought you'd want to know before we did anything." Jake said with concern at Allen's lack of response.

"Thank you. If you wouldn't mind telling me, just how far are you planning on going?" Allen asked quietly.

"Well, we kind of thought I might just... um, jerk off." Jake said with a flush of embarrassment.

"Although my probable emotional response is uncertain at this point, it is possible that I might also choose to engage in the activity." Xain said seriously.

"Good. I'm glad you've thought this out and have reasonable expectations." Allen said thoughtfully.

Jake gave a sigh of relief at Allen's words.

"You guys take it slow and be extra gentle with Xain. Even the slightest touch can be overwhelming when you aren't used to it." Allen said in concentration.

"We figured that we would each just take care of ourselves for now." Jake said uncomfortably.

"Even better. I'm not going to intrude on your privacy by asking any specifics, but I'd appreciate it if you'd talk to me before you take any major steps, I may have some advice to give." Allen said seriously.

"Yeah, that's why we're here." Jake said with a timid smile.

"I really appreciate that Jake. That's why I'm not worried about you taking this step." Allen said carefully.

Xain quirked an eyebrow at Allen's words.

"Well, of course I'm a little worried, but it's a dad thing. I'll worry about every new thing you experience in your lives." Allen finished with a smile.

"Thanks Dad." Jake said lovingly.

"Hang on a second." Allen said quickly and ran into his bathroom only to return a moment later.

"This should make things easier." Allen said and handed a tube of KY to Jake.

"Thanks Dad, I can't even tell you how incredibly cool you're being." Jake said with a smile.

"If I wasn't sure you were both ready for this I'd be fighting you every step of the way. I just need you to promise me one thing." Allen said as he looked at both boys.

"What's that?" Jake asked cautiously.

"If either of you have any problems with this, I want you to come and talk to me. Xain, you may need help dealing with the emotions associated with this new experience. Jake may need to deal with old memories and associations that this awakens. I'm serious about this guys, even if it's embarrassing, you need to deal with any problems now before they can compound into something that will prevent you from progressing in your relationship." Allen said seriously.

"I promise Dad." Jake said as a vow.

"As do I." Xain said formally.

"Good. Now you guys go have fun. I'll make sure to keep your brothers busy for a while." Allen said as he pulled Xain and Jake into a full hug.

"You are so completely cool Dad. Thanks for trusting us." Jake said as he hugged Allen tightly.

Allen smiled at the words and said, "Thanks for talking with me about it first. You make it easy to give my trust when you trust me too."

* * * * *

"Dan said that he's going to check his schedule and let us know on Thursday night when we visit." Billy said thoughtfully.

"Okay." Deacon said with apprehension.

"He's going to work it out so we're scheduled right before or right after Allen, that way we can wait together if we want." Billy said as he watched Deacon with concern.

"Just make the call Billy. I'll be fine." Deacon said seriously.

"Yeah." Billy said quietly and picked up the phone.

After a minute of listening, he said, "Dad's got his voice mail on, I guess he's not taking any calls."

"You're going to get the same thing with Mom." Deacon said in a tired voice.

"Oh, I guess I haven't tried to call them for a while." Billy said quietly.

"I've learned not to bother. It took Dad four days to get back to me last time I called him, and then he just bitched at me for leaving the message on his business phone." Deacon said seriously.

"I hope it wasn't something important." Billy said with concern.

"Not really. This guy in my class, Gus, he invited me over to hang out at his place. You know, to have dinner and watch movies and stuff. His parents wanted to talk to Mom or Dad to be sure it was okay first. By the time Dad got my message, it was too late. Anyway, that was almost five months ago." Deacon said sadly.

"Don't worry Deke, you've got all the guys across the street that you can visit with or invite over whenever you want. Everything is going to be better here." Billy said with a hopeful smile.

"It already is." Deacon said with a smile in return.

"I guess I'll leave Mom a message. But there's no way in hell I'm going to tell her machine that you're here." Billy said as he hit the speed-dial to call his mother.

"This is Billy... your son, I need you to call me as soon as you get this message. It's important. Bye." Billy said firmly, then hung up the phone.

"Today's Tuesday? I'm guessing she'll call on Saturday." Deacon said thoughtfully.

"Shit Deke! I didn't have a clue it had gotten this bad. I mean, I know I stopped calling because they always made me feel like I was interrupting something more important, but... I swear that if I knew it was like this I would have come and got you." Billy said in anguish.

"I know. It's not like they got this way overnight. It's been getting worse and worse for a long time and I didn't notice. I didn't even really think about it until my birthday was coming up and I realized that they were going to forget me." Deacon said seriously.

"Well it's over now. We don't need them. They can just go to work and do their jobs and meet with their clients. While they're doing all that, we'll be having fun and living." Billy said seriously.

"That sounds awesome. Did you really mean it about me being able to invite the guys over to spend the night sometime?" Deacon asked hopefully.

"Sure, just let me know a little ahead of time so I can lay in supplies. I don't think I have enough chips and popcorn for the whole squad." Billy said with a smile.

"Well, I thought I could just invite Kenny over." Deacon said hesitantly.

"Do you think Kevin is going to have a problem with that?" Billy said thoughtfully.

"No. But I'll ask him to be sure. I'll probably invite him next time anyway." Deacon said with a smile.

"That sounds cool. What about Zane? He's about your age too isn't he?" Billy asked curiously.

"Yeah, but he acts a lot more grown up than me. I don't think we would have too much fun if he came over. But if I dressed up in my new clothes, then I think it would be really fun to go out and do something with Xain." Deacon finished with a smile.

"Well let's do that. Find out when he has some spare time and invite him out to go to a movie or an arcade or something." Billy said with a smile.

"Yeah, and Kenny says that Jake really likes music, so if we go to a concert or something like that, we can invite Jake." Deacon said thoughtfully.

"Or The Hard Rock Cafe." Billy said with a smile.

"That would be so awesome! I bet Jake would love it!" Deacon said happily.

"It sounds like you're going to be really busy when you consider that they're probably going to want to invite you to do things with them too." Billy said with a smile.

"Not just me. You and Allen have to go and do stuff too." Deacon said seriously.

"We do?" Billy asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. Kyle said that if you guys spend some time together, you can be really good friends. Pete and Jono are the only friends I've ever seen you with and they're back in Minneapolis." Deacon said with strength.

"It's hard for me to make friends Deke, but you're right. Me and Allen seem to get along really well. He treats me like an equal, not like some skater punk who lucked into a bunch of money." Billy said thoughtfully.

"Then you need to spend time with him. Just go somewhere and do something fun. Us kids can stay with Juana for one night so you won't have to worry about me." Deacon said seriously.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to set me up on a date." Billy said with a teasing smile.

"Well, if you guys kiss, it's a date, but if you shake hands, it's two friends going out to have fun. I'll be happy either way, just as long as you don't screw it up and make Allen think you're not interested." Deacon said firmly.

"Shit! You'd really be okay with that Deke?" Billy asked quietly.

"Yeah, sure. As long as you're with someone you like... well, and I like, then I'll be very okay with it." Deacon said honestly.

"Thanks Bro, I don't know if things are going to go that way between me and Allen, but it's good to know if they do, you'll be cool with it." Billy said in relief.

"I love you Billy. I just want you to be happy." Deacon said in a quieter voice.

"Same here Deke. Now that I know how grown up you are about things, I feel a lot better about you staying here." Billy said with relief.

"What do you mean?" Deacon asked curiously.

"Well, I kinda remember you as an eight year old kid. I always kinda had to watch what I said and did around you. I mean I couldn't really talk about sex stuff, or much about dating. I guess I figured that with you living here it'd be like that again." Billy said thoughtfully.

"I'm a teenager now. I know a lot of that stuff already and what I don't know, I need you to teach me so I learn it right." Deacon said seriously.

Billy looked at Deacon with surprise, then said, "You got it Deke. I think this is going to be really cool. What do you say if after lunch we go shopping and get you some clothes and stuff."

"Yeah, that would be great. I've just got these clothes and the ones I was wearing yesterday." Deacon said seriously.

"Did you need any of your stuff from back home?" Billy asked thoughtfully.

"No. I've got everything that's important in my backpack. It's kinda funny. The only thing I wanted to bring that I couldn't was the Monopoly™ game." Deacon finished with a smile.

"I think we just about wore the other one out anyway." Billy said with a chuckle.

"I remember one time when we were about to play and Jono called you. I think he wanted you two to go and do something. You told him that you were going to stay home with me and that you'd do it another night... that made me feel so important." Deacon said with the beginnings of tears in his eyes.

"Deke, I stayed home because I enjoy doing stuff with you. Pete and Jono knew that and never gave me any shit for it. Hell, I think Pete was jealous of me because I had a great brother like you and he was stuck with that little buttwad, Frankie." Billy said with a smile.

"Frankie's changed a lot since you left... he's a big buttwad now." Deacon finished with a giggle.

Billy chuckled and shook his head as he dialed the phone, then said, "Okay, now if anyone calls, it will transfer to my cell phone. Let's go shoot some nine ball."

Deacon looked at Billy in question.

"Do you mean I didn't show you the game room last night?" Billy asked with a grand smile.

"You have a game room?" Deacon asked with excitement.

"No." Billy said flatly.

Deacon looked at Billy with complete confusion.

"*WE* have a game room." Billy said happily.

"Where is it?" Deacon asked with excitement.

"Did you notice the garage? I thought I'd enjoy a pool table more than a dry car." Billy said with a smile.

"What are you waiting for? Come on!" Deacon said as he ran out of the office.

* * * * *

Allen walked into the living room to find Kevin and Kenny in a deep discussion.

"What's up guys?" Allen asked curiously.

"Mamacita had to come in to start lunch." Kenny said simply.

"Well, if you want to go back outside, I could go with you." Allen said with a gentle smile.

"I'm kind of tired of Frisbee. It was fun with everyone. But it's not as good with just me and Kev." Kenny said frankly.

"Oh, well I guess we'll have to find something that *would* be fun then." Allen said seriously.

Kevin and Kenny both looked at Allen with question.

"Well, if you guys wanted, we could try out the pool." Allen said with a smile.

"Really?" Kevin asked with wide eyes.

"Really. You two go and get your swimming trunks on, and make sure you don't bother Xain and Jake. They need some private time." Allen said seriously.

Kevin looked at Allen curiously as Kenny ran out of the room.

"You remember when you said that you need privacy sometimes?" Allen asked Kevin seriously.

"Yeah." Kevin said quietly.

"Jake and Xain need privacy sometimes too." Allen said slowly.

"But how can it be private if you're not alone?" Kevin asked thoughtfully.

Allen smiled at Kevin's ability to see through half-answers and challenge what he was told.

"Please just trust me when I tell you that they need privacy."

"Oh. They're fucking." Kevin said in realization.

Allen had to fight down a chuckle as he said, "No Kevin, but you're close."

Kevin looked at Allen with question.

"Xain and Jake like each other very much. They need this time together to share their feelings. They may do some things that are sexual, or they may not, it's none of our business. But when they told me they needed private time, I said I would be sure that no one bothered them, just the same as I would do if you told me that you needed private time." Allen said calmly.

"So are Xain and Jake boyfriends now?" Kevin asked curiously.

"Sort of, they are *T'hy'la*." Allen said, realizing that Kevin would understand what that meant.

"Oh. Okay. Can Reuben and Ricardo swim with us too?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"If you can tell me where they are." Allen said seriously.

"They went to the kitchen with Mamacita." Kevin said seriously.

"I'll go ask them. Go on and get into your swimming trunks." Allen said gently.

* * * * *

"Would you mind if Reuben and Ricardo went swimming?" Allen asked as he entered the kitchen.

"They do not know how to swim." Juana said regretfully.

"I'll be right there with them and I can show them the basics." Allen said with a smile.

"Yes, that would be good." Juana said happily as she was gathering ingredients.

"You could join us if you want. Lunch isn't for a while and we can just have sandwiches." Allen said carefully.

"No, thank you. Even if you did not pay me to care for the family, this is what I would want to be doing. To care for the children is what makes me happy." Juana said honestly.

"Okay, this time. But very soon we're going to have to discuss you taking some time off to get away from this house. I can watch the boys for a while so you can go to church or play bingo or just go out to a movie, whatever you enjoy." Allen said seriously.

Juana smiled happily and said, "It has been many years since I have been able to do such things. I think that I would like very much to attend church this Sunday."

"We may be going out of town this weekend, but either way we'll work it out so you'll be free to attend church." Allen said with certainty.

"Thank you Allen. Would you mind if I invite the children?" Juana asked cautiously.

"That would be fine. I don't believe in requiring children to attend church, but if they want to go I think it's a good idea." Allen said with a smile.

Juana nodded happily in agreement.

"Reuben, do you and Ricardo have swimming trunks?" Allen asked carefully.

Reuben thought for a second, then he shook his head.

"Well, we'll just have to get some for you next time we go shopping. Go up to your apartment and get a pair of short pants for each of you." Allen said gently.

Reuben smiled a full smile and ran out the utility room door.

As Kenny ran into the kitchen wearing a baggy pair of swim trunks, Allen held up his hand in a 'stop' gesture.

"I've still got to change. Stay out of the pool until I'm out there with you." Allen said seriously.

"Can't we just get in the shallow end?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Not this time Cute Stuff. You're the only one who knows how to swim. Go on, I'll be right out." Allen said seriously.

Kevin walked slowly into the kitchen wearing his new Speedo swim suit.

As soon as Kevin's timid glance met Allen's eyes, a blush started from just above his nipples and carried up his face. Even the tips of his ears were blazing red.

Allen smiled as he said, "I think the milkshakes are working."

Kevin looked down at his concave stomach, then up at Allen in question.

"You look healthier than you did Sunday night. Your skin is a much better color. Go on outside with Kenny while I get changed. I'll bring out some sun block for you so you won't burn." Allen said with a smile.

Kevin ran to Allen and hugged him quickly as he said, "Thanks Poppa. You make me feel like I'm not little and skinny."

Allen ruffled Kevin's hair and said, "As long as you're healthy, you're perfect to me. Now go on."

Kevin gave one final squeeze of his hug, then ran past Reuben as he went out the utility room door

Reuben walked into the room carrying two pairs of short pants.

"Reuben, if you'll help Ricardo get changed, I'll meet you out at the pool." Allen said as he walked toward the kitchen door.

"Okay, come on Ricardo." Reuben said quickly.

Allen noticed Juana's contented look directed at him before he hurried upstairs to change.

CHAPTER 25

"Are you getting tired Little One?" Allen asked gently as Kevin swam to his side.

"Yeah." Kevin said quietly.

"Then let's get out for a while. I think Reuben is swimming well enough now that I can get out of the water." Allen said gently as he moved Kevin to pick him up.

A squeal of childish laughter sounded in the air as Kenny pushed off from the side of the pool with Ricardo held tightly to his back.

"Kenny will probably be tired soon too. He's been towing Ricardo since we got in the water." Allen said as he carefully climbed out of the pool with Kevin clung to his side.

Allen carefully laid out two beach towels and rested back to soak in the sun's warmth.

Finally Kevin asked in a small voice, "Poppa, will I ever be able to do stuff like Kenny?"

Allen looked beside him and met Kevin's worried gaze before saying, "Of course you will Little One. It's just going to take time for you to build up your strength. In fact, I bet you wouldn't have lasted for fifteen minutes in the pool when you arrived here."

"But what if I don't get stronger?" Kevin asked in a voice of concern.

"You will get stronger. But even if you didn't for some reason, it wouldn't make any difference. I love you for who you are, not what you can do." Allen said seriously.

"I love you too Poppa." Kevin said in such a sincere tone that Allen felt it in his heart.

Allen couldn't resist the pull of the words and scooted over to give Kevin a quick hug.

* * * * *

"You guys better enjoy the sunshine while you can." Billy said from the walkway as he walked out of the house.

"What time is it?" Allen asked in surprise.

"12:30, Juana wants to know if you'd like to have your lunch out here." Billy said with a snicker as he looked appreciatively at Allen in his swimming trunks.

Allen got a distant look, then said, "Actually, that sounds like a good idea. Would you guys mind?"

"No, it sounds good to me. Like I said, we need to enjoy the sunshine while we can. I saw the weather and we're supposed to be getting a storm this afternoon." Billy said as he took a seat on the nearby patio furniture.

Allen got up from his towel and called to the boys, "Everyone out of the pool. We're about to have lunch."

To Allen's surprise, none of the boys made a complaint. They all looked to be tired out by their morning's activity.

"Where are Xain and Jake?" Deacon asked curiously.

"Upstairs. I'll go and tell them lunch is ready, then help Juana carry it out." Allen said with a smile.

* * * * *

"I'll be back in just a minute to help you carry lunch out to the patio." Allen said as he passed through the kitchen.

"I wasn't being serious." Juana said in surprise.

"Well, it was a great idea anyway. It's a beautiful day Juana. We should enjoy it." Allen said before leaving the room.

* * * * *

"Guys, it's lunch time." Allen said after gently knocking on the bedroom door.

"You can come in Dad." Jake said in a peaceful voice.

Allen hesitantly opened the door to find both boys cuddled in Jake's bed.

The sound of Backstreet's 'Shape of My Heart' was playing softly in the background accompanied by the sound of the waterfall.

"Did everything go okay?" Allen asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. It was great." Jake said with a contented smile.

"I too am pleased with the experience." Xain said gently.

"So you didn't have any problems?" Allen asked cautiously.

"No. We felt each others feelings... it was... better than anything." Jake said, having difficulty finding words.

"Jake is now my *T'hy'la* in every sense of the word." Xain said with a look of love directed at Jake.

Allen smiled warmly and said, "I'm really happy for you. Billy and Deacon are here for lunch, so it's time to come downstairs."

"Okay Dad. We'll be down in a minute." Jake said with a grand smile.

Allen couldn't resist the urge and walked to the bed to give each of his sons a kiss on the forehead.

Xain looked at Allen curiously.

"You've just achieved something wonderful in your life. It's my way of saying that I'm proud of you both." Allen said gently.

"Thank you Father. What we achieve is due in large part to your encouragement and approval." Xain said seriously.

As Allen walked to the door he said, "Well, if either of you feel like talking to me, just let me know."

"I think we're okay Dad, but I promise that we'll tell you if we have any problems." Jake said with a peaceful smile.

Allen nodded as he closed their bedroom door.

* * * * *

"I can't believe how you guys eat. I can't remember the last time I had home cooked food like this." Billy said as he filled his plate.

"You can thank Juana and Xain for that. I haven't cooked a real meal since we moved in." Allen said with a smile.

"I'm used to cooking for myself, but it doesn't taste as good as this." Deacon said seriously.

"I think Juana and Xain use something besides the microwave to cook." Billy said in a teasing voice.

"Oh... what else is there?" Deacon asked with a playful smile.

Allen motioned to Kevin to come over to him.

Allen leaned in to whisper, "Juana needs a place to sit."

Kevin looked around and saw that all the seats were filled.

"Deacon, would you and Kenny like to sit in the grass with me and Reuben and Ricardo?" Kevin asked hopefully.

Kenny looked at Kevin curiously, then glanced at Juana who was watching them.

"Come on Deacon. We don't get to sit in the grass and eat very often." Kenny said with a smile.

Deacon looked at Kevin and Kenny and smiled, then grabbed his plate to follow.

"Not very subtle, but it worked." Billy said with a chuckle.

Allen gave a shrug, then smiled as Juana timidly took a seat.

"Will Xain and Jake be joining us for lunch?" Juana asked quietly.

"Yes. They'll be right down." Allen said with a smile.

"This is so nice. I'm always running around and doing things, I can't remember the last time I was able to just sit and enjoy a meal like this." Billy said happily.

Allen looked at Billy carefully, then cautiously asked, "How did your phone calls go?"

Billy smiled and said, "Dan is going to try and schedule us around the same time as you so we can, I don't know, keep each other company or support each other or something."

"And the other call?" Allen asked seriously.

"Voice-mail. I left a message for my mom to call me back. I told her it was important, so Deke says it will probably be Saturday before she calls me back." Billy said with a shrug.

"I'm sorry Billy. I had hoped you would have been able to get this resolved." Allen said quietly.

"It is. Deke's staying. I'm just going to let her know, that's all." Billy said frankly.

Allen nodded, then noticed Jake and Xain walk out of the house.

"You didn't tell us you were eating outside." Jake said with a chuckle.

"Oops." Allen said with a giggle.

"We looked all over the house for you. When Xain mentioned that you were wearing swim trunks, we thought about checking out here." Jake said as he filled his plate.

Xain looked around, trying to decide where to sit.

Jake looked at Xain seriously as everyone watched.

"It's rude to communicate telepathically in front of company." Allen said with a smile.

"Billy and Deacon are not company. They are family." Xain said seriously.

"And it would be more rude for me to say out loud what I was thinking." Jake said in a matching tone.

"Okay guys, you win on both counts." Allen said with a chuckle and noticed that Billy was trying to stifle a laugh.

Jake took a seat in the empty chair, then motioned for Xain to sit on his right knee.

Billy watched with amusement as Jake and Xain tried to behave in a dignified manner.

A whimpering cry came from the stroller beside Juana.

"I believe Edovina is also ready for her lunch." Juana said as she stood.

"I can prepare her bottle Mamacita." Xain said seriously.

"Thank you Xain. That is very nice of you." Juana said with a fond smile.

"It is a pleasure to attend to she who is my daughter." Xain said simply as he walked to the house.

"I can hold her until her bottle is ready." Jake said as he walked to the stroller.

"You guys are really good at this." Billy said seriously.

"Not really. Without Mamacita I don't think we would do very well. But we love doing things for Vina when she needs it." Jake said as he cradled Edovina in his arms.

"So I heard Teri say something about going to court at 2:00, is something wrong?" Billy asked with concern.

"No. Now that we have proof that Vina is my daughter, we're going to get her name changed to Thompson." Jake said with a warm smiled directed at Allen.

"Oh good. I was afraid there was a problem." Billy said with relief.

"No, we just want Vina to always know that her daddies love her and want her." Jake said as he looked into his daughters eyes.

"I don't think there will be any problem with that." Billy said with a tender smile.

"Look at that." Juana said in wonder as she pointed at the darkening sky.

"The storms do come up quick around here. Let's take the food inside before it starts raining." Allen said as he stood.

"Boys, come to help carry in the food." Juana said to the boys who were sitting in the grass.

* * * * *

The next few minutes were a flurry of activity as everyone rushed to get everything into the house before the rain started falling.

"Lookit." Reuben said as the rain started to fall.

"Wow. It's really raining hard." Kevin said with wide eyes.

"Get used to it boys. We're in Florida. We have some beautiful weather, but when it storms, it storms with a vengeance." Allen said seriously.

A crack of thunder caused all the boys to line up at the window to stare at the storm with fascination.

"We can continue to eat now." Juana said quietly.

"It's okay Juana. They haven't seen a Florida storm before. The worst of it will probably be over in a few minutes." Allen said as he watched the boys at the window, looking out over the lake.

"I bet you can see more from the windows in the family room." Allen said more loudly to the boys.

The boys fought between the urges to stay and watch and to run to the family room and take the chance of missing a moment of the dramatic storm.

Allen watched as if on cue, all the boys ran as a pack from the kitchen to the family room.

"I guess Kenny got caught up in the excitement. He's seen storms like this a hundred times." Allen said with a smile, then noticed Xain standing behind him, holding Edovina.

"Would you like me to hold Edovina so you can watch the storm?" Allen asked gently.

"Yes. Thank you Father." Xain said with a small, hesitant smile.

Allen happily accepted Edovina into his arms and watched as Xain walked calmly to the family room.

"You have a really cool family." Billy said with a smile at the door Xain had just passed through.

"So do you." Allen said warmly.

"Thanks Allen. I guess I do." Billy said thoughtfully.

"We're thinking of doing something this weekend, maybe going out of town. Do you think you and Deacon would be able to join us?" Allen asked hopefully.

"What are you going to do?" Billy asked curiously.

"We haven't decided yet. I told the boys about it Saturday and we haven't discussed it yet." Allen said frankly.

"You're going to let them decide?" Billy asked with surprise.

"I'm letting them make suggestions. If they come up with something that we can all do in the space of a weekend, then we'll do it." Allen said seriously.

"And you want me and Deacon in on this too?" Billy asked in confirmation.

"Yes. Xain was right. You're a part of our family now." Allen said with a tender smile.

Billy got a strange look, then put his hand under the table. A moment later he had his cell phone in his hand.

"I swear, every time that thing vibrates it freaks me out." Billy said with a hint of a blush as he looked at the caller ID.

Allen couldn't restrain a laugh at the statement.

"Hey Petey, what's up?" Billy said as he answered the phone.

"I'm having lunch with some friends, what are you up to?" Billy asked casually.

"No, I didn't really have a chance..." Billy began to say.

"Hold on Pete. Deke's here, he's fine. Don't worry." Billy said in an assuring voice.

"Yeah. I bet. Thanks for helping him out Pete and thanks for making sure he's okay. I really appreciate it." Billy said honestly.

"No shit? Well, tell Jono that he has a place down here anytime he needs it, and that goes for you too." Billy said with concern.

"All you got to do is call me and you'll have plane tickets waiting on you at the airport. It's that simple. Tell him. Okay?" Billy said seriously.

"Yeah. Thanks again Pete. Tell your mom and dad I said 'hi' and smack Frankie up side the head for me." Billy finished with a smile.

"Yeah. Later. Bye." Billy said and disconnected.

"Sorry about that. It was my friend Pete from Minneapolis. He's the one who bought Deke the bus ticket. He said that Deke was such a mess, he thought it would be best for him to come here right away. He freaked out when he couldn't get in touch with me and let me know Deke was coming." Billy said simply.

"It's good to know you have friends who'll watch out for Deacon like that." Allen said seriously.

"Yeah. Pete and Jono are the best... It sounds like the company Jono works for may be about to close down." Billy said with concern.

"They know you're here when they need you. That's probably all you can do for now." Allen said frankly.

"Yeah. You're right. I just feel like I should be able to do more since I have all this money." Billy said seriously.

Allen nodded and said, "It's hard to know when you should use it to try and help and when to stand back and let things happen."

"Yeah. I've learned that." Billy said quietly.

"Speaking of money, I have to remember to make a few calls. I've got to get the cable turned on and talk to a realtor about selling a house." Allen said seriously.

"You've got another house?" Billy asked curiously.

"Yes, the one that I lived in before I bought this one. It's a really nice little two bedroom." Allen said with a peaceful smile.

"Before you put it on the market, I'd like to see it." Billy said seriously.

"Of course, but why do you need another house?" Allen asked curiously.

"For Pete and Jono if they end up coming down here. I love those guys, they're my best friends. But there really isn't room for them at my place if they decide to move down here and besides that... I don't think I could live with them." Billy said with an uneasy look.

"Why not?" Allen asked curiously.

"Well, like I said, they're my best friends, but Pete is really... um, aggressive. I don't mean like violent or anything but more like pushy. He's a really good guy, but he kind of takes charge, like, all the time." Billy said with difficulty.

"That can really put people off. I'm glad you can see past it and appreciate the person inside." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. It would just be really tough to be around him all the time. And Jono is kind of... he never shuts up. He's interesting and funny and cool as shit but it just gets old after a few hours. I swear that my ears are still buzzing a half hour after he leaves from his constant chatter... I kind of miss it now." Billy said with a fond smile.

"So what irritating habit do you have to fit in with your friends?" Allen asked curiously.

Billy smiled a big smile and said, "I'm the quiet one."

Allen gave Billy an incredulous look.

"Seriously! When I met Pete and Jono in school, I probably didn't say ten words to them the first two weeks I hung around with them. They just kind of adopted me into their group and I went along with it." Billy said in explanation.

"Sorry, but I just have trouble seeing you as timid and quiet. You seem perfectly able to voice your thoughts and feelings." Allen said speculatively.

"Well I had to while I was hanging around with those guys. If I didn't learn to speak up, Petey would have walked all over me. And if I didn't learn to interrupt Jono he'd never have a chance to take a breath." Billy finished with a smile.

"Well, from the way you describe them, I think you're right about finding a separate place for them to live. Tomorrow I'll probably be taking the boys to look at schools. Maybe you and Deacon would like to come along. Afterward we could look at my old house and you can decide if you like it." Allen said seriously.

"Yeah, that sounds cool. Are you thinking about sending the guys to private school?" Billy asked curiously.

"No. Kenny will probably go to the public school he attended last year. Reuben may decide to go there too. Xain, Jake and Kevin will most likely be going to 'Camp Little Eagle'." Allen said carefully.

"Sean and Cory told me about the camp. But I thought it was like a boy's home." Billy said with concern.

"Not exactly. I mean it is a boy's home, but from what I've been told, it's a whole lot more. It's not a place to put problem boys to keep them out of trouble. It's a place to help boys who need individual attention. I haven't seen it myself but from everything I've heard, it sounds really nice." Allen said honestly.

"Well, it sounds like it's worth looking at. And I'd like to get Deke's school stuff started as soon as possible so he's not too far behind." Billy said thoughtfully.

"Good. I'll talk to Sean and Cory about it when they get here to see when's the best time to visit." Allen said seriously.

The group of boys walked into the kitchen and took their places around the table.

"I guess the best part of the storm is over." Allen said with a smile.

"Yeah. It was really cool. Kenny says you have storms like that all the time." Kevin said with excitement.

"That's right. We have some of the most beautiful weather in the world. But when it storms, it really storms." Allen said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Are you going to get married?" Kevin asked Jake and Xain curiously.

"What?" Jake asked as he nearly choked on his food.

"Poppa said you and Xain are *T'hy'la* are you going to get married now?" Kevin asked seriously.

"When I reach the age of fourteen, I will return to Vulcan and stand before my family to declare my mate." Xain said seriously.

Allen thought about the statement, then asked, "So you plan to follow the traditional *pon'farr* ritual?"

"Yes, although due to my unique physiology it is not a foregone conclusion that I will experience *pon'farr*." Xain said logically.

"I hadn't thought of that. Well, either way I think it's a good idea." Allen said with a gentle smile.

"Um, what's a ponfar?" Billy asked curiously.

"Sometime around Xain's fourteenth birthday he will feel an instinctive need to select a mate. The first *Pon'farr* is comparatively weak and would normally be suppressed to allow Xain seven more years to reach his full maturity. However, it is acceptable for him to select a mate during the first *pon'farr*." Allen said thoughtfully.

Xain and Jake were obviously communicating telepathically.

Allen noticed and waited for them to be done.

Jake glanced at his Dad and shyly said, "Xain was just filling me in on the ceremony. It sounds kinda cool."

Allen smiled and said, "I think it will be wonderful.

* * * * *

"That was a great lunch Juana. I think we're all ready to enjoy some birthday cake for dessert." Allen said with a smile at Deacon.

"Yeah." Deacon said as he rushed to the dining room.

"Would you like some coffee with your cake?" Juana asked as she cleared the dishes from the table.

"Yes. That sounds great Juana." Allen said with a contented smile.

"Deke and I are going to go shopping to get him some new clothes this afternoon." Billy said casually as he rested back in his chair.

"That should be fun. I was wondering if you and Deacon would like to come with us to the courthouse for the name change. It won't be too long before we leave and it should only take a few minutes." Allen asked as he also rested back.

"Um, okay, I guess." Billy said with confusion at the invitation.

"It's kind of a family moment, I thought you and Deacon would like to share in it." Allen said in explanation.

Deacon walked carefully into the kitchen carrying his cake and sat it in the center of the table.

Billy looked at his brother, then said, "I guess we're not used to being included in stuff like that. Yeah, we'd love to go."

"Where are we going?" Deacon asked as he took his seat.

"Allen invited us to be there when Edovina gets her name changed." Billy said with a smile.

Juana approached the table with a stack of dessert plates and a knife to cut the cake.

"It is Deacon's cake so he gets the honor of cutting it." Juana said as she handed him the knife.

Deacon looked at the cake and said, "It's too pretty to cut."

Allen smiled and said, "Just go ahead and do it Deacon. It's meant to be eaten."

Deacon hesitantly brought the knife up to cut the cake when Billy said, "Hold on a second Deke."

Deacon stopped and looked at Billy in question.

"Would you mind if we moved the cake back into the dining room and I took some pictures before we cut it?" Billy asked Allen quickly.

Allen smiled and said, "Leave it to the photographer to think of that."

"Put your cake back in the dining room and I'll get my camera." Billy said as he stood.

"Yeah, thanks Billy." Deacon said happily and carefully picked the cake up again.

Allen grabbed the knife and said, "Come on guys. We're going to have our cake in the dining room."

All the boys gathered the plates and forks to carry them into the dining room.

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"Okay Deke, would you stand by your presents for a picture?" Billy asked hopefully.

Deacon happily moved to the buffet where his collection of presents sat.

"Good... I guess I don't have to tell you to smile." Billy said happily as he snapped the picture.

"Now if everyone will stand in front of the window, I'll get one with the banner." Billy said as he quickly checked the light with his light meter.

"Good, Jake, turn Edovina a little so I can get her face... that's it." Billy said as he snapped the picture.

"While you've got it set up, would you like me to take one of you and Deacon?" Allen asked with a gentle smile.

"Yeah, thanks Allen." Billy said happily.

* * * * *

"Thompson residence." Allen said as he answered the phone.

"Sure Teri, in fact I already invited him." Allen said with a smile.

"Yes, don't worry, we'll be there. Thanks for calling. Bye." Allen said quickly.

"What was that all about?" Billy asked curiously.

"That was Teri. It seems that they got thrown behind schedule and need for us to meet them at the courthouse." Allen said seriously.

"Oh, okay. That's no problem." Billy said with a smile.

"And she asked me to invite you along, she didn't say why." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Okay, well, since we were planning to go with you anyway, that's fine." Billy said simply.

"Let's get everyone together and head down there now. I'd rather have to wait a few minutes than take the chance of being late due to traffic problems." Allen said to the group.

"I think we'll need to take both cars for this trip." Allen said as he returned to the dining room.

"Well, I'm going to take my car so we can go shopping when we leave the courthouse." Billy said frankly.

"We're still going to need to take two cars. There are just too many of us. Juana, you drive the Beamer, I'll drive the Caravan. You guys can split up any way you want." Allen said seriously.

"I think it's easier to take care of Vina in the Caravan." Jake said seriously.

"Can I ride there with Deacon and Billy?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Do you guys mind?" Allen asked with a smile.

"No prob." Billy said casually.

"Okay, then Kenny, grab your gameboy and headphones. Kevin, get your smallest sketchpad. Jake, if you'll go upstairs to my bedroom, you'll find a portable CD player on my nightstand. Grab it and a few CDs to listen to." Allen said, then looked curiously at Xain.

"I do not need distraction." Xain said seriously.

Allen nodded, then looked at Juana.

"Reuben, find a coloring book for Ricardo and a book for yourself." Juana said in her motherly voice.

"Kenny, can I borrow one of your books?" Reuben asked hopefully.

"Sure, come on while I get my gameboy." Kenny said quickly and ran out of the room.

"*Vamanos* Ricardo." Kevin said quickly and hurried out with Ricardo on his heels.

Billy looked at Deacon, trying to figure out what he should do.

"I have my new game." Deacon said with a smile.

Billy nodded with relief.

Allen looked at Xain again, then hurried out of the room to the family room.

* * * * *

"We'll meet you at the main doors of the courthouse." Allen said as the three groups went out the front door.

"Yeah, we'll see you there." Billy said happily as he, Deacon and Kenny walked toward their house.

"Do you have everything for Edovina?" Juana asked with concern.

"I stocked the stroller full of everything she'll need, I've got a bottle of formula and a bottle of juice and Xain has the car seat." Jake said seriously.

"Not many fathers have such foresight." Juana said with a smile.

Jake felt a boost of pride at the compliment.

* * * * *

"Hey guys. How's it going?" Teri asked as they entered the courthouse.

"Just fine. Did you get all your errands run?" Allen asked casually.

"Yes, even the bicycle shop. It just took longer at Starfleet than we expected." Teri said with a smile.

"I have your birthday cake in the car. I will give it to you when we leave." Juana said quietly.

"Thank you so much Juana. I really am looking forward to it." Teri said with a grateful smile.

Kenny looked at Cory and said, "Dad had us bring books and games because it's probably going to be really boring."

Cory smiled and said, "I bet he's right. Sean and I got enough paperwork between Starfleet and the Vulcan Embassy that we'll have plenty to keep us busy."

* * * * *

"How much longer?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Fifteen minutes." Allen said without looking up from his book.

Kenny nodded, then went back to playing his video game.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to listen to music with me? I'll share." Jake said with concern.

"No. Thank you." Xain said seriously.

Allen looked up from his book and said, "I brought something for you if you would like Xain."

After a long silent moment, Xain looked at Allen curiously.

"Here. This should keep you busy for a while." Allen said as he handed Xain a small piece of paper.

Teri and Billy watched Xain read the paper, then Teri noticed that Jake had a distant look in his eyes.

Billy silently watched as Xain's expression became more and more focused.

Cory looked up from his paperwork and was surprised to see the look of intense concentration on Xain's face.

Finally Teri looked at Allen with question.

Allen smiled at her, then started reading his book again.

* * * * *

"Okay Allen, he's been reading that little piece of paper for ten minutes. What could you have possibly given him that would absorb him and Jake so completely?" Teri finally asked in wonder.

"Xain, would you like to read it to Teri?" Allen asked with a smile.

Xain blinked, then in a distracted tone, said, "Yes Father."

anyone lived in a pretty how town
e.e. cummings

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did

Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that no one loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and no one stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
no one and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

Teri, Cory and Billy all sat staring in wonder.

"I thought it might occupy his mind." Allen said with a shrug.

Teri began to chuckle and finally said, "That was just mean."

"No. Not at all. The dynamics of this poetry are... fascinating." Xain finished and began to read the poem again.

Allen nodded with a smile, then went back to reading his book.

Deacon looked up from his game to see Billy looking at Allen with admiration.

With a happy smile, Deacon went back to playing his game.

* * * * *

"I didn't expect to see you all again so soon." Judge Robison said as he walked into his chambers.

"Neither did we your honor." Allen said honestly.

"Please, call me Jamie while we're in here. What can I do for you today?" Judge Robison asked as he relaxed into his chair.

Teri stood and handed the Judge a stack of papers.

"Would you like to give me the condensed version of this?" Jamie asked as he began to look over the papers.

"We were able to get a DNA test proving that Jake Thompson is the biological father of Edovina Vasquez. Since Jake is a member of Clan Short, she can be officially recognized as Jake's daughter by Vulcan law. But we still need to go before a judge to change her name." Teri said as simply as she was able.

Judge Robison looked through the paperwork quickly and said, "This all seems to be in order, there only seems to be one problem."

"What's that?" Teri asked in panic.

"Since you're operating under Vulcan law in the matter of the child's paternity, it takes precedence." Jamie said thoughtfully.

"Judge Robison is correct. Edovina is officially recognized as a dependent child of two Clan members. Vulcan law has precedent in this instance." Xain said seriously.

"Does that mean we can't change her name?" Jake asked in confusion.

"No, it means that no official change can be made to Edovina's legal status without the approval of the Clan Patriarch." Xain said and looked at Cory.

"Well, that's no problem. I'm right here. I approve." Cory said simply.

"May I see your credentials so I may continue?" Judge Robison asked in a respectful voice.

Cory handed his Vulcan ID to the Judge and waited.

"Then it's done. I'll have the clerk file this immediately." Judge Robison said as he signed the document.

Everyone looked at Judge Robison curiously.

"Oh yes. Jake and Xain, please bring Edovina over here." Judge Robison said as he stood.

Jake took Edovina from Juana and hurried with Xain to stand beside the Judge.

"Jake and Xain, may I present to you and everyone present Edovina Vasquez Thompson." Judge Robison said in a formal, booming voice.

A brief but heartfelt applause rose up from all in the room.

"I really should have a group rate for families like the Dodds, Thompsons and the Shorts." Judge Robison said as he took his seat again.

"You might want to add the Pierces to that." Teri said as she handed Judge Robison the custody papers for Deacon.

"What did you need me to do with these?" Judge Robison asked as he looked them over.

"Actually, nothing. I just wanted to introduce you to Deacon and Billy; the latest additions to our family. I just thought you might like to keep abreast of the latest developments since we seem to see each other so much." Teri finished with a shy smile.

Jamie laughed and said, "Thank you Teri. You know, I think you're the first person who actually thought to include me as an interested party in something like this. It's a good feeling."

"You know how families come together when there's a birth, death, or a marriage. It seems like you're there for every major event we have... it sort of makes you like part of the family." Sean said thoughtfully.

Teri nodded at Sean's statement, then said, "Judge Jamie Robison, I'd like to introduce William Pierce."

Jamie walked to stand before Billy and said, "It's nice to meet you Mr. Pierce."

"Please call me Billy." He said shyly as he shook the judges hand.

"As long as you call me Jamie." The Judge said with a gentle smile.

"And you must be Deacon." Jamie said and shook Deacon's hand.

"Y... yes sir." Deacon said shyly.

"Don't worry Deacon, I'm just meeting you as a friend of the family. You're not in any trouble." Jamie said in a gentle voice.

Deacon gave a sigh of relief.

Jamie noticed and smiled as he went back to his desk.

"So what else is going on with the family?" Jamie asked as he sat down in his chair.

"Well, Chip is back on Earth at the moment...."

* * * * *

"Cory, I was thinking of taking the boys to see Camp Little Eagle tomorrow. Is there anything I need to do?" Allen asked as they filed out of Judge Robison's chambers.

"When I get home I'll call Chief Tecumseh and set it up. I'll send you the details on your terminal." Cory said seriously.

"Thanks. Would it be any problem if Deacon came too?" Allen asked as an afterthought.

"I can't think of any reason why it would be, but I'll check to be sure." Cory said thoughtfully.

"Thanks. I just want to get everything taken care of before I have to go back to work." Allen said with a smile.

"Well if you need something official done when you're at work, you can always give me a call. I work from home so it wouldn't be a problem." Teri said as they walked out of the courthouse.

"Thanks Teri, I think Juana can handle almost anything. But if it comes to it, I'll call." Allen said gently as Teri pulled out her car keys.

"If you will wait a moment, I will get your birthday cake." Juana said and rushed away from the group.

Teri smiled at Juana and said, "I'm so glad the boys thought to invite Juana and her family to live here. I think it's the best possible thing for everyone."

"I have to agree. Juana is incredible." Allen said with a gentle smile.

"Me too." Jake said with a smile as he looked into the stroller where Edovina slept.

"What's wrong Ricardo?" Allen asked at the worried look on Ricardo's face.

"Sleepy." Ricardo said in a cranky voice.

"Oh, it's past your nap time isn't it?" Allen asked with a smile as he squatted down to hug Ricardo.

"If you would like, I can take Ricardo to the Caravan where he can lay down on the rear seat." Xain said seriously.

"Thank you very much Xain, that's a good idea. Here are the keys, we'll be there in just a few minutes." Allen said with a smile.

Xain accepted the keys and led Ricardo away by the hand.

"He's really amazing." Teri said with astonishment.

"All my boys are." Allen said with a loving smile at Jake, Kevin and Kenny.

Teri laughed as she said, "I know what you mean."

"Here, the cake was made by Xain. I know you will enjoy it." Juana said as she hurried back to the group.

"Thank you very much Juana. Do you think you'll be available to come over to visit while Allen and the boys look at the camp?" Teri asked casually.

Juana looked stunned by the request.

"We live just across the street from Camp Little Eagle, so it won't be out of your way." Teri said carefully.

"Yes, yes of course." Juana said happily.

"Good. Don't be surprised if Kayla or Helen is there too." Teri said gently.

"I will have Ricardo and Edovina with me." Juana said thoughtfully.

"That's fine. I'm sure Kayla and Helen will just fuss over them like crazy." Teri said happily.

"May I bring anything? A coffee cake perhaps?" Juana asked hopefully.

"Only if you want to. We'll probably end up sitting around and talking about our kids." Teri finished with a smile.

"I'm going to take Vina to the car. I think she needs to be changed." Jake said to Allen in a whisper.

"Go on, we'll be right there." Allen said in return.

"Well, I have to be going. See you all tomorrow." Teri said happily as she climbed into her car.

"Goodbye Teri." Allen said gently.

"Bye Cory, Bye Sean." Kenny said quickly as they also got into the car.

"Tell Xain to be near the terminal tonight. We'll be calling." Cory said from his open window.

"We will." Kevin said with assurance.

* * * * *

As Allen inched forward in the impossibly slow traffic jam, he thanked God, Mikey and whoever else he could think of that he had asked the boys to bring things to keep them entertained.

Just when he thought the traffic couldn't get any slower, it did.

"I think there's an accident up there." Kenny said from the passenger seat.

"That would explain why the traffic is nearly stopped. Some people don't have anything better to do than slow down to look at an accident." Allen said with irritation.

"Pop! It looks like Dad's car!" Kenny said in nearly a scream.

Allen inched impossibly closer to the car in front of him, trying to see the accident.

"Oh my God!" Allen said as he looked at the BMW turned completely over, blocking one lane of traffic.

"Where's Mamacita?" Jake said as he frantically looked at the car through tear filled eyes.

"And Reuben." Kevin said in a whimper as he squeezed in beside Kenny in the passenger seat and hugged him tightly.

CHAPTER 26

"Father. This is not the vehicle Mamacita was driving." Xain said firmly.

"What?" Allen asked as tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Although this car is of the same model and color, the license number is different. This is not the vehicle Mamacita was driving." Xain said seriously.

Allen looked at the license plate and realized that Xain was right.

"Thank you Xain." Allen said as he tried to compose himself.

Jake pulled Xain into a hug of relief and gratitude.

"If any of you pray, I think you should give thanks for that not being Juana's car." Allen said with a long sigh of relief as he watched the paramedics working to free the driver from the overturned car.

"Yeah Dad, I'm already on it." Jake said with a relieved smile.

"Well, thanks for thinking of me Jake, but it wasn't me." Mikey's voice came from the back of the van.

"Mikey!" Kevin said happily as he struggled to get out of the seat he was sharing with Kenny.

"Shhh, you don't want to wake Ricardo. He needs his sleep. Give me a minute." Mikey said quietly as he stroked Ricardo's head in his lap.

Kevin reluctantly settled back into his seat as Kenny asked, "Is whoever is in the car going to be okay?"

"Yeah, he'll be fine. He just needs to learn not to talk on his cell phone while he's driving." Mikey said with a distant look.

Xain looked at Mikey in disbelief, then to Jake.

"Well then, thank you for watching over the boys Mikey." Allen said as he glanced at Mikey in the rear-view mirror.

Jake shared his memories of Mikey with Xain along with an undercurrent of his gratitude for Mikey's help.

"I don't just watch over *them*." Mikey said with a mischievous grin back at Allen.

"I thought you were the Patron Saint of Gay and Abandoned youth?" Allen said carefully as he tried to keep at least some attention on his driving.

"I am. That includes you... unless you switched teams when I wasn't looking." Mikey said in a teasing voice.

"No chance of that... but, I'm not a kid." Allen said carefully.

"Sure you are, at least in all the ways that count." Mikey said honestly.

"Oh... so what I was saying to Billy about still feeling like a kid inside... I'm not just imagining that?" Allen asked thoughtfully.

"No. At some point while growing up, most people lose the spark of youth and innocence. That's when they really become adults. Something inside feels the loss of that spark and seeks to regain it. Starting a family and having kids is a way of doing that." Mikey said thoughtfully as he absently continued to stroke Ricardo's hair.

Allen sat thoughtfully at the statement, not knowing if still being a kid inside was a good or a bad thing.

"Your spark started to flicker when Carl died and Kenny left for Chicago. But just in the nick of time, you woke up in that hospital to find Kenny and Kevin beside you. It's a wonderful gift that most people your age can't even conceive. You aren't trying to regain your youth by spending time with your sons, you're sharing your youth with them." Mikey said warmly.

"Thanks Mikey. I didn't realize that I was so blessed." Allen said with a smile.

"No prob Allen. You're on the right track. Just be true to yourself and enjoy your boys and everything will be fine." Mikey said happily.

"Excuse me. Jake claims that you are an angel... I believed such creatures to be mythological." Xain said as he watched Mikey carefully.

Mikey got a big smile and leaned forward to Xain to whisper, "So did I."

Xain quirked an eyebrow at the unexpected response.

Mikey giggled, then said, "Logically I can't be here... But I am. If you'll promise not to spread what I'm about to tell you outside the family, I could explain the basics."

"Yes, please." Xain said hopefully.

"Everything in the universe follows a certain set of rules." Mikey said thoughtfully.

Xain nodded expectantly as Jake put an arm around him.

"Our Father set those rules in place so his children could be free to enjoy a logical, predictable existence." Mikey said carefully.

Xain listened, devoting his complete attention.

"Our Father created those rules but is in no way bound by them. Since the universe is filled with beings of free will, there is sometimes a need for events to be guided in a certain direction. That's why there are Angels and Saints." Mikey said with a peaceful smile.

"Is it intentional that you do not provide scientific evidence of your existence?" Xain asked carefully.

"Yes, for the most part. Those who are hopelessly bound by their belief in logic and science can choose to ignore us and explain away our works. Those who are believers in religion are free to accept the limited evidence as proof of our existence. Both points of view are valid and necessary. I'm not going to explain everything to you, I just want you to know that logic and science are important but don't encompass everything... you can choose to see beyond logic." Mikey finished with a serious look into Xain's eyes.

"I believe I understand." Xain said thoughtfully.

"I believe you do too. It isn't necessary to dwell on these questions, just knowing as a fact that some things exist outside the realm of what is scientifically definable and explainable can help you reconcile some of what you are likely to hear and see. Besides that, I think it would be cool if you'd pray to me now and then to let me know how things are going." Mikey finished with a smile.

"Don't you already know?" Jake asked curiously.

"Yeah, for the most part. But I don't know from your point of view. Anyway, I like hearing from you guys." Mikey finished with a warm smile.

Jake nodded as Xain was still lost thoughtfully.

"Here, take Ricardo. I have some twins to cuddle." Mikey said as he gently handed Ricardo to Xain.

"Come on guys. Thanks for being patient." Mikey said as he sat back in the middle of the back seat.

Kenny and Kevin scrambled back and took seats on either side of Mikey.

"Guys, I'm really proud of you, especially how you've taken care of Deacon." Mikey said as he hugged a twin with each arm.

"Thanks Mikey. Anyway, Deacon's kewl." Kenny said seriously as he enjoyed the hug.

"Yeah. He is. Kevin, do you remember how you would feel when your mom would leave for a few days at a time?" Mikey asked quietly.

Kevin nodded seriously.

"That's what Deacon's been feeling all day, every day, most of his life. Keep that in mind. He doesn't know how to ask for attention, he really doesn't know how to accept it, and sometimes he's a little afraid of it." Mikey said seriously.

"But he needs it worse than either of us." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"That's right. Until he's settled into his new life, he could easily melt down if he starts feeling abandoned or in the way." Mikey said carefully.

"That's no problem. We like Deacon. We'll just invite him to join us when we do stuff." Kenny said simply.

"Good. Deacon is very special. If we can get him past this rough part of his life..." Mikey drifted off with a dreamy look, then shook his head to dispel the image in his mind.

"What?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Good things." Mikey said with a secretive smile.

"We're here." Allen said as they pulled into the driveway.

"Would you mind if I held Edovina for a minute before I have to go?" Mikey asked hopefully.

Jake gave Mikey a momentary look of surprise, then said, "Um, sure."

Jake carefully got Edovina out of her car seat while Allen, Kenny and Kevin were climbing out of the SUV.

Mikey accepted Edovina from Jake and said, "Hello Edovina. I just wanted to welcome you to the family."

Edovina looked at Mikey with wide, alert eyes.

Mikey kissed her gently on the forehead, then handed her back to Jake.

"Who's that?" Ricardo asked sleepily from Xain's lap.

"That is Mikey, our guardian Angel." Xain said seriously as Mikey climbed out of the car.

Ricardo looked at Xain curiously, then looked at Mikey with a grand smile.

"Come here Ricardo. I have to fix something." Mikey said as he held out his arms to Ricardo.

"What's wrong?" Allen asked with concern as he walked to Mikey's side.

Mikey took Ricardo into his arms and said, "Nothing serious. Ricardo just got a little too much information in his language dump. Part of the joy of childhood is discovery. I'm putting a few blocks in place until he is older."

"Thanks. I thought his language was a little advanced for his age." Allen said carefully.

"It goes beyond that. Ricardo received all the language skills of Xain and Jake... all of them." Mikey said seriously, then waited for that to sink in.

"Oh, sorry." Jake said with a blush.

"I've just put a few blocks in place that will dissolve naturally when he's old enough to deal with those concepts. He still has his native Spanish, plus Jake's English and Xain's Ceremonial and Standard Vulcan." Mikey said as he cuddled Ricardo tightly.

"Thanks Mikey, I guess we didn't think of that." Allen said shyly.

"Solak and Xain had no way of knowing that a Human child would have difficulty with certain concepts. It wouldn't have been an issue with a Vulcan child." Mikey said, then kissed Ricardo on the cheek.

"I've got to go now. There's a girl in Venice who's about to come out to her parents and may need a little help." Mikey said with a distant look.

"Will you come back to visit us sometimes?" Kevin asked as he hugged Mikey from the side.

"Of course. Probably when you least expect it." Mikey said as he released Ricardo from his hug.

"Thanks for watching out for us Mikey." Kenny said as he hugged Mikey from the other side.

"It's my pleasure guys." Mikey said happily.

Xain and Jake stepped forward and Mikey turned his attention to them.

"When you guys go to Vulcan for the *Pon'farr* ceremony, I'll be there watching over you. I've already put in for the time off." Mikey said seriously.

"Thank you Mikey." Jake said as he gently hugged Mikey with one arm and held Edovina with the other.

"Yes. The knowledge of your presence will be comforting." Xain said seriously.

"Come here." Mikey said and pulled Xain into a hug.

Mikey leaned down so that only Xain could hear and whispered, "You are exactly who and what you were intended to be."

Xain hugged Mikey tightly and whispered, "Thank you Mikey."

Xain released Mikey and took a step back to stand beside Jake.

"Come on Allen, you too." Mikey said with a smile.

Allen gladly stepped forward and was pulled into a joyful hug.

"Carl was well on the way to an... unpleasant afterlife. His time with you and Kenny was enough to change his fate. He's at peace and very proud of you." Mikey said gently.

Allen hugged even tighter and said, "I just had a feeling that he made it."

"He did, and he has a message for you." Mikey said with a gentle smile.

"What's that?" Allen asked as he pulled out of the hug to look Mikey in the eyes.

"He says that Billy is a total stud. Go for it." Mikey said with a timid smile.

Allen laughed and said, "Well, Carl always was one for getting right to the point."

"I've got to go now. I'm proud of you guys, keep it up." Mikey said happily.

Jake blushed at the statement.

Mikey noticed and rolled his eyes as he dissolved in a shower of golden sparkles and laughter.

* * * * *

"Mamacita!" Jake said happily as he hurried into the kitchen.

Juana looked at Jake curiously as he pulled her into a hug.

Kenny and Kevin went immediately to Reuben and hugged him tightly.

"What is wrong?" Juana asked with confusion and concern from Jake's one armed hug.

"We saw an accident on the way home and for a minute... we thought it was you." Allen said quietly.

"We were scared that you were hurt." Kevin said honestly as he held Reuben tightly.

"Yeah. It scared us really bad." Kenny said as he hugged Reuben from the other side.

"It is satisfying to see that you are well." Xain said seriously as he looked into Juana's eyes.

"Thank you Xain." Juana whispered through the beginnings of tears in her eyes.

"Have you started on dinner?" Allen asked curiously.

"No, I was putting away the dishes from lunch." Juana said carefully.

"Good, then I'd like to take us all out to dinner tonight." Allen said gently.

Juana nodded as Jake finally released her from the hug.

The sound of the phone ringing surprised everyone in the room.

"I guess they got it turned on." Allen said casually as he walked to the phone by the kitchen door.

After a moment of listening, Allen looked at the clock and said, "That's fine. In fact, that works out perfectly. We're going out to dinner tonight, you can come with us."

"Don't worry about that, we're not going anyplace formal. I promise that it will be someplace you can feel comfortable." Allen said seriously.

"Good, I'll pick you up at 5:45." Allen said quickly, then hung up the phone.

Everyone looked at Allen in question.

"Mona will be joining us for dinner." Allen said with a smile.

Juana looked at Allen curiously.

"My mother." Allen said in clarification.

"Why do you call 'she who is your mother' by her name?" Xain asked curiously.

"Wait until you meet her. If you still don't understand after that, I'll explain it to you." Allen said seriously.

Xain nodded cautiously, then accepted Edovina from Jake.

"Juana, if you'll take the boys to the restaurant, I'll pick Mona up at the bus station and meet you there." Allen said seriously.

"Yes. Of course." Juana said carefully.

"We still have a few hours until all that happens. I have to make a phone call right now, so why don't you guys discuss what you'd like to do this weekend?" Allen asked carefully.

* * * * *

After calling to get cable and Internet service hooked up, Allen found the group in the living room.

"What did you guys come up with?" Allen asked as he took a seat.

"Nothing for sure. We've all been kind of thinking out loud." Jake said carefully.

"What have you been thinking?" Allen asked curiously.

"Well, Reuben was interested in Disney. Kevin was talking about Sea world. Kenny was wanting to see if the Dolphins are playing. Xain suggested a trip to the Smithsonian. And I was thinking about Graceland." Jake said seriously.

"All very good ideas. It's going to be tough to pick one." Allen said thoughtfully.

"No it isn't. We already figured it out." Kevin said with a big smile.

"Really? What did we decide?" Allen asked curiously.

"Since we're kind of celebrating Deacon's birthday all day today. Why don't we let him decide what he wants to do this weekend?" Kevin said happily.

"Is that okay with everyone?" Allen asked as he looked around.

"Dad, we'll all have fun no matter where we go... we'd have fun if we stayed here. Besides, from what Kenny told us, you'll want to take us all those places anyway." Jake said happily.

"Well, you're right about that. But this isn't the best time of year for some of those activities. I think we'll probably hold Disney and Sea world until

late in the Spring or Summer. I guess we'll wait for Deacon and Billy to get home to decide." Allen said decisively.

"Can we watch a movie right now... I mean, like a family?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Sure, if you can find one that everyone will want to watch." Allen said with surprise.

"I think Ricardo would like Willy Wonka." Kenny said immediately.

"That's fine with me." Allen said hesitantly.

"I've never seen it." Kevin said quietly.

"Me neither." Jake said with a smile.

Xain shook his head to say he hadn't either.

"I saw it once a long time ago, but it was before I knew English." Reuben said seriously.

"Well, I think you'll all enjoy it." Allen said as Kenny got the DVD and loaded it into the player.

* * * * *

"Why would the authorities allow Mr. Wonka to make slaves of the Cherellian miners?" Xain asked carefully.

"They're Oompa Loompas, not Cherellian miners. And they aren't slaves, they're factory workers." Kenny said seriously.

"Their size and coloring would suggest that they evolved in a high gravity environment with extreme solar radiation. Cherellians are the only species I am aware of that were able to survive a Class G environment and if Mr. Wonka bought their mining contract, he would in essence, be their master." Xain said reasonably.

Kenny couldn't think of any way to respond.

"The bodily secretions of Cherellians would make them unsuitable for Human food preparation." Xain said thoughtfully.

"It's just a movie Xain." Allen said quietly, wondering if this was such a good idea.

* * * * *

"Why didn't the Cherellian miners help the little fat kid?" Kevin asked with tears in his eyes.

"By the lyrics of their song, they believe that his eating disorder makes him unworthy of survival." Xain said as he watched the movie carefully.

Jake smiled fondly at Xain, then pulled him into a casual hug.

"He isn't dead. Just watch." Allen said in frustration.

"Oh... Okay." Kevin said quietly as he discretely moved into Allen's lap to be held.

* * * * *

"The boat ride was funny when I couldn't understand what they were saying." Reuben said as he moved closer to his mother.

"The method of transportation is inefficient and I fail to see the purpose of such a tunnel in a factory that manufactures chocolate products." Xain said seriously.

"I used to see things like that." Jake said absently as he took gentle hold of Xain's hand.

Allen just snuggled Kevin and tried to focus on the movie.

* * * * *

"They are going to squeeze the juice out of the fat blue girl?" Kevin asked in astonishment.

"It's just a movie Kevin." Allen said as he felt Kevin's hold on him get even tighter.

"It was irresponsible of the Cherellian miners and Mr. Wonka to allow the child access to such a dangerous item." Xain said firmly.

"It's just a movie Xain." Allen said in a tired voice.

"He shouldn't have invited kids into his place if he couldn't protect them." Jake said seriously.

"It's just a movie Jake." Allen said, even more quietly.

* * * * *

"What's he going to do to Charlie?" Kevin asked as tears filled his eyes.

"Shhh, he's going to be fine. I promise." Allen said as he held Kevin tightly.

"Yeah. Finely chopped." Jake said as he saw the spinning fan blades.

"Thinly sliced." Xain corrected seriously.

* * * * *

"I find her ability to openly declare her desires to be a logical approach." Xain said in a considering voice.

"Yeah, nobody knows what you want unless you ask for it." Jake said as he snuggled into Xain's side.

"He's going to hurt her, I don't want to see it." Kevin said as he buried his face into Allen's chest.

Allen glanced over to see Reuben also hiding his face in Juana's chest as Ricardo slept against her side.

"That's Varuca, you're not supposed to like her. You're supposed to see that she's a spoiled brat." Kenny said seriously.

"Her behavior is reasonable. It is the behavior of he who is her father that is unreasonable. As the parent, it is his responsibility to set boundaries." Xain said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. She's just asking. It's his job to say 'no' sometimes." Jake agreed as he shifted down in the couch to rest his head on Xain's shoulder.

* * * * *

"That is the most inefficient... could they have not walked into the next room?" Xain asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, and that foamy soda pop stuff just looks nasty. Why would you even build a car like that." Jake said as he craned his neck to look into Xain's eyes.

"I thought it was going to kill Charlie because he drank that flying soda stuff." Kevin said quietly.

* * * * *

"He needs to adjust the matter gain and increase the containment field to correct the size discrepancy in his transporter." Xain said as he watched carefully.

Allen smiled and said, "I didn't consider that you would know how to repair Willy Wonka's television."

"Only in theory. I have no practical experience with transporter technology." Xain said, then his eyes went wide as he saw Mike Teevee transport himself.

"He did that on purpose... that kid needs to spend some time with Dan." Jake said seriously.

"I believe he is acting in such a manner to gain the attention of she who is his mother." Xain said in a speculative voice.

"I think one of the Cherellian miners is going to eat him." Kevin said as he held close to Allen.

"He'll be fine. It's just a movie." Allen said in a concerned whisper.

* * * * *

"So the child, Charlie is the new slave holder of the Cherellian miners and now has responsibility for the unsafe and unsanitary chocolate factory?" Xain asked slowly.

"I guess you could say that." Allen said with resignation.

"I think Wonka is setting him up. He knows that he's just a few days away from someone finding out what he's doing in the factory and so he's giving it to Charlie so he won't get in trouble." Jake said thoughtfully.

"That would be a logical conclusion." Xain said speculatively as he absently stroked Jake's hair with a feather light touch.

"And Charlie will go to jail and Wonka can start another factory with all the money he made from this one. Just like when you move a meth lab." Kevin said in realization.

"Hence his lack of concern about damaging the structure when they left in his transparent escape pod." Xain said with a nod.

"Uncle Allen? Do we have time to watch another movie?" Reuben asked hopefully.

Allen looked at Reuben's hopeful expression and quietly said, "It depends on the movie."

"Wizard of Oz?" Reuben asked hopefully.

Allen looked at the clock, then said with a smile of relief, "No Reuben, we don't."

* * * * *

"Hey guys, what's going on?" Allen asked with a cheerful smile.

"Well, Deke and I were talking and decided that we'd like to take you all out for dinner tonight." Billy said hopefully.

"We do sort of have plans, but we were hoping you could join us." Allen said hesitantly as he led them into the living room.

"What kind of plans?" Billy asked cautiously.

"Mona, my mother, is coming to visit and I'm going to take her out to dinner. I was hoping you and Deacon could come along." Allen asked a bit shyly.

Billy looked at Allen cautiously before saying, "Yeah, we could do that. But only if you let me pay. You've been feeding us both since yesterday."

Allen looked as if he were going to refuse, but saw the determined look in Billy's eyes and finally nodded.

"Can we ask Deacon about this weekend?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Go ahead." Allen said with a smile as he took a seat in his favorite chair.

"Dad says we can go do something this weekend, all of us, you included. And we thought that since we're having your birthday today, you could decide what we're going to do." Kenny said with a grand smile.

Deacon got a look of fear and looked at Billy.

"We all agreed that you get to pick, so no one's going to be mad or nothing like that." Kenny said quickly.

"Um, like where?" Deacon asked cautiously.

"Guys. Why don't you take Deacon upstairs and discuss it in your room. I'd like a minute to talk with Billy and Juana." Allen said seriously.

"Sure Dad." Jake said and picked Edovina up from her stroller.

Xain automatically grabbed the diaper bag from the back of the stroller and followed Jake out of the room.

When the last of the boys were gone, Billy and Juana both looked at Allen with question.

"I already told Juana about the wreck we saw on the way home." Allen began in deep thought.

"I heard about it on the radio when I was driving us to the store." Billy said seriously.

"Well, it was a BMW, just like the one Juana was driving." Allen said slowly.

"And you thought it was Juana." Billy said, completing Allen's thought.

Allen nodded, then said, "I don't know if you've thought about this. But something like that could happen to any one of us. I'm going to talk to my lawyer and get a will drawn up that states in no uncertain terms what I want done with the boys if anything should happen to me." Allen said carefully.

"Shit, I never even thought about that." Billy said with a distant look.

"I haven't either." Juana said quietly.

"Now I just need your advice on how to do it... I mean, I'd hate to have to split them up, but four boys..." Allen said in a distant voice.

"I'll do it." Billy said firmly.

"Are you sure?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I've got enough money that I could take off work for a few years and live pretty well if I wanted to. Your boys are as much brothers as me and Deke, we can't split them up. Besides, if something happens to you, I'll have Juana to help me take care of them." Billy said with a smile.

"Yes. And it would be my pleasure." Juana said seriously.

"I guess I'd better do the same for Deke. What do you say Allen? If something happened to me, could you take on another one?" Billy asked seriously.

"Absolutely." Allen said without a moments hesitation.

"And my boys?" Juana asked slowly.

"Of course Juana. If you want, I'll set up a time when you can talk with my lawyer." Allen said in a serious tone.

"Yes. Thank you. If something were to happen to me otherwise, the boys would go to my sister, Maria... she has five children, she cannot care for more." Juana said in a low voice.

"This is all just in case. I just want to be sure that the boys will end up somewhere that they'll be loved and cared for." Allen said firmly.

"Same here." Billy said, matching Allen's tone.

"Yes." Juana said, sounding sure of herself.

"Good. I'll call my lawyer tomorrow and set it up. Billy, do you have a lawyer?" Allen thought to ask.

"I have a contract lawyer. But I've never needed one for something like this." Billy said carefully.

"I'll put you in touch. I guess we'd better think about getting the crew ready to go." Allen said as he looked at his watch.

"Where were you thinking of going?" Billy asked curiously.

Allen smiled as he thought of the perfect place.

* * * * *

"Mona!" Allen called in delight as he saw her walking from the bus platform.

"Oh Allen, it's good to be here." Mona said with relief.

"Did you have a bad trip?" Allen asked as he picked up her suitcase.

"I've just spent three hours beside a man who believed he was 'The Holy Spirit'." Mona said frankly.

Allen chuckled, then said, "You did it to yourself Mona. How long till you get your license back anyway?"

"Two more months... Florida Highway Patrol officers have no sense of humor." She said with a shake of her head.

"Neither do the judges apparently." Allen said as he led her to the car.

Before Mona could respond to his comment, she saw where he was leading her and stopped.

Allen turned to look at her and said, "What?"

"Don't 'what' me Allen. I thought I raised you better than this." Mona said sternly.

Allen rolled his eyes and opened the trunk to put her suitcase in.

"Who would have thought that a son of mine would be driving a BMW." Mona said in a tone of long suffering.

"This was Carl's car. Juana took my car on to the restaurant." Allen said as he stood by the drivers side door.

"You're not too yuppie and proper to be seen with your old mother are you?" Mona asked in a teasing voice.

"Either get in or run along side." Allen said with a smile as he got into the car.

Mona chuckled and got in.

* * * * *

"So have you warned the boys about me?" Mona asked cautiously.

"No." Allen said with a smile.

Mona chuckled and said, "Good. I learn a lot about a person by their first reaction."

"I can't even guess what their reactions will be, but they're all good boys. I know they'll love you." Allen said warmly.

Mona looked at Allen carefully and said, "I've never seen you look so contented."

Allen smiled and said, "I'm happy."

"It shows. God Allen, you've had me worried." Mona said seriously.

"I know. But I just followed my heart... I learned from the best." Allen said with a glance at Mona.

Mona chuckled and said, "As far as examples go, I'm far from the best."

"You're wrong. You showed me how to be myself, no matter what anyone else thinks... even you." Allen said frankly.

Mona considered the words, then got a distant look as she said, "When you were just a toddler I pictured what you'd be like as an adult..."

"Are you disappointed?" Allen asked cautiously.

Mona gave a hearty laugh, then said, "Not hardly. In my daydream I had you married... to a woman. Working as an auto mechanic and coming over every Sunday to have dinner with your dear old mom."

"I know I didn't make the choices that you wanted me to, but looking back, I wouldn't change a thing." Allen said seriously.

"I can't think of many people who can say that." Mona said with a tender smile.

"You can." Allen said frankly.

"Yeah. I guess I can." Mona said with a distant look.

"We're here." Allen said as he pulled into the Pizza Hut parking lot.

Mona saw where they were and started laughing.

"I told you it was someplace you could feel comfortable."

* * * * *

"There's Pop." Kenny said with excitement.

"Okay guys. We're going to get to meet our new grandma, so everyone be nice." Jake said seriously.

"She gonna be my gamma too?" Ricardo asked hopefully.

Jake looked at Ricardo and said, "I bet she will."

Allen walked into the dining room, preceding a woman. Everyone at the table strained to see past him.

"Everyone, I'd like for you to meet my mother, Mona Bridson (a/n pronounced Brideson)." Allen said proudly.

Kenny looked with wide eyes at the woman who stood two inches taller than Allen and outweighed him by at least thirty pounds, all muscle.

Jake smiled with delight as he saw Mona. He noticed that she wore no makeup, her long auburn hair was pulled back in a simple pony tail and her clothes were casual and comfortable. He automatically felt as if he could relate to her.

Xain gave a cursory examination of she who was Allen's mother. She was slightly taller than the average Human female. Her casual nature and unpretentious appearance cause Xain to briefly think of his own mother. Unbidden, an emotion welled up within him and he immediately established his link with Jake to identify it and determine the appropriate way to deal with it.

Kevin looked at Mona with wonder. His grandmother, his real, very own, grandmother was standing before him.

Reuben looked at Mona and smiled. She was a pretty woman. She was 'real pretty' like his momma, not 'fake pretty' like movie stars.

Ricardo looked at Mona and knew nothing but the hope that she would be his grandmother.

"Mona, this is Juana Vasquez. She looks after the house and the boys when I'm at work." Allen said gently.

"A pleasure to meet you Mrs. Vasquez." Mona said as she held out a hand to shake.

Juana gently shook the hand and said, "Please call me Juana."

Mona gave a warm smile and said, "Okay Juana, and you call me Mona."

Allen smiled and said, "Over here we have my neighbor and good friend Billy Pierce. Billy, this is Mona."

"I think I've seen you in your underwear." Mona said as she looked at Billy carefully.

"What?" Billy said with a gasp.

"Either it was you or you have a twin running around doing underwear ads." Mona said seriously.

"Oh... that was me." Billy said with a scarlet blush.

Mona looked him up and down and finally said with a smile, "I love your work."

Allen chuckled and said, "Beside Billy is his brother Deacon."

Mona looked at Deacon carefully and said, "I bet you'll be doing some modeling soon. You're just about as good looking as your brother."

Deacon immediately hid his face as he blushed even more than Billy.

"Okay, and now for my boys. Beside Deacon, we have my son Kenny." Allen said with pride.

"Oh, Allen's told me about you. You're the one who like's models and sports, right?" Mona asked gently.

"Yes Ma'am." Kenny said cautiously.

"You can call me grandma if you want... or Mona if you're like Allen." She finished with a smirk directed at Allen.

"Beside Kenny is his twin brother Kevin." Allen said, not phased by her comment.

"Oh, the artist. You're going to have to draw something for me while I visit." Mona said gently to the pale, thin boy.

"I'll draw something really nice for you grandma." Kevin said happily.

Mona smiled at finally being called Grandma.

"Beside Kevin is my nephew, Juana's son Reuben." Allen said with a big smile.

"Nephew? Well, that means that you must be my grandson too." Mona said with delight.

"Really?" Reuben asked with joy.

"That's right." Mona said with a warm smile.

"Next to Reuben is my second oldest son, Xain." Allen said with anticipation.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Xain. Who are you holding?" Mona asked as she walked around the table to see the baby in Xain's lap.

"This is Edovina, my daughter." Xain said with a note of pride in his voice.

"Your great-granddaughter." Allen added.

"Great Granddaughter?" Mona asked in wonder as she caressed Edovina's cheek with one finger.

Edovina looked up and saw Mona and gave a gurgle of delight.

"She's gorgeous." Mona said in amazement.

"Beside Xain and Edovina is Jake, my oldest son and Edovina's other father." Allen said with a great smile.

Mona looked up in time to see the tender look of loved he directed at Edovina.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Jake." Mona said quietly.

Jake looked up and met her gaze.

"Allen tells me you like music. Later I'll tell you about some of the times I partied with Crüe." Mona said with a smile.

"You partied with Mötley Crüe?" Jake asked in wonder.

"Yeah. A few times... I'll tell you later." Mona said with a glorious smile.

"The young man in the booster chair is my other nephew, Ricardo." Allen said with a warm smile.

"Oh sweetie. You are just too adorable for words." Mona said as she automatically hugged him.

"You my gamma?" Ricardo asked hopefully.

"That's right. I'm your grandma." Mona said as she lifted him from his seat to hold him in a gentle hug.

"And we're back to Juana, come over and sit down. You guys already ordered didn't you?" Allen asked as he took his seat.

Mona took her seat, still holding Ricardo in her arms.

"Yeah. I still think four pizzas is a little too much. But like Allen said, they are growing boys." Billy said with a smile.

A waiter walked to the table and quietly asked, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Dear God, please tell me you have beer." Mona said hopefully.

The waiter chuckled and said, "Yes Ma'am, I can bring you the drink menu if you like."

"Do you have Bud on tap?" Mona asked quickly.

"Yes we do." The waiter said with a genuine smile.

"Set me up and keep 'em coming till the pizza's gone." Mona said seriously.

"And for you sir?" The waiter asked Allen, trying to restrain his laughter.

"Since I'm driving, I'll just have iced tea." Allen said with a smile.

"I'll be right back." The waiter said and hurried away.

CHAPTER 27

"Grandma, are you a dyke?" Kevin asked innocently.

Mona looked at Kevin with disbelief as all other conversation at the table stopped.

Finally Mona said, "No Kevin, I'm not. I'm just not a dainty little woman and I don't pretend to be one."

Kevin nodded in acceptance.

"But if I could borrow Billy for half an hour, I could prove it if you want me to..." Mona said with a devilish smile directed at Billy.

Before anyone could comment, she added, "...Make that an hour, I'd like to prove it a couple times."

"If you'd caught me last week, I might have thought about it. But I just met someone kind of wonderful and I wouldn't want to take a chance of screwing it up." Billy said seriously.

Mona huffed a dramatic sigh and said, "It's the story of my life. It seems that all the cute ones are taken."

"This one is." Allen said seriously.

"Oh." Mona said with a look of realization.

Billy smiled at Allen's acknowledgement of him.

"We're taking it slow Mona, I'm being careful." Allen said as he looked her in the eyes.

Mona gave a gentle smile and said, "Billy just proved to me that he's loyal and level-headed. I think you'll be fine."

"Thanks Mona." Allen said tenderly.

Silence fell over the table as everyone waited for their pizza.

* * * * *

"So Allen, I suppose you're going to make me ask the question. How do two of your sons have a child?" Mona asked after taking a long drink of her beer.

"Edovina is Jake's daughter. Xain is Jake's..." Allen trailed off with difficulty.

"*T'hy'la*. He shares my soul." Jake said with pride.

Xain extended a hand to Jake and held out his index and middle fingers together. Jake responded by placing his index and middle fingers on top of Xain's.

"Oh. I see." Mona said with astonishment at the unusual expression of affection.

"It's kind of like a Vulcan kiss." Allen said to Mona in explanation.

"It's more than that." Jake said with a peaceful smile.

Before Allen could make any further comment, the pizzas arrived at the table along with breadsticks and hot wings.

* * * * *

"Aren't you hungry sweetie?" Mona asked Kevin who had been passing the time by talking quietly with Reuben, Kenny and Deacon.

Kevin looked up with surprise and shook his head timidly.

"Kevin isn't used to eating much. He's fine." Allen said with assurance, not wanting to make a big deal of it.

Mona looked at Allen challengingly and said, "That boy is too skinny, he needs to eat."

Before Allen could respond, Jake firmly said, "Kev is fine. He already ate twice today, that's a lot for him."

"To eat twice a day was a rare occurrence for Kevin before this week." Xain said seriously.

"Yeah, and he really feels funny about it, so can we not talk about it?" Kenny asked as he leaned over in his chair to hug Kevin quickly.

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry Kevin..." Mona trailed off with surprise.

The waiter arrived with a pitcher and started filling tea glasses around the table.

"All of us are going to go somewhere this weekend." Reuben said to Mona happily.

"Yeah, we just don't know where yet." Kevin said with relief at the change of subject.

"Are you keeping it a surprise?" Mona asked Allen with a smile.

"No. I'm letting the boys decide. Since we're celebrating Deacon's birthday today, they all decided to let him choose." Allen said with a gentle smile at Deacon.

"I don't know where to go." Deacon said helplessly.

"There's no pressure Deacon. Earlier Jake said that no matter what you pick, we would all have fun because we'll be together. I agree with him. Just think about what you would enjoy doing and we'll all do it." Allen said gently.

Deacon nodded thoughtfully.

"Are you ready for another beer?" The waiter asked Mona carefully.

"If you ever see my glass under half full, I'm ready for another one." Mona said seriously.

"I'll be right back." The waiter said with a smile.

* * * * *

Allen excused himself and left the table.

"So Billy, are you still modeling? I haven't seen any of your work for a while." Mona asked casually before taking a drink of her beer.

"No, well, not much. I work on the other side of the camera now." Billy said with a smile.

"Oh, so you're a photographer. I'd love to see your work." Mona said with interest.

"Yes. I was thinking about bringing my portfolio over tonight to show Allen." Billy said with a smile.

Allen returned to his seat and reached for a piece of pizza.

"I guess you were right about four pizzas being enough. These guys can really pack it in." Mona said as she looked at the diminishing pizza.

"It is a pleasure to see them have enough to eat." Juana said with a tender smile.

"Yeah, I think I've had more to eat in the last four days than I ate all last month." Jake said seriously.

"Well, I always had enough food, but not like Juana and Xain's." Kenny said with a grand smile.

"Yeah, their food is really good. I didn't know that food cooked for real tasted so different." Deacon said honestly.

Mona looked at Deacon curiously.

"Deacon is used to microwaving all his meals." Billy said and hugged Deacon quickly.

"A man after my own heart. I can't remember the last time I actually turned on my stove." Mona said with a smile at Deacon.

Deacon blushed and hid his face.

Mona turned her attention to Juana and asked, "So, is my son treating you alright since you came to work for him?"

Juana smiled and said, "Oh yes. Allen has been wonderful. He has given me a job, a place to live and accepted my children into his family."

"Good. I tried to raise him right, but he's been away from my tender loving care for a while. I just need to make sure that the lessons took hold." Mona said firmly.

Allen chuckled and said, "Don't worry Mona. You provided the best example I can imagine of how to be a decent person and a parent."

"When we get to the house I'm going to give you an example of how to be a grandparent. I'm going to start spoiling your kids rotten." Mona said with a mischievous grin.

"You would." Allen said in resignation as he looked toward the heavens

Mona looked around the table and said, "That includes you, you and you." As she pointed at Deacon, Reuben and Ricardo.

All the children seemed to be delighted with the prospect.

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"If you will excuse me, Edovina needs to be changed." Xain said as he stood.

"I'll get the diaper bag from the car." Jake said as he also stood.

Juana fished in her purse and handed Jake the keys.

"There's a fold down changing table in the men's room." Allen said as the boys started walking.

"Thanks Dad." Jake said as he walked past.

"I never would have imagined that two boys would be so responsible." Mona said as she watched them leave.

"Jake has had to take care of himself for the last two years. If he weren't taking care of Edovina, I think he might be feeling like he'd given up his independence. This way, I'm taking care of him, but he's taking care of her." Allen said speculatively.

"What about Xain?" Mona asked curiously.

Allen smiled as he said, "Xain accepts Edovina as his daughter. I think that by taking care of her, he's working out the issues he's had with his own childhood."

"Jake and Xain will be good fathers to my granddaughter. She will grow up with parents who love her and a grandmother to help her with girl things." Juana said tenderly.

"She also has a great-grandmother who is going to want to teach her some things." Mona said seriously.

Juana looked at Mona with question.

"Just promise me that when she's old enough, I get to be the one to show her how to rebuild her first carburetor." Mona said firmly.

Juana smiled and said, "I can promise that I will not deny you that joy."

"Good. Even if she grows up to be a girley girl, I'll see to it that she has a chance to learn about different things that everyone should know." Mona said with conviction.

Allen smiled in fond memory as he said, "I can remember when I was thirteen and you showed me how to drive a bulldozer."

Kenny looked at Allen with wide eyes.

"You took to it like a duck to water." Mona said with a smile.

"For years I wanted to grow up to drive heavy equipment." Allen said with a chuckle.

"You can really drive a bulldozer?" Kenny asked with excitement.

"He sure can. He can also operate a crane, backhoe and can do just about anything you can imagine with a forklift." Mona said proudly.

"It's been years since I've done anything like that." Allen said with a chuckle.

"You know that Morris would let you come by and help out anytime you wanted to." Mona said seriously.

At Kenny's questioning look, Mona explained, "Morris owns a construction company and has been a friend of mine for years. I used to work for him back in the day."

"It would be good to see Uncle Morris again. I haven't talked to him in years." Allen said distantly.

"He comes into the bar every now and then. He asks about you every single time he stops in." Mona said with a smile.

"Mona owns a bar." Allen said to the table in explanation.

"It keeps me out of trouble." Mona said with a casual shrug.

Allen gave Mona an incredulous look.

Mona smiled and said, "Well, maybe not. But it gives me something to do."

Allen nodded and went back to eating his pizza.

At Billy's curious look, Mona said, "I ran a stop light last month and didn't notice the police officer following me..."

"According to the police report, he chased you almost thirty miles." Allen interjected.

Mona chuckled and said, "Maybe I did notice him. I just didn't think he could catch me."

"So she led him on a thirty mile chase and finally lost control of her motorcycle on a dirt road." Allen said with an accusing look at Mona.

"You know me better than that Allen. I never lose control. I laid it down in a slide when I came around a corner and saw a tractor blocking the road. It was either that or run my Harley into a ditch and I'd never do that to my baby." Mona said firmly.

Allen shook his head and asked, "How is your baby anyway?"

"I don't know. The son-of-a... judge had it impounded. I'll get it back when I get my license back." Mona said sourly.

* * * * *

Xain and Jake walked back to the table with Edovina.

Allen looked up at the movement, and felt a fresh wave of love and contentment wash over him at the sight of the people he loved, all gathered around the table.

"Uh oh. Pop's got that look again." Kenny said seriously.

Kevin looked at Allen and nodded.

"What look is that?" Mona asked curiously.

"It usually means we're going to get hugged." Kenny said with a smile.

"Yeah. A lot." Kevin said with an identical smile to his twin.

"So you guys think you have me all figured out?" Allen asked, unable to keep a smile off his face.

"You have well established patterns of behavior." Xain said in his Vulcan demeanor.

Juana and Mona both chuckled at Xain's ability to tease Allen while remaining completely serious.

"Well, if I'm so predictable, then I guess you're expecting this." Allen said as he got up from his place at the table and walked to each boy to hug them in turn, starting with Deacon.

"We saw it coming from a mile away." Jake said as it was his turn to be hugged.

When Allen reached Ricardo, he noticed that Ricardo's face was covered, nearly ear to ear with sauce from the hot wings.

"I think my nephew needs to be cleaned up before I give him his hug." Allen said as he lifted Ricardo from his booster seat.

Ricardo giggled at the attention and tried to hug Allen. With some effort, Allen kept Ricardo's face slightly away from his body as he made his way to the bathroom.

* * * * *

"Pop is so cool." Kenny said happily.

Mona looked at Kenny with a smile and asked, "Do you really like living with Allen?"

"Yeah, he's been my Pop for years. But since Kevin and Jake and Xain are here, he's even cooler." Kenny said happily.

Mona looked at Kevin silently asking the same question with her eyes.

"I never had a Dad or a Poppa before this week. He loves me just the same as if I was born to him." Kevin said frankly.

Mona smiled and looked at Xain curiously.

"I am of mixed parentage. He who is my father is of Vulcan, she who was my mother was of Earth. In the absence of my biological Human parent, Father fulfills my Human needs as he who is my father fulfills my Vulcan needs." Xain said seriously.

Mona looked at Xain curiously, not fully understanding the response.

"Dad feels stuff and lets it show. Xain needs that." Jake said succinctly.

"What about you?" Mona asked curiously.

"When I first got here, someone asked me what kind of father I would like to have, the father of my dreams. Dad is everything that I asked for, and a whole lot more." Jake said happily.

Allen walked back to the table, carrying Ricardo on his hip and leading two other men.

"Hey everyone, I met some old friends while I was away." Allen said happily as he placed Ricardo back into his seat.

Everyone looked curiously at the short, heavyset balding man and the tall lean Vulcan.

"This is Stan and Sopek. Guys, this is my family, my mother, Mona, my neighbor Billy and his brother Deacon, my sons Kenny, and Kevin, my nephew Reuben, my sons Xain and Jake and their daughter Edovina, my nephew Ricardo who you already met and Ricardo's mother Juana." Allen said as he indicated each in turn.

"Allen said his family was here, but I didn't think there would be this many." Stan said with surprise.

Sopek looked at Xain curiously but didn't say anything.

"Pull up some chairs guys. There's still a little pizza left, please join us." Allen said cheerfully.

"We would not wish to intrude on your family gathering." Sopek said formally.

"If Father considers you to be friends, then it is logical for us to do likewise. Your acceptance of father's invitation would cause no intrusion but your refusal would cause distress." Xain stated firmly.

Jake nodded his agreement.

Allen pulled his chair out of the way as Stan pulled another table over to add it to the end.

When everyone was seated again, Stan said, "You never really talked about your home life Allen, but I never would have guessed you had this big a family."

Allen smiled and said, "I didn't. It's a very long story."

"Yeah, me and Pop got this big family all at once." Kenny said happily.

"How is it that you have a Vulcan child?" Sopek asked cautiously.

Allen looked at Xain to see if he wanted to explain.

Xain in turn, looked to Jake.

"Um, Xain came to live with us because he was invited to join our Clan. Dad kind of automatically accepted him as a son." Jake said thoughtfully.

"Then you are not formally Allen's child?" Sopek asked carefully.

"Poppa is *a'nirih* to Xain. His *sa-mekh* said so." Kevin said seriously.

Sopek raised an eyebrow at the young boy's use of Vulcan words.

At Sopek's look of surprise Jake said in standard Vulcan, "Kevin, Kenny, Xain and I are members of Clan Short of the family of Sarek of the House of Surak of Vulcan."

Sopek turned his surprised gaze on Jake.

"And my relationship to *K'war'ma'khon* Allen has been officially registered and acknowledged by my Patriarch." Xain said in English, keeping his full emotional control.

"Wow, a Vulcan Clan. I've read about them but I never met anyone who was a part of one." Stan said with wide eyes.

"The guys are just getting settled into it. They were officially made members Saturday." Allen said with a fond smile at his boys.

Deacon looked at his new friends curiously, wondering what the big deal was.

"You guys don't strike me as Pizza Hut people, how did you happen to stop in here tonight?" Allen asked, ready to change the subject.

"Well actually, I took Sopek to the Florida Museum of Natural History after work today. I was driving him back to the Vulcan Consulate when I saw your Caravan in the parking lot and I wanted to see how you were doing." Stan said frankly.

Allen smiled and said, "Thanks for checking on me guys. I appreciate that. You'd better hurry up and dig in while, there's still some pizza."

"Did you find the exhibits at the Museum of Natural History to be adequate?" Xain asked curiously.

As Stan grabbed a slice of pizza, Sopek said, "I find the diverse ecosystems of this planet to be quite remarkable. Normally one would have to examine several planets to find so many varied lifeforms."

"I have always thought it to be so. I would be interested in visiting the museum at some future date." Xain said seriously.

"If you guys will remind me, I'll try to work out a trip to the Museum later this week." Allen interjected.

Edovina started to fuss in Xain's lap.

"Can I hold her?" Deacon asked hopefully.

"Sure Deacon, just stay right there and I'll bring her to you." Jake said as he stood.

Everyone watched as Jake sat Edovina in Deacon's arms and made sure he was supporting her head correctly.

"What was the baby's name again?" Stan asked as he looked at the little girl.

"Edovina." Jake said with a proud smile as he took his seat.

"Edovina Vasquez Thompson, daughter of Xain of the family of Solak of the house of Suvak." Xain said formally, directing his statement primarily to Sopek.

"Wow. That's a big name for such a little girl." Stan said with wonder.

"You may call her 'Vina' if it is more convenient." Xain said with an expression that might be teasing directed toward Stan.

"My waiter seems to have forsaken me." Mona said as she looked longingly at her empty beer mug.

"Give him a minute Mona, you've got to admit that he's been doing a good job keeping up with all of us up to now." Allen said gently.

Mona gave him a 'whatever' look before turning in her seat, trying to locate the waiter.

"Don't get any ideas Deke, I'm not ready to be an uncle yet." Billy said as he watched Deacon carefully holding Edovina.

Deacon looked at Billy with a smile, then turned his full attention back to the baby in his arms.

Allen noticed movement and gave Kevin a curious look as he got out of his chair.

"Bathroom." Kevin said shyly.

Allen discretely looked at Xain and Jake. Without having to say a word, Xain automatically got up and followed Kevin to the bathroom.

"Can't he go to the bathroom by himself?" Mona asked curiously.

"Did you notice the way this place is laid out?" Allen asked seriously in return.

Mona shook her head.

"The exit is mostly out of view from the dining room. You have to walk past the exit to go to the bathroom. If someone wanted to abduct one of the kids, all they would have to do is wait for them to go to the bathroom, then they could pull them out the door and we wouldn't know anything was wrong until we noticed they were taking too long." Allen said seriously.

"I used to let you go off by yourself all the time and nothing ever happened to you." Mona said frankly.

"And we knew almost everyone in the community. If anyone had tried anything there would be a dozen people watching who would come to help me. We don't know anyone here and chances are that no one would help." Allen said reasonably.

"You're just being paranoid." Mona said with a shake of her head.

"No he isn't." Jake said firmly.

"There was a guy watching us in the store yesterday." Kenny said as he looked Mona in the eyes.

"We don't know if he would have tried to abduct one of the boys, but he was definitely some kind of threat to them." Allen said seriously.

"I used to live on the streets. I've heard all kinds of stories about how kids got grabbed. Everyone thinks it can't happen to them... until it does. Yesterday, before anything even happened, Dad made sure we stayed together and always knew where we were." Jake said with a smile of admiration directed at Allen.

Xain and Kevin came back from the bathroom and took their seats.

Jake discretely caressed Xain's fingers in a 'Vulcan Kiss' when he sat down.

Sopek noticed and looked at Xain with question.

"Jake is my *T'hy'la*." Xain said succinctly.

Sopek blinked, then looked at Allen inquisitively.

"They're bonded. From what Xain's father said, it may be a family trait. When they have telepathic contact with a Human, a bond forms instinctively." Allen said quietly.

"That is a possibility." Xain said speculatively.

The waiter arrived at the table and asked, "What can I get for you gentlemen today?"

"Just some iced tea for me." Stan said with a smile.

"A glass of water." Sopek said seriously.

The waiter sat a mug of beer before Mona, took her empty mug and left.

* * * * *

"Have you decided where you want to go yet?" Kenny asked Deacon hopefully.

"Um, sort of, I just need to ask Billy something first." Deacon responded with care.

Deacon turned to Billy at his other side and quietly asked, "Is this where we're going to live? I mean, like from now on?"

Billy considered the question for a moment before saying, "Yeah, as far as I know. Why?"

Deacon noticed that everyone at the table was listening and waiting for his answer.

"Well, you asked me what I wanted to do this weekend. I've never been here before and I'd like to see Orlando. I mean, I bet there's a bunch of fun stuff to do around here." Deacon said as he looked around shyly.

"That sounds like a great idea Deacon. Kenny is the only one who is from here so I think he and I should be able to show you around." Allen said happily.

Kenny smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

"We might even slip in a trip to the Florida Museum of Natural History on our tour of the city." Allen added with a smile directed at Xain.

After a shared glance, Jake and Xain nodded in unison.

* * * * *

"Can I get you anything else?" The waiter asked in a friendly voice.

Allen looked around the table at the empty pizza trays and said, "No, I think our work here is done."

The waiter smiled and turned to nod at another employee standing at the cash register.

A chorus of 'Happy Birthday' rang out as three other employees walked to the table carrying a tiny birthday cake.

Everyone at the table joined in the singing as the cake with a single candle was placed before Deacon.

After a moment of surprise, Deacon quickly blew out the candle.

Xain looked at Sopek and said, "It is a Human custom to celebrate the occurrence of one's birth."

Sopek raised an eyebrow to prompt for further explanation.

"Although the custom may seem illogical, upon further examination it fulfills an essential Human need. The significance of the celebration is to acknowledge the fact that our lives are improved by Deacon's presence." Xain said logically.

"I was aware of the custom although I did not know of the underlying purpose. Thank you for your clarification." Sopek said thoughtfully.

Xain nodded in acknowledgement of the thanks.

"There isn't enough cake for everyone to have some." Deacon said with disappointment as he looked at the tiny cake.

"We were able to share your birthday cake at the house. This one is just for you." Allen said gently.

"I will take Edovina so you may enjoy your cake without distraction." Xain said as he walked to Deacon's side.

Deacon hesitantly lifted Edovina into Xain's waiting arms.

After a moment of consideration, Deacon carefully cut the cake into four pieces.

"Mona, Stan and Sopek didn't get to share my cake at home so they can have some of this." Deacon said as he slowly shifted a quarter of the little cake to his plate.

"Thank you Deacon, that's very nice of you." Mona said with a note of surprise as the small cake was handed down the table to her.

"So, did you have a good birthday?" Stan asked as he watched Mona take her piece of cake.

"It was the best birthday ever. Allen and his family had a party for me and everything." Deacon said happily before taking a bite of cake.

"If you two don't have any other plans after dinner, you could see it for yourselves. The party is still set up at my house, and Billy was going to show us his portfolio tonight." Allen said hopefully.

"Your interest in the Earth's ecosystems would suggest that you would appreciate Billy's photography." Xain interjected to Sopek.

"And you'd get to see our new house!" Kenny said with enthusiasm.

After accepting his piece of cake, Stan glanced at Sopek and said, "It sounds like fun. Besides, now I'll be able to tell all the people at work that the mysterious 'Mr. Thompson' really does have a home life."

Allen looked surprised at the statement as everyone else looked at Stan curiously.

Stan looked around the group and said, "Most of us started this project together. With just a few exceptions, we've all been working together for... what is it? Ten years now?"

"Ten years, two months and eleven days." Sopek said seriously.

Stan nodded, then continued, "We've all gotten to really know each other in that time. We've visited each other's homes, met each other's families, and a few members of the team have even... um, paired off."

"Except for Allen." Mona said in a knowing voice.

"Correct." Sopek said without inflection.

"Allen is friendly and everything, but he just shuts up when anyone asks him anything personal." Stan said frankly.

"No one asks me anything personal." Allen said in his defense.

"Not anymore. After the first few years, there didn't seem to be a point." Stan said seriously.

"Given your reluctance to speak of personal matters, further attempts to do so would be illogical." Sopek said in support of Stan's statement.

After a long silent moment, Allen finally said, "I'm sorry guys, I didn't realize that I was being so distant."

"You took a month of personal leave without any warning. You didn't tell anyone what was wrong. Everyone at work was worried about you and wanted to help you, but we didn't know how because we know nothing about you." Stan said carefully.

Allen nodded slowly, then cautiously looked up to meet Stan's concerned gaze.

"My partner, Kenny and Kevin's father, died." Allen whispered.

"You're gay?" Stan asked with surprise.

Allen looked at Stan with question.

Stan looked embarrassed and said, "I mean, I guess I considered that, but I figured that if that was your big secret... well, it's no big deal."

"It was never a secret. I guess the subject just never came up." Allen said with a quizzical look.

"Oh. Um, I guess it didn't." Stan said with a note of confusion.

"I think I can explain things if you want me to." Mona said, looking at Allen with question.

"Sure, if you want to." Allen said cautiously.

"Even as a child, Allen was very private. The fact of the matter is, he wasn't hiding something, he was hiding everything." Mona said, then took a small bite of her piece of cake.

"I wasn't hiding anything." Allen said defensively.

"Honey, I know you better than just about anyone in the world and you keep me out of most of your life." Mona said frankly.

"Dad doesn't do that with me." Jake said in defense of his father.

"I never felt like Pop was hiding anything from me or trying to keep me away." Kenny said honestly.

Mona looked at all the boys. Seeing that they were in agreement, she said, "I'm talking about before you guys came along. The Allen I met today is a completely different person. A *whole* person."

Allen's attention was drawn to a strange, inquisitive look on Billy's face, followed by a scarlet blush rising up to the tips of his ears.

Before Billy could get his hand under the table, Allen said, "I think your phone is ringing."

Billy pulled out his phone and shyly mumbled, "Yeah." Before glancing at the caller ID and hitting the 'send' button to answer the call.

"Hi Mom." Billy said quietly.

Conversation around the table stopped as everyone, especially Deacon froze to hear what he was going to say.

After a short pause to listen, Billy said in an irritated voice, "Yeah, it *is* important. Deacon is here with me."

After a longer pause, Billy forcefully said, "Mom, listen, Deacon ran away from home and came to live with me. I'm his legal guardian now..."

In a smaller voice that could barely be heard, Billy said, "Mom?"

Billy met Deacon's worried gaze and said, "She hung up. She said that she's in a restaurant and the rest of her party just arrived."

A tear slipped down Deacon's cheek as Billy pulled him into a tight hug.

A long moment of silence hung in the air until it was broken by Kevin asking, "Will you come to our house to see Deacon's presents and Billy's pictures?"

Allen gave a fond glance at Kevin, then looked at Stan and Sopek inquisitively.

"I'm not going to pass up the chance to finally see Allen's house. We'll be there." Stan said assertively.

Deacon gave Billy one final squeeze, then pulled out of the hug.

"Our house is really great. I know you're going to love it." Kevin continued with happiness in his voice.

"Then I'll pay the check and we'll get out of here." Billy said with determination.

Allen looked as if he were going to object, but saw Billy's determined look and nodded in acceptance.

A moment later the group stood and began to gather their things in preparation to leave.

Kenny flashed a concerned look at Deacon, before absently walking before the group toward the door.

* * * * *

"Pop? Does this belong to us?" Kenny asked as he noticed a red T-shirt on the ground just outside the Caravan.

"I don't think so. Jake, did you drop something while you were getting the diaper bag?" Allen asked casually.

"No, that wasn't there before. Someone must have dropped it after I went back in." Jake said as he held Edovina and waited for Juana to unlock the door.

Kenny picked up the shirt and suddenly went pale.

"Guys! Come on!" Kenny said in a rush as he started running for the back of the parking lot.

Jake handed Edovina to Juana and took off in a dead run, followed closely by Kevin, Deacon and Xain.

"Kenny! Wait! What's wrong?" Allen called out in panic.

Before Allen could finish the sentence, Kenny was turning the corner to run down the alley.

* * * * *

Before Kenny could see the struggle, he could hear the sound of begging and crying.

As he turned the corner, he saw a large man holding someone up with one hand while drawing back to throw a punch with the other.

Without thinking, Kenny dove head first into the man's side, knocking him off balance.

Before Kenny could get back on his feet, he was knocked down by the back of the man's hand striking him in the face.

"THAT'S MY BROTHER!" Kevin screamed in rage and jumped on the man, punching with every ounce of strength at his command.

"Get back Ken." Jake said as he moved into the fight.

Xain touched Jake's mind briefly before moving to Jake's side to help him.

Deacon knelt by the whimpering huddled form on the ground and asked, "Do you need an ambulance?"

"No. I don't think I'm hurt too bad."

Kenny ignored Jake's warning and jumped into the fight to help his brother.

Xain managed a forceful kick to the man's right knee as Kevin sank a solid bite into his left forearm.

Jake tried to throw a punch at the man's jaw, but when the man moved suddenly, the punch connected with his throat.

Kenny saw the man trying to throw a punch at Kevin with his right hand and threw himself in the way to block it from reaching Kevin.

"Get the fuck away from me!" The man screamed in a burst of rage as he knocked Jake, Xain, Kenny and Kevin away and started to run.

"Let him go." Jake said with heavy breaths as he stood, then extended a hand to Xain.

Kenny helped Kevin to stand, then looked at Deacon who was soothing the crying girl in his arms.

"Shhh. It's going to be okay. I promise." Deacon said in a gentle whisper.

Kenny quickly motioned for Jake, Xain and Kevin to step away and leave Deacon to soothe her.

"Guys, she needs our help. When I touched the shirt at the car... I knew she needed our help... not just to keep from being beaten up. She really needs someone to care about her." Kenny said with distress evident in his voice.

"You know we'll do whatever we can Kenny." Jake said seriously.

"I know... It's just... She's kind of... Just try not to get weird about... um... because she's a guy." Kenny said with difficulty.

"I got no problem with that." Jake said seriously, not needing to even think about it.

"There was a tranny who used to live in my building. She was always really nice to me." Kevin said honestly.

Kenny, Kevin and Jake looked at Xain in question.

"Vulcans do not 'get weird'." Xain said as a statement of fact.

Jake smiled and pulled Xain into a quick hug.

"Are you guys okay?" Billy asked as he ran into the alley followed by Allen and Sopek.

"Yeah. We just had to keep our new friend from getting beat up." Jake said as he looked at Deacon, still whispering soothingly to the crying girl.

"Well, you can invite your friend to come home with us if you want. I don't think sitting in an alley is a good idea." Allen said in his fatherly tone of voice.

"We'll be right there Pop. We need to talk to Laura for a minute first." Kenny said seriously.

Allen looked at the crying girl and nodded.

"I'll stay here to make sure the guys don't take too long." Billy said to Allen quietly.

Allen gave Billy a smile of thanks and turned to walk back to the parking lot.

Sopek looked at the scene for a moment, then followed Allen.

* * * * *

"Laura, it's not safe here. Would you like to come with us?" Jake asked as he moved to stand beside Deacon.

"Come where?" Laura gasped between sobs.

"To our house, it's by Lake Nona. The guy you're holding onto is Deacon, he lives right across the street from us." Jake said quietly.

"What do you want... I mean, what do I have to..." Laura asked with difficulty before breaking down into fresh tears.

Jake gave the others a hesitant look and, as a group they stepped back and walked to wait with Billy.

Jake knelt beside Deacon and Laura and quietly said, "I know what you're asking, and I promise that you won't have to do anything like that."

Laura looked up through mascara streaked eyes at Jake with question, as if reading his soul with her gaze.

"I lived on the streets for two years so I know what it's like. If you want to come with us, no one will hurt you. If you don't, at least get out of this alley before that asshole comes back with some of his buddies." Jake finished with true concern.

Laura got a look of fear as she looked down the alley in the direction the man had gone.

"Can you walk?" Deacon asked gently.

"Yeah. I think so." Laura whispered.

"Let me help you up." Jake said as he moved to Laura's other side.

"Thanks." Laura said as she stood.

"I think that dress is history." Jake said as he looked at the blood stained blue dress.

"This was my best dress." Laura said in anguish as she looked at the damage.

"Come on. Let's get you someplace safe." Jake said as he urged Laura and Deacon to start walking.

* * * * *

"Is she okay?" Billy asked as the trio walked slowly toward him.

"Much better now." Laura said in a shaking voice.

"I'm Billy, Deacon's brother." Billy said gently.

"I'm Laura. Nice to meet you." She said as she looked at him with a small smile.

A bruise on her cheek and a split lip made the smile look more pathetic than friendly but Billy smiled in return.

"Everyone is waiting for us in the Pizza Hut parking lot. Let's go." Billy said as he turned.

"Everyone?" Laura asked in panic.

"Just our family. Don't worry. They won't give you any trouble." Jake said gently as Xain walked to his other side.

"Are you in need of medical assistance?" Xain asked in a neutral voice.

"I don't think so. I'm sure it looks worse than it feels." Laura said as she looked at Xain curiously.

"This is my boyfriend Xain." Jake said as he put an arm around Xain's shoulders.

"Oh shit!" Laura exclaimed, then looked at Xain and Jake with apology.

"No, not the boyfriend thing. That." Laura said as she pointed to several articles of clothing strewn across the alley.

"Your things?" Billy asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. Everything I own." Laura said as fresh tears filled her eyes.

"Guys. You want to gather this stuff up. It's Laura's." Billy said louder for all the boys to hear.

Kevin, Kenny, Xain and Jake immediately went to gather the scattered belongings.

"Everything..." Laura said as the tears streaked down her face.

"You'll be fine." Deacon said as he shifted his hug from one of support to one of comfort.

"Thanks Deacon. You're really sweet." Laura said with a smile.

Deacon blushed at the compliment, but held her gaze as he said, "Please come with us where you'll be safe."

Laura looked into Deacon's eyes and finally nodded.

* * * * *

"Are we ready to go to the house?" Billy asked as he led the band of boys into the Pizza Hut parking lot.

"What happened?" Juana exclaimed when she saw the blood and bruises on the teenage girl.

"Let's get Laura back to the house where she can relax before we get into that." Billy suggested at the look of anxiety on Laura's face.

"If we're going to do it, let's do it." Mona said with a look of concern directed at Laura.

"Come on Laura, you can ride with us." Deacon said as he guided her to Billy's Lexus.

Laura looked at the car with shock, then at Billy and Deacon in question.

"We'll meet you there." Allen said as he got into the BMW.

"You're rich." Laura said as she looked from the BMW back to Billy and Deacon.

"I am, but not because I've got money." Billy said as he looked at Deacon, then at Allen.

Laura followed his gaze and smiled, feeling just a little more relieved.

* * * * *

"Um, I think I need to tell you guys something before we go to your house." Laura said hesitantly, standing outside the car.

"I think I know, but go ahead." Billy said casually as he waited by his open car door.

"I'm not a girl." Laura said cautiously, looking at their reactions carefully so she could run if she needed to.

"I know." Deacon said with a tender smile.

"I thought so." Billy said frankly.

"You don't mind? I mean, it's okay?" Laura asked cautiously.

"Laura, being a model and a photographer, I've met a lot of people over the years. I can honestly say that it doesn't bother me a bit." Billy said honestly.

Laura nodded hesitantly, then looked at Deacon with question.

Deacon smiled and said, "Kevin told me that when you don't know what to say, hugging is the best way of saying it."

Laura remained still as Deacon pulled her into a tender hug.

After a long minute of the comfortable embrace, Deacon released her, then looked into her watering eyes.

"I understand. Thank you." Laura said, barely restraining her tears.

Deacon smiled broadly, then opened the door to let her sit in the front seat by Billy.

* * * * *

"So Laura, how old are you?" Billy asked casually as he watched the traffic.

"I'm sixteen... in a few months." She said shyly.

"You don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but do you have a place to live?" Billy asked as he glanced at her.

"Not right now. I, kind of had to leave my parents home suddenly." She said with difficulty.

"It's okay Laura. I'm just asking in case there's something I can do to help." Billy said seriously.

"You're not going to, like, call the cops or the CPS or something are you?" Laura asked carefully.

"No. I won't call anyone without talking to you about it first." Billy said as a vow.

Laura relaxed into the comfortable seat and whispered, "Thanks."

"We'll be there in just a few minutes." Billy said with a smile.

"Billy, do you think Laura could stay with us? I mean, if she wants to?" Deacon asked hopefully.

After a moment of thought, Billy said, "Yes. That's no problem."

"You guys just met me. How can you ask me to move in with you after knowing me for ten minutes?" Laura asked with surprise.

"Because it's the right thing to do." Deacon said honestly.

"Deke's right. You need a place to stay. We've got one. Hell, we even know some people who can get all the paperwork you'll need so you can go to school." Billy said frankly.

"Why are you doing this?" Laura asked with disbelief.

Billy glanced in the rearview mirror to prompt Deacon to explain.

"Because I was almost in the same situation as you." Deacon said shyly.

Laura turned in her seat to look at him.

"I ran away from home and came here to ask Billy to let me live with him. I guess I didn't think about the legal stuff and all the trouble it could have caused Billy. But Billy and Allen were able to fix everything. He's my legal guardian and I get to stay." Deacon said happily.

"And if you wanted, we could probably do the same thing for you." Billy added with a tender glance at his brother in the mirror.

Laura got a look of awe as she realized that they were being honest with her.

"You don't have to answer now. Come home with us, and if you like it, you can think about staying. How's that?" Billy asked gently.

"Yeah, thanks." Laura said thoughtfully.

"And remember that Kenny and Kevin and all the rest of the guys are going to be living right across the street if you want to get out of the house." Deacon said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Your dwelling exceeds my expectations." Sopek said as they walked into the entry hall.

"At least." Stan said in wonder.

"I like it." Allen said with a small smile of pride in his home.

"It's like a palace isn't it." Jake said cheerfully, once again reminded of his good fortune.

Stan looked at Jake and gave a smile of agreement.

"Come on, let's show you the party room first." Allen said as he led the group to the dining room door.

"Yeah, I want to show you all my presents." Deacon said as he walked into the dining room with Laura at his side.

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When everyone was in the dining room, Deacon said, "This has been the best birthday I've ever had. Better than I ever dreamed of."

"When I blew out my birthday candles, I didn't make a wish because there wasn't anything I could think of to wish for. There's one thing I always wanted, but knew I could never have... until now." Deacon said and looked at Laura hesitantly.

"A sister."

CHAPTER 28

"Deke, I think I need to have a talk with you about how to treat a lady. Pressuring her isn't going to help." Billy said to Deacon with a note of sympathy in his voice.

Deacon looked at Laura and whispered, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to try and tell you what to do."

Laura looked at Deacon with a tender smile and said, "It's okay Deacon. You were just being honest."

"Laura, if you would like, you could come over to our place and change into something... less bloody." Billy said gently.

After looking at her dress again, Laura said, "That's a good idea. But I think most of my clothes are torn up or filthy."

"If you wouldn't mind 'boy clothes' you could probably wear something of mine." Jake said as he looked at her to gauge her size.

Laura looked into Jake's eyes to find honest concern and a desire to help her.

"Sure, thanks." Laura said hesitantly.

"And when you're all cleaned up, I'm sure we can talk one of these men into driving us to the store for some clothes." Mona said as she looked around.

"I'll be happy to." Billy said with a smile.

"Come on Laura, you can look at my stuff and pick out something to wear." Jake said in a friendly voice.

"While you attend to Laura's needs, I will contact Patriarch Short and inquire of my duties." Xain said seriously.

"I'll join you when we're done." Jake said and placed his index and middle fingers over Xain's briefly.

Xain betrayed a small smile at the tender gesture, then left the room.

Jake glanced at Laura, then led her and Deacon upstairs to his room.

"It's not usually this crazy around here." Allen said to Stan, Sopek and Mona.

Kevin looked at Allen dubiously.

Allen smiled and shyly said, "Okay, maybe it is."

* * * * *

Juana drew Allen away from the gathering and quietly said, "I must take Ricardo and Edovina to have their baths before it is too late."

"I understand Juana. Thank you for all your help today. Reuben can stay here with the boys until bedtime if you like." Allen offered gently.

"I want to bathe with Ricardo." Reuben said immediately.

"You do?" Juana asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Kenny and Kevin showed me that bathing together is a way of showing that you like someone. I want to show Ricardo that I like him." Reuben said seriously.

Allen smiled and said, "That sounds like a wonderful idea Reuben. I'll see you in the morning." Allen said as he squatted down to give Reuben a hug.

"I love you Uncle Allen." Reuben said seriously.

"I love you too Reuben. Have a good night." Allen said tenderly.

Allen noticed Ricardo watching everything and gestured for him to 'come here'.

"Goodnight Ricardo. I love you very much." Allen said softly.

"I love you too Unca Allen." Ricardo said as he hugged Allen tightly.

"He spoke much better this morning." Juana said with concern.

"Yes. He was speaking too well for a three year old. Don't worry Juana, he's just fine." Allen said as he kissed Ricardo on the cheek and finally released him from the hug.

"Come on Ricardo so we can have our bath." Reuben said with enthusiasm.

Allen and Juana watched with amusement as the two boys hurry to the front door.

* * * * *

Jake opened the outer door of his room and automatically walked into the bedroom.

After a moment of looking around the peaceful haven, Laura said, "I love your room. It's so... relaxing."

"It's Xain's room too." Jake said with a smile of pride.

Laura looked at Jake curiously and asked, "Why do you have a kid for a boyfriend?"

The smile fell off Jake's face as he said, "Xain isn't a kid. He's my soulmate and I love him more than anyone or anything in the world."

"Sorry... It just seems a little strange." Laura said hesitantly.

Jake brought his welling emotions under control and said, "Xain may be young, but he's old enough to understand love. We love each other and are going to be married when he turns fourteen."

Laura's eyes went wide at the statement.

"Really?" Deacon asked from beside Laura.

"Yeah. It's all planned. His Father and our Dad have both said it's okay... Hopefully you two can be at the ceremony. It's going to be on Vulcan." Jake said with his peaceful smile back in place.

"It's another planet..." Laura sputtered in wonder.

"Yeah. I'll be there." Deacon said firmly.

"Good. Now let's get Laura's clothes so she can get cleaned up." Jake said in a casual tone and led them through the dressing room to the closet.

* * * * *

"We'll be back in a few minutes. I'm going to grab my portfolio and wait for Laura to get cleaned up." Billy said as he saw Laura and Deacon walking down the stairs.

"That will give me a chance to show Sopek, Stan and Mona around the house." Allen said with a smile.

"We'll see you in a few." Billy said as he walked with Deacon and Laura to the door.

* * * * *

"Would you close the door?" Kenny asked as he led the way into his bedroom.

Kevin closed the door and looked at Kenny with question.

"When that guy hit me, I heard you." Kenny said absently.

"He hurt you, it made me mad." Kevin said, not understanding his brother's mood.

Kenny pulled Kevin into a hug and said, "I heard it in your voice, I felt it, you really love me."

"Yeah, I told you a bunch of times." Kevin said, relaxing into the hug.

"I know, but this was different. You fought to protect me." Kenny said in wonder.

"So did you." Kevin said quietly.

"What?" Kenny asked in confusion.

"I saw when that guy was gonna hit me in the head. You got on top of me and I felt it when he hit you instead." Kevin said as he pulled back to look Kenny in the eyes.

"I forgot about that." Kenny said with a weak smile.

"So I know that you love me just as much as I love you." Kevin said seriously.

"Yeah, I do." Kenny said and pulled Kevin close to his chest again.

A long moment of silence fell over the brothers as they thought about their feelings.

"Do you think maybe we can do something, like, just the two of us?" Kenny asked as he held Kevin tightly.

"Yeah, we can talk to Poppa about it and tell him we need some private time... but he'll probably think we're gonna have sex." Kevin finished with a giggle.

"Why would he think that?" Kenny asked as he pulled away from Kevin to look him in the eyes.

"Because when he told us Jake and Xain needed private time, that's what he meant." Kevin said honestly.

"Do you mean while we were swimming, they were..." Kenny trailed off with wide eyes.

"Yeah. Poppa said he wasn't sure what they would be doing... but I think they did it." Kevin finished with a shy giggle.

Kenny looked at Kevin and thought about it for a minute before saying, "Good for them. I hope they had fun."

Kevin looked at Kenny with question.

"I love Jake and Xain. I want them to be happy and them being boyfriends makes them really happy." Kenny said as he looked into Kevin's eyes.

"Yeah. I guess so. I guess I always thought sex was, I don't know, wrong or something." Kevin said shyly.

"I think it's wrong if you're not in love." Kenny said thoughtfully.

Kevin thought about the words for a moment, then smiled and nodded in agreement.

"Let's go downstairs so we can see Billy's pictures. Then we can try to talk to Pop alone for a minute." Kenny said seriously.

"Yeah." Kevin said with a smile.

* * * * *

"What in the world are *you* going to do with a kitchen like this?" Mona asked incredulously as Allen was taking the group on a tour.

"I can cook." Allen said in a wounded tone as he stopped to look at Mona.

"You can follow the directions on Mac & Cheese. There's a difference." Mona said flatly.

Allen smiled and said, "I've learned how to cook a few more things since I left home Mona. But you're right. I'm not that good of a cook. Juana and Xain have been taking care of most of the cooking, they're both really good at it."

Sopek looked at Allen curiously and finally said, "From your words and actions, I surmise that you hold the abilities of Xain in high esteem."

"I do. Not only is he a talented cook, but he's a wonderful big brother to Kenny and Kevin and an amazing friend to Jake." Allen said with pride in his voice.

"It had always been my belief that a Vulcan would have difficulty conforming to Human expectations in a domestic setting." Sopek said carefully.

"I suppose that could happen. But we don't try to make Xain conform to our expectations. In our house we don't see Xain as a Vulcan, we see him as Xain. Each of the boys is special in their own way so as long as we're respectful of each other's differences, we get along fine." Allen finished with a happy smile.

"What's next on our tour?" Mona asked as she looked around.

"The family room." Allen said and led the way out of the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Chief Tecumseh said to come over at 10 in the morning. He wants to show you around the camp personally." Cory said from the view screen.

"Do you know if 'he who is my father' has made arrangements for my Vulcan tutor?" Xain asked in a neutral voice.

"I don't know any details, but Chief Tecumseh mentioned that he had spoken to your father." Cory said seriously.

Xain nodded in acceptance.

"Is there anything the rest of us need to know before we go?" Jake asked from Xain's side.

"No. It's like a regular school except that there are a lot more teachers." Cory said simply.

"Why do they have more teachers?" Jake asked curiously.

"Oh, it's because most of the guys need some kind of special attention. Some of the guys have emotional problems and need someone who cares about how they're doing. Some haven't been in school for a few years and there's even one guy who's older than me and never been in a school before this." Cory said frankly.

"Wow, I was worried that I might have trouble because I haven't been to school for a while." Jake said thoughtfully.

"You'll be fine. Just treat everyone with respect and no one will have any problem with you at all." Cory said with a smile.

"I'll make sure to tell Kevin. I know he's worried." Jake said with concern.

"Tell him that his Clan Brothers will be there if he needs us. Hopefully that will make him feel better." Cory said in a considering voice.

"Yeah. I bet it will." Jake grinned warmly.

"Uncle Chip wants you guys to come over and visit after you visit Camp Little Eagle." Cory said with a smile.

Jake looked at Cory curiously.

"Camp Little Eagle is almost right across the street from Uncle Chip's house." Cory explained.

"Oh, cool." Jake said with a smile.

Xain nodded and said, "We will tell father at the conclusion of this transmission."

"Good, if you're ready, we can discuss the details of the database." Cory said and changed the view of his monitor to show Noah and Caleb standing behind him.

"Proceed." Xain said calmly.

"We're sending you the system analysis Noah performed and the proposed fields that Caleb compiled." Cory said as he pressed a key on his terminal.

"I have received the information." Xain said as he looked at the incoming data.

'Would you like me to read it for you?' Jake asked Xain through their link.

'That would provide much assistance.' Xain responded with love and gratitude as an undercurrent to his thought.

* * * * *

"You have a beautiful home." Laura said as she looked around in wonder.

"I'm glad you like it. Please make yourself comfortable." Billy said as he led the way to the staircase.

"Were you really serious about me maybe living here?" Laura asked cautiously.

"Yeah, totally serious." Billy said as he hesitantly opened the door at the top of the stairs.

"This is awesome." Laura said with a gasp as she walked into the massive room

The dark, hardwood furniture gave a feeling of timeless elegance while the gold and green accent pieces around the room made it feel comfortable.

The main feature of the room was a four post hardwood bed covered with a green comforter with gold threads in an intricate pattern.

"This will be your room for as long as you choose to stay with us." Billy said quietly.

Laura looked at Billy with disbelief.

"This was Benny's room. Benny was the guy who left me this house in his will. I felt like I would be disrespecting his memory if I moved into his bedroom. But now... this feels right. If you decide to stay, we can redecorate it any way you want... it's your room now. Oh yeah, and you have your own bathroom right over there." Billy finished with a smile.

Laura ran to Billy and pulled him into a tight hug.

"Thank you, I wouldn't change anything in here. It's the most beautiful room I've ever seen." Laura said with excitement.

"My room is right next door and the next room down the hall is Deacon's. If you'll go ahead and get cleaned up, I'm going to get my portfolio together and I think Deacon has some new clothes and things that he needs to put away." Billy said as he glanced at his brother.

"Oh yeah, I forgot." Deacon said with a smile.

"Just come downstairs when you're done." Billy said as he walked toward the door.

"Billy?" Laura called in a serious voice.

Billy stopped and looked at her with question.

"Thank you, really." Laura said with absolute sincerity.

"My pleasure." Billy said with a gentle smile, then left the room, followed by Deacon.

* * * * *

"Are we interrupting?" Allen asked as he took one step into the family room.

"Come on in Dad. Xain and I are just looking over the specs for the database he's going to design for the Clan." Jake said warmly.

"How's it going?" Allen asked with interest.

"My inability to read the English language is going to hinder my ability to design the input interface." Xain said thoughtfully, not taking his eyes off the screen.

Allen looked at Sopek and Stan speculatively.

"The Libra Interface?" Stan finally said.

"Yeah. What do you think Sopek? Is it ready for a practical trial?" Allen asked seriously.

"The module has passed all scheduled tests. A practical trial would be indicated." Sopek said slowly.

"What about the Vulcan-English lexicon?" Allen asked thoughtfully.

"We have completed all reasonable preparation. The multimapping routine that T'Amara designed is performing within design specifications." Sopek said confidently.

"And from what I can see of the fields that they're going to be using, there shouldn't be any problem at all." Stan said as he read over Xain's shoulder.

"Do you think anyone will have a problem with us using it outside the project?" Allen asked with concern.

Sopek looked at the screen, then turned to Xain and asked, "This database will be for the exclusive use of Clan Short?"

"That is correct. A standard Vulcan database is insufficient for their needs due to the level of precision required in the query structure. Human commercial databases are overwritten to try to accommodate all possible users. The code becomes so vast and complex that errors occur that may threaten the integrity of the data." Xain said professionally.

"That's what project Libra is all about. If you'll promise not to share the code we give you outside the Clan, you could use the Libra Interface on a standard Vulcan database." Stan said with excitement.

"You'd actually be helping us out by testing our software. We're confident that it is bug free, but we're still not agreed on how user friendly it is." Allen said honestly.

"The Libra Interface will allow your programmers and users to use either Vulcan or English input." Sopek said without expression.

"I don't understand all the programming stuff, but it sounds like just what we need." Jake said and looked at Xain with hope.

"I agree. Further investigation is indicated." Xain said seriously.

"Xain, do you know how to network my computer into your terminal?" Allen asked thoughtfully.

"Of course." Xain said as he looked at Allen.

"I'm going to finish showing everyone around. Once you have the network established, open the Libra Interface file and start reading the documentation. I think you'll agree that this will work out perfectly for your database." Allen finished with a smile.

"Thank you Father. I will do so immediately." Xain said and betrayed a small smile of thanks.

"Let's leave these guys to their work, the living room is the next stop on our tour." Allen said as he walked to the double doors.

* * * * *

"Um, I don't do 'boy clothes' very well." Laura said hesitantly.

Deacon and Billy looked up at her with matching looks of surprise.

"You look great." Deacon said in wonder as he looked at the slender boy before him.

Laura gave a shy smile and mumbled, "Thanks."

"Laura, you're extremely attractive no matter which way you dress." Billy said honestly as he noticed her pale blue eyes and delicate facial features.

"Really?" Laura asked with disbelief.

"Absolutely." Deacon said firmly.

"I always thought I was too... feminine." Laura said cautiously.

"Not at all. You're beautiful. Anyone who says different has to be either blind or jealous because you're one of the most attractive guys I've ever seen." Billy said frankly as he looked at Laura's fine wispy golden blond hair.

Laura blushed and hung her head shyly at the words.

"I can't wait till the other guys see you." Deacon said with excitement.

"They're not going to believe that this is Laura." Billy said with a smile at his brother.

"When I'm in boy clothes, I usually go by my real name." Laura said cautiously.

"Which is?" Billy asked expectantly.

"Lawrence."

"Would you like us to call you Lawrence now?" Billy asked quietly.

"I think so. It just feels wrong to be called Laura when I'm trying to act like a boy." Lawrence said thoughtfully.

"That's no problem. When you're dressed like a boy, you're Lawrence, when you're dressed like a girl, you're Laura... who are you when you're naked?" Deacon asked seriously.

Lawrence blushed and said, "I guess you'll have to get me naked to find out."

"You walked right into that one Deke." Billy said with a laugh at Deacon's scarlet blush.

"But I guess that does bring up something we should talk about." Billy said in a more serious voice.

Lawrence and Deacon looked at Billy with question.

"Do you guys know about safe sex?" Billy asked with concern.

Deacon and Lawrence nodded seriously.

"Then that's all I'm asking. If you fool around with each other or the guys across the street, just play safe. If you're old enough to have sex, you're old enough to be safe. Got it?" Billy asked as he looked from one teenager to the other.

"Got it." Deacon said with a blush still glowing on his face.

"Yeah." Lawrence whispered.

"Good. Let's go. They're all waiting on us." Billy said happily.

"Lawrence, have you decided yet if you want to be my sister... or brother?" Deacon asked hopefully.

Lawrence looked around the room and his gaze fixed on Deacon and Billy standing side by side.

"Yeah, I think I would."

* * * * *

"This place is really amazing." Mona said as she took a seat on the couch.

"I think so too... come on in guys. I just finished showing everyone around." Allen said to Kenny and Kevin standing in the living room doorway.

Both boys took seats side by side on the couch beside Mona.

"Would anyone like some coffee or anything?" Allen asked as he looked around the room.

"Do you have any beer?" Mona asked hopefully.

"Not a bit. But you said you were clothes shopping with Laura later, you could pick some up on the way back." Allen said with a shrug.

"Some host you are." Mona grumbled.

"Stan, Sopek, would you like some coffee?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Yeah, sure." Stan said casually.

Sopek considered for a moment before answering, "Yes, thank you."

Stan looked at Sopek with surprise, but didn't say anything.

* * * * *

"How long are you going to stay with us Grandma?" Kevin asked Mona quietly.

"I'll have to leave Friday morning. I have to work Friday night." Mona said gently to Kevin.

"Will you be able to visit us a lot?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"You bet I will. Especially with Thanksgiving and Christmas coming." Mona said with a smile.

"Good, I like you being here." Kevin said as he snuggled into Mona's side.

"I like being here too Kevin." Mona said with a contented smile.

* * * * *

"Here we go." Allen said as he rested a tray on the coffee table .

"You can help yourselves to cream or sugar if you like." Allen said, then picked up two tall glasses from the tray and turned to face Kevin and Kenny.

"And for my boys, we have milkshakes." Allen said as he presented one to each boy.

"I get one too?" Kenny asked with a great smile.

"Sure. I thought you'd like it." Allen said as he picked up his own coffee and took a seat in his favorite chair.

"I thought I was going to be spoiling the boys tonight." Mona said as she looked at Allen curiously.

"Poppa gives me milkshakes because I'm little and skinny. The doctor on the *Enterprise* told him to." Kevin said seriously.

"Kevin's is a nutritional supplement in the form of a milkshake. Kenny's is a regular milkshake." Allen said with a smile.

"Your children were seen by the doctor on board the *Enterprise*?" Sopek asked in confirmation.

"Yes. Commander Dodds of the *Enterprise* is a family friend. He was worried about the boys so he suggested that I take them to the *Enterprise* to be checked out." Allen said, then took a sip of his coffee.

"Uncle Chip took us on a tour of the ship and even showed us the bridge." Kenny said with excitement.

"Count yourself as fortunate. Not many people have had the honor of seeing the flagship of the Federation first hand." Sopek said seriously.

Stan looked at Sopek curiously, trying to understand his more relaxed attitude.

"Yeah. It was really cool. Then Uncle Chip bought me a model of the *Enterprise*, a really good one." Kenny said happily.

A knock on the door stopped further conversation.

* * * * *

"Come on in Billy. You're family, you don't have to knock." Kenny said as he answered the door.

"It's just the polite thing to do Ken." Billy said as he led Lawrence and Deacon into the house.

"Laura?" Kenny asked in wonder.

"He's Lawrence when he's a boy." Deacon said quietly.

"You look really great." Kenny said with a smile.

"Thanks." Lawrence said shyly.

"Come on." Kenny said and took Lawrence by the hand to lead him into the living room.

* * * * *

"Oh, you look wonderful." Mona said in wonder.

Lawrence glanced around the room at everyone looking at him and an expression of panic came over his face.

After a moment of frozen silence, Lawrence dashed out of the room.

"Was it something I said?" Mona asked in confusion.

"No. I just don't think Lawrence can handle too many compliments. From what little he's told me, someone's been telling him that he's ugly and too feminine... and probably a lot worse." Billy said thoughtfully.

"I'll go talk to him." Deacon said as he started walking toward the door.

Before he could reach the door, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to talk to Laura first. I think I understand what she's going through."

"Okay grandma." Deacon said with a smile.

Mona gave Deacon a quick hug, then walked past him out of the room.

* * * * *

"Laura? Do you want to talk about it?" Mona asked quietly when she found Lawrence standing in the dining room, staring out the window.

"I'm Lawrence now." He said without turning.

"Come here baby, I think I know what you're going through. Maybe I can help." Mona said as she slowly approached.

Lawrence turned to reveal the tears in his eyes.

"Come on." Mona whispered as she held out her arms.

Lawrence took a hesitant step, then fell into Mona's embrace as if pulled by a magnet.

"People have always told me that I'm too big to be a real woman." Mona said softly.

Lawrence's only response was to hold onto Mona tighter.

"People assume that I'm a lesbian or a drag queen because I'm bigger than the average woman." Mona continued as she gently rubbed Lawrence's back.

"It hurts. But it's taught me something too." Mona said quietly.

"What?" Lawrence mumbled into Mona's ample bosom.

"To be myself. If I try to be dainty or girley the only thing I accomplish is making myself miserable. I wasn't meant to be a tiny 110 pound 1950's housewife." Mona said in a distant voice.

"But I don't know who I am." Lawrence said as he pulled away enough to look into Mona's eyes.

"That's okay. You're someplace safe where we'll give you all the time you need to discover just who you are." Mona said with a gentle smile.

"But... I don't even know if I want to be a boy or a girl." Lawrence said with anguish in his eyes.

"Why did you start dressing like a girl?" Mona asked quietly.

"Because my dad used to say I was too prissy to be a boy, then he'd hit me... I just... if I wasn't good at being a boy, I thought I should try being a girl..." Lawrence trailed off into tears.

"Was being a girl easier?" Mona asked with concern.

"No. I was always afraid someone would find out that I wasn't really a girl and people treated me like I was stupid and the pantyhose are hot and itch like crazy." Lawrence rambled.

"Yes they do." Mona said with a smile.

"I just... I don't know. I just want to be like everyone else." Lawrence said in a lost voice.

"That's the one thing I can't help you with." Mona said with regret.

At Lawrence's hurt and questioning look, Mona continued, "When I was your age I had a terrible time. I was nearly a foot taller than all of the other girls in my class and most of the boys. As time went on, some of them caught up to me but I was still a lot bigger than most of them."

"All I wanted, all I wished for was to be like everyone else... but I never was. I was very unhappy for a lot of years. It wasn't until I met a very special man that I understood." Mona said distantly.

"Understood what?" Lawrence asked with interest.

"That being different isn't a bad thing. It can be a wonderful gift." Mona said as she met Lawrence's interested gaze.

"A gift? How?" Lawrence asked desperately.

"All it takes is one person to show you your gift. When you see the light in their eyes and the love, you'll know it's for you. Not the boy or girl on the outside, but the person on the inside." Mona said tenderly.

"But what if I'm myself and I never find anyone like that?" Lawrence asked with worry.

"I think you already have." Mona said with a small smile.

"You?" Lawrence asked as he looked deeply into Mona's eyes.

"No baby. I love you just like one of my grandchildren. But there is someone here who I believe loves you down to your soul." Mona said gently.

"Deacon." Lawrence said in a whisper.

"Whether you're Lawrence or Laura, I think he'll be your closest and dearest friend if you'll let him." Mona said quietly.

"He wants me to be his sister." Lawrence said thoughtfully.

"He wants to be close to you. I think that's the safest way he knows to do that." Mona said honestly.

"Thank you Mona, I feel a lot better now." Lawrence said with a weak smile.

"You can call me grandma if you want." Mona said with love.

"Thank you Grandma." Lawrence whispered and hugged her again.

* * * * *

"Where are those pictures I've been hearing about?" Mona asked as she walked into the living room with Lawrence under her arm.

"Right here, we're just waiting for you to get in here." Billy said with relief at the sight of Lawrence.

"Well, bring them out, we still have some shopping to do tonight." Mona said as she took a seat in the middle of the couch across from Billy.

Lawrence automatically sat beside Mona, resting against her side.

Deacon moved from his position beside Kenny and sat beside Lawrence.

Kevin and Kenny moved to sit on Mona's other side, Kevin beside Mona and Kenny beside Kevin.

Allen looked at Mona and gave a gentle smile at the sight of all the children gathered around his mother.

"I do a variety of work, so I have these books separated by subject matter. Sopek, I think you might like this one." Billy said and handed a brown leather bound portfolio to Sopek.

"Mona, you'd probably like this one." Billy said as he handed her a black folder.

Billy glanced at Allen who was sitting beside him and handed him a folder too.

"Why did Billy take a picture of a car?" Kevin asked as he looked at the picture Mona was examining carefully.

"This isn't just a car, it's a 1968 Corvette." Mona said as she soaked in every detail of the beautiful image.

Kenny stretched to see the picture and said, "That's really nice. It's a beautiful car."

"Yes it is." Mona said softly before turning the page.

* * * * *

"Where was this photograph taken?" Sopek asked with interest as he turned the book for Billy to see.

"That one was taken in Hawaii, they have some spectacular waterfalls there." Billy said in fond memory.

"When next I take personal leave time, I believe I would like to visit this location. Exploration of this environment should prove satisfying." Sopek said seriously.

"I've always wanted to visit Hawaii." Stan said as he looked at the beautiful picture.

"When we return to our duties in the morning, we should schedule concurrent leave time so we may explore this location together." Sopek said reasonably.

Stan looked at Sopek with shock.

"Unless you have committed your leave time to other purposes?" Sopek asked curiously.

"No. I haven't. I'd love to go to Hawaii with you." Stan sputtered.

* * * * *

Billy glanced at Allen who was sitting, staring at the picture before him with wide eyes.

"I've never had any nudes published, but I did this set just to see how they would turn out... what do you think?" Billy asked hopefully.

Allen looked up from the picture and into Billy's eyes.

"Does that mean you approve?" Billy asked with the beginning of concern in his voice.

"You're so beautiful." Allen said in a whisper.

"Keep that. Those pictures are yours now... only for you." Billy said gently.

Allen closed the book and held it to his chest.

"And maybe one of these days, when you're ready, I can take some pictures of you?" Billy asked shyly.

Allen blushed and whispered, "Only for you."

* * * * *

"Father, Uncle Chip has invited us to visit his home after our inspection of Camp Little Eagle." Xain said as he and Jake left the family room.

"That sounds like a good idea." Allen said with a smile.

"Uncle Chip?" Mona asked curiously.

"Commander Charles Dodds. The kids call him Uncle Chip." Allen said happily.

"Oh." Mona said thoughtfully.

"But I think Teri and Juana have planned a 'ladies day' over at Teri's house. If you like, you could go over there." Allen said consideringly.

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it." Mona said in a serious voice.

"Do you think I could go to the 'ladies day?" Lawrence asked hopefully.

Mona looked at Lawrence's expectant expression and said, "I tell you what. If you want to go to the 'ladies day', I'll go with you."

Lawrence smiled broadly at the suggestion.

"Great. Xain, do you know when we have to be there?" Allen asked as he turned to face Xain and Jake.

"Chief Tecumseh will be expecting us at 10." Jake answered seriously.

"Good. We can all go and look at Camp Little Eagle, then the guys can go to Chip's and the girls can go to Teri's." Allen said, pleased with the arrangement.

"What's Camp Little Eagle?" Lawrence asked curiously.

"It's the place where Kevin, Jake and Xain will be going to school." Allen said simply.

"Where is Deacon going to go to school?" Lawrence asked curiously.

"Well, we haven't decided that yet. Since we're going to look at the camp tomorrow, Deacon may decide to go there. If not, we can look at the public and private schools in the area." Billy said thoughtfully.

Lawrence thought carefully before saying, "I think I should be a boy tomorrow, at least while we're looking at the camp."

"Why is that?" Mona asked curiously.

"I don't know, it's kind of hard to explain." Lawrence said with difficulty.

"Is it because you don't want to take the chance that people at the camp will find out that you're not a girl?" Mona asked cautiously.

"No. Not really. It's more like, I'm used to being a boy at school. I've always been a boy at school. After school is over, then I'm a girl." Lawrence said with difficulty.

Mona nodded and said, "Then you should be a boy when you visit. But if you would like, we can take your girl things with us so you can change when we're done."

Lawrence smiled and said, "That'd be great, then we can sit around and visit."

"If no one minds, I'd like to take Mona and Lawrence to the store now before it gets too late." Billy said seriously.

Deacon looked at Billy with question.

Before Billy could say anything, Mona said, "Deacon, I think you'd probably be happier if you didn't go with us this trip... unless you like the idea of standing in the junior miss section of a clothing store for a few hours while Laura tries on everything that's her size."

Deacon got an uncomfortable look and said, "I think you're right. If it's okay with Allen, I'll stay here."

"You're always welcomed Deacon." Allen said with a chuckle.

"Then it's a plan. Ladies?" Billy said as he gestured to the living room door.

"Thank you kind sir." Mona said dramatically, then walked to the door with Lawrence at her side.

* * * * *

"We too must be leaving." Sopek said in a low voice.

"Yeah, some of us have to work in the morning." Stan said with a grin.

"Before you go, I'd like for Sopek to look over the Vulcan translation of the Libra documentation, just to see that I have everything Xain will need." Allen said seriously.

"Good idea. That'll give me a chance to finish my coffee." Stan said as he sat back on the couch.

"This will just take a minute." Allen said as he led Sopek to the family room.

* * * * *

"What's wrong *T'hy'la*?" Jake asked with concern.

"The thought that I may possibly have family on Earth has been a distraction." Xain said distantly.

Jake carefully placed his hand over Xain's and gave a gentle squeeze.

"I am unsure if I should pursue the possibility." Xain said as he looked into Jake's eyes.

"Thinking about maybe having family is screwing with you... causing you distress. If you do nothing, the distress will continue. If you do something, then it might turn out good or bad, but either way, you'll know for sure. You should look for your family." Jake let all emotion fall from his expression as he said, "It is logical."

Xain smiled at Jake's attempt to imitate Vulcan mannerisms and said, "I thank you for your clarification *T'hy'la*. Your logic is impeccable."

Jake beamed a glorious smile at the praise.

'Before I pursue my search for family, I would like to express my admiration and affection for you.' Xain said through their bond.

'I would like to express my admiration and affection for you too.' Jake sent happily in response.

'I would like to express it physically.' Xain sent with force.

'Oh' Jake sent in surprise, then smiled and sent, 'You horney little Vulcan.'

* * * * *

"You're behavior is noticeably different tonight. I have the feeling that it has to do with Xain." Allen said carefully.

Sopek considered his words carefully, then said, "It has always been my belief that interactions between Vulcans and Humans could only occur within the confines of a structured work environment."

"And seeing Xain fitting in and being part of our family has proven otherwise?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Correct. Your acceptance of him has proven that one need not behave as a Human to gain acceptance among Humans in a social setting." Sopek said with difficulty.

Allen considered the words, then slowly said, "Please tell me if I'm misreading the situation, but it seems to me that you're interested in Stan... as more than a coworker."

Without betraying a hint of emotion, Sopek responded, "You are not mistaken."

"What are your intentions toward Stan?" Allen asked directly.

Sopek raised an eyebrow in surprise at the brash question and said, "Please clarify why I should explain my intentions to you."

"Because Stan doesn't have a clue. If you intend to pursue friendship, I'll leave you to it. You're doing fine. If you are planning on something more... intimate. You may need help." Allen said frankly.

Sopek considered the words, then said, "If Stan would be open to the possibility, I believe I would like to pursue an intimate relationship."

Allen nodded thoughtfully, then said, "I think I can help. Give me a minute to talk with Stan, then I'll come back and let you know what's going on."

Sopek considered carefully, then said, "I will remain until you return."

* * * * *

"Pop, can we talk to you for a minute?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"I need to talk to Stan right now, but as soon as Stan and Sopek have left I'll have plenty of time. Is that okay?" Allen asked carefully.

"Yeah. No rush." Kenny said with a smile.

Allen ruffled Kenny's hair, then walked to the couch where Stan was looking through the portfolio again.

"Did you guys figure it out?" Stan asked casually.

"Just about. I needed to ask you something." Allen said hesitantly.

"Yeah?" Stan said and closed the portfolio.

"Are you okay with everything? I mean, about me being gay?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Oh that. Sure, no problem. I just didn't expect it, that's all." Stan said with a grin.

"Good. But what if a guy was interested in you? How would you feel about that?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Are you coming on to me?" Stan asked with surprise.

"No, I'm not. I've already got someone that I'm interested in. I was just curious." Allen said seriously.

"I'm usually into women, but... I guess it would depend on the guy. If I found someone that I really liked, I suppose I'd go for it." Stan said distantly.

Allen smiled and said, "Thanks Stan. That's all I wanted to know."

"You're not going to try and fix me up or anything are you?" Stan asked with concern.

"Not unless you ask me to." Allen said with a serious expression as he stood.

Stan nodded and said, "Well, I'm not going to ask you yet, but... God Allen, it gets lonely in that little apartment. The weekends are the worst."

Allen sat down again and said, "If you wanted, I could help."

"I'm not going to intrude on your family. As great as it is here... I need something of my own... someone." Stan trailed off.

"That's wasn't what I had in mind. I think I know what you're looking for... If you want, I could help." Allen said in a softer voice.

"Yeah." Stan whispered as he looked at the floor.

"Just a second." Allen said and hurried to the family room.

* * * * *

"He's open to the idea." Allen said as he rushed in.

"Did you tell him of my interest?" Sopek asked, betraying a hint of panic at the thought.

"No. But he's open to the idea of being with a man. He's really lonely and I think that if you'll talk to him honestly right now, you've got a good chance of having what you both need." Allen said seriously.

"I cannot." Sopek said blankly.

Allen rolled his eyes and said, "Just come into the living room."

Hesitantly, Sopek followed Allen into the living room.

* * * * *

"Stan is lonely, he's not opposed to the idea of dating a guy." Allen said as he walked into the living room.

Before Stan could find his voice, Allen continued, "Sopek appreciates the time that Stan has spent with him and would be interested in their relationship moving beyond that of coworkers and friends."

Allen looked at Sopek to find him staring at Stan.

"You two work it out. Come on boys." Allen said and motioned for the boys to go into the family room.

* * * * *

"That was so cool Pop." Kenny said with a grand smile.

"Yeah. I never saw anyone get together before, that was awesome." Deacon said happily.

Kevin nodded his agreement.

"Yeah, it'll be great if those two end up together. Otherwise I just did the meanest, most horrible thing I've ever done." Allen said with a look of concern.

CHAPTER 29

Billy glanced at the caller ID on his phone before saying, "I've got a phone call. I'll be over in men's wear if you need me."

"We'll be fine here for a while." Mona said with a smile at Lawrence who was working his way methodically through the junior miss department.

Billy smiled and pressed the 'send' button to accept the incoming call as he walked away.

"Hi dad." Billy said without inflection.

"Your mother is irate. What's happened to Deacon?" Mr. Pierce asked forcefully.

"Fine. And you?" Billy said with full sarcasm, then continued, "Deke ran away from home and came to live with me."

"I don't have time for this..." Mr. Pierce trailed off in an absent voice of frustration.

"I know. That's why he ran away." Billy said flatly.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Mr. Pierce asked angrily.

In a more forceful voice, Billy responded, "You don't have time for this... for Deacon, or me for that matter."

"I suppose we'll have to get him home. Can you get him back here or will I have to hire someone to bring him back?" Mr. Pierce asked forcefully.

"Neither. I'm Deacon's legal guardian now. You don't have to do anything at all." Billy said firmly.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Mr. Pierce asked in nearly a scream.

Billy took a deep breath to calm himself, then quietly said, "Deke ran away from home. He came here and said he wanted to live with me. We talked to a few people and I was made his legal guardian. End of story."

"He's a twelve year old boy, what does he know about what he wants? I suppose you'll be wanting us to pay for his room and board while he stays there." Mr. Pierce said angrily.

"He's thirteen dad. You seem to be able to remember the time and date of every social event and client meeting for the next six months, but you forgot your own son's birthday." Billy said as his anger grew.

"Twelve, thirteen, what's the difference?" Mr. Pierce asked in a snarl.

"There's a big difference to Deke. He's officially a teenager now. When was the last time you saw him dad? A week ago? Two? What kind of a piss poor father are you? You ignore him and bark at him when he tries to get your attention. You act like he's the least important thing in your life and anything you have to do for him is a major inconvenience. Well it's over. I love Deacon and I'm going to make sure that the rest of his childhood is filled with all the love and attention he needs and I'll be the father you never were for him." Billy said in an increasing voice.

"Well you'll have to do it without any help from me or your mother. You won't see one red cent from us. As soon as you have to start paying for his clothes and food and medical bills you'll be ready to send him back." Mr. Pierce said firmly.

Billy's eyes went wide with surprise before he asked in a disbelieving voice, "You've never read my letters have you?"

"What?" Mr. Pierce asked with irritation.

"I wrote to you and told you what was happening in my life... you never even cared enough to open them, did you?" Billy said in amazement.

"I'm sure your mother looked at them." Mr. Pierce said in a frustrated voice.

Billy shook his head to dispel the shock and said, "Whatever. Just forget you ever had kids. That shouldn't be too hard, just do what you've been doing. Deacon is better off without you in his life. I don't want or need your money. Just don't expect to hear from me or Deke again. We're done with you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mr. Pierce asked angrily.

"It means that we're done. You should be happy. Now you don't have the burden of feeding and clothing Deke. And you won't have to pay for the Christmas gifts that your office staff pick out for him. Just think of all the money you'll save. Having a few thousand extra dollars in the bank is SO much better than being able to watch your son grow up and become a man. The interest you'll draw on that money will be more than enough to compensate you for never knowing if he marries or has children." Billy finished with full sarcasm.

"I thought you said you were done?" Mr. Pierce asked shortly.

"Yeah. We're done." Billy said with a tone of finality and hit the 'end' button to disconnect the call.

The sound of clapping caught Billy's attention and he turned to see a dozen people standing around watching him, including Lawrence and Mona.

"Um, thanks." Billy said shyly.

* * * * *

"So what did you need to talk to me about?" Allen asked as he pulled all three boys into a loose hug.

"We were hoping you could come up with something Kevin and I could do together." Kenny said honestly.

"What kind of thing did you have in mind?" Allen asked curiously.

"I don't know. Brother stuff." Kevin said seriously.

"Well, I don't know if you'd be interested, but maybe you two could work on Kenny's *Enterprise* model together." Allen suggested carefully.

Kenny looked at Kevin with wide eyes and said, "That'd be great! Thanks Pop, that's perfect!"

"What do you think Kevin? Would you like to help Kenny put his model together?" Allen asked quietly.

"Yeah. If he'll show me what to do." Kevin said hesitantly.

"That's going to be the best part. I can show you the right way to cut apart the pieces and how to put on the decals..." Kenny said happily, then noticed a 'left out' expression on Deacon's face.

"And Deacon could work on his new models with us when he's not busy with Laura." Kenny finished with a smile at Deacon.

"Yeah, that sounds like fun." Deacon said thoughtfully, then broke into a smile.

"Well, I'm glad we've got that figured out. I'd like to talk to Deacon alone for a few minutes. Why don't you guys go on up and get your baths. When you're done, Deacon can come upstairs." Allen said gently.

"Thanks for thinking of the model Pop." Kenny said as he squeezed Allen tightly.

"I'm glad you like the idea, Cute Stuff." Allen said gently.

"I love you Poppa." Kevin said as he hugged Allen from the other side.

"I love you too Little One." Allen said tenderly.

"We'll see you in a little bit Deacon." Kenny said quickly as he hurried out of the family room into the hallway. Kevin followed close behind.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Deacon asked hesitantly.

Allen walked to the couch and took a seat, then patted the cushion beside him.

Deacon took the offered seat and waited.

"You've been here just over a day now and I wanted to see how you're doing." Allen said gently.

"I'm okay." Deacon said cautiously.

Allen draped an arm around Deacon's shoulders and quietly said, "You've been through a lot of ups and downs in the past twenty-four hours."

Deacon hesitantly leaned into Allen's side and relaxed.

"If you need to talk, I'm right here." Allen said in nearly a whisper.

"I don't need to talk right now. But this is nice. Thank you." Deacon said softly.

Allen hugged Deacon gently with one arm and said, "I'm here whenever you need me Deacon. You're just as much one of my boys as any of them."

"Thanks Allen. Billy's a great brother, but it's easier doing stuff like this with you." Deacon said in a soft voice.

Allen smiled and said, "That's how relationships are Deacon. Watch the people around you and you'll see that everyone has their own way of dealing with the people around them. Sometimes they'll behave very differently depending on who they're talking to."

"Yeah, I guess so." Deacon said as he snuggled into Allen's side.

"You do know that we're all glad that you're here, right?" Allen asked in a low voice.

"Yeah, even if you didn't have a party to prove it, I would have figured it out by now." Deacon said with a smile.

"Good. Please remember that in the next few days." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Why?" Deacon asked curiously.

"I'm concerned that Laura may need a lot of attention to get settled in. I just don't want you to feel that she's more important or that we like her better or anything like that." Allen said seriously.

Deacon considered the statement and snuggled closer into Allen's side as he said, "She needs all of us right now. If I start feeling jealous, all I have to do is remember what she looked like in that alley all bloody and crying."

"Well, if it ever starts bothering you, just come to me and tell me that you need to talk with me. We'll sit down like this and talk it out." Allen said gently.

"I will. I may even come by when I'm not feeling bad, just to get a 'time out' from everything else that's going on." Deacon said in a relaxed voice.

"I'd like that. I need a 'time out' every now and then too." Allen said with a smile.

* * * * *

"How's the shopping going?" Billy asked as he walked to Mona and Lawrence.

"I can't decide what to get." Lawrence said with frustration.

"Show me what you're choices are and I'll give you my opinion." Billy said simply.

Lawrence led the way to a cart parked between two display racks.

"This one would go perfectly with my eyes." Lawrence said as he held up a spaghetti strapped powder blue dress.

"But I think this one is just gorgeous." He said and held up a cream colored sun dress with peach blossoms.

Billy nodded thoughtfully.

"This one is the *perfect* size and is just cute." Lawrence said as he held up a dress with a delicate pattern that reminded Billy of autumn.

"And then there's this one..." Lawrence said as he held up a royal blue satin dress that just cried out elegance.

"I see your problem." Billy said with a nod.

"Which one should I get?" Lawrence asked as he looked at all the dresses again.

"All of them." Billy said simply.

"What?" Lawrence asked in disbelief.

"You're going to need more than one change of clothes. Get all of them, plus a few dresses for around the house. When you're done, we'll go pick out some 'boy clothes'." Billy finished with a smile.

"Really? You're going to get me all this?" Lawrence asked in wonder.

"Sure. That's why we're here. Mona? Will you help him get everything he needs? I'm going to the boys department to start looking around. What size pants do you wear?" Billy asked casually.

"Um. Oh, 24×28." Lawrence sputtered, still unable to comprehend what was happening.

"Don't forget to get shoes." Billy said as he walked toward the boy's department.

Lawrence looked at Mona with tears in his eyes.

"Come on sweetie. Let's not keep the man waiting." Mona said with a joyous smile.

* * * * *

"Sopek and I are going to be leaving now." Stan said from the double doors.

"You're not too mad at me are you?" Allen asked cautiously.

Stan smiled and said, "I was for about two minutes, but when Sopek and I got to talking, I decided that it was worth it. Thanks for cutting through all the bullshit and making us face it."

"My two favorite coworkers becoming a couple is all the thanks I'll need." Allen said as he squeezed Deacon to his side.

"We're not an official couple yet, but after we finish talking tonight... maybe. It's looking favorable." Stan said with a peaceful smile.

"Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help." Allen said with a grin.

"After what you did tonight I think I'd be afraid to ask." Stan said with a chuckle as Sopek walked to Stan's side.

"Thank you for your hospitality and... encouragement." Sopek said carefully.

Allen stood and coaxed Deacon to stand with him.

"It was my pleasure. You two have a good talk tonight." Allen said as he walked with one arm around Deacon's shoulders.

The group walked through the living room to the front door.

"It was nice to meet you both." Deacon said in a quiet voice.

"It was nice to meet you too Deacon. Thank you for sharing your birthday cake with us." Stan said with a warm smile.

"Yes, I too would like to thank you and wish you a Happy Birthday." Sopek said politely.

Deacon smiled in contentment and snuggled close to Allen's side.

"I'll see you at work on Monday." Allen said as Stan and Sopek walked away from the house toward Stan's car.

"Yeah, we've been saving up a whole pile of work for you for when you get back." Stan said with a mischievous smile.

"Gee, thanks." Allen said with a chuckle.

"Bye." Allen called out as Stan and Sopek drove away.

* * * * *

Mona quietly watched the checkout clerk looking at the dresses, then at Lawrence.

"Do you have a problem with something?" Mona asked the checkout clerk forcefully.

"No ma'am." The young man said nervously as he took the hangers out of the clothing and stacked them to ring them up.

Mona watched the man carefully, doing everything in her power to shield Lawrence from any hateful or intolerant remarks on this happy evening.

"Are these for you?" The clerk asked Lawrence shyly as he folded the sun dress.

"Yeah." Lawrence said cautiously.

"Then you might look at that display just over there. They have a selection of sandals that match this dress perfectly." The clerk said hesitantly.

Lawrence looked in the direction the clerk pointed and saw the display.

"They're perfect, thank you." Lawrence said happily as he hurried to pick out a pair in his size.

"Yes, thank you." Mona said softly.

"No problem. I can see that you're very protective of him. I wish my family was as supportive of me. He's a very lucky boy." The clerk said as he looked at Lawrence wistfully.

"His name is Lawrence, mine is Billy and this is Mona." Billy said as he also watched Lawrence happily inspecting the sandals.

"I'm Dale. It's nice to meet you." The clerk said gently.

"Well Dale, since you've been so helpful, I think we'll go to the men's department and do the rest of our shopping then bring everything over here... you do work on commission don't you?" Billy asked with a smile.

"Yes sir." Dale said with surprise.

"Billy, remember?" Billy said in a teasing voice.

"Sure Billy. Would you like me to put these things aside for you until you're done in the boys department?" Dale asked hopefully.

"Thanks, that would be a big help." Billy said with a smile.

* * * * *

As Allen walked back into the house, he noticed Jake and Xain descending the stairs.

"Hey guys, what have you two been up to?" Allen asked casually as he walked with his arm around Deacon.

"Um, we were, um..." Jake fumbled.

"We were sharing intimacy." Xain said frankly.

Allen smiled and said, "That's great guys. I'm glad that you're taking time for each other. That's important."

Jake smiled at Allen and asked, "Have I mentioned how completely cool you are?"

Allen looked at the ceiling with an expression of deep consideration before saying, "You might have, but I don't mind hearing it again."

"Deacon, we are preparing to begin an extensive search program if you would care to join us." Xain said carefully.

"Yeah, it sounds like it might be fun." Jake said with a smile.

"No thanks guys. I think I'd like to hang out with Allen for a while." Deacon said hesitantly, not wanting to offend them.

"That's cool. We'll be in the family room if you change your mind." Jake said casually and walked with Xain to the family room.

"Do you want to go to the living room to continue our talk?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Yeah." Deacon said peacefully and followed.

* * * * *

As Billy, Lawrence and Mona were walking toward the front of the store, a display counter caught Billy's eye.

"Lawrence, what do you think of that?" Billy asked and pointed to a small gold and diamond pin.

"It looks just like Deacon's necklace." Lawrence said with a smile.

"How do you think that would look with the blue satin dress?" Billy asked with a grin.

"Wonderful.... you wouldn't." Lawrence finished with a gasp.

"Well, don't expect diamonds every time I take you shopping, but yeah. I would." Billy said with a smile.

"May I help you?" The sales lady asked professionally.

"I'd like to see that." Billy said, pointing to the pin.

The sales clerk looked at Billy critically before saying, "I'm afraid management won't allow us to open the cases at this time of night."

"Then how do you sell anything?" Mona asked with irritation in her voice.

The sales clerk looked at Mona appraisingly, but remained silent.

"Lawrence, would you go get Dale?" Billy asked hopefully.

Lawrence hurried off to find Dale as Billy and Mona watched him go.

"And would you call your manager?" Billy asked the clerk with a smile.

"The manager isn't available to speak with you at this time." The clerk said in a haughty voice.

"Did you need something Billy?" Dale asked as he hurried to Billy's side, followed closely by Lawrence.

Billy made a show of looking at the sales clerk's badge before saying, "Stella informed us that management won't allow her to show us the merchandise

that we're interested in. And that management isn't available for us to speak to about it."

Dale looked at Stella curiously, then at Billy and said, "I've never worked this department, so I don't know about their policies, but if you'll give me a minute, I think I can get a manager to speak with you."

"Would you please?" Billy asked hopefully.

Dale nodded and hurried away.

"Big mistake." Mona said with a predatory smile at the sales clerk.

Lawrence giggled and nodded.

"May I help you?" A middle aged man asked as he approached with Dale following close behind.

"Yes sir. I just wanted to see a piece of jewelry. I was told that it was policy not to remove items from the case at this time of night and that the manager was unavailable to help me." Billy said seriously.

"I'm afraid that it is our policy to keep the cases locked after a certain hour, but I am certainly available to help you. Which one would you like to see?" The manager asked politely.

"The angel pin." Billy said and pointed.

"Stella, would you get it out so we can have a look?" The manager asked professionally.

Stella nodded and unlocked the case. Then she carefully lifted it out and laid it on a black velvet board on the countertop.

"Come here Lawrence and have a look, this is for you." Billy said with a smile.

Lawrence hesitantly walked up to the counter and stared at the angel pin.

"Do you like it?" Billy asked quietly.

"It's so beautiful..." Lawrence said in awe.

"We'll take it." Billy said to the manager.

Stella smiled and took the pin to wrap it up.

"Excuse me, is there any possible way you could tell me how much commission Stella is making off of this sale?" Billy asked the manager curiously.

"Why do you want to know that?" The manager asked suspiciously.

"Because Dale was courteous and friendly. Without his help, we probably wouldn't be talking since Stella refused to call you. If it isn't against your policy for an employee to accept a gratuity from an appreciative customer, I'd like to give Dale the same commission that Stella will be receiving." Billy said seriously.

The manager looked at Dale and gave a slight smile of pride before saying, "I'll let you know when Stella's done with your ticket."

"Thank you for all your help." Billy said with a gentle smile.

"Your total comes to $2,619.95." Stella said professionally.

Billy handed Stella his credit card then turned to Lawrence and said, "I usually don't like jewelry, but I think this is going to look great on you."

"I can't believe you'd spend that kind of money on me." Lawrence said in wonder.

"Can you believe I'd spend that kind of money on Deke?" Billy asked seriously.

"Yeah, but he's your brother." Lawrence said in a lost voice.

"And yours." Billy said frankly.

Lawrence looked at Billy with question.

"Deke and I are a package deal. You've accepted him as your brother. If he's your brother, so am I. Welcome to the family." Billy finished with a smile.

"Thanks Billy." Lawrence said in a whisper as he hugged Billy tightly.

* * * * *

"Where do you want to look first?" Jake asked seriously.

"I believe a search of the genealogical archives should prove most productive." Xain said as he accessed the World Wide Web.

"Why don't we search the genealogy newsgroups first? It should only take a few minutes and if anyone was looking for your mom, there could be a message there." Jake said thoughtfully.

"I believed that you had no experience with computers." Xain said as he accessed the newsgroup application.

"I don't, not with programming and stuff like you do. But I've spent some time in the library searching for different stuff." Jake said as he watched Xain's search.

Within seconds, the screen was flooded with possible matches to Xain's search criteria.

"That one there." Jake said quickly and pointed to a message on the screen.

Xain efficiently opened the message to read it.

>From: kwerner2003@..
>Date: Wed Jun 27, 2004 10:04 am
>Subject: Mariah Elaine Werner
>
>When I was five, my grandfather took his family to Vulcan so he could study
>alternative medical techniques.
>
>Something happened and he left suddenly without my Aunt Mariah. My
>grandfather refused to talk about it and I've been trying to get in touch with
>her for the past five years.
>
>If you have any information about my aunt, Mariah Elaine Werner, please
>contact me.
>
>Kennon Werner
>

"Was your mother's middle name Elaine?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"It was." Xain said quietly.

"What do you want to do?" Jake asked cautiously.

After a moment of thought, Xain said, "I believe it would be best if you would respond to his message."

"Why me?" Jake asked carefully.

"Kennon... my cousin... may harbor the same prejudices as our grandfather. Until that is known, I believe it best to limit the amount of information that we share." Xain said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Okay." Jake said with distraction.

"Do you have an email account? I would prefer not to use the Clan Short address at this point in our correspondence." Xain said seriously.

"Um, yeah. Just let me sign in." Jake said and leaned forward to use the keyboard.

After a minute of signing in and pasting the email address from the newsgroup, Jake finally asked, "What do you think I should say?"

"Simply tell the relevant facts as you know them. Omit the fact that I am on Earth until we know of my cousin's predilections toward non-humans." Xain said carefully.

Jake nodded and began to write.

Kennon,
I never met your Aunt, but I've heard of her.

She married a Vulcan man named Solak. I guess that's why your grandfather was pissed. Mariah and Solak had a son named Xain.

A few years later, Mariah got sick and eventually died.

I'm sorry it wasn't better news. If you have any other questions, please just ask.

Jake Thompson

"How's that?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"It is sufficient." Xain said quietly.

Jake hit the send button on his email program and put an arm around Xain to hold him silently.

* * * * *

"How did it go?" Allen asked as Mona, Lawrence and Billy walked into the living room.

"Billy bought me so much stuff I can't believe it." Lawrence said with excitement.

"Do you want to show it to me?" Deacon asked as he jumped up from Allen's side.

"Yeah... but just wait here. I want to try stuff on and show you." Lawrence said with a shy smile.

"Okay. That sounds great." Deacon said as he sat down beside Allen again.

"I'll help you sweetie." Mona said and followed Lawrence out of the room.

"What have you guys been up to?" Billy asked as he took a seat on the second couch.

"Just talking." Allen said as he put an arm casually around Deacon.

Billy smiled and said, "Next time the ladies need to go shopping, I think Juana should take them. I can't believe how long they can look at shoes."

Allen smiled and said, "I actually thought you'd be gone longer. I learned a long time ago that if you're going to a shoe store with Mona, you'd better pack a lunch."

"I guess it just seemed like a long time. For the amount of stuff we bought, it didn't really take that long." Billy said with a smile.

"Did you spend a lot?" Deacon asked curiously.

"Except for one thing, I spent about the same on Laura as I spent on your stuff this afternoon." Billy said casually.

"What was the one thing?" Deacon asked with interest.

"You'll know when you see it." Billy said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Guys, come downstairs and look." Deacon said from Kenny and Kevin's doorway.

"What's up Deacon?" Kenny asked as he pulled on his t-shirt.

"Laura's home and she's going to show off all the stuff they got at the store." Deacon said happily.

"We'll be right down." Kenny said with a smile at Deacon's excitement.

* * * * *

"Guys, do you have a minute to come into the living room?" Deacon asked hopefully as he ran into the family room from the hallway.

Jake looked at Deacon with a gentle smile and said, "Sure. We'll be right there."

Deacon ran across the room and out the double doors into the living room.

Jake smiled at Xain and slowly stood. As they walked toward the double doors, Jake automatically put an arm around Xain to hold him in a loose hug.

* * * * *

Laura walked into the living room and was surprised to find everyone there, waiting for her.

"It looks great! That color looks really good on you." Allen said as he admired the pale blue dress.

"The garment in combination with your coloring and features is aesthetically pleasing." Xain said in a speculative voice.

Laura looked at Xain curiously, then Jake.

"That means you look good." Jake said with a smile.

"Come on, let's show them the next one." Mona 'stage whispered' from the door.

Laura hurried to Mona to change into the next dress.

* * * * *

Laura braced herself before walking into the living room.

She had left her hair down and loose with the other dresses, but Mona had convinced her to wear a small hair band to sweep her hair back with this one.

The effect was elegant and Laura couldn't believe how beautiful she felt.

She ran her fingers gently over the satin fabric to be sure there weren't any wrinkles, then felt to see that the pin wasn't turning at an odd angle.

With one last deep breath for courage, Laura walked into the living room.

* * * * *

"You look beautiful." Billy said in a proud voice.

"Wow. You're really really pretty." Kevin said as he looked at Laura with a grand smile.

Laura looked at everyone and saw their looks of appreciation. Finally her gaze rested on Deacon.

Hesitantly Deacon stood from the couch and walked to her.

"Would it be okay if I kissed you?" Deacon asked in a whisper.

Laura gave a shy smile, then nodded.

Deacon pulled her into a loose, gentle hug and gave her a feather-light kiss.

Laura felt as if electricity had jolted through her body as the tender, gentle kiss ghosted across her lips.

"You're really beautiful." Deacon whispered as he waited for Laura to open her eyes.

"You're not so bad yourself." Laura said with a shy smile, then remembered that the rest of the family were sitting, watching them.

Laura looked at the floor as a blush started rising up her cheeks.

"Come on Laura, it's time for us to show off what Lawrence got." Mona said from the doorway.

Before Laura could leave, Deacon stopped her and looked carefully at the pin.

"It's just like my necklace." Deacon said in wonder.

"Yeah, that's why we got it." Laura said shyly as she looked him in the eyes.

The sound of Mona clearing her throat in the living room doorway broke the spell and Laura reluctantly left the room.

* * * * *

Lawrence walked into the living room wearing a long navy blue jacket and black slacks with a pastel yellow button-down shirt opened at the collar. The angel pin was on his lapel bringing the whole look together.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone marveled at the gender transition.

"It's like you can wear anything and look wonderful." Allen said in amazement.

"Yeah. You look great." Kenny said with wide eyes of wonder.

"Billy picked it out for me." Lawrence said shyly.

"You're just as beautiful as a guy as you are a girl." Deacon said with a loving twinkle in his eyes.

"Thank you." Lawrence whispered as his eyes began to shine with the beginnings of tears.

"Have you ever thought about modeling?" Billy asked suddenly.

Lawrence looked at Billy with surprise, then said, "No. I always thought I was funny looking."

Billy gently smiled and said, "You're absolutely beautiful. As soon as we've got all your legal stuff worked out, the two of us can sit down and talk about doing a photo shoot."

"Are you serious?" Lawrence asked with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"Totally serious. Now show us what else you've got." Billy finished with a smile.

Lawrence nodded and ran to change into his next outfit.

* * * * *

"That was really great Lawrence." Allen said with a smile as Mona took a seat beside Billy on the couch.

"Yeah. You got some really cool stuff." Kenny said happily.

"Yeah, I did." Lawrence said with a shy smile.

Deacon got the feeling that Lawrence might like a break from the spotlight and asked, "Jake, did you guys get your search stuff done?"

Jake glanced at Xain, then said, "I think we found what we were looking for. But we'll probably be going through some genealogy sites to try and find a family tree."

"Genealogy?" Lawrence asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Xain found out that he might have relatives on Earth, so we're trying to find them." Jake said honestly.

"Do you think you could do that for me?" Lawrence asked in a rush, sounding almost desperate.

"Sure, I guess so." Jake said with confusion at Lawrence's attitude.

"Come into the family room and we will initiate your search." Xain said in a neutral tone.

"Yeah. Thanks." Lawrence said quickly and hurried to the family room door.

When he got there, he looked back at Deacon, silently asking if he would join them.

Deacon smiled and walked to Lawrence's side.

* * * * *

"What search criteria will I be using?" Xain asked as he took his seat before the terminal.

"Um, I don't know." Lawrence said hesitantly.

"Why don't you tell us what you're trying to find out and we'll see what we can do." Jake suggested carefully.

"Okay. Well, I'm adopted. I guess when my mom married the guy I always thought was my dad, he adopted me and they changed my name. About three years ago he told me that adopting me was the biggest mistake he ever made... it really hurt my feelings at the time. I guess he knew that because I think he said it at least once a day ever since. Anyway, now I agree with him, he made a mistake. I wish he'd never have adopted me. At least I'd have a clue of where to start looking for my real father." Lawrence said distantly.

"Do you know your birth name?" Xain asked quietly.

"No. Mom never told me anything. She wouldn't talk about it at all." Lawrence said quietly.

Deacon hugged Lawrence gently and said, "Maybe we can find out something for you."

"With insufficient search criteria there is little I can do." Xain said thoughtfully.

"What about that Clan thing you guys are a part of. Couldn't Sean and Cory help?" Deacon asked desperately as he held Lawrence close.

Xain looked at Deacon with surprise and said, "It is possible that Sean or Cory or others of our Clan Brothers would have the necessary skills and experience to find the requested information."

"Then let's call them." Jake said with a smile.

Xain's only response was to initiate the transmission.

"*Clan Short*." a small voice answered as a shock of bright red hair and a pair of gray eyes looked at them from the view screen.

"Hi Timmy. Would you tell one of your parents that Jake and Xain are calling?" Jake asked with a smile.

"*Uh huh*." Timmy said and his head ducked out of the view of the terminal.

Less than a minute later Sean appeared on the terminal and a second later Timmy was on his lap.

"*What's up guys?*" Sean asked in a friendly voice.

"Well, our friend Lawrence has a problem, and I thought you might be able to help him." Jake said honestly.

"*Yeah, that's what we're all about. What can I do?*" Sean asked pleasantly.

"Do you want me to tell him?" Deacon asked Lawrence carefully.

Lawrence smiled at Deacon and said, "No, I can do it. But thanks."

Deacon gave a happy smile and waited for Lawrence to continue.

"*I don't know much. I guess I was adopted and had my name changed when I was still a baby. I don't know anything about my father.*" Lawrence said in a pained voice.

"Well, I can't make any promises, but if you'll give us some basic information, we'll see what we can find." Sean said thoughtfully.

"What do you want to know?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"*Your full name.*" Sean said as he pressed some buttons to record the response.

"Lawrence Michael Winters."

* * * * *

"I think it's just about time for Kenny and Kevin to get to bed." Allen said as he looked at his sons.

"Can Grandma and Billy come up to say goodnight to us too?" Kevin asked hopefully.

Allen looked at Mona and Billy with question.

"You bet." Mona said as she stood.

"I'd love to." Billy said quietly with a loving look directed at Allen.

Kevin and Kenny raced ahead of the adults to go to their room.

"They're nothing like you were." Mona said as she walked at a casual pace toward the stairs.

"What do you mean?" Allen asked curiously as he followed.

"Getting you into bed was like trying to bathe a cat." Mona said with a smile.

"I bet I could get him into bed without a fight." Billy said with a wink at Allen.

"I bet you could at that." Mona said with a chuckle.

"Okay. That's enough of that. You two are not allowed to compare notes about me." Allen said firmly.

"After we get the boys tucked in, remind me to tell you where his tickle spot is." Mona said with a wide grin.

Billy laughed and said, "I'll do that Mona."

Allen shook his head in defeat as the three adults entered the boys' room.

* * * * *

"When do you think we'll know something?" Lawrence asked apprehensively.

"There is no way to predict if or when the information you seek will be available." Xain said honestly.

"The guys understand how important something like this is. They won't make you wait." Jake said seriously.

"Yeah, I guess." Lawrence said distantly as he held Deacon tightly.

"It'll be okay. I promise." Deacon whispered.

Lawrence looked at Deacon with a gentle smile and said, "That's what you said when you found me in the alley."

Deacon looked at Lawrence with confusion, then remembered saying those words to the trembling girl with the bloody lip.

"Did I lie?" Deacon asked carefully.

Lawrence smiled and said, "Not a bit."

"And I'm not lying now. Cory and Sean and their mom were able to fix it so I could stay with Billy. I'm sure they're going to be able to find your dad." Deacon said gently.

"Even if they don't. Thanks for trying." Lawrence said softly.

"Anything for my sister." Deacon said with a teasing smile.

"Brother at the moment." Lawrence said as he pulled away and made a sweeping gesture to indicate his jeans and t-shirt.

"Whatever you are, I'm just glad you're here." Deacon said happily.

Lawrence thought about the statement and quietly said, "So am I."

* * * * *

"Are you guys about ready to go?" Billy asked from the door of the family room.

"Yeah, I guess so." Deacon said reluctantly.

"Don't worry Deke, we'll be spending most of the day with these guys tomorrow." Billy said as he put a casual arm around his brother.

"Yeah. It's just been such a great day, I don't want it to end." Deacon said sadly.

"We will endeavor to make tomorrow another 'great day'." Xain said simply.

"Yeah, and every one after that." Jake said happily.

Deacon smiled at his friends and nodded.

"Do you require assistance transporting your gifts to your home?" Xain asked in a neutral tone.

"Yeah. And Lawrence has a bunch of stuff too." Deacon said with a smile at Lawrence.

"Then let's do it." Jake said and led the way out of the family room.

* * * * *

Allen and Mona were sitting in the family room, each thinking about the events of the day.

"How do you like my home?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Fishing for compliments?" Mona asked in a teasing tone.

"Fishing for approval from my mother." Allen said gently in return.

"You've got it. Your house is beautiful. Your friends are great and you have the most wonderful, incredible children I could imagine." Mona said frankly.

"I think so too." Allen said with a grin.

"You've done it Allen. You have everything I ever dreamed of for you." Mona said as she looked at Allen with tears forming in her eyes.

"Almost everything. Billy and I are taking it slow... I'm afraid with everything going so well, something's going to happen to screw it up." Allen said with concern.

"Some people think that every moment of pleasure in life is purchased with a moment of pain." Mona said thoughtfully.

"Yeah." Allen said distantly.

"They're wrong. There isn't some huge disaster waiting around the corner for you just because you're happy. Enjoy this time in your life Allen. These are the precious moments that you get to look back on and cherish later in your life." Mona said in a dreamy voice.

"Thanks Mona... He really is nice, isn't he?" Allen asked as he closed his eyes.

"Let's see, he's loyal, handsome, rich and has a gentle, loving nature. Nice is kind of an understatement." Mona said with a chuckle.

"I love him." Allen said as he opened his eyes to look at Mona.

"It shows Baby. And he loves you just as much." Mona said seriously.

"I hope we can make it work. With all the boys... I guess our own needs get put to the side." Allen said with a sad tone in his voice.

"That's one of the realities of having kids." Mona said frankly.

Allen nodded in acknowledgement.

[But you're my kid and I'll see to it that things work out.] Mona thought to herself.

CHAPTER 30

Author's Note: Camp Little Eagle, Chapter 1 contains their visit to Camp Little Eagle.

These events follow immediately after.

"Why do we have to go to this other place?" Lawrence asked apprehensively.

"Chief Tecumseh said that Commander Dodds asked everyone to meet at his house. I guess Teri is going to be there too." Billy said unsurely.

"Kevin says that his Uncle Chip is really great. Maybe it won't be too bad." Deacon said, sounding uncertain.

"I think this is the place." Billy said as he followed Allen's car carefully through the open gate.

"It's a mansion!" Deacon said in wonder as they approached Southcrest.

"You mean people actually live here? This place is like a mall." Lawrence said with wide eyes.

"Just look at the grounds... this place is amazing." Billy said as he followed Allen's Caravan.

* * * * *

"Uncle Chip!" Kevin squealed in delight as he raced from the Caravan to hug Chip tightly.

"Hello Little One. How did you like Camp Little Eagle?" Chip asked with a happy smile.

"It was so cool. Everyone was really nice and there was a real Indian Chief running it and they said I wasn't too dumb to be in regular classes and Xain has his very own teacher and Deacon and Lawrence will maybe get to go to school with us too." Kevin rambled in excitement.

"Breathe Kevin, you have to slow down and breathe." Allen said with a chuckle as he casually walked to stand by Chip's side.

"How are you all doing today?" Chip asked Allen with amusement as he hoisted Kevin to rest on his hip.

"We're doing fine. Commander Chip Dodds, I'd like to introduce my mother, Mona Bridson, my friend Billy Pierce and his brother Deacon and his... protégé, Lawrence." Allen finished with a smile.

"Nice to meet you all. Please come in and make yourselves at home." Chip said as he walked to the door carrying Kevin on his hip.

* * * * *

"To make this as simple as possible, I'm just going to tell you all who everyone is. Otherwise introductions could take all afternoon." Chip said with a smile.

"First we have my brother, Captain Spock of the *USS Enterprise*."

Xain looked at Spock curiously. This man was the example that had been held up to him for the majority of his life. In all these years Captain Spock had been larger than life, an ideal to strive toward. Now here was the man in the flesh before him.

"Next is my husband, Josh Chasez-Dodds, you might also know him as JC from *NSync."

Lawrence felt his knees go weak at the sight of JC. *NSync was one of his all time favorite bands and now he was here in the same room with JC! And he was even cuter in real life than in his pictures!

"Beside Josh is Lieutenant Brady Thompson. He's a Security officer on the *Enterprise*."

Ricardo struggled in his mother's arms, wanting to go to his Unca Brady. The only thing in his mind was the desire to be in the arms of his Unca Brady.

"Next is Doctor Christine Chapel, also from the *Enterprise*." Chip said with a gentle look at Christine.

Kenny looked at Dr. Chapel and remembered her from their visit to the *Enterprise*. She wasn't like other adults. She treated him and his brothers like friends, not kids.

"Next we have Teri Short, Director of Federation Youth Services."

Juana smiled at Teri, thinking what a genuinely nice person she was.

"Beside her we have Helen McCarthy, who is pretty much the backbone of the Short household from what I've heard."

Teri gave a smile and nod of agreement as Helen shyly waved at everyone.

Mona looked at Helen and felt a kindred spirit. Helen looked like a woman who had faced everything the world had thrown at her and came through triumphant.

"Next we have Lieutenant Bowers from the *USS Yorktown*."

Allen looked carefully at Lieutenant Bowers, feeling that he had seen him somewhere before.

"On my hip is Kevin Thompson, a member of Clan Short." Chip said with a smile at the boy on his side.

"Over here we have Allen Thompson, a senior programmer on Project Libra."

Brady smiled at his brother and nephews.

"Surrounding Allen, we have Jake, Xain and Kenny Thompson, members of Clan Short."

Spock noticed Xain among the Human children and allowed himself the indulgence of a moment to speculate on Xain's presence.

"Next we have Billy and Deacon Pierce and Lawrence Winters."

Lawrence looked at Chip with question, knowing that no one had mentioned his last name.

"Then the backbone of the Thompson household, Juana Vasquez and her sons Reuben and Ricardo." Chip said, then looked around and asked, "Did I miss anyone?"

"Edovina Thompson, daughter of Jake and Xain Thompson of the house of Suvak." Xain said as he took a step forward with Edovina in his arms.

"Of course. Thank you Xain." Chip said with a grin at the Vulcan boy before him.

"I guess you're wondering why I've asked you all here." Chip began, when JC interrupted.

"You've been watching too many late night murder mysteries, Love."

“I'll deal with you later, Angel.”

"Promises, promises," JC replied.

Chip smiled back at JC and gave him a wink. He then turned back to his guests. "Lawrence, Teri is the Director of Federation Youth Services. She has the authority to place you with a permanent guardian." Chip said gently.

A look of panic came over Lawrence's face at the words.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure everything works out the way you want it to." Teri whispered.

Lawrence gave a hesitant nod.

"Lawrence, next I'd like you to meet a very special person, Lieutenant Joseph Bowers of the *USS Yorktown*... your biological father." Chip said with a smile of delight.

Silence fell over the room as everyone watched the father and son staring at each other.

Lawrence looked up into the face of the Starfleet Lieutenant and saw some of his own features reflected back.

"You're my dad?" Lawrence asked timidly.

Lieutenant Bowers nodded with tears starting to form in his light blue eyes.

Lawrence fought the urge to run to the man and hug him. He pooled his courage and finally asked, "Do you want me?"

"Yes son, I absolutely want you." Lieutenant Bowers said and opened his arms to Lawrence.

Billy and Deacon held onto each other as they saw their newest brother being drawn away from them.

"Why don't we give these two some time alone to get to know each other." Chip said with a smile at the pair.

Reluctantly, Billy and Deacon followed the group into the game room.

* * * * *

As the group entered the game room, Xain followed Spock with his eyes.

"Would you like me to introduce you to him?" JC asked quietly from behind Xain.

"Your husband's method of introduction in the living room was adequate." Xain said seriously.

JC smiled at the 'Vulcan' response and said, "Come on Xain. I'm sure my brother-in-law would like to speak with you."

Xain obediently followed JC to meet Spock.

Jake was only a step behind.

* * * * *

"Unca Brady!" Ricardo screeched in complete joy as Juana finally released him.

Brady squatted down and caught Ricardo as he barreled into his arms.

"I've missed you Ricardo. How are you?" Brady asked softly as he hugged the young boy.

"We went to see the school where Kevin and Jake and Xain are gonna go. It's really pretty there and everyone was nice to me." Ricardo said happily from Brady's arms.

"I've gotten all your messages and it sounds like you've been having a lot of fun. Are you and Reuben getting along okay?" Brady asked as he picked up Ricardo to hold him on his hip.

"Yeah. Reuben bathed with me last night and said that it was 'cause he likes me being his brother. He said that he likes me and loves me." Ricardo said happily.

Brady smiled at Ricardo's rambling story and said, "I'm glad your brother told you that he loves you. Sometimes people forget to say it."

"I love you Unca Brady." Ricardo said seriously.

"I love you too Ricardo." Brady said and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek.

* * * * *

"Hello again. How are you doing Kenny?" Christine asked in a gentle voice.

"Okay. It's nice to see you again." Kenny said shyly.

"Thank you. When Chip invited me to a party at his house I couldn't resist. Besides, I wanted to see how you and your brothers were doing." She said with a loving smile.

"We're all doing really good, come on. I want you to meet my grandma." Kenny said happily.

* * * * *

"Why didn't you ever write to me or visit me?" Lawrence asked in a plaintive whisper.

"Because I thought you'd be better off without me." Lieutenant Bowers said honestly.

Lawrence looked at his father with disbelief.

"I suppose I'd better tell you everything before we decide what we're going to do." Lieutenant Bowers said as he fell into the nearest couch.

"Tell me what?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"I was young, stupid and dirt poor when I met your mother. We thought we were in love but... I don't know what happened. The feelings just went away after a while. Anyway, we stayed together and you were born... I was so happy." He paused with a smile.

"What happened?" Lawrence asked desperately.

"I would have stayed with your mother forever if she would have let me. But she left me. It wasn't her fault, I had nothing to offer her... not even my love. You were the only reason we stayed together as long as we did." Lawrence's father said with a distant, defeated look in his eyes.

"Finally she met someone else. Someone with money who was willing to take care of you and raise you as his own son." Lieutenant Bowers said softly.

"So you stepped back and let him because he could provide for me and you couldn't." Lawrence said in a distant voice.

"Yeah. After losing you... I had to get as far away as possible. The best way I knew to do that was Starfleet. I worked harder to qualify for the Academy than I've worked for anything in my life. It's taken a lot of years, but I've made it to the rank of Lieutenant." He said softly.

Lawrence thought about what his father was saying, then asked, "Where do you live?"

"On my ship, the *Yorktown*. This is the first time I've set foot on Earth in nearly seven years." Lieutenant Bowers said quietly.

"If we... I mean, if I was going to live with you, where would I live?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"Well, I could probably talk to the Captain and arrange for you to stay with me in my cabin until I can arrange to get transferred planet-side." Lieutenant Bowers said thoughtfully.

Lawrence looked at his father and considered all that he had just heard.

A flash of inspiration came over Lawrence and he quickly said, "Hold on a minute, I need to go get someone."

"I'll be right here." His father said with concern.

* * * * *

"Kevin, you and I and your Uncle Josh are going to have to have a serious talk a little bit later." Chip said as he held Kevin in a firm hug.

"What about?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"We'll talk about it later, Little One. Right now I have guests. Would you mind helping me?" Chip asked with a smile.

"What can I do?" Kevin asked seriously.

"We need to make sure that all the guests are comfortable and having a good time. If anyone is alone, we need to talk to them and make them feel included. Do you think you can help me do that?" Chip asked gently.

"Yeah, I'll help you, Uncle Chip." Kevin said as he hugged Chip tightly.

* * * * *

"Spock, this is Xain Thompson... oh, and his brother Jake." JC said as he noticed Jake following them.

"And Edovina." Jake said quietly as he looked at his daughter in Xain's arms.

"And Edovina." JC said with a smile at the sleeping baby.

"Greetings." Spock said formally and noticed that Jake's blond hair was styled in a somewhat Vulcan manner.

"I thought Spock and Xain would like to talk since you're both..." JC trailed off, not having any idea of what he should say next that wouldn't sound insulting.

Spock, Xain and Jake each raised one eyebrow in an inquisitive fashion as they looked at JC.

"I'll leave you guys to talk, I have to attend to my other guests." JC said in a rush and hurried away.

A long silence fell over the trio as they looked at each other.

Jake finally broke the silence by saying, "Xain's father has used you as an example of what Xain should be."

"How so?" Spock asked with interest.

"He who is my father compiled a list of those of your actions that are a matter of public record. My studies have been structured in such a fashion to provide the skills to emulate your knowledge and abilities." Xain said carefully.

Spock slowly raised an eyebrow in consideration before asking, "I am curious to know of the logic in that decision."

"She who was my mother was of Earth. My hybrid physiology has presented challenges for my education and socialization. He who is my father believes that it is logical to pattern my life after a person of mixed parentage who has made great achievements." Xain said reasonably.

Spock thought about the words, then slowly said, "There is one notable flaw in that logic."

Xain raised an eyebrow in question.

"The course of my life has been determined by my choices. Any achievements I have made have been the result of facing the consequences of those choices and overcoming the obstacles that lay before me. To base your decisions on the results of my choices rather than the choices themselves is to remove the most important factor." Spock said carefully.

"Which is?" Xain asked without inflection.

"Doing that which I believed to be right." Spock said seriously.

"So what you're saying is, that instead of trying to follow in your footsteps, Xain should make his own footsteps?" Jake asked cautiously.

"A succinct and accurate interpretation." Spock said in a considering voice.

"And in doing so, I would in essence, be following your example by mimicking your motivation rather than your actions." Xain said thoughtfully.

Spock gave a single nod in agreement.

"It may be difficult to explain this reasoning to 'he who is my father'. Perhaps Father may offer some insights in this matter." Xain said seriously to Jake.

"Yeah, Dad's pretty good at making sense out of stuff like this." Jake said seriously.

Spock raised an eyebrow in question.

"Solak is Xain's *sa-mekh* and is called 'he who is Xain's father'. Allen is Xain's *a'nirih* and is called Father." Jake explained.

Spock got a considering look, then said, "I believe the distinction would be lost on most Humans."

"Well, I get it." Jake said with a shrug.

"From your explanation of the distinction, I believe you do. However, if you would not be opposed to my intrusion into your personal affairs, I would like to make an observation."

"Proceed, your observation is welcomed." Xain said with interest.

"Logic would suggest that more distinct identifiers should be used." Spock said thoughtfully.

Xain raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

"Repeated explanation of the subtle distinction is time consuming and inefficient." Spock said without inflection.

Xain nodded in acceptance of the fact.

"And the possibility for misunderstanding among Humans is greatly increased by using such similar terms." Spock continued.

"I acknowledge your logic. Thank you for your observation, Captain Spock." Xain said seriously.

"Outside a formal setting, the use of my rank is unnecessary." Spock said in a neutral voice.

Xain nodded once in acknowledgement.

"So what do you want to call Solak and Allen?" Jake asked seriously.

Xain thought for a moment, then his considering gaze met Jake's curious eyes.

"Solak will be Father. Allen will be Dad." Xain said and betrayed a small smile of fondness at Jake.

Jake smiled at the choice and nodded.

Spock watched their interaction curiously.

* * * * *

"Hello Teri, it is good to see you again." Juana said quietly.

"Good morning Juana. How are you today?" Teri asked with a friendly smile.

"Very good, although I do not understand why we are here." Juana said honestly.

"Well, it's a rare occasion when Chip is on Earth and Josh isn't on tour. And since everyone was apparently available today, they decided to have a gathering. I thought that after everyone has had a chance to chat, the

ladies would probably retreat to the kitchen and we could have our talk just like we planned." Teri said honestly.

"That would be good. I brought a coffee cake, just in case." Juana said as she glanced to see where Reuben, Ricardo and Edovina were.

"That sounds wonderful. Let's just see how this thing with Lawrence works out, then we'll sneak away. I think Helen is already in the kitchen, probably helping Hazel with snacks or something." Teri said as she looked around.

"From his comments at breakfast this morning, I believe Lawrence would like to be included in our talk if you wouldn't object." Juana said slowly.

"That would be fine. I'd like to get to know him. He seems to be a nice boy." Teri said with a smile.

"He is." Juana said gently.

* * * * *

Allen walked to stand beside Deacon and Billy.

"God Allen, I feel so selfish right now I can't stand myself." Billy said in a whisper.

"You want Lawrence to stay with you instead of his father." Allen said gently.

"Yeah. Isn't that just horrible of me? I should just want him to be happy." Billy said as he held Deacon tightly to his side.

"Well, if it's horrible, then I'm horrible too." Allen said honestly.

"Me too." Deacon said with a voice filled with worry.

"Whatever happens, we'll get through this Deke. I promise." Billy said quietly.

"Yeah, we're all in this together." Allen said as he squeezed Deacon's shoulder with one hand.

* * * * *

"Grandma, this is Dr. Chapel." Kenny said as he led Christine by the hand.

"Nice to meet you Dr. Chapel." Mona said with a genuine smile.

"Please call me Christine." She said as she gently shook Mona's hand.

"And you call me Mona. You seem to be a close friend of my grandson's." Mona said with a fond smile at Kenny.

"Well, we had a chance to get to know each other when he came on board the *Enterprise*. The boys and I played a few hands of cards while we waited for the men to finish their meeting." Christine finished with a grin.

"Oh, I love to play cards. What do you play?" Mona asked with interest.

"Just about anything. Spades, Hearts, Canasta, Poker... I'm a little rusty on Bridge, but I think I still remember the basics." Christine said thoughtfully.

"We'll have to get together and play a few hands sometime. Maybe later today." Mona said in a considering voice.

"That sounds like fun. But you'll have to watch out for Kenny here. He's a card shark." Christine said in a teasing voice.

"I trumped her ace." Kenny said with a shy giggle.

"Yes you did. I still owe you for that." Christine said with a smile.

Mona glanced at the doorway, hoping things were going well with Lawrence.

* * * * *

"You seem to be on your own over here. How are you doing Reuben?" JC asked gently.

"I'm fine. I was just giving Ricardo time to be alone with Uncle Brady." Reuben said as he watched his brother carefully.

"I bet you want to spend some time with your Uncle Brady too." JC observed.

"Yeah. But Ricardo is little and he needs to have Uncle Brady all by himself for a little while." Reuben said as he looked up to meet JC's eyes.

"That's very grown-up of you, Reuben. How would you feel about walking around with me and talking to people until Ricardo and Brady are finished?" JC asked gently.

Reuben smiled at JC and said, "Okay. You're nice, I like you."

JC smiled at the genuine compliment and responded, "I like you too."

* * * * *

"Billy, can you and Deacon come in here? I need your help." Lawrence asked hopefully with a note of desperation in his voice.

"Sure, Lawrence." Billy said quietly with dread.

Allen watched as Billy and Deacon followed Lawrence out of the game room.

* * * * *

"Dad, this is Billy, the guy I've been staying with." Lawrence said seriously.

"Thanks for taking care of my son." Lieutenant Bowers said quietly.

"Lawrence is a great boy. It's been a pleasure to have him in our house." Billy said with an ache in his heart.

"Billy, were you serious about me staying with you, like from now on?" Lawrence asked in confirmation.

"Yeah. I already think of you as my brother." Billy said quietly.

Lawrence nodded and said, "Dad, your life is in Starfleet. I don't want you to give up everything that you've worked so hard for."

Lieutenant Bowers looked at his son with panic in his eyes.

"I want for you to be my father, but I don't want to live on a starship or make you take a job on Earth just to take care of me." Lawrence explained.

"But I wouldn't mind doing it." His father said quickly.

"But I'd mind. You said you started out with nothing. Now you're a Lieutenant in Starfleet. I won't be responsible for you giving up your career." Lawrence said firmly.

"So what are you saying?" Lieutenant Bowers asked hesitantly.

"I'm saying that if Billy and Deacon still want me, I'd like to live with them. And when you're on Earth, we could visit and do father-son things together." Lawrence said carefully.

"Is that alright with you?" Lieutenant Bowers asked, directing his question to Billy.

"Yeah. It sounds perfect to me." Billy said honestly.

"Please don't worry. Billy and Deacon are my brothers. You'll be my one and only father." Lawrence said seriously.

"Thank you Lawrence. I understand." Lieutenant Bowers said with relief.

"Then let's go tell Chip and Teri what we've come up with so we can make everything legal." Billy said to the group.

"Could you hang on a few minutes? There's one more thing I need to tell Dad." Lawrence said with a look of concern.

Billy looked at Lawrence and realized what he meant.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, Mona, do you think you could help me for a minute?" Lawrence asked with a rush.

"Of course. What do you need?" Mona asked at Lawrence's frustrated and worried expression.

"I need to change... I've got to show my dad what he'll be getting for a son before we do anything official." Lawrence said with a tremble of fear in his voice.

"Get the car keys from Allen so we can get your stuff and I'll help you." Mona said decisively.

Lawrence hurried away as Mona said, "Excuse me, Christine. My grandson needs me. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course. Please call if you need my help with anything." Christine said with concern at Lawrence's fearful mood.

"I'll be fine, but if Lieutenant Bowers says anything to hurt Lawrence, he may be needing your professional services." Mona said firmly.

Christine nodded and rested a hand on Kenny's shoulder as she watched Mona and Lawrence leave the room.

* * * * *

"So how did you meet my son?" Lieutenant Bowers asked cautiously, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Billy looked at Deacon, seeing if he wanted to explain.

Deacon looked from his brother to Lieutenant Bowers and slowly said, "He was getting beat up when we found him. I saw him laying on the ground, hurt and bleeding, then he looked up into my eyes... I had to help him. I don't think I even decided, I just knew that I had to help him and do whatever I could to make sure he was never hurt again."

"Thanks for helping him. I really thought I was giving Lawrence a chance at a great life by letting Winters adopt him." Lieutenant Bowers said quietly.

"Lawrence hasn't told us very much about what happened, but from what little he's said, it sounds like his adoptive father has been putting him down

and degrading him for years... trying to destroy his self-image." Billy said quietly.

"Why would he do that?" Lieutenant Bowers asked in a pained voice.

Billy looked at Deacon cautiously, then said, "Ask me again after Lawrence gets back."

Lieutenant Bowers looked at Billy and Deacon, then slowly nodded.

* * * * *

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to sweetie." Mona said as she walked with Laura to the door of the living room.

"I have to, Grandma. I've got to be honest with him before I'm made his son. I need to know if he can accept me." Laura said with tears in her eyes.

Mona pulled Laura into a gentle hug and said, "I'm so proud of you. No matter what happens in there, just remember that we're all there with you. Billy and Deacon love you like brothers and I love you as a grandmother. If your father can't deal with it, that's his problem, not yours."

"Thanks, Grandma." Laura said as she increased her hug.

"But if he gets nasty with you, I'm going to rip his face off." Mona said seriously.

Laura looked up at Mona in surprise.

"Maybe not literally. But I won't let him hurt you. No one is going to hurt you if I can prevent it." Mona said firmly.

"Okay." Laura whispered and pulled back to prepare herself.

Mona fussed with Laura's 'autumn' dress and straightened the pin on the collar before withdrawing her hands and giving a slight nod.

Laura took a deep inhale to brace herself and turned to enter the living room.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Bowers looked up as he saw movement in the doorway.

"Hi dad." Laura said hesitantly as she walked to stand beside Deacon.

Lieutenant Bowers stared in shock and his mouth fell open.

Mona carefully walked in to stand at Laura's other side.

Laura couldn't interpret her father's frozen stare.

"I just had to know if you can handle this." Laura finally said in a whisper.

Lieutenant Bowers blinked, then rushed to the door without saying a word.

Laura turned to follow, but Mona held her back.

"Give him a few minutes to deal with this, Laura. Billy, can go after him if you want." Mona said and looked at Billy.

"Would you?" Laura asked Billy hopefully.

Billy's only response was to run out the living room door.

* * * * *

Just outside the living room door, Billy found Lieutenant Bowers sitting against the wall with his knees drawn up to his chest.

"Do you mind if I talk with you, Lieutenant Bowers?" Billy asked cautiously.

"Joe." Lieutenant Bowers said into his knees.

"Care to talk about it, Joe?" Billy asked carefully.

"I guess." Joe said hesitantly.

Billy sat in the floor beside Joe and waited.

Uncomfortable silence fell between the two as Billy waited for Joe to ask the questions that were most important to him.

"Why is he like that?" Joe asked in a whisper.

"I don't know for sure. His adoptive father used to tell him he was too prissy to be a boy. I don't know if Lawrence has gender issues because he was told that, or if Lawrence was told that because even back then he had gender issues." Billy said frankly.

"So it doesn't bother you?" Joe asked carefully.

Billy smiled and said, "Not a bit. Lawrence is a gentle person with a tremendous loving heart. Him wearing pants or a dress doesn't change his heart."

"I guess not. I don't even know why this is freaking me out so bad. It's just... it's like something in me just snapped when I saw him dressed like that." Joe said desperately.

"Boys wear blue and girls wear pink." Billy said simply.

"What?" Joe asked in confusion.

"Lawrence is wearing pink. It goes against everything you were taught from early childhood." Billy said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I guess it does. I always thought I was so open minded..." Joe trailed off in a defeated whisper.

"Your first reaction doesn't make you homophobic or intolerant or anything, just human. What counts is what you do after you've had some time to deal with it. Can you accept Lawrence, even when he's dressed as Laura?" Billy asked frankly.

"I... I don't know." Joe said honestly.

"Your son is in there, probably turning himself inside out with worry about what you think of him. Even if you can't tell him everything he wants to hear right this minute. I think it would be good if you could go in there and let him know you don't hate him." Billy said cautiously.

Joe looked at Billy with surprise at the statement.

"Lots of fathers disown their sons and throw them out into the street over things like this. Lawrence never said either way, but I think his adoptive father might have done that. I think it's important for him to know that you love him, even when he's not exactly what you expect him to be." Billy said as he stood.

"Tell him I'll be in in a minute." Joe said in a distant voice.

"Yeah." Billy said and walked through the door.

* * * * *

"How is he?" Mona asked as she held Deacon and Laura in her arms.

"He's thinking about things. He said he'll be right in." Billy said as he walked into the room.

Laura pulled out of Mona's hug and wiped her eyes.

"I'm proud of you, Laura." Billy said honestly as he looked her in the eyes.

"Thanks." Laura whispered.

Joe walked into the room and looked hesitantly at Laura.

A look of determination fell across Laura's face as she walked to her father.

"Dad, if my being a girl bothers you that much... I won't do it anymore." Laura said firmly as she looked him in the eyes.

"Really?" Joe asked hopefully.

"Really." Laura said sadly, then continued, "Even though I'm not very good at being a boy because I'm prissy and feminine, I'll try and be what you want me to be."

Joe looked into Laura's eyes and saw the truth in her words.

"Thank you. But I'm not going to ask you to do that. You dressing like this makes me uncomfortable, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm your father. If you decide to dress like a boy, do it because it's what you want, not what I want. I'll still be your father and I'll love you no matter what you decide." Joe said hesitantly.

Tears started falling down Laura's cheeks as she threw herself into her father's arms.

After a long moment of hugging, Joe quietly said, "You really look nice."

"Thank you, Daddy." Laura said as she pulled back to look him in the eyes.

"I'm going to try, but I don't know how to be the father of a... shit, I don't even know the right word for what you are." Joe finished in frustration.

"I think trans-gender is the catch-all label these days." Billy said quietly.

"Thanks, Billy. Laura, please forgive me if I don't do the right things or say the right things. I just don't know what the father of a... trans-gender is supposed to do." Joe said in an apologetic voice.

"That's okay, Daddy. I don't know either. But I won't always be like this. Mona told me that I have a safe place to live and time to figure out what I want to be for sure. When I'm sure, I'll let you know." Laura said seriously.

"You'll let me know what?" Joe asked hesitantly.

"If I'm going to be a boy or a girl. It's just too confusing to be both; I don't want that for the rest of my life. When I've decided, I'll tell you." Laura said with a hopeful look into her father's eyes.

Joe smiled and said, "I'll be waiting. Until then, just let me know if you need me to do anything."

"You just did it. You told me that you love me no matter what. I can't think of anything else that I could want." Laura said with fresh tears in her eyes.

"Then lets go talk to those people who can make everything legal... if you still want to be my son?" Joe asked hesitantly.

"Of course I do." Laura said with a smile.

Joe noticed that Billy, Deacon and Mona were in a group hug, watching them.

"Thanks for taking care of my s... child." Joe finished with a smile.

"It was our pleasure." Billy said honestly.

"I'm so proud of you, Laura. That took so much courage ..." Mona said as she looked with admiration into Laura's eyes.

Laura shyly ducked her head and said, "Yeah, I guess it did."

"That was really brave Laura. I don't think I could have done it." Deacon said honestly.

Laura cleared her throat, then in her deepest and most masculine voice, she said, "Yeah, it was tough. Cross-dressin ain't for sissies."

Everyone laughed as the group filed out of the living room.

* * * * *

As soon as Laura entered the game room Chip walked to greet her with Kevin at his side.

"You look like you've had a good talk. Is everything okay?"

Laura glanced at her dad, then said, "Yeah, perfect."

Nearly everyone in the room started to converge on Laura when Chip said in a loud voice, "Give Teri and I a minute to talk with Laura and Lieutenant Bowers before we interrogate them about their decision."

"Can I come too?" Kevin asked Chip hopefully.

"Not this time, Little One. But if you wouldn't mind helping me, you could do me a favor." Chip said gently.

"Sure Uncle Chip. I'll do anything you want." Kevin said with a great smile.

"Please ask Spock to join us in my study. Depending on what Teri decides, it might be helpful to have a second Starfleet Officer to serve as a witness."

Kevin hurried away to get Spock.

"If you two will come with me to my study, we'll get everything taken care of." Chip said to Laura and Joe as he turned to leave.

"We need Billy there, and I think Deacon should be there too." Laura said seriously.

"Oh, okay. Well, let's go then." Chip said uncertainly as he watched Billy and Joe walk out of the game room.

As Laura and Deacon walked out the game room door, Chip noticed Deacon put an arm gently around Laura in a protective gesture.

CHAPTER 31

"Grandma looks worried. Let's go talk to her." Reuben said as he looked at JC hopefully.

"That sounds like a good idea Reuben." JC said gently and followed Reuben across the room.

"Grandma, this is Josh... I think he's my Uncle." Reuben finished in a voice of deep thought.

JC laughed and said, "That's right Reuben. I'm your Uncle Josh."

"Haven't we met before?" Mona asked curiously.

"I don't know. You look familiar but I can't place where we might have met." JC said as he looked at Mona consideringly.

Mona gave it another moment of thought before saying, "I'm sure it will come to me. You have a beautiful home here."

"Thanks. This place is my dream. Every now and then I can't believe that I'm really here." JC said with a distant smile.

"Our house is really nice too." Reuben interjected.

JC smiled at Reuben and said, "I know. The house you're living in now is where we lived before we moved here."

"Really?" Reuben asked with wide eyes of wonder.

"Really. That's why Chip and I were at your house on Monday. We were selling the house to Allen." JC explained with a gentle smile.

"It's a beautiful house. Everyone is so comfortable there it feels like they've been living there for years." Mona said happily.

"I just had a feeling that it would work out for them." JC said casually and noticed a concerned look pass across Mona's face.

Before JC could find a tactful way to find out what was wrong, Reuben asked, "Grandma, why are you worried?"

Mona looked at Reuben and said, "Because they're in the other room deciding where Laura is going to live. I feel so close to her... I can't help but worry."

"Teri is really good at what she does. She'll make sure that everything works out so Laura ends up in the best possible place." JC said with assurance.

"I hope so. No matter what happens, Laura's life is going to be difficult. I just want to help her through it any way I can." Mona said seriously.

JC smiled and said, "As the Director of Federation Youth Services, Teri has helped so many children that I could spend all day telling you the stories. But before anything else, she's a mother. She cares deeply for every single child that she encounters and has a way of making things work out for the best."

Mona gave a gentle smile to JC and said, "Knowing that she's a devoted mother gives me more comfort than whatever title she might carry."

"Maybe later you'll have the chance to sit down and trade stories with her. To look at her now, you might think that she's always had an easy life. But let me tell you, she's been a mom in the trenches. She's been through things that I hope I never have to face." JC said honestly.

"I look forward to talking with her," Mona said in a considering voice as she glanced at the door, awaiting Laura's return.

* * * * *

"I got to see a real live angel." Ricardo said with wide eyes.

"Really?" Brady asked cautiously as he shifted in his seat to be more comfortable with Ricardo in his lap.

"Yeah. His name is Mikey and he's got wings and is really nice and really pretty." Ricardo said in a rush.

Brady smiled, then got a curious look as he remembered hearing something about a new Saint who was named Mikey.

"And he said that he was our Garden Angel and he hugged me and held me and then he kissed Edovina." Ricardo said happily.

Brady chuckled at the statement and said, "I think you mean Guardian Angel. That means that he watches over you and protects you from bad things."

"Uh huh. I heard him in my head when he was holding me. He said that he was my Garden Angel and that if I'm ever scared I can call him and he'll help me." Ricardo said with a smile, then scrunched up his face thoughtfully and asked, "How do I call him, Unca Brady? Is it like when I call you?"

Brady smiled at Ricardo and said, "No, not like that. Does your mother have you say your prayers at night before you go to bed?" Brady asked quietly.

"Uh huh. Mommy says that I'm s'posed to close my eyes and tell Jesus 'thank you' for all the good things I have and for my mommy and brother and sister and Edovina. And then I say Amen... I think that means goodbye." Ricardo finished in a considering voice.

"Something like that. Well, you do the same thing when you want to talk to Mikey. Close your eyes and tell him what you want to say to him." Brady said gently.

"Do I have to do it at bedtime like when I talk to Jesus?" Ricardo asked seriously.

"No. You can talk to him anytime you want. It's called praying." Brady said with a smile.

"Can I do it now?" Ricardo asked hopefully.

"Sure you can." Brady said gently.

Ricardo folded his hands and closed his eyes as he said, "Hi Mikey. Unca Brady says I can call you like this when I want to talk to you."

"You know how you said you could hear Mikey in your head when he held you?" Brady said gently.

Ricardo opened his eyes, looked up at Brady and nodded.

"He can hear you that way too. If you want, you can just think the words and he can hear you the same way you could hear him." Brady said softly.

Ricardo nodded again, then closed his eyes and began to pray silently.

Brady smiled at the sight, then closed his own eyes and offered his own silent prayer of thanks for allowing Ricardo to be a part of his life.

* * * * *

Juana looked over in time to see Ricardo put his hands together and bow his head in prayer. A moment later she saw Brady also bowing his head.

A feeling of contentment washed over her at the sight and tears began to well up in her eyes.

"Is everything okay, Juana?" Allen asked in concern as he walked to her side.

"Si, yes. You and your brother are such good men. I have been worried that the children would not have a good man in their lives as an example. How is a boy to grow into a good man if he has never known a good man?" Juana said quietly.

"Juana, I grew up without a father and didn't have much of a male role model for most of my life. Mona was a wonderful mother and provided the best example I can imagine of how to be a good person. Even though I'm happy to be a father figure in their lives, I have no doubt that the boys would have grown up to be fine men if they had never met me. You're a good and loving mother and that's what's most important." Allen said seriously.

"Perhaps. But to see this... it fills my heart." Juana said and inclined her head to indicate Brady and Ricardo praying together.

Allen smiled and said, "You've got me there, Juana. You'd have to have a heart of stone not to be moved by that sight."

* * * * *

"Are you missing Uncle Chip?" Jake asked with concern as he and Xain approached Kevin sitting alone in a large chair.

"Yeah. He's with Deacon and Laura." Kevin said in a grumpy voice.

Jake got a look of concern, then glanced at Xain for an instant.

"I believe I should prepare a bottle for Edovina." Xain said simply and walked away.

"Kev buddy, do you want to talk about it?" Jake asked gently as he scooted Kevin to one side and sat with him in the chair.

Kevin looked at Jake's honest concern and said, "I love Uncle Chip."

Jake looked closely at Kevin and realized just what Kevin was saying.

"Oh, I guess you mean you love him like..."

"Like you love Xain." Kevin said firmly.

Jake closed his eyes and thought about what to say next.

"I really, really love him." Kevin said in an imploring voice.

Jake nodded and quietly asked, "If you could make a wish so that everything could be just the way you wanted it to be, what would it be like?"

Kevin thought about it for a minute and smiled before saying, "I'd get to be with Uncle Chip every day and every night and could hug him all the time."

"Where would Uncle Josh be?" Jake asked quietly.

"Gone." Kevin said firmly.

Jake got a sad look at the statement and continued, "Where would Kenny be?"

"Kenny could live here with us too. So could Poppa and Grandma and You and Xain and Edovina." Kevin said happily.

Jake thought about Kevin's words for a minute before saying, "Kev. You know I love Xain, right?"

"Yeah." Kevin said as he looked curiously at Jake.

"How do you think it would make me feel if Xain went away?" Jake asked softly.

"It'd hurt a lot. That would be really really bad." Kevin said seriously.

"If Xain went away because someone made him. How do you think I'd feel about that?" Jake asked quietly.

"Really mad. You'd probably want to hurt whoever made Xain go away." Kevin said firmly.

"Think about it, Kev. That's what you're doing to Uncle Chip." Jake said as he got up and walked away.

* * * * *

"I suppose it would be best to get right to it." Teri said in a serious tone as she took her seat in Chip's study.

Everyone took their seats and waited with concern at the tone of her voice.

"From the looks on your faces after your talk, it seems that you've come to some decisions. If you'll fill me in, I'll do my best to make things work out the way you want them to." Teri said seriously.

Laura looked at her father, silently asking him to explain what they had agreed upon. Something deep inside her just needed to hear him say the words.

"I want Lawrence... um, Laura to be my son... daughter... I mean, child. You know what I mean." Joe said in frustration.

Teri smiled at the stumbling statement and said, "I understand. I take it that you're okay with this Laura?"

"Yeah. Dad said that he's my father no matter what." Laura said with admiration directed at her father.

"Wonderful, this is going to work out fine." Teri said with a smile.

"But since Dad lives on a starship, I want to live with Billy and Deacon. He's still going to be my Dad, but this way he gets to keep his job and I get to stay on Earth." Laura said in a rush.

"That's no problem, we can make it work." Teri said with assurance, then switched to a business attitude and continued, "As Director of Federation Youth Services I have the authority to invoke the Safe Haven Act when I feel that the situation warrants."

"Even though the Safe Haven Act could be justified in this case and would be much faster and easier than trudging through the court system, I believe that to invoke Safe Haven would be a misuse of my authority." Teri said and looked around the group for their reactions.

"Does that mean that I have to go back to my parents?" Laura asked with a tremble of fear in her voice.

"No. It doesn't mean that at all. Let me back up and tell you how I arrived at this decision and hopefully you'll agree with me." Teri said in a measured tone.

"After you talked with my sons last night about finding your biological father, they did some investigation. The Clan has the ability to gather detailed information and they went all out on your behalf. They brought the information to me last night so I could determine the best way to help you." Teri said introspectively.

"Early this morning, I called your parents and talked with them about your situation." Teri said, then looked at Laura to see her reaction.

After a moment of shock, Laura hesitantly nodded for Teri to continue.

"Your parents and I had a long talk and finally came to an understanding. I'm sure you already know that they can't accept you as you are. When I told them that we located your biological father, they said that if Lieutenant Bowers is willing to adopt you, they will be willing to cooperate." Teri said seriously.

"They did?" Laura asked in wonder.

"Yes. Your mother seemed hopeful that Lieutenant Bowers would accept you..." Teri said slowly and drifted off.

"And my father was glad to be rid of me." Laura finished darkly.

"In a word. Yes." Teri said with a look of apology.

"So what do we do now?" Laura asked apprehensively.

"I've faxed some paperwork to your parents' lawyer. I've already received a fax in return of the signed official guardianship papers. The originals should be here tomorrow. What that means is that Lieutenant Bowers has legal custody of you on your parents behalf." Teri said thoughtfully.

"So they're still my legal parents?" Laura asked hesitantly.

"Yes. For now. The adoption will take its normal course and time through the court system." Teri said softly.

"Why could you fix it so Billy could be my guardian right away and Laura has to wait?" Deacon asked cautiously.

Teri looked at Deacon and said, "Well, to be honest Deacon, you were in such an emotional state that you needed the security of knowing that Billy was your guardian and that you couldn't be taken away from him. I think that going through the court system in your case would have been a long, drawn out process that would have caused you some serious problems. It's not uncommon for children in similar situations to experience depression, anxiety disorders and worse. It was my judgment at the time that you weren't emotionally capable of facing what was sure to be a long and ugly court battle for your custody."

Deacon looked at Teri and reluctantly nodded.

"Laura's situation is different. Everyone is in agreement and the court case only serves to make it happen." Teri said simply.

"Joe said that Laura can live with us. Is this going to mess that up?" Billy asked cautiously.

"No. When Laura's parents signed this paper they gave Lieutenant Bowers the authority to make that decision." Teri said and handed the fax to Joe.

"So I guess you didn't really need us in this meeting." Chip said quietly.

"I couldn't be sure of that until I knew what had been decided. But it's just as well that you're both here. If something happens later, it's good to have reliable witnesses about what was said here today." Teri said seriously.

"A reasonable precaution." Spock said in a considering voice.

"I really thought you were going to invoke 'Safe Haven' and get this all resolved today." Chip said honestly.

"Well, the only difference is that by doing it this way, we're working within the traditional legal process. 'Safe Haven' should only be applied in cases

where there is a threat to the child's well-being. The act was created to help the children who, for whatever reason, would be harmed by the traditional application of the law. As it stands right now, Laura's biological father has custody of her and she gets to live with Billy and Deacon... What more did you want?" Teri asked Chip curiously.

"Wow, I can see why you're the Director of Youth Services. You really know this stuff." Billy said with a look of respect and admiration.

"If you ever get tired of this job, I think you would do well at Starfleet JAG." Chip said with a smile at Teri.

"Not a chance." Teri said with a smile.

* * * * *

As the group walked into the game room, Kevin hesitantly walked to Chip's side and put an arm around his waist.

Chip gently petted Kevin's hair as he walked more slowly to join the gathering.

"So what happened?" Allen asked anxiously.

"Dad's going to be my dad, but I still get to live with Billy and Deacon." Laura said happily.

Allen and Mona walked simultaneously to Laura and gave her a firm hug.

Chip walked to Lieutenant Bowers and said, "Welcome to the family, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Commander." Lieutenant Bowers said cautiously.

"We're off duty and in my home. Please call me Chip."

"You're welcomed to call me Joe if you want."

Chip nodded and watched as everyone in the room made their way to Laura and Joe to offer their congratulations.

After a moment for everyone to share their happiness at the outcome, Chip spoke up in a commanding voice and said, "Now that the serious business has been taken care of, let's go outside and enjoy this day."

Everyone looked at each other curiously, but followed as Chip led the way out to the back yard.

* * * * *

"As you can see, there are plenty of snacks and chairs for anyone who wants to sit back and enjoy relaxing in the sunshine. Anyone who wants a more active diversion can follow me out to the stables. It's a perfect day for horseback riding."

Kevin immediately perked up at the statement and asked, "Can I ride a horse too?"

Chip looked at Kevin consideringly and said, "I don't know, Kevin. You may be too small to ride a horse all by yourself." Kevin's eyes began to fill with tears at the statement as he cast his eyes toward the ground. "I think, just to be safe, you should ride with me. At least until you're comfortable on a horse." Chip finished with a gentle smile.

"Really!?" Kevin squeaked with surprise and joy.

"Come on, Little One, I want to introduce you to my horse. I'm sure you're going to love him." Chip said tenderly as he put an arm around Kevin's shoulders.

"Thank you, Uncle Chip. I love you." Kevin said in complete bliss.

* * * * *

"Mona, if you would like, I think this would be the perfect time for us to sneak away. Besides, I think Helen and Hazel could probably use some company." Teri said gently.

"Laura, would you like to come with us for some girl talk?" Mona asked in a friendly voice.

Laura looked at her father with indecision, not wanting to leave him so soon after finding him.

"I'll be here all day. Go and enjoy your girl talk while I spend some time getting to know the guys." Joe said as he looked around the group.

"Okay." Laura said with a smile to her father, then turned to Mona and said, "Give me a second and I'll be ready."

Mona nodded as Laura quickly ran off to talk to Billy.

* * * * *

"Billy, can you and Deacon watch out for my Dad while I'm with Mona?" Laura asked hopefully.

"We'll take care of him. Go and enjoy your 'girl talk'." Billy said with a smile.

"Thanks Billy. I'm so glad you guys found me last night." Laura said as she pulled Billy into a hug.

"We're glad too Laura. And I can't even tell you how happy Deacon and I are that you'll be staying with us." Billy said as he returned the hug firmly.

"I know Billy. I don't understand why, but I know that it's true." Laura said as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Because you're our sister. We don't need any other reason." Billy said softly into Laura's ear.

Laura pulled out of the hug and said, "I have a brother, but you two are the brothers I always wanted."

"You have a brother?" Deacon asked curiously from Laura and Billy's side.

"Yeah. Well, a half-brother." Laura said darkly and looked away.

"Maybe later you can tell me about him." Deacon asked cautiously, understanding that she didn't feel like talking about it now.

"There's nothing to tell. Vince is just as mean and hateful as his father." Laura said firmly.

"That's all in the past now. You're here and we love you." Billy said seriously.

"Yeah. We really do." Deacon said as he looked deeply into Laura's eyes.

Laura's dark mood dissipated as she was filled with wonder at the love of her new brothers.

Deacon pulled Laura into a hug and whispered, "You'll always be my sister and my friend."

"Thanks Deke." Laura said in a soft voice.

Deacon pulled back and said, "You called me Deke."

Laura smiled and said, "Yeah, that's okay isn't it? I mean, that's what Billy calls you."

Deacon thought about it for a second, then said, "Only my family can call me that. So yeah, it's fine."

Laura gave a joyful smile, then kissed Deacon on the cheek.

"Mona's waiting on me. I'll talk to you guys later."

"Go on. We're just going to spend time with Allen and the guys." Billy said with a tender smile.

Laura gave Billy a quick kiss on the cheek, then hurried to Mona and her father.

* * * * *

"She really loves you." Joe said absently to Mona.

"It goes both ways. I can sympathize with her pain and can almost feel her struggling to find her identity." Mona said with a distant look.

Joe gave a nod, then said, "When I used to think about my son, I had this image of him growing up with a group of friends and being a happy young man. I guess I missed him so much that the fantasy was my way of dealing with the loss."

"How does the reality compare?" Mona asked curiously.

Joe glanced at Laura talking animatedly with Billy and Deacon.

"My dream son had the perfect life. He had all the support of parents who loved him and never had to face the ugliness of the real world. He didn't have any 'issues' and didn't need me. As selfish as it sounds... reality is better. I just hope I'm smart enough to do the right things to help him... her." Joe finished with a chuckle.

"Doing all the right things would make everything go smoother. Unfortunately, there's no way of knowing what the right things are. You just have to take your chances like the rest of us. But you've already done the one thing that will help most." Mona said seriously.

"What's that?" Joe asked, looking Mona in the eyes.

"You've let Laura know that you love her. She needed that worse than anything else. Billy or Deacon or me telling her just isn't the same. You're her father. I think she's faced some cruel rejection and the fact that her biological father accepts and loves her is the most important thing in her life at this moment." Mona said thoughtfully.

"I do love her. The more I get to know her, the more I love her." Joe said distantly.

"Just be sure to let her know. I don't think she'll ever get tired of hearing it." Mona said with a gentle smile.

"Count on it." Joe said as Laura approached.

* * * * *

"Christine, would you like to join us for a little 'girl talk' in the kitchen?" Mona asked hopefully.

"That sounds wonderful. You wouldn't mind if I leave you for a while, would you Kenny?" Christine asked carefully.

"That's okay. I want to go horseback riding with Uncle Chip." Kenny said with a smile.

"Have a good time riding Kenny. It was nice to see you again." Christine said tenderly.

"Thanks for being nice to me and my brother. I'll see you later." Kenny said, then walked to Allen who seemed to have a lost expression.

"He's a wonderful boy." Christine said as she turned her attention back to Mona and Laura.

"That's my grandson." Mona said with pride as she absently squeezed Laura in a one armed hug.

Laura smiled gently at the feeling of belonging as she walked with Mona's arm draped loosely around her.

* * * * *

"Do you want to go riding, Pop?" Kenny asked as he ran to Allen's side.

"Well, I haven't been on a horse for a few years. I suppose it would be nice to ride again." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Then you could show me what to do. You and Dad always talked about going horse riding sometime, but we never did it." Kenny said seriously.

Allen looked at Kenny's hopeful expression and smiled as he said, "Then we should do it now. It looks like the others are leaving, let's go."

Kenny gave a grand smile as he walked beside his Pop to go riding.

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"Juana, we're about to meet in the kitchen if you'd care to join us." Teri said gently as she glanced at Mona with her arm still draped loosely around Laura.

"Yes, I would like that very much. I will go and get the coffee cake now." Juana said as she glanced around to see that her children were all safe.

"We'll meet you in there." Teri said casually as she led Mona and Laura away.

* * * * *

"You said you didn't want us to call you Captain, but it seems... I don't know, disrespectful or something to just call you Spock." Jake said as he approached.

Spock considered the statement, then said, "As members of Clan Short, you and your brothers are entitled to address me as 'Uncle' should it please you to do so."

Jake thought about the statement, then smiled, "Yeah. It pleases me a lot. So, are you going horseback riding, Uncle Spock?" Jake asked with a contented smile.

"I believe I will not." Spock said in a neutral voice.

"Me either. What are you going to do now?" Jake asked curiously.

"From the evidence at hand, I believe my brother will be preparing the meat course for the evening meal on the outdoor cooking appliance. I will remain nearby in the event that I may be of assistance." Spock said in a considering voice.

Jake got a distant look, then looked at Spock in understanding and said, "Yeah. I smelled the smoke from the barbecue grill when we came outside. I've never been to a real cook-out before so this should be awesome." Jake said with a smile.

Spock tilted his head curiously at Jake but said nothing.

"Xain is feeding Vina right now. So if you don't mind, I'll just hang around with you." Jake said casually.

Spock considered the statement before saying, "I find your company to be acceptable."

Jake took the statement as the compliment that it was and responded, "Yeah, I think you're pretty acceptable too. How about we get a table so we'll have a place to sit when Xain and Vina get back?"

Spock gave a single nod of acceptance at the suggestion and followed as Jake led the way to one of the many patio tables by the pool.

* * * * *

"Aren't you going riding?" Joe asked as he approached Deacon and Billy.

"Um, I'd like to, but I've never done it before." Deacon said shyly.

"Well I see three adults walking toward the stable and one of them is Allen. I bet if you asked, he'd show you what you need to know." Billy said with a smile.

"Yeah. I know he would. You want to come, too?" Deacon asked hopefully.

"Not this time Deke. I'm going to hang out by the pool and relax. Believe it or not, I don't get to just sit around very often." Billy said with a contented smile.

"Do you want to ride with me, Joe?" Deacon asked with a hopeful smile.

"Thanks for offering, Deacon, but I think I'd like to spend some time talking with your brother." Joe said gently.

"Okay, I gotta go before they leave without me." Deacon said in a rush and ran toward the stables.

* * * * *

"Would you like to go ride the horses?" JC asked Reuben quietly.

"I like talking to people with you. Can I stay here?" Reuben asked hopefully.

"Yes, of course you can." JC said happily.

Reuben smiled at JC's acceptance of him and timidly took JC's hand so they could walk around the gathering together.

* * * * *

Chip walked to the stable with Kevin holding his hand. Behind him Brady followed with Ricardo on his hip. Kenny and Allen walked up next, side by side.

"Allen, can I ride with you?" Deacon asked quickly as he ran to join Kenny and Allen.

"Sure, Deacon. But you'll have to be patient with us. Kenny hasn't ridden a horse before." Allen said with a smile at Kenny.

"Neither have I. Would you mind showing me too?" Deacon asked hopefully.

"I wouldn't mind at all. We just have to make sure Chip knows that you two aren't experienced riders so he can pick out some gentle mounts." Allen said as he led the boys to talk with Chip.

* * * * *

"It looks like you're going to be feeding an army." Teri said in surprise at the huge amount of food on the counters in the kitchen.

"When classes let out, the entire Clan is coming here... and so are their parents." Helen said frankly.

Teri looked around at the piles of food and finally said, "Are you sure we have enough?"

Helen chuckled and said, "When you consider the table of snacks already set up in the back yard. It should be just enough to get them by until dinner."

Teri decided that she should make introductions and said, "Helen and Hazel, I'd like to introduce Dr. Christine Chapel, she works with Chip on the *Enterprise*. Mona Bridson, she's the matriarch of the Thompson family."

Mona got a surprised look, then a warm smile at the title 'Matriarch'.

"Beside Mona we have Laura Winters, the newest addition to the Pierce family." Teri said happily, then saw Juana walk hesitantly into the kitchen.

"Hello Juana. Everyone, this is Juana Vasquez, she takes care of the Thompson family." Teri said warmly.

"Last but not least, we have Hazel and Helen who care for the Dodds family and my family." Teri said happily.

"Do you need any help with anything?" Juana asked as she sat the coffee cake on the table.

"Yes. Mr. Chip told me last night that we would have a get together today. Of course, I told him that it would be no problem, but there is very much to do. If everyone attends who was invited, there may be as many as one hundred people here today." Hazel said in an overwhelmed voice.

"If you will tell me what needs to be done, I will be happy to help." Juana said in sympathy.

"We'll all help. That's why we're here." Teri said with a smile.

A relieved look came over Hazel's face, then she started leading the women around the kitchen and telling them what needed to be done.

* * * * *

"How are you guys doing?" JC asked casually as he and Reuben walked up to Billy and Joe.

"Fine. I love your house." Joe said quickly.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Please feel free to help yourself to the snacks." JC said and gestured to the table.

"Please call me Joe. And I'll have some snacks in a while." Joe said nervously.

"Relax Joe. We're all friends here." JC said with a casual smile, then picked up Reuben to hold him on his side.

"I was a little nervous during the introductions, what was your name again?" Joe asked, directing his statement to Reuben.

"I'm Reuben. My little brother is Ricardo. People always get our names mixed up." Reuben said shyly.

"I'll try to remember Reuben. How old are you?" Joe asked with a gentle smile.

"I'm six but I'm going to go to second grade when I start to go to school here." Reuben said happily.

"You must be really smart if you're going into second grade already." Joe said with a full smile.

Reuben got a serious look of thought before nodding in agreement.

Billy and Joe laughed at Reuben's serious expression as JC hugged Reuben tightly.

"I guess I'll go see how the others are doing. You guys just give a yell if you need anything." JC said happily.

"Sure thing." Billy said with a small wave 'goodbye' to Reuben.

* * * * *

"Edovina has completed her midday meal and requires the attention of her *sa-mekh*." Xain said as he walked to the table where Jake and Spock were sitting.

"Come to Daddy." Jake said with a smile and gently rested Edovina on his chest.

"The child is yours?" Spock asked with a touch of curiosity in his voice.

Jake looked to Xain to explain.

"Jake is *sa-mekh* to Edovina. Since I am *T'hy'la* to Jake, it is logical that I am her *a'nirih*." Xain said carefully.

Spock thought about the statement, then said, "You appear to be of insufficient age to engage in such a relationship."

Jake looked at Spock with surprise and a little offense, but then felt a wave of assurance flow from Xain.

"Circumstances outside my control brought me to a certain point. I was facing the prospect of long term cohabitation with a family of Humans. There was a moment when I faced a choice; Jake was in emotional distress. Logic would suggest that I should have summoned our caregiver, Allen, to provide Jake the emotional support that he needed. However, I chose to forego logic and attempt to provide assistance using my abilities to their best advantage." Xain said in deep thought.

"Can you explain what led you to make that choice?" Spock asked with interest as Jake listened in fascination.

"Upon reflection I can speculate that I felt an instinctive need to provide that which I had been denied in my own personal history. The process of identifying and resolving Jake's emotional distress was my primary objective, but it had the secondary effect of providing a sense of... caring. I was under the misconception that what I was lacking was the attention and nurturing of my father." Xain said carefully.

"Your statement leads me to believe you found the reality to be otherwise." Spock prompted, truly interested in Xain's story.

"The reality was that the fault in the relationship with my father was my own. He provided tutors to teach me, he accepted a position on Earth to allow me access to humanity, he did all things within reason to provide the material and emotional support that I needed. It was the belief that he did not understand my needs that prevented my acceptance of what he offered." Xain said distantly.

"How did helping me make a difference?" Jake asked curiously.

"When I made the choice to lend of my control, I thought of your needs before my own. I allowed myself to be vulnerable. In all the years with my father, the thought that he might have needs or concerns had not occurred to me. I believe that the process of... caring, the exchange of concern, the willingness to be vulnerable are the things that I refused to share with him and that reluctance on my part prevented the relationship between my father and myself to develop." Xain said seriously.

Spock nodded and said, "I believe that to recognize those concepts requires a certain level of maturity. It is the nature of a child to see his own needs as paramount and to have the belief that all those surrounding him exist to

provide those needs. When living in a Vulcan household, logic and control may, at times, reinforce the misconception that the parent does not seek a relationship of mutual understanding and respect."

"So you couldn't have known how to have a better relationship with your father because you were too young to understand stuff like that." Jake said happily.

Xain considered the statement and finally nodded.

"So you think that Xain isn't old enough to be in a relationship with me. Would you tell me why?" Jake asked seriously.

Spock looked at Xain and Jake speculatively for a moment, then said, "It was improper for me to voice my opinion in this matter. My approval of your relationship is not required."

Before Xain could speak, Jake quickly said, "Your opinion is very important to Xain. You have been his example for a lot of years. I think it's important that he know how you feel."

Spock nodded in understanding and said, "That being the case, I will give my opinion. Xain has demonstrated a level of maturity that suggests that he may be capable of making the decision to be in a relationship. There is insufficient information to predict the consequences of that decision. I have found that in such matters, there is no definite predictor to indicate which relationships will survive and which will fail. However, I believe it was the Human, Alfred Lord Tennyson, who said something that is relevant in this situation. "Tis better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all."

Jake thought about the words carefully, then broke into a smile as he said, "That means 'go for it!' doesn't it?"

Spock looked at Jake curiously, then at Xain with question.

"Jake has a talent for interpreting the underlying sentiment of a statement." Xain said proudly.

"Indeed." Spock said with a raised eyebrow, then turned to Jake and said, "And to answer your question Jake, You are correct. It is my opinion that you should 'Go for it'."

* * * * *

"Joe? Now that we've got a few minutes alone, do you want to talk about things?" Billy asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I really appreciate this Billy. It's like my whole life turned upside down in one day." Joe said in an overwhelmed voice.

"Welcome to the club Joe. I came home from a business trip to Belgium day before yesterday and found a note from my little brother telling me that he had run away from home and wanted to live with me." Billy said with a distant smile.

"If you don't mind telling me, why did he run away?" Joe asked with concern.

"Our parents have been ignoring him. I mean, they always had the 'I'm too busy for you' thing going on. But I guess lately it's gotten worse. They went for a week without talking to him, then forgot his thirteenth birthday." Billy finished in a whisper.

Joe looked at Billy with surprise and said, "And you say he got here two days ago? I never would have guessed. He seems to be perfectly happy and completely comfortable here."

Billy smiled and said, "Allen and his family are a big part of that. When they heard what happened, they bought presents and decorations and even made a cake. We went over to their house for breakfast yesterday morning and walked into a surprise birthday party."

Joe smiled warmly at Billy's happy expression.

"God Joe, I can't even tell you how wonderful it was. I don't know if Deacon ever felt special or loved like that before. It was unreal. The entire day was devoted to him. Allen even arranged for a little birthday cake at Pizza Hut last night..." Billy trailed off in a voice of wonder.

"It sounds like you really love him." Joe said into the ensuing silence.

"Yeah. Deke is the best brother a guy could ask for." Billy said with a tender smile.

"I was talking about Allen. Does he know?" Joe asked knowingly.

"Yeah. We've talked about it. Just with Deke and Allen's four boys, there always seems to be something going on. I guess it will happen when the time is right." Billy said in a distant voice.

"Not unless you make it happen." Joe said seriously.

Billy looked at Joe curiously.

"Fate has brought you two together, the rest is up to you. If you think you could have something special with him, it's up to you to make it happen." Joe said seriously.

"Are you a psychologist on your ship or something?" Billy asked in a teasing voice.

Joe laughed and said, "No, just a deflector control technician and..."

Billy gave Joe an inquiring look.

"Listen Billy, from what you just told me, you're a son without a father. For the past fifteen years, I've been a father without a son. If it won't mess with your head too much, I'd really like to be there for you and Deacon just like I intend to be there for Laura." Joe said seriously.

"You want to be our dad?" Billy asked cautiously.

"Well, yeah. Sort of. I wouldn't expect you to call me dad or anything like that. But if either of you need my advice or help with anything, I'd like for you to call on me." Joe finished shyly.

"I'll need to talk to Deke about it before I can tell you for sure. He may not like the idea of getting another dad when it took him thirteen years to get away from the last one." Billy said frankly.

"I understand Billy. There's no pressure. I just want you to know that I'm here if you need me." Joe said seriously.

"Thanks, Joe. It is a little overwhelming to have taken on a family all of a sudden. It's possible that I'll need some help when it all sinks in." Billy said seriously.

Joe smiled and said, "You'll be fine. From what I've already seen, you love my son as if he were your own brother... or sister. That's still messing with me."

"I know. But you'll get used to it. Lawrence has a lot of things to work out. There's not much we can do for him but love him and give him the time and space he needs to come to his own decision." Billy said thoughtfully.

"I guess it's a good thing that you'll be watching out for him. You understand this stuff a lot better than I do. I think he really needs someone he can trust and talk to about these things. I don't think he trusts me enough to do that." Joe said in a contemplative voice.

"Maybe. But you have a connection with Lawrence that I will never have. You're his father. When you told him that you loved him unconditionally...

the look on his face said it all. I may be there to help him and guide him. But in the end it's going to be your opinion and approval that he's going to be seeking." Billy said seriously.

"He'll have it. I promise." Joe said solemnly.

* * * * *

"Hey guys. How are you doing?" JC asked as he sat Reuben in the open seat beside Xain.

"We are well." Xain said as he watched JC grab a chair from a neighboring table and take a seat.

"This gathering is likely to last into the evening. Do you have everything you'll need for the baby?" JC asked with concern.

"No. I only brought sufficient supplies for the afternoon. We will need to return to our home for additional supplies before evening." Xain said seriously.

"We can go to the store and pick up what you need if that would be easier." JC said thoughtfully.

"I believe we should also retrieve two packages of Kevin's nutritional supplement. He has only had his first supplement today." Xain said seriously.

"Then I guess we'd better find someone to drive you over. I'd do it, but I really need to be here to play host." JC said thoughtfully.

"I am fully versed in the operation of a motor vehicle and possess the necessary certifications." Spock said informatively.

JC smiled and said, "Thank you Spock. Do you guys know how to get to your house from here?" JC asked curiously.

"I know the way." Xain said without inflection.

"I recall the location from previous visits with my brother." Spock said in a tone that matched Xain's perfectly.

"Good. Do you guys have keys to the house?" JC asked thoughtfully.

"No. But we can borrow Mamacita's key." Jake said in a considering voice.

"Check to see if she needs you to pick up anything else from the house when you get the key from her." JC said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Let's do it now so we can get back before Justy, Cory and everyone else gets here." Jake said as he stood with Edovina in his arms.

"Would it be easier if you left Edovina here? That way you won't have to bother with a car seat and besides, I bet all the ladies in the kitchen would be happy to fuss over her the entire time you're gone." JC said with a smile.

"Perhaps that would be the preferable way. Mamacita becomes distressed if she is without Edovina for an extended period of time." Xain said seriously.

"It's good that you recognize it. Being respectful of the feelings of others in your house is very important." JC said in his fatherly manner as he automatically took Reuben's hand.

"Yeah. It's what makes us a family." Jake said seriously.

CHAPTER 32

"Are you going to need any help showing the guys what to do?" Chip asked as he started to pick up equipment.

"I'm not a professional rider by any means, but I'm comfortable enough with riding that I can show the guys the basics." Allen said casually as he looked around.

"Okay, if you're sure. You should be able to find everything you need here in the tack room. There are some leads on that post if you want to walk them around for a while before letting the guys have full control." Chip said with a smile.

"Good idea. Small steps." Allen said with an affectionate glance at Deacon and Kenny.

Brady quietly followed behind Chip, picking up the things he would need to saddle a horse and handing them to Ricardo who was riding on his hip.

"Zephyr and Spirit are gentle enough for the boys and Chloe will take good care of you." Chip said as he handed some equipment to Kevin.

"They look like fine horses. I'm sure we'll be fine." Allen said with assurance.

"Come along 'Little One'. I'm going to show you how to saddle a horse." Chip said with a smile as he led the way out of the tack shed.

Allen noticed Kenny's distant expression and asked, "Are you doing alright Ken? You seem a little down."

Kenny looked at Allen and gave a hesitant nod as he said, "I was just thinking about Dad."

Allen immediately got an expression of concern as he tried to think of the right thing to say.

"Don't worry Pop. I'm not sad or anything like that. I was just thinking about how much Dad would have liked it here at Uncle Chip's house." Kenny said in a peaceful tone.

"I'm sure you're right, he would have loved it here. And I think Carl would have liked Chip too. Chip is the kind of honest, no nonsense person that your Dad liked to deal with." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Can we start riding now?" Kenny asked, wanting to change the subject.

"Sure, come on. I'll hand both of you what you'll be needing to saddle the horses." Allen said as he started walking around the tack room.

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"Mamacita, would you like to care for Edovina while Uncle Spock takes us to gather child care supplies?" Xain asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"I would like that very much. However I am in the middle of preparing vegetables." Juana said as she continued to peel carrots.

"I'd like to hold her for a while. I mean, if you wouldn't mind." Laura asked hesitantly.

Jake stepped forward and said, "That would be great Laura. Vina hasn't had a chance to get to know you."

Laura smiled as Jake took Edovina from Xain's arms and settled her into Laura's.

"Can I get the house key from you Mamacita? We're going to pick up Kevin's milkshakes and enough stuff for Edovina for the rest of the night." Jake said as he walked to Juana.

"In my purse, in the chair beside Laura. My hands are wet." Juana said in frustration.

Jake walked to Juana's purse and easily found the keys.

"Did you need anything from the house while we're there?" Jake asked casually.

"Would you go to the apartment and get an extra change of clothes for Ricardo? I believe he will need them before the day is over. He is a boy playing outside, after all." Juana said tenderly.

"Sure thing. We'll be back soon. Don't eat without us." Jake said with a smile.

"You'd better hurry then. Once school lets out, all bets are off." Teri said seriously.

"Got it." Jake said with a chuckle and left the room.

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"Thanks for helping me, Commander, I thought I remembered how to saddle a horse... I guess it's been longer than I thought." Brady said shyly.

"No problem. And while we're here, it's Chip, remember?" Chip asked seriously.

"Yes sir." Brady said formally, then broke into a smile.

Chip rolled his eyes, then walked back to his own horse.

"Once I'm on the horse, stand right here and I'll help you up." Chip said quietly to Kevin.

Kevin nodded in acknowledgement.

In one swift move, Chip mounted his stallion. Kevin took his position beside the horse, and a moment later was hoisted to sit in front of Chip.

"Did you see how Chip and Kevin did that?" Brady asked Ricardo gently.

Ricardo nodded slowly.

"Let's do the same thing. I'll get on the horse, then I'll lift you up." Brady said with a gentle smile.

Ricardo nodded with excitement.

Brady mounted his mare, not nearly as swiftly or gracefully as Chip... but he got up there.

After a moment to be sure of his balance, Brady reached down and took Ricardo's hand.

"Alley oop!" Brady said as he lifted Ricardo to sit in front of him.

"Do you want to come with us or go off on your own?" Chip asked as he got Kevin settled into place.

"Go ahead. I think we'll just walk for a few minutes until we're both used to balancing on the back of a living thing." Brady said as he gently hugged Ricardo.

"The boys will be out of school in about an hour and a half. Have fun." Chip said as he nudged his horse into a trot.

"You too." Brady said as he watched Chip and Kevin trot off.

* * * * *

"Pop?" Kenny asked in a voice of deep thought.

"What's wrong Ken?" Allen asked with concern as he led the boys around the field in front of the stable.

"Nothing's really wrong. I was just thinking about something and thought maybe you could help me sort it out." Kenny said carefully.

"Sure. Is it something private?" Allen asked carefully.

Kenny looked at Deacon and said, "No. Nothing like that. I was just thinking about Camp Little Eagle."

"What about it?" Allen asked seriously.

"Well, it's really nice there. It's not just a big building like my old school. I mean, my old school was kind of like being in a big box all day long. All the rooms were the same color and the lights made that funny buzz. The air was... different, not fresh like it is here. Camp Little Eagle is like going to camp. Each classroom has it's own little house and you get to go outside every time you go to a different class." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"I guess I didn't think about it, but I can see how that would brighten your day." Allen commented.

"Yeah, well. I was thinking... I wanted to go to my old school so I could be with TJ and Charlie and Tiffany, but... I think that was because I didn't want to go someplace new where I didn't know anyone. But I know a lot of the people who'll be going to Camp Little Eagle. I mean, all my brothers will be there." Kenny said seriously.

"Okay, I can see that." Allen said as he turned his attention back to where he was leading the horses.

"But if I go to Camp Little Eagle, it's like I'm kind of saying I don't want to be friends with TJ and Charlie and Tiffany anymore. And it's not really like that." Kenny said in an imploring voice.

"I understand what you're saying." Allen said with a nod.

"But I think I'll like Camp Little Eagle a lot better and I really want to go there." Kenny said in turmoil.

"Well, there's something you should know that might make your decision a little easier." Allen said uneasily.

"What's that?" Kenny asked anxiously.

"When we moved to the new house, we moved out of your old school district. I've been trying to decide how to go about getting you enrolled, but it's going to be tough. I'd about half decided to use our old address on the paperwork since I still own the house." Allen said hesitantly.

"So there's a chance I couldn't go to my old school anyway?" Kenny said in surprise.

"That's right. From the few dealings I've had with your school in the past few years, I doubt that they'd be willing to bend their rules for us. They fought me tooth and nail when I wanted to keep you out of school for a few days after Carl died." Allen finished quietly.

"You don't have to lie for me Pop. I really want to go to Camp Little Eagle. But can we invite TJ and Charlie and Tiffany over sometimes?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Sure Cute Stuff. In fact, if you wanted to, we could take them along with us for some of the sightseeing we do this weekend. I bet if you asked TJ's mom, she'd let him stay overnight one night." Allen said with a smile.

"Thanks Pop. That'd be great. I just don't want to lose my old friends because I made some new friends." Kenny said happily.

"That's good thinking. How are you doing Deacon? You're being awfully quiet." Allen asked as he shifted his gaze.

"I was just thinking about where I'm going to go to school." Deacon said seriously.

"Well, you've seen Camp Little Eagle. What would you think about going there?" Allen asked seriously.

"It's a nice place. I'm just... well, I'm not sure." Deacon said slowly.

"When Sean and Cory get back from school you can talk to them about it. I'm sure they'll be able to answer all your questions. I bet they'd love it if you'd go to school with them." Allen said with encouragement.

After a long moment of silence, Deacon quietly asked, "But what about Laura?"

"What about her?" Allen asked, matching Deacon's quiet tone.

"I mean, I don't know if they'll want her there because she's... different." Deacon said slowly.

"Don't worry about that Deacon. I don't know everything about the Camp, but I know my brothers in the Clan. They don't look at how someone is different, they just look at how we're all the same. But if it will make you feel better, I'll make you a promise." Kenny said seriously.

"What's that?" Deacon asked slowly.

"If they won't take Laura at Camp Little Eagle then I won't go either. I'm sure they'll take her, but if they won't for some reason, we'll go somewhere else." Kenny said firmly.

Deacon broke into a smile and said, "Yeah. Me too. If the three of us stick together, we'll make sure Laura gets into someplace nice."

"I bet if I talked to Jake and Xain and Kevin, they'd go along with it too. I know Jake would, he really likes Laura." Kenny said with a smile.

Deacon gave Kenny a questioning look of concern.

"Not like that. I mean that Jake likes Laura like a friend. Jake would never make a move on Laura. I've seen how he looks at Xain, it's the same dopey look that Pop used to give Dad." Kenny finished with a mischievous smile at Allen.

"Just you wait Cute Stuff. One of these days very soon you'll find someone to look at like that, then I'll get to tease you about it." Allen said in a teasing voice.

"You'll be too busy looking at Billy to notice." Kenny said with a laugh.

Deacon chuckled at Allen's surprised expression.

"Are you guys okay with that?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Yeah Pop. I know you loved Dad and miss him as much as I do. That don't mean you can't love Billy too." Kenny said gently.

"I already told Billy that it's okay with me." Deacon said honestly.

"Thanks guys. When I get you off those horses, I owe you both a big hug." Allen said with a smile.

* * * * *

"You seem kind of quiet Joe. Is everything okay?" Billy asked with concern.

"Yeah, I'm just trying to adjust to everything. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do now." Joe said distantly.

"What do you want to do?" Billy asked simply.

"Right this minute I just want to hold my son and tell him that I love him." Joe said with a helpless smile at Billy.

"Why don't you?" Billy asked seriously.

Joe looked at Billy with question.

"Laura is in the kitchen. I can't think of one good reason you can't just go in there right now and tell her that you love her." Billy said frankly.

"You're right. Do you want to come with me?" Joe asked as he stood.

"I wouldn't miss it." Billy said with a smile.

* * * * *

"You look really good with her." Christine said as she watched Laura holding Edovina.

"Yeah. She's so beautiful." Laura said in contentment.

"My granddaughter seems to like you as well." Juana said with a smile at Edovina's expression of wonder.

"Do you think that you'll have one of your own someday?" Mona asked Laura gently.

"I don't' know. I guess I never really thought about it. I kind of figured that being... um, like I am, that I'd never have the chance." Laura said hesitantly.

"Well, just because you wear a dress doesn't mean you can't father a child. You might even find a nice girl and get married someday and have a whole squad of them." Mona said with a peaceful, distant expression.

Laura looked at Mona with absolute confusion.

Mona noticed Laura's questioning look and said, "I admit that it's a challenge to find women who are okay with the cross-dressing thing, but there are a few out there. Hell, if I found the right guy and he was into that, it wouldn't bother me a bit... Hopefully we'd be close to the same dress size."

"You think I'm straight?" Laura asked hesitantly.

"No. I mean, I never assumed anything either way." Mona said seriously.

"I'm a guy that wears dresses. Doesn't that mean I'm gay?" Laura asked slowly.

"No sweetie. Wanting to have sex with men means you're gay. Wearing a dress means you like to feel pretty. Just because I wear tennis shoes doesn't mean I play tennis. One doesn't have anything to do with the other." Mona said with certainty.

"But... What about all those drag queens?" Laura sputtered.

"Drag queens are men who dress as women to put on a show. Most of the ones I know live their lives as men and just dress up for fun on the weekends. And yes, most of them are gay. You, my dear, are a different breed. You like to dress as a woman to feel pretty and comfortable. You don't do it to show off for everyone else, you do it for yourself." Mona said softly.

"I always thought that because I wear dresses that I'm automatically gay." Laura said in a daze.

"Well, it's possible that you are gay. That's something you'll have to figure out for yourself... But there's no reason you have to figure it out today." Mona said with a serious look into Laura's eyes.

Laura gave a gentle smile and a nod.

"Now, what I want to know is if anyone has any idea how we can get Billy and Allen together?" Mona finished with a mischievous smile.

"They've got it bad don't they?" Teri asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah. They're so cute together." Laura said fondly.

"I believe Allen and Billy need some time alone." Juana said seriously.

"That can be quite a trick with kids." Teri said absently as she walked to the table and cut a piece of the coffee cake.

"I think that's what's holding them back." Mona said with a nod.

"I can attend to the children if we can find a place for the men to be alone." Juana said thoughtfully.

"What about Billy's place? Deacon and I could go over to Allen's and hang out while Allen and Billy have their date." Laura said cautiously.

"That could work. I just don't know how we'll get them there. Does anyone have any ideas? I'm not good at being sneaky." Mona said carefully.

"I do not know these men, but it sounds like you all love them. If they are interested in each other and you tell them that you would like to provide them time together, they might agree." Hazel said as she worked on chunking pieces of fruit.

"Hmmm. Honesty... You know, it's just crazy enough that it might work." Christine said thoughtfully.

Edovina wiggled in Laura's arms and got her attention.

A flash of inspiration came over her and she said, "What about Xain and Jake? Can't we give them some time together too?"

Teri and Mona exchanged a look that appeared to be telepathic communication for a moment.

"I wouldn't mind having the other boys over at my house for a night. We have plenty of room." Teri said speculatively.

Juana got a distant look and said, "I could prepare a romantic dinner for the two of them, then go to my apartment."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful. Do you think Deacon and I could help somehow?" Laura asked hopefully.

"If you and Deacon will take care of things at Billy's house, we'll enlist Kenny and Kevin's help at Allen's." Helen said thoughtfully.

"What did you have in mind?" Teri asked in a conspiratorial voice.

"A romantic dinner sounds like the perfect beginning. If Juana takes care of Xain and Jake's dinner, I could take care of Billy and Allen's. Then Laura and the boys could take care of the finishing touches to make the evening perfect. Things like... flowers, candles... maybe some romantic music." Helen said with a dreamy expression.

"I'm scared of what some of the boys might think is 'romantic'." Christine said with a chuckle.

"Good point. We'll need to supervise them. I'd hate for Billy and Allen to sit down to the perfect dinner to the soundtrack from 'Mortal Kombat'." Teri said with a smile.

"That sounds like something Justy would do." Hazel said with a laugh.

"Or Cory." Teri said with a nod and a chuckle.

"Then when everything is in place, we could all come back to Teri's house for the rest of the evening and let nature take it's course." Helen said with a delighted smile.

"When are we going to do all this?" Mona asked hesitantly.

"Well, tonight we're all at this gathering. Do you think anyone has any plans for tomorrow?" Teri said carefully.

"Billy and Deacon haven't mentioned anything about plans. If it would help, I could ask." Laura offered cautiously.

"That's a good idea. I'm pretty sure I can get Allen to tell me if he has anything planned." Mona said thoughtfully.

"It sounds like we've got the beginnings of a plan. So what do you think we should make them for dinner?' Teri asked with a calculating twinkle in her eyes.

Juana dried her hands as Hazel moved a saucepan off the burner of the stove.

Within seconds all the women were gathered around the table, making plans.

* * * * *

"Well it looks like all the guests are entertaining themselves right now. Is there anything you'd like to do Reuben?" JC asked as they watched Billy and Joe walk into the house.

"Could I look at your house? I only got to see a couple rooms so far and it's really big and nice." Reuben said hopefully.

"That sounds like a great idea. Let's go in the kitchen and see if anyone else would like a guided tour of Southcrest." JC said with a smile as he took Reuben's hand.

"Do you have any kids?" Reuben asked as he walked with JC.

"Yeah, a bunch. You'll get to meet them when school lets out." JC said as they walked into the house.

"I don't have a Dad anymore, he left us. I wish I had a Dad like you." Reuben said quietly.

JC stopped and picked Reuben up.

"I tell you what Reuben. I may not be your Dad, but I am *A* dad. So if you ever need someone to do dad things with or if you have a question that only a dad can answer, all you have to do is call me. Allen has my number and you can call me anytime." JC said seriously.

"Uncle Allen and Uncle Brady do lots of dad stuff and they always make sure that Ricardo and I are included. It's just... I just like you." Reuben said as he hugged JC tightly.

"I like you too Reuben. Now let's find out if anyone is interested in taking a tour." JC said, then gave Reuben a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Reuben nodded in agreement, then laid his head on JC's shoulder and continued to hug him.

* * * * *

"Thank you for driving us Uncle Spock." Jake said seriously.

"It was logical for me to do so." Spock said without inflection.

"Yeah. I guess so. It's just nice because, I don't know, you're a lot like Xain so it makes it kind of special." Jake said with difficulty.

"Are you referring to our mixed parentage?" Xain asked curiously.

"No. I mean, maybe a little. But it's more like, I feel like Uncle Spock understands us better than just about anyone... well, except Dad." Jake said thoughtfully.

Xain arched an eyebrow in inquiry.

"When we talk with someone like Billy, I get this feeling like they're trying to understand things about us, but just don't entirely get it. It was kind of the same with Sopek and your father. When we talk with Uncle Spock, it just seems like he gets it. Like we're on the same wavelength or something." Jake said seriously.

"I believe I understand and concur with your observation." Xain said carefully.

"That being the case, perhaps you could tell me of the circumstances by which you became *T'hy'la*." Spock said with interest.

Jake looked at Xain with a smile, encouraging him to tell the story.

"As I mentioned earlier, I sought to ease Jake's distress by lending of my control. During the process of the mind-meld, our bond formed." Xain said carefully.

"Interesting." Spock said as he exited the freeway.

"Dad was... displeased that I had chosen to perform a mind-meld without his knowledge or consent." Xain said slowly.

"He was just worried that we might be hurt if it was done wrong." Jake quickly interjected.

"A reasonable concern." Spock acknowledged.

"When Dad learned of our bonding his only concern was that the bond might not be appropriately formed. Otherwise he has been encouraging and supportive of our relationship." Xain said carefully.

"I can anticipate many unfortunate reactions to such a development. It is good to know that Clan Short's choice of guardian was adequate." Spock said in a measured tone.

Spock maneuvered the car into the driveway and came to a stop.

"If you will gather the supplies for Edovina, I will get Kevin's nutritional supplements." Xain said as he got out of the car.

"Will you help me, Uncle Spock? I need to get a lot of stuff." Jake asked hopefully as he walked to unlock the front door for Xain.

Spock followed without comment.

* * * * *

Joe walked into the kitchen and got a curious look as the huddle of women hushed and turned to look at him.

Amongst the women, Joe saw Laura smiling and holding a baby in her arms.

"Hi Dad. Is everything okay?" Laura asked hesitantly.

Joe walked to her and said, "Everything is fine. I just wanted to come in here and tell you how much I love you."

Laura awkwardly got up from her chair and stood before her father as the group of women stood back to give them some space.

"Billy promised that you wouldn't get tired of hearing it." Joe said with a smile as he gently hugged Laura, being careful not to squish Edovina.

Tears welled up in Laura's eyes as she whispered, "He's right. I love you too daddy."

All the ladies looked on with wistful smiles at the touching scene.

"I'll go back outside now, that's all I wanted to do." Joe said quietly as he released her from the hug.

"Thanks daddy. I really needed to hear it again." Laura said as she wiped the tears from her eyes with her free hand.

Joe leaned in and gave Laura a gentle kiss on the cheek, then tickled Edovina under the chin for a few seconds before turning to leave.

JC was lost in his own thoughts after witnessing the touching scene then snapped out of his trance and said, "Reuben suggested that it might be a good idea if I show you around Southcrest. If anyone is interested in taking the grand tour, come with me."

Billy looked at Joe and gave a shrug.

Joe nodded in return and the pair moved to follow JC.

Laura looked at her father, then at the baby in her arms, trying to decide what to do.

"I need to spend some quality time with my great-granddaughter. Go on and spend some time with that sweet man you call daddy." Mona said with a smile.

"Thanks grandma." Laura said quickly and transferred Edovina into Mona's waiting arms.

* * * * *

Chip slowed the horse's pace and quietly asked, "Do you know why people get married?"

"So their kids won't be bastards." Kevin said honestly.

Chip chuckled at the statement and said, "That's one of the benefits, but it's not the main reason. Why do you think people get married?"

Kevin thought seriously about the question and finally said, "Maybe it's so they can live together and no one will say nothing bad about them."

Chip thought about the response and said, "It doesn't have anything to do with what anyone else says or about kids. Marriage is about two people loving each other."

Kevin shook his head and said, "I used to think that, but I don't think it works like that."

"Why not?" Chip asked with surprise.

"Because I've met a lot of married people and they wasn't in love." Kevin said seriously.

"Tell me about them." Chip asked with interest as he held Kevin a little more tightly.

"Well, my momma was married to my dad, but she hated him. She told me he was dead because she hated him so much." Kevin said honestly.

"I'm sure your momma was just hurting." Chip said thoughtfully.

"Mamacita is married to her husband, but he left when Ricardo wasn't even born yet. Reuben says that sometimes late at night he hears his momma crying about it. So marriage can't be about love. You couldn't hurt someone you love like that." Kevin said seriously.

"Well sometimes people make some selfish choices..." Chip tried to explain.

"Most of the guys who would whore with Jake and Lupe was married. I don't think being married has anything to do with love. All I know is that if your parents are married when you're born and you get your daddy's name, then you're not a bastard. That's the only good thing I've seen that comes from being married." Kevin said with certainty.

Chip held Kevin tightly to his chest and said, "I'm sorry you've seen all those things. You need to understand about love and marriage."

"I understand about love." Kevin said simply.

"Tell me about love." Chip said as he loosened his hug.

"Love is nice. Love is what Xain and Jake have. Deacon loves Laura and I think Poppa loves Billy." Kevin said with a smile.

"What do you think would happen if your Poppa and Billy got married?" Chip asked cautiously.

"Billy would probably move in with us... I guess Deacon and Laura would move in with us too." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"Would your Poppa and Billy still be in love?" Chip asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah. For a while." Kevin said slowly in deep concentration.

"What do you mean 'for a while'?" Chip asked cautiously.

"Love is nice, but it goes away." Kevin said in a quieter voice.

"Why do you think that?" Chip asked seriously.

"Because it does. People fall in love, but then they fall back out or go away or die or something." Kevin said simply.

"Kevin, love can really last forever." Chip said softly.

Kevin shook his head and said, "I never saw no one stay in love. It's great and feels really good and happy... but then it goes away."

"Parents love their kids, that love doesn't go away." Chip said, hoping that it would help to make his point.

"My Momma left me and Kenny alone. My Dad left Kenny when he died. Reuben and Ricardo's dad left. Jake's dad and mom left. Xain's mom left." Kevin said seriously.

"But Juana didn't leave. Neither did Allen." Chip said cautiously.

"Not yet." Kevin said in a whisper.

Chip tightened his hug and said, "You expect them to leave you someday don't you."

"Yeah. But I just have to get all the love I can now while they're still here so I can have it when they're gone." Kevin said honestly.

"Oh my Little One, I wish there was something I could do to prove to you that love can last forever." Chip said in a pained voice.

"Please don't feel bad Uncle Chip. That's just the way it is. We have to love each other today because it might be gone tomorrow. That's why I can't wait. I really really love you." Kevin said sincerely.

Chip leaned down to place a small kiss on the top of Kevin's head, then coaxed his horse into a faster pace as he thought about the things Kevin had revealed.

* * * * *

"Um, Ken? You never told me what happened to your Dad. I mean, I figured out that he died from what I've overheard but... um, I mean, I'm just kind of curious." Deacon said uncomfortably.

Kenny looked at Allen, then back to Deacon as he said, "I really don't feel like talking about it right now. If you'll ask me later I'll tell you."

Deacon nodded.

Allen noticed the dark mood that had descended on their little group and said, "It looks like you guys are comfortable enough with the horses that we can go riding now. Are you ready?"

"Yeah. Thanks Pop." Kenny said with a gentle smile.

Allen disconnected the leads and draped them over the fence before mounting his own horse and saying, "Come on, we're going to go nice and slow for a few minutes while you figure out how to let your horses know what you expect them to do. Just watch me and do what I do."

Allen shook his reigns and nudged his mare gently to get her to start walking. A moment later both boys were following.

* * * * *

"Uncle Spock, would you mind if I asked you a question?" Jake asked hesitantly as he gathered extra diapers and clothes for Edovina.

"Proceed." Spock said without inflection.

"Um, I don't really know what I'm asking but, I just wanted to know if... I want to know how to make Xain happy. I mean, I know because of our bond that he's okay now but... I don't know about Vulcan stuff and I don't want him to feel like he has to live like a Human because he's with me... Does that make any sense?" Jake asked with difficulty.

"Although your query was disjointed, I believe I understand the underlying sentiment. You seem to be working under the assumption that given the choice, Xain would embrace Vulcan culture and is conforming to Human culture to accommodate you. The reality may be otherwise. I advise that you speak honestly with your mate about this matter." Spock said seriously.

"Yeah, I guess so. I just feel funny talking about Vulcan stuff with him sometimes. It's like, that's something that's his personal stuff. If I try to share it with him, I feel like I'm messing with something that belongs just to him. But if I don't share it with him it's like I'm... I don't know, maybe acting like I'm not interested or ashamed or something." Jake said as he searched for words.

"I understand. I will again advise you to be honest with your mate. Once your concerns have been discussed, I believe the logical resolution to the matter will be for each of you to clearly define your expectations in regard to your cultural identity and participation. It is possible that you will choose to incorporate the most desirable components of both cultures into your lives." Spock said reasonably.

Jake smiled and said, "Thanks Uncle Spock. I was really confused about all that stuff before, that helped a lot."

"Such are the duties of an Uncle." Spock said without inflection.

Jake grinned at the response and completed his tasks by grabbing an extra set of clothes for Ricardo, then on impulse he picked up some extra short pants for both boys.

* * * * *

As they rode, Kevin absently began to play with Chip's ring.

"Do you know what kind of ring that is?" Chip asked casually.

"Gold?" Kevin replied as he looked more closely at the ring on Chip's finger.

"It's a wedding ring, do you know what that means?" Chip asked in a leading tone.

"I guess." Kevin said in a small voice.

"It means that I'm married to your Uncle Josh." Chip said in a clear voice.

"What do you do with the ring when you get divorced?" Kevin asked curiously.

"We're not going to get divorced." Chip said firmly.

"But if it's like you say and people get married because they're in love, then when they're not in love anymore they get divorced." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"It works that way with some people, but not the ones who are really in love." Chip said as he held Kevin tighter, feeling sympathy for the boy who had such a distorted view of the world.

"But you *might* get divorced." Kevin said as he tilted his head back to look up at Chip.

"No Kevin. I love Josh completely and we won't ever get divorced." Chip said firmly.

Kevin held tightly to the arms that were wrapped around his waist and silently thought about what had been said.

* * * * *

After looking at the weight room, Laura pulled her father aside and quietly asked, "Would you like it better if I changed now?"

Joe looked at Laura and honestly said, "Now that I've had some time to adjust to this I don't mind either way. You do what makes you most comfortable."

Laura quickly pulled her father close and kissed his cheek before saying, "Thanks Daddy, I'll be right back. I really planned on being a boy today, I just wanted to be honest with you before you decided for sure to be my Dad."

"I'll always be your Dad. Nothing will ever change that. I promise." Joe said softly as he looked into her eyes.

"Thank you, I love you." Laura said in a tearful voice before dashing away.

* * * * *

Chip noticed Brady and Ricardo on horseback, wandering at a leisurely pace and guided his horse to move along side them.

"How are you two doing Brady?" Chip asked as he slowed his horse to match Brady's pace.

"We're fine, Sir." Brady said automatically.

"You just can't make yourself call me Chip, can you?" Chip asked with a twinkle of humor in his eyes.

"No, Sir. I guess I can't," Brady said shyly.

"Well you can call me Commander or Sir if that's what makes you most comfortable. Just as long as you know that I don't require it." Chip said with a genuine smile.

"Thank you Sir. I appreciate that." Brady said shyly.

"Hi Uncle Brady." Kevin said with a beaming smile.

"Hello Kevin. Are you enjoying your ride?" Brady asked quietly.

"Uh huh. It's fun." Kevin said as he snuggled back into Chip's chest.

"We're having fun too." Ricardo said happily from Brady's embrace.

Chip looked fondly at the young boy beaming with happiness and said, "You two have fun, we're going for a run now."

Brady smiled and nodded as Chip nudged his horse into a full gallop and raced away with squeals of delight coming from Kevin.

* * * * *

"Hi Lawrence, I thought we'd lost you." JC said as the group started walking up the stairs.

"I just wanted to change into my 'boy clothes' before the guys got out of school." Lawrence said timidly.

"I don't think any of the boys would have minded if you stayed dressed the other way." JC said in a soft voice of assurance.

Lawrence smiled at the statement and said, "I don't know if they would or not, but it's not really about them. I try to keep my school life separate

from my home life. From now on I think I want my 'girl thing' to be just for at home with my family."

"Whatever makes you most comfortable Lawrence. Just as long as you know that we don't expect you to be one way or the other." JC said assuringly.

"Thank you JC... I always had a feeling that you'd be nice, but you're really great." Lawrence said with a shy smile.

"Thank you. Now come on and I'll show you the upstairs." JC said with a hint of a blush at the sincere compliment.

* * * * *

After putting the baby supplies into the car, Jake said, "Xain is in the family room getting a message from Father. Let's go get some swimming trunks for Kenny and Kevin."

Spock nodded, then asked, "You refer to he who is Xain's father as 'Father'?"

"Yeah, he said it was okay since I'm Xain's *T'hy'la*." Jake said casually as they walked toward the stairs.

"In the event that you are unaware of the significance, his invitation for you to call him Father is a declaration of acceptance." Spock said seriously.

"I thought it was something like that. Xain sent me something like pride and happiness through our bond when Father said it." Jake said as they reached Kenny and Kevin's room.

Spock stopped inside the door of the room and considered for a moment while Jake got swimming trunks for Kenny and Kevin.

Jake walked to Spock and raised an eyebrow in question.

Spock noticed the inquisitive look and asked, "Are you aware of the difficulties that Humans tend to have in the company of Vulcans?"

"Dad said something about misunderstandings because Humans like to say stupid things that don't make sense." Jake said as he led Spock into his room to get swimming trunks for Xain and himself.

"There is that. Also, I have noticed that Humans sometimes feel frustration at the feeling of being unable to express themselves fully." Spock said thoughtfully.

"Oh yeah. I kinda felt like that a few times, but Father straightened it out for me." Jake said absently as he joined Spock back at the door with the swimming trunks in hand.

Spock raised an eyebrow as a prompt for further explanation.

"He said that I'm a Human, so I'm supposed to act like a Human. To expect me to do otherwise would be illogical." Jake said as he started down the stairs.

"An enlightened view, and quite logical." Spock said in a considering voice.

"Yeah. It took a lot of pressure off me. If it wasn't for him saying that, I'd probably try to act like a Vulcan all the time to try and make Xain comfortable. Now I just act a little 'Vulcany' now and then, it's kind of my way of saying 'pay attention, I'm serious'. " Jake said as he led the way into the family room.

"Father asked me to express to you his hope that you are well." Xain said as Jake and Spock approached.

"When you talk to him again, tell him that I am well and hope that he is too." Jake said as he stood by Xain's side.

"Would you like to check your email before we return to Southcrest?" Xain asked casually.

Jake smiled, knowing that Xain's question held more emotion than he was showing.

"Sure, let's see if Kennon sent you an answer." Jake said with a smile.

Xain stood and Jake took his place before the terminal.

* * * * *

"How are you doing son?" Joe asked in a whisper as the group headed down the stairs.

"I'm good. I don't think I've ever been this happy." Lawrence whispered in reply.

"I think the tour is about over, do you want to go back to the kitchen or come outside with me and Billy?" Joe asked quietly.

Lawrence smiled and said, "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to come with you."

Joe turned to Billy, and in a louder voice asked, "Do you mind if my son joins us outside?"

Billy smiled at Lawrence and said, "Of course I don't mind. Come on little brother, let's hang out by the pool like rich folks."

Lawrence moved between Billy and Joe and pulled them both into a quick hug as they continued to walk.

>From: kwerner2003@..
>Date: Tue Sep 28, 2004 09:04 am
>Subject: Re: Mariah Elaine Werner
>
>Thank you for answering my question Jake. Thanks to you
>providing me with the name Solak I was able to retrieve
>the official records of what happened to my Aunt.
>
>While I was looking for more information about my Aunt
>and the man she married, I came across a recent entry
>that stated Jake Thompson was recognized as a son of
>Solak. I don't know enough about Vulcan customs to know
>how or why that is, but it probably means that you live
>on Vulcan.
>
>I hate to ask for a favor from you, but since you've
>helped me once, I'm going to ask anyway. If it's
>possible, would you please give my cousin Xain a
>message from me?
>
>Please just tell him that his cousin Kennon is on Earth.
>Let him know that I'm not like our grandfather and that
>if he is ever on Earth or wants to contact me, that I'd
>really like to get to know him. If not, that's okay.
>Grandfather hurt a lot of people, so I understand.
>
>Kennon Werner
>

"What do you say *T'hy'la*? Do you want to talk to him?" Jake asked quietly.

Xain seemed to be lost thoughtfully for a moment before turning away from the terminal.

"Uncle Spock, I am experiencing a state of apprehension at the possibility of establishing contact with this person who is, in all probability, my cousin. I am unsure of the source of the apprehension and believe the emotion might effect my ability to make a sound decision in this matter. However, until the matter is resolved, I do not foresee an end to the

apprehension. Could you please advise me on the appropriate way to expedite this matter?" Xain asked reasonably.

"What are the choices you face?" Spock asked seriously.

"I must choose whether to accept contact with Kennon and face the possibility of being rejected as my mother was, or reject contact and lose the possibility of contact with my Human family." Xain said thoughtfully.

Spock looked at Xain thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "The Vulcan method of dealing with this matter would involve introspection, meditation and a detailed analysis of the emotional reaction. The next logical step would be to gather all the facts about your decision and forecast all the possible outcomes, then choose that which is most desirable. It is not possible to calculate the amount of time needed to bring this matter to resolution with any accuracy. The entire process should take 1.6 to 3.2 days... statistically speaking."

Jake looked at Spock with wide eyes at the statement.

After a pause to allow Xain to ponder that possibility, Spock continued, "The Human method for resolving this issue will take 0.1 to 0.3 seconds and would only require that you accept the decision as final once it has been made."

"I believe I would like to attempt to resolve this matter by the Human method. What must I do?" Xain asked seriously as Jake looked on in disbelief.

"Flip a coin."

* * * * *

"How did you like that, Little One?" Chip asked as he slowed the horse to a slow trot.

"It was fun. I love it here, Uncle Chip." Kevin said through his giggles of delight.

"Are you happy living with Allen and your brothers?" Chip asked with concern.

"Yeah. Poppa is really nice and he loves all of us a lot." Kevin said as he finally began to settle.

Chip nodded as he turned his horse back toward the stable.

"But if I was your boyfriend, Poppa would still love me and so would all my brothers." Kevin said in a considering voice.

"Kevin, there's no way someone your age should ever have a boyfriend my age." Chip said firmly.

"Jake had boyfriends older than you when he wasn't much older than me." Kevin said seriously.

"I think you know that those weren't his boyfriends. They didn't love him." Chip said gently.

Kevin thought about the words as they rode at a gentle pace.

"So does that mean it's wrong for us to do boyfriend stuff unless you pay me?" Kevin finally asked in confusion.

"No Little One. That's not what I meant at all." Chip said as he hugged Kevin gently with one arm.

"I love you Uncle Chip. If it's like you say and love is forever, then I'll always love you." Kevin said with certainty.

"Let's head back to the house now. I think it's just about time for us to have that talk I've been putting off." Chip said thoughtfully.

Kevin didn't respond as he held tightly to Chip's arm wrapped around him.

CHAPTER 33

Joe and Billy took their seats by the pool as Lawrence looked on with indecision.

Joe smiled at Lawrence and said, "You can sit with me if you want."

Lawrence beamed a full smile and carefully sat in his father's lap.

Joe pulled him into a full hug and quietly said, "You said something before about being prissy and feminine, but I don't see it. You look just as good as a boy as you do a girl."

Lawrence kissed his father's cheek and said, "Thank you Daddy, Billy said that too. I just don't know what to believe."

Billy thought about the statement before asking, "Why did you feel like you had to change before Joe accepted you?"

"Because I had to be honest with him." Lawrence said as he turned to look at Billy.

"Even if it hurt him?" Billy asked in a leading tone.

Lawrence nodded.

"I think that's how it is with love. You have to be honest with the people you really love, even when it might hurt them in the short term because you know you're saving them a bigger hurt later on." Billy said in deep thought.

Lawrence considered the statement and finally nodded.

Billy gently smiled and said, "That's what you should believe."

Lawrence gave Billy a questioning look, silently asking for more of an explanation.

"If we tell you that you look good as a boy, we say it because we mean it. Please believe that we love you enough that we would tell you the truth even if it's something you don't want to hear." Billy said seriously.

"Yeah. Okay Billy. I'll try." Lawrence said as he snuggled against his father.

* * * * *

"Such an arbitrary method for determining the action to take seems inappropriate." Xain said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps, but the method is expedient. In the absence of criteria that make one of the choices more desirable, this method allows one to make a choice and proceed." Spock said reasonably.

Xain slowly nodded, then said, "I thank you for your guidance Uncle Spock."

"Jake, do you have a coin available?" Spock asked in an emotionless voice.

"There is no need for a coin. I have decided to contact my cousin and no longer have any apprehension associated with the decision." Xain said reasonably.

Spock gave a single nod of acknowledgement.

"I think I get it." Jake said suddenly.

Spock and Xain looked at Jake with question.

"When Uncle Spock told you to flip a coin, you understood that you just need to make a choice. You'll know everything you need to do next after that choice is made either way, so the most important thing is just to choose." Jake said with a calm smile.

"Correct. I believe the Human expression that would best explain my difficulty is that I was 'over thinking' my decision." Xain said carefully.

"Cool. Well, why don't you take a seat and send him a message then?" Jake said as he stood.

"I believe it would be preferable if you would compose a response to his message, then when you have concluded, I will add my own message." Xain said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, okay. This'll just take a minute." Jake said as he took his seat again.

* * * * *

"Hey guys, I'm glad we ran into you." Chip said as he trotted his horse up to Allen, Kenny and Deacon.

"Hi Chip. Are you guys enjoying your ride?" Allen asked with contentment at the sight of Kevin's glowing smile.

"Yeah, it's been great!" Kevin exploded.

"We've had a good ride, but we need to go back to the house for a while to have a serious talk... I think you should be there too Allen." Chip said slowly.

"Sure, I think the guys can use a break anyway." Allen said as he looked at Kenny and Deacon.

"We should probably let Brady know that we're going back to the house." Chip said thoughtfully.

"We saw him just a few minutes ago. He should be just over that rise. Boys, do you want to go let him know that we're heading back?" Allen asked with a smile.

Kenny quickly nodded and turned his horse to go toward the rise, followed closely by Deacon.

"You taught them well." Chip said as he watched Kenny and Deacon ride away at a decent pace.

"I think I got the point across to them about safety. They're not ready to gallop yet, but I think it's safe for them to ride off for a few minutes on their own." Allen said as he watched his boys riding away.

"Well, Josh has been wanting us to have a talk with Kevin for a few days now and I think it's the right time... maybe past time." Chip finished uncertainly.

"Can you tell me what it's about?" Allen asked casually.

Chip gave Kevin a squeeze and said, "Kevin is in love with me and I think we need to discuss it."

"Oh, I noticed. I remember having a few crushes at his age." Allen said with a fond smile at Kevin.

"You don't understand Allen. This is beyond a crush." Chip said seriously as he looked into Allen's eyes.

Allen sat stunned at the statement as he realized what Chip was talking about.

"Uncle Brady is coming back with us. He says Ricardo needs a nap." Kenny said as he approached.

"Okay, come on everyone." Chip said in his 'commander' voice as he led the way back to the stable.

Allen followed behind the group, deep thoughtfully.

* * * * *

Kennon,
I'm glad to hear that you don't hate Xain because he's part Vulcan. He's really great and I think you'll like him.

He's here with me on Earth, but didn't know how you would feel about him. He's read your email and is going to finish this message for me.

Don't worry, he's cool.

Jake

Jake stood away from the keyboard and motioned for Xain to take a seat.

"Your written language is difficult for me. If it would be acceptable, I will tell you what I wish to say through our bond." Xain said seriously.

"Sure thing *T'hy'la*. I'm ready when you are." Jake said gently as he sat before the terminal again.

Greetings Cousin,

I am Xain Thompson, son of Solak of the house of Suvak of Vulcan. You have expressed a desire to 'get to know me'. I find that to be acceptable and share the sentiment.

I know little of our family, however from your references to our grandfather, I believe him to be the Human equivalent of my grandfather on Vulcan.

It is my hope that our correspondence will yield a favorable outcome. To my knowledge, you are my only Human family.

Live long and prosper,

Xain Thompson.

After sending the message, Jake said, "I guess we'd better get back to Southcrest if we're going to get there in time for some food."

"Given the reactions of those in the kitchen, I believe we should make haste." Xain said in agreement as he watched Jake shut down the terminal.

"I would like to express my approval of your choice to initiate contact with your Human family. A sense of family can have many benefits." Spock said seriously as he followed Jake and Xain out of the room.

"Thank you Uncle Spock. We have tons of family now, but this is something different. This is about 'blood' family." Jake said thoughtfully.

Xain stopped at the front door and looked at Jake curiously.

"Ask me later." Jake whispered, then walked through the front door.

* * * * *

"Hey guys, mind if we join you?" JC asked as he walked to the pool side with Reuben at his side.

"The more the merrier. We're just talking." Billy said frankly.

Reuben looked at Lawrence carefully and finally asked, "Are you a boy or a girl?"

Billy and Joe froze at the question as Lawrence thought carefully about his answer.

"I'm a boy. I just like to dress like a girl sometimes." Lawrence said carefully.

"Why?" Reuben asked as he was guided by JC to sit in his lap.

"Um... I don't..." Lawrence sputtered as he tried to think of an answer.

"How do you think you'd feel if you put on a dress Reuben?" Billy asked seriously.

Reuben giggled at the thought and said, "I'd feel silly."

Billy smiled and said, "So would I. But when Lawrence puts on a dress it makes him feel pretty. Isn't he pretty when he wears a dress?"

"Yeah, he looks really pretty." Reuben said with a smile directed at Lawrence who was still sitting in his father's lap.

"That's why." Billy said with a look of accomplishment.

Reuben thought about the words, then asked, "So it's like when I get dressed nice to go out to eat with momma and Ricardo."

"Maybe. If you're dressing nice because you want to feel like you look good and not just because other people expect you to dress that way." Billy said thoughtfully.

"I think Lawrence is prettier as a boy." Reuben said seriously.

Lawrence got off his father's lap and walked to stand before Reuben and JC.

"Thank you for saying that Reuben. Can I give you a hug?" Lawrence asked hopefully.

"Uh huh." Reuben said and hopped off JC's lap to be pulled into a gentle hug.

"Thank you Reuben. You're really special. What you said made me feel really good." Lawrence said, trying to make sure that Reuben would understand.

Reuben happily held on to Lawrence and said, "You're nice, I like you."

"Well, you're nice too. I hope we can be really good friends." Lawrence said honestly.

"Uh huh." Reuben said as he gave one final squeeze of the hug, then hopped back into JC's lap.

Lawrence smiled at the boy and pulled a chair over so he could sit beside his father.

"Is that your daddy?" Reuben asked as he pointed at Joe.

"Yes, that's my daddy." Lawrence said proudly.

"I don't have a daddy no more but I've got lots and lots of Uncles so I guess it's okay." Reuben said thoughtfully.

"That's right Reuben. All of your uncles will be here if you need us for anything." JC said seriously.

"And since my son likes you so much. I'll be your Uncle too." Joe said with a gentle smile.

"What do I call you?" Reuben asked curiously.

"Uncle Joe." He said with a peaceful smile.

"Okay Uncle Joe." Reuben said with a smile as he snuggled into JC's chest with contentment.

* * * * *

"Just leave the horses saddled for now. When the boys get out of school, they'll probably want to go for a ride." Chip said as he eased Kevin down to the ground.

"Come here guys, remember I said that I owed you a hug." Allen said as Deacon and Kenny struggled down off their horses.

"Oh Pop." Kenny said with mock aggravation, but nevertheless went directly to Allen for a big hug.

Allen hugged Kenny firmly and discretely kissed his cheek before turning to Deacon and motioning him to 'come here'.

Deacon felt a silly smile come over his face as he was pulled into a three-way hug.

"Thanks guys. It'll be great if things work out so Billy and I can be a couple. You two made the chances of it working out a whole lot better." Allen said honestly.

"We love you Pop. And we know that Billy will make you happy." Kenny said gently.

"Yeah Pop. What he said." Deacon said with a teasing smile.

"So you're ready to call me Pop now?" Allen asked as he released the hug and kept an arm on each boy's shoulder as he steered them toward the house.

"Yeah. If that's still okay." Deacon said, already knowing the answer.

"Of course it is Deacon. From the moment you stepped into my house you became one of my kids." Allen said seriously.

"I kinda figured that when you offered to adopt me." Deacon said shyly.

"You did?" Kenny asked in wonder.

"Yes. I said that if Deacon and Billy thought it would be the best thing for Deacon, I'd be willing to adopt him. I just wanted to be sure that he ended up where he wanted to be." Allen said quietly.

"I did. Thanks Pop." Deacon said warmly as he put an arm around Allen's waist and squeezed him gently.

"Yeah Pop, what he said." Kenny said with an impish grin as he mimicked Deacon's hug from the other side.

* * * * *

"Hey Angel, we're ready to have that talk with Kevin now." Chip said as he walked to his husband's side.

JC looked at Kevin, held tightly to Chip's side and nodded as he stood.

"Lieutenant Thompson?" Chip said in his 'commander' voice.

"Yes Sir." Brady said immediately, out of reflex.

"I'm putting you in charge of my guests while we have our talk." Chip said seriously.

"Aye Commander." Brady said, keeping his serious expression.

Chip gave one nod, then betrayed a smile.

"The guest that I'm holding needs his afternoon nap. Where would you suggest I put him down?" Brady asked with a gentle smile.

"If you put him in the family room, you can put on a cartoon for him to watch until he's ready for sleep." Chip said with a smile at the sleepy little boy in Brady's arms.

"Yes sir. Thank you. As soon as Ricardo is settled, I'll watch after your guests." Brady said and turned to leave.

"Can I come too?" Reuben asked hopefully.

"Of course Reuben. We can talk while Ricardo is going to sleep." Brady said and held out his free hand, inviting Reuben to join him.

Reuben pulled JC into a hug and said, "I love you Uncle Josh."

JC smiled at the sincere words and said, "I love you too Reuben. Now don't keep your Uncle Brady waiting."

Reuben nodded and hurried to Brady who immediately pulled him into a one armed hug.

* * * * *

"Um, Uncle Spock said I should talk to you about this stuff. And since we're going to be at Southcrest all day, I guess now is the best time." Jake said hesitantly.

"I am sure we would be able to arrange an appropriate venue should you desire privacy for this discussion." Spock said as he started the car.

"No, not unless Xain wants it to be private. You understand this stuff better than either of us, so you could help us figure things out... unless you don't want to." Jake finished uncertainly.

"Pending Xain's approval of my inclusion in the discussion, it would be acceptable." Spock said as he kept his focus on his driving.

"Is it okay if we talk about Vulcan and Human stuff with Uncle Spock? There are a few things that are bothering me and he said I should just go ahead and tell you so we could work it out." Jake said seriously.

"It is acceptable." Xain said cautiously.

"Okay, I'm not sure how to put this exactly. I guess it's just that I feel like some of the Vulcan stuff is your private stuff and I feel funny asking about it. I don't want you to feel like you have to share everything with me and can't have anything that's just your own." Jake said seriously.

Xain thought about the words and asked, "Do you have the feeling that I am intruding on your cultural identity when I ask about the significance of a Human custom?"

"No. I know you're just trying to understand. But it's different. We're on Earth and you're going to run into stuff like that a lot. But, I don't know, if I ask you about Vulcan stuff, it's like I'm being nosey." Jake said with difficulty.

"We are *T'hy'la*. Though certain aspects of Vulcan history and culture are rarely discussed with Humans, that prohibition does not include you. There is no part of my life I wish to withhold from you." Xain said carefully.

"Oh, um... well there is one part of my life I want to withhold from you." Jake said hesitantly.

Xain responded with the raise of one eyebrow.

"When I was living on the streets I did some stuff. I love you and I think you seeing that stuff might hurt you... besides, I'd be ashamed if you saw it." Jake said hesitantly.

"I believe I understand. If the time should come when you are comfortable sharing that part of yourself, I would be honored to accept it. Rest assured that I love the person you are. Witnessing the events that made you into this person may cause some distress for what you have endured, but will not alter my perception of you." Xain said seriously.

"Thank you *T'hy'la*. I think that's what was worrying me. When you saw some of the things I did, you wouldn't want me anymore." Jake said shyly.

"The bond you share precludes that possibility." Spock said seriously.

"I believe I could make the same promise without our bond. Jake is my *T'hy'la*, but he is also my brother and friend. I am sure our union was predestined." Xain said in a voice of certainty.

Spock raised an eyebrow at the statement.

Jake thought about Xain's words, then smiled as he said, "Yeah, I feel that way too."

Spock glanced at Jake with a look of question.

After a moment of thought, Jake let all the emotion fall from his face as he said in a toneless voice, "One week ago I was living in Chicago. I lived on the street and did many illegal things to survive. Xain was living in San Francisco in the Vulcan Embassy with his father and couldn't speak English. He had no contact with Humans."

After a pause to form his next words, Jake continued, "The series of events that brought us to this time and place are so unlikely, that predestination or divine intervention seem the most reasonable explanation."

"Though a series of events may be statistically unlikely, them occurring does not necessarily suggest supernatural forces are at work." Spock said thoughtfully.

"True. But given the evidence at hand, one has to make a choice. You may choose to believe that random and unrelated factors aligned to produce this outcome by chance, or you may choose to believe that a force outside our perception guided events to produce this result." Xain said carefully.

"To believe in predestination seems illogical." Spock said seriously.

"From a scientific perspective perhaps." Xain said as he noticed that they were pulling onto Chip's property.

"What perspective would you suggest?" Spock asked with interest.

"When science fails to explain an occurrence, it is regarded to be the statistically improbable alignment of random factors. Those who believe strictly in science routinely disregard what others offer up as proof. To accept the possibility that forces, as yet unknown to us, guide events to a certain outcome allows one to envision possibilities that exceed the forecasts of logic." Xain said in deep thought.

"What do you call this wider perspective?" Spock asked carefully.

"Faith."

* * * * *

"Okay guys, have a seat and we'll get this worked out." Chip said as they walked into the study with Kevin at his side.

"Kevin, do you want to sit with me?" Allen asked, hoping it would help.

Kevin shook his head firmly and sat on Chip's lap.

"Kevin, I know you love me. But it isn't right for a boy your age to love a man my age." Chip said seriously.

"I don't care." Kevin said as he held Chip tightly.

"Kevin honey, please try to understand. We don't want to hurt you. But you need to realize that you loving Chip like this is wrong." JC said softly.

"I'm not your honey and I don't like you. I love Uncle Chip. Maybe you loving him is wrong." Kevin said defiantly.

Chip pulled Kevin away from his chest and looked into his eyes as he said, "Kevin, Josh is my husband and no one. NO ONE is allowed to talk to him like that. Do you understand?"

Kevin saw the seriousness in Chip's eyes and nodded as his eyes filled with tears.

Feeling that he might have finally gotten something through to Kevin, Chip continued in a softer voice, "I love my husband and he comes first in my life. If you can't accept that, then it may be best if you don't come over here anymore."

Kevin got a look of panic in his eyes as the tears started to fall.

"I love you Kevin, but I love my husband too. If you force me to choose, I'm going to choose Josh every single time." Chip said, hoping that he was finally getting through.

Kevin broke down into full sobbing and buried his face into Chip's chest.

"Do you think I got through?" Chip asked JC and Allen with a helpless look.

"Too early to tell. He's just as stubborn as his father." Allen said with a concerned look at the sobbing boy holding tightly to Chip's chest.

"I... I... love... you..." Kevin wailed into Chip's chest.

All three adults felt their hearts break at the desperate declaration of love.

Chip was torn between his fatherly instinct to offer comfort to the suffering boy and the more logical part of him saying that Kevin had to endure this to understand.

The room became silent except for Kevin's crying.

All the adults thought about what they should do to make sure Kevin would be alright.

Finally Kevin looked up from Chip's chest and stared at JC with a look of such intensity that it made a chill run up his spine.

"What is it?" Chip asked with concern at JC's look of shock.

"He... for just a second the look in his eyes was exactly like Craig... The expression he had when he would look at you." JC gasped.

Chip looked from JC to Kevin and finally started to realize the seriousness of the situation.

"What's wrong?" Allen asked as he felt the tension in the room increase even more.

Chip thought for a second then said, "Let's just say that this is a lot more serious than I realized. I think we need to..."

All conversation stopped as the door to the study was thrown open.

* * * * *

The opening musical introduction of 'The Muppet Show' hadn't finished before Ricardo was fast asleep on the couch with his head resting in Brady's lap.

"How are you doing Reuben?" Brady asked quietly as he draped his arm around Reuben on his other side.

"I'm really good. I spent the day with Uncle Josh talking to people." Reuben said happily.

"Hmmm. That's an important job at a party. Ricardo said that you took a bath with him and told him that you like him and love him. That was really special to him. Thank you." Brady said in a soft voice.

"Kenny and Kevin made me feel special and loved when I spent the night with them. I just wanted Ricardo to feel like that too." Reuben said seriously.

"You and your brother are both very special. I hope you understand how much I love you both." Brady said gently.

"Yeah. I know Uncle Brady. It's like you're the Uncle that belongs just to us. We have you like Kenny and Kevin have Allen." Reuben said as he nestled his head into Brady's shoulder.

"I have to get back to the guests soon. Will you stay with Ricardo so he doesn't wake up alone?" Brady asked as he hugged Reuben.

"Yeah, but can we spend some time together later?" Reuben asked hopefully.

"Sure, I'll make sure that we can have some time for just the two of us." Brady said with a smile.

"It's okay if Ricardo is with us too. He's little so he can't do a lot of stuff. I don't want him to feel left out." Reuben said seriously.

"You're such a good brother. When Ricardo is done with his nap, come and find me and we'll do something together." Brady said with a smile.

"Thank you Uncle Brady, I love you." Reuben whispered as he hugged Brady more tightly.

"I love you too." Brady said as he leaned over to give Reuben a kiss on the top of his head.

* * * * *

"So did you guys have fun horseback riding?" Billy asked Kenny and Deacon casually.

"It was a lot of fun. Pop showed us everything we needed to do and even let us go and get Brady by ourselves." Deacon said as he pulled a chair up beside Lawrence, the other side from Joe.

"Pop?" Billy asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Allen said it was okay if I called him Pop... that's okay isn't it?" Deacon finished carefully.

"Oh, yeah. It's fine. I just didn't expect it, that's all." Billy said thoughtfully.

"What have you been doing Lawrence?" Deacon asked with a smile.

"Well, we had our 'girl talk' in the kitchen, then JC took us on a tour of the house. This place is incredible. Did you ever watch that TV show with that English guy who screams when he talks?" Lawrence asked in a ramble.

"Do what?" Deacon asked in confusion.

"He shows off famous people's houses. I forget what the show was called, but I used to watch it sometimes. This place is as nice as any of the places he talked about on TV." Lawrence said seriously.

"Oh, I get it. Yeah, I've seen that show." Deacon said with a smile.

Billy and Joe shared an amused look and stayed silent as they watched Deacon and Lawrence interact.

* * * * *

"Well, the boys should be home in less than half an hour. Do we have everything ready for them?" Teri asked as she looked around.

"Right before they get home I'll go out and make sure the snack table is filled and has plenty of drinks." Hazel said as she picked up a spiral bound notebook.

"Is that the menu for tonight?" Mona asked curiously.

"Yes. There is too much for me to rely on my memory alone." Hazel said as she looked down the list.

"What still needs to be done?" Christine asked as she cut herself a piece of the coffee cake in the middle of the table.

"I think all the important things are ready. Now we wait for Mr. Chip to begin cooking the meat. When the cooking has begun I will clear away anything that is left on the snack table and begin to carry out the food for dinner." Hazel said thoughtfully.

"It sounds like you have everything covered here. When do you think we should talk to the guys about tomorrow night?" Mona asked seriously.

"After dinner. Their attention span increases to almost three minutes when their bellies are full." Teri said with a playful smile.

"I wish I'd known that when Allen was a kid. No wonder he never listened to me." Mona said dramatically.

Juana chuckled as she said, "It will be helpful to know this when dealing with my own children."

"Just keep up with whatever you're doing with your boys. I don't think I've ever seen two sweeter, more well behaved boys." Teri said with a smile.

"Thank you. It has not always been so. Where we lived before they had many bad influences. I have done my best to shelter them from the worst of the ugliness of the world." Juana said distantly.

"Whatever you did, worked." Teri said with assurance.

"Thank you, and may I say that your own sons are quite well behaved and responsible. I was very impressed." Juana said honestly.

"Yeah. I wish I could take credit for all of that, but they've even surprised me. I just tried to prepare them for life the best I could." Teri said with a distant look.

"They wouldn't be where they are without you Teri. You raised them to accept responsibility. So just accept the compliment because you deserve it." Helen said firmly.

Teri looked at Helen with surprise, then turned to Juana and said, "Thank you Juana. I guess I'm still not too good at accepting compliments."

"Before I moved here, to receive a compliment was uncommon. I understand." Juana said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Why aren't you in school?" Chip asked as he saw Justy standing in the doorway panting for breath.

"I'll tell you in a minute. I need to talk to Kevin right now." Justy said in a rush.

Kevin looked at Justy with tear streaked eyes.

"Come over here Kev, this'll just take a minute." Justy said in a softer voice as he tried to get his rapid breathing under control.

Kevin hesitantly got off Chip's lap and walked across the room to talk to Justy.

All the adults watched as Justy talked seriously to Kevin.

They couldn't make out what Justy was saying, but his dramatic hand gestures while he was talking convinced them all that he was probably talking a mile a minute.

Finally after long minutes of discussion, Kevin shyly nodded and turned to face the adults.

"I'm sorry if I was bad. I didn't mean to hurt you Uncle Chip." Kevin said as his eyes filled with tears again.

"It's okay Kevin. Are you going to be alright?" Chip asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Kevin said in a whisper, then turned to look shyly at JC.

"I'm sorry I hurt you Unc... JC. It was wrong of me to say those mean things to you. I promise I won't be mean to you anymore." Kevin said, obviously feeling humiliated by his behavior.

"It's okay Kevin, you can still call me Uncle Josh if you want." JC said carefully.

Kevin shook his head and said, "I can't. I was bad..."

Justy interrupted Kevin's speech and whispered into his ear.

Kevin whispered back, then waited for Justy's nod.

"Okay Uncle Josh. If you're sure it's okay." Kevin said timidly.

"I'm sure, Kevin." JC said softly.

Kevin nodded and whispered, "Thank you."

A moment of silence fell over the room until it was broken by Allen standing and holding his arms open to Kevin.

After a brief moment of indecision, Kevin ran into Allen's open arms and buried his face into Allen's chest.

"I'm sorry Poppa. I didn't mean it. Please don't send me back. I'm really really sorry." Kevin said as his tears began soaking into Allen's shirt.

"Shhh Kevin. I'll never send you away. You don't even have to worry about that. I love you Little One and I will always love you." Allen said in a soft, assuring voice.

"I love you too Poppa." Kevin said in a whimper.

"Kev, did you eat anything yet today?" Justy asked in a soft voice.

Kevin looked at Justy and shook his head slowly.

"I think it's probably time for you to have something, it'll make you feel better." Justy said gently.

Kevin let loose his hug and whispered, "Thanks Justy."

"Sure thing bro. Just remember that when I screw up, it's your job to tell me. Then we'll be even." Justy said with a smile.

"I will, I promise." Kevin said with a watery smile.

"Go eat." Justy said softly as he patted Kevin on the shoulder.

Kevin nodded and left.

* * * * *

"You wanna get something to eat?" Deacon asked Lawrence shyly.

"I will if you will." Lawrence said with a grin.

"Come on." Deacon said and led Lawrence away by the hand.

After a moment of watching the two boys walk away, Joe said, "Your brother is quite the smooth talker."

Billy smiled and said, "He's doing a lot better than I did at his age."

"He really seems nice. I'm glad Lawrence found someone nice who can accept him no matter what." Joe said with a peaceful smile.

"Yeah. I'm really proud of him. I don't know what happened for him to turn out so open minded considering how we were raised. I'm just glad that he is." Billy said distantly.

"I think I know what happened." Joe said in a considering voice.

Billy turned to look at Joe with question.

"I bet he just followed the example of his brother." Joe said with a smile.

Billy looked back at Deacon for a long moment, then said, "Maybe, but when I was his age I didn't know anything about anything. I was just an innocent kid who didn't have a clue. Look at him... he knows what he wants out of life and he goes and gets it."

"You're talking about more than his relationship with Lawrence, aren't you?" Joe asked quietly.

"Yeah. He's thirteen and I think he has more of a handle on what he wants in life than I do." Billy said absently.

"Billy, I've been thinking the same thing looking at your life." Joe said honestly.

Billy looked at Joe with question.

"You have a job you love, enough money to live life the way you want to and enough sense to put your family before your money. I think what you're seeing in Deacon is something you also carry, you just have trouble seeing it in yourself." Joe said honestly.

Billy smiled and shyly nodded, then watched as Deacon and Lawrence came back to their table carrying plates of snacks.

Brady walked up to the table a moment later and asked, "What did I miss?"

Joe and Billy simultaneously looked at Deacon and Lawrence talking to each other, lost in their own little world.

Brady smiled as he took his seat beside the two men.

* * * * *

"What did you say to him?" Chip asked Justy in wonder.

Justy smiled and walked to his father for a hug.

"I love you Daddy." Justy said as he hugged his father tightly.

"Uh oh. That doesn't sound good." JC said only half-seriously.

Justy shifted over to JC and said, "I love you Pop."

Chip looked at Justy, waiting for the upcoming explanation.

JC guided Justy to sit between them on the couch.

"Um, I'm home early because every telepath and empath at Camp Little Eagle was about to crawl out of their skin. We could all feel what was going on over here." Justy began in deep thought.

"Why is that?" Allen asked curiously.

Justy looked up at Allen, as if just noticing that he was in the room, then said, "I think it's because Kevin is a twin. All twins have a sort of telepathic link, even if it isn't always on a conscious level, but I guess Kevin and Kenny's bond isn't strong enough to connect when they're apart. Kevin was in so much turmoil that he was broadcasting like a loudspeaker to anyone with the ability to hear."

Allen nodded cautiously at the explanation.

"So what did you tell him?" Chip asked cautiously.

"Um, I really can't tell you most of it. Some of it is Kevin's private thoughts and other things are his memories. But the main thing I told him is that he was having adult feelings and he was trying to handle them like a kid." Justy said carefully.

"I'm not sure I understand." JC said slowly.

"A kid's way of thinking is to think of himself, an adult thinks about someone else. When a kid is in love, he wants to be happy. When an adult is in love, he wants his partner to be happy." Justy said thoughtfully.

"So you told him to think about what would make Chip happy?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Something like that. I used examples from his past to make the point so he could see what he was doing. I really can't say any more than that. Like I said, it's his private stuff and all it would do is hurt him if I shared it." Justy said quietly.

"We trust you. If you say he'll be okay, we'll let it go." JC said with a concerned look at Chip.

"That's right." Chip said and smiled at his husband.

"Well, I didn't say he'll be okay. I just steered him away from his obsession. He's really fragile right now and it wouldn't take much to cause him to break down." Justy said slowly.

"What can we do for him?" Allen asked with immediate worry.

"Right now he needs food. His physical state was affecting his mood and making his emotions more extreme. After that, he needs his Poppa to love him no matter what. He needs his Uncle Chip to show that he still loves him and his Uncle Josh to show that he's really forgiven." Justy said seriously.

"Okay, that sounds easy enough." Allen said with a questioning look at the other adults.

He received nods of affirmation in response.

"Then when Dan gets here, he needs to have a good long talk with him. Kev has a lot more than just this to work out and he needs to get started." Justy said seriously.

"You sure do know a lot about this." Allen said cautiously.

Justy smiled and said, "This isn't just me talking. I'm getting advice from all the Clan Short telepaths right now. Cory and Sean are being kept up-to-date on what's happening too. We're all worried about Kevin and want him to be okay."

"Oh. Well, thank them for me." Allen said quietly.

"They say 'your welcome'." Justy said with a playful smile.

"I guess I'd better go keep an eye on him. Thanks for all your help Justy." Allen said as he stood.

"Don't worry Allen, just love him. That's the most important thing you can do for him now." Justy said seriously.

Allen smiled and said, "As if I could stop."

* * * * *

Jake walked out to the pool and noticed the disturbed look on Kevin's face as he was staring at the snack table.

Xain and Spock continued on, to join everyone else at the table as Jake veered off to join Kevin.

"What's wrong Kev?" Jake asked with concern.

Kevin looked at Jake with tear streaked eyes and his lower lip began to tremble.

"Come here buddy and tell me about it." Jake said as he pulled Kevin into a hug.

After a moment of Kevin crying into Jake's chest, Xain approached and quietly said, "I will prepare his nutritional supplement."

Jake nodded and watched as Xain walked back into the house.

Finally Kevin was able to say in a barely audible voice, "That stuff you said before... about how I was hurting Uncle Chip... it was true. I was really really bad."

"Did you tell him you were sorry?" Jake asked softly.

Kevin nodded into Jake's chest.

"Did he forgive you?" Jake asked as he began to rub Kevin's back.

"Yeah." Kevin mumbled.

"What about Uncle Josh?" Jake asked cautiously.

"He said I could still call him Uncle." Kevin said quietly.

"Then it's not too late buddy. You fixed it before you really hurt anyone." Jake said gently.

"Really?" Kevin asked as he looked up at Jake hopefully.

"That's right. If Uncle Josh is okay and Uncle Chip isn't mad then everything is fine." Jake said assuringly.

"But I feel..." Kevin began to say, then started crying again.

"Kev buddy. You remember how it used to be, back in Chicago?" Jake asked as he pulled out of Kevin's hug and squatted down to look Kevin in the eyes.

"Uh huh." Kevin said hesitantly.

"You remember that I never told you a lie? Even when it was something that might bother you, I was always honest." Jake said seriously.

"Yeah." Kevin whispered.

"Then trust me now. It's not too late." Jake said sincerely.

"Thanks Jake." Kevin said with relief as he lunged forward to hug Jake.

Jake laughed as he lost his balance and fell back on the patio, pulling Kevin down with him.

On impulse, Kevin started tickling Jake.

Everyone at the table looked on with amusement as Kevin and Jake giggled and wrestled on the ground.

* * * * *

"Um, what did I miss?" Allen asked in puzzlement to find Kevin and Jake laughing.

"I'm not sure, but I think Kevin just tackled Jake." Kenny said in confusion.

"Whatever it is, Jake doesn't seem upset by it." Allen said as he pulled up a chair and sat down beside Brady.

"Kev buddy, Xain brought something for you." Jake said through his giggles.

Kevin looked up to see Xain standing over them holding a milkshake.

"Perhaps you could explain why you are sitting astride my *T'hy'la*?" Xain asked in a toneless voice.

Kevin felt a momentary spark of fear, thinking that he might have upset Xain when he looked into Xain's eyes to find the tiniest glint of amusement.

"I'm just keeping it warm for you." Kevin said with an evil smile.

Jake let out a full laugh at the response as Xain arched an eyebrow in surprise.

"I can't believe it! Kevin made a Vulcan blush!" Kenny said as he ran to join his brother.

Jake looked up in time to see Xain begin to turn away to hide his face.

"Xain is more than a Vulcan Ken, and you just embarrassed him." Jake said firmly with a note of anger in his voice as he shifted Kevin off of him and stood beside Xain.

"I'm sorry, I was just surprised. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." Kenny said shyly.

"I am not offended Kenny. Kevin, this is for you." Xain said quietly as he handed the milkshake to Kevin.

"Thank you Xain. I'm sorry if what I said embarrassed you. I was just playing." Kevin said in a small voice.

"There is no need for apology, I instigated the verbal exchange. I was just surprised by your response and did not expect a physical manifestation of my emotional reaction. Kenny's comment further exacerbated the existing situation. Your comments have caused me no injury. However I must investigate my involuntary reactions..." Xain trailed off thoughtfully.

"Okay guys, we're all fine. I think Xain and I need to go in and see our daughter." Jake said seriously.

Xain looked up at Jake and nodded his approval.

Kenny and Kevin watched as Jake put his arm around Xain's shoulders and walked with him into the house.

* * * * *

"What's wrong Kev? You're all tied up in knots?" Kenny asked with concern as he walked with his brother to join the others at the table.

"I got a lot of stuff to think about. But I think everything is going to be okay." Kevin said quietly.

"Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help. I hate to see you all worried and stuff." Kenny said seriously.

"After I finish my milkshake, maybe we can go somewhere and I'll tell you." Kevin said quietly as he pulled a chair over to the table to sit beside Spock.

Kenny grabbed a chair and placed it on the other side of Kevin's as he said, "I'll hold you to that."

* * * * *

"Did you run over here all the way from Camp Little Eagle?" Chip asked as he pulled Justy into a hug.

"No, Mr. T drove me over and dropped me off. I was just hurrying to get in here before you guys said something to make Kevin think he was nuts." Justy said as he enjoyed the hug from his father.

"Is he?" JC asked quietly, receiving a reproachful glance from Chip.

"I guess it depends on who you ask. Someone who can't look inside his mind might think he's obsessive or something. But actually that's just the way he is. Allen understands it best, because Kevin's father was the same way." Justy said thoughtfully.

"But shouldn't he get some help learning how to... deal with it?" JC asked with concern.

"Yeah. Dan will take care of that. The real problem is that Kevin doesn't need to get the idea that he might have a mental problem. He already sees himself as little and skinny and stupid, if he thought he was nuts too it would be too much for him to handle. He's really fragile right now, but it shouldn't take too long before he starts to see his own self worth and he'll be able to deal with that possibility if he needs to." Justy said with certainty.

"But if he has to see Dan, isn't that saying he has a mental problem?" JC asked cautiously.

"Not to Kevin. Since his whole family is going to see Dan, he doesn't feel funny about it." Justy said with a smile.

"Okay, it's just... when I saw that look in his eyes... it really scared me." JC said as he snuggled Justy into his side.

"I know Pop. Don't worry about Kevin. We've got it covered." Justy said with assurance.

CHAPTER 34

As Jake and Xain walked into the kitchen, all the women fell silent.

Jake looked around curiously and noticed that Mona was holding Edovina.

"Is everything okay?" Jake asked cautiously as he sat down the bundle of clothes he was carrying.

"Just fine, she's been sleeping the whole time you've been gone." Mona said with a gentle look at her great-granddaughter.

"Would you mind if we took her outside with us? We've kind of missed her." Jake asked hopefully.

"Of course. It was really nice to have some time with her." Mona said as she carefully shifted the baby into Jake's arms.

"Then I'll see to it that you get to spend some time with her later. Vina has a lot of people who want to fuss over her." Jake said with a tender smile at his daughter.

"Whenever you need me..." Mona said gently at the beautiful sight of Jake holding Edovina cradled in his arms.

Jake turned his loving look from his daughter to Xain and whispered, "Our daughter needs her *a'nirih*."

Xain's only response was a tender look at Jake as he accepted Edovina and held her to his chest.

"What would you like me to do with Ricardo's extra clothes?" Jake asked casually as he looked at the gathering of women.

"Just leave them by my purse. Before the end of the night, I'm sure he will need them." Juana said as she watched Xain and Edovina with a tender smile.

Jake moved the small pile of clothes to the chair where Juana's purse sat, then dropped her keys into the purse.

"Thanks for watching out for Vina." Jake said as he turned to walk for the door.

"Thank you for leaving her with us." Juana said with an honest smile.

Jake nodded as he walked out of the kitchen, followed by Xain.

* * * * *

"How is everyone doing out here?" Chip asked as he walked to the poolside with one arm around JC and the other around Justy.

"Just fine, we're playing at being 'the idle rich'." Billy said with a smile.

Chip chuckled at the statement as he let loose of JC and Justy and pulled up a seat to join the gathering.

"I noticed that you've got something cooking over there. What do you have planned for dinner?" Allen asked as he glanced at the barbecue grill.

"That's a brisket that's slow cooking. Later on I'll start cooking a variety of meats for dinner. With all the people that were invited, we're going to need plenty of food." Chip said casually.

A distant chiming drew the attention of everyone at the table.

"I'll get it." Justy said quickly and bolted from the table.

"I don't think I was ever that young." Joe said as he watched Justy race away.

Lawrence reached over and took his father's hand and squeezed it gently.

Joe glanced over to see the look of love directed at him and squeezed Lawrence's hand in return.

"I'm done, let's go." Kevin said uncomfortably and stood from his place at the table.

"How are you doing Kevin?" JC asked hesitantly.

Kevin froze in his tracks and looked JC in the eyes.

With obvious effort, Kevin forced himself to walk to JC and leaned in to hug him.

JC returned the hug.

"Thanks for not hating me Uncle Josh." Kevin whispered.

"We all make mistakes sometimes, it's okay." JC whispered in return.

Kevin pulled out of the hug, then walked away slowly.

A moment later, Kenny followed Kevin out into the yard.

* * * * *

"Aunt Jackie?" Chip asked in shock as he stood.

"Are you surprised? Pop made us promise not to tell you." Justy beamed with accomplishment as he walked his Aunt Jackie to the gathering by the pool.

"Surprised is an understatement." Chip said as he walked to his aunt and pulled her into a firm hug.

"How is my 'Little Duck' doing today?" Jackie asked with a loving smile.

Chip smiled at the nickname and said, "I was doing good before, but now that you're here, I'm perfect."

"Please sit down and join us. We're just relaxing before everyone gets here." JC said as he was also pulled into a hug.

"Well, before I do that, introduce me around. I see a lot of new faces here." Jackie said as she looked at the unfamiliar people gathered before her.

"Do you want to do the introductions, Justy?" JC asked with a smile.

Justy smiled and said, "Aunt Jackie, you know Uncle Spock, these guys beside him are Allen and Brady Thompson. They're brothers."

"I think I've seen Brady before, though I can't recall if we were introduced." Jackie said with a gentle smile at the two handsome men.

"Brady works on the *Enterprise* with Dad." Justy said quickly, then hurried to stand behind Billy.

"This is Billy Pierce and that brown haired guy over there is his brother Deacon." Justy said as he pointed.

"Nice to meet you, I feel I may have met you before too." Jackie said with a voice of uncertainty.

Billy blushed as he shyly said, "I used to model, you might have seen some of my pictures."

Jackie looked at Billy carefully, then her eyes went wide in recognition.

Billy saw the look, and blushed even more.

"This is Lieutenant Bowers, but you can call him Joe and beside him is Lawrence Winters, his son." Justy said as he hurried from one to the other.

"Nice to meet you." Jackie said as she was captivated by Joe and Lawrence's identical pale blue eyes.

"Come on and sit down. Kenny and Kevin are going out in the yard for a while." Justy said as he guided Jackie to the chair that Kenny had been using.

"Kenny and Kevin?" Jackie asked as she took her seat.

"They're Allen's sons. They're twins." Justy said simply.

"Honestly, when Josh invited me down here, I just thought it would be the family." Jackie said in an overwhelmed voice.

"When I invited you, I thought it would be just the family too. Everyone got invited in the past twenty-four hours." JC said with a smile.

"Mind if we join you?" Jake asked as he approached the group.

"There's plenty of room, just pull up another chair." Chip said warmly.

Jake pulled a chair over to join the one vacated by Kevin. Then he and Xain took their seats.

Noticing Jackie beside him, he said, "Hello, I'm Jake and this is Xain and our daughter Edovina."

"Nice to meet you. How old is she?" Jackie asked as she looked at the baby.

"She'll be two months old tomorrow." Jake said with pride.

"So she's *your* daughter?" Jackie asked as she gestured from Jake to Xain.

"That's right Aunt Jackie, exactly the same way that Justy is our son." Chip said in a gentle tone.

Jackie nodded, then glanced at the baby, then at Jake and Xain curiously.

"Please ask whatever question you would like. We will not be offended." Xain said seriously.

"Well, I was just trying to figure out which one of you is her biological father. She has Xain's hair and coloring, but Jake's eyes." Jackie said curiously.

Jake smiled at the statement and said, "I'm her biological father, Xain is her nurturing father."

Jackie watched the gentle way that Xain was holding the baby and said, "He certainly is."

"Jake and Xain are Allen's sons." Justy said into the ensuing silence.

"Well, now that I know who everyone is. What is everyone doing here?" Jackie asked with interest.

"Billy and I took the boys over to Camp Little Eagle to look around today to see if they want to go to school there. Chip left a message for us, inviting us over after our tour." Allen said with a smile.

"And Commander Dodds invited me along because he knew my brother would be here." Brady said with an identical smile.

"He invited me so I could meet my son." Joe said with a loving look at Lawrence.

"Meet your son?" Jackie asked with interest.

"That's right. I haven't seen him since he was less than a year old." Joe said, never taking his gaze off Lawrence.

"Well it's wonderful that you were reunited. I can see that you're happy together." Jackie said with a warm smile.

"Yeah, my Dad is great." Lawrence said simply as he took Joe's hand.

Chip and JC simultaneously looked up, then at their watches as they saw the school van coming up the drive.

Then there was another, and finally a third.

"I guess the peace and quiet is over." JC said as he watched the first van come to a stop.

"If anyone gets between the boys and the snack table, I won't be held responsible for what happens to you." Chip said to the group.

"I don't think any of us are going to make that mistake." Allen said as he watched the boys erupting from the three vans.

* * * * *

"What is it Kev? You know you can tell me anything." Kenny said quietly as they walked away from the pool.

"Yeah. I just... would you mind holding me. You know, like you did last night?" Kevin asked in a small voice.

Kenny turned Kevin to face him and pulled him into a firm hug.

"I don't know what's wrong Kev, but just remember that you're my brother and you'll always be my brother. I'll always be here for you no matter what." Kenny said gently.

"Thanks Ken, will you just hold me for a while? I don't feel like talking about stuff yet." Kevin said in a small voice.

"You got it." Kenny whispered as he held Kevin tightly.

* * * * *

"Hi Aunt Jackie, Pop said you were coming today." Jacob said as he walked to Jackie's side and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"How was your day at school, Jacob?" Jackie asked gently.

"It was okay. We stopped working about a half an hour ago and just talked for a while." Jacob said with a smile.

"Well isn't that nice. I hope you still learned something." Jackie said with interest.

"Oh yeah. We talked about some really serious stuff, it was just cool because it wasn't the same as reading it out of a book or something." Jacob said happily.

"Well, I think I saw a table of snacks over there, why don't you get some while I talk to your brother?" Jackie said gently.

"I'm glad you're here. I've missed you." Jacob said and hugged Jackie again.

"I've missed you too." Jackie said with a warm smile.

"Hello Jamie, how are you today?" Jackie asked as Jamie approached.

"Okay I guess." Jamie said shyly as he stood before Jackie.

"Where's my hug?" Jackie asked firmly.

Jamie smiled and moved in for a hug.

"So what's got you in this mood today?" Jackie asked as she looked Jamie in the eyes.

"I guess I just, I don't know, I kinda did something I shouldn't have and I feel bad about it." Jamie said in a low voice.

"What's that? Maybe I can help you with it." Jackie said seriously.

"Well, I kinda looked into someone's mind and saw some stuff I shouldn't have." Jamie said with a look of shame.

"I'm sure that happens now and then." Jackie said softly.

"Not like this... I did it on purpose." Jamie said in shame.

"Then you need to tell whoever you did this to and apologize." Jackie said firmly.

Jamie got a look of horror on his face at the suggestion.

"That is, unless you like being in turmoil like this?" Jackie asked in her grandmotherly voice.

"No. I hate feeling this way." Jamie said as tears began to well up in his eyes.

"Then go make it better. I'm sure everything will be okay." Jackie said with assurance.

"Thank you, Aunt Jackie. I'll take care of it now." Jamie said softly.

"Come back and talk to me later and tell me how it went." Jackie said gently in return.

"I will. I've got to go find Kevin." Jamie said and hurried away.

* * * * *

"What was that all about?" Chip asked curiously as he watched Jamie run out into the yard.

"Jamie just needs to talk to someone named Kevin. I'm sure it will all work out." Jackie said, then noticed the group of boys swarming the snack table.

"Goodness! How many children do you have now?" Jackie asked in astonishment.

"Just the three... and Aaron, but he's more like a brother than a son." Chip said thoughtfully.

"Just look at all of them." Jackie said with disbelief.

"Would you like some sweet tea Aunt Jackie?" Justy asked from his place at the table.

Jackie looked lovingly at Justy and said, "Yes, thank you. That would be nice."

Justy hopped up and ran to the snack table.

"He was really excited when he heard you were coming." JC said with a proud smile at Justy's good manners.

"He's grown so much since the last time I was here. I really need to visit more often." Jackie said distantly.

"Well, you know you're always welcomed, But the reason you were invited now is because we're both home for a few days. This time next week you'd be lucky to catch either of us at home." JC said honestly.

"I see what you mean. Well thank you for inviting me. The whole trip was worth it just to see that look on Chip's face." Jackie finished with a smile.

"I should have thought to have a camera handy for that." JC said with a chuckle.

"I'll deal with you later, Angel." Chip said with a glance at JC.

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"Kevin, um, can I talk to you for a minute?" Jamie asked as he approached the brothers who were still hugging.

"Sure, what's up Jamie?" Kevin asked as he released Kenny.

"I, uh, kinda did something I shouldn't have." Jamie said with difficulty.

"Me too. What did you do?" Kevin asked with increasing concern at Jamie's remorseful stare at his feet.

"I kind of read your mind." Jamie mumbled.

"Yeah, so?" Kevin asked, waiting to find out what was making Jamie feel so bad.

"That's it. I read your mind without your permission. I'm not ever supposed to do that and I'm really sorry." Jamie said quickly.

"It's okay. You can read my mind whenever you want. Or if that makes you feel funny, just ask me whatever you want to know." Kevin said frankly.

Jamie looked deeply into Kevin's eyes to find that he was telling the truth.

"Oh. Um, thanks." Jamie said in a confused voice.

"My brother is something special isn't he?" Kenny said with a smile.

"Yeah, he really is. I guess I'm going to go get a snack now before they're all gone. Thanks for not being mad." Jamie said, then walked away, still trying to understand Kevin's attitude.

"I think you just freaked him out." Kenny said with a smile.

"I guess he's used to people having secrets. I've done stuff I'm not proud of, but it's not secret and I don't care if Jamie looks at my mind and stuff." Kevin said frankly.

"You'll have to teach me to be like that. I'd be really scared if I knew someone was looking around in my mind." Kenny said as he casually put an arm around his brother.

"Do you have stuff that you're ashamed of?" Kevin asked curiously.

"Sure. I think everyone does." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"Well, the thing I figured out a long time ago is that no one cares about that stuff but you." Kevin said seriously.

"What do you mean?" Kenny asked with interest.

"Just think about the biggest, most embarrassing thing you ever did. I bet if you told everyone here, no one would care even a little bit." Kevin said frankly.

Kenny smiled and said, "You're right. But you can't ever call yourself stupid again. That's probably one of the smartest things I've ever heard."

"Maybe you just need to get out more." Kevin said with a shy smile.

* * * * *

"Uncle Chip, would it be okay if we used one of the rooms for a Clan meeting right now?" Cory asked quietly.

"Sure, why don't you use the family room. We're just going to relax for a little while before we start the cookout." Chip said casually.

"Okay. Thanks Uncle Chip." Cory said with a beaming smile before running back to the cluster of boys at the snack table.

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Jacob ran up to Kenny and Kevin who were walking aimlessly around the yard.

"Hey guys, we're about to have a Clan meeting. Cory asked if you would invite Deacon and Lawrence." Jacob said, somewhat out of breath.

"Yeah. Sure, but why us?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Because you guys know them best. It'd be kind of weird for one of us to ask them. Sean and Cory are going to invite Reuben." Jacob said seriously.

"Okay. We'll do it now. Where are we having the meeting?" Kenny asked in concentration.

"The family room. The guys are just finishing their snacks then we're all heading inside." Jacob said quickly.

"Let's go then." Kenny said and started back toward the house with one arm still draped around his brother's shoulders.

* * * * *

"The Clan is about to have a meeting. Do you guys want to come with us?" Kenny asked with a gentle smile.

Lawrence looked at Deacon hesitantly, not understanding what they were being invited to do.

"Kenny and all his brothers are members of a Vulcan Clan. From what Kenny told me, they help kids who need it. In fact, Sean and Cory helped make it so Billy could be my guardian." Deacon said quietly to Lawrence.

"So why do they want us there?" Lawrence asked hesitantly.

"I don't' know. But there's one way to find out." Kevin said seriously.

"Yeah. I guess..." Lawrence said with apprehension.

"You can sit with us so you won't be alone." Kenny said with assurance.

"I'll be right beside you the whole time." Deacon said in a whisper into Lawrence's ear.

"Thanks Deke." Lawrence whispered in return.

* * * * *

Sean and Cory walked into the family room to find Reuben sitting and watching television while Ricardo slept on the couch.

"Hi Reuben. Do you have a minute to talk with me?" Cory asked gently.

"Sure. I already seen this show anyway." Reuben said as he turned his full attention to Cory.

"Well, Sean and I are part of a group, a Vulcan Clan." Cory said slowly.

"Yeah, Kevin told me all about it. You're the pate-tree-ark... or something like that. It means you're like the boss. Sean is the guy who remembers everyone's stories. You help kids who are being hurt and make sure they don't get hurt no more." Reuben said thoughtfully.

Cory smiled and said, "That's right. I couldn't have explained it better. Right now, we're going to have a Clan meeting and if you think you'd like to, you could join us so you could help kids too."

Reuben thought seriously for a moment, then asked, "Is it just me, or can Ricardo join too?"

Cory looked at Sean with question and received a shrug in reply.

"Ricardo is a little young to understand what it means..." Cory began to say.

"I love my brother and if he can't join then neither will I." Reuben said firmly.

Cory smiled and said, "I tell you what. If you'll talk to your brother and explain the Clan to him, later I'll ask you both if you want to join us. If Ricardo wants to join us, he'll be welcomed."

"Okay. It's time for him to wake up anyway. I'll talk to him now." Reuben said seriously.

"Thanks Reuben. You just proved to me that you've got what it takes to be a part of the Clan." Cory said with a tender smile.

* * * * *

Kevin and Kenny walked into the family room on either side of Deacon and Lawrence, their expressions broadcasting their protectiveness of the pair.

Jake led the way to the couch where Reuben and Ricardo were sitting and motioned for Xain to sit with Edovina before he took his seat beside them.

"What are we going to do now?" Reuben asked with worry in his voice.

"We're just going to sit and listen. When the meeting starts, Sean is going to tell you what everyone's life was like before they joined the Clan. If that stuff starts to make you feel sad, just remember that everyone is here now and they all have families that love them now." Jake said softly.

"Is everyone ready?" Cory asked from beside the door.

Timmy started to pull off his shirt and had his pants half-way down when he noticed that he was the only one undressing.

"We're going to be having dinner after the Clan meeting, so we're going to stay dressed this time." Cory said with a smile.

"Daddy! That was mean." Timmy said gruffly as he pulled up his pants.

"Now that we've enjoyed the floor show, it's time for me to tell you how we all got to be here." Sean said with a tender smile at Timmy.

A screech sounded loudly in the quiet room, drawing everyone's attention to one of two eagles perched on the back of the couch.

"Duke says that Kevin and Kenny and Xain and Jake should tell their own part of the story. He says that Deacon and Lawrence need to hear it from them." Ricky said in a loud voice.

"Well, you heard the bird. Who wants to start?" Sean asked curiously.

Jake stood and said, "I'm the oldest, I will."

After a moment of thought, Jake turned to face Deacon and Lawrence and said, "My dad had a really bad temper. Mom would pick and nag at him, like she was trying to make it worse."

"When dad had been drinking, it got really bad. He'd slam doors and throw things and even put his fist through the wall a few times..." Jake trailed off thoughtfully.

"He never hit me... I've been thinking about this stuff for two years and it never occurred to me that he never hit me. He'd scream at mom and slam things and trash the place, but no matter what else he did, he never once hit me when he was mad..." Jake said as he looked off into a distant place only he could see.

"The night that it happened... I don't even know what the fight was about. Mom was nagging and bitching and trying to drag dad into a fight. I was in my room, so I don't know exactly everything that happened. It went on for a couple hours I guess, both of them screaming, just getting madder and madder..." Jake said as he relived the memory.

"Then I heard the gunshots... three of them. Then it was quiet." Jake said with a vacant expression.

"I just sat there in my room, afraid to move a muscle. I was scared to breathe."

"Then the door opened and my dad walked in." Jake said as he blinked and a tear started falling down his cheek.

"All he said was, 'You need to go to a friends house for a while. Don't come back here tonight."

"He stuffed some of my clothes into my backpack and then he picked me up and carried me through the living room to the front door. I guess he was

hiding my mom's body from me because I don't remember seeing it." Jake said distantly.

"I went..." Jake choked on a chuckle, and started again, "I went to my friend Manny's house that night."

Jake turned to look at Reuben and said, "I forgot that I stayed at your house that night Reuben. Mamacita didn't ask me what happened, she just took me in and let me stay with Manny that night."

"I was so out of it that I didn't know what to do. The next day when Manny went to school, I went to Daddy K and asked him what I should do. I mean, All I really knew about him is that a lot of people went to him when they wanted stuff. He was someone important who lived on our block, so I went to him and asked for his help." Jake said, gazing off into the distance again.

"Daddy K wouldn't 'give' me money. He used to say that something that you get without earning it ain't worth nothin. But what he did is gave me jobs doing stuff for him."

"I slept in the basement store room at first. I used the money I earned from Daddy K to get food and... well, I survived... barely." Jake said absently as he looked at Lawrence and Deacon to see how they were doing so far.

Jake smiled when he noticed that they were holding hands and looking on with their full attention devoted to him.

Hesitantly, Jake continued, "I needed more money. I didn't really want to, but I went to Daddy K to ask him if there was anything else I could do to earn more money."

"He called this guy named Moochie who was a few years older than me. I'd met him before but didn't really know him." Jake said with a disturbed look.

"Daddy K told me that Moochie was going to show me how to earn more money. He said that he knew it was going to be scary and was going to hurt, but that I'd be able to make enough money to be able to buy food and clothes and maybe even a few bucks to pay someone to rent a room if that's what I wanted." Jake said, then looked around the room at all the interested faces.

"You guys don't need to hear the details. I probably couldn't say it out loud anyway. Let's just say that Moochie broke me in and showed me what I needed to know to earn some money." Jake said, then turned his gaze to look at Lawrence and Deacon.

"I was a whore." He said frankly, not wanting there to be any possibility that they weren't getting it.

"Daddy K would set me up on 'dates' and get me good money. It worked out best that way because when Daddy K set it up, I knew I was going to get paid and I didn't have to worry about it being a cop or a social worker."

"When the money started coming in regular... I don't know, I guess I felt lousy or something. I can't really tell you why now, but for some reason I started smoking weed." Jake said thoughtfully.

"When I tried that and it felt kinda good, I tried other things to make me feel even better..." Jake said thoughtfully.

"I can't even tell you all that story, because I don't remember most of it, and what I do remember doesn't make much sense. I just got stoned... a lot." Jake drifted off, then took a deep breath and continued.

"I didn't get so messed up that I couldn't work and I tried to stay in my right mind enough to keep an eye on..." Jake glanced at Kevin and received a nod.

"Well, to keep an eye on Kevin here. He wasn't far from being in my situation, so I did my best to see that he wouldn't have to do the things I did and turn out like me." Jake said as he looked back to Deacon and Lawrence.

"Kev and Ken can tell you their part of the story about how these guys rescued us. But for my part, all you need to know is that now I'm clean. I have a family..." Jake said and looked at Xain and Edovina.

"I have a daughter and a fiancée." Jake said with a warm smile, then turned to face Lawrence and Deacon again.

"I have brothers, cousins, uncles, a Dad, and a grandmother. As horrible and messed up as my life was before, I'd go through every single bit of it again if I was going to end up here." Jake finished with a gentle smile.

Jake sat back in his seat and received a one armed hug from Xain from one side, and a two armed hug from Reuben on the other.

"Thanks guys." Jake whispered shyly.

"Edovina needs her *sa-mekh*." Xain said quietly as he handed the baby into Jake's arms.

"I am next oldest." Xain said as he stood.

Xain turned to face Deacon and Lawrence and said in a neutral voice, "I am Xain, son of Solak of the house of Suvak of Vulcan."

"I am also Xain Thompson, the second eldest son of Allen Thompson." Xain said with an introspective look.

"We, of Vulcan, are defined as a people by our logic and emotional control." Xain said carefully.

"We, of Earth, are defined by our passion and determination."

"From my first awareness of myself, I have held the belief that I was imperfect because I did not conform to the Vulcan world around me." Xain said with increasing difficulty.

"That which came naturally to those around me was elusive to me. The methods that served to purge emotions in others only caused me disappointment and distress."

"Initially, I believed that the source of my distress was due to my mixed parentage. I believed that I experienced a sense of isolation because there were no others like me to guide my way." Xain said thoughtfully.

"He who is my Grandfather enlightened me on this point. He referred to me as 'the abomination' rather than by my name or station in his family." Xain said as his expression grew dark.

"It was then that I realized that I am what Humans call 'a freak'. I am a Vulcan without proper emotional control. I am a Human without the ability to express emotions properly. I am the combination of two unique species, without the ability to adapt to the culture of either." Xain said as his eyes began to shine with unformed tears.

"With years of evidence to prove the point, he who is my father reluctantly accepted that I am unable to adapt to Vulcan culture."

"However, when I arrived on Earth, my inability to assimilate the language or understand the culture proved to be more of a hindrance than could be overcome. The evidence seemed to bear out the assumption that I was unable to adapt to Human culture."

"Logically, creatures that do not have the ability to adapt to their surroundings should become extinct." Xain said as he looked into Deacon's eyes.

Xain waited for a long minute as he collected his thoughts.

Finally, in a low voice, Xain said, "The members of Clan Short became aware of me and requested that I be permitted to join Clan Short to design and maintain a database."

"He who is my father found this to be acceptable due to the fact that Clan Short is of the house of Surak, possibly the most respected house on Vulcan."

"I followed the instructions of my father and took the shuttle that Clan Short had arranged for me. I mistakenly believed that Clan Short, of the house of Surak would be composed of only those Vulcans who had mastered the ultimate emotional control." Xain said as he turned his gaze to Lawrence.

"It was my expectation that shortly after my arrival, they would recognize me as the flawed being that I am and become aware of my inability to adapt. Logic would then suggest that they should expel me from their Clan." Xain said quietly.

"In the spaceport that day I met the man who I would eventually call 'Dad'. Without knowing it, he told me that he would adapt to me and my needs. My inadequate English was not a concern and he was willing to speak Vulcan to accommodate me."

Xain turned to look at Kevin, and betrayed a tender smile before saying, "Likewise, my new brothers were willing to adapt to my needs. Kevin would translate the literal meaning of my spoken words, Jake would interpret the meanings of my statements and Kenny was my example of normalcy in the new environment."

"It is due to the actions of Clan Short that my existence is anything more than a series of frustrations and failures. And as my *T'hy'la* so eloquently said, 'I'd go through every single bit of it again if I was going to end up here'." Xain said, doing his best estimation of Jake's Chicago accent as he quoted his words.

Xain took his seat again and was promptly pulled into a one armed hug by Jake.

Deacon gently moved to put an arm around Lawrence.

* * * * *

"I'll go first if you want." Kenny said quietly.

"Yeah." Kevin said, lost in his own feelings.

Kenny stood and looked around the room to see all the boys watching him.

Finally he turned to face Lawrence and Deacon and a resolved look came over his face.

"I never had to live on the street like Jake. And I never had to feel like I didn't fit in like Xain. I grew up with my Dad. Ever since I can remember it was me and him." Kenny said with a distant look.

"I loved my Dad so much. I don't think there was ever a day in my life when he didn't tell me how much he loved me. He'd take me places and do things with me and... I guess I could go on all night telling you about how great he was." Kenny finished sadly.

"About three years ago, Dad found out that he had HIV. I'd met Pop, Allen, a few times before that, but that night was the first time I saw him as something more than just a friend of Dad's."

"Allen was the one who explained what HIV was. He told me because he wanted me to understand why there were some things we were going to have to do different around the house. It was all little stuff that didn't bother me anyway. But he talked to me like I was, I don't know, like a grown-up or something." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"At first when Allen moved in, I was worried that Dad wouldn't love me as much or something like that. But I guess Dad could tell what I was thinking or something because he sat me down and told me that he loved me just as much as ever, and said that he thought that Allen might even love me a little bit too." Kenny said with a smile.

"I guess Pop had lived with us about a year when Dad got the news that his HIV was officially AIDS..." Kenny said as his mood shifted to darkness.

"I can't tell you everything because thinking about those two years still hurts too much." Kenny said as tears started welling up in his eyes.

"I'll just tell you the one, worst thing... I got to watch him get weaker and sicker every day. My big strong wonderful Dad who could handle anything or anyone just got sicker and sicker and there was nothing I could do to help him." Kenny said with tears flowing down his face.

"But he never stopped loving me. The last things he said to me before he died were 'I love you' and 'Go find your brother'." Kenny said before he broke down into full tears and went to Kevin to hold him as he cried.

After a minute to get Kenny calmed down, Kevin stood and walked to the middle of the room.

"I guess you can look at me and know most of what happened to me." Kevin said with strength.

"My momma didn't feed me much or really care about me too much." Kevin said as he tried to think about what to say next.

"I didn't know why Jake looked out for me the way he did, but I'm glad he did. I probably would've starved to death or been out whoring if it wasn't for him taking care of me." Kevin said with a smile at Jake.

"I mean, I dug through the trash looking for food sometimes and I stole some food from the stores a few times. But that was when there just wasn't no other way to get something to eat." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"I guess if I had to pick the one best thing about being here instead of there, it'd be that there are people here who love me no matter what." Kevin said as he looked around the room.

"I did some stuff today and acted really stupid. I fell in love with someone whose already in love with someone else." Kevin said seriously.

"I acted like a kid... worse than that, I acted like a spoiled brat." Kevin said as he looked directly at Justy.

To Kevin's surprise, Justy gave him a small smile in response.

"Anyway, I did some stuff and said some stuff that was really wrong and if I was back in Chicago and acted like that I'd get beat twelve shades of blue. But everyone who I was bad to here just said that they forgive me and that they still love me." Kevin said frankly.

"My clan brothers made me see that what I was doing was wrong. I'm grateful for them saving my life and getting me out of Chicago and finding me a great Poppa. But... it's hard for me to put into words. You could've just done all that stuff and left me with Poppa. But instead, you made me one of you, a member of Clan Short. It's more than just words. We call each other brothers. Jamie and Justy showed me today that we really are brothers." Kevin said with difficulty.

"It's easy to call someone your brother when you're happy with them. That's the easiest thing in the world. But when you're screwing up, it's your real brother who's going to be there to tell you about it and help you make it right. And it's your real brother whose going to tell you when he's screwed up and take the chance that you'll be mad. You're brothers because stuff like that won't change the fact that you'll still love each other and still be brothers when it's all over with." Kevin said firmly.

After a long moment of silence, Kevin shyly said, "I guess I didn't do such a good job with my history."

Sean smiled and said, "If you don't mind, I'll just fill in the parts you skipped over. But for the record, what you just said needed to be said. We all call each other brothers, but it's not very often that someone can explain what that means."

"Thanks for your stories guys. Kick back now and let Sean do his historian thing." Cory said with a gentle smile.

Kevin nodded as he took his seat beside Lawrence.

CHAPTER 35

"So what are they doing in there?" Joe asked with concern.

"The Clan is having a meeting. I can't tell you exactly what they're doing, but it's nothing to worry about." Chip said with assurance.

"Yeah, and unless I miss my guess, Lawrence and Deacon are about to gain more family than they ever imagined." Allen said with a smile.

Joe looked at Allen with question.

"Just wait for it. I don't want to say too much in case I'm wrong. But Chip's right, they're all good boys. There's nothing to worry about." Allen said gently.

"I can't help but worry about Deke." Billy said quietly.

"You know how kids in a group tend to put 'peer pressure' on each other?" JC asked seriously.

Billy nodded cautiously, looking even more concerned.

"Not all peer pressure is bad. Every single one of those boys is a loving and genuinely good person. As a group, they inspire the best in each other. It's easy to look at Cory as the leader and think that everything the Clan accomplishes is 'his' accomplishment. But even though he's in charge, everything they do really is a group effort. Every single one of the boys plays their part and contributes." JC said in deep thought.

"You sound like you really understand what they're feeling." Billy said as he looked at JC consideringly.

JC looked into Billy's eyes and gave a timid smile as he said, "Well, I do. At least to a point. I guess my clan is *NSync. We inspire each other and support each other. We don't go out and rescue kids in trouble... well, maybe we do. I like to think that our music inspires kids who need hope."

"My clan is the command staff of the *Enterprise*. It's exactly like what Josh is saying. We inspire and bring out the best qualities of each other." Chip said in distant thought.

"My brother is correct in his assessment. Likening the command staff of the *Enterprise* to a Vulcan Clan serves to explain why the *Enterprise* has been able to make achievements far beyond those of other ships." Spock said seriously.

"So you see, Lawrence and Deacon are in there and probably about to be asked to become part of Clan Short. Just think of it as taking whatever natural potential they have and multiplying it by about thirty. Because if they join, they'll be able to draw on the strength, advice and motivation of all their clan brothers." Allen said instructively.

"Wow. You just sent a shiver right up my spine." Billy said with an astonished look.

"Oh. I thought your phone was ringing." Allen said with a teasing smile.

* * * * *

"Deacon, you've heard how we all came together and became a Clan. Now I need to know if you want to join us." Cory said seriously, letting his solemn tone convey the seriousness of the situation.

Deacon looked at Lawrence beside him, then at Kenny on his other side before standing.

"To tell you the truth, it sounds wonderful. I've felt alone most of my life and knowing that I'd never be alone again sounds better than just about anything I can imagine... but..." Deacon stopped thoughtfully.

A look of surprise came over Cory's face, but he remained silent, waiting for Deacon to continue.

"I can't join you... well, not without Lawrence." Deacon said shyly.

"Well Lawrence, would you like to join us? We were going to ask you next." Cory said simply.

"Really?" Lawrence asked with disbelief.

Cory smiled at the genuine surprise on Lawrence's face.

"Why is it such a surprise? That's why we invited you to the meeting." Cory said gently.

"I thought I was just here so I could see Deacon join." Lawrence said as he accepted Deacon's hand and stood up.

"Why would you think we'd want Deacon and not you?" Cory asked curiously.

"Well, all you guys went through some terrible stuff. I never would have guessed it to look at you now. I've gone through some stuff too... but..." Lawrence trailed off shyly.

"Is it about the cross dressing?" Cory asked, honestly not sure if that was the source of Lawrence's problem.

Lawrence looked at Cory with surprise, then around the room at the reactions of everyone gathered.

Not one person in the room looked at Lawrence with anything but concern or curiosity. No accusation or disapproval showed in their eyes.

"Yeah." Lawrence finally mumbled as his eyes met Cory's.

"Do you think you're the only one who's ever had questions about their gender identity?" Sean asked from Cory's side.

Lawrence looked at Sean with question.

"I get the feeling that you think we might not want you because you're different. The truth of the matter is... we need you." Sean said seriously.

"Why?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"Because sooner or later... probably sooner... we'll run into a kid who's struggling with their gender identity. All of us would want to be there to help him or her however we can. We'd all try to say the right things and offer our help, but there's something none of us can do that you can." Sean said as he looked into Lawrence's eyes.

"Understand." Lawrence muttered, deep thoughtfully.

"That's right. We can only guess what they're going through but you've been there." Sean said seriously.

"But I can't help. I don't know the answers to their questions. I don't even know the answers to my own." Lawrence said helplessly.

"That doesn't matter. You understand the questions. That's more than the rest of us can do. Besides, even if you knew the answers, they would be *your* answers. Everyone has to find their own answers. What's most important is having someone there who understands the questions and can help make sense of everything." Cory said as he discretely put an arm around Sean.

"It's the difference between feeling alone and feeling like someone really knows what you're going through." Sean said softly.

Lawrence thought about his meltdown in the dining room at Allen's house and how Mona's explanation of how she understood his feelings made all the difference.

Finally, Lawrence turned to look at Deacon and whispered, "Deke, I really want to do this. I could help kids who are like me and let them know that they're not alone."

"I want to do it too." Deacon whispered in return.

Lawrence turned to face Cory and Sean and said in a somewhat firm voice, "Deacon and I would like to join you."

Cory got a peaceful smile and said, "Then it's done. You are both members of Clan Short now. All that's left to do is tell us your story."

* * * * *

"I think that's everything." Teri said as she looked around the kitchen.

"Yes. When Mr. Chip begins to prepare the meats, the rest of the food can be moved outside." Hazel said as she looked around.

"Let's go check on the men-folk and see what they're up to." Mona said with a teasing smile.

"I'm scared to think of it. You leave a group of men alone for any length of time and anything could happen." Helen said with a shake of her head.

"Yeah. I wouldn't be surprised to find the whole group of them gathered around the front of the Explorer, looking at the engine." Teri said with a chuckle.

"I'd pay to see that." Christine said with a laugh.

Juana looked at Christine curiously.

"I work with Commander Dodds for months at a time and he's always in uniform... even when he isn't." Christine said with difficulty.

"Okay, back up and explain that." Helen said with a wide eyed look.

"He's always in his Commander persona when he's on the ship. I mean, he loosens up when he's off duty, but he still carries that 'Commander' presence with him. To see him doing something so... typically male... it would just be interesting to see." Christine said thoughtfully.

"Well, I can't guarantee that they'll all get under the hood of a car tonight. But since Chip is going to be running the barbecue grill... well, how much more *male* can you get?" Teri asked with a smile.

"You've got a point. This is going to be a fun day." Christine said with a grand smile.

"It already is." Mona said happily from Christine's side as the group of women left the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Do you want me to go first?" Deacon asked quietly from Lawrence's side.

"No, I want to get it over with." Lawrence whispered, then took hold of Deacon's hand for assurance.

After a deep breath for courage, Lawrence looked around the gathering and said, "I guess most of you know that I sometimes dress like a girl."

Lawrence noticed a few nods and even a couple of shaking heads, but no one had a disapproving look.

"A couple years ago my dad got the idea that I wasn't a *real* boy." Lawrence said thoughtfully.

"Before that, everything was okay I guess. I mean, he always kind of treated me different but I never really thought too much about it. I thought he just loved my brother Vince more than me."

"The first time I can remember him saying anything about it, he was really pissed about something. I guess it was something at work, I don't know. Anyway, he was really in a bad mood and when he noticed me sitting in the living room reading my history book he just started calling me names." Lawrence said in a distant voice of remembrance.

"He called me a sissy and a fag. He said that a 'real' boy would be outside playing football and hanging around with friends." Lawrence said as tears started to form in his eyes.

Deacon released his hold on Lawrence's hand and put an arm around him to give him a gentle hug.

"I'm not sure if that was the day he told me I was adopted, but I guess it doesn't matter. After that it seems like every day he would come home and scream at me, telling me how much of a disappointment I was and how sorry he was that he ever adopted me..."

Lawrence chuckled and said, "The closest he came to saying something nice to me was when he said he was glad I was a fag because at least I wouldn't have any kids to further disgrace the Winters family name."

Deacon noticed a tear slowly falling down Lawrence's cheek and gently reached up and wiped it away.

Lawrence smiled at the gesture and continued, "He hit me sometimes. It was like he was looking for any excuse to hit me... It wasn't as bad as what happened to some of you guys but... I don't even care about that. His words hurt worse than anything else."

"After a year or so of being told that I wasn't a *real boy* and that I was prissy and feminine I guess I finally... listened."

"At first, I just thought about dressing like a girl. I mean, it was like, I tried everything I could for over a year to try and be a boy like what my dad wanted me to be and nothing was ever good enough. Somehow, I figured that if I couldn't be a boy, I'd be a girl and maybe... he'd love me again." Lawrence said, and another tear fell.

Deacon pulled Lawrence into a full hug and whispered, "It's okay. You're here with me now and I love you just the way you are."

Lawrence pulled back with surprise and looked into Deacon's eyes with question.

Deacon gave a gentle smile at the questioning, hopeful look and repeated, "I love you."

Lawrence smiled and pulled Deacon back into the hug.

Suddenly Lawrence remembered that they were standing in the middle of a room full of people.

He straightened and sniffed back his tears.

Lawrence looked around the room and said, "My dad caught me ... "

He stopped in mid sentence and turned to face Deacon again.

Lawrence pulled Deacon into a quick but firm kiss, then said, "I love you too."

Deacon looked at Lawrence in shock as Lawrence faced the group again and said in a strong voice, "My dad walked into my room one night and caught me wearing a dress that I'd been secretly wearing for about a month."

The group was amazed by the contrast between the timid, crying boy of a moment before and the strong young man who was speaking after the kiss.

"He beat me pretty bad and threw me out. The son-of-a-bitch actually picked me up and threw me out the front door. At least he was stupid enough to throw my clothes and stuff out the window of my room when he got back in. That actually helped me since I had the money I saved in my pants pocket." Lawrence finished with a chuckle.

"I lived on the streets for a couple weeks. I made my way downtown and met a few other cross-dressers... um, they were hookers. They were way older than me, but they told me some things to help me get by." Lawrence said thoughtfully.

"Well, when my money ran out I..." Lawrence trailed off, then took Deacon's hand again for strength.

"I did a few things for money. I mean... well, I blew a few old guys to get money for food." Lawrence said with difficulty, feeling shame at saying the words.

"A couple nights ago this guy offered me fifty bucks for my ass." Lawrence said in a shaky voice.

Deacon brought Lawrence's hand to his lips and kissed it gently.

Lawrence smiled at the gesture and said, "I said no, but said I'd blow him for twenty."

"We went into the alley so I could do it."

"Another guy who I didn't notice before followed us, but the guy I was with told him to get lost for fifteen minutes." Lawrence said with distraction.

"Anyway, when I was about to do it. He grabbed me by the hair and told me he was going to get my ass anyway."

Lawrence paused to collect his thoughts and realized that there wasn't another sound in the room as everyone there was listening intently.

"Well, he hit me a few times... the next thing I know, there's a kid tackling the guy." Lawrence said, then glanced at Kenny.

"A few seconds later there were four guys beating the crap out of the guy. And a really cute guy was asking me if I needed an ambulance." Lawrence finished with a loving look directed at Deacon.

"I guess I thought I'd found the perfect life after that. Everyone has been so nice to me and willing to accept me... I thought I had everything I would ever need to be happy. And it was great because that was what I needed right then." Lawrence said, then looked around the room.

"But you guys just made me realize that there was one more thing I was needing... and you gave that to me too." Lawrence finished with a smile.

"A purpose."

* * * * *

The women stood in the doorway leading to the patio and watched the men engrossed in animated conversation.

"All the snacks are gone." Hazel said in amazement as she looked at the snack table.

"I guess that means the boys are home." Helen said with a smile as she walked with Hazel to the snack table to clear away the last evidence that there had once been food on the table.

"I will help." Juana said as she walked to join Hazel and Helen.

"Jackie?" Teri asked with surprise as she finally noticed her sitting amongst the men.

"Teri, oh, how nice to see you again." Jackie said as she stood.

"No one told me you were coming. It's great to see you again." Teri said as she offered Jackie a warm hug.

"How are your boys doing? I think I might have seen them pass by on their way to the snack table, but I can't be sure." Jackie said with a teasing smile.

"All the boys are fine. I hope we can find some time to sit down and talk so I can tell you everything that's happened since last time we talked. It's been like a whirlwind." Teri said as she finally released Jackie from the hug.

"Well, I'll be here all evening, so I'm sure we'll have a chance to catch up." Jackie said fondly, then looked at the women behind Teri, who seemed to be looking a little lost.

"Won't you introduce me to your friends?" Jackie asked casually.

"Oh yes. This is Dr. Christine Chapel, she works with Chip on the *Enterprise*." Teri said as she indicated Christine.

"Yes, we've met a few times before. How is Dr. McCoy these days?" Jackie asked with a knowing smile.

"Oh, he's arrogant, opinionated, grouchy, rude, overbearing..." Christine said in an unconcerned voice.

"So he's normal." Jackie said with a smile.

"For him." Christine said with a shrug.

"Jackie Littrell, this is Mona Bridson. She's Allen's mother." Teri said as she indicated Mona beside her.

"Goodness. They sure do grow'em big wherever you're from." Jackie said as she looked up and up to meet Mona's eyes.

Mona looked down at the tiny, elderly woman and saw the mischief and strength in her eyes.

"I'm guessing they grow them feisty where you're from." Mona said with a chuckle.

"You got that right." Chip said with a laugh.

Jackie flashed a look at Chip that silenced him in an instant.

"You need to show me how you do that. I never could get 'the look' to work on Allen." Mona said in an impressed voice.

"Oh, you have to start working on it when they're young. By this age they're untrainable." Jackie said in a serious voice.

Mona nodded in agreement as she glanced at Allen who was just shaking his head.

"You know Helen and Hazel at the snack table, the woman with them is Juana Vasquez. She takes care of the Thompson family." Teri said gently.

"She's also Edovina's grandmother." Allen interjected, wanting everyone to know that Juana was more than just a housekeeper, she was family.

"Well, if everyone is here, it must be about time to start the cookout." Jackie said as she turned her attention to Chip.

"There are still a few more people coming." Chip said with a secretive smile.

"The parents of every single one of the boys in the family room." JC interjected.

Jackie thought about the statement, then asked, "Do you ladies need any help in the kitchen?"

"No. Hazel has everything under control. In fact, that's why we're out here now. There's nothing left to do." Teri said and took a seat at the neighboring table.

"Chip, whatever you're paying Hazel can't be enough." Jackie said as she took her seat.

Chip glanced over at Hazel wiping down the, now cleared, snack table and said, "You may be right."

* * * * *

"Well, after hearing what everyone else went through, I feel kind of stupid complaining about what happened to me." Deacon said shyly.

Lawrence immediately took Deacon's hand and gave a firm squeeze of encouragement.

Deacon smiled at Lawrence and said, "My parents never hit me or screamed at me much."

"In fact, I could go for weeks at a time without even seeing them. They had a housekeeper come in twice a week while I was at school to clean up the place, stock the cupboards and do laundry. I had a credit card that was on their account so I could buy whatever else I needed." Deacon said absently.

"I'd get up in the morning and nuke something for breakfast and get ready for school. When I'd get home, I'd nuke something for dinner and watch some TV or play video games."

"That's about it." Deacon finished with a shrug.

"What about friends?" Lawrence asked quietly.

Deacon just shook his head 'no' at the question.

"So you'd go for weeks at a time without talking to anyone?" Eli asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. Sometimes I thought I was going to forget how to talk." Deacon said with a weak chuckle.

"I couldn't do it." Benji said in a soft, pained voice.

Deacon looked at him with question.

"I don't think I could have lived like that. I'd go nuts." Benji said honestly.

"That's right. Don't think that your pain was any less real because it wasn't physical Deacon. You were hurt just as much as any of us." Jacob said from the other side of the room.

Deacon nodded slowly.

"And you have me now. You'll always have me." Lawrence whispered.

"Thanks." Deacon said with a watery smile.

"So you just sat alone in your house day after day?" Kelly asked quietly.

"Yeah. The TV and games got boring really quick. I'd just sit there and listen to music sometimes. Sometimes I'd just sit there in the silence." Deacon said in a distant voice.

"So you finally had enough of all that and came here?" Kelly asked, feeling like Deacon was leaving something out.

"Yeah. I figured that I'd see if Billy, my brother, would let me live with him. I figured that it was worth a try since I had nothing to lose." Deacon said quietly.

"You wanted to die." Kelly finally said in realization.

Deacon looked at Kelly with surprise, then thought about the words and finally nodded and said, "If Billy didn't want me, then... yeah."

"Deacon, do you think you're the only kid who ever felt completely alone in the world?" Justy asked quietly.

Deacon shook his head, not trusting his voice to answer.

"Then it's just like with Lawrence. Your pain is different from ours, that's why we need you." Kelly said firmly.

"But I wouldn't know what to tell someone who was feeling like I did." Deacon said in a shaky voice.

"Tell them what's waiting on the other side of all that pain. Tell them that it's worth living." Kelly said seriously.

Deacon looked at Lawrence and gave a gentle smile as he said, "Yeah, it really is."

Cory smiled at the tender sight of Lawrence and Deacon staring into each other's eyes, then glanced at Reuben.

"Reuben, what do you think? Would you like to join us?" Cory asked gently.

"Uh huh. Ricardo says he wants to help people too." Reuben said somewhat shyly.

"Do you want to tell us anything about what it was like before you came here?" Cory asked in a soft voice that wasn't insisting.

"Uh huh." Reuben said as he stood. Reuben put out his hand for Ricardo and waited until he got off the couch and stood beside him.

Reuben put a hand on Ricardo's shoulder before saying, "When I was just little, about Ricardo's age, my daddy left us."

Everyone devoted their full attention to the six year-old and waited for him to continue.

"Manny, my brother was older than me. Momma was sad and cried a lot so Manny would come into my room and hold me at night. He said that he'd take care of me and make sure that nothing bad happened to me." Reuben said quietly.

Reuben shifted to stand behind Ricardo and hugged him from behind, then said, "Manny was really nice and had lots of friends. Kevin and Jake were both his friends, they can tell you how nice he was."

Kevin and Jake both nodded sadly in agreement with Reuben's statement.

"Last spring a bunch of us were coming home from school and a car drove by and shot Manny and killed him." Reuben said as tears filled his eyes.

"I lost my Daddy and then I lost my big brother. Momma was sad and cried a lot but I didn't know what to do." Reuben said in a lost voice.

"But then one night I heard Ricardo crying at night and I remembered how I cried at night when Daddy left."

"Reuben got in bed with me and held me and said he'd take care of me and he'd make sure nothing bad would happen to me and then he fell asleep and he snored in my ear." Ricardo said quickly.

A small round of chuckles went around the room at the statement.

Reuben gave his brother a squeeze and said, "I figured all I could do is be a big brother to Ricardo like Manny was to me. Somehow it made me feel good. Like I was keeping part of Manny alive by being like him."

"And Reuben is really nice to me and always has time for me and plays with me and even stays with me while Mama is doing stuff and I need to take my nap." Ricardo said happily.

"So when I got here, Kevin and Kenny showed me the ways that they show they like being brothers. And whenever I find a new way to show Ricardo that I love him, I show him so he'll always have me to watch over him... even if I die like Manny did. Ricardo will always have me there like I have Manny and then he can be the big brother for Edovina." Reuben said as tears filled his eyes and he hugged Ricardo even tighter.

Jake walked to Reuben and Ricardo and pulled them into a hug.

"There's just one thing you forgot." Jake said softly as he hugged the two boys.

"What?" Reuben asked as the tears streaked down his cheeks.

"You've got a whole bunch of big brothers to watch over you now." Jake said seriously.

Reuben looked up at Jake with question.

"Me, Xain, Ken and Kev are just like your brothers and we'll be there to watch over you and protect you and love you just like Manny did." Jake said softly.

"Don't forget us." JJ said from the other side of the room.

Jake looked at JJ with question.

"It's like what Kevin was saying. We're all brothers. All of us. Everyone in this room is your brother now and we'll all watch out for you." JJ said firmly.

There was a murmur of agreement from around the room.

"Ricardo too?" Reuben asked cautiously.

"Yeah, Ricardo too." JJ said in a definite voice.

Reuben nodded, then quietly asked, "And Edovina?"

"And Edovina." JJ said with a smile.

Reuben smiled and finally returned Jake's hug for real.

* * * * *

"So Allen, are you having any problems settling in with your new family?" Teri asked casually.

"No. Actually, everything is great. There are one or two small things that still need to be taken care of, but everything should be ironed out by the weekend." Allen said thoughtfully.

"What kind of things? Maybe it's something I can help with." Teri said with interest.

"Oh, let's see... I need to get the cable and Internet connected. I have to get a household bank account set up for Juana so she doesn't have to carry cash when she goes shopping, and I'd like to get Jake a new bed." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Jake needs a new bed already? What has he been doing to wear out the old one in four days?" JC asked with a chuckle.

Allen smiled at JC's insinuation and said, "Nothing. I'm just afraid that he and Xain are going to start feeling cramped in Jake's bed. They would be more comfortable if they had a full bed, or maybe a queen."

"So it doesn't bother you that they're... um, you know. Messing around?" Joe asked with concern.

"Not really. I mean, I remember being that age and fooling around..." Allen said, then trailed off as he looked at Mona.

"As if I didn't know." Mona said with a roll of her eyes.

Allen looked at her with disbelief.

"Come on Allen. It didn't take a genius to figure out what you and Doug were doing in your room. Besides, if you really didn't want me to know, you could have hid the evidence a little better." Mona said frankly.

Allen didn't say a word, his eyes just got wider.

"I swear, if I would have dropped one of his socks on the way to the laundry room it would have shattered." Mona said to the group.

"Mona, I think you'd better ease off before he has a seizure." Billy said with concern as he looked at Allen's almost purple blush.

"Kids." Mona said as she shook her head and rolled her eyes again.

Teri giggled and said, "Joe. If that's what the boys decide they want to do, they'll do it no matter what we think. Our reactions will just determine whether they do it with love and commitment to each other or with shame and dishonesty as they try to hide it."

Joe thought about the words and hesitantly nodded.

"I've already had the 'safe sex' talk with Lawrence and Deacon, so you don't have to worry about that." Billy told Joe quietly.

"Thanks, I didn't even think of that." Joe said with concern.

"I'd really like to find a way to give Lawrence and Deacon some time together. I think they need to be somewhere away from the house and away from me where they can just concentrate on each other for a while." Billy said thoughtfully.

"Maybe you could rent them a hotel room. I bet they'd jump at the chance." Allen said thoughtfully.

"I'll ask them after dinner. Kids seem to listen better when their stomachs are full." Billy said decisively.

Mona and Teri looked at each other and considered how this would impact their plans.

* * * * *

"Jacob, would you like to explain about what you've come up with?" Cory asked seriously.

"Yes. Jamie and I have been researching how we might be able to use Xain's skill at transferring language so that we can all share languages." Jacob began.

"The process is actually fairly simple and won't take very long." Jamie said in a confident voice.

"Would we have time to do it now?" Sean asked curiously.

"Yes. If Xain is willing." Jacob said as he turned to look at Xain.

"It will be an honor to serve my Clan. What is required of me?" Xain asked as he stood.

"All the telepaths are going to join to make this as simple as possible. One by one we will touch all the non-telepathic minds in the room and you will copy their language skills into something like a language pool. Then when that's done, we'll kind of touch everyone's mind at once and give everyone a copy of what's in the pool." Jacob said to Xain, then looked at Cory with question.

"Are you sure Xain?" Cory asked carefully.

Xain gave a single nod of approval.

"Then let's do it." Cory said, and waited to see what was going to happen.

After a long moment of silence, Sean finally said, "When are you going to start?"

"We're coming up on one third done right now." Jacob said in concentration.

"You mean, you don't have to touch us or anything like that?" Sean asked in confusion.

"There need be no physical manifestation of the procedure. However, we could simulate a response if that would make the process more comfortable." Xain said seriously.

"No, that's okay. I just thought it would be... more... like a ritual or something." Sean said in a disillusioned voice.

"You can light a candle and chant if it'll make you feel better." Justy said as he seemed to be looking off into the distance.

"No that's alright. Besides, you guys will probably be done before I could get the candle lit anyway." Sean said as he absently reached over and hugged Calen who was sitting beside him.

"Okay guys, here it comes." Jacob said with a determined look in his eyes.

There was a cluck and a few small screeches from one of the Eagles on the back of the couch.

"Wait, Duke and William don't want to be in here for this part." Timmy said quickly as he ran to the door of the family room.

After the birds had left, he ran back to his place between Cory and CD and said, "Okay."

"Is everyone in?" Jacob asked cautiously.

"I'm checking, give me a sec." Jamie said thoughtfully.

"All present and accounted for." Kyle said from beside Gabe.

"Let'er rip." Justy said thoughtfully.

Everyone waited, and nothing seemed to happen.

"You guys really need to work on your act if you expect to hold an audience." Sean said seriously.

"If we did this through the conscious mind, it would take a couple days and we'd have to do everyone separately." Jacob said firmly.

"Next time we'll get some sparklers or something to keep you entertained." Jamie said sarcastically.

"Okay. Sparklers will work." Sean said with a teasing smile.

"Sean, Le réalité et toi, vous ne vous entendez pas, n'est-ce pas?"[1] Jacob asked seriously.

Sean gave Jacob an 'oh yeah?' look and responded, "On t'a bercé trop près du mur?"[2]

Sean broke into a smile as he realized what had just happened.

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1 “Sean, you and reality don't get along, do you?”
2 “As a chid, was your cradle rocked too close to the wall?”

"That's it? Whoa, when you spoke to me in French I just... understood. And I knew just how to answer!" Sean said with excitement.

"Do you still need sparklers?" Jamie asked with a smile.

"I think you just provided more sparklers than I was expecting." Sean said happily.

CHAPTER 36

"Master Justy, you have a visitor in the entry hall." Hazel said cautiously through the family room door before quickly withdrawing.

Justy looked at Cory, silently asking if they were done.

"Go ahead, we're almost done here. Someone can fill you in later." Cory said with a smile at Justy.

"Thanks Cor." Justy said quickly and hurried out of the room.

Cory looked around the room and said, "Okay everyone. I just wanted to cover a few things about the new languages."

Seeing that he had everyone's attention, he continued, "I've had some time to think about this since Xain mentioned that he had the skill to transfer languages and there are a few things I'd like for you to think about before we join the gathering."

"I think Reuben, Ricardo and Xain can tell you how it feels to be around people that you don't understand. Now that we have the ability to speak a variety of languages, we should use the gift responsibly."

"Whenever we're around someone who speaks only English, we should only speak English. If you want to speak privately to someone, take them aside to speak. Even though it may be tempting to slip into Vulcan or Eagle just to show off, it's rude and immature and makes people feel left out." Cory said, looking around again.

"So we'll just use the new languages when we're alone or when we're around someone who speaks one of the new languages. Does anyone have a problem with that?" Cory asked and looked around for everyone's reactions.

"I agree with your reasoning, Patriarch Short. It is logical." Xain said seriously from Jake's side.

"Hey, we're a Vulcan Clan, what more do we need to hear?" Beau asked with a smile.

"That's right Beau, Xain said it perfectly. Now I think JJ had something to say to everyone." Cory said and looked at JJ with question.

"Yeah, Gabe and I were talking and thought it would be a good idea if we had a few more clan members trained in hand-to-hand and phasers. Anyone who is interested should get with us after the meeting and we'll see about setting up a time when we can do some training. As soon as we've got a

time pinned down, we'll arrange for a qualified instructor to give the lessons." JJ said seriously.

"You never know when you're going to need to be able to defend yourself or one of your brothers, so it's a good idea to know this stuff." Gabe interjected.

Deacon looked at JJ introspectively for a moment then said, "I felt so helpless when I saw Lawrence getting beat up. Kenny and Kevin and Xain and Jake all jumped on the guy and scared him away, but... there was nothing I could do. I would really like to take the training so I never have to feel like that again."

Lawrence hugged Deacon to his side and whispered, "You helped me as much as anyone by being there for me."

Deacon hugged Lawrence in return and looked around the room.

"As a father, it would be logical if I developed the necessary skills to defend my mate and our child." Xain said in a measured tone.

"Okay guys, work it out with JJ. Unless anyone has anything else, I think we're done." Cory said as he looked around with question.

Some murmuring went around the room, but no one spoke up.

"I need to go to the bathroom." Kevin whispered to Kenny.

"I'll meet up with you outside. I'll be with Pop." Kenny said with a smile.

Kevin hurried to the door and slipped out quietly.

* * * * *

"I know that look, that's a phone call." Allen announced as he saw the surprised and somewhat embarrassed look come across Billy's face.

"Yeah, excuse me while I take this." Billy said as he took out his phone and walked away from the group at the tables.

Perhaps it was the acoustics by the pool, or maybe the fact that no one else was talking, but for whatever reason, everyone at the table could clearly hear everything that Billy was saying as he walked away.

"No shit?" Billy asked in surprise.

"Chill dude, you're talking so fast that you're skipping words." Billy said with a chuckle.

"Yeah... That sucks... What... When... Yeah, I was being totally for real. Just tell me when you want to leave and it's like... done." Billy said seriously.

"Cut the shit Jono. We're buds, I know that if I needed help you'd be right there. Give me a few minutes to work this out and I'll call you right back. Is Petey there?" Billy asked quickly.

"Hey Petey, Jono sounds like he's on the edge of losing it. You need to do something to get his mind off his problems..."

"Whoa man, that was like, totally way too much information. I'm planning on eating in a while, I don't need that mental picture." Billy said with a sour look on his face.

After a small laugh, Billy said, "Just hang on until I call you back before you start, I really REALLY don't need to be talking to you on the phone in the middle of that!"

"What?" Billy asked with surprise.

"That would be totally awesome!"

"Fuck that! You two are my buds. Listen, I'll call you back as soon as I've got it set up. Is Saturday okay?"

"Yeah, just hang on. I'll call you right back." Billy said seriously.

"Yeah, best buds forever. I'll talk to you in a few." Billy said, then hung up the phone.

Billy put his phone in his pocket and was surprised when he looked at the group of people all looking at him curiously.

* * * * *

Kevin stepped out of the family room and was about to walk away when he heard an unusual squeaky sound from down the hall.

Quietly, he walked toward the entry hall, trying to identify the unusual sound.

As he walked around the corner, he came upon the sight of Justy holding a boy that he hadn't met before in a tight hug.

The sound he heard was the two boys engaged in a passionate kiss.

Squeaky sucking sounds and the occasional growl was coming from the pair who seemed to be almost desperate in their passion.

Kevin felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see David at his side.

Behind David were various others, all coming to investigate what Kevin had stumbled upon.

A long moment that would have been silence but for Justy and his companion filled the entry hall.

"Last time I heard that sound, it was my Pappy workin a chicken neck." Tommy said, breaking the silence.

Justy looked up in shock to find about half the Clan watching him.

Soft snickers spread through the group at Tommy's statement.

"Um, hi guys... I'd like you to meet my friend..." Justy said hesitantly.

"Somehow I got the feeling he wasn't an enemy." David said with a teasing smile.

Justy gave a nervous laugh before saying, "Dean, I'd like you to meet... the guys."

Dean timidly looked around the group of boys and noticed that the group was still increasing.

"Guys, I need to talk to Dean about... us. Could you give me a few minutes?" Justy asked hesitantly.

"Sure Justy, we'll be outside. Just be sure to introduce Dean to everyone when you're done." Aaron said from David's side.

"Yeah, I will." Justy said quietly, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"Come on guys. Let's see if Daddy has the food cooking yet!" Jacob said from somewhere in the middle of the group of boys.

That was enough encouragement to cause the entire group to move as a unit toward the back of the house.

Kevin stayed behind until the others were out of hearing range, then said, "You remember when you said that someday I was supposed to tell you when you're making a mistake?"

Justy looked at Kevin and slowly nodded.

Kevin looked into Dean's eyes for an instant, before looking at Justy again and saying, "I don't think today's going to be that day."

Justy smiled and said, "Thanks Kevin. We'll be out in a little bit."

Kevin nodded happily and hurried to find the nearest bathroom.

* * * * *

"Sorry, that was a friend of mine from back home." Billy said timidly as he walked back to his place at the table.

"Which one is the act?" Mona asked Billy curiously.

"What?" Billy responded in confusion.

"When you were talking to your friends on the phone you seemed to be a completely different person, it was like you were sixteen years old. Which one is the real you?" Mona asked in a speculative voice.

Billy thought about the question and finally answered, "I guess I'm somewhere in between. I kind of adapt to whoever I'm around."

"Do you do it on purpose or does it just happen?" Mona asked curiously.

"Most of the time I don't even realize I'm doing it. Every now and then I have to stop and think about what's the 'mature' way to say something." Billy said thoughtfully.

"Well, just so you know, if you feel comfortable talking the other way, I wouldn't mind. It's kind of nice." Mona said gently.

"Yeah, I like it too." Allen said with a tender smile at Billy.

The sound of a cell phone ringing stopped further conversation as everyone looked around and a few people checked their phones to see who it was.

"It's mine." Allen said and got up to walk away from the table.

"I guess it's the time of day when everyone is making their calls." Teri said absently as she watched Allen walk away.

"Chip, is there any way I could borrow your computer for a few minutes? I need to make some travel arrangements for some friends of mine." Billy asked quietly.

"I'll take you into the study." JC said as he stood.

Billy quickly stood and followed.

* * * * *

"Hello?" Allen said cautiously.

"You have the right number. I can get her for you if you need me to." Allen said into the phone.

"Sure, no problem. What's the message?" Allen asked as he noticed JC and Billy walking toward the house.

"Okay, can you be more specific?" Allen asked with distraction in his voice.

"No, that's fine. Do you have the address?" Allen asked curiously.

"Yes. That's right. Someone will be there, thank you for calling." Allen said seriously.

"Goodbye." Allen finally said, then disconnected the call and walked back to the table.

"Bad news?" Chip asked with concern.

"No, not at all. That was the moving company calling to say that someone will need to be at the house on Friday." Allen said thoughtfully.

"That was quick. I didn't expect them to be in until Monday." Teri said with surprise.

"Yeah, I'd actually forgotten that her stuff was coming." Allen said as he took his seat.

"Is that going to be any problem?" Chip asked curiously.

"No. As far as I know we don't have any other plans on Friday. It shouldn't be any problem at all." Allen finally said as he relaxed back into his chair.

"Hey, you didn't start the party without us did you?" A voice called from beside the house.

"No way. Now that you're here the party can begin." Chip called out with a smile.

"Are the boys here yet?" The woman asked as she looked around.

"Yes. They're in a Clan meeting." Teri said with a smile.

"Everyone, this is Russ and Sarah Wagner." Chip said to the gathering, then looked at Russ and Sarah and said, "I thought you were going to be here earlier."

"We kind of got... um... sidetracked..." Russ said timidly and started to blush.

"Oh... I see." Teri said with a knowing smile.

Sarah giggled, then she and Russ took a seat at the table with Teri, Mona and Christine.

Chip smiled warmly, then said, "Now that you're here, I'd like to introduce everyone..."

* * * * *

"What's going on here?" Dean asked quietly.

"There's some stuff I didn't tell you about me." Justy said with difficulty.

Dean thought about the statement as Justy led him into the study off the main hallway.

"First of all, I never lied to you. But, I guess there's some stuff I just didn't tell you." Justy said, searching for the right words.

Dean pulled Justy into a hug and said, "You don't have to tell me. I know what a wonderful person you are. That's all I need to know."

Justy smiled and leaned in to kiss Dean briefly.

"If you want me to leave so you can be with your other friends, I can come back when we can be alone." Dean said quietly.

"You'd really do that?" Justy asked in wonder.

"I just need to call for a ride." Dean said bravely as he pulled out of the hug.

Justy took hold of Dean's arm and gently said, "I don't want you to go. I was just surprised that you would be that understanding."

Dean kissed Justy on the cheek and said, "Whatever this is, it's obvious that you don't want me to be a part of it. I'm fine with that... really."

"Please sit down with me. I really do want to tell you about it." Justy said in a soft voice.

Dean walked with Justy to a nearby sofa and sat down, not releasing Justy from his hug.

"Um, I don't know where to start..." Justy said thoughtfully.

"The beginning usually works." Dean said quietly.

"You've met Daddy and Pop. I guess it started when Daddy was adopted into the family of Sarek." Justy said carefully.

"I've heard that name before. Who is he again?" Dean asked thoughtfully.

"Grandpa Sarek is the Ambassador to Earth from the planet Vulcan." Justy said quietly.

"So your grandfather is a Vulcan." Dean said, seeking confirmation.

Justy nodded as he looked into Dean's eyes, looking for a reaction.

"Okay, what else?" Dean asked cautiously.

"Well, some of the guys you just saw in the hallway, they kind of went through a bunch of really messed up stuff." Justy said with difficulty.

"Define 'messed up'." Dean said, not in a demanding way, but wanting to be sure he understood what Justy was trying to tell him.

"Um, like abused, abandoned... stuff like that." Justy said uneasily.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Go on." Dean said quietly.

"Well, when I met Sean and Cory, it was kind of... it was right. I mean, it was like we were instantly friends... beyond friends." Justy said with difficulty.

Dean's eyebrows went up in surprise at Justy's statement.

"No, not like that. Like brothers. We totally trust and depend on each other. It's really hard to describe any other way. We ARE brothers." Justy said thoughtfully.

"Okay, I get that." Dean said slowly.

"Well... now all the guys you just saw in the hallway are my brothers too." Justy finished, looking into Dean's eyes.

"No problem so far." Dean said cautiously.

"A while back, some of my brothers were in danger from some really bad guys." Justy said, then stopped to think.

"How bad?" Dean asked, not sure he wanted to know.

"These guys made my brothers do sex stuff and took pictures and movies and stuff of them and sold it on the Internet." Justy said in a pained voice.

Dean nodded that he understood, then pulled tighter to Justy.

"Grandpa Sarek believed it would be logical if me and my brothers were given status as a Vulcan Clan so we could protect our brothers." Justy said carefully.

"Wait a second. I've heard something about a Vulcan clan on Earth that rescues kids in trouble... is that what you're talking about?" Dean asked with wide eyes.

"Yeah, that's us. Clan Short." Justy said timidly.

"A guy at school said that a friend of his was in trouble when his grandfather beat him up and threw him out. He said that some guys from your Clan showed up and took him to a doctor. Then they told him that if he wanted, they would get him a place to live and go to school where he'd be safe. He said that his friend was really happy and talking about how he wants to go to college for engineering when he gets out of school there." Dean said with excitement in his voice.

"Engineering? I think you're probably talking about Devon. He's a good guy... except that I can't understand what he's talking about most of the time." Justy said thoughtfully.

At Dean's curious look, Justy continued, "Devon is really smart. He's a great guy, but when he gets excited about something, he usually starts talking way over our heads. Everyone at Camp Little Eagle likes him a lot. Even though he's one of the older guys, everyone, even the little kids feel like they need to protect him."

"So is that all of it? Is that the big secret that you've been hiding?" Dean asked cautiously.

Justy smiled and said, "Yeah, that's it. And I wasn't really hiding it. I mean, it's not like I'm ashamed of being part of the Clan."

"Are you ashamed of me?" Dean asked bravely.

"No. Absolutely not!" Justy said firmly and looked into Dean's eyes to convey his sincerity.

"Then why didn't you tell me before?" Dean asked quietly.

Justy thought about it for a moment before saying, "When I'm with you, it's not complicated. Things get a little crazy sometimes with my brothers and my parents and with the Clan. When I'm with you, it's like a vacation from everything else in my life."

"So you use me to escape from your problems?" Dean asked haltingly.

"No... Well, not really... I really messed this up, didn't I?" Justy asked with a worried look into Dean's eyes.

After a moment of silence, Dean said, "No. I'm flattered that you wanted to keep me all to yourself. I'm really glad that we had so much time with just the two of us to get to know each other without the world intruding on us."

Justy smiled with relief at the statement and pulled Dean in to a heartfelt hug.

"I just need to know where we're going from here." Dean whispered into Justy's ear as they hugged.

Justy pulled away and looked into Dean's eyes.

"Do you still want to keep me out of that part of your life? I need to know the ground rules so I'm not trying to intrude on something you want to keep private." Dean said with concern.

Justy smiled at Dean and said, "It's not just about what I want, I need to know how much of the rest of my life you want to be involved in."

Dean nodded thoughtfully.

"I think I'd like for you to get to know all my brothers." Justy said quietly.

"Yeah, they seemed nice, I think I'd like that too." Dean said with a gentle smile.

"Once you get to know them and they get to know you, then we'll see if you're interested in becoming part of the Clan." Justy said carefully.

"Yeah. I think I'd like to wait on that part of it for a while... do you think they'll mind us... you know, being... boyfriends?" Dean asked cautiously.

Justy smiled at the question and said, "Most of the guys have boyfriends. No one will have any problem with it. The only thing they might be upset by is that I didn't introduce you sooner."

"Okay, I just don't want to make trouble for you." Dean said quietly.

"I promise that there won't be any trouble at all." Justy said assuringly.

Dean nodded and snuggled into Justy's embrace, just soaking in the comfort.

* * * * *

"Is the meeting over already?" JC asked as he came face to face with nearly thirty boys headed toward the sliding glass doors.

"Yeah. Is Uncle Chip cooking dinner yet?" Calen asked hopefully.

"Not yet. I think he's waiting on more of your parents to show up before he starts." JC said with a gentle smile at the boy.

Several serious looks passed among the boys before Sean finally spoke up. "Timmy, get Harley, Ricky, Reuben and Ricardo. You're in charge of hungry looks and puppy dog eyes."

Timmy nodded seriously and started to gather his troops.

"Kyle, CD, Calen and Tyler. You're going to be the cranky kids. Each of you grab someone older to comfort you. All you have to do is look hungry and glance at Uncle Chip every now and then with your most pitiful look." Sean said thoughtfully.

"Jacob and Jamie, hang back until Uncle Chip has noticed the others, then when the time is right, move in and ask him when the food is going to be ready. If you can manage your quivering lip thing, it'll help." Sean said firmly.

JC chuckled and said, "He doesn't stand a chance."

"You're not going to rat us out are you, Pop?" Jamie asked with a hopeful look.

"No way. I love to see a plan come together. Please just hold off until Billy and I are back outside. I don't want to miss a minute of it." JC said with a smile.

"You got it, Uncle Josh." Sean said with a mischievous grin.

* * * * *

Justy and Dean both looked up from their embrace as the door opened.

"Sorry guys, I didn't know you were in here." JC said as he looked into the study.

"It's okay, Pop. I just needed to talk to Dean in private for a few minutes. We're done." Justy said timidly.

JC looked at his oldest son curiously and asked, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I think everything is going to be great." Justy said with assurance as he stood, then held out his hand to help Dean off the couch.

"Everyone else is out by the pool." JC said with a smile at the two boys holding hands.

"Is Daddy cooking yet?" Justy asked hopefully.

"Not yet. Go talk to Sean and get your assignments," JC said with a chuckle.

Justy looked at JC curiously, then shrugged and walked out of the study with Dean at his side.

"They look like they're close friends." Billy said speculatively.

"At least." JC said with a hopeful gaze at the closed door.

* * * * *

"It's mine." Teri said with a chuckle as she took out her ringing cell phone.

"Director Short." Teri said with a smile as she got up and walked away from the tables by the pool.

After listening for a long minute, a serious look came over Teri's face and she glanced at Sean and Cory walking out of the house.

"Thank you for calling me, Doctor. Keep them there, call the police to detain them if you need to." Teri said as she motioned for Sean and Cory to come to her.

"I'll be right there. Thank you again," She said firmly before hanging up the phone.

Teri thought for a moment, then looked at Sean and Cory as she said, "We've got some work to do."

"How big a job?" Cory asked, immediately in his professional persona.

"Both of you, security, intelligence... and Lawrence," Teri said quietly.

Both Cory and Sean looked at Teri with question.

"When I got the intelligence report on Lawrence, I learned that he has a half brother still living at home. This morning I faxed notices to the local hospitals and urgent care clinics that if Vincent Winters was admitted, I was to be notified immediately. Today just after lunch, the school nurse took him to the Arnold Palmer Children's Hospital for treatment for symptoms that indicate a concussion. Vincent said he fell down the stairs at home this morning." Teri finished with a dubious look.

"I'll get the team together." Sean said quickly and hurried away.

"How did you know?" Cory asked quietly.

"Well, it was just a hunch. Think of it this way. Lawrence was the target for his father's abuse for at least two years. Just because Lawrence left doesn't mean that his father suddenly stopped being abusive." Teri said quietly.

"I should have thought of that... we could have prevented this." Cory said in a defeated tone.

"No, you couldn't. Like I said, I was playing a hunch. It might just as well have turned out the other way... it may still. There's a chance that Vincent is just clumsy and DID fall down the stairs this morning." Teri said speculatively.

Cory looked at his mother with his most incredulous look turned on full blast.

"Okay, I grant you that it's not likely, but we can't automatically assume that it's a case of abuse until we have the facts." Teri said quietly.

"Yeah, I guess so." Cory finally relented.

"It looks like the guys are ready to go. Let's go find out." Teri said as she put an arm around Cory's shoulders.

Cory nodded and started walking with his mother toward the car.

Sean and his assembled group walked from the back door of the house to join them.

"Is it okay if Deacon comes along too? Lawrence would feel more comfortable if he was there." Sean said carefully.

"Yeah, that's a good idea." Cory said as they walked toward Teri's car.

Suddenly Cory turned back toward the house and rushed to Aaron.

"Postpone operation 'Feed Me' until we get back, okay?" Cory asked Aaron seriously.

"No problem, it'll just give us more time to plan." Aaron said with a crafty smile.

Cory smiled at the statement, then hurried to join his mom at the car.

* * * * *

"What do you suppose that's all about?" Allen asked curiously as he saw the group walking toward Teri's car.

"If I were a betting man, I'd say that there's a hurting child somewhere who is about to have their life changed." Chip said as he half turned in his chair to watch the group leave.

"Really? Right now?" Joe asked with wide eyes as he watched his son get into Teri's Hummer.

"That's what these guys do. They help kids who need it." Chip said frankly.

"That's how Lawrence got to be with us. One of my sons found out that he was in trouble and without a moments hesitation, he called his brothers and ran to the rescue." Allen said with pride in his voice.

"And Lawrence is going to do that now? I mean, *right now*, right this minute he's on his way to rescue a kid that needs help." Joe asked in confirmation.

"Exactly. It kind of makes you proud, doesn't it?" Chip said with a smile.

"Proud, in awe, scared to death..." Joe trailed off helplessly.

"His clan brothers will make sure that he's kept safe." Chip said firmly.

Joe nodded nervously at the statement.

* * * * *

"So why did you need me to come with you?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"Didn't Sean tell you?" Cory asked as he looked around.

"I figured that you were getting the whole story while I was gathering the guys so I'd let you explain." Sean said simply.

"Okay." Cory said thoughtfully, then took a deep breath.

"Lawrence, when you asked for our help, we had to investigate your past to try and find your father." Cory said carefully.

"Yeah." Lawrence said hesitantly, getting the feeling that Cory was about to lay some bad news on him.

"We got a lot of information, we kind of did a full profile on you, just to see if there was anything we could do to help you. It's stuff we'd never ever share with anyone except Mom and the Clan." Cory finished quickly.

"Yeah." Lawrence said again, waiting for whatever was coming that he wasn't going to like.

"When we were done, we shared the report with mom so we could figure out the best way to help you." Cory said carefully.

"Yeah." Lawrence said, this time with a small nod to prompt Cory to get to the point.

"This morning Mom faxed a warning to the urgent care clinics and hospitals to be on the lookout for your brother."

Lawrence only wore a look of surprise at the statement.

"We're on our way to Arnold Palmer Children's Hospital where your brother is being treated for a head injury." Cory said softly.

Lawrence shook his head and said, "I don't know why you would want me along. He hates me."

A moment of silence filled the car until it was broken by Sean asking, "How do you feel about him?"

Lawrence thought about the question for a moment before he said, "I don't know..."

"If you want to go in there with us, maybe something good can come from it. If not, you can stay here in the car and no one will think any less of you." Cory said assuringly.

Lawrence thought about it for a second, then looked at Deacon helplessly.

"I think you're going to have some stuff to deal with either way. No matter what you decide, I'll be there to help you deal with it." Deacon said seriously.

"Cory? Can you please help me? I don't know what to do." Lawrence asked desperately.

"Follow your heart." Cory said in a pained voice, knowing that no matter what happened, that Lawrence was likely to be hurt.

* * * * *

"Hey Dad. How are you doing?" Jake asked as he approached his father.

"Great." Allen said as he automatically got up and gave Jake a gentle hug, careful not to crush Edovina between them.

"Oh, it looks like the little princess is awake. She didn't cause any problems in the meeting did she?" Allen asked with concern.

"No. She was a perfect angel." Jake said as he looked at Edovina proudly.

"Where is Xain?" Allen asked as he looked at the group of boys funneling out of the house.

"He went to the kitchen to get a bottle of juice ready for Vina. He's afraid that she'll get dehydrated being out in the sun so much." Jake said with a contented smile.

"That's a good idea. I'm glad he thought of that." Allen said as he carefully caressed the baby's cheek with one finger.

Edovina reached up and grabbed Allen's finger and got a good, firm hold.

"Your daughter has a good strong grip." Allen said with a chuckle.

"Wait till she gets hold of your hair and see what you think." Jake said happily.

"Oh, she's beautiful. Can I see her?" A girl's voice interrupted.

Jake turned to see a teenage girl looking at Edovina wistfully.

"Sure, her name is Edovina." Jake said as he turned so the girl could see Edovina more fully.

"Oh, she's absolutely beautiful. My babies are boys." The girl said, then rubbed her slim belly.

"You said boys... how many you got in there?" Jake asked curiously as he noticed a guy about his own age approaching.

The boy walked up and put a hand on the girl's shoulder.

She looked over her shoulder at the boy and gave a loving smile.

"Three, and this is my boyfriend Clint." She said timidly.

"I'm Jake, what's your name?" Jake asked with a gentle smile.

"Oh, I'm Crystal. Oh, look at her..." Crystal said and leaned in to look at Edovina more closely.

"Watch out for your..." Jake tried to warn, but alas, too late.

"...hair." He finished in a defeated voice as Crystal tried to get the little baby girl to release her hair.

"Um, can you help me here? She's really got a good hold of me." Crystal said in a pained voice.

"I believe this should help." Xain said as he joined the impromptu gathering, carrying a bottle.

"What's that going to do?" Clint asked incredulously.

Xain carefully moved the bottle between Crystal and Edovina and waited for the expected reaction.

"It will distract her." Xain said as Edovina took the bottle and began to drink it thirstily.

"Thanks... oh, my brother told me about you. You're Xain aren't you?" Crystal asked curiously as she stood and fussed with her hair.

"Correct. Who, may I ask, is your brother?" Xain asked curiously.

"Ian. He's one of your Clan brothers." Crystal said proudly.

"Yes. As I recall, he is mated to Toby. I have not, as of yet, had the opportunity to interact with your brother. But his actions seem consistent with one who is a caring and generous person." Xain said casually.

Clint looked around and found Ian watching them from about twenty feet away.

Jake and Xain watched as Clint motioned for Ian to join them.

The boy seemed hesitant, but finally came over to Clint and shyly stood beside him.

"Guys, this is Ian. Ian, I think you've mentioned that you know who Xain and Jake are." Clint said with amusement at Ian's timid expression.

"It's nice to meet you Ian." Jake said warmly.

"Hi." Ian said timidly, then looked hopefully at Xain.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Xain said formally, then extended his hand to shake.

Ian quickly took Xain's hand and shook it as he said, "Thanks, I heard what you said in the meeting and it's really cool that you're here now and have a family where you fit in."

Xain raised an eyebrow at Ian's excitement.

"I concur with your observation." Xain said carefully.

"Crystal, would you like to hold Vina for a few minutes. I mean, so you can get some practice before you have your own?" Jake offered with a gentle smile.

"Clint and I have just started taking some parenting classes so we'll be ready, but yeah, I'd really like to hold her." Crystal said with a grand smile.

Jake carefully transferred Edovina into Crystal's waiting arms.

Clint moved to Crystal's side and looked on with love at the sight of his girlfriend holding the baby.

"Let's all sit down. Maybe you have some baby questions that we could answer." Jake suggested as he gestured to an empty table by the pool.

"Yeah, thanks." Clint said for both of them.

"Ian, when the children are born, will you be assisting in the child care?" Xain asked in a casual voice.

"Yeah. I'm going to be their uncle so I want to help whenever I can." Ian said quickly.

"Then it would be logical if I were to instruct you in the proper method for formula preparation and diapering." Xain said in a neutral voice.

"That would be really cool. Thanks Xain." Ian said with a great smile.

Jake looked on with fond amusement and sent to Xain across their link, 'I get the feeling that Ian looks at you like a hero.'

Xain arched an eyebrow in surprise, then glanced at Ian's look of happiness and admiration.

'If it is to be so, then I will endeavor to be worthy of his trust in me.' Xain returned with an undercurrent of contentment.

* * * * *

"Well Lawrence, we're here. We're going in, whether you stay or go is up to you." Cory said, making no move to get out of the car.

"I'll go, but I don't think it will do any good." Lawrence said quietly.

"I don't know that it will. But we have to do what we believe is right. I think that being there to help your brother is the right thing to do. It's going to be his choice whether or not he accepts your help... or ours." Cory said gravely, then opened his car door.

Before the group could get into the hospital, Teri said, "Give me a minute to talk to the doctor. Let me get the facts before we storm the place."

"Do you have anything yet Sammy?" Cory asked the smaller boy beside him.

"No. Too many people, I haven't found him yet." Sammy said thoughtfully.

"Let's do it my way, this once." Teri said with a smile, then started walking again.

"Okay, Mom. It's your show." Sean said with a smirk.

"That's a first." Teri said with a chuckle as they entered the hospital.

* * * * *

"Hey guys." Justy said timidly with Dean at his side.

"Hey Justy, so are you ready to tell us about your friend here?" Aaron asked curiously.

"Sure. I've known Dean for a couple years now. We used to go to school together and... well, we've always been friends." Justy said uncomfortably.

David noticed Justy's discomfort and said, "Don't worry, Justy. There's nothing wrong with having friends outside the Clan. I'm just glad we're going to get to meet Dean. He must be a great guy to be your friend for so long."

Justy got a smile of relief as he said, "Yeah, he really is. Dean, this is David Gallagher and Aaron Carter."

Dean got a surprised look on his face as he said, "I thought you guys looked familiar but... wow... and you're Justy's clan brothers?"

Aaron smiled at Dean's mellow reaction and said, "That's right. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Justy, have you got a minute?" An anxious voice called from Justy's side.

Dean looked curiously at the pale thin boy beside Justy and remembered him from the entry hall.

"Sure, Kevin. What's up?" Justy asked seriously.

"Well I just had some questions about that stuff you told me before about being in love and acting like an adult and stuff... I'm sorry, I'm interrupting." Kevin finished shyly.

"That's okay, Kevin. But I really think you need to talk to Dan about that stuff. He knows a lot more about how to be an adult than I do. While you're here, I'd like you to meet my friend Dean." Justy said with a gentle smile.

"From the way you guys were 'chicken necking' in the hall, I think he's more than your friend." Aaron said, then broke into chuckles.

"Kev, Dean. Give me a hand here. Aaron needs a swim." Justy said firmly.

Kevin smiled as Dean's eyes went wide.

When Aaron tried to run, David grabbed hold of him and held him until the others were able to get a firm hold of him.

"Come on, I was only joking..." Aaron pleaded as the boys carried him toward the pool.

"Stop struggling or we'll drop you." Justy said as he fought to keep hold of Aaron's arm.

Looking as if they'd practiced the act for weeks, the group of boys heaved Aaron sideways into the pool.

"We just threw Aaron Carter into the pool." Dean said with shock as he watched Aaron swimming toward the side.

"I bet he won't be the last one today." David said with a chuckle.

"Safe bet." Justy said in return.

"Justy, I really need to talk about this stuff. It's getting all mixed up in my head and I don't want to do something stupid like I did before." Kevin said from Justy's side.

"You see that car coming up the drive?" Justy asked as he pointed.

"Yeah." Kevin said as he turned to look.

"That's John's car. I'm betting that Dan is with him." Justy said, then pulled Kevin into a hug. "Kevin, I'll always listen to you and help you however I can. But this time I really think that Dan is going to be able to help you sort things out better than I can. I don't want to tell you the wrong thing and take the chance of making it worse." Justy said seriously.

Kevin enjoyed the hug for a second, then asked, "Do you think you could tell Dan... you know, what's going on? I think you understand better than me anyway... it's still mixed up a lot."

"Sure thing. Wait here while I talk to him." Justy said with a smile, then hurried away.

David walked to Aaron and gave him a playful hug when he was fully out of the pool.

Kevin was standing and watching Justy talk to Dan beside his car.

"Are you in love with Justy?" Dean asked quietly from Kevin's side.

Kevin looked up into Dean's eyes and saw concern.

Kevin shook his head and giggled, before saying, "No. His father."

Dean's eyes got wide and he involuntarily looked over at Chip.

"Dan said he's got a few minutes now. Come on." Justy said from across the pool area.

"It was nice to meet you, Dean. Don't worry, Justy loves you, I can tell." Kevin said with a smile before hurrying away.

Justy made his way to Dean's side and they watched as Dan and Kevin walked into the house.

"He's in love with your Dad?" Dean asked in disbelief.

"Yeah. If things work out the way he wants them to, someday he'll be your mother-in-law." Justy said with a giggle.

Dean looked at Justy in shock, then broke into laughter.

* * * * *

The boys waited anxiously as Teri talked with the doctor.

"This sucks. We should be in there finding out what's going on." Sean groused.

"We'll let mom do it her way this once. You've got to admit that she's been pretty cool about letting us take charge so often." Cory said reasonably as he discretely rubbed Sean's back.

"I guess." Sean said reluctantly, then added, "It still sucks."

"How you holding up Lawrence?" Deacon asked quietly.

Lawrence looked into Deacon's eyes and said, "I'll be fine. He's my past, you're my future. Nothing he says matters anymore."

"But if he does say something that hurts, remember that I'm here with you." Deacon said softly.

"That's the only reason I was strong enough to come in here and face this." Lawrence said honestly.

"Okay guys. Here's the story." Teri said as she walked out of the office, followed by the doctor.

"Vincent needs to be in observation for a few hours because of his head injury. They're going to put him in a room in a few minutes and the doctors said that he can have visitors. You guys go talk with Vincent while I have a 'heart to heart' with his mother." Teri said, and finished with almost a growl.

"Is there enough evidence to support a claim of abuse?" Cory asked, considering how soon they should try telepathic interrogation after a head injury.

"When the hospital staff finally associated my fax with the boy who had been admitted, Dr. Jenkins made a thorough exam for signs of abuse. Let's just say that the police have already been notified and there is enough evidence that you won't even have to worry about that." Teri said seriously.

"But what if Vince claims that he fell down the stairs?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"Unless he can prove that the staircase has knuckles, that's not going to work." Dr. Jenkins said firmly.

"He's only nine... this shouldn't happen to him..." Lawrence said regretfully.

"It doesn't matter how old he is, it's never right to abuse a child." Teri said with sympathy in her voice.

Dr. Jenkins looked at Lawrence curiously.

"This is Lawrence Winters, Vincent's half-brother." Teri said as she pulled Lawrence into a gentle hug.

"You're not in any danger are you son?" Dr. Jenkins asked with concern.

"Lawrence is in his biological father's custody now. He isn't in any danger." Teri said quietly.

"Good. Every time I see something like this it turns my stomach." Dr. Jenkins said with irritation.

"I hope you never get used to it." Teri said quietly.

"The day I do, it'll be time for me to find another job." Dr. Jenkins said in agreement.

"Let's see. Vincent should be in his room by now. I'll take you boys to talk with him. Then I'll take Director Short to visit with Mrs. Winters. I believe she would appreciate a few minutes alone with her before the police investigators arrive." Dr. Jenkins said and led the way out of the waiting room.

"If the school nurse brought Vince here at lunch, why is it almost dinner before we're hearing about all this?" Lawrence asked from Deacon's side.

"There was a pretty bad car wreck at about noon today and we had to treat the most seriously injured patients first. If anything would have happened

that Vincent needed immediate treatment, he would have gotten it." Dr. Jenkins said with assurance.

"Here we are, you guys can go on in. I'll check back later." Dr. Jenkins said seriously.

* * * * *

"What's up with Kevin? Is he okay?" Kenny asked with concern as he ran to Justy and Dean.

"Yeah, he just needed to talk to Dan. Kenny, this is my friend... boyfriend, Dean." Justy said shyly.

"Cool. Nice to meet you." Kenny said with a smile at Dean, then hurriedly asked, "Is Kevin okay? I'm just worried about him."

"Did he already tell you about what happened today?" Justy asked curiously.

"Not really, I just know that he felt bad about something, then he said that stuff about falling in love in the clan meeting." Kenny said seriously.

"Well that's about all there is. You really need to ask Kevin about that stuff, it's not my story to tell." Justy said with regret.

"But he's going to be okay, right?" Kenny asked firmly.

"Yeah. The worst part is over, now he just needs to talk about stuff with Dan to get it all sorted out." Justy said assuringly.

"Oh, okay. I'm sorry that I interrupted you guys..." Kenny said quickly.

"That's okay Kenny, I understand. You've just found your brother and now you just want to make sure that he's going to be okay. Try not to worry, he's going to be fine." Justy said softly as he put an arm around Dean.

"Yeah. That's it." Kenny said with a timid smile, then said, "I'm glad you've got a boyfriend. You two look really good together."

"Thanks." Justy said happily and squeezed Dean to emphasize the word.

* * * * *

"Brady, do you think I could talk with you for a minute?" Mona asked with a look of determination in her eyes.

"Sure." Brady said cautiously as he got up from his seat beside Allen.

"We'll be right back." Mona said in response to Allen's worried gaze.

"Don't be too hard on him. I just found him." Allen said with a knowing look at Mona.

"He's Starfleet security, I'm sure he can handle it." Mona said with a smile.

Allen nodded, but didn't look as if he were as sure as Mona.

CHAPTER 37

Cory led the way into the hospital room to find two boys laying on beds. The one on the nearer bed was Asian and appeared to be asleep.

The boy on the further bed had a bandage on his head. He was awake and watching Cory carefully.

"Vincent?" Cory asked as he walked across the room.

"Yeah." Vincent said cautiously.

"My name is Cory. How are you doing?" Cory asked quietly, as the rest of the team began to funnel into the room.

"Well, since I'm in the hospital, I think you should be able to figure that out for yourself." Vincent said in a grumpy voice as he watched the boys come slowly in.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Vincent asked angrily when he saw Lawrence enter.

"I heard you were hurt. I just wanted to see if you needed any help." Lawrence said in a cold but polite voice.

"I don't need anything from you! It's your fault that I'm in here!" Vincent said forcefully.

"If you want me to leave, just say the word and I'm gone." Lawrence said frankly.

"Get out of here. I don't ever want to see you again faggot!" Vincent snarled.

"I'll be in the waiting room when you guys are finished." Lawrence said, not looking particularly upset.

"I'll go with you." Deacon said immediately.

Cory held up his hand, indicating that he wanted Lawrence and Deacon to wait. Then took a step closer to Vincent and said, "We came to see if you needed our help, but if Lawrence is leaving, so are the rest of us. You'll just have to take your chances with the police and CPS."

Vincent thought about it for a second, then a resolved look came over his face. "No. I guess he can stay. Maybe he can help me figure something out."

"I'll do whatever I can." Lawrence said hesitantly, not ready to fully trust his half-brother.

Vincent nodded, then looked around and asked, "Who are all these guys anyway?"

Lawrence glanced around the group, then said, "Since I didn't have any family that wanted me, I found a new family. Vince, these are my new brothers, Deacon, Sean, Cory, Sammy, Sebastian and Gabe. Guys, this is my old brother, Vince."

"Do they know you're a sissy-fag?" Vince asked in an accusing voice.

Lawrence surprised himself when he felt a smile come across his face. Finally he said, "No, but I won't tell them if you don't."

Vincent looked at his brother in confusion at the statement.

"It's not nice to tease the guy with the head injury." Sean chuckled.

"Right." Lawrence said with a laugh, then said, "Vince, these guys don't care about that stuff. They don't care if I'm gay or straight or butch or whatever. They're just my brothers."

Vincent looked around in shock and saw that the group of boys were all nodding in agreement.

"So what can I help you figure out?" Lawrence asked as he took another step closer to the bed.

"Well, after you moved out, Dad got all kinds of mean and nasty with me and mom." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"I didn't move out. Dad picked me up and threw me out the front door. He threw me out and told me he'd kill me if I ever came back." Lawrence said with force.

Vincent nodded and said, "I thought it might be something like that."

"So what did you want to know?" Lawrence prompted.

"I don't know exactly... I mean... all that stuff he used to say about you... he started saying that I was like you and I was turning into a sissy too." Vincent said quietly.

"Is that why he beat you up?" Cory asked gently.

"I don't know. Mom and Dad talked to someone on the phone this morning, it sounded like a lawyer or something from how they were talking. I was getting ready for school and when I was about to leave, out of nowhere, dad just smacked me up side the head. I didn't see it coming and lost my balance and fell onto the stairs. I hit my head when I landed."

"I started crying because it hurt, then he started punching me and screaming at me about how much of a pansy and a fag I was for crying about a bump on the head." Vincent said with a distant, confused look.

"Then mom told me to go on to school and if anyone asked, just to tell them that I slipped and fell on the stairs." Vince said as he looked at Lawrence with question.

"Okay Vince. I can explain what happened if you want to hear what I think." Lawrence said quietly.

"Yeah." Vincent said with a hopeful look.

"I don't know why, but I think dad is getting some kind of power trip off of beating us up." Lawrence began.

"No... he wouldn't ever do that... he's not like that..." Vincent began to say.

"Vince, he hurt you so bad he put you in the hospital. I don't know why he's like this but it's been getting worse and worse for a couple years. Now that Lawrence isn't there to yell at and hit, he's starting in on you." Sean said seriously.

"And it's only going to get worse if you stay there." Cory interjected.

"No... he loves me..." Vincent said with tears in his eyes.

"He probably does. But this doesn't have anything to do with love. It's about anger and abuse. Something is wrong with your dad that makes him want to hurt you. If he could control it, you wouldn't be here. Next time he could kill you." Sean said with concern in his voice.

"That's right. Think about it Vince. What did I ever do to deserve the way he treated me? Name one thing." Lawrence said softly.

"You're soft and pretty like a girl. You're not anything like a boy. That's what you did!" Vincent said angrily.

"Vince. You're just repeating the things he said when he was justifying his abuse. My new brothers made me stop and take a good look at myself. Dad was wrong. There is absolutely nothing wrong with me. If you'll take a good look at me you'll see that I'm just the same as my brothers." Lawrence said carefully.

"And besides that, there isn't anything that any child could do to deserve being put in the hospital or thrown out into the street. Even if Lawrence was the most limp-wristed fairy in town, he wouldn't deserve to be beaten, degraded and abandoned." Cory said seriously.

"But... Dad said he was wearing a dress..." Vincent said helplessly as he reached up and rubbed his head.

"Yeah, and dad's probably the reason that I was wearing it." Lawrence said coldly.

Vincent looked at Lawrence with question and confusion.

"For two years he told me that I wasn't a boy. He beat it into me that no matter what I did or how hard I tried, I would never be the son that he wanted me to be. Finally I stopped trying. If I did my best at being a boy and it wasn't good enough, I decided to try being a girl. It sounds kind of stupid now, but it's not like I really thought about it, it's just something that happened inside me. When I dressed as a girl, I felt like... I don't know... like someday, someone might love me." Lawrence said with difficulty.

Deacon discretely put a hand on Lawrence's shoulder and gave a squeeze of support.

"These guys are okay with you wearing dresses?" Vincent asked, looking more confused than ever.

"If that's what makes Lawrence comfortable, then why should we mind? He's not doing anything to hurt or insult us." Sean said carefully.

"But it's wrong..." Vincent trailed off.

"Why?" Deacon asked with genuine curiosity.

"Because guys are supposed to dress like guys..." Vincent tried to explain.

"It's just pieces of cloth. I'll feel the same way about Lawrence if he dresses like a boy or a girl or if he puts on a gorilla costume. It's about the person inside, not the way he's dressed." Deacon said seriously.

Vincent hesitantly nodded.

"Vincent, I don't know how things are going to work out with your family. But just so you know, if you need a safe place to live for a while, we've got a kind of a place set up where kids who've been abused or abandoned can go." Sean said softly.

"Is that where Lawrence is staying?" Vincent asked carefully.

"No. My brothers Billy and Deacon have made me a part of their family and given me a room in their home. I think I'll be going to school at Camp Little Eagle, but I don't live there." Lawrence said seriously.

"Camp Little Eagle?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yeah, it's like a cross between a summer camp and a boy's ranch. I just saw it for the first time today, it's really cool." Deacon said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do now... It's like everything is... all messed up..." Vincent said helplessly.

"Yeah, believe me, I know that feeling. Last week I was living on the street and didn't know how or when I was going to be able to find my next meal. I didn't have anyone in the world that I could go to for help. I was completely alone." Lawrence said seriously.

Vincent looked into Lawrence's eyes and saw sincerity.

"You don't have to go through that. You're not alone. You have all of us to help you if you'll let us." Lawrence said firmly.

Vincent looked down at his folded hands in his lap and mumbled, "Thanks..."

"Now all we have to do is find out what the grown-ups come up with." Cory said in a more relaxed voice.

"And then you let us know what you think about what they've decided." Sean said with a smile.

"And then we'll make sure things turn out the best for you." Lawrence said as he put an arm fully around Deacon.

"So is that your boyfriend?" Vincent asked in a hesitant voice.

"What do you say Deke? Are we ready to be boyfriends?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"I've been ready since the first day I met you." Deacon said gently.

Lawrence tightened the hug and said, "Yes. Deacon is my boyfriend."

Vincent watched Lawrence and Deacon looking into each other's eyes happily and, try as he might, couldn't find anything wrong with what he was seeing.

* * * * *

"I've been trying to find a time when the two of us could be alone to talk... but I'm not a patient person." Mona said as she and Brady walked away from the pool.

"Somehow, I can believe that." Brady said and glanced curiously at Mona.

"How do you feel about finding your long lost brother?" Mona asked seriously.

Brady smiled at the blunt question and said, "Having Allen as a brother is like an answer to a prayer. After years of being alone in the universe, I have a family again."

Mona nodded seriously thoughtfully before saying, "Brady, you're a good man. I can see that. I'd be proud if you'd consider me a member of your family too."

Brady stopped and looked at Mona with question and disbelief.

"I know it might be strange to think of me as your mother... but maybe if you thought about me like a step-mother or something... it doesn't matter. I'd just like for you to be a part of my family." Mona continued thoughtfully.

Brady froze in concentration and seemed to be looking at something only he could see.

"Unless that's too much for you to handle." Mona said with concern at Brady's distant look.

Brady snapped out of his thoughts and said, "Allen is really lucky to have such a loving mother. You're willing to open your heart to his adopted kids and now his long-lost brother."

Mona rolled her eyes and asked, "Do you wanna be my kid or not?"

Brady chuckled at Mona's irreverent tone and said, "Yes, I'd love to be your son."

"Good. Now that that's settled, tell me a little about you." Mona said as she started walking again.

"What would you like to know?" Brady asked, sounding much more casual than before.

"Where do you live? Do you have a girlfriend? What are your plans for the future?" Mona asked seriously.

"Oh, um, I've been keeping an apartment in San Francisco. I'm not there much since I'm usually off-planet. Now... well, I'm thinking of relocating to Orlando." Brady said thoughtfully.

"It would make perfect sense if you'd move in with Allen and the boys. And that way I could visit both my sons at once." Mona said firmly.

"I'd like that. Thanks Mom." Brady said with a teasing smile.

"Finally! I have a son who'll call me Mom. You need to work on your brother about that." Mona said with a chuckle.

"I don't understand why he doesn't call you Mom." Brady said curiously.

"I'm not really sure. He's always said that I look too young to be his mother." Mona said thoughtfully.

"Well, he's right about that. To see the two of you together, someone might think you were a couple, maybe brother and sister." Brady said consideringly.

"Bullshitting must be a Thompson family trait." Mona said with a chuckle.

"Maybe. But I'm serious. It doesn't matter either way, because I'm going to consider you my mother and call you Mom. Other people can think whatever they like." Brady said with a smile.

"Okay, now that that's settled, are you seeing anyone?" Mona asked firmly.

Brady looked away and didn't say anything.

"You're my youngest son now... my baby boy. I need to know these things." Mona said seriously.

"Yes. I'm seeing someone. But please don't ask me about it, that's all I can tell you at the moment." Brady said hesitantly.

"She's married, isn't she?" Mona asked suspiciously.

"No... well, kind of. He's married to his work. Please Mom, I promise I'll tell you everything when I can, just not yet." Brady said anxiously.

"I just need to know one thing, then I'll let it drop." Mona said as she looked into Brady's eyes.

Brady nodded hesitantly.

"Are you happy?"

Brady smiled and said, "Yes. I can't say I'm always happy with the way our jobs keep us apart, but we're working on that. As far as our relationship, yes, I'm very happy."

"Then that's all I need to know. Just promise me that when everything is settled, you'll bring your mystery man to meet me." Mona said firmly.

"I promise. I know you'll love him as much as I do." Brady said with a dreamy smile.

"Oh lord! You have exactly the same dopey smile as your brother when you're in love." Mona said, then broke into laughter.

"What about you? Are you seeing anyone?" Brady asked with a smile.

Mona gave a shy smile and said, "No. But... I... well..."

"Just spit it out Mom. Being shy and demure doesn't work for you." Brady teased.

"Well, I think Joe is really cute. The way he accepted Laura showed me that he really is a caring man who can see past the surface." Mona said timidly.

Brady's eyebrows went up in surprise, then a crafty smile fell across his face.

"What?" Mona asked hesitantly when she saw his expression.

"Nothing, I was just thinking about how nice it would be to have Joe as a step-father." Brady said with a smile.

"It's way too early for that. I'm just attracted to him and he hasn't given a single sign that he would even be interested." Mona said in warning.

"Don't worry Mom. The past week has proven to me that if things are meant to work out, they will." Brady said with a smile.

"Good. I thought for a second that you were going to try and set us up." Mona said with relief.

"If a situation presents itself where I can do something, I'll do whatever I can to help out. But I'm not going to scheme and plan anything to get you two together." Brady said warmly.

"Speaking of getting people together. We're planning to give Billy and Allen some time alone tomorrow night. I'm going to talk to Allen about it after dinner." Mona said seriously.

"Who is going to talk to Billy?" Brady asked curiously.

"Laura. She volunteered herself and Deacon to help out and make it a special evening." Mona said with a smile.

"That sounds nice. If there's anything I can do to help, just let me know." Brady said with a wistful smile.

"That's all for now. I just want your brother to be happy, and I think Billy is going to be the best one to do that." Mona said gently.

Brady thought about the statement, then said, "I think you're right."

* * * * *

"It looks like you know every travel agent in Florida." JC said with amazement.

"I travel a lot for my job. Look at this and tell me what you think." Billy said as he enlarged one window to fill the computer screen.

JC looked at the itinerary for a moment, then said, "So you booked their flight, then used your frequent flyer miles to upgrade them to first class?"

"Yeah, I want the guys to have a good time. I don't think either of them has ever flown before." Billy said with a smile.

"Well this should do it. What would you think about hiring a limo to pick them up from the airport?" JC asked with a smile.

Billy's eyes got wide at the thought, then he nodded happily.

"If you want, I can make the arrangements for you. I think I know everyone at the limo service by their first name now." JC said shyly.

"I keep forgetting that you're the famous 'JC from *NSync'. I've just been thinking of you as Allen's friend Josh." Billy said honestly.

"Thanks Billy. I'd rather be seen as a person than an image." JC said happily.

* * * * *

"Edovina needs to be changed. Ian, if you will accompany me, I will begin your instruction." Xain said seriously.

"Really? Um, yeah! Thanks!" Ian said as he jumped up from his seat.

Jake watched Xain and Ian walk away from the table with a loving smile.

"You seem so happy." Crystal observed, breaking Jake out of his contemplation of his mate.

"I am." Jake said as he turned his attention to Clint and Crystal.

"How? I mean... you've got a daughter and a boyfriend and you're living with a bunch of other people... it just seems... stressful." Clint said brokenly.

"I guess it could be if we didn't love each other." Jake said with a content smile.

"But Crystal and I love each other..." Clint trailed off in confusion.

"I mean all of us. My Dad and Mamacita love us and support us as a couple and help us with Vina. My brothers love us and are always willing to help us out... even if it's just by giving us some time alone." Jake said happily.

"Maybe that's what's bothering us. It feels like we never get time alone..." Clint said as he put an arm around Crystal.

"Have you told anyone about it?" Jake asked seriously.

"No. I didn't really understand what was causing the problem until just now." Clint said seriously.

"Is the problem with Ian or your parents?" Jake asked thoughtfully.

"I don't know. I guess it just feels like, even when we're alone, someone could walk in at any minute. It's not like they're watching us or trying to make sure we don't do anything, but it feels like we haven't been alone together in weeks." Crystal said in a voice filled with frustration.

"I can tell you what Xain and I did if you would like." Jake offered cautiously.

"Yes. Please." Crystal said, almost desperately.

"We just asked Dad if we could have some private time for the two of us. He understood and made sure our brothers wouldn't interrupt us. He was absolutely cool about the whole thing." Jake said happily.

"I think I'd be embarrassed to talk to Robin and Kayla about that... and I don't want Ian to get his feelings hurt." Crystal said worriedly.

Jake got a distant look on his face, then said, "Xain is going to have a talk with Ian about you two needing privacy. He probably needs privacy with Toby so I'm sure he'll understand."

Clint looked at Jake with question.

"We have a telepathic bond." Jake said with a smile.

"I bet that makes it a lot easier." Clint said with an apologetic look at Crystal.

"It's just communication. Whether I talk to Xain with my voice or through our bond, it's all the same. We just have to communicate." Jake said seriously.

"I see what you mean. You seem so happy and peaceful, I just want for us to be like you and Xain." Crystal said longingly.

"I think that if we can arrange some private time for the two of you, then everything else will work itself out. If you want, I could go with you now and talk to your parents about arranging it. Once they understand how important it is, I'm sure they won't have any problem." Jake said assuringly.

"Thanks Jake... It's funny, it feels like by doing this, we're moving from being boyfriend and girlfriend to being more of a real couple." Clint said thoughtfully.

"That's a good way of thinking about it. And with the babies on the way, I think you're moving in the right direction." Jake said happily.

"There's Robin and Kayla, let's go ask them now." Crystal said as she pointed toward the house.

* * * * *

The boy on the first bed awoke and looked around curiously.

Deacon saw the boy looking at him and said, "Hey there. How you doing?"

The boy looked at him with question and sleepily said, "Gomen nasai, waka rimasen."[3]

"Watashi no namae wa Deacon desu."[4] Deacon said gently, with a smile.

"Dozo yoroshiku. Watashi no namae wa Koji desu. O genki desu ka?"[5] The boy said with a smile.

"Hai, genki desu. Anata wa?"[6] Deacon asked cautiously.

"Byoki desu."[7] The boy said as he rubbed his abdomen with apparent discomfort.

"Watashi no namae wa Lawrence desu."[8] Lawrence said next.

"Since when do you speak... whatever that is?" Vincent interrupted from his bed.

"Japanese. And I speak it since my brothers taught me." Lawrence said with a smile at Vincent's puzzled look.

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3 "I am sorry. I do not understand."
4 "My name is Deacon."
5 "Pleased to meet you. My name is Koji. How are you?"
6 "I'm fine. And you?"
7 "I'm sick."
8 "My name is Lawrence."

Lawrence turned to Koji and asked, "Anata wa eigo o hanashimasu ka?"[9]

"Hai, sukoshi hanashimasu."[10] Koji said shyly.

Lawrence nodded.

"He... no speak... the Japanese?" Koji asked with difficulty as he looked at Vincent.

"No. His name is Vincent." Lawrence said, wanting to keep it simple.

"Vincent. Pleasure... to be... to meet you." Koji said brokenly.

"Yeah. Me too." Vincent said as a wave of nausea washed over him and he laid back on the bed.

"You okay Vince?" Lawrence asked with concern.

"I think I'm gonna puke." Vincent said through gritted teeth.

"Here's a trash can. Do you want me to call someone?" Sean said quickly and handed the can to Vincent.

"No." Vincent said into the trashcan.

"Koji, do you need anything?" Deacon asked as he focused on Koji again.

"Daijobu desu. I to be well." Koji said directing his English response to Vince who was watching from his bed with a trash can in his hands.

"Good..." Deacon began to say when the door opened and a Japanese man walked into the room.

"Konnichiwa." Deacon said automatically to the man.

The man looked surprised, then said, "Good afternoon."

"We'll leave you two alone to talk." Deacon said shyly and moved closer to Vincent's bed.

"Domo arigato gozaimasu." The man said formally and turned his attention to Koji.

"Do itashi mashite." Deacon said quietly, then turned his attention back to Vincent as the man pulled the curtain for privacy.

* * * * *

"She's in the lounge." Dr. Jenkins said as they walked down the hall.

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9 "Do you speak English?"
10 "Yes, I speak a little."

"Are you Dr. Jenkins?" A man asked quickly as he approached. He was followed by a grim looking woman who was moving more slowly.

"Yes I am. And this is Director Short of Federation Youth Services." Dr. Jenkins said professionally.

"Director Short? I thought our paths would cross one of these days. You're something of a hero back at the precinct." The man said with a smile.

"Then I take it that you're a police detective?" Teri asked pleasantly.

"Yes. Excuse me Director Short. I'm Detective Blair, I'm here to investigate an allegation of abuse of..." The detective trailed off, then pulled out a notebook to look up the name. "...Vincent Winters."

A clearing throat drew everyone's attention to the plain woman accompanying the police detective.

"And this is Ms. Rind from CPS." Detective Blair said with a note of irritation in his voice.

"So you're Director Short... I suppose I should just leave now." Ms. Rind said with a sneer.

Teri gave a predatory smile and said, "You don't have to leave on my account. I'm sure you won't get in my way."

"Well, to be honest, I'm not sure who has jurisdiction in this instance." Detective Blair said carefully, hoping to minimize the hostility coming from the two women.

"I have the authority and sufficient grounds to invoke the Federation's Safe Haven act and take Vincent into custody if I feel that's what's in his best interest. However, I would prefer to interview the mother and the child before taking that step." Teri said thoughtfully.

Ms. Rind shook her head in exasperation and said, "You stomp in here where you aren't wanted or needed and make decisions without a proper investigation or regard for the law."

Teri gave a Vulcanesque raise of one eyebrow in surprise before saying, "Well, I'd be happy to put my track record up against anyone at CPS, or for that matter, everyone at CPS. As far as the rest, I'm going in and doing the things that your department can't or won't do for these children. If you were really interested in the welfare of the children, you'd see that we could work together to help ALL the kids. None of them have to fall through the cracks..."

Ms. Rind looked at Teri as if she'd just smelled something bad.

"On the other hand, if you'd rather treat me as an enemy, I can play it that way too." Teri said with a shrug.

"So how do you want to do this?" Detective Blair asked Teri cautiously.

"Play it by ear. We'll talk to the mother and see if anything positive comes from that. I wouldn't get my hopes up, but... it's worth a try." Teri finished casually.

"What is the boy's condition?" Detective Blair asked Dr. Jenkins seriously.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to have this discussion in front of the mother. That way we don't have to repeat ourselves and she can understand just how much trouble she is in." Teri suggested somewhat firmly.

"I like your style Director Short." Detective Blair said with a smile.

Ms. Rind flashed Detective Blair a hateful glance.

"I would ask you to call me Teri, but I think my title might actually be more intimidating when we get in there." Teri said with a casual smile at the detective, ignoring the social worker completely.

"I see your point. When the official business is over, I will. And you'll be welcomed to call me OC." Detective Blair said with a warm smile.

"OC? What does that stand for?" Teri asked curiously.

"Nothing. On my birth certificate, my first name is O and my middle name is C. My parents couldn't agree on names for me and that was their compromise." Detective Blair said with a smile.

Teri looked at the Detective with question, prompting for more information.

"Dad wanted Otis Clarence and mom was pushing for Octavio Cantu. They decided to name me OC and that way I could decide when I got older. I decided that I like OC better than any of those names." Detective Blair finished with a chuckle.

"I see what you mean. I guess there's no more putting it off... Let's go talk to Mrs. Winters." Teri said in a voice of resignation.

* * * * *

"Hey Pop." Kenny said as he walked to Allen's side.

"What's up Cute Stuff?" Allen asked with a smile as he pulled Kenny to sit on his lap.

"Nothin. Kevin is talking with Dan. Jake is talking with that boy and girl. Xain is with Ian..." Kenny trailed off.

"Feeling a little left out?" Allen asked with sympathy.

"Maybe a little. I think I'm just worried about Kevin." Kenny admitted reluctantly.

"Well, you're welcomed to sit here with me." Allen said as he hugged Kenny gently.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Kenny said as he rested his head on Allen's shoulder.

A string of cars coming up the driveway drew everyone's attention.

"It looks like the rest of the guests are finally here." Chip said with a smile.

"Goodness. They came in a convoy." Jackie said in astonishment.

"I'm going to greet my guests. If you will just stay here, I'll bring them over in just a minute." Chip said as he stood.

As they watched Chip walk away, Spock said, "Mr. Thompson. I would like to voice my approval of your childcare techniques. After speaking with your sons Jake and Xain, I find your methods to be acceptable."

"Thank you Captain Spock. I am gratified by your acknowledgement. It is my hope that my sons will perform their duties adequately and bring honor to the house of Surak." Allen said formally.

"My house is improved by their inclusion." Spock said seriously.

"As they are improved by inclusion in your house." Allen said with a gentle smile.

"Hey Kenny, some of us were going down to the stable for a ride before dinner. Do you want to join us?" Jacob asked hopefully as he led a group of boys to the table.

"Yeah. Thanks guys." Kenny said quickly and hopped off Allen's lap.

* * * * *

"Mrs. Winters?" Teri asked as she entered the small lounge, followed by Dr. Jenkins, Detective Blair and Ms. Rind.

"How's my son? I thought you were done with him. Is something wrong?" Mrs. Winters asked with concern.

Dr. Jenkins gave Teri and Detective Blair an inquiring look.

Detective Blair looked at Teri and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Mrs. Winters. I'm Director Teri Short of Federation Youth Services, I spoke to you this morning regarding the abuse and abandonment of your son Lawrence. Right now I'm here in regard to the abuse your son Vincent has suffered." Teri said firmly.

"Alleged abuse." Ms. Rind said coldly.

"Abuse? He just fell on the stairs. We would never hurt Vincent, he's our baby. Please, you have to believe me." Mrs. Winters said in a trembling voice.

"I'm not here to debate the point Mrs. Winters." Teri said coldly, then turned to Dr. Jenkins and asked, "Can you tell us about Vincent's condition?"

"Yes. Our initial examination was for the injury that was causing the patient discomfort. To put it in layman's terms, he has a significant bump on the back of his head with a minor amount of bleeding. He's suffering from a moderate concussion which is effecting his thought processes and his vision to a small degree." Dr. Jenkins said seriously, then glanced at Teri.

"Kids fall and get hurt all the time. That doesn't prove anything." Ms. Rind said in nearly a growl.

"When the afternoon duty nurse made the connection between the advisory Director Short issued and the boy that we were treating, I immediately performed a cursory examination for signs of abuse then contacted her." Dr. Jenkins said in a careful tone.

"What did you find in that examination Doctor?" Detective Blair asked curiously.

"Indications of a beating, inflicted as recently as this morning. Several bruises on his abdomen and upper body of sufficient clarity to show the individual knuckles." Dr. Jenkins said and a note of disgust crept into his voice, then he handed a small handful of photos to Detective Blair.

"He could have gotten into a fight at school. There is no reason to believe that this has anything to do with abuse." Ms. Rind said defensively.

"Is that all the significant information?" Teri asked absently as she glared at Ms. Rind.

"Yes. I'll send each of you my full report when it's ready." Dr. Jenkins said to Teri, Detective Blair and Ms. Rind.

"I'll be making my own investigation into this. I want an independent CPS certified physician to examine the child." Ms. Rind said quickly.

"Now Mrs. Winters, here are the facts. Your son Lawrence was verbally and physically abused by your husband for a period of years, then he was physically thrown out of his home and left with no way to support himself. During an investigation to find Lawrence's biological father, telepathic testimony was taken that will serve as evidence in any criminal case that may arise." Teri said coldly, then said to Detective Blair, "I'll have those transcripts for you by tomorrow."

Detective Blair just nodded, astonished by Teri's commanding presence.

"In the matter of Vincent, I believe that since I put out an advisory in advance of the 'alleged' abuse..." Teri gave a significant look toward Ms. Rind. "...and in light of Dr. Jenkins' preliminary findings that there is more than enough evidence at hand to pursue a criminal case against Mr. Winters and possibly against Mrs. Winters as well."

Mrs. Winters looked at Teri with panic.

"Now I think you should have a long talk with Detective Blair and Ms. Rind to see if there is anything you can say to them that will convince them that you aren't an accomplice in the crimes committed against your children. After I've talked with Vincent, I'll make a decision regarding his custody." Teri said forcefully.

"You have no right to make that decision. This isn't a Federation matter so you should just butt out." Ms. Rind said angrily.

"Ms. Rind, you do whatever you feel you need to do to protect the interests of CPS and yourself, I'll do what I feel I must to protect the child. If you get in my way, I promise that you'll come away worse off for having had the experience." Teri said seriously, then turned to Detective Blair and said, "Detective, I'll be in Vincent's room when you're done."

CHAPTER 38

"Robin, Kayla, this is Jake." Clint said shyly as they approached.

"It's nice to meet you. Ian has mentioned you." Robin said with a genuine smile.

Jake looked at Robin with question.

"He just said that you have a Vulcan boyfriend. I'm not sure why, but Ian is fascinated with Vulcans." Robin said warmly.

"Xain is more than a Vulcan. He's a really good person." Jake said, a bit defensively.

"Hopefully Ian will see that for himself. If he can learn the lesson that generalizations about people don't define who they are, he should be able to adopt a more realistic view toward Vulcans." Robin said thoughtfully.

Jake smiled and said, "Yeah, I think you're right."

"Um, Jake and Crystal and I were talking about something and we thought we'd talk to you about it..." Clint trailed off, seeming to run out of steam.

"They need to have some private time as a couple." Jake said with a smile at Clint's embarrassed look.

"So do we." Kayla said frankly.

Jake looked at Kayla with question.

"Robin and I were talking about it today and realized that... basically, we miss each other." Kayla said with a helpless expression.

"Oh, I didn't think of that..." Crystal said, feeling like they were being a burden to their new parents.

"So it looks like you're all having the same problem. What can we do to fix it?" Jake asked as he carefully watched the expressions of the people around him.

"I don't know. I just feel like we need some time to be alone, just the two of us." Clint said helplessly as he looked at Robin and Kayla.

"I don't know if it will work, but why don't we just set aside an hour or so each night for us to just, be together. Everyone will know that the time is for all the couples to be alone. That way no one will have to worry about being interrupted." Robin said thoughtfully.

"What about Ian?" Kayla asked with concern.

Jake got a distant look for an instant, then said, "Ian wants to spend that time talking with Toby. He feels like they don't get to spend enough time together."

"They're together all day at school and most afternoons when they get home." Robin said incredulously.

"But it's never just the two of them. Someone else is always around. They need some time when they can talk privately, just like any other couple." Jake said as he broke out of his distant gaze.

"I didn't think of that. Well, it sounds like we've got a plan." Kayla said with a smile.

"Yeah. Thanks Jake. Here I thought we were going to have to get into a big detailed explanation about *why* we needed time together." Clint said with relief.

"I think this is going to be great. How about this? Tomorrow after dinner, all of us can spend an hour or so doing something as a family, then after that, we'll break off into couples and finish the evening that way?" Robin asked with a smile.

"That sounds soooo perfect." Crystal said with delight.

"Then it's a date!" Kayla said cheerfully.

"Xain and Ian are on their way back outside, I'll talk to you guys later." Jake said as he turned to leave.

"Thanks for all your help Jake." Clint said with honest gratitude in his expression.

"Anytime." Jake said with a peaceful smile as he walked toward the back door of the house to wait for Xain.

* * * * *

"Hey guys, how are things going?" Teri asked as she entered the room.

"Okay I guess, Mom, this is Vincent, Lawrence's brother. Vincent, this is my mom, Teri Short, the Director of Federation Youth Services." Cory said quietly.

"Um, what does that mean?" Vincent asked slowly.

"It's just a big title that means I help kids who need it." Teri said casually as she walked past the boys and took a seat in the chair beside Vincent's bed.

"So what are you going to do?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"First, I'm going to ask you what you want to do." Teri said simply.

"I just want to go home and be happy." Vincent said in a small, defeated voice.

"I wish I could do that for you Vincent, but I think you know that's not possible." Teri said quietly.

"What's going to happen to my dad?" Vincent asked in a fearful tone.

"As soon as the police detective is done here, I'm pretty sure your father is going to be arrested for what he's done to you and your brother." Teri said frankly.

Tears began to well up in Vincent's eyes.

"Vincent? I need you to listen to me now." Teri said and gently took his hand.

Vincent hesitantly looked into her eyes.

"I promise that I'll do whatever I can to help you and your family. To do that, the first thing I have to do is make sure that you're safe. Once I know that you aren't going to be hurt anymore, I'll do whatever I can to try and find out why your father is behaving the way he is." Teri said softly.

"Does that mean you won't make him go to jail?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"He probably *will* go to jail. There's not really anything I can do to prevent that. But I think that if I talk to a few friends, I might be able to have some medical and psychological tests run on your father to find out why he hurt you. Once we know that, then maybe there is a way we can help him." Teri said softly.

"Cory said something about me maybe going to a camp... is that what you want me to do?" Vincent asked in a worried voice.

"That's a possibility. I tell you what, if you want, I think I could arrange it so you could come home with me for a few days. Then we could talk about all your options and see what happens with your parents and the police. How do you feel about that?" Teri asked gently.

"Would I be able to talk to my mom and let her know where I am and that I'm okay?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Yes. That shouldn't be a problem. Let me make a quick call to get this arranged, then I'll see if your mother is allowed to come in and visit with you for a while." Teri said pleasantly.

"Okay." Vincent said softly.

"Mom, before you do that, Sammy and Sebastian are ready to make a report." Cory said quickly.

Teri smiled at her son, then looked at the twin boys and said, "Why don't you take a peek in my mind and just tell me what I haven't already figured out for myself."

Sammy and Sebastian looked at each other with question for an instant, then carefully looked into Teri's mind.

"I think you have everything that's important." Sebastian finally said carefully.

"Good. Now excuse me for a minute while I make a call." Teri said and quickly left the room.

"If you'll let me take a quick look at you, I'll see how you're doing." Dr. Jenkins said as he moved to Vincent's bedside.

Cory and the rest of the group stepped away from the bed to allow Dr. Jenkins free movement.

"Excuse me?" The Japanese gentleman asked quietly from behind Cory.

"Yes?" Deacon responded as he turned to face the man.

"I am Akemi Ishii. I would like to thank you for being nice to my son. He arrived here three weeks ago from Japan and it has been difficult for him. For him to have someone close to his age to talk to has made him very happy." The man said sincerely.

"Your welcome. If you wouldn't mind, I could give Koji my phone number so we can talk whenever he wants." Deacon said uncertainly.

"He is asleep now, but if you'll give it to me, I'll see that he gets it." Mr. Ishii said with a look of love directed at his son.

"We can give him all our numbers if that's okay. That way he can have lots of people to talk to." Cory said quietly.

"He speaks very little English. He said that you spoke Japanese." Mr. Ishii said to Deacon carefully.

"Yes. In fact, all us kids except Vincent in the bed over there can speak Japanese." Deacon said proudly.

"That will make him very happy. He's been extremely lonely here and I didn't know what to do to help him." Mr. Ishii said regretfully.

"Is he going to be okay?" Deacon asked, looking at Koji with concern.

"Yes. He has had a bad reaction to American fast food. His body cannot yet tolerate the amount of fat, sugar and salt that we are accustomed to. He has been living with the family of my late wife in Japan all his life and has only ever had traditional Japanese food. Now that his grandparents are too elderly to care for him, he has come to live with me..." Mr. Ishii said in a distant voice.

"Ishii-san, it sounds like your son isn't the only one having difficulty with adjusting to him being here. Maybe there's something we can do to help you both." Cory said seriously.

"I don't know what you could do to help." Mr. Ishii said in a lost voice.

"We'll figure it out..." Cory began to say when he was interrupted.

"*Toire wa doko desu ka?*"[11] Koji asked in a gasp.

Mr. Ishii quickly went to Koji's bedside and helped him to the bathroom.

"Good. That's what I was hoping for." Dr. Jenkins said as he watched from beside Vincent's bed.

Cory looked at Dr. Jenkins with question.

"Let's just say that Koji's medical problem just, um... worked itself out." Dr. Jenkins said with a smile.

"How is Vince?" Lawrence asked as he turned his full attention to the Dr. and his brother.

"Well, his marbles aren't all back in the bag yet. But the only treatment for what ails him now is rest." Dr. Jenkins said gently.

"What? Does that mean I can leave?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yes, as long as you aren't left alone. You may still have bouts of nausea and lightheadedness but they should get less and less severe as the day goes on... Also, no driving or operating heavy machinery for the next seventy-two hours." Dr. Jenkins said firmly, then broke into a smile.

Vincent looked at the doctor with confusion.

"Why is he allowed to tease the guy with the head injury when I'm not?" Lawrence asked in a playful voice.

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11 "Where is the toilet?"

"Because he's had years of medical training and knows when it's okay to play." Cory said with a smile.

Teri walked into the room and walked to Dr. Jenkins' side.

"Is everything settled?" Dr. Jenkins asked curiously.

"Just about. When will Vincent be able to leave?" Teri asked curiously.

"Whenever he has someplace to go." Dr. Jenkins said in a friendly tone.

"Then I guess I need to go talk with Mrs. Winters for a minute..." Teri began to say when the door opened again.

"Mom. Is everything okay?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I was going to ask you the same thing. How are you feeling baby?" Mrs. Winters asked as she walked to her son's side.

"My head hurts. I felt like I was going to throw up a few times, but I'm okay now." Vincent said seriously.

"Since you're past the worst of your symptoms, I can give you something for the headache now. I'll get it for you in just a minute." Dr. Jenkins said as he made some notes on Vincent's chart.

"Honey, I'm going to have to go with Detective Blair for a while and I don't know when I'll be back." Mrs. Winters said in nearly a whisper.

"Mrs. Winters..." Teri began to say.

"Peggy." Mrs. Winters said with a sad look at Teri.

"Peggy. If you would allow it, I'd like to take Vincent home with me tonight. That way you'll know that he's somewhere safe and you won't have to worry about it if you have to be away for a while." Teri said seriously.

"You mean you aren't going to take Vincent away from me?" Mrs. Winters asked in wonder.

"Not unless I have to. Until your husband is taken into custody, I don't think Vincent would be safe at your home. After that... well, let's just see how things work out. I'll give you my phone number so you can call Vincent and see how he's doing whenever you want." Teri said in a gentle voice.

"The child... both children need to be taken into state custody immediately." Ms. Rind said forcefully.

"Why? You seemed to believe Vincent was fine where he was when I left you." Teri asked with interest.

"In the interview, Mrs. Winters revealed that one of the children has undergone long term abuse. With her admission on record, I have no choice but to recommend immediate placement of both children into a state approved child care facility." Ms. Rind said with strength.

"Do you believe that Mrs. Winters is responsible for the crimes committed against her children?" Teri asked, not allowing Ms. Rind's hostility to influence her tone.

Teri glanced at Sammy and Sebastian to receive shakes of their heads as an answer.

"I would have to interview both children and conduct a full investigation before making that determination. While that is being done, the children should be in a state facility or state approved foster care." Ms. Rind said firmly.

"Ms. Rind. Peggy is as much a victim of the abusive situation as the children. Since she's chosen to stand up for herself and the children by cooperating, I don't see any reason for Vincent to be taken away from her..." Teri said, maintaining her pleasant, professional demeanor.

"She's not my concern. With the confirmation of abuse on record, the proper procedure is to take the children immediately into state custody. If you try to stop me, I'll have you arrested." Ms. Rind said forcefully.

Teri's pleasant expression dropped and she looked at Ms. Rind with icy determination in her eyes.

"Ms. Rind, you are a bureaucrat of the worst kind. You process these children into the system like you're an assembly line worker without getting to know them or feeling any type of concern for their individual needs. This child has a name. This is Vincent Winters. He's a person who has just been through a traumatic experience. The last thing he needs is to be ripped away from his mother by some soulless agent of the state. Do you have any idea of what will happen to him in your foster care system? Do you know how long and how much effort it will take for Mrs. Winters to get custody of him again when you're finished with him? Do you even care that he would be separated from everyone in his life that he turns to for safety and comfort?" Teri asked in a low icy voice.

"The matter of Lawrence's custody is settled and you have no authority to relocate him. And if you cared anything about Vincent at all, you would see that what I'm offering him is a chance to keep all the best and most important things in his life. Detective Blair and Mrs. Winters can be free to

do what they need to do about Vincent's father and not have to worry about Vincent's safety or emotional well-being..."

"Detective, make sure she doesn't leave. I'm going to get a court order to force her to turn the children over to my custody." Ms. Rind said forcefully as she pulled out a cell phone.

Teri rolled her eyes, then looked at the detective with question.

"She can't tell me what to do. If you decide to leave, I won't stop you." Detective Blair said frankly.

Teri smiled and said, "Thanks OC. It's tempting, but I wouldn't want to run out in the middle of a fight."

"Somehow I didn't think you would." Detective Blair said with a smile.

"What!?" Ms. Rind screamed into the phone.

"You can't be serious!" She said as Dr. Jenkins walked to her side.

"Would you please be quiet, this is a hospital." Dr. Jenkins said as he tried to gain her attention.

Ms. Rind ignored the doctor completely and turned to face Teri with a look of fury on her face.

"Jamie said 'no', didn't he?" Teri asked with an impish grin.

"This isn't over! I'm going to contact my supervisors and find a way to get those children into our custody where they belong!" Ms. Rind said vehemently.

"Please Ms. Rind. You need to either quiet down or leave." Dr. Jenkins said more insistently.

"This is official CPS business! You've examined the child and made your report so you can leave. I'm not done yet!" Ms. Rind screamed.

Dr. Jenkins went to the phone beside Vincent's bed and dialed a number quickly.

"Security? This is Dr. Jenkins. Would you please send someone up to escort a hysterical woman out of room 210?"

Ms. Rind turned her furious gaze on the doctor.

Dr. Jenkins then dialed another number and waited.

"You can't do that! I'm here on official business!" Ms. Rind ranted.

"Mr. Cummings? This is Dr. Jenkins. I'm having Ms. Rind from Child Protective Services escorted from the building for loud and disruptive behavior." Dr. Jenkins said seriously.

"That's right, 210" Dr. Jenkins said professionally.

"You have no authority over me! I represent Child Protective Services!" Ms. Rind screamed.

"Yes sir, I did. I asked her to speak more quietly twice and to leave once. " He said with a glance at Ms. Rind.

"Yes. Thank you Mr. Cummings. I'll tell her." Dr. Jenkins said with a smile, then hung up the phone.

Two uniformed security officers walked into the room and looked at the doctor expectantly.

"Ms. Rind. I just spoke to the hospital administrator. He's received several complaints about the noise coming from this room. Since I asked you to be quiet and you refused, you are being asked to leave the premises... and not return. You are banned from entering this hospital until further notice. Mr. Cummings is contacting your regional supervisor to make sure that other representatives of your organization won't behave as badly. Gentlemen, would you please escort Ms. Rind off the property?" Dr. Jenkins finished with an expectant look at the two officers.

The officers walked to Ms. Rind and stood on either side of her.

"Get away from me." Ms. Rind said and pushed one of the security officers out of her way as she stomped toward the door.

The security officer was caught off guard and lost his balance. He landed on his butt in the middle of the floor as everyone looked on in shocked silence.

"Excuse me Ms. Rind. But I am placing you under arrest." Detective Blair said seriously.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Ms. Rind said as she spun on her heel to glare at the detective.

"Ms. Rind. I'm placing you under arrest for assault on the person of this security officer, for criminal trespass since you refused to leave the premises when asked by a representative of the hospital, and for public indecency in the presence of minor children." Detective Blair said firmly.

"Mrs. Winters, if you'll wait here, I'll be back in a few minutes. Ms. Rind, either come with me now or I'll add resisting arrest to the charges." Detective Blair said firmly.

Ms. Rind saw his determined look and nodded that she would comply.

As Detective Blair walked her to the door, he said in a firm voice, "You have the right to remain silent..."

"When was she indecent?" Gabe asked with confusion.

"When she said the F word." Sammy said seriously.

"You can get arrested for that?" Gabe said with surprise.

"Yes. If you're an adult and you're saying it in front of a room full of children." Dr. Jenkins said frankly.

"Wow. I've always been told it was wrong, but I never thought you could get arrested for saying it." Gabe said in amazement.

"Is the crazy woman gone?" A voice called from the barely opened bathroom door.

"Yes Ishii-san. It's safe to come out now." Cory said with a smile.

"Director Short, this is Mr. Ishii and his son Koji." Deacon said formally.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both." Teri said gently.

"Koji, if you'll lay down on your bed. I'll have a look at you to see how you're doing." Dr. Jenkins said in a friendly voice.

Koji looked at the doctor with complete confusion.

Mr. Ishii quickly told Koji what the doctor had said and helped Koji into his bed.

"So, now that all the excitement is over, I just need to know that we're all agreed on what's going to happen." Teri said frankly as she looked from Mrs. Winters to Vincent.

"I'm going to go to the police station to make a formal statement. Detective Blair said that until my husband is arrested, I should find someplace safe to stay that he doesn't know about..." Mrs. Winters said thoughtfully.

"Do you know of someplace?" Teri asked with concern.

"Yes. I do." Mrs. Winters said quietly.

"Good. If it doesn't work out, just give me a call." Teri said and handed Mrs. Winters a business card.

"Thank you, I will." Mrs. Winters said as she looked at the card carefully.

"That's my number if you want to call to talk to Vincent." Teri said seriously.

"Thank you Director Short. I really thought you were going to take Vincent away from me..." Mrs. Winters finished in a trembling voice.

"If you had decided not to cooperate with the police, I would have taken Vincent into custody to protect him. But I can see that you have your priorities straight, so I'll be willing to work with you." Teri said honestly.

Mrs. Winters nodded but looked apprehensive.

"I promise that Vincent will be fine. Director Short is one of the people who helped me." Lawrence said with strength.

"Lawrence..." Mrs. Winters said with tear-filled eyes.

Lawrence looked at his mother, then quickly around the room.

"Come on. I think we need to talk." Lawrence said firmly.

Mrs. Winters hesitantly followed Lawrence out into the hall.

* * * * *

"Did we miss much?" JC asked as he and Billy joined the group by the pool.

"Not much, your beloved is just greeting the new arrivals out in the driveway." Allen said as he smiled at JC.

JC watched as Chip led a group of people away from the cars.

"I'm glad everyone came. It's been quite a while since we've been able to get everyone together." JC said with a peaceful smile.

"I just hope no one is going to expect me to remember everyone's name." Allen said as he looked at the approaching group.

JC laughed and said, "I'm sure they'll be having the same concern. Just relax, this is a party."

Allen smiled and waited expectantly.

* * * * *

Mrs. Winters looked at Lawrence with tears in her eyes and said, "I should have done this two years ago. I should have called the police the first time your father hit you."

Lawrence looked at his mother with cold regard for a moment, then said, "But you didn't."

Mrs. Winters looked at her oldest son with pain in her eyes.

"I have a wonderful, happy life now. I hope that when this is all over with, you and Vince will have a wonderful and happy life too." Lawrence said thoughtfully.

"I love you." Mrs. Winters said to her son as tears ran down her cheeks.

"But not enough to fight for me or protect me."

"I couldn't... your father..."

"Not my father, your husband. My father is a Lieutenant in Starfleet. My father loved me enough to leave me with you and your husband because he thought it would give me the best possible future. He loves me so much that I know without a doubt that he would fight to defend me."

"I'm sorry." Mrs. Winters said in a whisper.

"If you really are sorry, you can make it up to me by taking good care of my brother. Give him all the love you never gave me, protect him like you never protected me. If you'll do that, I'll consider us even." Lawrence said in a hollow voice.

"Please Lawrence, I'm your mother." Mrs. Winters begged.

"You have a son who loves you and wants to be with you. Protect him, defend him, and be the mother that he needs you to be. Your husband threw me out while you watched. You had a choice to make and you chose to do nothing. I stopped being your son that day. I'll make sure Vince is okay. I'm his big brother, so I'm going to do my best to help him have a better life than I did." Lawrence said firmly.

"Do you two need a few minutes?" Detective Blair asked cautiously as he approached.

"No. We're finished." Lawrence said with a tone of finality and walked into Vincent's room.

Mrs. Winters hung her head as her tears continued to fall.

"Do you want to go say goodbye to Vincent before we leave for the station?" Detective Blair asked quietly.

"Yes, thank you." Mrs. Winters said as she wiped her eyes.

* * * * *

Brady and Mona took their places back at the table as the new mass of people approached them.

JC watched the group approach and noticed something odd.

The people seemed to be moving in formation, as if they were protecting someone at the center of the group.

"Angel, would you make introductions while I get started cooking?" Chip asked with an impish grin.

JC rolled his eyes and said, "I suppose, but you'll owe me one."

"Later..." Chip said with a delighted smile and a wink.

JC stood and said, "Allen and Brady Thompson, Mona Bridson, Billy Pierce and Joe Bowers I'd like for you to meet Dr. Austin Michaels and his wife Carrie, Cecil and Angela Evans..."

As the group parted, JC trailed off as his eyes went wide.

"Mom?" JC asked in shock.

"Surprise!" Karen Chasez said with a grand smile.

JC ran to her and enveloped her in a firm hug.

Chip watched Karen and JC from the barbecue grill, feeling a rush of contentment wash over him.

"How? I thought you had some big trip planned and couldn't come?" JC asked with the beginnings of tears in his eyes.

"This was my big trip. Chip wanted it to be a surprise." Karen said as she held her son tightly.

JC chuckled and glanced at Chip to find him watching with an expression of love and accomplishment.

"Even after all this time, he can still surprise me." JC said with absolute joy.

"I think that means he's a keeper." Karen whispered into JC's ear.

JC chuckled and renewed his hug with his mother as he said, "I think you're right."

* * * * *

"Okay, that didn't sound good." Sean said as he watched Lawrence and Mrs. Winters leave the room.

"Koji, I think you're going to be fine. Just cut back on the high fat foods for a little while until your body has time to adjust." Dr. Jenkins said seriously.

Mr. Ishii relayed the message to his son and Koji nodded to the doctor shyly in agreement.

"Mom, Koji just came to live here three weeks ago and I think Mr. Ishii could probably use some help dealing with things." Cory said hopefully.

Teri looked at Mr. Ishii and said, "You'll have to excuse my son. He has the best intentions, but he isn't always tactful."

Mr. Ishii looked at Cory with a fond smile and said, "As much as I hate to admit it, your son is right. I have been living as a bachelor for the past ten years and know nothing of how to be a father."

"Mr. Ishii..." Teri began.

"Please call me Kem." He said quickly.

"Thank you Kem, and please call me Teri. I know a child psychologist that could probably help Koji adjust to being in a new country." Teri said as she wrote Dan's number on the back of her business card.

"Perhaps that would be best. Koji has been withdrawn and very alone since he arrived. I hope his limited English won't be a problem." Kem said with concern.

"We'll let Dan and Koji work that out. I know about thirty boys who speak fluent Japanese, so I don't think it will be too big a problem." Teri said with a smile as she handed the business card to Kem.

"Thirty?" Kem asked in surprise.

"It's a long story. That's my card. I think it would be good if we could arrange a time when Koji could come over and visit with the boys. Dan's number is on the back, tell him I sent you and I'm sure he'll be able to work you in." Teri said with a smile.

"Thank you very much Teri." Kem said as he reverently put the business card in a case he kept in his chest pocket.

* * * * *

"Hey Dad, did we miss anything?" Jake asked as he and Xain walked to the table where Allen and Brady were sitting comfortably.

"Just a whole bunch of people. How are you guys doing?" Allen asked as he motioned for Xain to hand Edovina to him.

Xain carefully transferred the baby into Allen's waiting arms.

"We're fine. I'm just starting to get hungry." Jake said honestly.

"Well, Chip is over there working on cooking the meat, so it shouldn't be too long now." Allen said with a glance at Chip.

"So what are you guys going to do now?" Brady asked casually.

"Well, since Dad has Vina, I think it would be nice if Xain and I just walked around and looked at this place for a while. It's really beautiful here." Jake said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, in fact, I was thinking about asking Josh and Chip if I could do a photo shoot here. The architecture, landscaping and decorating are all just beautiful." Billy said as he looked around.

"My nephew is very proud of his home. Rightly so, I might add. I don't think Chip or Josh would have any problem with you taking some pictures." Jackie finished speculatively.

"I'll ask them later when they're free." Billy said with a smile as he noticed JC talking a mile a minute with his mother.

* * * * *

"Oh good, you're still here. I brought some pain medication for Vincent." Dr. Jenkins said as he hurried into the room.

"Thank you, my head is really hurting." Vincent said in a small voice.

"Mr. Cummings caught me in the hall and had to get the whole story about Ms. Rind. Here Vincent, this should make you feel better. But it might make you a little sleepy." Dr. Jenkins said as he handed Vincent a small cup with some pills in it.

"No driving. No heavy machinery." Vincent said with a pained smile.

"Right, for seventy-two hours." Dr. Jenkins said as he poured Vincent a glass of water.

"Do we need to get any prescriptions for Vincent?" Teri asked the doctor seriously.

"No, if he has any problems with pain, just give him some non-aspirin pain reliever." Dr. Jenkins said in a friendly voice.

"Thank you doctor. You've been very helpful." Teri said with gratitude.

"No, thank *you*. Ms. Rind has been a royal pain in the backside of nearly every doctor in this hospital. I'm just honored to have been present when she met her match." Dr. Jenkins said with a smile.

"So you're going to have a new story to tell around the water cooler this week." Teri said with a chuckle.

"Yes. Unless I decide to throw a party to commemorate the occasion... where could I find the sheet music to 'Ding Dong the Witch is Dead'?" Dr. Jenkins asked in mock consideration.

Teri laughed and said, "We'll leave you to plan your party, unless there is anything else we need to know for Vincent?"

Dr. Jenkins looked at Vincent, then noticed that Kem and Koji were also listening.

"No. Vincent and Koji both need to rest, and neither should go to school the rest of the week. If either has significant pain or any symptoms that are causing you concern, feel free to call me." Dr. Jenkins said gently.

"Thank you. We're going to a cook-out this afternoon. Will Vincent be able to eat with everyone else, or should he stay in bed?" Teri asked seriously.

"It depends on how he feels. If he wants to sit at the table, that's fine. I doubt that Vincent will feel like eating very much, but with boys, you can never tell. I had a patient recovering from pneumonia who put away two racks of ribs. He swore that they made him feel better than any medicine that I gave him." Dr. Jenkins said with an amused smile, then turned to Kem and Koji and said, "The same goes for Koji, if he's hungry, he should eat, if he's tired he should sleep."

"Thank you Doctor." Kem said sincerely.

"Your very welcome. Now both my patients are free to leave. Let me know if you have any problems." Dr. Jenkins said with a smile as he walked toward the door and passed Lawrence who was entering.

* * * * *

"How are you doing?" Allen asked with concern as he saw Dan and Kevin approaching.

"I'm fine." Kevin said with a happy smile.

"I'm glad." Allen said, then glanced at Dan with question.

"Why don't you go find one of your brothers?" Dan asked Kevin in a leading tone.

"Kenny is down at the stable, Jake and Xain are just walking around." Allen said quickly.

"I'll see if I can catch Kenny. I'd like to ride some more." Kevin said happily and took off running toward the stable.

Allen watched Kevin run off, then looked at Dan with question.

"You have a very complex boy there Allen." Dan said seriously.

"How is he?" Allen asked, now with full worry in his voice.

"Lucky." Dan said frankly as he pulled up a chair from a neighboring table.

"Just spit it out." Mona said firmly as she scooted her chair closer so she could hear.

"You must be Kevin's grandmother." Dan said with a smile.

"Yes. How is he?" Mona said, none too pleasantly.

Dan smiled at the woman's irreverent tone and said, "He's headstrong, stubborn, single-minded and extremely focused."

Mona gave Dan a 'duh' look, and waited for the punch line.

Dan noticed Mona's expression and nearly chuckled.

"Under all that will-power and determination is a naive, frightened little boy who feels like his entire world was pulled out from under him." Dan said, now more seriously.

"What can we do for him?" Brady asked with concern.

"Just what you're doing. You've moved him out of a horrible home environment into a place of love and safety. On top of that, you've brought the people in his former life who provided any sense of security for him here to Florida." Dan said happily.

One glance at Mona told Dan that he needed to continue... now.

"The only thing that I'll suggest is that you try to understand that if Kevin does something that might be considered 'acting out' in another child, it may be something very different with him. Kevin is not a typical child. Developmentally, he's all over the place. He has the emotional complexities of an adult, while at the same time, he has the problem solving skills of a young child. On top of that he has a level of tenacity that is almost frightening. Put it all together and the outcome is impossible to predict." Dan said honestly.

"Thanks Dan. What I saw this afternoon worried me. I mean, I think he's *really* in love with Chip. Not just a crush or puppy love." Allen said with concern.

"He is. We talked at length about that and I think we've got it covered. We discussed some 'appropriate' ways that he can express his love for Chip." Dan said with an introspective look.

"So he's still in love?" Brady asked hesitantly.

"Oh yes. I doubt that that's going to change anytime soon. But now he's going to try to express his love in a way that's appropriate for an eleven year old toward his Uncle." Dan said seriously.

Allen nodded thoughtfully.

"Just a suggestion though. You might want to set some extra money aside for Kevin to buy Chip's Christmas gift." Dan said with a smile.

Allen thought about it for a second, then said, "I can guess how important that's going to be for Kevin, so I'll see to it that he can get Chip something nice."

Dan smiled with relief and said, "I'm glad you understand. Now that the professional business is out of the way, let me get John over here so I can introduce him to you all."

* * * * *

Mrs. Winters and Detective Blair entered the room and crossed to the bed where Vincent was getting up.

"Baby, I'm going to be going now." Mrs. Winters said softly to Vincent.

"Don't worry momma. Lawrence said he'll make sure that I'll be okay. I think I believe him." Vincent said seriously.

Mrs. Winters looked sadly at Lawrence and said, "I think you *should* believe in your brother. He's a fine young man and I hope that you'll be able to grow up to be like him someday."

Lawrence looked at his mother with complete surprise.

"Really?" Vincent asked in disbelief.

"Really. I'll be calling Director Short later tonight, probably after you go to bed. I'll leave a phone number where you can call me if you need to talk. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know what's going on." Mrs. Winters said with tears in her eyes.

"I'll be okay. Lawrence said so." Vincent said softly, trying to comfort his mother.

"Then it must be true. I've never known Lawrence to lie about anything. Bye baby, I love you." Mrs. Winters said softly, then leaned down and kissed Vincent on the cheek.

"Bye momma, I'll talk to you tomorrow." Vincent said with tears starting to form in his eyes.

Mrs. Winters moved slowly away from the bed, then looked at Lawrence hesitantly.

Lawrence gave her a small nod and was quickly enveloped in a tight hug.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She whispered into his ear.

"So am I." Lawrence whispered in return as he felt a tear falling down his cheek.

Mrs. Winters abruptly broke the hug and pulled back to look Lawrence in the eyes.

"I *do* love you." Mrs. Winters said firmly.

Lawrence looked at his mother through his teary eyes and said in a whisper, "I love you too mom."

Mrs. Winters turned to Detective Blair and said, "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I'm ready now."

"Yes Ma'am." Detective Blair said professionally as he led the way out of the room.

"Are you guys ready to go now?" Teri asked, hoping to break the somber mood that had fallen over the room.

"Yeah." Vincent said without enthusiasm.

"I will call to set up a time when Koji can visit later this week." Kem said gently as he helped Koji out of the bed.

"I don't know where they put my clothes." Vincent said as he looked around.

Lawrence looked at his brother in the hospital gown and couldn't help but laugh.

"What's so funny?" Vincent asked suspiciously.

"Look who's wearing the dress now." Lawrence said, then broke into full laughter.

Vincent tried to keep a gruff expression on his face, but finally smiled and said, "Mom said I should follow your example."

All the boys broke up in laughter at the statement.

CHAPTER 39

"How are you feeling Vincent?" Lawrence asked with concern.

"My head hurts a little but it's getting better." Vincent said in a small voice.

"You can move over here and sit between us if you want." Deacon offered quietly.

Vincent looked at Deacon and Lawrence for a second, then said, "No. That's okay."

Deacon nodded, then casually put an arm around Lawrence.

A beeping sound from the front seat drew everyone's attention.

"This is Cory, go ahead." Cory said into his communicator.

"A cop from Chicago just called. They found Gloria Harris." Tommy said seriously.

"Where is she?" Cory asked in a tone of voice that was all business.

"Provo, Utah. She was drunk, in a stolen car and ran a stop light. When the cops tried to stop her, she tried to outrun 'em... she ended up ramming a police car that was blocking the road."

"Was anyone hurt?" Cory asked in deep thought.

"She put one cop in the hospital but he's gonna be alright."

"Anything else?" Cory asked seriously.

"The cop said that they're not gonna try to extradite her to Chicago. If we want her, we need to talk to Utah."

"Got it. I'll talk to Kenny and Kevin about what they want to do when we get back. We're about ten minutes away." Cory said firmly.

"I'm thinkin Kevin and Kenny are down to the stable ridin. You want I should go and get 'em." Tommy asked curiously.

"No. Let them have fun. I'll talk to them after I've checked out our legal options." Cory said thoughtfully.

"I can get Justy on that if you want." Tommy offered.

"No. I'm giving Justy the day off so he can enjoy his time with Dean. I'll take care of it myself." Cory said with a small smile.

"Okay, Uncle Chip's started cookin, so y'all best be hurryin up." Tommy said playfully.

"I'll tell mom to step on it. Cory out." Cory said with a chuckle.

"Tommy out." Tommy said with amusement.

* * * * *

"Allen? Pete and Jono are going to be here Saturday. I need to go ahead and buy your other house." Billy said thoughtfully.

"Don't you want to see it first?" Allen asked cautiously, then noticed that Mona was holding out her hands to him.

After a moment, Allen realized what she wanted and handed Edovina to her.

In a distracted voice, Billy said, "No. If you say it's nice, that's good enough for me. Besides, I don't have any time to waste. I'm going to have to get furniture and stuff for them before they get here... I don't know if I'll have time to get everything taken care of..."

"If you're willing to trust me, I could take care of it for you." Allen said seriously.

"You've got too much going on already, the last thing you need is something else to worry about." Billy said frankly.

"Trust me?" Allen asked with a gentle smile.

Billy nodded and responded with a smile of his own.

Allen pulled out his cell phone and started looking through his phone book.

After a few seconds of searching, he pushed a button and held the phone to his ear.

"Hello. Is Damon there? Tell him it's Allen Thompson." Allen said, then glanced at Billy and smiled again.

"I'm fine, thank you. Actually, I've called to ask you a favor..." Allen began to say, but was interrupted.

Billy chuckled as he watched a blush wash over Allen's face.

"As nice as that sounds..." Allen sputtered and glanced at Billy shyly before continuing, "...I was calling to ask for a *business* favor."

"That's right. I moved into a new house last weekend. A friend of mine is buying my old house and it needs to be furnished and decorated by Saturday... Are you up to it?" Allen finished with a smile.

"I bet you are." Allen said with a chuckle, then glanced at Billy again.

"Okay, this is being set up for two guys in their early twenties with a skater or surfer type of personality." Allen said, then glanced at Billy with a raised eyebrow.

Billy smiled and nodded at the generalization.

"Cost isn't an issue. Keep it casual, fun and masculine..." Allen trailed off and looked at Billy with question.

Billy nodded again, amused at how easily Allen was taking care of the situation.

"That's it. You've already seen the house. I'll drop a key off to you in the morning so you can do whatever you need to do. I'm leaving all the details up to you." Allen said in a serious, business tone.

"I'll tell you later. I'm at a party right now and can't talk. Call Bobby and Eric, they can fill you in." Allen said in a happy voice.

"Okay, I'll see you in the morning. Take care." Allen said with a smile.

Allen put away his phone and said, "There, it's all taken care of."

"I'm guessing that whoever you were talking to is an interior decorator." Billy said cautiously.

"Yes. Damon is one of my friends. He's really good at interior design, you just have to specify 'masculine' because he tends to go a little bit frilly and dainty in his designs." Allen said as he relaxed back into his chair.

"I'll remember that." Billy said as he also relaxed.

"Don't worry. I'm willing to bet that you'll love what he comes up with, he really is good." Allen said seriously.

"I trust you. I guess I'm just a little too much of a control freak to be comfortable with doing what you just did." Billy said shyly.

Allen laughed and said, "As casual and laid back as you seem on the surface, there's really a hard-working, controlled person inside."

"Yeah." Billy said in a mumble.

"I'm not complaining Billy. Actually, it's perfect. I think I'm kind of the opposite." Allen said with an impish grin.

"What do you mean?" Billy asked cautiously.

"I don't know how everyone else sees me, but I feel like I project a... conservative image?" Allen asked with difficulty.

Billy nodded slightly.

"Outside I try to be tidy, organized and in control. But when no one is looking, when I'm just being me, I like to take chances, let things happen, let go of control and feel the excitement of doing something spontaneous."

Billy smiled and said, "Like the birthday party."

Allen nodded.

"So what you're saying is that we're kind of like opposites." Billy asked carefully.

"Maybe, I think it's more like we're two people who compliment each other." Allen said with a smile.

Billy looked deeply into Allen's eyes and hesitantly moved a fraction of an inch closer.

"Kiss him." Mona said firmly.

Allen broke the gaze with Billy and looked at his mother with question. He hadn't realized that she'd been listening.

"Either you kiss that man this minute, or I'm going to steal him away for myself." Mona said firmly.

Allen looked at Billy with question to find a look of amusement in his eyes.

"Do you mind?" Allen whispered.

Instead of answering, Billy leaned in and gave Allen a full, deep kiss.

"It's about time." Mona said with exasperation.

"You probably should have let them go at their own pace." Brady said with an embarrassed glance at his brother.

"Who has time for that? Your brother is just too timid for his own good." Mona said seriously.

"What do you think Joe? Did mom do the right thing?" Brady asked with a smile.

Joe looked away from Allen and Billy, who had stopped kissing and were just looking into each other's eyes.

"I think so. At least Billy and Allen don't seem to mind." Joe said, then glanced back at the couple.

Mona gave a warning glance at Brady, then said, "I spent over twenty-five years of my life getting Allen to this point, don't think I'm going to let him screw it up now."

Joe laughed at the statement and looked at Mona with admiration.

"How would you feel about going somewhere tomorrow night?" Billy asked, then glanced at Mona and continued, "Just the two of us."

Allen chuckled and said, "That sounds great. I just need to make sure that Juana can watch after the kids."

"Oh yeah... I don't want to leave Deke and Laura alone..." Billy said thoughtfully.

"Allen. Kenny and Kevin are staying at Teri's tomorrow night. Jake and Xain will be enjoying an evening alone in the house, Juana and her kids will be in the apartment if they need anything." Mona said seriously.

Allen just looked at Mona with question.

"Deacon and Laura will be having their own date at your house Billy. I'm sure both couples would appreciate it if you two would consider going to a hotel after your date tomorrow night." Mona said frankly.

"How?..." Billy trailed off in confusion.

Mona rolled her eyes and said, "Don't ask. Just accept it."

Billy nodded hesitantly, then looked into Allen's eyes and saw the amusement within.

"I'm guessing that your inner-control freak is having a little trouble with Mona's match-making technique." Allen said with a smile.

"Yeah, that's it." Billy said with a chuckle.

"Well, I think she's right. We can go on our date and trust that Mona has everything else taken care of." Allen said as he looked deeply into Billy's eyes.

"Okay. It just feels strange for someone else to make decisions for me like this." Billy said cautiously.

"Don't get used to it. I'm just getting you two set on the right track, then I'm out of it." Mona said firmly.

"So where will you be staying tomorrow night?" Brady asked Mona carefully.

"Oh... I guess I didn't think of that. I'll need to check to see if Teri has room for me at her place." Mona said thoughtfully.

Billy looked at Joe and gave an urging look, as if to say, 'Here's your chance! Go for it!'.

Hesitantly Joe said, "Mona? Maybe the two of us could go out and do something tomorrow night?"

Mona looked at Joe with complete surprise.

"I mean, it sounds like you don't have any other plans and I don't..."

"Yes." Mona said with a warm smile.

"Yes?" Joe squeaked in shock.

Mona giggled and said, "Yes."

"Then it's a date." Joe said proudly.

Mona nodded at Joe, feeling incredibly young.

* * * * *

"What was that all about?" Vince asked curiously.

"I don't know for sure." Lawrence said and glanced at Sean, silently asking for an explanation.

"Kenny and Kevin's mother abandoned them. Since then we've been trying to find her. Now she's in Utah where it looks like she's going to be staying for a long time... unless we get involved." Sean said seriously.

"What are you going to do?" Deacon asked curiously.

"Well, it's hard to say until we've been able to see what our legal options are. If there is some way to get the charges of abandonment and neglect transferred to Utah, then we'll probably just do that and leave her there. Otherwise, we may need to have her case moved into a Federal or Federation court to be sure that she's tried on all the charges against her." Cory said thoughtfully from the front seat.

"If that's what Kenny and Kevin want." Sean interjected.

At Lawrence's questioning look, Sean continued, "This isn't about punishing her, it's about getting justice for Kenny and Kevin. Once we know what they consider justice, we'll do our best to see that it ends up so that they're satisfied. If they want to let it drop, we'll just back off and stay out of it."

"So she might get away with what she did to Kevin?" Deacon asked cautiously, sounding very unhappy at the prospect.

"She's going to spend a long time in jail however it works out. The only thing our getting involved is going to effect is to determine whose jail and for how long." Sean said thoughtfully.

"What did she do to him?" Vincent asked curiously.

"She didn't feed him. His whole life he's never had enough to eat. Kevin is eleven years old, but he's smaller than you are Vincent." Cory said seriously from the front passenger seat.

"Why did she do that? I mean, is it because she didn't have enough money to buy food?" Vincent asked carefully.

"That's what I thought when I first read JJ's report, but the evidence doesn't support that reasoning. By everything I've found out about Kevin's mother, she just didn't care. She used her money to take care of herself and if there was anything left over after her own wants and needs were met, she *might* buy something for Kevin to eat." Cory said thoughtfully.

"The point is, Kevin was neglected. Even if she couldn't afford to feed him, she could have found ways to get food for him. There are charities that will help families in need. She could have even gone to Kevin's father for help or to offer him custody of Kevin... But she didn't." Sean said firmly.

"Vincent, look. This is where we're having dinner." Lawrence said as he pointed at Southcrest just coming into view.

"Is it a hotel?" Vincent asked as he pressed his face against the window so he could see everything.

Gabe laughed at the question and said, "That's Uncle Chip's house."

Vincent looked away from the window for an instant to try and determine if Gabe was serious.

"For real. I promise." Gabe said with a smile.

"Wow. I don't know any rich people. Am I dressed right?" Vincent asked as he looked down at his jeans and T-shirt.

"Don't worry, you're fine. Look at the rest of us." Gabe said with a smile.

Vincent looked around to see that no one was dressed any better or worse than he was.

"Vince, do you feel well enough to go out by the pool for a while or do you want to lay down inside?" Teri asked softly.

"Pool?" Vincent asked with excitement, then said with distraction, "Um, I'm okay. My head just hurts a little."

"Okay. But if you start feeling bad, you've got to tell me right away. Is it a deal?" Teri asked seriously.

"Yes Ma'am." Vincent said shyly.

"Please call me Aunt Teri." She said with a gentle smile.

Vincent nodded but remained silent.

"Guys, you heard what the doctor said, Vincent could become light headed or nauseous at any time. I'm going to trust you to see that he isn't left alone." Teri said in her motherly, commanding voice.

"We'll take care of him Mom." Sean said seriously.

Teri nodded and said, "Then go ahead and show him around. Come and get me if he starts to feel bad."

"Got it." Cory said as he opened his door to get out.

"Come on Vincent. I want you to meet Uncle Josh and Aaron." Gabe said quickly as he climbed down out of the hummer.

Vincent started to follow, then looked hesitantly back at Lawrence.

"I'm here if you need me. Go and have fun." Lawrence said with an encouraging smile.

Vincent nodded with a confused look, then followed Gabe toward the pool.

"How are you doing Lawrence?" Sean asked with concern.

"Better than I thought I would be." Lawrence said as he hugged Deacon to his side.

"Is Vincent being here going to be a problem for you?" Teri asked gently.

"No. All this time I've been thinking that Vincent was evil and hateful... it turns out that he just believed everything that he was told. I think that it's a good thing that he's here. Maybe he'll start to un-learn some of the stuff that his dad taught him." Lawrence said seriously.

"That's a very mature attitude Lawrence. I'm proud of you." Teri said with a smile.

"But if he calls Lawrence a 'sissy fag' again, I'm throwing him in the pool." Deacon said firmly.

Teri laughed and said, "Just remember that he's had a head injury."

"We'll throw him gently." Lawrence said with a mischievous grin at Deacon.

* * * * *

In a distracted voice, Billy said, "I really need to call Pete and Jono back and let them know what's going on."

"That's a good idea." Allen said in a dreamy whisper.

Billy looked at Allen's contented expression and felt a fresh wave of love wash over him at the sight.

Hesitantly, Billy stood and walked away from the gathering before opening his cell phone and placing the call.

"Jono?" Billy said in a peaceful voice.

"Yeah, it's all set. I emailed all the details to you. Just pack a few suitcases with the stuff that you want to bring. If you have any big stuff to ship, go ahead and send it to my address." Billy said, then glanced at the group at the tables to find Allen turned in his chair, watching with a loving gaze.

Billy smiled happily at the sight, then turned his attention back to the call, "No, you don't need anything like that. Just your clothes and anything personal that you want to keep like pictures and stuff."

After a pause, Billy said, "Jono! Stop. Breathe. Rewind. Play at normal speed."

Billy smiled as he waited, then listened intently.

"That's better. No, you don't need sleeping bags. You'll each have your own bed, in fact, you'll each have your own room." Billy said with a smile.

"Hey Petey, what happened to Jono?" Billy asked with confusion.

After a chuckle, Billy said, "You'd better go ahead and help him burn off some of that energy before he hurts himself. Just check your email and be at the airport on time. Everything is handled."

"Shit Petey, just chill and go with it. All you gotta do is pack your shit and get here. Got it?" Billy said firmly.

"Good. See ya Saturday." Billy said with a smile, then turned off his phone.

Billy smiled to himself and chuckled as he walked back to the tables by the pool.

* * * * *

Justy led Dean to the table where his Aunt Jackie was sitting.

"Aunt Jackie, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend Dean." Justy said, trying to sound less scared than he really was.

Jackie looked at Justy's apprehensive look and Dean's timid expression carefully before saying, "It's nice to meet you Dean. Josh has told me all about you. I'm glad you two are finally an official couple."

"Thank you." Dean said shyly.

Justy looked at Jackie hesitantly for an instant, making sure that she really approved before he moved in and gave her a tight hug.

"Thanks Aunt Jackie." Justy whispered into her ear.

"All I want is for you to be happy. From what Josh has told me, Dean can do that for you." Jackie said warmly.

Dean felt a glow of contentment at the feeling of being accepted.

"Now why don't you two pull up some chairs and tell me what's been going on with you. Sooner or later Josh and Karen are going to notice that we're here and want to spend some time with us." Jackie said playfully, then glanced at JC and his mother still chattering away, oblivious to everyone around them.

"Probably later." Jackie said with a chuckle, then turned her attention to Justy and Dean.

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Gabe led Vincent to the poolside and quickly said, "Vincent, this is Aaron Carter and David Gallagher."

"You're wet." Vincent said as he looked at Aaron seriously.

"Yeah. I just went for an unexpected swim. You're Lawrence's brother aren't you?" Aaron asked with a smile.

"Um, yeah. David, weren't you in that Richie Rich Christmas movie?" Vincent asked with distraction.

"That was a few years ago. Now I'm on 7th Heaven." David said proudly.

"Oh, I've heard of that show. That's one of those soap operas for teenage girls isn't it?" Vincent asked seriously.

David and Aaron both looked at Vincent with disbelief.

"I thought you'd be taller." Vincent said, looking at David with a critical eye.

Gabe laughed at Aaron and David's expressions and said, "I'm going to take Vincent to meet Uncle Josh."

As David watched Vincent and Gabe walk away, Aaron whispered, "You're tall where it counts."

* * * * *

"Uncle Josh, this is Vincent Winters, Lawrence's brother." Gabe said happily.

JC turned from his mother and said, "Hi Vincent, it's nice to meet you."

"Hi." Vincent said with a look of question.

"This is JC from *NSync." Gabe said proudly.

"Oh." Vincent said in realization, then dutifully said, "Nice to meet you."

JC was surprised by Vincent's disinterested manner.

"I take it that you're not a fan of my son's music." Karen Chasez said uncertainly.

"Um, no. I tried to listen to it once. I didn't like it." Vincent said with distraction as he looked around.

"At least he didn't tell you that you're short." Gabe said with a smile.

At JC's questioning look, Gabe said, "I'll tell you later."

"Who's that?" Vincent asked, pointing to the barbecue grill.

"That's my husband Chip." JC said quietly.

"Commander Chip Dodds?" Vincent asked with excitement.

"Yes." JC said hesitantly.

"Can I meet him?" Vincent asked Gabe hopefully.

"Sure, come on." Gabe said with a smile at JC.

As JC watched Vincent and Gabe walking away, Karen gently said, "They can't all be fans."

JC looked at his mother and said, "I guess not. It's just kind of a kick in the ego."

Karen looked at her son with love and said, "At least he seems to like Chip."

JC smiled and hugged his mother.

* * * * *

"Justy, do you want to introduce Dean to Chok. He's online right now." Jamie asked with Beau at his side.

Justy looked at his Aunt Jackie with indecision, not wanting to leave her alone.

"Go on dear. I think your grandmother and pop are just about talked out. It's been good to have this time to catch up with you." Jackie said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks Aunt Jackie. I love you." Justy said as he gave her a firm hug.

"And it's been very nice to meet you Dean. Maybe later we can have a chance to talk, I have some wonderful stories to tell you from when Justy was a child." Jackie said with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"Yes Ma'am, I'd like that." Dean said with a warm smile.

Justy gave his Aunt Jackie a pained look, not wanting to imagine what stories she was going to tell.

* * * * *

"Uncle Chip, this is Vincent Winters, Lawrence's brother." Gabe said as he presented Vincent.

"Nice to meet you Vincent." Chip said with a warm smile.

"Are you really Commander Chip Dodds from the *USS Enterprise*?" Vincent asked in nearly breathless excitement.

"Yes..." Chip said cautiously, as he recognized the expression as one that Kevin sometimes had.

"What's it like to fly a starship? I mean, to be the one who actually controls it?" Vincent asked with wide eyed wonder.

Chip began to feel slight relief as he recognized that Vincent's interest was in his profession.

"I can't really describe the feeling. There's nothing else in the universe like it. Do you want to be a helmsman someday?" Chip asked with a smile as he picked up a tray of meat and started laying out steaks on the grill.

"I don't know. I want to go to the academy and do whatever I'm best at. That's how it works isn't it?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yes. Cadets are tested for aptitude in all the operations of a starship, then are generally guided toward where their strengths lie." Chip said absently as he continued to place the meat on the grill.

"Good. I think it would be awesome to pilot a starship. But it would be just as cool to be in engineering or medical or just about any section of the ship." Vincent said honestly.

"I'm glad you think so Vincent. It sounds like you have a realistic attitude. Maybe the boys can take you into the game room sometime tonight and let you take a crack at the training sim." Chip said as he looked up from the grill.

"I have the Starfleet simulator at home. I'm good on all the positions." Vincent said proudly.

"Then you'll have a lot of fun with Ensign Cory Short, from the *Enterprise's* engineering section and Ensign Sean Short from the *Enterprise's* helm division on your team." Chip said as he closed the lid on the grill.

"Cory and Sean are... they're really Starfleet officers?" Vincent asked in amazement.

"That's right. Come to think of it, there are quite a few Starfleet officers here... and one civilian employee. Since you're open to any division, maybe Gabe could introduce you around and you could ask some questions?" Chip asked, then looked at Gabe expectantly.

"I'd be happy to." Gabe said with a happy smile and motioned for Vincent to walk with him.

"Thank you, it was nice to meet you Commander Dodds." Vincent said with respect.

"It was nice to meet you too, Vincent, and please call me Chip. I'm off duty now. Maybe we can talk again later." Chip said with a gentle smile.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Vincent said happily before turning to walk with Gabe.

* * * * *

"Jackie? Oh, it's good to see you again, how have you been?" Karen Chasez asked as she turned her attention away from JC.

"Just fine dear. I'm glad you were able to make it." Jackie said as she stood from her chair.

Karen gave Jackie a gentle hug and said, "I am too. I didn't realize just how much I've missed the boys until I saw them again."

Jackie took her seat again and said, "I know just what you mean. We really must do this more often, it's good to see everyone together again."

"There are a lot of new faces here." Karen said as she looked around, then noticed JC at her side and put an arm around him.

"Yes. I believe there is one person in particular you should meet." Jackie said with a smile, then looked at JC and said, "Josh, you should really greet your other guests. I can introduce Karen around."

JC looked at Jackie cautiously, but finally just nodded, then gave his mother a kiss on the cheek before walking away to talk with his other guests.

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"Vincent, I'd like for you to meet Dr. Christine Chapel from the *Enterprise*." Gabe said formally.

Christine looked at the young boy with a bandage on his head and immediately felt concern for him.

"It's nice to meet you Vincent. How are you feeling?" Christine asked gently.

"I'm fine Dr. Chapel. Aren't you the one who developed the electrolyte replacement therapy to help people who've been hit with high stun phasers?" Vincent asked professionally.

Christine looked at Vincent with surprise for an instant before responding, "Yes. I don't know how you know about that, but I developed that treatment last year."

Vincent smiled and said, "I try to learn anything I can about Starfleet and especially the *Enterprise*. You and Dr. McCoy are like legends. You've seen things that no one else ever has." Vincent said with wonder.

Christine smiled and said, "I suppose we have. I just didn't know we had a fan club."

"If there really was a fan club, I'd be a member. I have a million questions..." Vincent began to say, but was interrupted by Gabe.

"Why don't I introduce you to the other Starfleet officers before you start in on those questions." Gabe said with a chuckle.

"Oh, Okay." Vincent said happily.

"Lieutenant Bowers is right here if you want to meet him." Christine said with a smile.

"I don't know him, could you introduce us?" Gabe asked seriously.

"I'd be happy to." Christine said, then took two steps and tapped Lieutenant Bowers on the shoulder.

"Lieutenant Joe Bowers, I'd like to introduce you to Vincent Winters and Gabe Michaels." Christine said in a friendly voice.

Joe looked at the boys and noticed the facial features Vincent had in common with his ex-wife Peggy and with his son Lawrence.

"It's nice to meet you Gabe, Vincent." Joe said, only briefly glancing at Gabe.

Vincent looked at the Lieutenant curiously and tried to remember where he might have seen him before. He looked familiar.

"Dad, I see you met my brother Vince." Lawrence said as he walked to his father with Deacon at his side.

"Dad?" Vincent asked in shock. Then noticed that Lieutenant Bowers had exactly the same eyes as Lawrence.

"Yeah. You know how your dad was always saying that I was adopted. I was. This is my real father." Lawrence said and leaned over the back of the lounge chair to hug his father from behind.

"Really? Your dad is in Starfleet? That's so cool!" Vincent said with amazement.

Joe felt himself relax a little at the statement and said, "That's right. I'm in deflector control on the *USS Yorktown*."

"The *Yorktown* is a Constitution-Class starship, just like the *Enterprise*, right?" Vincent asked seriously.

"That's right. You're the first person I've met outside Starfleet who's ever heard of her." Joe said with a warm smile.

"I try to learn everything I can about Starfleet." Vincent said with a shy smile.

"Since when?" Lawrence asked with surprise.

"Since always." Vincent said seriously.

"Oh... I guess I never really talked to you about what kind of things you enjoy." Lawrence said in a small, apologetic voice.

Vincent looked at Lawrence curiously and hesitantly said, "Don't feel too bad about it. I don't know what kind of stuff you like either."

"So you guys grew up like strangers in the same house?" Gabe asked carefully.

"Yeah. I guess so." Lawrence said with regret.

"Well, maybe it's not too late to get to know each other. You're both here now." Joe suggested in a quiet voice.

"Maybe." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Come on, I want to introduce you to Uncle Spock." Gabe said quickly, hoping to break the somber mood.

"Captain Spock?" Vincent asked with delight and started looking around.

"He's over there." Christine said with an indulgent smile and pointed to the grill where Spock had joined Chip.

"Come on." Vincent said quickly and took Gabe by the arm to pull him away.

Lawrence put an arm around Deacon and said, "There's a lot more to Vince than I thought. I always thought he was just a screwed up little kid. But it turns out that he's really smart."

"Nothing says he can't be both." Deacon said quietly as he hugged Lawrence with one arm.

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"Uncle Spock, this is Vincent Winters." Gabe said as he presented Vincent.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Spock said formally.

Vincent looked up at Spock with wide eyes as his mouth fell open.

"I notice that you have had an injury. Do you require further medical attention?" Spock asked as he watched the young boy stare at him silently.

"I believe what you are witnessing is hero worship, my brother." Chip said in a playful voice.

Vincent looked at Chip quickly, then back to Spock.

"Um, Vincent has been studying everything he can find out about Starfleet. He really knows a lot of stuff." Gabe said, hoping that would cause Vincent to snap out of his daze.

"Do you have an interest in pursuing a career in Starfleet?" Spock asked Vincent slowly.

"Yes... Yes sir." Vincent said through his stupor.

Spock nodded seriously, then said, "Starfleet has need of dedicated and intelligent individuals. If one as knowledgeable as Gabriel finds you to be of acceptable ability, then I have no doubt that you will succeed in the academy."

"Thank you Captain Spock." Vincent said reverently.

"Come on Vincent, I want to introduce you to JJ." Gabe said and took hold of Vincent's arm to guide him away.

Vincent resisted Gabe's tugging on his arm and said, "It was nice to meet you."

Spock gave a slow, single nod in acknowledgement of the statement.

"Come on, JJ's over by the pool." Gabe said as he drew Vincent away from Chip and Spock.

* * * * *

"Mona, I would like to introduce Karen Chasez, Josh's mother." Jackie said as she led Karen around to Mona's side of the table.

Mona stood and looked at Karen curiously before saying, "You must be really proud of your son."

Karen looked up at Mona and smiled as she said, "Oh yes, he's achieved everything I could have dreamed of for him... even if he did take a somewhat different path than I would have predicted."

Mona laughed and said, "I know how you feel. Karen, these are my sons Allen and Brady. You'll have to excuse them, they're in their own little world."

Karen glanced at the two men engaged in conversation with two other men, oblivious to the women talking beside them.

"And who is this that you're carrying?" Karen asked as she looked at the baby in Mona's arms.

In a voice of boundless pride, Mona said, "This is my great-granddaughter Edovina."

"Great-granddaughter?" Karen asked with surprise as she looked at the small baby.

"Would you like to hold her?" Mona asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes. It's been far too long since I've held a baby." Karen said happily.

"Look at her eyes..." Karen said in wonder.

"She has her father's eyes." Mona said gently.

"She is just the most adorable baby I've ever seen." Karen said as she cuddled the baby in her arms.

Jackie watched the tender scene of Karen holding Edovina for a moment, then a look of resolve came over her face.

"Teri dear? Could you come over here for a moment?" Jackie asked in a friendly, yet somehow commanding tone.

"Of course." Teri said as she turned off her padd and got up from her seat at the table with Christine and Kayla.

Jackie waited to see that she had Karen and Mona's attention before saying, "Ladies, from what I've seen since I've been here, I think we have a job to do."

Mona and Karen both looked at Jackie curiously.

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"That was REALLY Captain Spock!" Vincent said with excitement as they walked past the tables to the poolside.

"That's right. I guess after that, this guy is going to be a let down." Gabe said with a smirk.

Vincent looked at Gabe with question.

"JJ, this is Vincent, he's Lawrence's brother, he wants to be in Starfleet someday." Gabe said with a secretive smile.

"Hi." Vincent said to JJ, then looked at Gabe and said, "I thought you were going to introduce me to Starfleet officers."

"I am. This is Ensign Richardson of the *Enterprise's* Security Division." Gabe said proudly.

"Really?" Vincent asked with wonder.

JJ discretely lifted the edge of his untucked T-shirt to reveal a hand phaser clipped to his belt.

"Have you ever fired it?" Vincent asked with wonder.

"Yeah. A few times." JJ said with a smile.

"So you and Sean and Cory are REALLY Starfleet officers?" Vincent asked in amazement.

"That's right." JJ said seriously, then broke out into a genuine smile when he spotted Adam and Harley approaching.

"Daddy, tell Poppa I don't have to do my homework yet. Not till we get home." Harley demanded in a grumpy voice.

"What did your Poppa say?" JJ asked as he picked Harley up onto his hip and looked him in the eyes.

"He said it was up to you." Harley said with a cranky tone.

JJ looked around the pool area and found Timmy, Reuben, Ricardo and Ricky sitting by the pool, playing with some toys.

"Well, since it looks like your friends aren't studying right now, I suppose it's okay. But when it's time to do your homework later, no complaining. Right?" JJ asked seriously.

"Thanks Daddy. Can I play with Timmy and Ricky now?" Harley asked hopefully.

"Kiss first." JJ said with a smile.

Harley gave JJ a big wet kiss on the cheek.

"Give your Pop a kiss, then go play with your friends." JJ said as he sat Harley down.

"I love you Pop." Harley said and ran to Adam.

Adam bent down to get his kiss and gave Harley a quick hug before turning him loose.

"Vincent. This is my partner Adam and that little tornado was our son Harley." JJ said proudly.

A look of confusion came over Vincent's face, then his eyes darted around the pool area.

"All you guys are fags?" Vincent asked in wide eyed realization.

"Um, Vince. That's probably on the top ten list of things you don't want to say to someone armed with a phaser. And no, not everyone here is gay." Gabe said in a hesitant voice.

Vincent looked into JJ's eyes and found anger and resentment looking back.

"I'm sorry I said that JJ. It's just... I guess it just surprised me." Vincent said uncertainly.

JJ thought for a second, then said, "Apology accepted. But there's something you should think about."

Vincent looked at JJ with hesitation.

"How are you going to be in Starfleet around all the people of different species when you can't even accept the people of your own species?" JJ asked seriously.

"I never thought of that." Vincent said in a whisper.

"I think it's important that you do think about it. Vincent, when you get out into the universe you'll meet people that act and believe differently from you. And if it's just the sex thing that bothers you, think about this. Some species have one, two and even three genders." JJ said with concern.

"Yeah." Vincent said thoughtfully.

Adam walked to JJ's side and said, "Vincent, when you use words like 'fag', it hurts and makes people not like you. If you keep using those kind of hurting words, the only people who'll want to be around you are people who are filled with hate. People like that make themselves feel better by making other people feel bad."

JJ nodded and said, "If that's the kind of person you want to be, then Starfleet probably isn't the place for you. You'll need to find a place where there are other people who think the same way that you do so you'll be able to keep believing that you aren't evil."

"I really am sorry." Vincent said in shame.

"And I really do accept your apology. But just so you know, if you use any of that hateful language around Harley I'll make sure you regret it for the rest of your life." JJ said firmly.

"I won't, I promise." Vincent said in a mumble.

"Alright then. What do you say we start again? I'm JJ and this is my partner Adam." JJ said seriously.

After a moment of thought, Vincent said, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"It looks like Uncle Chip is about done cooking. Would you like to sit with me and my family at dinner?" JJ asked with a smile.

Vincent looked at Adam with question and received a nod of encouragement.

"Thank you JJ, I think I'd like that." Vincent said shyly.

"Cool." JJ said happily and motioned for Gabe and Vincent to walk with him toward the tables.

* * * * *

"The boys need some time together." Jackie said firmly.

Teri, Mona and Karen nodded with agreement as they looked at JC mingling with guests and Chip working the barbecue grill.

"This is one of the few times they are both home at the same time and they planned this party. I think they need to have some time as a couple before they have to go their separate ways." Jackie said firmly.

"I'd be happy to take care of the boys for a night so they could be alone." Teri said simply.

Mona had a look of deep concentration, then said, "I don't know your sons that well, but if their being together is such a rare occasion, then we should make their time together really special."

Jackie looked at Mona consideringly for a moment, then said, "Mona's right. This isn't a quiet night at home kind of affair. They need a weekend away from all of this for just the two of them."

"Time to reconnect as a couple." Karen said as she nodded in agreement.

"How do you want to do it?" Teri asked thoughtfully.

"Teri, would you be willing to take care of the boys for a weekend?" Jackie asked seriously.

Teri smiled and said, "I can't think of anything that would make my boys happier than to have Justy, Jamie, and Jacob stay the weekend."

Jackie nodded and said, "Karen, do you think you can get it through to Josh just how important this is?"

Karen immediately nodded, and said, "I'm sure it won't take much doing."

"Chip may be harder to convince. I get the feeling that his extended trips off-planet have distracted him from what's going on here on Earth. I think it's time to remind him of his priorities." Jackie said firmly.

"Is there any particular place you had in mind for them to go?" Mona asked thoughtfully.

"The place doesn't matter. It's just the change of scenery so they can focus on each other that's important." Jackie said firmly.

Karen and Teri nodded in agreement.

"Then if you would allow me, I'd like to plan the weekend for them. I think my boys and I will be able to come up with something memorable." Mona said with a smile.

"Thank you Mona. That will leave Karen and I free to work on the boys." Jackie said firmly.

"And I can enlist the help of the kids." Teri said with a smile.

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"Were I Human, I believe I would be experiencing a sense of apprehension at the sight of that gathering." Spock said in an introspective tone.

Chip followed Spock's gaze and a chill ran up his spine as he saw Mona, Karen, Teri and his Aunt Jackie gathered into a tight group.

"Maybe it's not..." Chip began to say, when the group of women all looked at him in unison and smiled sweetly.

"Oh shit!" Chip said in a gasp.

"Well spoken brother." Spock said seriously.

CHAPTER 40

As Vincent walked with Gabe and Adam toward the tables, he noticed that Lawrence was watching him.

"I need to talk to my brother for a few minutes. When I'm done I'll come back and sit with you." Vincent said seriously.

"We'll save you a seat." Adam said softly.

Vincent looked at Adam and realized that after how he had behaved, that Adam's gesture was incredibly kind.

"Thank you Adam, I appreciate it." Vincent said as he looked Adam in the eyes to convey his sincerity.

Adam smiled and nodded that he understood.

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The silence in the study was broken as Sean's frustration finally erupted, "Maybe we should ask Mom or Uncle Chip about this. I feel like we're just going in circles."

"I think before we do that, we should talk with Kenny and Kevin and find out what they want to do." Cory said seriously.

"But we don't know what we *can* do until we've finished digging through this legal mumbo jumbo." Sean said as he looked up from his padd.

Cory thought about the statement for a moment, then said, "Let's find out what they want to do, then work to make it happen. I think we'll be in here all night if we try to trace out every legal pathway that's open to us."

"You're the patriarch." Sean said with a smile as he turned off his padd.

"That's not all I am." Cory said with a playful twinkle in his eye.

Sean recognized Cory's expression and quickly said, "Oh no. We're at Uncle Chip's house. We can do that at home."

"Don't you love me anymore?" Cory asked with his best pouting expression.

Sean broke into a smile at the sight and said, "You know I do, now and forever."

"Show me." Cory said in a seductive whisper.

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"Can I talk to you for a few minutes?" Vincent asked Lawrence firmly.

"Sure." Lawrence said as he stood from his father's side.

As Deacon stood to join them, Lawrence said, "I think this talk needs to be just the two of us."

Vincent glanced at Deacon apprehensively and nodded his agreement with the statement.

"I'll be right here if you need me." Deacon said as he looked deeply into Lawrence's eyes.

Lawrence broke into a smile and said, "I'll be right back."

After a long silent moment staring into Deacon's eyes, Lawrence turned to look at his brother expectantly.

"Is there someplace where we can talk alone?" Vincent asked impatiently.

"I doubt that anyone will be in the weight room right now. No one will bother us there." Lawrence said seriously and led the way toward the house.

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"I think we need to start back toward the house." Jacob said with a serious tone.

"Is something wrong?" Kenny asked with concern as he pulled on his reigns to stop the horse he was sharing with his brother.

"Sort of." Jacob said distantly.

Kenny and Kevin shared a look, then Kevin asked, "Am I in trouble?"

"No, nothing like that." Jacob said as he looked past Kenny and Kevin into the distance.

Kenny noticed the distant look in Jacob's eyes, then asked, "What do you see?"

Jacob shook his head in distraction and said, "Guys, I'm going to tell you something that I probably shouldn't right now. But I think you two need to talk about this before you make any decisions."

"Is it something bad?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"It kinda depends on how you look at it. Um, I guess I'll just say it, they found your mom. she's under arrest in Utah." Jacob said as he watched for a reaction.

"Good." Kenny said, then leaned forward to look at Kevin's expression.

After a long silent moment, Kevin looked up and noticed that Jacob and Kenny were looking at him expectantly.

"Are you okay Kev?" Kenny asked quietly as he hugged Kevin from behind.

"Yeah. I'm fine." Kevin said with surprise.

"What are you feeling?" Kenny asked with concern.

"Nothing." Kevin said to Kenny, then turned to Jacob and asked, "So is that it?"

"Sean and Cory are going to ask you what you want done with her... you know, to make things right." Jacob said hesitantly.

"I never met her. She doesn't care about me and I don't care about her. I kinda hope they keep her in jail for a long time." Kenny said with a touch of anger in his voice.

Kevin looked back at Kenny for a second, then stared off into the distance.

"What do you think Kev? You're the one who lived with her, whatever you decide, I'll go along with it." Kenny said more quietly.

"I don't know" Kevin said in a small voice.

"Well, Cory and Sean are just about done... um, working things out. They should be ready to talk to you by the time we get back to the house." Jacob said with a distant look.

Kenny hugged Kevin for a moment, then picked up his reigns and followed Jacob back toward the stable.

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"Do you live here or something?" Vincent asked as he followed Lawrence into the weight room.

"No. JC showed a group of us around his house. What did you want to know?" Lawrence asked as he took a seat on the weight bench.

"I'm not sure... JJ and Adam said some stuff to me that got me thinking..." Vincent said with difficulty.

Lawrence nodded and waited for Vincent to find the words to ask his question.

"Well, I guess what I really want to know first is, um, do you think about me naked and... like, um... doing stuff to me?" Vincent asked in a small voice as he fought to look Lawrence in the eyes.

Lawrence felt a momentary urge to laugh at the suggestion, then recognized the apprehension in Vincent's expression.

"No Vince. I can honestly say that I've never thought about you that way." Lawrence said sincerely.

Vincent continued to watch Lawrence's expression for a moment longer before nodding in acceptance.

"Vince, before I met Deacon, I don't think I ever really thought those things about anyone, well, except maybe movie stars and stuff." Lawrence said thoughtfully.

"So the stuff dad said about you trying to make me queer like you was a lie?" Vincent asked in confusion.

Lawrence thought about the question seriously for a moment before answering, "Well, I think he believed the things he told you, so I don't know if you can say he was lying to you. But what he said was wrong, so yes, it was a lie."

Vincent looked at the floor as he thought about the words.

"Vince, I just want you to be happy. If that means that I need to be your brother or your friend or to just stay away from you, that's what I'll do." Lawrence said seriously.

"That's kind of what I figured out today." Vincent said thoughtfully.

Lawrence waited for Vincent to put his thoughts together.

"JJ and Adam said that when I say things like 'queer' and 'fag' and stuff like that, it makes people not like me. They said that the only people who would want to be around me are people filled with hate..." Vincent trailed off in a small voice.

"I think they're right." Lawrence said softly.

"I don't want to be like that... I just... I don't know if I can be any other way." Vincent said and looked at Lawrence with a pleading expression.

Lawrence saw his brother's suffering and said, "I think that if you really care... If you're worried about it... Then it's not too late to change."

"Really?" Vincent asked with hopeful eyes.

"Really. Just try to ease up on the hate talk and just accept that different people find happiness different ways. Just try to figure out what will make you happy and leave them alone to take care of themselves." Lawrence said seriously.

Vincent nodded thoughtfully.

"And if there's something you're not sure about, you can always just ask me." Lawrence said softly.

"Yeah. Thanks." Vincent said in a whisper.

"You ready to get back to the party?" Lawrence asked as he stood.

"Yeah... I'm sorry I used to say all that mean stuff to you." Vincent said shyly.

"I understand about that. Don't worry about it." Lawrence said gently.

"Thanks. Lawrence... Can I call you Larry?" Vincent asked with a teasing smile.

"No." Lawrence said firmly, then a small smile escaped.

* * * * *

As Aaron and David were walking away from the pool area, they noticed Jake and Xain walking toward them.

"Hey guys, how's it going?" Aaron asked happily.

"Just fine. We're just enjoying walking around out here. It's really beautiful." Jake said in a slow peaceful voice.

"Yeah, it really is." Aaron said happily, then was struck with inspiration, "Guys, I was just going to change into some dry clothes before we eat. Would you like to see our house?"

"Your house?" Jake asked cautiously.

"Yeah, right over there." Aaron said in a proud voice as he pointed to the guest cottage he shared with David.

"The one with the pink flamingo in the yard?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"No. That's Mark's house... but we put the flamingo there." Aaron said with a chuckle as he led Jake and Xain past Mark's cottage.

"I fail to see the humor in putting a plastic replica of Earth avifauna on Mark's property." Xain said seriously.

"It's because Mark is a landscaper. He creates big beautiful landscape designs that people pay huge amounts of money for. I put the flamingo there because it's like the opposite of landscaping and design. It's like the lowest form of landscape decoration." Aaron said as he led the group to the door of his cottage.

Xain paused for a moment, then looked at Jake and said, "I wish to verify my understanding of this form of humor. If one were to use the same logical process to attempt to respond in kind, then Aaron would be deserving of an accordion."

David broke out in laughter at the statement as Aaron cringed and said, "Dude! No one deserves an accordion."

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As Lawrence and Vincent walked from the weight room, Vincent quietly asked, "Do you know any, um... not-gay people?"

Lawrence stopped and thought for a second, then said, "To tell you the truth, I don't think of people in terms of 'gay' and 'not-gay', but I know there are a few straight people around here."

"Who?" Vincent asked as they began to walk again.

"My dad for one." Lawrence said frankly.

Vincent thought about the statement as the pair reached the sliding glass door.

"You're welcomed to sit with us if you want to." Lawrence offered gently.

Vincent looked up into Lawrence's eyes and saw the genuine concern.

"Thank you, but I already said I'd sit with Adam and JJ." Vincent said gently.

"Okay, just as long as you know you're welcomed." Lawrence said seriously.

"Yeah, thanks." Vincent said with a timid smile.

* * * * *

"I guess we'd better go get Kenny and Kevin." Sean said as he cuddled Cory to his side.

"Yeah, I have to admit that I'm not looking forward to this." Cory said quietly.

"I know, neither am I, but this can give them some closure and let them put this whole situation behind them." Sean said seriously.

"I'm with you babe. I know it needs to be done, I just don't have to like doing it." Cory said frankly as he reluctantly stood.

Just then the door opened. Kevin, Kenny and Jacob walked in.

"Hey guys, we were just coming to look for you." Cory said with a smile.

"I know... you got some on your chin." Jacob said with a disapproving glance.

Cory automatically reached up to wipe his face, then realized the joke as Jacob, Kenny and Kevin all started laughing hysterically.

"Yeah, yeah. Funny guys." Cory muttered in a barely tolerant tone as he waited for the boys to calm down.

Sean looked at Jacob curiously and asked, "How much did you tell them?"

Jacob finally got his chuckles under control and said, "Mom. Jail. Utah."

Sean nodded, then looked to Kenny and Kevin who had also calmed down.

"Well, since Jacob already told you, I guess all we need to do is decide what needs to be done." Cory said seriously.

"I only want one thing." Kevin said in deep thought.

"What's that?" Jacob asked, not able to make sense of Kevin's swirling thoughts.

"Somehow, I want Momma to know what happened to me since I came here. I want her to know that I'm loved and have food and I'm learning to read and that I'm really happy..." Kevin said distantly.

Kenny shared a look of surprise with Sean, Cory and Jacob.

"...I think that will hurt her worse than anything else." Kevin said with a bitter tone in his voice.

"I don't understand." Kenny said quietly.

"I don't think she ever loved me. She didn't want me to be happy. All she wanted for me was to be little and skinny and stupid..." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"Why?" Jacob asked in a leading tone, apparently already knowing the answer.

"I don't know..." Kevin said in a lost voice.

"Yes you do. You heard her say it once when she was yelling at you. It's time to remember." Jacob said firmly.

"Because I'm like my dad." Kevin said in a whisper as tears started welling up in his eyes.

Kenny looked around the group in confusion.

"She hated me and hurt me because I'm like my dad." Kevin said in a whimper as the tears began to fall.

Kenny hugged Kevin tightly, doing his best to comfort his brother.

"She... she made me weak because my dad was strong. she made me little because my dad was big. She made me stupid..." Kevin said before he broke into sobs again.

"So I guess when she knew that dad was dead, hurting you must've stopped being fun for her, so she left." Kenny said in a pained voice.

"It fits. Her abandoning you the way she did was the final insult." Cory said in consideration.

Jacob watched as Kenny held Kevin close and started a slight rocking to soothe him.

"Jacob, get with intelligence and see what you can come up with." Sean said seriously.

Jacob nodded then got a vacant look in his eyes.

Kevin and Kenny noticed and looked at Sean with question.

"It's a telepath thing." Sean said dismissively with a shrug.

As Jacob's attention returned to the room, Kevin shyly said, "Thanks for helping me to remember Jacob."

"Yeah, you'll have to teach me how to do that." Kenny said, relieved that Kevin was feeling better.

"I probably could." Jacob said seriously.

"Really?" Kenny asked with wonder.

"Well, you and Kevin appear to have the potential to develop full telepathy, but until you get your twin link fully formed we can't be sure." Jacob said thoughtfully.

"How long will that take?" Kevin asked curiously.

"It's hard to say. Most twins grow up together and just have to work on extending the telepathy past their link. You two need to connect with each other before you can do anything else." Jacob said carefully.

"How do we do that?" Kenny asked seriously.

"Jamie and I need to sit down with you two and work on that. I think that once we get you to recognize the link on a conscious level, all you'll need to do is spend time together working to strengthen it." Jacob said thoughtfully.

"That sounds like it's going to take quite a bit of time, why don't you guys work on that after the current situation is resolved." Cory said thoughtfully.

"Guys, if you'll come out by the pool, I think the entire intelligence division of Clan Short would like to help you with this." Jacob said with a smile.

Kenny looked at his brother curiously and received a nod in response.

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"Vincent, we saved you a seat." Adam said as he gestured to the empty seat beside him.

"Would it be a lot of trouble to save it for a few more minutes?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

"No problem, just go do what you need to do." Adam said with assurance.

"Okay, I don't think I'll be gone long." Vincent said seriously, then walked to Lawrence's table.

* * * * *

Chip had his attention divided between the grill before him and the group of mothers who were talking seriously and occasionally glancing over at him lovingly.

"If you would like, I could assume the cooking duties so you may speak with your Aunt." Spock offered seriously.

In a distracted voice, Chip said, "It wouldn't do any good. She won't tell me anything until she has everything worked out. I'm just worried about what those four are planning."

"Given the past encounters I have observed, whatever is being planned is ultimately for your benefit." Spock said in a slow, measured tone.

"Probably, but it's also something that I don't want to do, otherwise I would have done it already." Chip said honestly.

Spock nodded slowly, then said, "Such is the purpose of the extended family."

"Then will you stay here and support me when they're finished?" Chip asked hopefully.

Spock arched an eyebrow at his brother, then said, "When there are indications of an impending disaster, the logical person evacuates the area."

Chip gave Spock a stern look and muttered, "Coward."

* * * * *

Vincent walked to Lawrence's table in time to hear Joe say, "I want to take Mona someplace nice. Not so fancy that it makes her uncomfortable, but nice enough to be considered a real date. I'm not from around here so I'm really stuck, do you guys have any ideas?"

"Lieutenant Bowers?" Vincent asked as he stood to one side of Joe's chair.

"Oh. Hi Vincent. How are you doing?" Joe asked in a pleasant tone.

"Um, I was just wondering if I could talk to you... I mean, when you have some extra time." Vincent said uncertainly.

Joe looked at Vincent's concerned expression and said, "I have time right now, you can hop on up here and talk to me if you like."

Vincent looked at the group around the table and said, "I kinda wanted to talk in private."

* * * * *

"Unca Brady?" A small voice asked from Brady's side.

Brady looked down to see Ricardo looking up at him shyly and Reuben at his side.

"How are you boys doing?" Brady asked with a warm smile.

"We were playing with Ricky and Timmy for a while, but Ricardo wanted to come over here with you." Reuben said quietly.

Brady looked around the table and said, "Well, I think it's about time to eat. We're kind of packed in here, what would you two think if we moved over to that table by Robin and Kayla? We can save a seat for your mom."

"That'd be nice. Momma's working really hard." Reuben said as he watched his mother carrying food out to the serving table.

"I think she's doing that because she enjoys helping people." Brady said as he stood.

"Reuben?" Allen called as the three turned to leave.

Reuben looked at Allen curiously.

Allen turned in his seat and opened his arms in invitation.

Reuben accepted the invitation and hugged Allen tightly.

"Thanks Reuben, I was just needing a hug." Allen said in a contented voice.

As Allen released Reuben, Ricardo waited for his turn.

Allen leaned down into an awkward position to give the small boy a hug, but it was worth it.

"You need hugs?" Ricardo asked with concern.

"Yeah, sometimes I just need a hug. Thank you Ricardo." Allen said with a smile.

"I'm gonna eat w'Unca Brady. Billy can give you hugs." Ricardo said in a serious voice.

"I'll remember that." Allen said with a smile and released Ricardo.

* * * * *

As Kevin, Kenny and Jacob walked to the side of the pool where Kyle, Sammy and Sebastian were already waiting, Cory and Sean walked to the table where Dan, John and Matt were sitting quietly and watching the boys.

"Do you guys mind if we join you for a minute?" Cory asked respectfully.

"Please sit down. What's on your mind?" Dan asked as he turned his full attention to Sean and Cory.

"Kevin and Kenny's mother has been found. She's in police custody in Provo, Utah." Sean said as he took a seat.

Dan considered the statement for a moment, then said, "I think that's a good thing. What are you going to do now?"

"Well, Kevin wants his mother to know what has happened to him since he came here. He believes that knowing that he's happy will be the best revenge he can take. I don't think Kenny really cares what happens as long as she doesn't get away with what she did to Kevin." Cory said thoughtfully.

"So I'm guessing that the meeting of all the telepaths by the pool is to decide how to give Kevin what he wants?" Matt asked as he glanced at the increasing group of boys.

"That's right. But first I need to know if this is a good thing as far as Kevin and Kenny are concerned." Cory said, directing his statement to Dan.

After a moment of consideration, Dan said, "Actually, I can't imagine anything better for both of them. Kevin will have the satisfaction of closing this door to his past without doing anything that he might regret later. Kenny will get to see the woman who hurt his brother in jail and can carry the knowledge that justice has been served."

Cory nodded as Sean said, "That's kind of what I was thinking. Now all we have to do is figure out how to get the Utah authorities to allow Kenny and Kevin to visit their mother in the jail."

"If you'd like, I can handle that for you. I have the connections to make that happen." John said thoughtfully.

"Thanks John. Just let me know if you need anything from me to make it easier." Cory said in a very business-like tone.

"I'm sure it won't be a problem. But I suggest that you get Matt and Dan to go with you. Matt can handle security and Dan can make sure that everything is going the way it should, from a psychological standpoint." John said seriously.

Cory nodded and said, "That's a good idea. Matt, would you make arrangements for the Mississippi to be ready to depart this evening? I'd like to get this taken care of tonight."

"Consider it done." Matt said seriously.

"I guess we'd better find a place to sit before the food is ready." Cory said as he looked around the pool area.

"Why don't you stay and sit with us. We don't get much chance to just sit and visit lately." Dan asked pleasantly.

"Don't you want your kids to sit with you?" Sean asked cautiously.

"They're having too much fun with their friends to remember that they even have parents." John said with a chuckle.

Cory glanced over to see his boys scattered among the other guests and having a good time with their friends. With a nod he said, "I see what you mean."

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After looking in the family room and finding it occupied with a group of boys around the computer, Joe led Vincent into the living room and closed the door.

Vincent took a seat on a sofa and looked at Joe with apprehension.

Joe noticed Vincent's expression and said in a gentle voice, "You look like you have something really serious on your mind. Go ahead and ask me whatever you want."

Vincent nodded thoughtfully then asked, "You're not gay are you?"

"No, I'm not." Joe said seriously as he took a seat on the couch across from Vincent.

"Good. I didn't think so." Vincent said, sounding a little relieved.

"What's got you so worried?" Joe asked with concern.

"Everything I thought was right and wrong is all upside down now. Lawrence says my dad told me lies, but dad used to say that queers would try to trick you and tell you lies to make you one of them." Vincent said seriously.

"So are you asking me what you should believe in?" Joe asked cautiously.

Vincent thought about the question for a moment, then finally said, "My dad said that I can't trust what Lawrence says cause he's queer. Lawrence says I can't trust what dad says cause he's full of hate. You're really nice, so you're not full of hate, and you already said you're not gay. So I just wanted to know what you believe is right and wrong."

"Come over here and sit with me and I'll tell you what I can." Joe said as he patted the spot beside him.

"You're sure you're not gay?" Vincent asked seriously.

"One hundred percent not-gay. I promise." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent hesitantly sat beside Joe and looked up at him with question.

"Well, the first thing I believe is that people make too big a deal out of the whole 'gay' business. What people do in the privacy of their bedroom doesn't matter to me." Joe said thoughtfully.

"But don't it make you feel weird if you're around a gay guy? I mean, don't you feel like he's lookin at you?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Not usually. But now and then I notice a guy checking me out and it makes me feel... I don't know, kind of good. I feel like I'm attractive." Joe said as he casually put an arm around Vincent's shoulder.

"But what if he wants to stick his thing in your butt?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Well, to be honest, in all my life, I've only had two guys try to pick me up. I told both of them that I wasn't interested, and they left me alone." Joe said honestly.

Vincent snuggled into the casual embrace and asked, "So it doesn't make you mad that Lawrence is queer?"

"No. I mean, I suppose if someone had given me a choice of whether I wanted my son to be gay or straight, I probably would have chosen straight. But that's just because I can see how gay people are treated sometimes and I'd want to keep my son from having to go through that." Joe said carefully.

"I wish I had a dad like you. You're nice." Vincent said in a contented whisper.

"Well, since I used to be married to your mom, I guess that kind of makes me your step-father." Joe said in a considering voice.

"Really?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Well, I don't think that it means anything legally, but yes. Really." Joe said as he gave Vincent a real hug.

"I don't remember the last time my dad hugged me like this." Vincent said in a small voice.

"Well, I have a lifetime of hugs saved up that I haven't been able to give to anyone. So whenever you feel like you need a hug, just come to me and you'll get one." Joe said with a smile.

"You're sure you're not gay?" Vincent asked again.

Joe laughed and said, "Yes, completely sure."

"But I thought hugging another guy would make you gay." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"I'm pretty sure it doesn't work that way. But if I'm making you uncomfortable, I'll stop." Joe offered quietly.

"No. I like the hugging, I just don't want to do nothin to make me gay." Vincent said seriously.

"Vincent, I don't think anything you can do right now will make you one way or the other. One day you'll either be attracted to girls or boys. That's when you'll know. Until that day, I don't think there's anything you can do that will make a difference." Joe said honestly.

Vincent thought about the statement, but remained silent.

"Right now, I think we should get back to the cookout. From the look of things when we left, the food should be ready any minute."

* * * * *

Out of the corner of his eye, Chip kept tabs on the group of mothers while trying to stay focused on his cooking.

"How's it going?" JC asked as he approached the grill.

"Fine. Would you mind doing one of your expert carving jobs on the brisket? I just started the hot links and burgers so we can start as soon as the brisket is ready to serve." Chip asked as he was turning burgers to grill them evenly.

"Yeah, I'll do it now. Everyone seems to have settled in fairly well." JC said as he looked over the gathering.

"Aunt Jackie and your mother are in conference with Teri and Mona." Chip said as he looked at the group of women again.

"What do you think that's all about?" JC asked curiously.

"Us." Chip said frankly.

JC looked at Chip and saw an expression of concern.

After a glance at the mothers, JC leaned in and gave Chip a quick kiss on the cheek, then walked to the serving table to start carving.

Chip glanced at the women again, then started transferring the cooked burgers onto a tray.

* * * * *

"This place is really nice. You two live here?" Jake asked as he looked around the clean little cottage.

"Yeah. Isn't it great? I mean, we still go up to the house for meals cause all we've got here are snacks." Aaron said as he motioned to the kitchenette.

"I just think it's really cool that you guys have your own house." Jake said with a smile.

"Yeah. It's awesome." Aaron said, then walked into the bedroom.

"Aaron used to have a room in the house, but Chip and Josh said that since Aaron was so responsible, that he could have a cottage." David said with a look of pride directed at the bedroom door.

"I kind of like living in our house. I mean, it would be cool if Xain and I could live on our own like this, but I really like having Ken and Kev around too." Jake said thoughtfully.

"Well, it's not like we're across town. We have the intercom so anyone can call us at any time and our computer is on the main house network." David said seriously.

"You appear to have found a practical way to gain your independence without losing the support of your family." Xain said in a speculative voice, then continued, "I find the arrangement to be logical."

"Yeah, I guess it is." David said thoughtfully.

"Okay, are we ready to get back to the party?" Aaron asked as he walked out of the bedroom wearing swim trunks and a mesh shirt.

"I guess you're planning on going swimming again." Jake said with a smile.

Aaron chuckled and said, "No, but I usually don't have to plan it. It just happens. This time I'm going to be prepared."

"I guess we're ready." Jake said with a smile as he put an arm casually around Xain.

Aaron put an arm around David and led the way to the door.

* * * * *

"Did you get everything settled?" Adam asked as Vincent took his seat.

"Yeah. I think so. I'm just really confused about some stuff." Vincent said carefully.

"That bump on your head can't be helping." Gabe said from across the table.

"I guess not... If I tell you guys something will you promise not to get mad at me?" Vincent asked carefully.

"I'll promise to try." JJ said seriously.

Adam and Gabe nodded their agreement.

"I guess because my dad always talked mean about qu... gays, it made me think bad about 'em. Now that I've talked to you, I don't hate you or nothin but...I guess I'm kinda scared of you." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"You're scared of us?" Gabe asked with disbelief.

Vincent nodded shyly.

"It makes sense." Adam said distantly.

JJ and Gabe looked at Adam curiously.

"If he's been told all his life that gay people are evil and bad and trying to 'get him'. Then it makes sense that he'd be afraid of us. Even if his logical mind tells him that we're not bad, deep inside there's still a voice that's telling him to watch out, be careful, don't trust." Adam said speculatively.

"Yeah, okay. I can see that." JJ said with a nod.

"Vincent, just tell us what we can do to make you not afraid of us and we'll try to help you." Gabe said in a soft voice.

"Be not-gay?" Vincent said as he looked up, barely hiding a teasing smile.

"Well, besides that." Gabe said with a chuckle.

"Um, I guess all I need you to do is understand if I act weird around you or need to go away from you. I just... I can't help it." Vincent finished in a whisper.

"Vincent?" Adam said, drawing Vincent's attention.

"You've taken quite a few big steps today. We'll give you the time and space you need to take the next step." Adam said seriously.

"Yeah. We'll invite you to join in and do stuff with us, but we'll understand if you don't want to." Gabe added.

"And as long as you're willing to talk honestly with us like this. We won't be mad at you if you slip up a little now and then." JJ said with a smile.

"Thanks." Vincent whispered, then looked at the serving table, hoping that the food would be ready soon.

* * * * *

"Guys, I think Brady has the right idea. We have too many people gathered around this little table to be able to eat. Let's get that table by Brady before anyone else can snag it." Allen said quickly.

"I think we're going to need two tables." Deacon said as he looked at the group.

"You're right. With all the boys, we'll overflow one table pretty quick." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Let's just get that table and the boys can fill in wherever they want." Billy said as he stood.

"I'll save my dad a seat." Lawrence said seriously.

"I want to sit with you and Pop." Deacon said with a smile directed at Billy as he also stood.

"Sounds perfect." Allen said with contentment as he walked to Billy's side and hesitantly put an arm around him.

"I love this part." Billy whispered to Allen.

"What's that?" Allen asked curiously.

"Where everything is new. Allen, let's never lose this feeling." Billy said as he hugged Allen to his side.

"I promise to try. Every day will be like the first."

CHAPTER 41

"So what's it like living with Allen?" Jacob asked casually.

"Poppa's great! He talks to me like I'm special and we have food, like all the time, and we live in a big house like we're rich or something." Kevin said happily.

"How is it having a twin brother?" Jamie asked, then smiled at Jacob.

"Kenny is awesome. He really really loves me and is always making sure I'm okay and is always helping me with the stuff I don't understand so people won't think I'm stupid." Kevin said, then quickly turned and gave Kenny a hug.

"Are Jake and Xain good brothers?" Kyle asked next.

"Yeah, the best. Jake protects us and makes sure all of us are doing the stuff we should and that we understand what's going on." Kevin said seriously while keeping one arm around his brother.

"What about Xain?" Jacob asked with interest.

Kevin got a look of deep concentration before saying, "Xain takes care of Jake. He's smart and stuff and helps Jake by making him slow down and think about things before doing them."

"What does Jake do for Xain?" Kyle asked curiously.

"Jake gets Xain to try things and do things that he wouldn't usually do because Vulcans don't do stuff just because it's fun." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"So all of you together really get along okay?" Jacob asked carefully.

"Yeah. It's like those families you see on TV at Thanksgiving when they all sit around and eat together and just feel good because they're together. I always thought someone just made stuff like that up because I never knowed... knew anyone who had a family like that... and now *I* do." Kevin said in wonder.

Jacob and Jamie smiled at each other as Kyle asked, "Kenny, how is it with Kevin living here?"

Kenny smiled and said, "Dad always wanted Kev to live with us. I've been waiting my whole life for my brother to come home, and now that he's here it's better than I ever dreamed... I just wish Dad could have lived to see Kevin come home." Kenny finished in a whisper.

"Mikey says that your Dad is watching over you and is very proud of you both." Kyle said frankly.

"Really?" Kenny asked as he glanced around quickly.

Kyle chuckled as he said, "Really. I promise."

"Would you guys mind if I borrow Kevin for a minute?" JC asked as he walked to the group by the pool.

"Sure, I think we have everything we need." Kyle said with a cheerful smile.

"You do? All we've done is talk." Kevin said in confusion.

"That's right. We were asking you questions about how your life is different since you came here. While you were thinking about how to answer, we were gathering the images from your mind." Jacob said seriously.

"And we picked up some happy memories of your Dad from Kenny to throw in for good measure." Jamie said with a chuckle.

"We'll work on putting them all together while we're having dinner." Jacob said with a grin.

"Kevin?" JC asked quietly.

Kevin looked at JC hesitantly, then nodded.

"Don't worry Kevin, the food is ready and I thought you might like to sit with me and Chip." JC said in a friendly voice.

"Are you sure?" Kevin asked hesitantly.

"Completely sure. You and I have something in common, we both love Chip." JC said frankly.

Kevin looked up at JC and nodded.

"I thought that instead of you tearing yourself up trying not to show Chip that you love him, we could work as a team. I'll show Chip how much I love him as his husband and you show him how much you love him as his nephew." JC said as he led Kevin to the table by the grill at a leisurely pace.

"But I don't really know how's the right way to be a nephew." Kevin said seriously.

"I think I can help you with that. The first thing we're going to do is sit down to eat. I'll make sure to get you some of the brisket. When you taste it, make sure you tell Chip how much you like it. The sauce is his own

recipe and he's very proud of it." JC said with a smile as they finally reached the table.

"I will. Thank you Uncle Josh, you're really nice." Kevin said as he gave JC a quick hug.

"You're pretty nice too Kevin." JC said with a smile as he gave Kevin a casual hug in return.

* * * * *

Justy and Dean ran to Cory's side and whispered quickly into his ear.

After a moment to digest what he'd just been told, Cory quickly nodded at Justy, then stood.

"Is it almost ready?" Cory asked as he hurried to Chip's side.

"Yes. I was just about to make the announcement." Chip said, curious about Cory's anxious expression.

"Could you hold it for one minute please. I just need to talk to the guys first." Cory said and turned on the puppy-dog eyes (medium intensity).

Chip smiled at the expression and nodded.

"Would all the Clan members come here for a minute? I need to talk to all you guys." Cory said in a loud voice as Justy and Dean hurried around, making sure everyone heard.

There was a sound of rustling and scraping chairs as Clan members got up from nearly every table around the pool area.

Cory gestured for the guys to follow him to the back of the house.

* * * * *

"Guys, Justy and Dean had an idea and I think it sounds pretty good. Let's get all the adults sat down and serve them. We don't get a lot of chances to tell them how much we appreciate what they do for us. I think there's enough of us that we can each pick one or two people to take care of. Once we have all of them taken care of we can all get our own." Cory said seriously.

"Can I get Uncle Chip's?" Kevin asked quickly.

"Sure Kevin, you get daddy and I'll get Pop." Justy said with a smile.

"I'll get Aunt Jackie." Jamie said quickly.

"And I'll get Grandma Karen." Jacob said happily.

"You all work it out. I'm going to let the adults know what's going on." Cory said firmly, then stepped away from the group.

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"Everyone! All us kids decided that we want to show you how much we appreciate all that you do for us. So everyone please sit down and one of us will be by in a minute to find out what you would like to eat... That includes Hazel, Helen and Juana." Cory finished with a look at the trio fussing over the table full of food.

"Go on, sit down. We're waiting." Cory said and crossed his arms across his chest.

"You too Uncle Chip." Sean said, now at Cory's side.

"Don't I get any say in this?" Chip asked in playful protest.

"Nope. Not unless you think it's worth risking an interplanetary incident." Sean said, doing his best to hide a smile.

"I may need to talk to father about his choice to give you clan status. It's gone to your heads." Chip said in a grumble as he walked toward the table where JC was watching with a grand smile.

* * * * *

"What kind of meat would you like Grandma?" Kenny asked as he approached Mona.

"I've been wanting to try some of that brisket that I've been smelling since we arrived."

"What would you like Daddy?" Lawrence asked Joe with a smile.

"I think I'll have the brisket too." Joe said, feeling immeasurable love for his son.

* * * * *

"What kind of meat would you like Uncle Chip?" Kevin asked with a smile.

Chip looked at Kevin with surprise, then asked, "How did you get stuck serving me?"

"I called it first." Kevin said proudly.

Chip couldn't help but smile in response and said, "I'd really like a slice of brisket and a nice thick steak."

"Would you like some sweet tea too?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"You know it." Chip said happily.

"I'll be right back." Kevin said happily and ran off to get Chip's food.

* * * * *

"What kind of meat can I get for you Dad?" Jake asked with a loving gaze at Allen.

"I'd like one of those steaks, medium to medium-rare if there are any." Allen said with a look of love and pride directed at Jake.

"How about you Billy?" Deacon asked happily.

"A burger with..." Billy began to say when Deacon stopped him.

"...Catsup and pickles only. I'll get you two. You always end up getting a second one." Deacon said before hurrying away.

* * * * *

"Here you go Pop." Justy said as he placed a plate loaded with food before JC.

"Thank you Angel, it looks like you got enough food here for two people." JC said as he looked at his plate.

"Well I know how much you like Daddy's steaks and brisket so I brought you some of each." Justy said with a proud smile.

"It's just perfect. Where is Dean?" JC asked as he looked around.

"He's bringing Hazel some food. She's always been really nice to him when he visits and he wanted to do something nice for her." Justy said happily.

"I'm glad you two are getting closer. It's been wonderful to watch you two go from classmates to friends to best friends. It's been all I can do not to interfere and try to push you two together." JC said honestly.

"Really? You and Daddy have always been nice to Dean, but I didn't know you thought about us getting together as boyfriends." Justy said in wonder.

"Good. I didn't want you to know. I wanted whatever happened between you two to be because it's what you both wanted. Now that you've taken that step, I just want you to know that your Dad and I are here to support

you however we can. We both really like Dean and approve of your relationship completely." JC said with a gentle smile.

Justy pulled JC into a hug and said, "Thanks Pop. I wasn't worried about you not liking Dean, but I didn't know how you'd feel about us being boyfriends."

"Dean is trying to get your attention. Go on." JC said with a grin.

Justy turned to see Dean shyly waving at him.

After giving JC a quick kiss on the cheek, Justy ran to the food table where Dean was waiting for him.

* * * * *

"Did anyone get Vincent?" Lawrence asked from the food table as he took a small portion of each salad.

"Adam got him." JJ said as he put a hot-link sausage onto the plate for his father.

As Lawrence took a step away from the food table, he noticed Xain walking behind Ricardo carrying a drink and carefully watching Ricardo's every move.

Lawrence continued to watch and couldn't help but smile at the expression on Brady's face as Ricardo presented him with a plate of food.

Juana's expression was nothing short of complete pride and love as Reuben sat a plate of food in front of her.

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"What were you looking at over there, I couldn't see." Joe asked as he accepted his food from Lawrence.

"Oh, I was just watching Ricardo giving Brady a plate of food. I never thought about having kids before but... well, maybe someday." Lawrence said with a distant expression.

"I hope you do Lawrence. I've missed out on a lot of your life, but being here today... I'm so proud of you that I don't even have words." Joe said past the lump in his throat.

"I know what you mean Daddy. I feel the same way about you." Lawrence said with the beginning of tears in his eyes.

"C'mon, before all the brisket is gone." Deacon stage whispered from Lawrence's side.

"Do you mind if we sit with you two?" Lawrence asked his father hopefully.

"I'd like it if you would." Joe said with a smile.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry I took so long to get to you Dr. Chapel. Do you know what you'd like to eat?" Kenny asked as he hurried to the table.

Christine turned and smiled at Kenny before saying, "Yes, I'd like a small steak if there is one and at least two slices of that brisket. Everyone at the tables around us has been going on about how good it is."

"Is anyone getting your food Aunt Teri?" Kenny asked quietly.

"Oh yes. I had three waiters fighting over me, Aaron finally won. They made a point of mentioning that you asked if you could bring Christine's food." Teri finished with a contented smile.

Kenny looked shyly at Dr. Chapel to see her looking at him happily.

"You were really nice to my brother when he was scared and I just wanted to do something nice for you." Kenny said shyly.

"Thanks sweet pea. It was my pleasure to help." Christine said modestly.

On impulse, Kenny gave Christine a quick hug, then hurried off to get her food.

* * * * *

"Where is Xain?" Allen asked as Jake sat a plate of food before him.

"He's taking Uncle Spock his food. He just stopped to help Ricardo first." Jake said as he placed a drink before Allen.

"Would you and Xain like to join me and Billy?" Allen asked casually.

"Are you sure? You two don't get too much time alone, Aaron and David wouldn't mind if we sat with them." Jake said seriously.

"Don't worry about it Jake. Billy and I are going on a date tomorrow night. You'll need to ask your grandmother about what you'll be doing while we're on our date. I have the feeling that she has something planned for you and Xain." Allen said thoughtfully.

"Oh okay. I'll ask her about it now, then I'll come back here to eat with you." Jake said with an expression that sought Allen's approval.

Allen nodded with a smile.

* * * * *

"It looks like you got the biggest steak of them all." Chip said as he had a loaded plate of food sat before him.

"I did. JJ wanted it for his dad but I got it before he did." Kevin said proudly.

Chip looked over at Dan's table to see JJ looking back at him cautiously.

"Can I get you anything else?" Kevin asked hopefully.

Chip made a show of looking carefully at his plate before saying, "No Kevin, it looks like you got everything."

"I'll be right back. Uncle Josh said I could sit with you." Kevin announced quickly, then hurried back to the food table.

Chip looked at JC curiously.

"I think it's time for some positive reinforcement." JC said with a smile.

"How's that?" Chip asked cautiously.

"I just thought that if Kevin could spend some time with us, we could encourage him when he acts appropriately and discourage him when he doesn't. Maybe that will help him learn how to express his feelings in a more... age appropriate manner." JC said carefully.

"A logical approach." Spock said consideringly.

"I thought so." JC said happily, then took another bite of his food.

Chip glanced over to the food table and saw Kevin happily gathering a meal for himself.

"Good brisket. You outdid yourself." JC said happily.

Chip looked at his husband with a smile and said, "You inspire me to do my best."

* * * * *

"Are you sure you don't want to sit with Daddy and Pop?" Jamie asked his Aunt Jackie seriously.

"No Angel, I'm fine here with Karen and two of my grandsons. How did your talk go with Kevin?" Jackie asked curiously.

"Fine. I just told him what I did and he said it was okay. He wasn't mad at me at all." Jamie said thoughtfully.

"So what's bothering you now?" Jackie asked curiously.

"I don't know. It's like I can almost see something when I look at Kevin, but when I try to focus on it, it goes away." Jamie said thoughtfully.

"Are you sure you aren't still feeling a little bit guilty about reading Kevin's mind?" Jackie asked carefully.

"I really don't think so." Jamie said thoughtfully.

"Well, maybe it's like one of those things you catch a glimpse of out of the corner of your eye. Don't try to look at it and maybe you'll be able to see it easier." Jackie said in a considering tone.

"Maybe. I guess I can try that, nothing else has worked." Jamie said carefully.

"No need to worry about it now. Your father has outdone himself with the brisket. Relax and enjoy this meal with me." Jackie said in a warm tone.

"Okay Aunt Jackie. I hope someday I'm as smart as you are. You know how to fix anything." Jamie said as he got out of his chair and hugged her warmly.

"I'm sure you will be when you have your own children." Jackie said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Excuse me Grandma, Dad just said he was going on a date tomorrow night and that you had something planned for me and Xain." Jake said as he squatted by Mona's chair.

"Oh. Well I was going to tell you after the meal, but I guess it doesn't matter. Juana volunteered to make you and Xain a nice dinner tomorrow night. Allen is going to be on his date with Billy and your brothers are going to be staying with Teri so you'll have the house to yourselves." Mona said with a smile.

Jake looked at Mona with complete shock and gripped the arm of the chair as he felt his balance slipping away.

"Honey, I have some idea of how hard it is to be a couple and not have enough time together. We're just working it out so all the couples can have a special night of their own tomorrow night." Mona said seriously.

Jake quickly stood and leaned in to give Mona a tight hug as he said, "Thank you Grandma. I thought my life couldn't get any better than having Allen as my Dad, but having you as my Grandma too... I never dreamed anyone could be so cool."

Mona laughed as she said, "That means a lot coming from you Jake. Now why don't you go get some food before all the good stuff is gone."

"Can I get either of you anything while I'm over there?" Jake asked hopefully.

"You could grab me another slice of that brisket with some extra sauce. It has to be the best brisket that I've ever tasted." Mona said seriously.

"Anything for you Joe?"

"Nothing now. If I think of anything I'll get it myself." Joe said with a peaceful smile.

"No you won't. You just tell me and I'll get whatever you need." Lawrence said as he sat his plate on the table.

Jake gave Lawrence a smile and a nod of approval as he turned to walk away.

* * * * *

"Can I get you anything while I'm up?" Cory asked as he sat his plate on the table.

"No, we've got everything we need." Dan said happily.

Cory nodded and took his seat.

A moment later Sean was sitting by his side.

"Is everything ready for the shuttle?" Cory asked casually before taking a bite of food.

"The *Mississippi* will be ready for take-off when you arrive." Matt said seriously.

"Good. How's the progress on the telepathic surprise you guys are cooking up?" Cory asked Kyle curiously.

"We'll have 'the package' ready to deliver by the end of the meal." Kyle said with a distant look.

"Do you know who you're taking on this mission yet?" John asked seriously.

"Well Sean and I will go. Of course Kenny and Kevin will have to be there. Dan will go along to make sure Ms. Harris doesn't mess with their heads too much. Kyle, would you like to be the one to deliver the package?" Cory asked as he turned to face Kyle again.

"Yeah, I'd like that. It'd be nice to go on a mission with Dad." Kyle said with a smile at his father.

John smiled at Kyle and Dan and nodded his approval before taking another bite of his food.

"John, will you need to go along to get us in?" Sean asked curiously.

"No. It's all arranged. Just have your Vulcan IDs handy and they'll be expecting you." John said seriously.

Sean turned to Cory and said, "We really need to get the new guys Vulcan IDs and communicators."

"I can handle that if you would like. All I'll need to do is take a picture of each of them before we leave. Security at the spaceport will have the IDs and communicators waiting for us when we get there. " Matt said frankly.

"Thanks Matt. That'll be a big help." Cory said with a smile.

"And while I've got you here, I would like to talk to you about security for the Thompson, Vasquez and Pierce families." Matt said seriously.

"Do you really think they need security?" Cory asked carefully.

"Yes. I do. They need terminals installed in the Vasquez and Pierce households, upgraded security systems in each building and satellite security monitoring of both houses. I'd also like for security to have the ability to override and lock the entry gates to their gated community." Matt said seriously.

"What do you expect to happen?" Sean asked cautiously.

"I don't deal in expectation, I deal in preparation. The rest of the clan are kept secure at Southcrest, the Short compound and Camp Little Eagle." Matt said frankly.

"Cory, Matt's right. Until today, Gloria Harris was on the run and could have shown up at any time and caused all kinds of trouble. Deacon's parents might decide they want him back and hire someone to take him. Or Edovina's mother might show up and decide she wants her daughter back. That's not even counting the people who might just like to get even with someone from Clan Short." Kyle said frankly.

John looked at Kyle with pride and said, "Kyle makes a good point. And the most effective security is the kind that's in place 'before' you need it. I can't see any reason to wait, but I can see several good reasons to act immediately.

Cory gave a sigh of resignation, then said, "I'd be crazy to argue with all three of you."

"That would be my department." Dan said with a smile.

Cory rolled his eyes, then went back to work on eating his dinner.

* * * * *

"Wow Uncle Chip! This is the best meat I've ever had... ever!" Kevin said after tasting the brisket.

"Thank you Kevin. I had the briskets and steaks shipped in from Texas and made the sauce myself." Chip said with pride.

Kevin glanced at JC and saw him give a slight nod of approval.

"I think some of the boys are going riding after dinner before it gets dark. Are you going to join them?" Chip asked Kevin casually.

"Nuh uh. Me and Kenny are going to Utah to see my momma." Kevin said with a serious look.

"Oh? Your mother..." Chip trailed off thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Cory and Sean are going to take us there so we can let her know that I'm happy here with my brothers and my new Poppa." Kevin said, then took another bite of the brisket.

Chip and JC shared a look of concern at the statement.

"Momma always tried to hurt me because I'm like my Dad. Now she'll get to see that all the stuff she did to me ended up not hurting me at all. It's because of all that bad stuff that I can really be thankful for the good stuff that I've got now." Kevin said thoughtfully.

"Aren't you afraid that she's going to try to hurt you again?" JC asked with concern.

"No. I'm not scared of her no more. I kinda feel sorry for her." Kevin said seriously.

"Why is that?" Chip asked cautiously.

"Cause if she woulda been nice and loved me, she coulda been happy like I am now. Having a big house and lots of food is nice. But even if Poppa didn't have all that stuff, he'd still love all of us just the same and we'd still be happy." Kevin said seriously.

Chip smiled at the statement and said, "I'm glad you can see what's most important. There are a lot of people who never figure that out."

"Then they need a Poppa like mine. I never woulda learned it if he didn't show me." Kevin said honestly.

"I think you're right Kevin. More people need Poppas like yours." Chip said gently.

* * * * *

"Hey Kevin, are you about ready to go?" Cory asked as he approached the table.

"Yeah, just let me tell my Poppa where I'm going." Kevin said quickly.

Everyone watched as Kevin raced away to find Allen.

"He's made amazing progress from when he arrived." JC said distantly.

"Do you think him seeing his mother is such a good idea?" Chip asked with concern.

"I don't know. But it was his idea and we'll have Dan with us to make sure he's okay." Cory said seriously.

"He needs to put his past behind him so he can move on." Sean said from Cory's side.

"I guess so. He's just been through so much. I'd hate to see him get hurt again." Chip said quietly.

"Please trust me Uncle Chip. We'll protect him." Cory said seriously.

"You'd better, or there'll be hell to pay Ensign." Chip said as he looked Cory in the eyes.

A long moment of silence fell over the group until Chip finally broke into a smile.

Cory laughed and said, "Please don't do that Uncle Chip. I thought you were serious."

"Well, I'm not going to hold you responsible as your commanding officer, but I am going to hold you responsible." Chip said firmly.

"Got it. I'll protect him. I promise." Cory said sincerely.

Chip nodded his acceptance of the statement, his expression making it clear that he was serious.

* * * * *

"Poppa, Kenny and I are going to Utah to see my momma." Kevin said as he hurried to the table.

"You are? Right now?" Allen asked in surprise.

"Uh huh. She's in jail there and Cory and Sean said I could go there and tell her that I'm okay and I have a family now." Kevin said quickly.

"I'm going with you." Allen said firmly.

"Cory and Sean will make sure that I'm okay." Kevin said seriously.

"Kevin, I love you very much and I don't want to see you get hurt. I'm going along in case you need me." Allen said firmly.

"Dad. I'm pretty sure if Cory and Sean are going along, this is a Clan thing. It'd probably be best if you stayed here. Xain and I could go along to take care of Kenny and Kevin... besides, I have a few things I'd like to say to their mom." Jake said seriously.

Allen thought about the statement and finally said, "Okay Jake. I understand about it being Clan business. I know you'll take good care of your brothers so I'll try not to worry too much."

"Thanks Dad." Jake said as he got up from his chair and gave Allen a hug.

"No one ever trusted me like you do. I'll make sure all the guys are fine." Jake said firmly.

Allen enjoyed the hug, then said, "You'd better get going before it gets too late. I'll be waiting here for you to get back."

"Okay. We'll be back as soon as we can." Jake said, then glanced at Xain with question.

"I anticipate an atmosphere of hostility at our destination. Dad, would you be willing to care for Edovina? I would not wish to expose her to such an unfavorable environment." Xain said seriously.

"Of course. She can keep me company while you're gone." Allen said with a smile at the little girl in Xain's arms.

Xain carefully stood and handed Edovina to Allen.

"Her primary supplies are in a bag in the bathroom by the kitchen. Additional supplies are in the car, should you have need of them." Xain said seriously.

"I'm sure that between me and Juana, we'll find everything we need. Go on, the sooner you leave, the sooner you'll be back." Allen said with a smile.

Xain looked at Allen curiously for a moment, then nodded his acceptance of the statement and turned to join Jake.

"Kevin?" Allen called.

Kevin stepped away from Jake and Xain and hurried to Allen's side.

Allen pulled him into a one armed hug and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"No matter what happens there, remember that I love you and I will always love you." Allen said seriously.

"I knew that." Kevin said with a playful smile.

Allen laughed at the statement and gave Kevin one more quick kiss before letting him go.

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Jackie stood and glanced at Karen with question.

Karen gave a nod and also stood.

Jackie then looked around the tables and spotted Mona.

As Jackie and Karen started walking toward Mona's table, Mona glanced over at them.

Jackie gave a nod as if to say, 'its time'.

Mona gave a quick nod in return and stood.

Jackie, Karen and Mona then walked to Teri's table.

"May we borrow Teri for a few minutes?" Jackie asked sweetly.

"Of course." Christine said immediately.

"This won't take long." Teri said as she stood and walked to Mona's side.

"Ladies... let's do it." Jackie said as she spotted her target table and led the way.

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"Kevin, please stand right here and face the terminal for just a second so I can take your picture." Matt said seriously.

"What for?" Kevin asked curiously as he turned to face Matt.

"Face the terminal. This is going to be for your Vulcan ID." Matt said as he tried to get the terminal to get a good picture of Kevin.

"What do I need one of those for?" Kevin asked Matt curiously.

"Face the terminal. It's to prove to people that you're members of Clan Short. Now hold still..." Matt said slowly, then turned and hit the video capture key.

When the image he captured came up on the screen, he couldn't help but laugh at the wide eyed, puzzled expression on Kevin's face.

"Kevin, what were you thinking when I took your picture? That expression is priceless." Matt said through his chuckles.

Kenny and Jake rushed to the monitor to see the picture that Matt had taken.

"I think the elastic in my underwear just broke." Kevin said uncertainly as he reached into his pants and pulled out the edge of his underwear.

Kenny, Jake and Matt were all laughing at the expression that Kevin wore in the picture. Knowing what caused him to look that way made it even funnier.

"It's not funny." Kevin said in a grumpy voice.

"Come over here and say that." Jake said with a snicker as he motioned for Kevin to join him.

Kevin walked to Jakes side and saw the picture for himself.

"It's not..." Kevin began to say, then broke up into laughter.

"Yes it is." Kenny said as he laughed even harder.

"Come on guys, picture time. We've got to get to the spaceport. Kevin, let's try again." Matt said with a smile.

"Can't you keep that one?" Kevin asked with a laugh.

"Are you serious?" Matt asked incredulously.

"Yeah. It's funny. It makes people laugh. I wanna keep it." Kevin said with a smile, then reached into the side of his pants and tugged up his falling underwear.

"Kev, go take those off. You don't want to be hitching up your drawers for the rest of the night do you?" Jake asked with a smile.

"But... then I won't be wearing any underwear." Kevin said slowly.

"So? It won't hurt you to go commando one night. Go ahead while we get our pictures taken." Jake said with an assuring smile.

"Okay." Kevin said reluctantly and walked out of the study.

* * * * *

"I hope that you will excuse me for discussing business at this gathering, but I must speak with Lieutenant Thompson about some security matters." Spock said as he stood.

"They're coming, aren't they?" Chip asked as he watched Spock carefully.

Spock's only response was to say, "Good evening ladies." as he passed the four women approaching the table.

"I'll get him for that. I don't know how or when, but I'll get him." Chip said seriously to his husband.

"Chip, you need to go away with Josh this weekend and take some time for just the two of you." Jackie said firmly as the four women stood by Chip and JC's table.

"I'm sorry Aunt Jackie, but I'm going to be needed on the *Enterprise*. We're leaving Sunday night and I have to make sure everything's ready." Chip said seriously.

"Can't you talk to Captain Kirk and make arrangements just this once?" Jackie asked carefully.

"Captain Kirk has been very understanding about giving me time off when I've needed it in the past. But I can't just call on a whim and ask for the weekend off." Chip said frankly.

"A whim." Jackie muttered as she shook her head in disapproval.

The other three women nodded in sympathy with her dilemma.

"Josh honey, talk to your husband and make him understand how important this weekend is." Karen said to her son in an imploring voice.

"I'm supposed to be in the studio to rehearse this weekend. This is the end of our break and we have to be well rehearsed before we go back to work." JC said to his mother.

"He *used to* listen to me." Karen said with a tremble in her voice.

"Chip, these are the times that you get to look back on. You can't squander an opportunity like this to spend a special weekend with the most important person in your life. If you can't see how important this is, then you need this worse than I thought." Jackie said in a pleading whisper.

"I'm sorry Aunt Jackie. As much as I'd like to go away with Josh for the weekend, I just can't." Chip said with regret.

Jackie got a determined look in her eye as she said, "We'll see."

Chip glanced at JC with question to find him looking back.

Jackie took out her cell phone and stepped away from the group.

"What about you Josh? Are you going to listen to the advice of your mother or not?" Karen asked intensely.

"I made a commitment to the band..." JC began to say but was cut off as Karen raised her hand in a 'stop' motion.

"But mom..." JC tried to say, but was silenced with a glare.

A moment later, Karen had her cell phone in her hand and was dialing.

"You should have listened." Teri said in a gentle voice.

Mona nodded her agreement.

* * * * *

"Kenny, how's your underwear?" Jake asked just as Matt pressed the video capture button.

"Guys, you need to be serious. These pictures are going to be stored at the Vulcan embassy." Matt tried to say with a straight face as he looked at the bizarre expression in Kenny's picture.

"Sorry Matt." Jake said, not sounding the least bit sorry.

"I'm guessing you're going to want to keep this picture." Matt said in a resigned tone as he showed the picture to Kenny.

After a giggle, Kenny nodded.

"Next." Matt said with a shake of his head.

Xain took his place before the terminal and let all expression drop from his face.

"Good." Matt said as he quickly turned and hit the capture key.

When the image appeared on the screen, Matt stared at it in wonder.

There before him was a picture of the Vulcan boy with a happy smile on his face.

"How did you manage that?" Matt asked as he turned to Jake.

Kenny laughed as he approached and looked at the picture.

Jake looked at Matt wearing his most innocent expression.

"Not buying it." Matt said flatly.

"Our bond. I just let Xain feel exactly how much I love him." Jake said happily.

Matt transmitted the image and motioned for Jake to take his place in front of the monitor.

"Are you going to *try* to be serious for this picture?" Matt asked cautiously.

"I'll try." Jake said assuringly.

Matt looked at Jake cautiously, then quickly turned and hit the capture key.

The image that came up made Matt burst out in laughter.

"Can we do that again?" Jake asked with embarrassment.

"Only if you tell me what made you blush all the way to the tips of your ears." Matt said with a chuckle.

"No deal. I'll just live with the picture." Jake said, then glanced at Xain and raised one eyebrow in a uniquely Vulcan manor.

"Whatever you say." Matt said and transmitted the picture.

Jake walked to Xain's side and muttered, "Horney little Vulcan."

* * * * *

Jackie walked back to the table and said, "Your Uncle Harold and I will be staying in Orlando for the weekend, is there room for me here or do I need to call a hotel?"

"Your guest cottage is just like you left it. You've always got a place here." Chip said quickly.

Jackie nodded seriously, then glanced at Karen who was approaching.

"Josh, your father will be arriving on the next available flight. Do you have room for us here?" Karen asked JC in a cold, professional tone.

"There's always room for you." JC said in a small voice.

Karen nodded, then looked at Jackie with question.

"Wait for it." Jackie said, then turned her icy gaze on Chip.

JC and Chip squirmed under the combined glares of the mothers until they were interrupted by Hazel saying, "A call for you Mr. Chip. It is Captain Kirk."

Chip accepted the phone and quickly said, "Commander Dodds here."

After a long moment of listening, he briskly said, "Yes sir!"

There was a shorter pause, then he again said, "Yes sir!"

JC looked on in concern at Chip's serious expression.

"I understand sir. Dodds out." Chip said, then hung up the phone.

Chip turned to JC and said in a disbelieving voice, "I've just been *ordered* to take leave until the *Enterprise* is ready to disembark Sunday night."

JC was about to say something when the phone rang.

"It's for you Josh." Karen said simply.

JC hesitantly picked up the phone and said, "Southcrest, this is JC."

"Hold on, he did what?" JC asked in shock.

"Yeah, I got it. I'll see you Monday." JC said absently, then hung up the phone.

"Dad called Lance's parents and told them that our rehearsal was keeping me and Chip from our second honeymoon." JC said with disbelief, then looked up at his mom.

"All the parents should know by now." Karen said without emotion.

"The rehearsal has been cancelled, we're going to rehearse Monday morning instead." JC said in a considering voice.

"So here's how it's going to work. You two be packed and ready to go Friday afternoon. A limo will pick you up and take you to the airport and you're going away on a romantic weekend for two." Jackie said firmly.

"We'll be staying here all weekend to make sure you two don't try to sneak back." Karen said as she crossed her arms across her chest.

"Don't we get any say in this?" Chip asked defensively.

"You had your chance." Jackie said firmly.

"Then where are we going?" Chip asked his Aunt carefully.

"You'll find out Friday when you get there." Jackie said seriously.

"Mom?" JC asked in a small voice.

"Am I still your mom? You couldn't tell by the way you ignore my advice." Karen said as she glared at JC.

"Ouch. Direct hit." Mona whispered to Teri.

Teri glanced up at Mona and nodded in agreement.

"I'm sorry mom." JC said even more quietly.

"To think that the little boy that I raised could grow up to be too rich and famous to care about what his poor old mother has to say..." Karen said in a tone of suffering with a shake of her head.

"Now she's just showing off." Teri whispered with a smirk.

Mona nodded and whispered in return, "She sank his battleship."

* * * * *

The group traveled in silence toward the spaceport until it was broken by Dan asking, "Are you going to be okay Kevin?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." Kevin said honestly.

Kyle looked at Kevin carefully, then turned to Dan and said, "He's telling the truth. He's not scared at all. He's fine."

Dan looked at his son with question.

"Really." Kyle said as he looked his father in the eyes.

"We need to get out here to get your IDs and communicators." Matt said as he pulled into the parking lot beside the security building.

"Will this take long?" Dan asked curiously.

"No. Just a minute. They just have to pick them up in person." Matt said as he got out of the hummer.

Matt led the boys into the security building and up to the reception desk.

As soon as the officer behind the desk looked up and saw the four boys, she burst into laughter and called out, "They're here."

Three uniformed security officers rushed into the room and immediately started laughing when they saw the four boys.

"We didn't know if you were really serious when we saw the pictures." One of the officers was barely able to say.

Another of the officers calmed down enough to say, "We thought it had to be a joke."

"Are the IDs ready?" Matt asked with a smile, fighting to hold in his own laughter.

"Yes. Anita will just need you to sign for them." One of the officers fought to say.

"Well Kevin, you said you wanted to make people laugh." Matt said with a smile as he accepted a clipboard and signed for the IDs.

"Each of you will need to sign by your name." The woman behind the desk said with a large smile as she handed four ID cards and communicators to Matt.

Each boy signed their name and received their ID card and communicator.

"Thank you, we have to be going." Matt said as he handed the clipboard to the woman behind the desk.

"No. Thank you. We don't get a lot of reasons to laugh at this post. Please stop by anytime." She said, directing her last statement to the four boys.

* * * * *

"Brady, I'd like to talk to you and your brother for a moment." Mona said seriously as she led the group of mothers through the gathering.

"Sure mom. I'll be right back." Brady said to Juana and the boys.

Brady and the mothers walked to Allen's table and stopped across from him.

"Allen, I need your help with something." Mona said firmly.

"Anything you want, just name it." Allen said immediately.

"We're planning a weekend getaway for Chip and JC, sort of a second honeymoon. I'm not very computer literate or organized. I was wondering if you could help me take care of it?" Mona asked sweetly.

"I don't have a lot of experience trip planning..." Allen began to say.

"I travel a lot. Do you mind if I help too Mona?" Billy asked hopefully.

"Thank you Billy, that would be nice. You can call me Mom if you want." Mona said with a twinkle in her eye.

Allen looked at Mona incredulously but remained silent.

"I could take care of security for them when we know where they're going." Brady said seriously.

"That's my boy." Mona said with a happy smile.

"I guess that leaves me to organize the details like entertainment, flowers..." Allen trailed off thoughtfully.

"Mona, it looks like your boys don't need any convincing so we'll leave you to it." Jackie said with a smile at the three men.

"Don't worry about a thing Jackie. Everything will be arranged for Friday afternoon." Mona said seriously.

"We'll leave it up to you. I can't wait to hear what you have planned." Jackie said with a smile.

"I'll let you know as soon as we have the details worked out." Mona said happily.

* * * * *

"Do you remember the last time we were on a shuttle?" Jake asked Kevin with a smile.

"Yeah. When we went to the *Enterprise*. It feels like that was a hundred years ago." Kevin said with a smile.

"I thought Ken was gonna wet himself when he realized what ship we were going to." Jake said with a chuckle.

"I've been reading about the *Enterprise* all my life, and then, all of a sudden I was really there." Kenny said in his defense.

"Yeah, it was cool. I was so out of it I couldn't even go on the tour with you guys." Jake said with a smile.

"Then if the opportunity should present itself, we would be able to share our first experience of touring the *Enterprise* together." Xain said in a speculative voice.

"Yeah. I'll have to ask Uncle Chip about that sometime. That'd be cool." Jake said as he extended his index and middle fingers to Xain.

Without hesitation, Xain held out his fingers and initiated a 'Vulcan Kiss'.

Dan smiled at the expression of love between the two, then looked at Kyle and asked, "What's got you so preoccupied?"

"It's something Jamie asked me about Kevin... something is different about him." Kyle said in a voice of deep concentration.

"How so?" Dan asked curiously.

"You know how I said that Kevin wasn't scared at all?" Kyle asked quietly.

"Yes. I remember." Dan said slowly.

"That's what's wrong. Kevin is always afraid. When he's happy or sad or angry there's this part of him inside that's always afraid." Kyle said in deep concentration.

"I'll take your word for it. So what's different?" Dan asked curiously.

"It's gone. That part, the little boy that's always scared and wanting so badly just to be loved, is gone. And I don't know where it went." Kyle said thoughtfully.

"I talked to Kevin about some things today, maybe he finally realized that he doesn't need to be afraid and that he *is* loved." Dan suggested.

"You're good Dad, but you're not *that* good. That kind of life-long pain doesn't just go away." Kyle said seriously.

"Who is the child psychologist here anyway?" Dan asked with a smile.

"Am I wrong?" Kyle asked in challenge.

Dan got a serious expression as he said, "No, you're not wrong. I don't have the luxury of being able to look into his mind. But if what you're saying is right, this might be an indication of a problem."

"Like what?" Kyle asked curiously.

"Speaking in a strictly theoretical sense, the loss of a component part of the personality could be a sign of a bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, a multiple personality disorder, or selective amnesia. And that's just off the top of my head. Keep an eye on him and let me know if anything else comes up that worries you." Dan said seriously.

"Yeah. I will." Kyle said thoughtfully.

CHAPTER 42

"Patriarch Short?" A uniformed officer asked expectantly as the group stepped off the shuttle.

"Right here." Cory said as he made his way to the front of the group.

"Welcome to Provo Patriarch Short. I'm officer Flatley and I've been assigned to provide whatever assistance you might need during your visit to our city." The officer said seriously.

"Thank you officer Flatley. We will need transport to the police station so we may interview Ms. Harris." Cory said cautiously, not quite accustomed to being treated as a visiting dignitary.

"There is a van right over here that should be able to accommodate your entire party. I had hoped to get you something more comfortable, but this was the best I could do on such short notice." The officer said as he led the way.

Cory looked at the van and said, "It is acceptable."

* * * * *

"How are you doing Vince?" Lawrence asked as he approached JJ and Adam's table.

"Fine. But I'm starting to feel really tired." Vincent said in a small voice.

"Why don't you come into the house and lay down for a while? The doctor said that if you're tired you should rest." Lawrence said with concern.

"Okay." Vincent said weakly as he slowly stood.

"Do you want us to go with you to keep you company?" Gabe asked quietly.

"No thanks. You've all been really nice, but I just need to rest for a while." Vincent said as he walked to Lawrence's side.

"Come on." Lawrence said as he carefully put his hand on Vincent's shoulder.

"Could you not touch me please?" Vincent asked in a soft voice.

"Whatever you want, Vince." Lawrence said as he withdrew his hand.

"I don't hate you or nothin. But I know you're qu... gay and I just don't want you to touch me." Vincent said in an even quieter voice.

"It's okay Vince. As long as you'll let me know if I do something that makes you uncomfortable, I won't be mad." Lawrence said assuringly.

"Okay. That's good." Vincent said without emotion.

"Daddy, I'm going to take Vincent inside for a while. He's feeling tired and the doctor said he can't be left alone." Lawrence said as they walked to Joe and Mona's table.

"Since Mona is off with her sons I'm not doing anything right now. I can stay with Vincent if you'd like." Joe said frankly.

"What do you say Vince?" Lawrence asked carefully.

"Yeah. I like your dad. Maybe we can talk about some Starfleet stuff while I'm resting." Vincent said, sounding slightly more energetic.

Joe smiled and stood.

"Thanks Daddy." Lawrence said gently.

"Why don't you spend some time with Deacon while we're gone?" Joe suggested with a wink.

"Yeah, I will. Thanks." Lawrence said shyly, then gave his father a kiss on the cheek.

"Come on, Champ. Let's get you inside where you can get some rest." Joe said to Vincent as he gestured toward the house.

Vincent hesitantly stepped to Joe's side and put an arm around his waist.

Joe smiled and let his hand drop and come to rest on Vincent's shoulder.

As Lawrence watched his father and brother walk toward the house he absently said, "Good for you Daddy."

* * * * *

"Hey Josh, do you mind if I use your computer for a few minutes?" Billy asked as he approached Chip and JC's table with Allen, Brady and Mona following him.

"Sure. You should have all the access you'll need with the guest account. The login and password are both 'guest'." JC said as he looked at the group.

"Thanks, this won't take long. I just have one thing to do that can't wait until I get home... if it isn't already too late." Billy said thoughtfully.

"What would that be?" Chip asked curiously.

"That's a strictly 'Need to Know' matter Commander." Mona said before Billy could answer.

"And I don't need to know?" Chip asked hesitantly.

"Not until Friday afternoon." Mona said with a smile.

Chip and JC watched as Mona and her sons walked toward the house.

"Mona's making the arrangements?" JC asked in a cautious voice.

"We'll have a great time no matter where we go because we'll be together." Chip said with a smile to his husband.

"Have you ever *been* to a tractor pull?" JC asked frankly.

Chip looked at JC curiously, then toward the house with concern.

* * * * *

"Hello, I'm Craig Horton, the Chief of Police. Please feel free to ask for anything you might need to make your stay in Provo more comfortable." The distinguished man said with genuine courtesy.

"Thank you sir. I would appreciate it if you would allow us to see Ms. Harris as soon as possible." Cory said, trying to maintain his professional demeanor.

"Of course. We're just getting the room set up so you can all be comfortable... we weren't expecting so many of you. Maybe we could get the official business out of the way while the room is being prepared?" Chief Horton said respectfully.

"Of course." Cory said impassively.

"If your party could just sign in and provide identification for our records. By the time we're finished we should be ready to go into the visitation room." The Police Chief said professionally.

"It is acceptable." Cory said as he walked to the main desk.

"May I see your identification?" The young officer behind the desk asked politely.

Cory handed his Vulcan ID to the officer and waited patiently as the officer wrote information from the ID into a notebook.

"Thank you Patriarch Short. If you'll step to the end of the desk, Officer Rivers will need to search you for weapons before you can enter the visitation area." The young officer said as he returned Cory's ID.

Cory nodded as he walked to stand before the slightly older officer at the end of the desk.

"I'm sorry we have to do this, but I'd hate for our prisoner to find a way to injure you or take you hostage." Officer Rivers said seriously as he moved the metal detector wand over Cory's body.

The tone of the metal detector went up slightly when it passed over Cory's chest.

"A necklace?" Officer Rivers asked professionally.

"A key." Cory said as he pulled the key on a chain out of his shirt.

"I'm sorry Patriarch Short, but that key could conceivably be used as a weapon. If you'll leave it here with me, I promise to return it as soon as you're finished with your interview." The officer said with concern in his voice.

Cory thought for a second. The lock that the key fit into was back in Iowa. The key was now a symbol of the love and belief of his family.

"I'm Patriarch Short's personal security. Can you make an exception in your policy if I give you my personal assurance that Ms. Harris will not be allowed within three feet of Patriarch Short at any time during the interview?" Matt asked forcefully.

The Police Chief looked at Matt consideringly for a moment before Cory said, "No. Officer Rivers' reasoning is logical. Besides, the most effective security is the kind that's in place 'before' you need it."

"I can see why you're the Patriarch. If more people were smart enough to adopt that philosophy it would make our jobs a lot easier." Chief Horton said seriously.

Cory handed his key to Officer Rivers and said, "The only claim I can make to being 'smart' is that I try to be smart enough to listen to the people around me when they give me good advice."

The police chief laughed and said, "Is that all? Hell, if we could get the people of Provo to do that, they wouldn't need a police department."

Cory stepped away from the desk to allow Sean to be scanned and said, "The trick is to figure out which advice is good."

"Very true." The Chief said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Hey Champ, how are you feeling?" Joe asked as he led Vincent to the couch in the living room.

"Just tired, and my eyes are going a little bit funny again." Vincent said as he sat down.

"Wait here for a second, I've met two doctors since I got here, I'll get one of them to have a look at you just to make sure that you're going to be okay." Joe said with concern.

"Okay." Vincent said weakly as he rested back into the couch.

Joe hurried out of the room, filled with concern for his 'step-son'.

* * * * *

"Did you fall off your skateboard one too many times?" Mona asked in exasperation.

"Vegas is a perfect place for a couple to spend the weekend." Billy quickly defended.

"Maybe for you or me, but I doubt that Chip and JC would think so. What I'm looking for is something more... wholesome. Let me at that thing... where do you type in what you want?" Mona asked as she nudged Billy from the chair in front of the computer.

"Right there." Billy said with a chuckle as he pointed at the text field of the search engine.

"Okay, I just tell it what I'm looking for, right?" Mona asked curiously.

"Sure. Let's see what you get." Billy said with a smile.

Billy, Allen and Brady all fought to hold in their chuckles as Mona used the hunt-and-peck method of typing to put in her search criteria.

"Now what?" Mona asked as she looked at Billy seriously.

"Hit the enter key." Billy said with a tender smile at her.

Mona looked over the keyboard for a second, then finally found it and hit 'Enter'.

"Well look at that... Do you think they would like a trip to the Adirondacks for the weekend?" Mona asked curiously.

Allen fought the urge to laugh as Brady said, "They might. Go ahead and pull up the site."

Mona clicked on the link and a beautiful picture of a snowy mountain filled the screen.

"Isn't that something." Mona said in amazement.

"I can see how snuggling with someone you love while looking at that view would make for a perfect weekend." Brady said with a smile.

"It's close, but not 'exactly' what I was looking for." Mona said consideringly.

"Click that left arrow and you can look at the other choices." Billy said as he pointed at the screen.

Mona awkwardly moved the mouse and finally was able to position the cursor over the back arrow.

As the screen changed back, Mona started reading over the choices before her.

"What about the Poconos?" Allen asked as he looked at the list.

"Maybe, but let's try this one first." Mona said and clicked a link.

There was a long moment of silence as all four read the page until it was broken by Allen asking, "Country music?"

"What's wrong with country music?" Mona asked sternly.

"Nothing, nothing at all. I was just thinking that Josh and Chip's tastes might be a little more modern..." Allen said quickly.

"Especially since Josh is a member of *NSync." Brady added.

"Maybe they'd enjoy a different style of music for a change. Besides, look at this, there are all kinds of shows, not just country music." Mona said as she pointed at the screen.

"Chinese acrobats..." Billy said in a non-committal voice.

"Cirque... I'd like to see that." Brady said as he pointed.

"Scroll down." Allen said thoughtfully.

"How do I do that?" Mona asked as she looked at the keyboard.

"You can press that 'page down' key." Billy said as he pointed at the keyboard.

Mona pushed the key and looked at the screen.

"Isn't that something." Mona said in wonder.

All three men fought to hold back their chuckles at her reaction.

"I see comedians, magicians and even a few acts that I'd only expect to see on the strip in Vegas." Billy said as he looked over the available shows.

"Scroll down." Allen said again.

Mona pressed the 'page down' key, then giggled to herself as she watched the screen scroll down.

"That one." Brady said and pointed at the screen.

"Oh my God! They have GOT to go to that show." Allen said with a chuckle.

"I don't know, do you think Josh will see the humor in someone impersonating *NSync on stage?" Billy asked with concern.

"Read the description. These impersonators are doing all these bands as a tribute to the artists. I think Chip and Josh will get a kick out of seeing *NSync perform on the same stage as Elvis and the Beach Boys and Tina Turner. Look, you can order the tickets for the show online." Allen said with enthusiasm.

"So are we decided that this is where they'll be going for the weekend?" Mona asked as she sat back in the chair.

"It looks like beautiful scenery, good shows and a lot less 'glitz' than Vegas. I think they'll have a wonderful time." Billy said seriously.

"And it's someplace that they'd probably never think of going in a million years." Allen said with a chuckle.

"From a security standpoint it's probably going to be a lot easier to manage than a Vegas casino." Brady said thoughtfully.

"Okay, it's settled. Now you three need to swear that you won't tell anyone where we're sending them." Mona said seriously.

"We're not going to tell them Mona." Allen said in an exaggerated voice.

"I didn't think you'd tell Chip and JC, I'm more concerned that they'll send in spies to try and find out." Mona said seriously.

"Spies?" Allen asked incredulously.

"Do you think Kevin would try to find out what we're planning if Chip asked him to?" Mona asked as she turned in her chair to look at Allen seriously.

"In a heartbeat." Allen admitted.

"This stays with the four of us until those two get on the plane Friday afternoon." Mona said firmly.

"Agreed." Allen said seriously.

Mona stood up and motioned to the chair as she said, "Okay Billy, it's time to work your trip planning magic."

"I'm on it." Billy said as he dropped into the chair.

"First thing, book a first class flight for two to Branson, Missouri."

* * * * *

"You've got to see this one." The young officer said with a smile as he held out Kevin's ID to officer Flatley.

"I'm sorry Patriarch Short, we usually try to keep a more professional..." Chief Horton said, then was handed the ID.

All the boys watched as the Chief of Police looked at the ID and tried to hold in his laughter.

"A... very interesting... picture." The Chief said as he handed the ID to Kevin.

"Right when they took the picture, the elastic in my underwear broke." Kevin said timidly.

Chief Horton, officer Flatley and the young officer behind the desk broke into laughter at the statement.

"Next." The young officer fought to say.

Kenny handed over his ID and waited.

The young officer quickly copied down the information and held out the ID to officer Flatley without a word.

The Chief reluctantly accepted the ID from officer Flatley, then broke into fresh laughter at the sight of the picture.

By the time Jake's ID had been returned to him, everyone in the room had been drawn into the infectious laughter.

"Are we ready to go in?" Cory asked with a smile at the officers.

"Almost. Mr. Barnes, I'm willing to recognize your security credentials and allow you to carry your weapon into the visitation room. But you need to know that if you fire your weapon, the building will automatically be

locked down and your group may be unable to leave for some time." Chief Horton said seriously.

"I understand. Thank you for respecting my position." Matt said sincerely.

"Then follow me. The visitation room should be ready."

* * * * *

"Vincent, this is Doctor Austin Michaels." Joe said as he led another man into the room.

"You can call me Doc Austin if you like."

"Hi. I'm Vincent."

"Teri told me that you've got a concussion. If you'll hold still for a second, I'm going to scan you to get your vital signs." Doc Austin said carefully.

"Is that a Federation medical tricorder?" Vincent asked with interest.

"No. But it's close. This is a Vulcan medical scanner. It's basically the same thing." Doc Austin said as he scanned Vincent carefully.

"What does it say?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"It says that you need to rest. I'm going to get you an ice pack for the bump on your head. If we can bring the swelling down just a tad, your vision should clear right up. Are you in any pain?" Doc Austin asked gently.

"A little. Not too bad." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Then I'll get you a mild pain reliever. There's no reason you should have to hurt." Doc Austin said with a gentle smile.

"Thank you. Do you have any kids?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yes, I have four sons. I saw you sitting with my oldest son Gabe at dinner." Doc Austin said with a smile.

"You're Gabe's dad?" Vincent asked in wonder.

"Yes. I'll be right back with the ice pack and medicine." Doc Austin said gently as he hurried away.

There was a long silence that was finally broken by Joe quietly asking, "Would it be okay if I sit with you?"

Vincent looked up at Joe and nodded hesitantly.

Joe looked at Vincent consideringly, then said, "How about I sit at that end of the couch, then you can lay down?"

Vincent nodded and watched as Joe took a seat at the far end of the couch.

"Here's something for the pain and an ice pack." Doc Austin said as he hurried into the room.

"Thanks." Vincent said quietly as he accepted a pill and a small glass of water.

After taking the pill, he handed the glass back to Doc Austin.

"Go ahead and lay down." Doc Austin said quietly.

Vincent hesitantly laid down and rested his head on Joe's thigh.

"Do you want to hold this for him?" Doc Austin asked as he handed Joe the ice pack.

"Where do I need to put it?" Joe asked carefully.

"Right there." Doc Austin said and pointed to a spot on the back of Vincent's head.

"Thank you Doctor. Are you sure Vincent is going to be okay?" Joe asked with concern.

"Yes. I think he was just up a bit longer than he needed to be. As soon as we get that swelling to go down a little he should be feeling much better." Doc Austin said seriously.

"Thank you. I'm sorry I had to take you away from your wife and kids." Joe said as he held the ice pack gently against the back of Vincent's head.

"Carrie is used to it by now, but I should be getting back to her. I'll leave you two alone so Vincent can get his rest." Doc Austin said with a smile at the sight of Joe treating Vincent so gently.

"Thank you again Doctor." Joe said quietly.

"My pleasure." Doc Austin said happily as he walked out of the room.

* * * * *

"If you will all take your seats, someone will bring Ms. Harris in a moment." Officer Flatley said professionally.

"Thank you officer Flatley. You've been very helpful." Cory said as he took his seat.

"We're honored to have Vulcan representatives visit our city. We just want to be sure that if you ever have a reason to mention us in the future, you'll have nice things to say." Officer Flatley said frankly.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. I can't think of anyplace I've ever visited that I've felt more welcomed." Cory said honestly.

"Good, that's what we were trying for." Officer Flatley said with a smile.

Conversation stopped as the door opened and Gloria Harris stepped in wearing an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs.

"Please have a seat Ms. Harris." The large female officer said as she led Kenny and Kevin's mother into the room.

"Or I suppose you'll make me." Gloria Harris said defiantly as she threw herself into the chair just inside the door.

"If you gentlemen wouldn't mind, I'd like to stay here in case 'Sunshine' decides to try and pull anything." The female officer said courteously.

"Thank you officer..." Cory said slowly, prompting for her name.

"Strickland. And you're welcome." The officer said professionally as she took a step back from Ms. Harris and watched her carefully.

"Hi Momma." Kevin said and gave a little wave.

"Oh God! *That's* why they brought me out here? I thought it was my lawyer." Ms. Harris said in a grumble.

"Fine, and you?" Kenny said dryly.

Gloria looked at the two boys, then said, "I knew it. I got the runt of the litter."

Jake glanced at Xain questioningly and nodded before saying, "Calling her a bitch is redundant if she already talks about her kids like they're dogs."

"Jake? Wow, the 'street meat' really cleans up nice. Did you finally suck the golden dick or something?" Ms. Harris asked as she looked him up and down with surprise.

"Something like that... jealous?" Jake asked with a smile.

"Of a drugged-up street whore like you?" Gloria asked with a derisive laugh.

"I did what I had to do." Jake said with a shrug, then continued, "At least I'm better off than a bitter old hag who can't give it away. Besides, we're just here so Kevin and Kenny can let you know that they're okay."

"Great! Like I was worried about *that*." Gloria said with a roll of her eyes.

Cory looked at Kyle with question.

Kyle shook his head and whispered, "Wait for it."

"Momma, I've got a new Poppa and live in a big house with lots of food now." Kevin said proudly.

"A group home?" Gloria asked in a disinterested tone.

"No. A real home. All four of us have been adopted." Kevin said with excitement.

"And we have a swimming pool and a housekeeper." Kenny said with a happy smile.

"And we have a father who really loves us." Jake said as he put an arm around Xain.

"And a grandmother." Xain said impassively.

"So what? You're still a sickly pathetic little retard. They're just acting like they love you because they feel sorry for you." Ms. Harris said with a sneer.

Officer Strickland clenched her jaw and looked like she would enjoy five minutes alone with Gloria Harris.

"Wait for it." Kyle whispered even slower.

Kevin giggled and said, "My new Poppa and my brothers and my uncles love me and are helping me get bigger and stronger and smarter."

"What makes you think you'll ever be able to be one bit better than you are right now?" Ms. Harris said in a superior voice.

"Because I'm just like my Dad." Kevin said in triumph.

"Now." Kyle said with a grin.

Inside Gloria Harris' mind a vision appeared. It was like a flower blooming, each petal held an image of love and happiness. Several scenes flashed by, Kevin happily reading a book, Allen putting an 'extra special' milkshake on the table before Kevin, Brady and Kenny asking for Kevin to draw the shelf they were going to build, a collage of hugs, kisses and gentle words, at the center of the flower was a memory of her ex-husband Carl telling Kenny

about all the wonderful things they were going to do when Kevin came to live with them.

Gloria Harris raised her cuffed hands to her head and gave a growl of anger.

"I think it's time for Ms. Harris to return to her cell." Officer Strickland said firmly.

Gloria started pulling at her cuffs in frustration as she continued to growl and threw in the occasional curse for good measure.

"Yes, thank you officer Strickland, you've been very helpful." Cory said professionally.

The officer looked at Cory with momentary surprise at the courtesy, then smiled at him briefly before helping the growling and struggling Gloria Harris to her feet.

"Walk or I'll carry you outta here like a six-pack." Officer Strickland said in an icy voice that made everyone in the room flinch.

Ms. Harris regained her control and looked back at the boys with a glare.

"Bye bye Momma." Kevin said with a happy little wave.

Gloria Harris gave one more growl and was 'encouraged' to leave the room.

* * * * *

"What's it really like to live on a starship?" Vincent asked as he snuggled in to get more comfortable.

"It's like it's own little world. Sometimes we're traveling for a month or two at a time to get from one system to another. During those long trips we're all just working as a team to make sure the ship is running perfectly... it's so peaceful." Joe drifted off in a happy voice.

"Do you have lots of friends on your ship?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yes. And quite a few friends that used to be on my ship. That's one of the things you have to get used to in Starfleet. People come and go. You have to be able to accept that someone you enjoy spending time with may be reassigned and go on to another posting." Joe said quietly.

"Isn't that hard to do?" Vincent asked in a sleepy voice.

"It was at first. But eventually you learn to enjoy the time that you have with people here and now because there's no guarantee that you'll still be on the same ship in one month or one year." Joe said distantly.

"I never thought about that. I think that if I had friends, I wouldn't want to let them go." Vincent said slowly.

"Don't you have any friends Vincent?" Joe asked with concern.

Vincent tensed and quickly said, "I mean that if I was on a starship and I had friends..."

"Do you have any friends Vincent?" Joe asked more quietly.

"No." Vincent whispered.

"Well now you do. You've got a friend and he happens to be a Lieutenant in Starfleet. What do you think of that?" Joe said with a smile.

Vincent smiled and said, "That's the kind of friend I always wanted."

"Vincent, you know that I'm going to have to leave soon don't you?" Joe asked quietly.

"I thought you would." Vincent said with a sigh.

"Well, if you wanted to, you could write to me and let me know how things are going with you back here on Earth and I could write back to you." Joe said gently.

"Really? That'd be cool. Then you could tell me about all the cool places that you're going and all the aliens that you meet." Vincent said happily.

Joe smiled and said, "Life on a starship isn't usually that exciting. It just sounds like it because the only news worth reporting are the exciting things that occasionally happen. You never hear about the boring six month mission that goes exactly as planned."

"Still... it sounds so much better than being stuck here. On a starship no one yells at you for no reason or hits you." Vincent mumbled.

"No. At least not on my ship. I've been serving with Captain Byrne for... almost seven years now, and I've never heard him raise his voice. He expects... no he requires everyone to treat each other with respect. Anyone who comes on our ship with an attitude problem either learns to keep it to himself or leave." Joe said distantly.

"That sounds nice." Vincent said with a dreamy smile.

"It is for me. I used to have problems dealing with people. I never hit anyone or anything like that, but I guess I wasn't the nicest person to be around when I was angry. Being on the *Yorktown* keeps me from being that

way. No one provokes me, and even if they did, I know that type of behavior isn't tolerated." Joe said thoughtfully.

"You seem really nice to me. I can't imagine you angry." Vincent said seriously.

"I hope you never see me like that. I'm really not proud of myself when I get that way." Joe said quietly.

"I'm not proud of myself sometimes too. It's like my mouth keeps going even when I know I should be quiet." Vincent said distantly.

"Yeah. I know that feeling. I swear, if I didn't know better, I'd swear you were my own son." Joe said with a chuckle.

"I wish I was." Vincent said in a small voice.

Joe brought his other hand over and started stroking Vincent's hair gently as he asked, "Why is that?"

"Cause my daddy don't love me no more." Vincent said as tears filled his eyes.

Joe closed his eyes in pain at the statement and whispered, "I'm sure he does. Sometimes grown-ups just have trouble showing their feelings."

"He won't let me hug him and the only time he talks to me is to yell at me and now he hurt me like he used to hurt Lawrence and Cory says that if I keep living with him he'll probably hurt me worse and maybe even kill me." Vincent said, then broke into full crying.

"Are they doing anything to keep your father from hurting you anymore." Joe asked quietly.

"Yeah. Aunt Teri said they're gonna arrest him and put him in jail, then she's gonna try and find out why he hurts me and Lawrence." Vincent said as he tried to get his tears under control.

"Good. I wouldn't want to see you get hurt again." Joe said in a whisper.

"But my momma's with the police right now and they're gonna arrest my daddy... I... I don't know what I'm going to do..." Vincent said in a lost, hopeless voice.

"I tell you what. My ship isn't going to be leaving until Sunday night. If you like, I can stay here with you until everything is settled. I'll make sure that you'll end up someplace safe before I go." Joe said as he continued to smooth Vincent's hair.

"I always thought step-dads and step-moms were supposed to be mean and evil but you're really nice." Vincent said seriously.

"I think the brothers Grimm just had some unresolved family issues." Joe said gently.

Vincent got a look of confusion, but it soon faded as Joe continued to stroke his hair.

* * * * *

"Here's your necklace, just like I promised." Officer Rivers said with a smile as he presented Cory with his key.

"Thank you for taking good care of it." Cory said with a friendly smile.

A beep changed his expression in an instant.

"Patriarch Short." Cory said seriously as he opened the communicator.

"*Cory, I've got officer Chase on the phone and I think you should talk to him*." Tommy said in a completely serious voice.

"What's going on?" Cory asked, completely in business mode.

"*It's best if he tells you. You got Jake and Kevin there to translate*." Tommy said with a smile in his voice.

"Is the Chicago accent too much for you to handle?" Cory asked with a smile.

"*Just about, you wanna talk to him?*" Tommy asked, back to his serious tone.

"Yeah. Patch him through." Cory said and glanced around the room to see everyone paying him their full attention.

"*Patriarch Short?*" a muffled voice came over the communicator.

"Officer Chase, how can I help you today?" Cory asked cautiously.

"*From what I heard, you Vulcan guys help kids who are in trouble. Right?*" Officer Chase asked cautiously.

"If we can." Cory replied slowly.

"*I been a cop for twelve years and I never seen a kid in more trouble than the one I seen today. I got no one else to call to try and help him and I don't know how much longer he's gonna last*." Officer Chase said and a note of desperation crept into his voice.

Cory looked at Sean with question.

"I think I can make it from Provo to Chicago in twenty minutes if I give it all she's got." Sean said thoughtfully.

"We can have you to the airport in less than ten minutes with lights and sirens." Chief Horton said firmly as he walked to Cory's side.

"Officer Chase. We'll be touching down at O'Hare in thirty minutes. Unless you need us there sooner?" Cory asked seriously.

"*Thirty minutes? I'll be doing good to get to O'Hare in thirty minutes... but I'll be there*." Officer Chase finished firmly and hung up.

"Okay guys, we're on our way to Chicago." Cory said as he looked around the group.

"Have three squad cars take them. It'll be faster than the van." Chief Horton said seriously to the officers behind the desk.

"They'll be out front by the time you get there." Officer Rivers said and ran into the radio dispatch room.

"It's been a pleasure to meet you Patriarch Short. Hopefully we'll be able to meet again when we can have time to trade stories." Chief Horton said as he walked with Cory and his group to the front doors.

"Thank you Chief Horton, I think I'd like that. Provo should be very proud of their police department." Cory said quickly, then noticed three police cruisers pull up on the curb.

"Go on. There's a kid in Chicago that needs you." Chief Horton said seriously.

Cory gave the Chief a nod, then climbed into a waiting cruiser.

* * * * *

"How is he?" Lawrence asked in a whisper as he and Deacon entered the living room.

"Asleep. I think he just needs some rest after a very hard day." Joe said softly.

"Thanks for taking care of him Daddy." Lawrence said gently as he approached.

Vincent cracked his eyes open a slit and looked around, then closed them again and listened.

"I'm not doing it for you Lawrence, or even for Peggy. I see a lot of myself in Vincent. I feel like I really understand what he's going through and I'd like to help him through it however I can." Joe said in a considering voice.

"I'm glad he's got someone to take care of him. Now that I'm really getting to know him, I feel like I'd do just about anything to help him... but I can't change who I am and he can't accept me because I'm gay." Lawrence said sadly.

Deacon went to Lawrence's side and gently put an arm around him.

"I don't know if he ever will be able to accept you. But if you can love him anyway, that's as much as you can do." Joe said as he continued to stroke Vincent's hair.

"I already do." Lawrence said quietly.

"I'm going to let him sleep for a while longer. Why don't you two go out and enjoy the party?" Joe asked with a gentle smile.

"Okay. They just brought out a bunch of desserts. Would you like us to bring you anything?" Lawrence asked with a smile at the tender way his father was stroking Vincent's hair.

"When Vincent wakes up we'll go out and see what they've got." Joe said gently.

"Okay, I'll see you out there in a while. I love you daddy." Lawrence said happily.

"I love you too son."

* * * * *

"How you doing Kev?" Jake asked with concern as the shuttle lifted into the air.

"That was the coolest thing I ever done. I think the police car went up on two wheels when we went around that last curve." Kevin said with excitement.

Jake chuckled and said, "I was asking about the thing with your mom."

"Oh that. I'm fine. I got to tell her that I'm happy and I got to see her get all mad about it. That's all I wanted." Kevin said seriously.

Jake looked at Kevin with concern, then over to Dan.

"Kevin, is there anything you'd like to talk about?" Dan asked immediately.

"No. I know you're worried about me, but I'm really okay. Do you think officer Chase will drive with lights and sirens too?" Kevin asked with renewed excitement.

"He might." Dan said with a slight smile.

* * * * *

"Here they come." JC said as he watched Mona, Billy, Allen and Brady walking out of the house.

"Did you find what you needed?" Chip asked pleasantly.

"Oh yeah. It's amazing what you can find on the Internet." Billy said with a smile.

"So can you give us a hint about where we're going?" JC asked hopefully.

"No. He can't." Mona said firmly.

"You heard Mom. I can't say a word." Billy said with a glance at Mona.

"We have a right to know what you're planning for us." Chip said firmly.

Mona looked around and made a casual gesture.

Chip followed Mona's gaze and saw his Aunt Jackie and Karen approaching.

"You were saying?" Mona asked as the women approached.

"Never mind." Chip said weakly.

"Are the plans all made?" Jackie asked curiously.

"Oh yes. It was so easy I couldn't believe it. I really need to get one of those computer thingies at my house. Allen's been trying to talk me into getting one for years but I never could see the need for it." Mona said frankly.

"Just wait until you get email. Once you have that set up there's no reason your kids can't write to you every single day." Karen said with a smile.

"And the grand-kids too. I've gotten some of the most delightful letters from Justy, Jamie and Jacob. Kids see and hear a lot more than their parents know." Jackie said, then smiled at Chip and JC.

Chip noticed Spock approaching the table, then stop. He looked at the gathering around the table and raised an eyebrow, then promptly started walking in another direction.

"Did you need us to do anything else for you Mona?" Allen asked with a smile.

"Oh no. Thank you, all three of you, for helping me. Jackie, Karen, my boys made all the arrangements already. Everything is completely taken care of." Mona beamed with pride.

Allen, Billy and Brady all smiled at Mona's praise then wandered away to check out the dessert table.

"Oh Mona, you're so lucky to have sons who will *listen to you*." Jackie said and spared a glance at Chip.

"And *not talk back*." Karen said as she looked at JC.

"Come with me and I'll tell you how Allen asked Billy out on their first date." Mona said with excitement as she drew the other mothers away.

Once the mothers were well away from the table, Chip cautiously asked, "How long do you think they'll keep this up?"

"Until they've gotten every single thing they wanted." JC said frankly.

* * * * *

"Officer Chase?" Cory asked as he stepped off the shuttle.

"Patriarch Short?" Officer Chase asked cautiously.

"Yes. We're ready to go when you are." Cory said as the group started climbing out of the shuttle.

"Wait, there's no way all of you can fit in my cruiser." Officer Chase said as he looked at the group of people gathering around Cory.

"I see..." Cory said thoughtfully.

"I'm doing this on my own. I'm not 'officially' here right now." Officer Chase said seriously.

"Jake, Kevin, Matt, you're with me. I want the rest of you to stand by for transport in case we need you." Cory said decisively.

"Are you sure about Kevin?" Sean asked quietly.

"This is his home. I think he and Jake will be best able to help me. I'll call if I need you, I promise." Cory said seriously.

"Take care of yourself Cor, I love you." Sean said quietly.

Cory gave Sean a quick kiss, then turned to Officer Chase and said, "Ready when you are."

Officer Chase blinked in surprise, then said, "Yeah, the car is right over here."

* * * * *

Teri pulled out her ringing phone and turned it on before saying, "Director Short."

"*You got my kid and I mean to get him back*." A mans voice said in a low growl.

"Excuse me? Who is this?" Teri asked curiously.

"*How many kids have you stolen today? First you get my wife's faggot son and now you got mine. Worst fuckin mistake of my life marryin that bitch... Only gives birth to fags...*" The man slurred in a deep voice.

Teri quickly hit the mute key on her phone then called out to the gathering, "Security Red, and I need someone to trace this call."

JJ opened his communicator and quickly said, "TerraMain, I need a trace on Director Short's cell phone, priority one."

Chip immediately stood and opened his communicator and said, "I have a security red condition at Southcrest, repeat security red." Before he had finished saying the words, Brady was by Chip's side with his phaser drawn and looking around the gathering cautiously.

Gabe ran to Teri's side with his phaser drawn and waited to see if she could give him any more information.

"Where's Peggy? Let me talk to Peggy." Teri said into the phone quickly.

"*That bitch is done talkin... Her cop friend too...*" Mr. Winters said in a growl.

"Tell me what you want. Maybe we can work this out." Teri said carefully, then hit the mute and said to Gabe, "Check on Vincent. It's his father."

Before Teri could get the phone back to her ear, a gunshot sounded over the phone and it went dead.

CHAPTER 43

"JJ, get Lawrence inside, NOW!" Teri said firmly as she pressed the 'call back' on her phone.

Before JJ could make his way to Lawrence's table, his communicator beeped, gaining his full attention.

JJ looked around and quickly said, "David, get Lawrence inside right now. Priority one."

David didn't answer but instead jumped up out of his chair and hurried to Lawrence.

"Richardson here." JJ said into his communicator.

"*We were able to trace the call to a cell phone. Satellite GPS tracking has provided the coordinates.*" A voice said seriously.

"Stand by." JJ said and nearly tripped over his own feet in his rush to get to Teri's side.

"They've traced the call and have the location. What do you want done?" JJ asked Teri professionally.

"Dispatch a security team immediately. Let them know to be careful, I heard a gunshot." Teri said thoughtfully.

JJ lifted his communicator and quickly said, "Scramble a security team to that location. Be advised that there have been shots fired."

After a moment the voice said, "*A security team is transporting now, Security Lieutenant Rajh in command. He will be contacting you from the scene.*"

"Understood. Thank you TerraMain. Richardson out." JJ said seriously.

"*TerraMain out.*" The voice responded formally.

Chip walked to Teri's side and asked, "Do you want to keep us at 'Security Red'?"

Teri looked at him consideringly for a moment, then said, "Yes. At least until we have the report from the security team."

Chip gave a single nod, then turned his attention to Spock who was now standing by his side.

"*Enterprise* is standing by to provide security personnel and any other assistance that may be needed." Spock said without emotion.

"Can you give us a summary of what's going on?" Chip asked Teri, now firmly in his Commander persona.

"From what I just heard, I think Vincent's father just killed his mother. I called 'Security Red' because I'm concerned that he may be coming for either Vincent or Lawrence." Teri said in a slightly trembling voice.

Chip gave a single nod, then said, "Let's set up a command center in the study. Also, we need to get everyone inside until the 'Security Red' has been cancelled."

"I will attend to your guests." Spock said and walked away before Chip could answer.

Chip motioned for the group to follow him into the house when Dr. Chapel approached.

"Is there anything I can do?" Dr. Chapel asked professionally.

"I don't think so, but it wouldn't hurt for you and Dr. Michaels to be prepared to receive patients just in case." Chip said seriously.

"We'll be ready." Christine said and walked toward the house with purpose.

As Chip was about to lead the way inside, he saw his Aunt Jackie and his mother-in-law watching him with concern.

"Go on in the study, I'll be right there." Chip said to Teri and John.

Teri, John, JJ, and Brady walked into the house as Chip walked to the Mother's table.

* * * * *

"We need to see the gunshot victim from Saturday." Officer Chase said as the group approached the nurse's station on the fifth floor of the hospital.

"Those kids can't go in there." The nurse behind the desk said sternly.

"These kids might be able to provide me some valuable information if they can see your patient." Officer Chase said slowly, hoping that it was a good enough reason to get him past the dragon at the gate.

"No unauthorized visitors beyond this point. Period." The nurse said in a voice of resolve.

"Excuse me. Would you call the hospital administrator so we can ask him to make an exception in this case?" Cory asked in his most professional voice.

"Mr. Johnston is too busy to have to deal with a bunch of kids. Now get out of here or I'll call security." The nurse said firmly.

"If you'll just listen to reason..." Matt began to say but stopped when the nurse picked up the phone.

"*Security: Station five. Security: Station five*." Sounded over the hospital's PA system.

The nurse put down the phone and looked up at Matt with a 'what'cha gonna do now?' expression.

"It doesn't have to be like this. We just need to see the gunshot victim." Officer Chase said in a quiet, reasonable voice.

"No unauthorized visitors beyond this point." The nurse said coldly.

A huge uniformed security officer stepped off the elevator and hurried to the nurse's station.

Cory looked up in awe at the six foot five, bald man who had to be well over 350 pounds.

"Fred?" Officer Chase asked curiously.

"Rick? How you doing?" The security officer asked with a smile.

"Fine. I thought you retired." Officer Chase asked in a friendly voice.

"I did for about six months, then I took this job. Pat and I were driving each other nuts being constantly under each others feet." The security officer, Fred, said with a gentle smile.

"Escort these people out of here." The nurse said in an angry voice.

"What's going on here Rick?" The security officer asked curiously.

"These kids are from a Vulcan group called Clan Short. I called them here to help a kid in the psych ward." Officer Chase said as he motioned to the group.

"Seriously? I've been reading some good stuff about Clan Short." Fred said as he looked at the three boys.

"I am Patriarch Cory Short of Clan Short." Cory said as he craned his neck to look up into the face of the huge mountain of a man.

"I'm honored to meet you Patriarch Short, may I have the honor of shaking your hand?" The security officer asked with respect.

Cory offered his hand and was amazed at the contrast in size between his hand and the officer's. He felt like a small child as he shook the officer's hand.

"Get these people out of here or I'm going to call Mr. Johnston." The nurse threatened.

"That's what I asked you to do in the first place." Cory said as he turned to spare her a glance.

"Rick, do you know where we're going?" The security officer asked, ignoring the nurse completely.

"Yes, but the door is kept locked." Officer Chase said with a disapproving glance at the duty nurse.

"I've got it. Come on." Fred said as he took a ring of keys off his belt.

"I'm going to have your job for this!" The nurse screamed from behind her desk.

"You wouldn't want my job. You have to put up with too many unreasonable people." Fred said casually as he unlocked the door to the ward.

As the group walked through the door into a connecting hallway they could hear the nurse saying into the phone, "Mr. Johnston, I need you at station five right away..."

* * * * *

"Can you tell me what's going on?" Jackie asked Chip seriously.

"We're not sure, but it seems that Vincent's mother was just killed by his father." Chip said carefully.

"How terrible." Jackie said in a gasp.

"Which one is Vincent?" Karen asked with concern.

"The little boy with the bandage on his head." Chip said thoughtfully.

"What can we do to help?" Jackie asked in a determined voice.

"We're going to send everyone inside for a while. It would be a great help if you could reassure people and help to keep them calm." Chip said seriously.

"Does this mean that the boy's father is still on the loose?" Karen asked carefully.

Before Chip could answer the question, Jackie said, "And probably on his way here."

Chip gave a single nod.

"Come Karen, let's do our part to help out... don't you have something you should be doing Chip?" Jackie finished with a smile.

"Yeah. I do. Thanks Aunt Jackie." Chip said as he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, then hurried off to join the others in the study.

* * * * *

"Is Vincent okay?" Gabe asked as he looked around the room.

"He's fine. Just resting." Joe said with a curious look at the phaser in Gabe's hand.

"Okay, I'm going to stay here with you guys for a while." Gabe said seriously.

"What's going on?" Vincent asked in a sleepy voice as he tried to sit up.

"Stay laying down so I can keep the ice pack in place." Joe whispered gently.

Vincent laid back down and looked at Gabe with question.

"I don't really know. I'm just supposed to stay in here with you guys." Gabe said seriously.

"Why do you have your phaser out?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Because I'm on duty as Clan Short security. I have to be ready to use it at a moments notice." Gabe said in a neutral voice.

"So something *is* going on." Joe said slowly.

"Well, yeah. But I don't know what it is. Aunt Teri told me to come in here so here I am." Gabe said as he looked around the room nervously.

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. He's just holding the phaser because it's part of his job." Joe said gently to Vincent as he stroked his hair.

"If it was anyone but Gabe I might be worried, but I trust Gabe so it's okay." Vincent said as he snuggled down to get more comfortable.

Joe smiled at the response, then looked at Gabe with concern, wishing he felt as assured as Vincent.

* * * * *

Dan noticed Kenny's distant expression and quietly asked him, "Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

"Um, no. I'm fine. I just feel kinda, I don't know, kinda like she got away with hurting Kevin." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"You should be very proud of your brother for handling this the way he has. He didn't seek revenge, but instead found a way to gain closure with love and joy. What he did has to be the most healthy and constructive resolution I have ever heard of... short of a reconciliation." Dan said frankly.

"I am proud of him and I understand all that. But I still feel like she got away with it." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"Dad, it sounds like you're talking about thinking and Kenny is talking about feeling. If you don't mind, I'll help Kenny be at peace with all this." Kyle said as he looked into his father's eyes seriously.

Dan smiled at his son's expression and said, "If you ever decide to become a psychologist, I think you'll be amazing at it."

Kyle smiled at his dad and said, "Thanks, but I don't think I could handle doing it every day. I think I'd rather just help out when I see someone who needs it."

Dan smiled and nodded as Kyle got out of his seat and moved to sit beside Kenny.

* * * * *

"You can't be in here." The nurse inside the ward immediately said as she saw the group entering the room.

"Don't worry about it Elle, they're here to help." Fred said as he walked to the front of the group.

The nurse visibly relaxed as she asked, "What's going on here Fred?"

"This young man heads an organization that helps kids in need. They need to see one of your patients." Fred said seriously.

"John Doe 256?" Elle asked cautiously.

"That's how he's listed." Officer Chase said quickly.

"Oh, thank God someone is going to help him. Come on." The nurse said as she rushed away from the podium where she had been standing.

* * * * *

"Richardson." JJ quickly answered his communicator, gaining Teri's immediate attention.

JJ looked to his other side to see John waiting expectantly for the report.

"*This is security Chief Rajh with a preliminary report*." A voice said respectfully.

"Proceed." JJ said immediately, holding his communicator up so Teri and John could hear more easily.

"*We arrived on the scene to find two female subjects both with injuries consistent with gunshots; neither exhibit life signs. There is also one male who has an apparent gunshot injury to the upper left chest area, we are awaiting an ambulance to transport him... excuse me, I may have more information for you*." The voice finished abruptly, then the communicator went silent for a moment.

"Do you mind?" Teri asked as she put out her hand for the communicator.

JJ handed his communicator to Teri and waited expectantly.

"This is Director Short of Federation Youth Services. I have been monitoring your report. Is the injured male identified as police detective OC Blair?" She asked quickly.

"*Yes Director Short. That is correct*." Chief Rajh said simply.

"Shit!" Teri muttered as she closed her eyes thoughtfully.

"*Detective Blair regained consciousness for a moment and gave us additional information*." Chief Rajh said professionally.

"Go ahead." Teri said quickly, trying to control her welling emotions.

"*The shooter is identified as Victor Winters. One of the females is identified as Mrs. Peggy Winters, the other female is unknown to Detective Blair, but is believed to be the tenant of the apartment where the ambush took place*." Chief Rajh said carefully.

"What about Mr. Winters? Did he get away?" Teri asked quickly.

"*He is not at the scene. Detective Blair was able to discharge his weapon and believes that he injured the suspect in the hand and speculates that the bullet might have passed through to strike the suspect in the head to some degree*." Chief Rajh said in a measured tone.

"Chief Rajh, I want an all points bulletin issued for the apprehension of Victor Winters. He is to be considered armed and dangerous. Organize search teams to cover the area and track him down." Teri said firmly.

"*I'm sorry Director Short, but I'm not sure you have the authority to approve an operation of that scale*." Chief Rajh said slowly.

"Lieutenant Rajh, this is Commander John Martin, you have my personal authorization to provide Director Short any and all assistance that she might require. Am I understood?" John said firmly.

"*Yes... Yes sir.*" Chief Rajh said immediately.

"Good, Director Short will let you know what she needs." John said seriously, then handed the communicator back to Teri.

"For now I just need one other thing. I want to be notified immediately when Detective Blair's condition has been determined." Teri said with a note of concern in her voice.

"*Yes Director Short, I'll see to it personally*."

"Thank you Lieutenant Rajh. I'll be standing by for updates. Short out." Teri said, back in her professional demeanor.

"*Acknowledged. Rajh out*."

* * * * *

"Kenny, if I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone else?" Kyle asked in a whisper.

"Sure." Kenny said cautiously.

"Well, when we were making the package for your mom, some of us felt like you do, like it wasn't enough. Eli and Jacob hid something in the package without letting the others know." Kyle said carefully.

"What did they do?" Kenny asked with interest.

Kyle looked at Kenny in concentration for a moment, then asked, "Do you feel that?"

Kenny squirmed in his seat for a second and said, "I think so. Did you do that?"

Kyle nodded seriously.

"Will you make it stop? That feels really gross." Kenny said uncomfortably as he continued to shift in his chair.

Kyle concentrated for a moment and Kenny became still again.

"Is that what you did to her?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Yeah. We couldn't do anything big or the others would notice. So we tied this into her subconscious to the feelings of guilt about what she's done to you two that she refuses to acknowledge. It will always be there and deep inside she'll know that it's her punishment for what she's done to you. The only way she'll ever be able to get rid of that little tickle is if she honestly feels regret for what she's done, tries to make things right and knows without a doubt that she's been forgiven by both of you." Kyle said seriously.

"Then she'll always have it. I'll never forgive her for what she did to Kevin." Kenny said seriously.

"You're probably right. But it's always good to leave an out." Kyle said frankly.

Kenny thought about it for a second, then hesitantly nodded.

"Is it enough?" Kyle asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I think it is. Now I know that she didn't really get away with it. Thank Eli and Jacob for me." Kenny said honestly.

"I will. Remember not to tell anyone else about it, especially my Dad. He's really glad that we didn't go for revenge, I don't want him to be disappointed in me." Kyle said quietly.

"It isn't revenge. It's justice. The stuff she did to Kevin will probably be bothering him the rest of his life, we just gave her something to bother her too since she doesn't feel guilty." Kenny said seriously.

Kyle smiled and said, "Yeah. I don't think Dad would see it that way, but I really feel like we did what was right."

"Me too." Kenny said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Here he is." Elle said as she pointed to the last bed in the ward.

Jake took one look and turned away at the horrifying sight before him.

Matt's security training kicked in as he noted that the boy was restrained to the bed frame and the restraints were cutting into his skin.

Cory was shocked and could only stare at the sweaty, bloated and bruised boy with half his face covered in bandages. He had gashes and slashes of

scars running up both his restrained arms, some looking years old and others looking as if they'd been done in recent weeks.

"He was a skinny street kid when they brought him in. I'm not a doctor but I've seen a lot of people who've been shot... this ain't right." Officer Chase said to no one in particular.

Before anyone could stop him, Kevin walked to the bedside and said, "You look like you're hurting. We're here to help you."

"Kev, you shouldn't bother him." Jake said in warning.

The boy in the bed looked at Kevin curiously with his single unbandaged eye and asked in a raspy voice, "Kevin? Is that you?"

Silence fell over the room as Kevin looked carefully at the boy before him. From the swelling, it was difficult for him to make out the distorted features but when he looked closely at the eye, he could tell that the boy was Chinese. Suddenly Kevin realized who it was and asked, "Is that you Dylan?"

Jake turned to look at the boy again in shock at the question and realized that the bandaged and disfigured boy in front of him was his old rival from the streets.

"Yeah. I need help. Please, I'll do anything you want. Just make it stop hurting..." Dylan trailed off in a desperate, hoarse whisper.

"Why is he strapped down?" Jake asked the nurse firmly.

"Pick a reason. He's suicidal, a drug addict and they've declared him insane. Personally I think they just moved him to psych because he wouldn't stop crying." The nurse said frankly.

"I'm gonna help you Dylan, I promise. I don't need you to do nothin for me. Just hold on and I'll make sure you get some help." Kevin said, then looked at Cory with desperation.

"Matt, get Doc Austin here to check him..." Cory began to say when he was interrupted.

"There they are." The nurse from the desk said as she led a man in a suit into the room followed by two security officers.

"What's going on here?" The man asked in an authoritative voice.

"We're here to help this boy. Are you Mr. Johnston?" Matt asked formally.

"Yes. I'm in charge here and you aren't allowed in here without permission." Mr. Johnston said firmly.

Fred motioned for the other two security officers to follow him and led them away from the group to fill them in.

"Mr. Johnston, may I introduce Patriarch Short of Clan Short of Vulcan. He is here to..." Matt said before he was interrupted.

"I don't give a rat's ass who he is or why he's here. Get out of this ward right now before I call the police." Mr. Johnston screamed.

"Actually, I'm the one who called them." Officer Chase said as he stepped forward.

"You have no right to call anyone into *my* hospital without my approval." Mr. Johnston said firmly.

Cory opened his communicator and said, "Tommy, I need security, intelligence and Doc Austin to my location immediately."

"*I'm sorry Cory, but we're under a 'Security Red' condition here, it might take me a few minutes to make that happen.*" Tommy said quickly.

"I don't have a few minutes, Cory out." He said quickly, then rekeyed his communicator and said, "*Enterprise*, this is Patriarch Short. I need a security team and Doctor McCoy to this location immediately."

There was a moment of silence, then Uhura's voice responded, "*They'll be there in less than a minute. What do you want me to tell Captain Kirk?*"

"Tell him that Clan Short is grateful for the assistance provided by the *Enterprise* and that he'll get a full report when I've got this all sorted out. I've got to go now, I have a hospital administrator to deal with." Cory said quickly.

"*We'll be standing by if you need anything Cory. Enterprise out*." Uhura said seriously.

"Short out." Cory said, then closed his communicator.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Mr. Johnston asked in confusion.

Before anyone could answer, five columns of shimmering light appeared and resolved into the shapes of Dr. McCoy and four security officers.

"Somebody better tell me what the hell is going on here, I was standing by to transport to Florida and ended up in Illinois." McCoy said with a grumble.

"Doctor McCoy, please help my friend Dylan. He's hurting real bad. Please help him." Kevin begged desperately.

"DEAR GOD!" McCoy exclaimed at the sight of the boy in the bed.

"That boy is under the care of this hospital. You can't..." Mr. Johnston began to say.

McCoy glanced at the nearest security officer and said, "If that jackass tries to interfere with me, stun him. That's an order."

"Yes Doctor." The officer said immediately and trained his phaser on Mr. Johnston.

Dr. McCoy pulled out his medical tricorder and began to scan Dylan carefully.

* * * * *

"Hey Vince, how are you feeling?" Lawrence asked as he walked into the living room with Deacon, Aaron and David following.

"I'm feeling better. What's going on?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I don't know, but it sounds pretty serious. Teri yelled 'Security Red' and everyone started running around." Lawrence said honestly.

"She sent Gabe in here and told him to stay in here with me. He didn't say we were at 'Security Red'." Vincent said, then glanced at Gabe with question.

"Since I don't know what's going on, I didn't think it mattered." Gabe said hesitantly.

Vincent looked at Gabe cautiously, then finally nodded his acceptance.

"Are you alright?" David asked with concern.

"I'm kinda scared." Vincent said seriously.

"I think we're in the safest place we could possibly be right now." Deacon said quietly.

"And you've got an armed security guard to protect you. How much safer could you be?" Lawrence asked and forced a smile onto his face.

Vincent didn't answer, but instead sat up and scooted over on the couch to snuggle into Joe's side. He was immediately pulled into a reassuring hug.

"Good answer." Deacon said to Lawrence in a gentle whisper.

* * * * *

McCoy continued to move the small canister of the medical tricorder over the boy in the bed and had his complete attention focused on the readout.

"Can he make it stop hurting? Please Kevin, make it stop hurting." Dylan begged in an exhausted voice filled with pain.

"Doctor McCoy is going to make you all better. I promise. He's the bestest doctor in the Federation." Kevin said seriously.

"I need this patient's medical records to verify what treatment he's received... if any." McCoy said without looking up from his scanner.

"I'll get them." Elle said quickly.

"No. You won't. Those records are hospital property." The duty nurse said firmly.

"Nurse Hoyle, in case you haven't noticed, there are armed Starfleet security officers here. I think we can bend that rule just this once." Mr. Johnston said seriously.

"As long as you're willing to take the heat for it, what do I care?" Nurse Hoyle said and turned her attention back to what Dr. McCoy was doing.

"What an angel of mercy." Matt said sarcastically.

"Yeah. Mr. Johnston, I hope you get Nurse Hoyle to take care of you next time you're in the hospital." Jake said with irritation.

"Here are his records." Elle said as she walked past the group and handed a clipboard to Dr. McCoy.

After a moment of reading, Dr. McCoy glanced at the *Enterprise* security officers and said, "Ensign Long, come here."

"Yes sir." The security officer said quickly as he came to stand before Dr. McCoy.

"I want you to take this and secure it as evidence." McCoy said as he handed the medical records to the security Ensign.

"Evidence for what?" Mr. Johnston asked cautiously.

"Malpractice to begin with. I'll let the legal boys worry about what criminal charges apply." Dr. McCoy said as he quickly disconnected the IV from Dylan's arm.

"Doctor McCoy? Can you please give Dylan something for the pain? He says he's hurting real bad." Kevin asked hopefully.

McCoy looked at Kevin to find him holding tightly to Dylan's bloated, sweating hand.

"Yes Kevin. I'll give him something right now. Will you help me unstrap him?" Dr. McCoy asked in a gentle voice.

"That kid's a drug addict, he'll say anything to get a fix." Nurse Hoyle said sternly.

Dr. McCoy checked the contents of his hypospray, then carefully injected Dylan in the neck before saying, "This boy has received minimal care for multiple gunshot wounds. Half his face is gone and there is significant damage to his spleen. What do you do to help him? You deny him any type of pain medication then strap him to the bed and move him to the psych ward for crying out in pain. To top it off the mega-doses of antibiotics you've been pumping into this boy have caused his kidneys to shut down. He's drowning in his own fluids. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get him to the *Enterprise* where I can do something to help him."

"Doctor, our facilities and staff are at your disposal. Anything you need." Mr. Johnston said quickly.

"I wouldn't let you butchers lance a boil on my butt..." McCoy said as he looked at his tricorder again, then shook his head.

"I'm going to need a shuttle to transport him. He's not stable enough for the transporter." McCoy said thoughtfully.

"The *Mississippi* is standing by at O'Hare." Cory said quickly.

"Does this torture chamber have a helipad?" McCoy asked Mr. Johnston seriously.

"Yes, for life flight..." Mr. Johnston said before he was interrupted.

"Make sure it's cleared. There will be a shuttlecraft landing on it in a few minutes." McCoy said seriously.

"Right away." Mr. Johnston said and rushed out of the room.

Cory looked at Matt and raised an eyebrow. He received a nod as his reply. Matt then pulled out his communicator as he walked away from the group.

"Ensign Long, I'm putting you in charge of the investigation of this place. See to it that the proper authorities are contacted, the staff is interviewed, independent physicians are brought in to verify the treatment

of any patient that you have cause to believe is being mistreated... and according to his file, this boy is listed as indigent care. Make sure you focus your investigation on past and present indigent care patients." McCoy said firmly.

"Yes sir." Ensign Long said professionally.

"Excuse me Doctor, I'm Ensign Long's superior officer, I should be handling the investigation." Lieutenant Masterson said in a formal tone.

"Are you saying that one of the men under your command isn't trained well enough to conduct a security investigation?" McCoy asked seriously.

"No sir." The Lieutenant said quickly.

"Good, I didn't think so. I want you to see to the welfare of this young man until I say otherwise. I'm making his safety and well-being your personal responsibility." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"Yes sir." The Lieutenant said efficiently.

"The *Mississippi* will be landing in about two minutes." Matt said as he approached the group.

"Good. Nurse, get a gurney in here so we can transport this patient to the helipad." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"Right away Doctor." Elle said as Nurse Hoyle looked on impassively.

"How are you feeling now Dylan?" Kevin asked quietly.

"It stopped hurting." Dylan said as a tear slid down his cheek.

"Don't worry young man, we're going to fix you right up." Dr. McCoy said with assurance.

* * * * *

"Security reports that Southcrest, the Short Compound and Camp Little Eagle are all secured. I've had TerraMain focus satellite surveillance on the area and additional security personnel are standing by if needed." John said seriously to Chip from his seat in front of the terminal.

"Good. I think it should be safe for our guests to..." Chip began to say when an incoming message window appeared on the screen.

"Go ahead." John said quickly.

"*A car just ran the security checkpoint and is heading your way.*" The young officer responded quickly.

"Apprehend. Consider the driver to be armed and dangerous until proven otherwise." John said professionally.

"*Yes sir.*" The young officer quickly responded and the window closed.

"That man must be a complete idiot if he thinks he can get past Starfleet security." Chip said with a shake of his head.

"He's either drunk or insane. Possibly both." Teri said from Chip's other side.

Chip looked at Teri with question.

"He was slurring his speech when he called me and seemed to be single minded about getting to Vincent." Teri said thoughtfully.

"Then I doubt that he'll be taken peacefully." John said grimly.

"I just hope he doesn't hurt anyone else before they get him." Teri said with concern.

"Don't worry, we have well trained security professionals taking care of this." John said with assurance.

"Why do you think he wants to get to Vincent so badly? Is he trying to rescue him?" Chip asked curiously.

"I think he wants to kill him." Teri said frankly.

* * * * *

As the gurney was carried up the ramp into the shuttle, McCoy looked around and said, "There's too many of you. Anyone who's not essential needs to transport up to the *Enterprise* and wait for us."

Cory looked around the group and said, "Matt, Kyle, Dan, Jake, Xain, Kenny and Kevin can transport up..."

"I'm going with Dylan. He needs me." Kevin said as he gripped Dylan's hand more firmly.

"I have to stay with Kev. I promised Dad." Jake said to Cory seriously.

Kenny opened his mouth to say that he wanted to stay with Kevin too when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

He turned to see Kyle shaking his head.

Kenny nodded at Kyle and walked off the shuttle with him.

Cory looked at Dr. McCoy with question.

"Good enough." McCoy said, then moved to one side of the gurney and said, "Masterson, help me move him off this bed. Kevin, step away for just a minute."

Lieutenant Masterson hurried to Dr. McCoy's side and helped him shift Dylan over to the row of seats that had been laid out to form a bed.

As soon as Dylan had been moved to his new bed, Kevin was back at his side, holding his hand.

"We're not helping this boy by sitting here. Let's get this thing moving." McCoy called to the front of the shuttle.

"Yes Doctor." Sean called back as Cory secured the door.

"You're piloting the shuttle?" McCoy asked with wide eyes.

"Yes Dr. McCoy. You'd better strap in, I'm going to burn some atmosphere." Sean said as he fired up the engines.

McCoy quickly snapped his seatbelt in place, then discretely muttered to himself, "Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee..."

* * * * *

"Martin." John said to the 'audio only' message field on the terminal screen.

"*This is Lieutenant Commander Clark. The suspect just rammed the gate of the Short Compound at a high rate of speed. The gate held and the suspect is slumped over the steering wheel, apparently unconscious.*" Lieutenant Commander Clark said professionally.

"Approach with extreme caution. We have reason to believe that he is armed and dangerous as well as mentally unstable." John said firmly.

"*Acknowledged, Clark out.*"

"Martin out." John said, then looked at Teri and Chip who had been listening.

"When do you want to tell Vincent?" Chip asked into the silence.

"Not until we have his father in custody. When I go in there I want to be able to tell him what's going on. I want him to know that his mother died while trying to find a safe place for him to live." Teri said distantly.

"Do you think that might make him feel somehow responsible?" John asked thoughtfully.

"I don't know. I just need for him to know that his mother loved him. I don't know how I can tell him without destroying him." Teri said as her eyes began to glisten with unformed tears.

"There's no way you can tell a boy that his mother is dead without completely destroying his world." Chip said softly.

"I know." Teri said in a whisper.

* * * * *

"Why did you stop me from going with Kevin?" Kenny asked as the group walked away from the helipad.

Kyle stopped and got a distant look for an instant, then said, "Because Mikey told me to."

"Why does Mikey want me to stay here?" Kenny asked curiously.

"All he'll say is that Kevin, Jake and Dylan need to talk about some things." Kyle said distantly.

"Okay." Kenny said seriously and started to walk again.

"Don't worry, you'll get to see Kevin again in a few minutes on the *Enterprise*." Kyle said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Yeah." Kenny said in a noncommittal voice.

Kyle thought for a second, then got a look of mischief in his eyes.

Kenny stopped walking and looked at Kyle with question.

Kyle looked back at Kenny with a smile.

"Stop it." Kenny said seriously as he wiggled his butt a little, trying to relieve the tickle.

"Not until you stop worrying about Kevin. He's got Jake, Cory, Sean and Mikey watching out for him." Kyle said firmly.

Kenny wiggled his butt again and said, "Okay, I'll stop worrying. Just stop it."

Kyle smiled and removed the suggestion from Kenny's mind.

"Just wait until I learn telepathy. Then you'll be sorry." Kenny said with a smile as he walked to Kyle's side.

"If you'll forgive me, I'll tell you what I did to Aaron." Kyle said in a calculating tone.

Kenny thought about it for less than a second before saying, "Okay, you're forgiven. Tell me."

* * * * *

"Tommy, can you tell me what's going on? Why is Southcrest at Security Red?." Cory asked seriously.

"*Mom called it. I don't know too much. I'll ask JJ as soon as he gets out of the study*." Tommy said quickly.

"Is the Clan okay?" Cory asked with concern.

"*Yeah. Andrew went around and checked on everyone. We're all accounted for.*" Tommy said seriously.

"Good. See if you can find out what's going on. I'll call you when we reach the *Enterprise*." Cory said seriously.

"*Will do. Short out*." Tommy said with a smile.

"Short out." Cory said with a gentle smile, then noticed Jake looking back at Dylan with concern.

"I need to do something for a minute babe, yell if you need me." Cory said quietly to Sean.

"Will do." Sean said with a loving glance.

"Wanna talk about it Jake?" Cory asked as he took the seat across the aisle.

Jake looked at Cory with a helpless expression as he said, "I don't even know what I'm thinking or feeling."

Cory nodded his acceptance of the statement, then asked, "Then do you mind if I ask you about something?"

"You can ask me anything." Jake said sincerely.

"Will you tell me about why Dylan has those scars on his arms?" Cory asked quietly.

"Yeah. Some people do that when they use heroin." Jake said thoughtfully.

"You mean he cut himself?" Cory asked to be sure.

"I never did it, but some people say that it helps them fight the cravings. They get all crazy like because they want a fix so bad and the cutting calms them down." Jake said carefully.

"There's so much I don't know..." Cory said distantly.

"The best way I ever heard it described was that cutting can be like writing "help" across your body when there's no other way to ask." Jake said, then looked back at Dylan.

"Babe, I'm about to need you on comm." Sean called out from the front.

"Thanks Jake. Don't worry about your friend. We'll make sure he's okay." Cory said as he got up from the chair.

Jake continued to look at Dylan as he whispered "My friend..."

* * * * *

"*The suspect was apparently killed in the impact with the gate. His drivers license says that he is Victor Winters.*" Lieutenant Commander Clark said from the terminal.

Teri nodded and began to walk slowly toward the door.

"Thank you Lieutenant Commander. Please send a copy of your report directly to me." John said quietly.

"*Yes sir. Clark out.*" The Lieutenant Commander said formally.

"Martin out." John said without enthusiasm and hit the disconnect key on the terminal, then found himself being pulled into a hug by JJ.

Chip discretely reached around John and JJ and pressed a few keys, then said in a quiet voice, "Stand down 'Security Red'."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Brady asked Teri as she approached the door.

"No. Thank you Brady. I have had some experience with this. I'll handle it." Teri said with regret, then continued out of the study.

* * * * *

"Jake? Is that you?" Dylan asked in confusion as he squinted his one good eye.

"Yeah." Jake said as he unbuckled his seatbelt and moved back in the shuttle to kneel by Dylan's bed.

"Are you gonna kill me now?" Dylan asked quietly, not sounding particularly bothered by the idea.

Before Jake could answer, Kevin said, "Daddy K and Spade are both dead. Jake's not gonna kill you, he's gonna help me make sure you're going to be okay."

Dylan looked at Jake with question.

Jake thought about the words and finally nodded.

"Why?" Dylan asked weakly.

"Because we're the same. We both did what we had to do to survive. Without Daddy K and Spade telling us what to do, we're on the same side." Jake said thoughtfully.

Dylan nodded hesitantly.

"I've got a new life now. A life without drugs or whoring or fighting. If you want, you can have a life like that too. Kev and I will both be willing to help you." Jake said quietly.

"What do I have to do?" Dylan asked suspiciously.

"Accept it." Jake said simply.

"What kind of life can I have with half a face?" Dylan asked as he reached up to feel the bandage.

"We'll talk to Doctor McCoy about that after we land. I bet he'll be able to do something to fix you." Jake said with a smile.

"Yeah, Dr. McCoy is making me not be little and skinny no more." Kevin said happily.

Dylan looked at Kevin and gave a weak smile before saying, "I can see that. I think you look bigger than last time I saw you."

"Uh huh. I got so fat that the elastic in my underwear broke today." Kevin said proudly.

Dylan began to chuckle, then winced in pain.

"Do you need the doctor?" Jake asked with immediate concern.

"No. Just don't make me laugh. It hurts." Dylan said with a pained smile.

"Guys, get in your seats. We're about to land." Cory called back into the cabin.

* * * * *

"Guys, I need to talk to Vincent and Lawrence for a few minutes." Teri said quietly as she walked into the living room.

Gabe looked at her expression and felt a shiver run up his spine as he began to suspect what she was here to do.

"Come on guys, let's leave them to talk." Gabe said, trying to inject some cheer into his voice.

"Do I have to go too?" Deacon asked quietly.

Teri gave him a gentle smile and said, "No. It's probably best if you stay. Please sit down, both of you."

Joe looked at Teri with question and received a nod as his answer.

"Boys, some things happened just now. There's no easy way to say this, so I'll just come out and say it." Teri said gently.

Everyone in the room waited, dreading the coming words.

"Peggy and Victor Winters both died this evening." Teri said, trying to keep her voice from cracking.

A moment of silence fell over the room as everyone tried to absorb the statement.

Finally the silence was broken when Vincent jumped up from the couch and screamed, "YOU'RE LYING! You took me away from my momma so you could bring me here and make me one of your faggot kids!"

"Vincent..." Teri said with sympathy.

"You lie! I don't want to talk to you. I HATE YOU!!!" Vincent screamed and ran out of the room.

Teri quickly turned to follow, but stopped at the feeling of a hand on her shoulder.

Joe looked torn with indecision, but finally said, "I'll get him. Help Lawrence."

Teri gave a quick nod, then turned to find Lawrence sobbing in Deacon's arms.

CHAPTER 44

"Would you care to discuss your reasons for concern?" Xain asked quietly as he approached Kenny who was looking out the view port in the *Enterprise's* forward lounge.

"Um, I don't know. I guess I must've got used to having Kevin around and knowing how he's doing. I know it's stupid for me to worry but I can't help it." Kenny said thoughtfully.

"I understand. The unknown can be quite disconcerting." Xain said carefully.

"Yeah. And on top of that, Kev doesn't seem like himself. He's acting really different." Kenny said slowly.

"I too have noticed uncharacteristic variations in Kevin's patterns of behavior." Xain said in a neutral tone.

"Do you have any idea what's wrong with him?" Kenny asked as he looked Xain in the eyes.

"No. I have no insights into the matter. But be assured that if Kevin is having difficulty that we, his family, will take all necessary steps to see that his emotional needs are met and any problem he is having is corrected." Xain said with certainty.

Kenny thought about the words, then smiled as he said, "Thanks Xain, you're right. No matter what's wrong, we'll all be there to help him."

Xain gave a single nod then joined Kenny in staring out the view port.

* * * * *

Vincent ran into the family room with a wild look in his eyes.

Several conversations stopped as people turned their attention toward the obviously distraught boy.

Jackie and Karen both noticed him immediately and moved as one to comfort the hurting child.

Vincent saw the two women approaching and was about to turn and leave when he felt a stabbing pain in the back of his head.

Karen saw Vincent grab his head and heard him gasp. Quickly she ran to his side to support him in case he passed out.

"Come over here and sit down for a few minutes until it stops hurting." Karen said as she carefully pulled him into a hug.

Vincent was barely able to think as he walked with her to a nearby chair.

Karen lifted the boy into her lap as Jackie stood close by, warning everyone away with a look.

"It hurts." Vincent said in a mumble into Karen's chest.

"Do you need a doctor? Dr. Chapel is right over there." Karen asked with concern.

"No. Doc Austin just said I was gonna be okay." Vincent said softly.

"I'm Karen Chasez, you can call me Grandma Karen if you like." Karen said gently as she rubbed his back.

"Okay." Vincent mumbled.

"Chip told me what happened. It's okay to cry if you want." Karen whispered.

"But... but boys ain't supposed to cry." Vincent said, barely holding back the tears.

"It depends on where you are. If you're sitting on the school bus going to school, then no, you probably shouldn't cry. But when you're sitting on your Grandma Karen's lap it's okay to cry if you want to." Karen said softly.

Karen's permission was all Vincent needed to let loose the floodgates.

"It's okay baby. Just let it all out." Karen said in a soothing voice as she began to rock him in her lap.

* * * * *

"We've landed Dr. McCoy. You can let go of the arm rests now." Lieutenant Masterson said, trying not to laugh.

Dr. McCoy looked down at his white knuckles and said, "I don't know if I can."

Lieutenant Masterson unbuckled his seatbelt and walked to the hatch of the shuttle.

"Do you boys remember where the sickbay is?" Dr. McCoy asked as he approached Jake and Kevin beside Dylan's bed.

"Not really." Jake said hesitantly.

"I remember." Kevin said proudly.

"Good. Kevin, why don't you and Jake go on ahead and meet us there. We'll be there in just a few minutes." Dr. McCoy said with a gentle smile.

"Uh huh. I'll see you in a couple minutes Dylan." Kevin said happily, then hurried toward the front of the shuttle followed by Jake.

"Now that I've got a minute alone with you, I want to be sure that having Kevin and Jake around isn't bothering you." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

Dylan thought about it for a moment, then said, "If you would have asked me half an hour ago, I would have told you that I didn't want them anywhere around me but now... I think they really want me to be okay. And besides, they help keep my mind off... other things."

"Good enough. Here's your ride." Dr. McCoy said as he stood aside.

Lieutenant Masterson led two crewmen with a gurney to Dylan's bedside.

"Gently." Dr. McCoy warned as he watched them shift Dylan off the make-shift bed.

"Let's go get you fixed up." Dr. McCoy said as he fell into step beside Dylan as they left the shuttle.

* * * * *

"I'm so sorry Lawrence. If there was any way I could have prevented this I would have." Teri said with anguish.

"How did it happen?" Deacon asked in a small voice as he held Lawrence close.

"I'm not sure about everything but it looks like Mr. Winters shot his wife, another woman and Detective Blair. Then killed himself trying to ram the gate at the Short Compound." Teri said quietly.

"Your house?" Deacon asked cautiously.

Teri nodded and said, "I think he was trying to get to Vincent."

Lawrence pulled away from Deacon suddenly and asked, "Where is Vince? Is he okay?"

Teri put a hand on Lawrence's shoulder and said, "Your father went after him. He'll be fine... Well, as fine as anyone can be after finding out..."

Lawrence nodded and moved back into Deacon's embrace.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Teri asked helplessly, feeling powerless to do anything that could really help.

"I said such awful things to her..." Lawrence said, then began to cry again.

"Do you remember the last thing that you said to your mom?" Teri asked softly.

After a moment, Lawrence nodded and slowly said, "I told her that I loved her."

Teri gave a weak smile and said, "I'm sure that's the thing she remembers. The last time she saw you she knew that both her sons were safe and that you both loved her. As a mother I can tell you that knowing those two things will help her be at peace with whatever happened."

Lawrence nodded and said, "Thank you Teri. Would you please go check on Vincent? I promise that I'm going to be okay. I've got Deacon to take care of me. Vincent doesn't have anyone..."

"I'll check on him. But if you need to talk about anything, all you have to do is ask." Teri said gently.

"Okay. I will. Thanks." Lawrence said as he held Deacon tightly.

* * * * *

Joe looked down the hallway and didn't see any sign of Vincent. He walked to the nearest door and looked in to see if Vincent had ducked into the family room.

He glanced around the room to find Vincent sitting in a woman's lap being held and another woman standing by them in a protective stance.

Hesitantly, Joe walked back into the hallway as JJ walked past him into the family room with a determined expression.

Joe stopped and thought for a moment about what he could possibly do to help Vincent. He realized that all his reasoning and thoughts about what he should do were meaningless. His heart had already decided what needed to be done.

As he started walking up the hall, he noticed Chip step out of the study with a disturbed look on his face.

"Commander, if you have a moment I'd like to ask your advice." Joe asked hesitantly.

Chip thought about all that was going on and decided that he could spare the time.

As he guided Joe into the study he said, "Of course. What can I do for you Lieutenant Bowers?"

"Director Short just told us that Vincent's parents both died tonight. In your professional opinion, how difficult do you think it would be for me to take some family leave time so I could stay with Vincent... I mean, since he isn't legally part of my family?"

Chip considered the question for a moment before saying, "Lieutenant... Joe, Vincent's parents didn't just die. Vincent's father killed his mother then died trying to ram the gate of the Short Compound."

Joe was stunned by the statement, then thought to ask, "Why was he trying to get in there?"

"I'm assuming that he thought that is where Teri and Vincent were." Chip said quietly.

A shiver of dread crawled up Joe's spine as he asked, "So you think he was trying to get to Vincent?"

"Teri believes that he wanted to kill Vincent." Chip said in a whisper.

"Commander Dodds?" John asked quietly, obviously hesitant to interrupt.

"Yes?" Chip asked as he turned his attention to John.

"Lieutenant Thompson wants to head the security team to investigate the Winters home for any clues behind Mr. Winters' motives for tonight's action." John said professionally.

Chip looked at Brady with question.

"It's all I can think of to do to help." Brady said in a hollow voice.

Chip nodded his understanding to Brady, then said to John, "That's fine. And I'd like a copy of the report of what you find."

"Of course. Thank you. Sorry for interrupting." John said then walked to Brady.

"I'm sorry about that Joe... where were we?" Chip asked curiously.

Joe shook his head to dispel the racing thoughts and said, "I was asking about the possibility of taking family leave time."

Chip nodded thoughtfully.

"Maybe I should consider requesting an emergency transfer to a planet-side posting." Joe said, obviously thinking out loud.

"You'd do that for Vincent?" Chip asked curiously.

"Yeah. I would. My career has been the most important thing in my life for the past ten years but now... I'd give it all up in a heartbeat if it would help Vincent." Joe said quietly.

"Joe, before you take that step, I think there's another possibility you should consider." Chip said as he thought about his conversation with Vincent earlier in the day.

* * * * *

JJ hurried to JC and said, "Uncle Chip told me to tell you that it's okay for everyone to go back outside now. The Security Red has been cancelled."

"Thanks JJ. I think Spock already got the message." JC said as he noticed Spock walking to clusters of people around the room and speaking to them briefly.

JJ nodded and turned toward the large group of Clan members gathered at the far side of the room.

JJ stopped at the feeling of a hand on his shoulder and turned as JC asked, "Can you tell me what's going on?"

"Sure Uncle Josh. I need to tell the guys what's going on too. How about I make you an honorary Clan member just for tonight so you can sit in on the briefing?" JJ asked seriously.

JC smiled at JJ's suggestion and said, "That'd be great. Lead the way."

* * * * *

Teri walked into the family room and was surprised to find Karen Chasez comforting Vincent. She had expected to find him with Joe.

She was about to go over and see if there was anything she could do when she noticed Billy, Allen and Mona talking quietly.

"Mind if I interrupt?" Teri asked, trying to sound cheerful.

"Of course we don't mind. Maybe you can give us some answers about what's going on." Mona said frankly.

Teri nodded and said, "It's a long story but the main facts are Victor Winters killed his wife, and then himself."

"Oh my God... Where's Lawrence?" Billy asked immediately.

"In the living room. He's with Deacon." Teri said softly.

Billy gave Allen a quick, helpless look, then nearly ran for the door with Allen following close behind.

"How are you holding up Teri?" Mona asked with concern.

"I feel like all this is somehow my fault." Teri said in a whisper as she looked up into Mona's eyes.

Mona pulled Teri in to a gentle hug and said, "It's a natural thing for a mother to want to be in control of everything and take responsibility for the world. But it doesn't work that way."

Teri nodded into Mona's chest.

"Teri dear, there's something that you need to remember at times like this." Mona said gently.

Teri pulled back to look at Mona with question.

"Shit happens."

* * * * *

"It looks like you found the way without any problems." Dr. McCoy said as he walked into sickbay beside Dylan.

"Kev took us straight here, he didn't make a single wrong turn." Jake said with a proud smile at Kevin.

Dr. McCoy watched carefully as the medical assistants moved Dylan to the biobed, then said, "That's quite an accomplishment Kevin. There are a few Starfleet graduates who can't find their way around after being on board for a week."

"Really?" Kevin asked with wonder.

"Yes. I remember one particular instance when a newly commissioned ensign was searching for the mess hall on the wrong deck." Dr. McCoy said with a teasing glance at Lieutenant Masterson.

"You're never going to let me live that down, are you?" Lieutenant Masterson said with embarrassment.

"Now let's have a look at you, young man." Dr. McCoy said as he looked over the biobed's readings.

Cory walked into sickbay and said, "I asked the others to wait in the forward lounge. I figured Dr. McCoy wouldn't want everyone under foot."

Dr. McCoy didn't answer, but spared an approving glance at Cory before pressing some buttons on the head of the biobed.

"Kevin. You need to let go of Dylan's hand for a moment so I can get some accurate readings." Dr. McCoy said gently.

"Okay." Kevin said and reluctantly released Dylan's hand.

"What does it say doctor?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"It says that Dylan has had an extremely adventurous life and is very lucky to be alive."

"It really says that?" Kevin asked with wonder.

"If you know how to read it." Dr. McCoy said with a smile.

"Am I going to be okay?" Dylan asked with worry.

"Eventually. Right now there are toxins in your blood stream that are poisoning your entire body. Normally your kidneys would deal with that, but they aren't functioning at the moment and your spleen is damaged so it isn't offering any assistance... I wouldn't brag on your liver function either." Dr. McCoy said as he looked carefully at the readings.

"So what does all that mean?" Jake asked with concern evident in his voice.

Dr. McCoy looked at Jake and gave a gentle smile as he said, "It just means that this is going to take some time. The biobed is already working to detoxify Dylan's system. Once the antibiotic level has decreased some, then his kidneys should slowly return to normal function and speed the process along considerably.

"How long is all that going to take?" Dylan asked hesitantly.

"There's no way to know how your body will react as the toxins decrease. It could be a few days or over a week." Dr. McCoy said in a speculative voice.

"We'll come to visit you all the time. I bet Poppa would let me spend the night here if I told him it was important." Kevin said seriously.

Dylan looked at Kevin and gave a reluctant smile.

"What happens after you get the toxins down?" Cory asked thoughtfully.

"Well, like I said, his kidneys should start back up on their own. As far as the organ damage... I think everything should be able to heal naturally once the toxin level comes down." Dr. McCoy said as he looked at the readings again.

"Doctor, there's something else that might be a problem." Dylan said reluctantly with a pained look on his face.

"I'm aware of your drug addiction. Even if I hadn't seen your blood toxin readings, the tracks on your arms would have let me know. The past few days must have been hell for you." McCoy said sympathetically.

"They should have let me die." Dylan said as he closed his eye.

* * * * *

Chip and Joe walked into the game room to find Karen sitting and rocking Vincent in her lap.

"Vincent? Can I talk to you for a minute?" Joe asked quietly.

Vincent looked at Joe with tear stained eyes and said in a trembling voice, "I'm sorry I said that to Aunt Teri."

Joe gave Vincent an assuring smile as he said, "I'm sure she understands about that. Don't worry about it now."

Vincent nodded, then looked at Joe with question.

"Commander Dodds and I were talking about what happened and thought that, if you wanted to, you could come with me on the *Yorktown* for a few weeks." Joe said quietly.

"Really?" Vincent asked with excitement, temporarily forgetting his problems.

"Yes. We already talked to Captain Byrne and he gave his approval." Joe said with a smile.

"Did you hear that Grandma Karen? I get to go on a real starship!" Vincent said happily.

"I heard sweetie. That sounds like a wonderful idea." Karen said and flashed a smile of appreciation at Chip and Joe for thinking of it.

"We still need to work out a few details about your custody. But Commander Dodds assures me that as long as you're in favor of it, that's not going to be too much of a problem." Joe said with a smile at Vincent's improved mood.

"Where will we be going?" Vincent asked with anticipation.

"The *Yorktown* is scheduled to transfer cargo and personnel to Alpha Centauri. It won't be a very exciting run, but for the two weeks we're gone from Earth, you'll be living on a starship." Joe said with a warm smile.

"That's sooooo cool! Grandma Karen! I get to live on a starship!" Vincent said as he turned and hugged Karen tightly.

"I heard." Karen said as she gently returned the hug.

"And we should have plenty of time to discuss 'things' while we're gone." Joe said with a significant look at Karen.

"That sounds like a very good idea." Karen said softly. Her look, more than her words, speaking her approval.

* * * * *

"Dylan. Would you like a nice bowl of chicken soup?" Doctor McCoy asked into the ensuing silence.

Dylan opened his eye and looked at the doctor with surprise at the question.

"By the look of your readings, you haven't eaten for a while. I promise that our chicken soup is much better than what you would get in the hospital." McCoy said seriously.

"Um, yeah. Sure." Dylan said in a confused voice.

"Ensign Short, would you take Jake and Kevin to the mess hall to get Dylan some chicken soup? You can get something for yourselves while you're there if you like." Dr. McCoy said casually.

"I want to stay with Dylan." Kevin said immediately.

"Kevin. I need to look at the wound on Dylan's face. I'm sure he won't want you to see what's under his bandage so I need for you to be away for a few minutes." Dr. McCoy explained patiently.

"Do you want me to go?" Kevin asked Dylan quietly.

"Yeah. I don't want you to see my face all messed up like it is. Besides, chicken soup sounds really good. Could you try to get me some crackers too?" Dylan finished with a smile.

"Sure. We'll be right back." Kevin said as he hurried to Cory's side.

Dr. McCoy watched as the boys left the room, then said, "It looks like you've got a real friend there."

"I guess I do." Dylan said thoughtfully as Dr. McCoy carefully pulled the bandage back from Dylan's face.

Lieutenant Masterson gasped at the sight of the damage.

"That bad, huh?" Dylan asked as he glanced at the Lieutenant.

"I've seen worse." Dr. McCoy said seriously as he washed the wound.

"Thanks for making the guys leave. I haven't seen it yet, but from the way the nurses acted when they changed the bandages, it's really bad." Dylan said, trying not to react to the feeling of the doctor cleaning the raw flesh.

"I won't lie to you. It's bad. But it's not the worst I've ever seen. Do you have much pain in your face?" Dr. McCoy asked seriously as he continued to clean.

"Only when you're touching it like that." Dylan said honestly.

"Nurse Holden, please dress the wound." Dr. McCoy said to a nurse who was standing nearby.

"Before the others get back, I wanted to ask you how you would like to proceed in dealing with your drug addiction." Dr. McCoy said seriously as he looked Dylan in the eye.

"I don't know what to do... I'm craving so bad right now that I'd do anything for a fix." Dylan said with pain in his voice.

"I thought so. I can give you something to help ease your craving for the moment. It isn't any kind of long term solution but it should allow you to get a break from the... need." Dr. McCoy finished with difficulty.

"Yes. Please." Dylan said in a desperate voice.

Dr. McCoy went to a cabinet and returned a moment later with a hypo spray.

Dylan watched with anticipation as Dr. McCoy injected him.

Relief washed through his body as the crawling sensation and the gnawing need started to ease.

Dylan felt a smile creep across his face at finally being able to be comfortable after so long, then he noticed that Dr. McCoy was watching him carefully.

"Thank you Doctor. If there is ever anything I can do to repay you, just name it." Dylan said with gratitude.

"Get into treatment." Dr. McCoy said immediately.

Dylan glanced away as he said, "It doesn't work for someone like me. I've seen it too many times and it never works."

"How do you mean?" Dr. McCoy asked with interest.

"When someone gets arrested for dealing or using, they sometimes get sentenced to treatment. That's all good and nice, but as soon as the treatment is over, they're back on the streets, needing to survive and... when the drugs are the closest thing to happiness you can find in your life..." Dylan drifted off.

Dr. McCoy slowly nodded his understanding.

"It's not hard to put it down for a day. Anyone can do that. But when you're living out there and every day is just a little bit worse than the one before. You've got no hope of things ever getting better... you finally say, 'Why not?' When you've got nothing, you've got nothing to lose." Dylan finished in a begging voice.

Dr. McCoy looked up at a movement and saw Cory, Jake and Kevin standing in the doorway.

* * * * *

"Cory wants to know what's going on." Tommy said immediately as JJ and JC approached.

"Yeah. I'll go ahead and tell you what I know and you can pass on the basics to him. He'll get all the details in my report." JJ said seriously as he came to stand beside Tommy at the terminal.

Before JJ could begin, he noticed everyone looking at JC with question.

"Uncle Josh wanted to know what's going on too, so I said that just for tonight he could be an honorary Clan member and sit in on our discussion." JJ said with a smile at the group.

"Don't worry guys. As soon as I've heard JJ's explanation, I'll be getting back to my guests." JC said seriously.

Some significant looks went around the group and it was silently decided that just this once, it was okay.

"You guys don't mind if Dean is here do you?" Justy asked carefully.

"No problem. Dean will probably join us sooner or later anyway." Sebastian said with a smile at the couple.

Justy returned the smile with relief.

"Okay. Gabe, you went to the hospital to get Vincent, why don't you fill us in on the history, then I'll tell you what just happened." JJ said, now completely in his 'Security' persona.

"Right. Okay, you all know that Aunt Teri got a copy of our report about how Lawrence used to get beat up and degraded by his father." Gabe said as he looked around the group.

"Well, Aunt Teri put out an advisory to all the hospitals and clinics and stuff to be on the look out for Vincent, Lawrence's half-brother. He showed up at Arnold Palmer Children's Hospital today with a head injury and they called her." Gabe said thoughtfully, trying to stick to the most important facts.

"Vincent's dad hit him this morning and ended up knocking him down on a staircase where he hit his head... that's why he's got the bandage." Gabe finished seriously.

"We went to the hospital with Aunt Teri and she pretty much handled everything while we visited with Vincent. It ended up that Vincent's mom went with a police detective to make a statement. A CPS worker got arrested and banned from the hospital and Aunt Teri ended up taking care of Vincent for the weekend." Gabe said, then looked at JJ, indicating that he was done.

JJ nodded, then said, "Mr. Winters, Vincent's father, somehow knew where his wife was going to be and set up an ambush. He shot Vincent's mom, another woman and a police detective. He called Aunt Teri and she heard him get shot, that's when she called the 'Security Red'. After that, he drove here and tried to ram the gate of the Short Compound. He died when the gate held."

"Oh my God." JC said with wide eyes, then glanced over to see his mother holding Vincent tenderly in her lap as they talked with Chip and Joe.

"I'll pass it on to Cory when he checks in." Tommy said seriously.

JC shook his head to dismiss the random thoughts and quickly said, "Thanks for letting me sit in guys. I'll get back to my guests now."

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Thompson, would you please come into the study? We just got past the security on the computer and... I think you need to see this." Ensign Carlson said from the living room doorway of the Winters home.

Brady stopped looking through the mail on the coffee table and walked to join the ensign as he asked, "What did you find?"

"Probably the most disgusting thing I've ever seen." Ensign Carlson said as he led Brady across the hall.

"When you've been in security for a while, you start to build up some calluses. Don't worry, you'll toughen up." Brady said with assurance as Ensign Carlson stopped inside the door and extended his hand to indicate the desktop computer.

Brady walked to the computer and felt the bile rise in his throat at the sight before him.

After taking a breath to calm his stomach, Brady quietly said, "Then again Ensign Carlson, there are some things you should never get used to."

* * * * *

"What's wrong?" David asked with concern as they walked away from the other Clan members.

"Vincent." Aaron said quietly.

David turned to see Vincent sitting in Karen Chasez' lap and talking happily with Chip and Joe.

"What about him?" David asked with concern.

"He's lost both his parents. When it finally hits him... I don't know if he's going to be able to handle it." Aaron said seriously.

"Do you want to try talking to him about it?" David asked cautiously.

"No. Not right now... and not me. But I know someone whose been through basically the same thing." Aaron said distantly.

David gave Aaron a curious look.

"I'm going to call Jake and see if he'll have a talk with Vincent. I don't know when Vincent's going to be ready to deal with it. But when that day finally comes, I'm pretty sure Jake is going to be the one who can help him make sense of things." Aaron said seriously.

"Because he's been through it." David said in a speculative voice.

"Yeah. Let's see if we can get Tommy off the terminal long enough to call Jake." Aaron said with a smile.

"I love you." David said with a scorching look.

Aaron got a look of surprise which slowly turned into a tender smile.

"You're going to be a great father someday." David said with a dreamy look.

At that, Aaron's smile turned back into surprise.

David giggled and said, "I'm not talking about now or even a year from now but... someday. It would be a horrible waste if you didn't put that wonderful, caring heart of yours to use by being a father."

Aaron's expression changed back to tender as he said, "Someday, I promise."

David pulled Aaron into a firm hug, not having any words to adequately express what he was feeling at that moment.

After a long minute of hugging, Aaron finally said, "Let's go call Jake."

* * * * *

"Try to look at this as an opportunity. You have a chance to make a fresh start." Cory said, trying to inject cheer into his voice.

"I only know one way to make money and no one's gonna wanna pay me looking like this." Dylan said gravely.

"Dylan. Listen to me. This may not make sense to you, but please try to understand what I'm saying." Cory said seriously.

Dylan turned his full attention to Cory.

"You're a kid. You shouldn't have to worry about earning money." Cory said firmly.

Dylan had a spark of understanding, then shook his head and said, "I'm an addict. I've got to make money... I've got to..." He choked on a sob, then continued in a whisper, "I've got no choice."

Jake thought about Dylan's words as he moved closer to Dylan's bedside and said, "Dylan. I need to ask you something really serious. It may sound like a joke at first but it's really important."

Dylan looked at Jake with question.

"If you had one wish to make your life better, what would it be?" Jake asked seriously.

Dylan looked at Jake with surprise and was about to tell him what a stupid question that was when he was taken off guard by the absolute seriousness in Jake's eyes.

After a minute of thinking, Dylan hesitantly said, "If I had just one wish... I think I'd like to have a life like what you said."

"What did I say?." Jake asked thoughtfully.

"You said that you have a life without drugs or whoring or fighting... it sounds nice." Dylan said softly.

"I'm sorry to say that one of your goals may be difficult to accomplish." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

Everyone looked at Dr. McCoy with question.

"Your body is physically addicted to some very powerful drugs. Leaving aside the psychological addiction, your physical addiction will require at least a month of treatment to wean you off the drugs completely." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

Dylan's hopeful look fell as he realized the impossibility of his dream.

Jake watched Dylan's expression fall and came to a decision deep within himself.

With a look of resolve, Jake knelt beside the bed and gently urged Kevin to release Dylan's hand.

Once Kevin had let go, Jake took a firm hold of Dylan's hand and closed his eyes as he said in a clear voice, "Saint Mikey, The miracle you gave to me is wonderful and I'm really thankful for it, but Dylan needs it worse than I do. Now that I have a family, I know I'm strong enough to fight the pain and the cravings. You already said that you can hear us when we pray to you so I know your listening. Please give my miracle to Dylan instead."

Kevin moved behind Jake and pulled him into a hug as he joined him in prayer.

Jake clenched his eyes tightly shut and prayed as hard as he could, trying to impress on Mikey just how important this was.

"What the...?" Dr. McCoy said in shock as a golden glow started to radiate from Jake's body, then slowly moved to engulf Dylan's as well.

"What are you doing?" Dylan asked with fear as a cold numbness seemed to wash over him.

"Granting your wish, I hope." Jake said as he continued to hold Dylan's hand firmly.

"Whatever you're doing, keep it up." Dr. McCoy said as he watched the toxicity level in Dylan's blood rapidly decrease.

Dylan felt a warmth rush over his body and a sense of overwhelming peace.

"That's got it." McCoy said as he saw the readings stabilize well within the normal range.

Jake opened his eyes and whispered, "Now you don't have to do drugs anymore. They're all gone."

"Look at your arms." Kevin said with a smile.

Dylan looked down and was shocked to see that not only were the needle tracks gone, but also the slashes and gashes where he had cut himself.

"My turn." Cory said as he moved to stand beside Jake.

Dylan looked at Cory with question.

"I can't let Jake have all the fun. You said you'd like a life without drugs and whoring and fighting. Right?" Cory asked with a gentle smile.

Dylan nodded hesitantly.

"Well, it appears that Jake took care of the drugs, and I think that if you'd like, I could take care of the rest." Cory said carefully.

"How's that?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"I know of a place where everyone gets along and there is no fighting. Food, clothes and everything else you need are provided and all that is expected of you is to attend classes and occasionally help out with some chores." Cory said in a measured tone..

"Is it a group home?" Dylan asked carefully.

Cory shook his head and said, "There's a group of people in each cabin, and we do our best to make it a home but no, it's not a group home in the way you mean."

"I've heard about how you get gang raped in the group homes. I'm not going to anyplace like that. I'd be better off on the streets." Dylan said, looking like he was ready to fight.

"Well, we try to stress sexual responsibility at Camp Little Eagle. But if you're interested, there is one cabin where none of the residents will even approach you about sex." Cory said slowly.

Dylan looked at Cory with question, obviously interested.

"There are a lot of people at Camp Little Eagle and some of them have special needs. The members of Cabin One have been through a lot of different life experiences but they have one thing in common. None of them are interested in getting into a sexual relationship with anyone. If

you're interested in living there, no one in the entire camp would even approach you about anything sexual." Cory said seriously.

"For real? You mean that if I lived there no one would even ask?" Dylan asked carefully.

"That's right. It's not like the rest of the camp is one big orgy or anything, but in the other cabins if someone found you attractive they might try to get to know you better and you might eventually end up in a sexual relationship. That won't happen in Cabin One. The whole camp knows that the guys in cabin one aren't interested and don't want to be approached." Cory said frankly.

"Cabin five too." Sean said from just inside the doorway.

"Oh, I didn't see you come in love. Come over here. Sean this is Dylan." Cory said with a smile.

Sean walked over and put a casual arm around Cory.

"What were you saying about Cabin Five?" Dylan asked with interest.

"No one approaches the Cabin Five guys either." Sean said casually.

"That's because they're straight." Cory said with a smile.

"I'm straight." Dylan said frankly.

Everyone in the room except Kevin looked at Dylan with disbelief.

"I just worked the streets to pay for drugs and stuff. When you feel like you have maggots crawling under your skin because you need a fix and a rice queen offers you fifty bucks to do a job... you do what you've got to do. I'm not really into guys at all. They're kind of gross if you think about it." Dylan said frankly.

"Well then... I guess it's up to you. You'd fit in either place." Cory said consideringly.

"The cabin one guys, have they been through stuff like I have, I mean like Jake and me?" Dylan asked as he glanced at Jake.

"Not exactly. I mean, some of them have been sexually abused or exploited... but some of the guys are just there because they like the relaxed atmosphere in Cabin One." Sean said thoughtfully.

Cory smiled and nodded at Sean's statement.

"If I don't like it at this camp... can I leave?" Dylan asked hesitantly.

"Sure. With only a few exceptions, everyone at Camp Little Eagle is there by choice. If you choose to leave, the staff will want to know that you have someplace safe to go, but they won't force you to stay." Cory said seriously.

"And we'll be going to school there so we'll get to see you every day. And maybe you could even come over to our house sometimes and spend the night." Kevin said with delight.

Dylan looked at Cory with question.

"Sure. If you wanted to, that would be fine. We know that you would be safe at Kevin's house." Cory said with a smile.

"Okay. I'll give it a try." Dylan said thoughtfully.

Cory smiled and said, "Good. Then as soon as Dr. McCoy has you all taken care of, we'll take you to Camp Little Eagle."

Dr. McCoy looked up at the sound of his name and said, "I'm not exactly sure what Jake just did, but according to Dylan's readings his blood toxin level is low enough to be considered normal, his kidney's are functioning normally and the damage to his spleen is... gone."

"So how long will Dylan need to stay here?" Kevin asked carefully.

"He'll need another half an hour or so for his kidneys to flush the excess water out of his body. After that he should be stable enough to leave." Dr. McCoy said in a considering voice.

"What about my face?" Dylan asked hesitantly.

"That's another matter entirely. I happen to know that Dr. Michaels attends to the residents at Camp Little Eagle. Once you get settled in, you'll need to go see him so that he can give you your options. The reconstruction of your face is going to take several surgeries to complete and you need an Earth based physician to oversee that process. When the *Enterprise* leaves, I leave with her. There's no way I could be available when you needed me." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"Is there any chance that he can fix my face to look like it was before?" Dylan asked hopefully.

"Honestly, I just don't know. Reconstructive and cosmetic surgery isn't my area of expertise. You'll need to talk to an expert to get a definite answer. But I do have some good news." Dr. McCoy finished with a hopeful smile.

"I could use some." Dylan said frankly.

"The damage to your left eye is to the eye socket, not the eye itself. It shouldn't be any problem to reconstruct the socket and return your eye to full functioning. On top of that, the antibiotics that those idiot doctors in Chicago were pumping into you assured that your doctors won't have to deal with any infections before they can begin reconstruction. That will save a lot of time." Dr. McCoy said professionally.

Dylan nodded in acceptance, then quietly said, "I've got to go to the bathroom."

"Right over there. For the next half hour or so you'll be doing that a lot." Dr. McCoy said with a smile.

Dylan nodded, then hurried away.

"How is he really Dr. McCoy?" Cory asked with concern.

"Physically, he's going to be fine. Emotionally... I think you've got your work cut out for you." Dr. McCoy said honestly.

* * * * *

Ensign Carlson walked into the study to hear Brady saying in a frustrated voice, "I understand that, but this investigation was ordered by the head of the Southeast Division of Federation..."

"*Excuse me Lieutenant Thompson, but the clearance just came through. If you'll let me know what you need. I'll do whatever I can to help.*" The male voice on the communicator said politely.

"Thank you. I need two things. First, I need the phone records for the Winters residence for today. If you could just fax them to Commander Martin's office to my attention it would be a big help." Brady said, in a much more relaxed tone.

"*I'll have that sent within half an hour. What else can I do for you?*" The man asked courteously.

"If there's any way you can do it, I need to know who called the Winters house right before... give me a second." Brady said, then clicked on an icon on the computer.

"...Four Thirty-five pm today." Brady continued.

"*It will probably take me a few minutes to convince the phone company to give up that information. Would you like me to call you back?*" The man asked in a casual tone.

"Yes. Thank you very much for your help." Brady said with gratitude.

"*You're welcome. Brandon out*." The man said professionally.

"Thompson out." Brady said, then closed his communicator.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you sir, but we found something I thought you should know about." Lieutenant Carlson said hesitantly.

"Go ahead." Brady said as he turned away from the computer.

"There was a false back in the master bedroom closet. We've found a collection of gay porn and bondage gear in there." Lieutenant Carlson said carefully.

"Anything illegal?" Brady asked curiously.

"Not so far, but it's quite a bit to go through." Lieutenant Carlson said seriously.

"I guess it doesn't matter. After seeing what's on this computer... I'm glad he's dead. I'd be sorely tempted to hunt him down and kill him otherwise." Brady said in a cold voice.

"Sir?" Ensign Carlson asked with surprise.

Brady looked at the Ensign for a moment, then asked, "Ensign... What's your first name?"

"Gary." Ensign Carlson answered slowly.

"Gary. I think I'm going to need your help." Brady said with a tired look in his eyes.

"How so?" Ensign Carlson asked hesitantly.

Brady turned to the computer and clicked on one of the picture files.

The picture that came up was of a teenage boy, naked and just about to step into the shower.

"This is Lawrence. Mr. Winters oldest son. Gary, this isn't like a regular investigation for me. I know these kids." Brady said, then clicked another picture.

The image of a younger boy, naked from the waste down, obviously changing out of his pajamas.

"This is Vincent, the younger son. From the looks of these pictures, there are some hidden video cameras in the bathroom and the boys' bedrooms." Brady said with a pained look.

"That's just sick." Ensign Carlson said in a low voice.

"Yes. And it gets worse. There are thousands of pictures and movie files here. It looks like Winters must have been at this for years. As far as I know he never did anything sexual to either of the boys but... Gary, will you help me keep my objectivity? If you see me becoming too focused on something that isn't relevant to the investigation, will you please tell me?" Brady asked quietly.

"Only if you'll do the same for me." Ensign Carlson said with a dark tone in his voice.

Brady looked at him with question.

"I've got two boys about the same age as these. I've read the report about suspected abuse, that alone is enough to make it personal for me. But now this..." Gary said as he shook his head.

"There's more." Brady said in a whisper.

"What else." Gary asked in a hollow voice of dread.

"Winters kept a journal of his... interests." Brady said with a queasy look.

"Does it have anything useful?" Gary asked with hope.

"Yes. This file is huge. Winters tells about when he first became interested in Lawrence... here." Brady said and opened the document.

"It starts out as a collection of fantasies about Lawrence based on these pictures. They're not even really sexual to start with but they still make my skin crawl." Brady said with a disturbed look.

"As you read from week to week through this... thing. You can almost hear Winters slipping deeper and deeper into his obsession with Lawrence. The fantasies get darker and more violent. From what I caught as I skimmed over this, he blames Lawrence for tempting him, for making him turn gay." Brady said thoughtfully.

Ensign Carlson nodded as he quickly read the passage on the screen.

"Now here's where it gets bad." Brady said and hit the page down key until he came to the photo he wanted.

"A dress?" Ensign Carlson said with surprise.

Brady nodded, then reluctantly paged down to the next screen.

"That's disgusting on so many levels I can't even..." Ensign Carlson trailed off with disgust as he looked at the body of a nude woman in a vulgar pose with Lawrence's face pasted in place of her own.

"He has hundreds of these pictures. But here's the really interesting part." Brady said as he quickly paged down.

I finally did it. I threw my wife's faggot son out of my house.

He didn't get me. He's been wanting it. He's been begging for it but I'm too strong for him.

That little whore has been trying to seduce me for years, I didn't give in and now I've won.

Now I can get my life back.

Without that little slut around to tempt me and distract me, I can be a proper husband to my wife again and show my son what it is to be a man.

I'm free. It's finally over. My new life begins today!

"So he was fighting it." Ensign Carlson said in a speculative voice.

"On some level. I don't see any evidence of concern here for the children but, he *was* fighting it. As you read from the beginning of the document... almost two years earlier, you can see how Winters became progressively more abusive as his attraction to Lawrence increased." Brady said slowly.

"So Winters hated Lawrence because he couldn't acknowledge his own sexual desires." Ensign Carlson said in a speculative voice.

"That's what it looks like." Brady said thoughtfully.

"So what happened to cause today?" Gary asked quietly.

"There's a time gap after that entry. The next entry is three days ago." Brady said as he paged down.

God Damn Him! That little faggot whore slut!

My wife's faggot son did something to my Vincent!

Today Vincent gave me that look. The one that Lawrence used to give me. The one that says he wants it. He wants me.

My son! That fucking faggot made my little boy into a sissy-fag!

At supper tonight he was tempting me. The way he put the food in his mouth, the way he moved his mouth when he chewed his food.

Every move he made was just to get me worked up, to turn me on.

Then after supper he kept it up...

Oh God! When he walked into the living room, the way he walked was like a dance. Every move he made was like he was touching me. Stroking me.

"So he transferred his fixation to the younger son, Vincent." Ensign Carlson said in concentration.

"Yes. And then here is today's entry." Brady said and paged down a few more times.

I just got a call from someone telling me that Peggy went to the cops.

I've been fighting it and staying strong for so long and now that bitch has the nerve to call the cops on me!

I didn't do it. I didn't give into her slut of a son and I didn't give in to my own little faggot whore and the bitch still called the cops.

Fuck it! If I'm going to be damned, I'm going to be damned for doing it!

I bet she's going to that dyke bitch Sharon's house.

She thinks I don't know about what she does when she says she's going shopping.

Well I've got a little surprise for her.

I just hope that the last sight in her dying eyes is me fucking the shit out of my little faggot whore of a son!

"Call?" Ensign Carlson asked, then remembered what Brady was saying when he walked in.

"As far as I can tell, that's the only loose end. Winters is dead, we've got a detailed confession... with pictures. Everything I've seen and heard here confirms what I've read." Brady said thoughtfully.

Ensign Carlson looked at Brady and quietly said, "Lieutenant Thompson..."

"Brady."

"Brady, you said you know the boys. If they need anything at all, please let me know. We have plenty of room at my house if they need a place to stay. And like I said, my boys are about the same age..." Ensign Carlson drifted off with a tone of concern.

"If there's any way you can help, I promise that I'll let you know. As luck would have it, today Lawrence met his biological father for the first time and they really hit it off. I think Joe will be more help to Lawrence than anything anyone else can do." Brady said quietly.

"What about the younger brother, Vincent?" Ensign Carlson asked with concern.

"Peggy Winters asked a friend to watch out for Vincent so she could go to the Police Department and make her statement. That friend happened to be Director Teri Short of Federation Youth Services. I don't think there's any way that this will turn out to be anything less than devastating for Vincent, but Director Short is the most capable person in the entire Federation to see that he's provided with the best possible future." Brady said seriously.

Gary nodded as he absorbed the statement when his thoughts were interrupted by Brady's communicator.

"Lieutenant Thompson." Brady said quickly.

"*I have the information you requested*." Lieutenant Brandon said professionally.

"Go ahead." Brady said and devoted his full attention to the communicator.

"*The last call came from the Orlando Police Department*." Lieutenant Brandon said frankly.

Brady looked at Ensign Carlson with surprise.

"*I took the liberty of talking to the Police Department and found that the phone used was for prisoners to make their 'one phone call'. Also the calls are recorded for security purposes. And before you ask, I've already requested a copy of that recording*." Lieutenant Brandon said and a note of accomplishment could be heard in his voice.

"Were you able to find out who called?" Brady asked firmly.

"*Yes. According to their call log and the time you gave me, the caller was a Ms. Carolyn Rind*."

CHAPTER 45

"Lieutenant Thompson, Lieutenant Marsh of the Orlando Police Department would like to speak with you." A security ensign said from the study doorway.

"Gary, would you see to documenting the locations of the hidden cameras and keep an eye on things while I talk to the locals?" Brady asked hopefully.

"Yes sir. I'll take care of everything." Ensign Carlson said seriously.

Brady nodded and walked to the living room.

* * * * *

Ricardo broke away from the clan meeting and walked directly to the small group where Vincent was sitting on Karen Chasez' lap.

Reuben followed close behind, concerned about what his brother might do.

"I give you hug?" Ricardo asked Vincent seriously.

All other conversation stopped as Vincent looked at the small boy with question.

"Um, okay. I guess." Vincent said slowly and got off Karen's lap.

Vincent hesitantly picked up the small boy and was surprised by Ricardo's vice-like grip.

Reuben walked to the group and hesitantly said, "We just heard about... what happened, and Ricardo wanted to make you feel better."

Vincent looked at Reuben and noticed the honest concern in his eyes.

"Do you know what happened? Aunt Teri just told me that they were dead." Vincent asked in a small voice.

Reuben looked at Chip and Joe with question, not knowing if he was supposed to talk about it.

Chip quietly said, "Vincent, I can tell you what you want to know. But I think you'd better sit down with Karen first."

Vincent looked at Karen to be sure it was okay with her.

"This chair is big enough for both of us, and you can bring your little friend too if you want." Karen said as she shifted to one side of the chair.

Vincent tried to get into the chair without letting go of Ricardo, but couldn't seem to manage it.

Joe smiled at the scene, then lifted the pair of boys to sit beside Karen.

"Okay Vincent, we're still trying to figure out everything that happened tonight, but from what we know so far, your father killed your mother." Chip said in a low, quiet voice.

Vincent tensed at the statement, then felt himself being hugged by Ricardo and Karen simultaneously.

After a moment to think about what he'd been told, Vincent quietly said, "Cory already said that if I stayed with my dad, that he might kill me. I guess this means that he was right."

Chip glanced at Joe with a pained expression, then said, "After that, your father wrecked his car. He died in the crash."

Vincent didn't realize he was crying until he felt the tears running down his cheeks.

Karen felt the boy's tense body beside her as she held him gently. She looked up at Chip and whispered, "Could you give us a few minutes. I don't think Vincent wants you to see him crying."

"Of course, we'll be over with Teri if you need us." Chip said seriously.

"Thank you for telling me Commander Dodds." Vincent said in a trembling voice.

Chip stopped and gave Vincent a brief look of admiration before continuing.

Karen watched as Chip, Joe and Reuben walked away, then said, "It's okay Vincent. You're with your Grandma Karen, go ahead and let it loose."

Vincent held back his tears as best he could and fought to say, "Ricardo shouldn't see me crying."

"Nonsense. It's better for him to learn when it's okay to cry than to watch you fight to hold it in." Karen said seriously.

"Ricardo..." Vincent choked, then continued, "When you're sitting with your grandma, it's okay to cry if you need to."

"I'll remember." Ricardo said seriously.

Vincent leaned into Karen's side and let loose his control as he began to cry freely.

Ricardo held tightly to Vincent, doing the only thing he knew to make someone who was hurting feel better.

* * * * *

"Um, I forgot to tell you before... we brought your soup." Kevin said as Dylan walked out of the bathroom.

"Thanks Kevin." Dylan said as he climbed back into the bed.

As Dylan was beginning to eat his soup, there was a beeping noise that drew everyone's attention.

Dr. McCoy pressed the button to turn on the intercom and said, "Sickbay."

"*I have a video transmission for Jake Thompson.*" Uhura said seriously.

McCoy looked over to see Jake looking back at him with question.

"Uhura, would you put it through to my office? He's on his way." McCoy said, then clicked the button to turn off the intercom.

Jake looked around the room, not sure which door led to the Doctor's office.

Cory gestured to a door at the far side of the room.

"Thank you Doctor." Jake said quietly as he hurried into the office.

* * * * *

Billy and Allen walked into the room to find Deacon and Lawrence holding each other in silence.

Deacon looked up from the hug and held out an arm to invite Billy to join them.

Billy immediately walked to the pair and hugged both boys firmly.

"I'm going to be okay." Lawrence said in a hoarse whisper.

Deacon looked up at Allen watching them and slowly pulled out of the hug.

Allen gave a sympathetic smile and opened his arms in invitation to Deacon.

"Thanks Pop." Deacon said in a whisper as he hugged Allen tightly.

"You be strong for Lawrence and I'll be strong for you." Allen said gently.

Deacon nodded into Allen's chest as he soaked in the comfort.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Marsh, what can I do for you?" Brady asked professionally as he offered his hand.

Lieutenant Marsh shook the offered hand and carefully said, "From what I know of what happened tonight, you're out of your jurisdiction here. This investigation should be a matter for the Orlando Police Department."

Brady considered his response before saying, "Mr. Winters attacked the home of the Director of Federation Youth Services. That makes this our jurisdiction."

Lieutenant Marsh nodded thoughtfully, then said, "I see. I'm sorry if I sounded like I was trying to pick a fight... It's just that Detective Blair is a friend of mine..."

"I understand. It becomes personal when it's one of your own." Brady said in a sympathetic voice.

Lieutenant Marsh nodded, then quietly asked, "Is there any way that we can be involved in this investigation? It's really frustrating to know that OC is laying there in the hospital, fighting for his life and we can't even help to figure out why this happened."

Brady thought about the words, then said, "Let me see what I can do. This isn't something that I have the authority to approve, but if I talk to Commander Martin about it, I might be able to convince him to accept help with the investigation."

"Thank you Lieutenant Thompson. If you can manage it, that will make everyone feel a lot better. Sometimes we get the feeling that Starfleet just walks in, takes over and kicks us out of the way." Lieutenant Marsh said seriously.

Brady nodded again, then said, "I can't make any promises, but I'll see what I can do."

* * * * *

"Where is your brother?" Juana asked Reuben in panic.

"He's over there." Reuben said as he pointed.

"Why is that boy crying?" Juana asked with motherly concern as she shifted Edovina in her arms.

"Vincent's momma and daddy both died tonight. Ricardo wanted to hug him to make him feel better." Reuben said quietly.

Juana watched the scene with understanding and pulled Reuben into a hug.

* * * * *

Jake went into the Doctor's office to find Aaron looking back at him from the terminal screen.

"What's going on Aaron?" Jake asked with concern at Aaron's serious expression.

"*We've got a situation here.*" Aaron said thoughtfully.

"We've got one here too." Jake said frankly.

"*Then I guess it makes sense to share. Maybe we can help each other.*" Aaron said carefully.

Jake nodded.

"*Lawrence and Vincent's father killed their mother, then himself tonight*." Aaron said in a disturbed tone.

"Shit." Jake muttered as he considered how this would effect Lawrence.

"*I was thinking that since your dad... well, you know. Maybe you can help them.*" Aaron said in a considering voice.

Jake shook his head as he quietly said, "No kid should have to go through this."

"*Maybe you can be there to do all the things you wish someone would have done for you. This will be kind of like your chance to pass on what you've learned and make it a little easier for them to deal with everything.*" Aaron said carefully.

"Yeah, okay. I don't know what I'll say to them, but I'll be there when they need me." Jake said seriously.

"*Good. That's what I thought. Is there anything I can do to help with what you've got going on there?*" Aaron asked with concern.

Jake thought about it for a minute, then carefully said, "Maybe."

"*Just name it*." Aaron said seriously.

"A guy from my old neighborhood was shot last weekend, he's messed up pretty bad. He's going to be going to Camp Little Eagle as soon as Dr. McCoy

is done with him. I thought that if you wouldn't mind doing the celebrity thing, maybe you could welcome him to his new home." Jake said thoughtfully.

"*Is he a fan?*" Aaron asked casually.

"I don't know. We never really hung around together so I don't know what kind of music he likes. But even if he isn't a fan, he'll probably still be impressed by the celebrity welcome." Jake said in concentration.

"*Yeah, sure. Just let me know when he's arriving and I'll go over to the camp to meet him. What's his name?*" Aaron asked curiously.

"Dylan. And I guess I should warn you, he was shot in the face. Try not to freak out too bad when you see it." Jake said seriously.

"*Got it. Thanks for the warning. I'd better get off here now. Tommy is bouncing like he's about to wet himself, I guess that means he wants to use the terminal.*" Aaron said with a teasing smile.

Jake smiled at the statement, then thought to ask, "Would you give Mark a message for me?"

"*Sure.*" Aaron said curiously.

"Just tell him that he's right, when you can help someone else get their wish, it's better." Jake said with a happy smile.

Aaron looked confused by the statement for a moment, then broke into a smile and nodded.

"Thanks for thinking of me to help them Aaron, I really appreciate it." Jake said seriously.

"*It's part of being a team. Later.*" Aaron said and began to stand.

The next thing Jake knew Tommy was taking Aaron's seat before Aaron was completely out of the chair.

Jake smiled as Tommy quickly said, "*Oh, uh. I need to make a call.*"

"Got it. Later Tommy." Jake said with a chuckle and disconnected the transmission.

As Jake was about to leave the office, a voice behind him asked, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

* * * * *

"Commander Martin, I'm ready to make a preliminary report." Brady said seriously into his communicator.

"*I hope you found something to explain all this.*" John said as he devoted his full attention to the terminal before him.

"I believe I did. Mr. Winters kept a journal that detailed his thoughts and feelings. There is no doubt in my mind that Victor Winters was a seriously disturbed man. But I believe that he and Peggy Winters would still be alive if not for the actions of a third party. A Ms. Carolyn Rind." Brady said seriously.

"*What connection does this third party have to the events of this evening?*" John asked curiously.

"Anything I could say at this point would be speculation. But her conversation earlier today with Mr. Winters was recorded. I believe that as soon as we have the recording we may have sufficient evidence for the prosecution of Carolyn Rind as an accessory to murder." Brady said seriously.

"*Keep me posted. Is there anything else?*" John asked thoughtfully.

"Yes. Lieutenant Marsh of the Orlando Police Department is here and very determined to be a part of this investigation." Brady said formally.

"*This is a Federation matter. If he can't accept that, I'll have a talk with the mayor...*"

"Actually, I'd like to request his assistance in the investigation." Brady interrupted.

After a moment of thought, Commander Martin carefully said, "*That could be problematic. Civilian authorities don't have the skilled training or resources available to carry out an effective investigation.*"

"One of their detectives was shot and may still die from his injuries. I believe we have all the relevant information already. Allowing the Orlando Police to contribute won't hinder our investigation and will make them feel like they're able to do something to help their fallen comrade." Brady said with a plea for understanding under his words.

John thought for a moment, then said in a less formal voice, "*I know how it feels to be excluded from an investigation over a matter of jurisdiction. I'll leave it to your discretion. But just remember that the Orlando Police Department isn't as secure with their information as we are.*"

Brady gave a slight chuckle as he said, "Actually, I'm counting on that."

"*What are you up to, Lieutenant?*" John asked in a playful voice.

"The news about this will come out one way or another. If I'm right, doing it this way will cause the media to focus completely on Mr. Winters. That way they won't be poking around and asking questions that might cause problems for Lawrence and Vincent." Brady said carefully.

"*Why do you believe that?*" John asked curiously, sensing that Brady was withholding something.

"Because Mr. Winters was a postal worker."

* * * * *

"I need to know exactly what just happened for my reports." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

Cory looked at Dr. McCoy and hesitantly said, "It was a miracle. Jake just called on Saint Mikey of Urbandale to take away all traces of drugs and disease from Dylan's body."

Silence fell over the room as Dr. McCoy considered what Cory just said.

Finally Dr. McCoy said, "As a doctor and a man of science I can't accept what I've just seen. But before I'm either of those things, I'm a person with my own beliefs and faith. The pope has confirmed Saint Mikey and I've seen the miracle with my own eyes. What more does a good Catholic boy need? Don't worry about the reports, I'll come up with something that Starfleet Medical will be happy with... I always do.

A moment later, Dylan walked out of the bathroom, yet again.

As Dylan was getting back into his bed he noticed someone walking into the room. Before Dylan was completely settled in the bed, Kevin was standing beside him.

"Ensign Short, would you care to fill me in on the situation?" Captain Kirk asked firmly.

"Yes sir. And it's Patriarch Short at the moment. Captain Kirk, I'd like to introduce you to Dylan..." Cory trailed off, trying to remember if anyone had said Dylan's last name.

"Chang." Dylan said with an expression of wonder as he looked at Captain Kirk, his boyhood hero.

"It's nice to meet you Dylan. Now would someone tell me what's going on here?" Captain Kirk said as he looked around the room.

"Clan Short was called by a police officer in Chicago who was worried about Dylan. When we saw what they were doing to Dylan in the hospital, I called for help. The rest of the Clan is at Southcrest and they're under a Security Red condition, so the next logical course available to me was to call for assistance from the *Enterprise*." Cory said carefully.

"It was a bona fide medical emergency. There's no way this boy could have survived another day in that place. His kidneys had completely shut down and those morons were pumping fluids into him... It'll all be in my report." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

Captain Kirk was taken a little off guard by the note of anger in McCoy's voice.

"The situation was bad enough to warrant a full investigation." Lieutenant Masterson said seriously.

"I see." Kirk said with a look of concern directed at Dylan.

Dylan got a desperate look and quickly said, "Excuse me Captain Kirk, I've got to..." Then ran to the bathroom.

Captain Kirk looked at Dr. McCoy with question.

"His kidneys are working now." Dr. McCoy said with a slight shrug.

"Well then, it looks like you have everything under control down here... I'll just get back to the bridge." Captain Kirk said in a diminishing voice.

"Captain Kirk, I just want to say for myself and all of Clan Short how grateful we are for the assistance that the crew of the *Enterprise* provided." Cory said seriously.

"As I understand the purpose of Clan Short, it's your primary mission to help children in need. I'm glad that the *Enterprise* and her crew were able to provide assistance toward that worthy goal." Captain Kirk said with practiced diplomacy.

"Sorry about that." Dylan said shyly as he hurried back to his bed.

"Dylan, maybe when you're feeling better, Patriarch Short could arrange for you to get a proper tour of the ship." Captain Kirk said with a gentle smile.

"Really? Thanks!" Dylan said with excitement.

Kirk smiled at the boys excitement as he turned and left the Sickbay.

* * * * *

Vincent's tears finally stopped flowing and he sat quietly for a minute just enjoying the feeling of hugging and being hugged.

"You feel better now?" Ricardo asked quietly.

"Yeah. A lot better. Thank you." Vincent said gently.

"I think my momma needs a hug now." Ricardo said seriously.

Vincent looked across the room to see Reuben hugging a woman. The woman had tears in her eyes and was holding a baby gently in her arms.

"I think you're right. You'd better go over there." Vincent said carefully.

"If you need a hug. You tell me." Ricardo said firmly.

"Yeah. I will." Vincent said with a smile.

Ricardo looked at Vincent's expression carefully, then wiggled down off Vincent's lap and hurried to his mother and brother.

"Are you feeling better now?" Karen asked Vincent quietly.

"Yeah. Thank you Grandma Karen." Vincent said softly.

"Well, like Ricardo said, if you need a hug, you tell me." Karen said with a smile.

"I will. I promise." Vincent said as he snuggled against Karen's side.

* * * * *

"Doctor, I think I'm ready to stop peeing now." Dylan said as he walked back to the bed yet again.

McCoy chuckled and said, "You look a hundred percent better than when you got here. I think you've lost about twenty pounds."

Dylan looked at the doctor seriously and said, "Yeah, it feels like I've peed about twenty pounds of water."

The intercom sounded again, drawing everyone's attention.

"Sickbay." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"*A video transmission for Patriarch Short*." Uhura said efficiently.

McCoy looked at the office where Jake was still using the terminal and finally said, "I guess you'll need to go into the conference room down the hall."

"I know where it is. I'll be right back." Cory said seriously.

Sean looked at Cory with a hopeful expression.

Cory gave a gentle smile and a slight nod, then headed out the sickbay door followed closely by Sean.

"Uhura, patch it through to conference room two. He's on his way." McCoy said with a smile.

"*Yes Doctor.*" Uhura said professionally.

Well, it looks like our little group is getting smaller all the time." Dr. McCoy said as he ambled over to the side of the biobed.

"Shit!" Dylan said and hopped off of the bed and ran to the bathroom.

"So Kevin, tell me how you've been doing. Are you enjoying the milkshakes?"

* * * * *

"So what are they doing now?" Matt asked casually as he rested back in the cushioned chair.

"Dylan is peeing again." Kyle said in a bored tone.

"Jake has completed his conversation with Aaron. I believe it would be inappropriate to relay the information he has been given."

Kyle got a distant look in his eyes, then sat up suddenly.

"It is inappropriate to scan another's mind without prior consent." Xain said as a statement of fact.

"Yeah, sorry." Kyle said absently, then looked at his father with concern.

"What is it?" Dan asked carefully.

"It's one of those things that I'm not supposed to repeat because I got it accidentally." Kyle said with frustration.

"Is something going on?" Kenny asked curiously.

"Oh yeah." Kyle said as he squinted his eyes in concentration.

"My bond with Jake has closed." Xain said distantly.

"I can't see him either. He's shielded." Kyle said thoughtfully.

"Do you think something's wrong?" Kenny asked immediately.

"No. He's in Dr. McCoy's office, I'm sure he's fine... I think Cory is about to find out about the Security Red." Kyle said in concentration.

"They'll tell us if they want us to know." Matt said firmly.

Kyle looked at Matt, then reluctantly nodded.

"Come here." Dan said and opened his arms to Kyle.

Kyle reluctantly walked to Dan and was pulled into a hug.

"This sucks." Kyle said in a grumpy voice.

"I know. But Matt is right. Having a special ability means also having a special responsibility." Dan said as he held his son close.

"Yeah. But it still sucks. I want to be doing something to help." Kyle said in a grumble.

"Kyle, there's something you can do to help me if you want." Kenny said quietly.

"What?" Kyle asked as he turned to look at Kenny.

"Help me to learn the telepathy thing." Kenny said with hope.

"It'll be a lot easier if we have Kevin here when I teach you." Kyle said seriously.

"I know. But he's not here and we don't have anything else to do right now. Let's just do it the hard way." Kenny said frankly.

Kyle thought about it for a second, then smiled and said, "Yeah."

* * * * *

"Mikey!" Jake said happily as he pulled Mikey into a joyful hug.

"I'm glad to see you too Jake." Mikey said with a chuckle.

"Thank you for helping Dylan. I wasn't sure you would but, thank you." Jake said happily.

"It was more you than me Jake." Mikey said honestly.

Jake pulled out of the hug and looked at Mikey with question.

"Your heartfelt plea for me to give your divine gift to your life-long enemy attracted the attention of our Father." Mikey said seriously.

"You mean...?" Jake asked as he looked up.

"Himself." Mikey whispered.

Jake looked at Mikey with wide eyes.

"If it were up to me, every single child I encounter would receive a miracle of one kind or another. But it doesn't work that way. Miracles are granted only in very rare circumstances and are usually planned and approved in advance." Mikey said carefully.

"Was mine?" Jake asked thoughtfully.

Mikey smiled and said, "Yes. But I couldn't bestow the miracle until you made a real commitment to change your life. Coming to Florida was a good start, but you still had some wiggle room. When you accepted Allen as your father, I was free to help you."

"But Dylan's miracle wasn't like that." Jake said in a leading tone, prompting Mikey to explain.

"No. It wasn't planned. You and Kevin were guided to meet up with Dylan to show him that there is reason to hope for a better life. You were just supposed to be an example." Mikey finished with a shrug.

"So did I mess things up for you?" Jake asked with concern.

"No. Well, not too much. I need your help with one thing and then I think it should all work out." Mikey said seriously.

"What's that?" Jake asked immediately.

Mikey smiled and said, "When the time comes, I need for you to trust Kenny."

"I already trust Ken." Jake said in confusion.

"Jake. You've known Kevin almost all his life. You know Xain's true self through your bond. But you haven't really had the chance to get to know Kenny that well. When the time comes that you have a choice to either support Kenny's decision or disagree with him, I need you to trust him." Mikey said seriously.

"Okay. I can do that." Jake said thoughtfully.

"Good. Now I've got to be going." Mikey said frankly.

"Before you go, can you tell me anything about what I should do for Lawrence and Vincent?" Jake asked quickly.

"Not really. Just remember what it felt like when you were in a similar situation and do what you think is best for them." Mikey said distantly.

"Okay." Jake said thoughtfully.

All of a sudden, Mikey shook his head and his expression changed from distant to worried.

"Is something wrong?" Jake asked with concern.

After a long silent moment, Mikey turned to Jake and said, "I REALLY need to go now. I'll talk to you later Jake."

"Okay, and thanks again Mikey." Jake said quickly as he watched Mikey fade away with none of his usual sparkles or laughter.

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Jackie asked as she walked to stand beside the chair.

"Better, I think." Karen said softly.

Vincent looked up at Jackie and gave her a weak smile.

"How are you doing Vincent?" Jackie asked with concern.

"I think I'm going to be okay." Vincent said uncertainly.

"If you need to talk about anything, Karen and I will do whatever we can to help you." Jackie said seriously.

"Um, I... I don't know what... I mean, I don't have a home anymore. What do I do now?" Vincent asked in a lost tone.

"We need to get Teri over here. Vincent is ready to deal with this so it's time to get this settled." Karen said decisively.

Jackie saw Teri and Mona watching with matching looks of concern.

With one gesture from Jackie, both women hurried across the room to offer whatever assistance they could.

"Okay Vincent. It's time to make some decisions. It's Teri's job to help kids who need it." Karen said carefully.

Vincent looked at Teri with an expression of shame and said, "I'm sorry I said those mean things to you before. Sometimes my mouth just keeps going when it shouldn't... I can't help it."

Teri gave a tender smile at Vincent's remorseful expression and said, "I understand. Don't worry about it, I'm not mad at you."

Vincent nodded, but still seemed worried.

"If you can tell us what you would like to happen, we'll see what we can come up with to help you." Karen said softly.

Vincent turned to look at Karen with a hopeless expression and said, "What I *really* want is to have a daddy who loves me."

Karen nodded as she thought about what they could do to help Vincent.

"Do you know who you want that to be?" Jackie asked in a leading tone.

Vincent hesitantly nodded.

"But you don't think he'll want to be your father." Jackie said in a speculative voice.

"I don't know. He said I can live with him for two weeks but..."

"But you want it to be longer than two weeks. You want it to be forever." Jackie said, completing the thought.

Vincent nodded and said, "And I want to be in Starfleet someday."

"I missed something here. Who? What?" Teri asked in confusion.

"Lieutenant Bowers has arranged for Vincent to live with him on the *Yorktown* for two weeks to give Vincent a break from his problems. Unfortunately, we don't know what's going to happen after those two weeks." Karen explained.

"Vincent, are you sure that's what you *really* want?" Teri asked seriously.

Vincent looked at her expression and gave a firm nod.

"Then let me see what I can do. Give me a few minutes to work things out." Teri said and waited for Vincent's acknowledgement.

After another nod from Vincent, Teri walked across the room to where the majority of the clan members were gathered.

* * * * *

"Sorry to keep you waiting Lieutenant Marsh." Brady said as he walked back into the living room of the Winters home.

"That's fine. How did it go?" Lieutenant Marsh asked hopefully.

"Very well. As you can see we've already secured this location and there is a team working on the location of the shooting. But if you'd be willing, there are two things the Orlando Police Department could do to be of assistance to Starfleet Security." Brady said carefully.

"Just name it." Lieutenant Marsh said seriously.

"First of all, you have a Ms. Carolyn Rind in custody at the city jail. She is a person of significant interest in this investigation. I would appreciate it if you could keep her in your jail until we have gathered all the facts in this case. If it appears that there is no way to avoid her release, call us immediately and we'll make a determination at that time if we have enough evidence to bring charges against her and take her into Starfleet custody." Brady said thoughtfully.

"No problem. I'll take care of that right away." Lieutenant Marsh said professionally.

"It would also be helpful if you could have a detective or two talk to Mr. Winters coworkers and find out about his personality, mental state, if perhaps there was anything in particular bothering him lately." Brady said carefully.

"I'll get a team right on it. Thank you for doing this Lieutenant Thompson." Lieutenant Marsh said honestly.

"When I told Commander Martin that one of your men was injured, he said that he's been in a similar position before and understood the feeling. It was his decision." Brady said modestly.

"A decision that he never would have faced if you hadn't brought it to him." Lieutenant Marsh said with a smile, then pulled out his cell phone as he walked away.

The last thing Brady heard the Lieutenant say as he was walking out the door was, "This is Marsh. We've got a prisoner named Carolyn Rind in lockup. I want her in solitary until further notice."

* * * * *

"Why are you at Security Red?" Cory asked as soon as he saw Tommy on the screen.

"*We're not now, but Lawrence and Vincent's father killed their mother, then died trying to ram the gate of the Short Compound trying to get to Vincent*." Tommy said seriously.

"That would do it." Sean said with a nod.

"How is everyone?" Cory asked with concern.

"*The Clan are all accounted for. Camp Little Eagle reports all accounted for plus two visitors*." Tommy said seriously.

"Good. Anything else I should know?" Cory asked quickly.

"*Hang on, Jamie's got a really funny look. I think he may have something.*" Tommy said with a look of concern.

"Go find out, we'll wait." Cory said immediately.

* * * * *

"Guys, The Department of Federation Youth Services needs a favor from Clan Short." Teri said seriously.

"What can we do?" JJ asked immediately.

"I need one of you guys to come with me to talk to Lieutenant Bowers. I've got an idea about how we can work things out to help Vincent, but I may need the Clan's help to make it work." Teri said thoughtfully.

"I'll do it." Aaron said immediately.

"No. I think you're going to be needed at Camp Little Eagle soon. I'll take care of it." David said seriously.

Aaron thought about it, then nodded that David was right.

"Fine, come with me." Teri said and started walking toward Joe and Chip.

* * * * *

"Jamie, what is it?" Tommy asked as he ran to Jamie's side.

"He's trying to focus. There's a ton of mental noise around here right now." Jacob said in concentration.

Jamie's eyes went wide as he homed in on what he was looking for.

"You're not going to believe this!" Jamie said as he finally focused on Tommy.

"Cory's on the terminal. If it's something he should know, tell him." Tommy said seriously.

"Come on, none of you are going to believe this." Jamie said as he hurried to take the seat in front of the terminal.

* * * * *

"Commander Dodds I have an official matter to discuss with you." Teri said formally.

"Of course Director Short, how may I help you?" Chip asked in full Commander mode.

Joe turned to leave when Teri said, "Lieutenant Bowers, this concerns you as well."

Joe turned back around and waited to see what Teri was going to say.

"First of all, David, speaking strictly hypothetically, if a Vulcan Clan were to accept guardianship of a child, that child would automatically become a Vulcan citizen, correct?" Teri asked carefully.

"Yes. I mean, one of the first things we do after we get custody of a child is to apply for dual citizenship." David said thoughtfully.

"But if you didn't apply for dual citizenship, the child would automatically become a full Vulcan citizen. Right?" Teri asked carefully.

"Yes. Since the Clan is of Vulcan, the child that is given into their care automatically becomes a citizen of Vulcan... it is logical." David said thoughtfully.

"Commander Dodds, still speaking hypothetically, if a Human Starfleet officer were given the honor of mentoring a Vulcan child with aspirations of one day becoming a Starfleet officer, do you think that would pose any insurmountable problems?" Teri asked carefully.

Chip considered the question before saying, "Well, since you said 'mentoring' instead of 'adopting' it removes many of the usual objections that come with the subject of raising a child on a starship."

"And as a Vulcan citizen, the child would have a level of autonomy that Earth children don't have." Joe said thoughtfully.

"Yes. Vulcan children are encouraged to make most of their own decisions... provided that they are logical." Chip said in agreement.

"So does Safe Haven apply in Vincent's case? I mean, hypothetically." Joe asked carefully.

Teri glanced at Vincent and said, "Definitely. Under Article 11 Section 1 of the Safe Haven Act, signs of physical abuse justify the application of the Act. If we need to back up that claim, there is the fact that I issued an advisory before the alleged abuse and Lawrence's telepathic testimony of an abusive history in the home is on record."

Chip nodded his agreement of Teri's assessment.

"So the next thing we would need to do is find a suitable mentor for our hypothetical Vulcan child." Teri said as she looked at Joe.

"I think you've just found yourself a hypothetical mentor." Joe said with a mischievous grin.

"Are we ready to do this?" Teri asked as she looked at the men.

Chip, Joe and David all nodded.

The four set their course across the room and homed in on their target.

* * * * *

"Cor, you know that CPS worker your mom got booted from the hospital?" Jamie asked quickly.

"*Yeah. Crust or something like that*." Cory said thoughtfully.

"Rind. John just found out that she called Vincent's dad right before he went on his shooting spree, but he doesn't know anything about what happened at the hospital." Jamie said quickly.

"*So she called Mr. Winters and probably told him that Mrs. Winters was talking to the police*." Sean said over Cory's shoulder.

"And that was enough to send him off the deep end." Tommy continued the thought.

"*Guys, I can't handle this from here. I need for you to get John, Mom and whoever else you think needs to be in on this and tell them what's going on so they can compare notes*." Cory said seriously.

"Wait a second, they're up to something... let me adjust the view, I think you need to see this." Jamie said as he quickly adjusted the controls.

* * * * *

Karen, Jackie, Mona and Vincent watched as Chip, Joe, Teri and David approached.

David pulled out his communicator and said, "Tommy, I need for you to record an official log."

"David, I'm right here." Tommy called out from beside the terminal.

"Just do it." David said with an exasperated look at Tommy.

"*We're recording*." Tommy's voice said over the communicator.

A moment of silence fell over the group until it was broken by David saying, "Director Short, I, David Gallagher formally request that you invoke the Safe Haven Act on the behalf of Vincent Winters citing Section 11 Article 1 as cause and name his custodian to be Clan Short of Vulcan."

"Commander Dodds have you witnessed the request?" Teri asked formally.

"I, Commander Charles Dodds of the Federation Starship *Enterprise* have witnessed the request." Chip said seriously.

"Lieutenant Bowers, have you witnessed the request?" Teri asked, still using her formal voice.

"I, Lieutenant Joseph Bowers of the Federation Starship *Yorktown* have witnessed the request." Joe said reverently.

"I, Teri Short, Director of Federation Youth Services have heard the request of David Gallagher and found it to be justified under Article 11, Section 1 of the Federation's Safe Haven Act. I hereby name Clan Short of Vulcan to collectively be the guardian of Vincent Winters." Teri said seriously.

"End recording." David said into the communicator.

"*Got it*." Tommy said in response.

"Did you just adopt me?" Vincent asked with a curious look at David.

"Sort of. You see all those guys over there?" David said and pointed to the clan all looking back at them.

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly.

"The whole group of us are now your legal guardians. That means that if anyone wants to mess with you, they have to mess with all of us." David said with a smile.

Vincent looked at Teri with tears in his eyes and said, "But I thought you were going to make it so I could stay with Joe?"

Teri smiled with sympathy and said, "We're getting there. Now that Clan Short has custody of you, they can ask Starfleet if Lieutenant Bowers can be your mentor. That means that he will not only take care of you, but it will be his job to train you how to be a Starfleet Officer."

Vincent looked at Joe with confusion.

"Sometimes officer's families are brought along on diplomatic missions as passengers, but they don't 'live' on the ship. If I adopted you, there's not much chance that you could stay with me. I would have to accept a

planetary posting or find someone to watch after you while I'm off planet. If we do it this way, you're a Vulcan citizen who is living on the starship learning how to be a Starfleet Officer. I will be responsible for teaching and training you, but you'll also be responsible for yourself." Joe tried to explain.

"That's right. You'll be given duties to perform just like any other crewman on the ship." Chip interjected.

Vincent's eyes got wide as he realized what they were saying.

"So I don't just get to live on a starship? I get to be a member of the crew?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"That's right. Well, as long as we can get Starfleet Command to go along with it." Joe said carefully.

"I think one or two calls from Patriarch Short will help with that." Teri said with a smile.

"And my personal recommendation for Lieutenant Bowers to serve as your mentor wouldn't hurt." Chip said in a considering voice.

"Thank you Commander." Joe said happily.

Vincent hopped up out of the chair he was still sharing with Karen and ran to hug Joe.

"Thank you." Vincent said as he hugged Joe tightly.

"Director Short, Commander Dodds and David did most of it." Joe said as he returned the hug.

"But if you didn't want me, they wouldn't have done any of it." Vincent said as he continued his hug.

"Vincent, when you're done, I want to introduce you to some of your guardians." David said with a smile.

Vincent pulled away from Joe slightly and looked at David consideringly for a moment before saying, "I'm sorry if I wasn't nice to you when I met you... and I really did like your 'Richie Rich' movie."

David smiled and said, "Thanks Vincent."

* * * * *

"*Way to go David!*" Cory said with a smile.

"*Yeah. It looks like he got that all worked out*." Sean said happily.

"*Guys, transfer me over to the study, then get everyone in there so you can tell them what you discovered*." Cory said quickly.

"Tommy, transfer Cor. Jacob, get Aunt Teri, I'll get Daddy." Jamie said firmly.

"Can I do anything?" JJ asked from near by.

"I guess Lieutenant Bowers needs to be in on this too. Get him." Jamie said with distraction, then hurried to get Teri.

* * * * *

"Is something wrong?" Jake asked with concern as he walked out of Dr. McCoy's office to find Kevin laying on a biobed.

"No. I just thought I'd check on Kevin's condition while he's here." Dr. McCoy said casually as he looked at the readings.

"How is he?" Jake asked cautiously.

"Fine. Excellent in fact. I can see marked improvement in every system of his body. He's gaining weight at a reasonable rate, his muscle and bone mass are increasing..." Dr. McCoy said in a considering voice.

"So I'm not going to be little and skinny no more?" Kevin asked hopefully.

"No Kevin. In fact, I think you can be officially upgraded from skinny to thin... and if you keep going at this rate you'll be slender in no time." Dr. McCoy said with a smile.

"So do we keep up with the milkshakes like we have been?" Jake asked seriously.

"Let me check." Dr. McCoy said, then checked some readings on the biobed.

Dylan walked out of the bathroom and walked to the other side of the bed Kevin was on.

"Dr. McCoy is checking to be sure I'm going to be okay." Kevin said at Dylan's curious gaze.

"Kevin, do you like the milkshakes you've been getting?" Dr. McCoy asked seriously.

"Yeah. Poppa makes them extra special for me with whipped cream and cherries and nuts. And yesterday he made Kenny a milkshake too." Kevin said happily.

"That's good. But you have to let me know if you get tired of the milkshakes. There are other ways to give you these nutrients." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"No. I really really like the milkshakes." Kevin said honestly.

"Good enough." Dr. McCoy said with a smile.

"Ooop." Dylan said suddenly and hurried back to the bathroom.

"Shouldn't he be empty soon?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"Give him another fifteen minutes or so. He had a LOT of fluids built up." McCoy said with a look of concern in the direction of the bathroom.

"Yeah. He looked really bad. Thanks for helping him." Jake said sincerely.

"I didn't do much compared to what you did." Dr. McCoy said with consideration.

"You stopped his pain. You told him he'd be okay. You treated him like a real person instead of a drugged up street kid. All I did was pray for him." Jake said frankly.

"Maybe I should just stay in there." Dylan said in a tired voice as he walked back into the room.

"I could get you a bedpan if that would be easier." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

Dylan's eye got wide and he said, "No thank you. I'm just fine this way."

"Thought so." Dr. McCoy said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"What's this about?" Joe asked curiously.

"I'll tell you as soon as Aunt Teri gets here." Jamie said seriously.

"I don't really have time for this. I have an investigation to watch after." John said sternly.

"This is about your investigation." Jamie said, then turned as Teri and Jacob walked into the room.

"Oh, I see they got you too." Teri said impatiently as Jacob pulled her to join the others.

"Okay, what's this about?" John asked impatiently.

Jamie looked over to the terminal to see Cory watching the proceedings and said, "Carolyn Rind."

"What about her?" Teri asked with sudden interest.

"You know her?" John asked with surprise.

"Not personally. But she was the Child Protective Services worker assigned to Vincent's case. We kind of butted heads over how best to help Vincent and she ended up being arrested by Detective Blair." Teri said thoughtfully.

"The same detective Blair who was shot by Victor Winters?" John asked in confirmation.

"That's the one." Teri said quietly.

"And John got a report that Carolyn Rind called Vincent's dad right before he went nuts and killed Vincent's mom." Jacob said seriously.

Silence fell over the room as everyone put the pieces together.

"Come on guys. We're done with our part." Jamie said and walked toward the door.

"Do you want me to leave you on?" Tommy asked from in front of the terminal.

"Yeah. There might be something I can do to help. Go on and enjoy the rest of the party." Cory said with a smile.

Tommy nodded, then noticed that JJ, Jacob and Jamie were waiting for him at the door.

CHAPTER 46

"Blue bedroom slippers." Kenny said in concentration.

Kyle shook his head and said, "Not even close. Concentrate and try again."

"What about burnt toast?" Kenny asked hesitantly.

Kyle shook his head again.

"Do you think that when Kevin and I are together that I'll be able to do it?" Kenny asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I really do. But until you've been able to develop your twin link, I think you're going to be about as telepathic as a rock." Kyle said frankly.

"Well, I can read a rock's mind without any problem. People are harder." Kenny said honestly.

"Oh yeah. I forgot about that. Why don't you try reading my mind again, but this time try doing it while you're touching me." Kyle said thoughtfully.

"Okay." Kenny said hesitantly and reached out to touch Kyle's cheek.

"I'm ready, go ahead." Kyle said as he concentrated on the image he wanted Kenny to see.

"Too much... it's too much." Kenny said in a pained voice and pulled his hand away.

"Are you alright?" Kyle asked with concern.

"Yeah, but... I'm sorry. I saw stuff I shouldn't have." Kenny said as he tried to make sense of the images in his mind.

"Like what?" Kyle asked hesitantly.

Kenny shook his head as he said, "Doesn't matter. I couldn't see what you were thinking anyway, I could only see stuff from a long time ago. I don't think I can do telepathy that way."

"You're really good at avoiding a question. What did you see?" Kyle asked with a firm note in his voice.

Kenny looked him in the eyes and said, "Stuff that you don't want to be reminded of. I'm not going to tell you, so you can just stop asking. The only way you're going to find out is to go in my head and get it without my permission."

Kyle looked at Kenny with aggravation for a moment, then asked in a quiet voice, "Was it something really bad?"

Kenny nodded.

"Okay. I'll let it go. But did you know that you have a stubborn streak just like Kevin's?" Kyle finished with a smile.

"We get it from our Dad." Kenny said with pride.

* * * * *

After Teri filled the group in on everything that happened at the hospital, John gave a very brief summary of what Brady had told him from the Winters' home.

"*So I guess as soon as you get the recording of what Ms. Rind said to Mr. Winters, you'll know what you can do about pressing charges*." Cory said thoughtfully from the terminal screen.

"That about sums it up." John said thoughtfully.

"I want to talk to Lieutenant Thompson. If he's read Mr. Winters' journal, maybe he can explain why all this happened." Joe said decisively.

"Lieutenant Bowers, I'm afraid that he won't be able to discuss the details of an ongoing security investigation." John said seriously.

"Then do you want me to send Vincent and Lawrence to you when they get to the point when they're trying to make sense of all this?" Joe asked with a pained look in his eyes.

"In my personal experience, there isn't often a clear-cut answer to why things like this happen. To this day I still don't have an answer for why my husband died... or Cory's parents or... Mike... Mikey." Teri choked on a sob.

Joe looked at Teri with sympathy. He didn't know anything about her own losses, but didn't need to know. He could see in her expression that reliving those memories was tearing her apart.

"I never could find those answers for my boys. If you can find any answers for your boys, you'll have my complete support." Teri said in nearly a whisper.

"I would have given anything to have been able to answer Justy's questions after Ben died. It was just pointless... How can you explain to a child that their parent died for no reason?" Chip said with anguish.

A moment of silence fell over the room until it was broken by John quietly saying, "I've seen how badly JJ and Kyle wanted to know why Sharon died. It nearly killed Dan and I when we had to admit that we didn't know. I'm not sure how much the information will help, but I'll authorize Lieutenant Thompson to tell you what you want to know. If it will help the boys make some kind of sense of all of this, it will be worth it."

"Thank you Commander Martin." Joe said sincerely, not sure that he really wanted the answers, just knowing that at some point the boys would want to know 'why'.

"*If we're about done with this, I need to talk to you about something else*." Cory said from the terminal screen.

"Yes. I think we're done." Chip said as he looked around the study.

"*Can you fill me in about Vincent? I saw what you did out there, I just don't know exactly why.*" Cory said frankly.

Joe smiled at Cory and said, "Because Vincent's biggest wish is to be able to live on a starship. More than anything he wants to be in Starfleet."

"And to have a father who loves him." Teri added with a pained smile at Joe.

"He's got one." Joe said seriously.

"I talked with Vincent briefly before all this happened with his parents. The boy has the right mindset." Chip said thoughtfully.

"I talked to him about some of the realities about living on a starship. I think he understands as well as anyone can who hasn't actually lived on a starship before." Joe said carefully.

"*By making him a Vulcan citizen, he can be treated as an adult as long as he behaves in a reasonable manner. So I need to talk to Admiral Morrow about approving Vincent's training and assigning Lieutenant Bowers as his mentor... right?*" Cory asked thoughtfully.

"That's the plan." Teri said with a smile of pride for her son.

"It might be easier if Lieutenant Bowers transferred to the *Enterprise*. That way Vincent would have a support group to help him adjust to his life on a starship." Chip said thoughtfully.

A moment of silence fell over the room before Lieutenant Bowers said, "It's hard to say if he needs that kind of help or not. I think I'll have a better sense of what needs to be done after our trip to Alpha Centauri."

Chip nodded and said, "That's probably best. Give him a little time to adjust and see how he's going to handle the responsibility. If it looks like he can't handle it, then you can consider the transfer or... other options."

"I'll be sure to explain that to him before we leave." Joe said carefully.

"*I didn't get to spend much time with him, and I guess I didn't get to see him at his best. If you think this will work, I'll do my best to set it up*." Cory said from the terminal screen.

"We're giving him a chance to live his dream. What he does with that chance will be up to him." Teri said in an uncertain tone.

Chip nodded his agreement at the statement.

* * * * *

"Is Dylan well enough to have visitors now? I'd really like to introduce the rest of the guys to him." Jake asked Doctor McCoy hopefully.

"Let's find out. Will you get on the bed for me Dylan?" Dr. McCoy asked with a casual smile.

Dylan looked at him cautiously as he climbed up on the bed.

As Dr. McCoy looked at the readings he asked, "What do you say Dylan? Would you like to meet Jake and Kevin's friends?"

"I don't know. I mean, look at me..." Dylan trailed off as he felt the bandage on his face.

"The guys all saw you when we were getting on the shuttle. They'll just be glad to see that you're looking better." Jake said seriously.

"Yeah, and I want you to meet my twin brother." Kevin said as he took his spot at Dylan's bedside.

Dylan looked at the anticipation in Kevin's eyes and gave a gentle smile before nodding his acceptance.

"Well, from the look of these readings, I'd say that Dylan is recovering nicely. He's going to be sore and tired for a while. You can have visitors on the provision that you tell me if you start feeling tired." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"I will Doctor, I promise." Dylan said as a vow.

Jake concentrated for a moment, then said, "They're on their way."

Dylan looked at Jake with question.

"Oh, I guess I didn't tell you about that. Um, my boyfriend and I have a telepathic bond and I can send him messages." Jake said shyly.

"Boyfriend?" Dylan asked in confirmation.

"Yeah. His name is Xain. He's great. I know you're going to like him." Jake said happily.

"Xain." Dylan said slowly.

"Yeah, and he's a Vulcan. He's really cool." Kevin said happily.

Dylan turned his attention to Kevin and couldn't help but smile at the boy's enthusiasm.

"Just try not to feel bad if he doesn't act the way you expect him to. Vulcan's don't show their feelings the same as Humans." Jake said seriously.

Dylan rolled his eye and said, "I'm not stupid. I know about Vulcans. Emotional control, logic, touch telepathy, green blood..."

"Xain has green blood?" Kevin asked with surprise as he looked at Jake.

"Don't ask me. I've never seen him bleed." Jake said honestly.

Dylan chuckled at the sight, drawing both Jake and Kevin's attention.

"You two really are brothers, aren't you." Dylan asked with a smile.

Kevin and Jake looked at each other, then at Dylan and nodded simultaneously.

Dylan shook his head wistfully and said, "I really hope I can get a life like yours. All I've wanted for years is a real home where I can belong."

"We'll do whatever we can to get that for you." Jake said seriously.

"Yeah. Thanks Jake. It's still hard for me to believe that you're helping me like this... I mean, I was always so mean to you... Why are you helping me?" Dylan asked as his look turned serious.

Jake considered the question carefully before answering, "It's a long story, but what it boils down to is that a guy named David helped me... us. Me and Kevin and his twin brother Kenny. I didn't do anything to deserve help. At first I even said 'no', I didn't want his help. But David is a member of Clan Short and they've made it their job to help people who need it. David and the guys ended up rescuing us from Spade's guys and helped us get a family and a really good life. Even if I didn't become a member of the Clan, I'd still want this for you. I don't know how many chances you get to be

happy in your life, but I'm here to tell you, this is real. Grab it. Hold on to it. This is your chance to get 'happily ever after'."

"Getting a little intense there aren't you Jake?" Kyle asked in a playful voice as he walked into the room, leading the group from the lounge.

Jake smiled and said, "Yeah. But I just wanted to let Dylan know how important this is."

"Dylan. This is Kyle, Xain, Doctor Dan, Matt and my twin brother Kenny." Kevin announced happily.

Dylan looked at the group and his inquisitive gaze fixed on the Vulcan boy.

Jake moved to Xain's side and said in a clear voice, "This is Xain. My *T'hy'la*."

"Your what?" Dylan asked hesitantly.

Before anyone else could answer, Kevin quickly said, "It means a lot of different things. It's like being more than boyfriends or brothers or something like that. It's like being best best friends."

Jake smiled at Kevin's explanation and nodded his agreement.

"What's wrong?" Kevin asked at Kenny's confused expression.

"I don't know." Kenny said slowly, then continued, "When I walked in and saw you, I didn't know who you were... are you really Kevin?"

Kevin looked down at himself, then back at Kenny before cautiously saying, "Yeah."

Kenny looked at Kevin carefully as he thought about what he was seeing.

Everyone watched in silence as Kenny walked to his brother and slowly brought up his hand to touch Kevin's face.

Kevin took a step back and asked, "What are you doing?"

"I want to touch you. I want to know who or what you are." Kenny said slowly.

"Okay, you're being weird now." Kevin said frankly.

"Maybe I am. But if you're really Kevin, this will prove it to me." Kenny said seriously.

Kevin rolled his eyes and tilted his head to one side with an expression of exasperation.

Kenny placed his hand on the side of Kevin's face and closed his eyes to focus on the images he was about to see.

* * * * *

A long minute of silence fell over the room, then was broken by an inelegant sniff from Lawrence.

Deacon, Allen, Billy and finally even Lawrence all broke up in laughter.

Allen guided Deacon to his side and walked him over to Billy and Lawrence.

"Thank you." Lawrence said shyly.

"You're our brother. Your pain is our pain." Billy said as he looked Lawrence in the eyes.

Lawrence gave a weak smile and said, "I'm realizing that. I mean, it hurts, but... I know I'm going to be okay. And it's because I know you're there for me. You're my family now."

Deacon broke away from Allen and pulled Lawrence into a new hug.

Billy stepped away from the pair and walked to Allen's side as he said, "My parents have no idea what they're missing. There's no amount of money more important than being there for the people you love when they need you."

Allen nodded his agreement and pulled Billy into a hug of comfort, sensing that he needed it as much as Deacon and Lawrence.

* * * * *

Doctor McCoy put a hand on Dylan's arm to gain his attention and said, "I understand that you will be going to Camp Little Eagle when you leave here."

Dylan looked up at the Doctor and nodded hesitantly.

"You see Lieutenant Masterson over there?" Dr. McCoy asked and pointed to the security officer at the foot of the bed.

Dylan nodded again.

"He's assigned to protect you. When you leave here, he's going with you." Dr. McCoy said firmly.

"Nobody's going to hurt Dylan at Camp Little Eagle. He'll be safe." Kyle said seriously.

Dr. McCoy turned to face Kyle and gave him a challenging look.

Kyle looked at the Doctor with question.

"Dylan was basically tied to a bed and tortured by the people who were supposed to be taking care of him. Now we're sending him to a new place where new people are supposed to take care of him. You and I know that Camp Little Eagle is a safe place, but considering what he's been through, I wouldn't ask Dylan to trust you or me about that. I'm going to send Lieutenant Masterson to protect Dylan for as long as he's needed." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"Really?" Dylan asked in wonder.

"Yes. Really. Lieutenant Masterson's only job is going to be to see that no one hurts you. If you ever feel the least bit afraid, you can call on him." Dr. McCoy said as he looked into Dylan's eye.

Dylan looked at Lieutenant Masterson to find him nodding his agreement to the statement.

"Thanks." Dylan whispered past the lump in his throat.

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"*Lieutenant Thompson, I'd like to have a meeting with all the team leaders. When is the earliest you could be available?*" John asked seriously.

"Immediately. I believe we've found what we were looking for here and Ensign Carlson has my complete confidence to be able to conclude the investigation of the Winters home without supervision." Brady said professionally.

"*Very good. Return to Southcrest immediately and meet with me. I have a quick job for you to do before we have the team leader meeting.*" John said firmly.

"Yes sir. Right away."

* * * * *

"What's wrong?" David asked as he led Vincent to the group of clan members.

"I was thinking about that kid that Jake's bringing to Camp Little Eagle." Aaron said with a look of concern.

"What about him?" David asked curiously.

"Well, Jake said he's been shot in the face... I just don't know how I'm going to handle that." Aaron said uncomfortably.

"What are you afraid of?" David asked slowly.

"That I'll say something stupid to make him feel worse or that I'll stare at it or, I don't know, try too hard to not look at it." Aaron said with real worry in his eyes.

"Stop and think for a second about what you're doing." David said seriously.

"What am I doing?" Aaron asked cautiously.

"You're trying to decide how you're going to 'act' when you meet this guy... Jake said his name is Dylan, right?" David tried to remember.

Aaron nodded.

"Well, stop it. Be yourself. If Cory and Sean are bringing him in then it's a safe bet that a lot more has happened to him than being shot in the face. He's probably had enough drama to last a lifetime. He doesn't need more from you." David said firmly.

Aaron looked at David with wide eyes.

"Aaron, the world is full of fake people who will tell you what you want to hear and act the way they're supposed to. Be real. It's the most important thing you can do for him." David said in an almost begging tone.

Aaron nodded and said, "I see what you mean, and you're right. Where did you come up with that?"

David shrugged and said, "I'm an actor. Sometimes the trick is knowing when 'not' to act."

Aaron looked down to see Vincent looking at him curiously.

"How are you doing Vincent?" Aaron asked with sympathy.

"I don't know." Vincent said honestly.

Aaron nodded his acceptance of the answer.

"David said that you guys are going to be my guardians... what does that mean?" Vincent asked curiously.

"It means that we'll all make sure that you're safe and taken care of." David said in a careful tone.

Vincent thought about the words and finally asked, "So it's not like you're trying to take the place of my mom and dad, but you're going to make sure I have a place to stay and food and stuff."

"That's right. When I asked for the Clan to be made your guardians I was making a promise. We'll listen if you need to talk, protect you from harm, make sure you have enough food and a warm bed. No matter how the thing in Starfleet works out, no matter what you ever say or do, you'll always have a home with us and we'll always care for you. Every one of the clan members are a part of that promise and we take our promises very seriously." David said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"And we're the guardians of the guys at Camp Little Eagle too. So that makes all of them like your brothers." Aaron interjected.

Vincent nodded at the information.

"Is that okay?" David asked quietly, not sure how to interpret Vincent's thoughtful gaze.

"Yeah. I was just thinking about how my dad threw Lawrence out and he didn't have anyone to take care of him. I feel bad because I didn't feel bad about it then... I thought he deserved it because he's gay." Vincent said distantly.

"I'm sorry you feel bad about that Vincent. If there's anything I can do to help you feel better, just let me know." David said quietly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then shook his head and said, "Too much stuff has happened today. I need to think about stuff and sort it all out."

"That sounds like a smart way of dealing with things. But if you don't mind, I'd like to give you some advice." Aaron said seriously.

Vincent looked up at Aaron with question.

"Don't think about it alone. I think if you ask any of the guys, they'll be happy to sit with you and listen while you talk or just hold you if that's what you need. It really helps to have someone there when you think about stuff like this." Aaron said seriously.

Vincent looked around the group, then back to Aaron and said, "But most of them are gay. I don't want a gay guy to touch me."

"You see that guy over there talking to the pretty girl, that's Clint. I bet if you asked, he'd sit and talk with you. He's a really nice guy and he's completely straight." Aaron said as he pointed toward Clint and Crystal.

"He's big." Vincent said with concern.

"Well..." Aaron said as he looked around the gathering.

"If you want someone smaller, there's a whole group of them over there." David said and pointed to a collection of younger boys playing off to the side of the main clan group.

Vincent looked at the group and smiled as he said, "I promised Ricardo that if I needed a hug, I'd tell him."

"Then you should keep your promise."

* * * * *

"What happened to you?" Kenny asked with an expression of horror.

"Nothing. Maybe something happened to you." Kevin said with irritation in his voice.

"No. You're not the same person I met in Chicago. You don't have any... history. I touch you and I can't see anything past this week." Kenny said in deep concentration.

Kevin brushed Kenny's hand away from his face and said, "I'm still me. I don't know why you're acting all funny like this but there's nothing wrong with me."

Kenny looked around the room to find everyone watching him.

Finally he said, "Okay. I'll let it drop for now. But I don't think it's me that's changed."

"Dr. McCoy, when can I leave?" Dylan asked in a small voice, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room..

After a quick glance at the biobed readings, Dr. McCoy said, "I think you're stable enough to use the transporter now. If you're planning to leave by shuttle, you'll probably need another half hour or so."

"Why does he have to wait before he can use a shuttle?" Jake asked as he put a casual arm around Xain's shoulders.

"Dylan will still need to make frequent trips to the bathroom for a while. If he were to leave by shuttle right now, the ride could get very uncomfortable for him. Remember that there isn't a bathroom on the shuttle craft." Dr. McCoy said with a knowing look at Dylan.

"I see what you mean. Besides, it may not matter anyway. By the time Cory and Sean get back Dylan might be empty." Jake said with a shrug.

Matt turned to Kyle and asked, "Are they about finished?"

"I don't know. I've been keeping my mental shields up." Kyle said shyly.

Matt thought for a moment before saying, "I'm sorry if I sounded like I was accusing you of snooping up in the lounge. I know you wouldn't do that... I guess from the way you were talking, I thought you were crossing the line."

"Thanks for saying that, but you were right. I was about to cross the line and intrude on something private. That's why I'm going 'mind blind' for a little bit to get my focus back. Without all the little distractions pulling at my attention in a hundred directions at once I can rebuild my discipline so I won't forget again." Kyle said thoughtfully.

Matt glanced over at the bed and noticed that Dylan was gone. He looked over at Lieutenant Masterson and saw him watching the bathroom door intently.

"How are things going in here?" Sean asked as he and Cory walked into the Sickbay.

"Just fine. Dr. McCoy said that Dylan can beam down whenever we want. But if you want to take him on the shuttle, we'll have to wait for a little bit longer." Jake said simply.

"Oh, okay. Matt could co-pilot for me if you'd like to take Dylan down to the camp." Sean said thoughtfully.

"Sounds good. Kevin and Jake can come with me, the rest of you can go back by shuttle." Cory said as he hugged Sean to his side.

"I need to go too." Kenny said seriously.

Cory looked at Kenny with question.

Kenny looked at Jake with a begging expression in his eyes, hoping for his understanding and support and at the same time, not expecting to get it.

Jake considered for a moment before saying, "If Ken says he needs to go, he needs to go."

Cory looked into Jake's eyes and saw the determined expression.

"Okay. Then it's settled. Dr. McCoy, is there anything we need to know before we leave?" Cory asked seriously.

"Two things. First, Lieutenant Masterson will be beaming down with you and staying with Dylan as his personal security. Second, Dylan is going to need to see Doctor Michaels in the morning. I'm going to give him an injection for

the pain before he leaves that will get him through the night." Dr. McCoy said seriously, then turned his attention to Dylan who was walking out of the bathroom.

"We'll meet you down there. Love you." Sean whispered, then gave Cory a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Love you too." Cory whispered, then returned the kiss.

"Okay! Everyone who's going down on the shuttle, follow me." Sean said as he turned toward the door.

"Um, Sean. Could you call Aaron and let him know we're on our way. He's going to meet us at the camp." Jake asked quickly.

"As soon as I get to the shuttle." Sean said with a smile, then led his group out the door.

Jake concentrated as he looked at the group leaving and sent, 'Please check on Vina when you get back to Uncle Chip's house and let me know how she's doing.'

'Perhaps once Dylan has been shown his accommodations, we three may spend some time as a family unit.' Xain responded with a slight undercurrent of emotional need carrying under the words.

'That sounds perfect. I won't take any longer than I have to. I love you *T'hy'la*.' Jake sent with longing clearly sounding in his mind/voice.

'I love you as well my *T'hy'la*.' Xain responded with the love for his mate accenting each word.

Cory watched as Dr. McCoy injected Dylan with a hypo spray, then whispered something into Dylan's ear.

Dylan nodded, then turned and looked at Cory expectantly.

"Transporter group, follow me." Cory said in distinct imitation of Sean's tone.

Kevin walked to Dylan's right side and Jake to his left.

Lieutenant Masterson followed a few paces behind and Kenny fell in beside him.

* * * * *

"I need a hug." Vincent said to the group of boys playing in the corner.

Vincent was surprised when he was swarmed by CD, Ricky, Timmy, Harley, Reuben and Ricardo.

Vincent laughed and said, "I just meant Ricardo. He asked me to tell him if I needed a hug.

"More hugs is better." Timmy said with certainty.

Vincent smiled and said, "Yeah, I guess."

"Come on and play with us. We've got some of Justy's old cars and stuff that he don't play with no more." Ricky said happily.

"I don't play with stuff like that since I'm older." Vincent said gently, not wanting to upset the boys.

"You can sit with us while we play. You don't have to play if you don't want to." Reuben said encouragingly.

Vincent thought about it for a minute, then said, "Yeah. Okay."

"Ricardo, you give Vincent hugs. When you're done, it's my turn next." Reuben said seriously.

"I'm next!" Timmy said quickly.

"Then me!" Ricky chirped.

"Me next!" CD and Harley barked at the same time.

The boys guided Vincent to sit with them, then Reuben said, "Ricardo, I'll use your yellow truck while you're hugging Vincent. Then you can use my race car while I'm hugging him."

"Okay." Ricardo said happily, since he wanted the race car to begin with.

Ricardo snuggled into Vincent's side as they watched the other boys pushing their cars and trucks around a complicated track they had constructed in the family room floor.

Vincent felt a moment of peace as he remembered how he used to play like that and tried to remember why he had ever stopped.

* * * * *

"Camp Little Eagle, this is the *USS Enterprise*. I have six transporting to your location." The transporter operator said efficiently.

"*Stand by.*" A voice said through the speaker, then there was silence.

A moment later the voice returned, "*Acknowledged Enterprise, awaiting transport*."

"Energize." Cory said from his position on the transporter pad.

There was a tingle and sparkle as the *Enterprise's* transporter room disappeared around them, and a warm room with rough hewn walls came into being.

"Cory. I should have known it would be you." Chief Tecumseh said with a warm smile as he walked into the room.

Cory grinned at the statement and said, "We have a new student for you. Chief Tecumseh, this is Dylan Chang. Dylan, this is Chief Hawkeye Tecumseh of the Seminole tribe and the head administrator of Camp Little Eagle.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Dylan. I hope your injury is not causing you discomfort." Chief Tecumseh said with concern.

"No. The doctor gave me something and it's not hurting at all." Dylan said shyly.

"I was wondering if there's still a spare room in Cabin One?" Cory asked hopefully.

"Yes, there is one bed available. Obadiah will have the other bed, he is in the process of moving into the room as we speak." Chief Tecumseh said as he gestured for the group to walk with him.

Dylan looked at Cory with question.

"Obie's really great. He's a little bit younger than you but I think you'll like him. Let me know if you two don't get along for some reason and we'll work out something else. It's important that you're happy here." Cory said to Dylan with a casual smile as they walked.

"It is good to see you again Jake. How is your lovely daughter?" Chief Tecumseh asked as the group walked to the exit door of the administration building.

"Daughter?" Dylan asked and stopped, just before reaching the doorway.

"Yeah. You remember when Lupe was pregnant?" Jake asked with a happy smile.

Dylan's eye got wide at the statement.

"We found out a few days ago that I'm her baby's father." Jake said a little quieter.

"You and Lupe?" Dylan asked with a devastated expression.

"Yeah. We weren't like a couple or anything. We were both messed up one night and I guess we were both wanting the same thing. To feel like someone understood and cared..." Jake trailed off as he noticed Dylan's eye beginning to sparkle with tears.

"You like Lupe?" Jake asked cautiously.

Dylan hesitantly nodded.

"Did you ever tell her?" Jake asked in almost a whisper.

Dylan shook his head and said, "She worked for Daddy K, I worked for Spade. There's no way we could have made that work."

"I know what you mean. Well you won't have that problem here. There's just one thing you need to keep in mind, Lupe's got problems. You and I made it out of there, but she wouldn't leave when she had a way out. Her mom's here and if she ever decides that she's done with all of that, I'm pretty sure this is where she'll come. But it could take some time." Jake said seriously.

Dylan's expression lit up, then just as suddenly fell as he reached up and felt the bandage on his face.

"Talk to the doctor tomorrow and see what he has to say. I bet by the time Lupe gets here you'll have that all taken care of." Jake said with a look of encouragement.

Dylan looked at Jake with question, then a small smile came onto his face as he asked, "You really think so?"

"I think it's worth a shot. You get your stuff taken care of and hopefully Lupe will get her stuff taken care of, then if it's meant to be, it'll happen." Jake said with assurance.

"Thanks Jake." Dylan said with a smile of relief.

"Are you ready to see your new home?" Chief Tecumseh asked with a tender smile.

Dylan looked at Chief Tecumseh with a little fear in his eye and hesitantly nodded.

Chief Tecumseh opened the door and stepped aside to allow Dylan to get a full view of the camp.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Bowers?" Brady said cautiously as he walked into the study.

"Lieutenant Thompson?" Joe said as he stood.

Brady nodded and gestured to the couch where Joe had been sitting, indicating for him to take a seat.

As soon as Joe had sat, Brady took a seat in an armchair across from him and said, "Commander Martin gave me permission to tell you about what I found at the Winters home."

Joe nodded and waited for the explanation.

"Before I start, I just want to be sure that you understand that if some of this information got out before or during any criminal proceedings, it could cause irreparable harm to our case." Brady said seriously.

"I understand." Joe said as he sat a little straighter, giving his full attention.

"I guess the best way to explain it is to say that Victor Winters was an extremely disturbed man. I'm not a psychologist or anything, but it seems to me that at a certain point he experienced some latent homosexual impulses and couldn't deal with them. He had such an abiding hatred of anyone who was gay that he transferred the anger and hatred that he felt for himself onto Lawrence, then later to Vincent. He blamed them for the feelings of attraction that he felt." Brady said carefully.

"Oh my God. I never... it didn't even occur to me that it could be something like that." Joe said in shock.

"The man became fixated on the idea and set up hidden cameras to spy on the boys. He recorded them showering, changing clothes... everything. There are thousands of pictures and videos of them on his computer." Brady said in a low voice.

"It seems that in Winters' mind, his abuse was an acceptable way of... dealing with his attraction. He got an emotional high off hitting and degrading the boys, mainly Lawrence. He chronicled his fantasies and actions in a journal so he could relive the experience again and again. His fantasies started out as simple voyeurism and as time went on moved into more and more extreme scenarios of bondage, sadism and rape." Brady said in a tightly controlled voice.

"I can't tell them about this. Nothing they imagine could be as bad as the truth." Joe said as he stared at the coffee table between him and Brady.

"I don't know about that. Maybe knowing for a fact that what happened in that house was in no way their fault would give them some comfort. It's hard to say." Brady said as he fought to contain his emotions.

Joe nodded thoughtfully.

"This is the most sensitive information and I really need for you to consider carefully before you share it." Brady said, now sounding more controlled.

Joe looked up at the statement and saw the pain in Brady's eyes.

Brady took in a slow breath, then said, "After being told that his wife had gone to the police to make a statement, Victor Winters left his home intending to murder his wife. After that, he came to the Short Compound to try and force his way in so he could rape and murder Vincent."

Joe shook his head, unable to believe that anyone could be so completely evil.

"When the time comes that the boys are ready. Tell them as much as you think they can deal with. And if there's anything I can do to help you... anything at all, just ask." Brady said, finishing in nearly a whisper.

Joe looked into Brady's eyes to find tears beginning to form.

"You really care for them don't you?" Joe asked quietly.

Brady looked at Joe with pain and said, "I've never really been around kids until this week. Whenever I would come across something like this I would be disgusted by it, but I could still maintain a professional detachment. Now I'm an uncle to Reuben and Ricardo and all of Allen's kids. I'm beginning to know what it feels like to fear for their safety. I can see what a kind and gentle person Lawrence is and it kills me to know that Winters abused him like that. And all I have to do is look at Vincent with that bandage on his head and... "

"I know. And the worst part is, the emotional scars run deeper than the physical ones. I don't think there is anything that will undo all the damage to Lawrence's self image. And Vincent is going to live with the belief that his father didn't love him, probably for the rest of his life." Joe said with downcast eyes.

Brady nodded and said, "Winters did a lot of damage on his descent into madness. This world is a better place without him in it. If he'd died a few years sooner he would have prevented a lot of pain."

Joe nodded his agreement, then looked at Brady curiously.

Brady raised his eyebrows in question.

"Do you think you'd be up to the challenge of having a few more nephews?" Joe asked with a smile.

Brady's features melted into an expression of contentment as he said, "I would gladly accept that challenge."

"Let's see if Deacon and Lawrence are still in the living room. After that we can check on Vincent in the family room." Joe said as he stood.

"I've got to be in a security meeting in a few minutes." Brady said as he glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Duty first." Joe said with a sigh of resignation.

"I'm still going to check on the boys with you. I just wanted you to understand why I'm going to have to leave before we're finished." Brady said quickly as he walked to Joe's side.

Joe looked at Brady and smiled as he said, "Then I guess we'd better hurry."

* * * * *

Dylan took a single step out the door of the Administration building and looked around in wonder at the camp.

Chief Tecumseh smiled at the sight, then turned to say, "Kenny, it's good to see you again and..."

Both boys looked on as Chief Tecumseh's eyes went wide in realization.

"Kevin." Kenny said quietly, not quite sure if Chief Tecumseh had forgotten his brother's name.

"Come with me. We must make haste." Chief Tecumseh said quickly and hurried out the door.

"What's wrong with him?" Kevin asked Cory as they followed.

"I don't know. I've never seen him act like that before." Cory said as he hurried to catch up to the chief.

* * * * *

"Would you look at that?" Teri said with a gentle smile as she walked to stand beside Mona.

"When I watch the news on television, I feel myself losing faith in humanity. But seeing this... I can't help but believe that we're going to be fine." Mona

said as she looked with loving eyes at the group of young boys playing with toy cars and trucks and taking turns hugging Vincent.

"Oh, isn't that sweet." Jackie said as she and Karen came to stand beside Teri and Mona.

"How could anyone hurt a child like that?" Karen asked in a quiet voice as she focused on the bandage on Vincent's head.

"I really don't know. In the course of my work I see so many things, but I don't think I'll ever understand what drives someone to abuse a helpless child." Teri said with a distant look.

"Grandma Karen." Timmy said as he broke away from the group.

"Oh, how's grandma's little fireball doing tonight?" Karen asked as she picked him up into a warm hug.

"I'm having fun with all my friends. I like it here, but Ricky's stuck." Timmy said seriously.

"Stuck?" Karen asked and turned to see Ricky being held in Vincent's arms.

"Yeah. He was taking his turn hugging Vincent and Vincent fell asleep and Ricky doesn't want to wake him up but he wants to play with us some more." Timmy said in his most serious voice.

"I see." Karen said with an indulgent smile, then turned and asked, "What do you suppose we can do to rescue Ricky?"

"I'll take Vincent to the living room where he can lay down and it's a little bit quieter. When I pick him up, you can free Ricky." Mona said as she knelt down beside Vincent.

Mona slowly picked up Vincent and Ricky, then turned so Teri could free Ricky from Vincent's arms.

As soon as Teri had extricated Ricky from Vincent's grasp, Vincent turned and pulled Mona into a full hug.

"Shhh. I'm just going to take you into the living room where you can lay down." Mona whispered as they walked to the family room door.

"I love you Mommy." Vincent mumbled in his sleep.

Mona looked around to see if anyone was listening, then whispered, "I love you too baby."

* * * * *

The group of boys fought to keep up with Chief Tecumseh as he led them to Cabin One.

"He moves pretty fast for an old guy." Jake whispered to Dylan.

"I need the bathroom." Dylan whispered back.

"It looks like we're going in that cabin. I'm sure they'll have a bathroom you can use." Jake said as they approached the cabin.

"Kevin, follow me." Chief Tecumseh said with authority.

Kevin glanced at Jake with question and received a nod.

Chief Tecumseh knocked loudly on the cabin door and waited impatiently for it to be answered.

CHAPTER 47

"Is he okay?" Allen asked with concern as he saw his mother carrying Vincent into the living room.

"I think he's just tired. You have to admit that it's been a very long day." Mona said as she slowly took a seat on the couch, careful not to wake Vincent.

Everyone watched in silence as Mona held the boy cradled in her arms.

Joe and Brady walked into the room and stopped at the sight.

"Is anything wrong?" Joe asked with immediate concern for Vincent.

"No. He's just tired. When he stopped for a few minutes to think, he dropped off to sleep." Mona said tenderly.

Joe gave a distracted nod, then looked at Lawrence and asked, "Could I talk to you for a minute Lawrence?"

Brady got a surprised look and quickly said, "It's too soon."

Joe glanced at Brady and said, "I know. I'm just going to let him know to come to me when it's time."

Brady nodded as he watched Joe lead Lawrence to the other side of the room where they could talk privately.

"How are you doing Brady?" Allen asked as he walked to stand beside his brother.

"I'm just ready for this day to be over." Brady said frankly.

"I know what you mean. All the boys went to Utah to see Kenny and Kevin's mother. I'm about to go crazy worrying about them." Allen said seriously.

Brady could see the distress in Allen's eyes and hesitantly pulled his brother into a hug of comfort.

Allen gladly accepted the hug and said, "With all this stuff happening with Lawrence and Vincent's family, I can't help but worry about my boys... do you really think they're okay?"

Brady quietly said, "I'm sure they're fine, but if you're worried, why don't you go into the family room and ask Tommy how they're doing? When there's a team out, he knows exactly where they are and what they're doing at all times."

"I don't want the guys to think that I don't trust them or that I'm checking up on them." Allen said hesitantly as he pulled out of the hug.

"You're their father and you want to be sure that they're okay. I don't think any of the boys will have a problem with that. Come on and we'll check on them together." Brady said with a gentle smile.

Allen smiled at Brady and nodded.

* * * * *

"Lawrence, before I start I need to ask you a few questions. Alright?" Joe asked seriously.

Lawrence nodded hesitantly.

"You know that I love you, right?" Joe asked quietly.

Lawrence gave a small smile and nodded.

"Good. And because I love you, I want to protect you from things that might hurt you. Do you believe that?" Joe asked seriously.

Lawrence nodded that he did.

Joe smiled and said, "Then I want you to know that I've learned some things about what happened tonight and why."

Lawrence got a look of surprise and opened his mouth to ask a question when Joe quickly interrupted.

"I'm asking you to trust me when I say that it's too soon to tell you everything right now." Joe said firmly.

Lawrence closed his mouth and looked at his father with caution.

"I'm telling you this because I think it will help you to know that I have some answers for the questions you'll probably have in the next few weeks as the shock of all this starts to wear off." Joe said seriously.

"Give it some time and just deal with what's in front of you right now. When you're ready to know more, just come to me and ask me and I'll do my best to answer whatever questions I can." Joe said as he looked Lawrence in the eyes.

"Thank you Daddy." Lawrence whispered with a look of love at his father.

Joe smiled at Lawrence and pulled him into a full hug.

* * * * *

"Aaron, it's time." Tommy said as he ran to Aaron and David.

"They're about to leave the *Enterprise*?" Aaron asked casually.

"They've probably already left. Sean just called from the *Mississippi* and said that Cory and the new guy are beaming down." Tommy said quickly.

"Oh, I guess I'd better hurry then." Aaron said as he checked to see that he had his car keys.

"Be safe. Love you." David said and gave Aaron a quick kiss.

"I love you too." Aaron said with a warm smile, then started toward the door.

* * * * *

Joe felt Lawrence's body stiffen in his arms and pulled back to look at him to see what was wrong.

"I've got to go." Lawrence said with distraction.

"Aaron." Deacon gasped and looked at Billy as if he didn't even recognize who he was.

"Come on." Lawrence said in a rush and started running for the door.

"What's wrong?" Joe asked in confusion.

"Clan thing. Don't worry." Deacon said as he followed Lawrence out of the door at a run.

Joe looked at Billy with question.

"I guess we'll just have to get used to that." Billy said hesitantly.

"It's going to take some doing." Joe said, then turned his attention to Vincent who was still being held by Mona.

Billy nodded, then followed Joe's tender gaze to Mona and Vincent.

* * * * *

"Aaron, we need to go with you." Lawrence said quickly as he ran to Aaron's side.

Aaron looked at Lawrence curiously, then noticed something different.

"Your angel is glowing." Aaron said hesitantly.

Deacon pulled his necklace out of his shirt to see that it was glowing too.

Aaron looked closer at the angel pin on Lawrence's shirt collar, then recognized who it was.

"It's Mikey!" Aaron said in astonishment.

"Yeah." Lawrence said urgently.

Aaron finally put the pieces together in his mind and said, "Mikey needs you two to go with me and we need to hurry."

"Yeah, you got it. Let's go." Lawrence said firmly.

"Come on. My car's this way." Aaron said and led the way to the door.

* * * * *

Lawrence, Deacon and Aaron all hurried into Aaron's car and were surprised by the sound of a voice.

"Thanks for hurrying guys. This just might work." Mikey said as he faded into view in the back seat beside Deacon.

"What's going on Mikey?" Aaron asked as he quickly started the engine.

"No time. Deacon and Lawrence, I need to ask you a really huge favor. I thought I was going to have more time to work up to this but Jake... never mind, it doesn't matter now. I really need you guys' help." Mikey said seriously.

Deacon looked at Mikey in wonder as Lawrence asked, "Are you really an angel?"

"A Saint actually. I'll give you my full bio when this is all done. Aaron can tell you that I'm for real. What I need is for you guys to trust me and let me kind of... work through you for a few minutes." Mikey asked cautiously.

"What do you mean?" Lawrence asked hesitantly.

"I mean that there's some stuff that needs to be done right now and if you guys will help me there's a chance that everything can work out for the best for everyone." Mikey said urgently.

"Lawrence, a Saint is asking for our help. Think about it." Deacon said quietly.

Lawrence looked at Mikey carefully, then turned to Aaron and asked, "Is he for real?"

"Yeah. Really for real. Just a second." Aaron said, then brought his car to a stop at the Camp Little Eagle security gate.

Lawrence turned his attention back to Mikey and said, "Okay. If Deacon wants to, then so will I."

"Good enough." Mikey said with relief.

"What do we have to do?" Deacon asked thoughtfully.

"Here are the absolute basics of what's happening. You two are wearing my symbol, you're my chosen avatars here on the Earthly plane. All that means is that if I need to, I can work through you. I can speak or perform miracles through you, just like I was doing it myself. All I need is for you guys to follow my instructions. You'll hear me in your heads and you'll just have to follow along with what I say." Mikey said seriously.

"Why do you need us? I mean, why can't you just do it yourself?" Lawrence asked thoughtfully.

"Because even though I can do some really cool mystical stuff, I still can't be three places at once. Every now and then I need a little help. Oh, we're here. You guys go on and I'll be there when I'm needed. Just listen when I tell you to do something and trust that I wouldn't ask you to do anything to hurt you or anyone else." Mikey said in an almost begging voice.

"I think this might be our last chance to back out, are you sure about this Deke?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"Let's do it. We're going to get to help a Saint... How cool is that?" Deacon asked with an expression of boyish wonder.

Lawrence smiled at Deacon's expression and felt the last of his reservations give away.

"I can't argue with that. Let's go do this." Lawrence said with enthusiasm and got out of the car.

* * * * *

"Director Short?" A Starfleet Lieutenant asked as he approached.

"Yes." Teri said as she looked away from the young boys playing in the corner of the family room.

"I am security Chief Rajh. I spoke to you earlier. I just received word that Detective Blair's condition has been upgraded from critical to serious. They performed emergency surgery to remove a bullet from an artery near the heart and the surgery concluded without complications. The doctors are hopeful that he will make a full recovery." Chief Rajh said professionally.

"Did they say when he can have visitors?" Teri asked carefully.

"No, they haven't made any comment on visitors yet. But they don't expect him to regain consciousness for at least a day. I should think Friday at the earliest." Chief Rajh said thoughtfully.

"Thank you very much for you report Chief Rajh. Will you contact me if there's any change in his condition?" Teri asked hopefully.

"Of course. I've left instructions that you be notified immediately. Now if you will excuse me, I am needed in a security meeting." Chief Rajh said respectfully.

"Yes. Of course. And thank you again." Teri said with appreciation.

Chief Rajh gave a gentlemanly bow, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

Camp Little Eagle: Cabin One

The door opened and Chief Tecumseh rushed into the cabin with Kevin at his side. Cory and Kenny followed close behind.

Jake, Dylan and Lieutenant Masterson walked into the cabin at a more leisurely pace.

"Um, I'm sorry but I don't remember your name. I'm Jake, I met you this morning. Um... where's the bathroom?" Jake asked timidly.

"I'm Simon and the bathroom is right over there." Simon said as he pointed.

Dylan started toward the bathroom but stopped at the feeling of a hand on his shoulder.

"Please let me check first." Lieutenant Masterson said in a firm yet friendly voice.

Dylan nodded and watched as Lieutenant Masterson walked into the bathroom, then returned a moment later.

"I'll be right here when you're finished." Lieutenant Masterson said as he stood by the bathroom doorway.

"Thanks." Dylan said shyly as he hurried into the bathroom.

Jake noticed three younger boys standing in the hallway and asked them, "Did you just see a group of people run through here?"

"They all went in there." The oldest of the boys said as he pointed.

"Thanks. Lieutenant Masterson, when Dylan's done would you tell him that I'm in there?" Jake asked hopefully.

"Sure." Lieutenant Masterson said with a kind smile.

Jake smiled in return, then turned and entered the bedroom.

* * * * *

Southcrest: Family Room

"Tommy, do you think you could let us know how Allen's kids are doing? He's kind of worried." Brady asked as he and Allen approached the group of boys gathered around the terminal.

"They're on their way home. Jake, Kenny and Kevin are over to the Camp. And Xain is comin in on the *Mississippi*. He'll be here pretty soon." Tommy said as he turned in his chair.

"Are they alright?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Yeah. From what Cory said, they found someone that Jake and Kevin knew in Chicago that was hurt and they're bringing him to the Camp." Tommy said casually.

"Okay, thanks. Sorry to bother you." Allen said shyly.

"S'Okay. It's kewl that you worry fer'em like you do. It jus means yer family." Tommy said with a smile.

Allen smiled and nodded in return.

"I've got to go to a meeting right now. Maybe you should go and check on Edovina. Juana might be ready for a break." Brady said quietly.

"Yeah. Thanks Brady." Allen said with a gentle smile.

* * * * *

Camp Little Eagle: Cabin One - Arlo & Simon's Bedroom

Kevin walked into the bedroom at Chief Tecumseh's side and froze at the sight of a boy being held and comforted in the bed.

"You!" Kevin said with a snarl at the sight.

Cory and Kenny ran into the room next.

As soon as Kenny saw the boy in the bed, he smiled with relief and said, "Kevin! There you are!"

Kevin looked at his brother with question and was surprised to see Kenny run to the boy in the bed and hug him happily.

"I'm guessing you must be Kevin." A young native American man said as he walked from beside the bed to stand before Kevin.

"Yes, I'm Kevin Thompson." Kevin said in a firm voice.

"It's nice to meet you Mr. Thompson. My name is Jerico Foote, I'm a Shaman... that's kind of like a priest." Jerico said carefully.

Kevin giggled and said, "You can call me Kevin. Nobody ever called me Mr. Thompson before."

"Okay Kevin, and you can call me Jerico or Jerry if you want." The young Shaman said gently.

"Okay Jerry." Kevin said with a smile.

"Kevin, you know who that is over there in the bed don't you?" Jerico asked as he pointed to the boy Kenny was holding.

"Yeah. I mean, I don't know who he is outside, but inside it's the whining crybaby fraidy-cat thing that I used to have inside me. It looks like it found someone else to live off of." Kevin said seriously.

The young Shaman's eyes went wide at the description.

"You're wrong." Kenny said firmly from the bed with the whimpering boy held tightly in his arms, "This is my brother. I don't know what you are, but somehow I'll find a way to undo whatever you did and get Kevin back."

Kevin looked at Kenny with astonishment and said, "You think I'm not your brother!?"

Kenny stopped all movement, surprised by Kevin's exclamation.

"I'm the one who fought to protect you in the alley, not him! The only thing he'll ever do is take from you, he'll never give you anything back. He's nothing but a leech."

Silence fell over the room as everyone looked around, trying to decide what was really the right thing to do.

Kenny looked down at the boy in his arms, then up at Kevin with question.

"I really am your brother and I really do love you Kenny. The difference is, that thing you're holding NEEDS you to love him. I can love you and not want anything in return." Kevin said seriously.

Kenny looked at Kevin in wonder and said, "I'm sorry Kevin... I saw him hurting the way you did when I met you and I thought..."

"So you believe me?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I do." Kenny said quietly.

"Guys, we have a problem here. We have to find a way to get Kevin to take this part of his spirit back. Otherwise this little guy is going to die." Jerico said hesitantly as he watched Kevin's expression.

"No way. I don't know what that thing is, but you should let it die so it can't hurt anyone else." Kevin said firmly.

"It's part of you Kevin. It's part of your true self." Jerico said as he looked deeply into Kevin's eyes.

Kevin shook his head and said, "So what? Just because it used to be part of me doesn't mean I should take it back. It's like a tumor or cancer or something."

Kenny looked down at the trembling boy in his arms and felt pain wash through him at the hopelessness and fear in the green eyes staring at him.

"You really don't want him back, do you Kev?" Kenny asked quietly as he looked at his brother.

"No. I don't even want to be in the same room with that thing." Kevin said with a look of disgust.

Jerico shook his head in disappointment then gave Chief Tecumseh a helpless look.

"You said that he's going to die if Kevin doesn't take him back, right?" Kenny asked quietly.

"That's right. Arlo's body is rejecting him and he's too weak and incomplete to survive as a disembodied spirit." Jerico said with an ache in his heart.

"What would happen if I took him?" Kenny asked thoughtfully.

"You can't. This is part of your brother's soul. All the pain and fear that this little guy is carrying would become a part of you. It would hurt you. Your spirit would probably reject it, but if it didn't... that much pain and fear could drive you insane. Honestly, I don't even know if I could do it. I've never heard of it being done." Jerico said distantly.

Jake had been standing and watching for a few minutes just inside the bedroom door. Finally he had to ask, "So what are the options?"

"Kevin has to accept this part of his soul back into himself..."

"Which he won't do." Jake interrupted.

Jerico nodded, then continued, "Or we let it die."

"No! You're wrong. You're worried about this piece of Kevin's spirit hurting me, but you don't care that it already hurt Kevin. You want him to take it back even though he already said that he doesn't want it. Well, I love my brother and I don't want him to hurt. But I love this part of my brother too and I want him to live. I want you to give him to me." Kenny said firmly.

"I don't think the spirit fragment will be able to survive in you." Jerico said quietly.

"We're twins. IDENTICAL TWINS! We're the same!" Kenny said firmly.

Chief Tecumseh felt that this was getting out of hand and said, "Jake, this course of action is very dangerous. Try and make your brother understand the gravity of the situation."

Jake looked into Kenny's eyes and saw the determination housed within. As he opened his mouth to begin to try and talk Kenny out of his plan, Mikey's words replayed in his mind. 'I need you to trust him.'

"I'm with Ken. If he believes that this is the right thing to do, I'll trust him." Jake said firmly.

"Really?" Kenny said with surprise.

"Yeah Ken. If you say it'll work, then I'm with you." Jake said seriously to Kenny.

Kenny turned to Kevin and said, "I'm sorry I thought you weren't my brother for a while. I understand now. I know that since I'm going to take the part of yourself that you hate into me that... well, that you might hate me too."

"I won't hate you, I promise! I'll always love you." Kevin said with the beginnings of tears in his eyes.

Kenny gave a watery smile to his brother and quietly said, "I'll always love you too Kev."

"So are you going to do it?" One of the other boys in the room asked, directing his question to the Shaman.

Jerico thought about it for a few seconds, then reluctantly said, "Okay... It looks like I don't have any other choice. I'll give it a try. Are you really sure?"

Kenny looked at Kevin, then at the boy in his arms and quietly said, "Yeah. Do it."

"I left some things in the bathroom that I'll need." Jerico said as he started walking toward the door.

"STOP!" Deacon said in a breathless voice as he ran into the room followed by Lawrence and Aaron.

* * * * *

Southcrest: Living Room

"What's going on with you Joe? I mean, with Vincent?" Billy asked curiously.

Joe turned his gaze away from Mona and Vincent and said, "I can't even tell you how it happened. I just feel like Vincent is my own son. I want to protect him and do whatever I can to give him a good life."

"From what little I've seen, he feels just as strongly toward you." Billy said honestly.

"We're trying to work it out so Vincent can live on the *Yorktown* with me." Joe said quietly.

"Really? Do you think that's such a good idea? I mean, from what I've heard, you guys get into some dangerous stuff out there." Billy said with concern.

"Billy, I can't see any way that Vincent could be happy here. His family is gone. He's all alone. I'm afraid that he'll grow into a very rebellious and troubled teenager if he's left here. I just don't see any way around that. But if he comes with me he'll gain the benefit of Starfleet discipline, structure, respect... I think this may be his only chance to have a decent future." Joe said thoughtfully.

"Wow. You've really thought about this. When you put it that way, I guess it is the best thing for him."

"I hope so. If we can get it all worked out with Starfleet, then the rest will be up to Vincent. I'll be there to support him, but whether he succeeds or fails will be entirely on him." Joe said with a tone of worry in his voice.

"What happens if he can't handle it?" Billy asked with concern.

"I don't know." Joe said and the worry could clearly be seen in his eyes.

"Joe, if it comes to that, he'll always have a place with us... and so will you." Billy said gently.

"Thanks. I really appreciate that. And remember that if you or the boys ever need anything I can provide, all you have to do is ask. I was serious about being like a father to you all."

Billy gave a gentle smile and said, "I know you were. We'll keep in touch and if there's ever a time when we need some fatherly advice or anything like that, you'll be the first to know."

Joe gave an ironic chuckle and said, "I've been alone for so long... then in one day I've taken on a whole family."

"Been there, done that." Billy said with a sympathetic smile.

Joe looked at Billy for a second, then said, "Yeah, I guess you have."

* * * * *

Southcrest: Study

"Everyone, I think all of you know Commander Dodds, this is his home and he's been kind enough to allow me to use his study as a command center. To his right is Lieutenant Brady Thompson from the *Enterprise*. He volunteered to help us with the investigation into tonight's incidents." John said to the group.

"To my right is Lieutenant Clark who is in charge of security for Southcrest, the Short compound and Camp Little Eagle. To my left is Lieutenant Rajh who is in charge of Starfleet security for the Orlando metro area.

Greetings and handshakes went around the group quickly, then everyone settled in to listen.

"Lieutenant Rajh, report." John said seriously.

"The first victim is positively identified as Sharon Anne Stanton, maiden name Watford. She is the estranged wife of Walter Stanton currently residing in Wheeling, West Virginia. The shooting took place in her residence and from the condition of the crime scene, I would venture to say that there was no struggle. It appears that she answered her front door and when she opened it, she was shot immediately in the head." Chief Rajh said carefully.

"The second victim is tentatively identified as Peggy Jean Winters, maiden name Shoupe. Due to the excessively violent attack on her person, we will have to rely on fingerprints to give us a positive identification. Preliminary investigation indicates that she had assumed a defensive posture and had tried to defend herself to some degree."

"The third victim is Police Detective O C Blair. He was shot in the upper right chest area and has undergone surgery to remove the bullet. He is currently listed in serious condition. He regained consciousness long enough to identify the shooter in the incident to be Victor Winters. Detective Blair also said that he discharged his weapon at Victor Winters and believed that he was able to hit him in the hand and possibly in the head to some degree as Mr. Winters' hand was holding a phone to his ear."

"We have a forensics team on site and the area is secure." Chief Rajh finished professionally.

* * * * *

Camp Little Eagle: Cabin One - Simon & Arlo's Bedroom

Everyone looked at Deacon and Lawrence with question.

"Cory, would you take Aaron and Jake to get Dylan settled into his new home? These guys can handle this." Mikey said from beside the bed.

"Mikey!" Corey said with a happy smile.

"Go on. I'll talk to you later bro. We have some things to do right now, but Dylan needs some attention too." Mikey said with a warm smile at his brother.

"Okay. You guys yell if you need me." Cory said as he looked around the room.

"Count on it." Mikey said with a smile.

Cory nodded and walked to the door.

Jake looked around with concern, then hesitantly followed Cory and Aaron out of the room.

* * * * *

Southcrest: Study

"Lieutenant Clark, report." John said as he turned in his chair.

"Mr. Victor Winters entered the Southcrest area by running past a security checkpoint, then proceeded at a high rate of speed until he purposely crashed his car into the Short Compound entry gate. He appears to have died in the impact, we're awaiting the autopsy for an official cause of death." Lieutenant Clark said seriously.

"Anything else?" John asked carefully.

"Inspection of his vehicle yielded an empty 'Jack Daniels' bottle in the floorboard and a cardboard box of various items in the back seat." Lieutenant Clark said without emotion.

"What items?" John asked with irritation.

"Duct tape, rope, a leather gag... the selection that he carried is what law enforcement professionals sometimes refer to as a 'rape kit'." Lieutenant Clark said seriously.

John shook his head at the statement, then said, "Thank you Lieutenant Clark, Lieutenant Thompson?"

"While investigating the Winters home I found Mr. Winters personal journal with a very detailed description and photographic evidence of the acts he perpetrated against his children. His last entry referred to a phone call from someone who we believe was a Ms. Carolyn Rind who is in custody in the Orlando City Jail. In the final entry he expressed his desire to kill his wife and rape his son." Brady said, trying to hold in his emotions.

Lieutenant Clark looked at Brady with a mix of disbelief and horror.

"After Lieutenant Thompson told me about the phone call from Ms. Rind, it was brought to my attention that Director Short and Detective Blair had had an encounter with Ms. Rind earlier in the day that resulted in Detective Blair arresting her. Apparently Ms. Rind was the Child Protective Services case worker assigned to Vincent Winters." John said seriously.

"Why was Child Protective Services called?" Lieutenant Clark asked cautiously.

"Director Short issued an advisory to the local health care providers this morning to be on the lookout for Vincent Winters. This afternoon he was admitted to the Arnold Palmer Children's Hospital with a head injury and when the doctor investigated, he found signs of abuse. The hospital is required by law to notify the police immediately when child abuse is suspected and I'm sure they called Child Protective Services." Chip said seriously.

Lieutenant Clark nodded slowly.

"Lieutenant Thompson, have you been able to secure the recording of the phone call between Ms. Rind and Victor Winters?" John asked as he turned to face Brady.

"No sir, but if I may use the terminal, it might be waiting for me." Brady said carefully.

John nodded, then watched as Brady walked to the terminal.

After a moment of looking, Brady said, "I don't have it yet, would you mind if I make a quick call to find out why?" Brady asked hesitantly.

"Go ahead. I'd like to find out what was said." John said seriously.

Brady nodded, then initiated a call.

"*Brandon here.*" A voice said in frustration over the terminal's speakers.

"This is Lieutenant Thompson, what's the status on the phone recording?" Brady asked curiously.

"*Oh, Lieutenant Thompson, just when I thought I had it, some... officer... decided that he needed a court order to release it. He's just dragging his heels and making it unnecessarily difficult. I should be able to get it for you within twenty minutes.*"

"Let me try something first. I've made a friend down there, maybe he'll be able to get things moving." Brady said with a smile.

"*I'll keep working on things here in case your friend doesn't have the right connections.*" Brandon said seriously.

"Thank you Lieutenant Brandon. Thompson out." Brady said with a smile, then switched connections for another call.

"*Orlando Police Department, how may I direct your call?*" A pleasant female voice asked.

"Police Lieutenant Marsh please. Tell him it's Starfleet Lieutenant Brady Thompson." Brady said firmly.

"*Right away sir.*" The woman said quickly, then the call switched over to soft music.

"*Lieutenant Thompson, what can I do for you?*" Lieutenant Marsh asked seriously a few seconds later.

"Lieutenant Brandon has been trying to get a recording that Ms. Carolyn Rind made to Victor Winters right before all this mess. He seems to have hit a bit of a roadblock, I was wondering if you might be able to help me out?" Brady asked hopefully.

"*Let me put you on hold for a moment and I'll see what I can do.*" Lieutenant Marsh said professionally.

There was the sound of a click, then everyone in the room could clearly hear Lieutenant Marsh saying, "*Turner, are you trying to play your power*

games with Starfleet? These guys are trying to piece together what happened to OC. Go ahead and give them what they want."

"But this is Starfleet! They're always walking all over us." Turner said in a whiney tone.

There was a moment of silence, then Lieutenant Marsh said, "*Not this time. This is different. Lieutenant Thompson asked us to help out with this investigation. We're on the same side here. OC's side. Besides, if we won't give them help when they ask for it, why shouldn't they kick us out of the way to get the job done?*"

"I'll send it off right now." Turner said quietly.

A moment later there was a click, then Lieutenant Marsh said in a pleasant voice, "*It should be to you soon Lieutenant*."

Brady looked around the room with amusement, then said, "Thank you Lieutenant Marsh. You've been very helpful. There's just one other thing."

"*What's that?*" Lieutenant Marsh asked curiously.

"You need to check to see if your 'hold' button is working. I could hear everything you just said." Brady said with a smile.

"*Oh... you could?*" Lieutenant Marsh said hesitantly.

An icon on the terminal screen flashed and drew Brady's attention.

"I just thought you should know. I've got another call. Thank you for your help." Brady said in a kind voice.

"*Of course and thank you for.. um.. telling me about that. Goodbye*." Lieutenant Marsh said shyly.

Brady chuckled and said, "Sure. Goodbye." Then switched over to the other call.

"*You must have some good friends at the Police Department. I've got your recording. It's on it's way.*" Lieutenant Brandon said in an impressed voice.

"I just met a cop with the right attitude about cooperation. I've got it. Thanks for your help." Brady said sincerely.

"*Anytime. Brandon out*."

"Thompson out." Brady said, then looked around the room with question.

"This is what we've been waiting for." John said as he looked at Brady expectantly.

Brady nodded, then clicked the file to open it.

* * * * *

Camp Little Eagle: Cabin One - Simon & Arlo's Bedroom

"Devon, I'm going to need to hold on to Arlo for a while to keep him safe. Thanks for doing such a good job taking care of him." Mikey said gently.

Devon looked at Mikey with wide disbelieving eyes, then carefully got out of the bed.

Mikey slipped into the bed behind Arlo's body and took the frightened boy into his arms.

"Shhh. Don't worry little one, you're almost home." Mikey whispered into his ear.

Deacon and Lawrence looked at Mikey with question, then got matching looks of realization.

Deacon walked to Kenny and asked, "Will you trust me?"

"Sure Deacon." Kenny said cautiously, confused by the distant look in Deacon's eyes.

"Hold still." Deacon said, then held his cupped hands in front of Kenny's stomach.

As everyone watched in silence, a sphere of sparkling light slowly emerged from Kenny's chest.

The light floated out and stopped all movement a few inches above Deacon's hands.

Mikey held Arlo's body tightly as Lawrence extracted a hazy golden sphere of dim light from Arlo's chest.

As the sphere of light floated over his cupped hands, Lawrence whispered, "It's okay. You don't have to be afraid now."

"Tell me what you see." Mikey prompted as he held Arlo's unmoving body in his arms.

"I have fear." Lawrence said as he looked into the dim glow.

"I have safety." Deacon said as he looked into his sparkling sphere.

"I have loneliness." Lawrence said in a pained voice.

"I have companionship." Deacon said with a warm smile.

"I have strength." Lawrence said curiously.

"I have weakness." Deacon said with surprise.

"I have wisdom." Lawrence said with a delighted smile.

"I have innocence." Deacon said with a look of indecision.

"I have stubbornness." Lawrence said with a chuckle.

"Uh oh." Deacon said as he looked carefully into the sparkling orb.

He glanced up and looked around the room before saying in a hesitant voice, "I have stubbornness too. A lot of it."

An amused chuckle spread through the room.

Deacon looked over at Lawrence and gave him a loving smile.

Lawrence smiled in return and nodded slightly.

The two boys walked toward each other holding their glowing spheres before them.

Deacon held his sphere forward, as if offering it to Lawrence.

In response, Lawrence lifted his fainter glowing sphere to float beside the brighter one.

Deacon and Lawrence watched in concentration as the two orbs began to pulsate.

Everyone in the room watched carefully, none sure exactly what was supposed to happen.

In a movement that seemed to be slow motion, the larger sphere absorbed the smaller one into itself.

Deacon and Lawrence looked into the new, brilliantly shining sphere with matching expressions of peace and joy.

Quietly, Mikey said, "The spirit is now complete, brought full circle. That which started as one has become whole again, as it should have always been."

With their hands nearly touching, Deacon and Lawrence carefully guided the glittery sphere of light to Kenny.

"Is that thing going to hurt him?" Kevin asked in a voice that held an underlying tone of menace.

"No. The frightened child is safe. The lonely child is forever held in his brother's arms. This won't hurt Kenny, it will complete him." Lawrence said with a happy smile.

"If you wanted, you could share this complete spirit with your brother. The two of you would become what you should have always been." Deacon said quietly.

"Kevin, it's your choice. Kenny will be fine either way. All you have to decide right now is if you want to share a soul with your brother. You will literally become soul-mates, friends for life." Mikey said from the bed, still holding Arlo in his arms.

Kevin looked at Kenny with question.

"I'd really like to share it with you if you'd let me." Kenny said seriously.

"What about Uncle Chip?" Kevin asked in deep thought.

"What about him?" Kenny asked in confusion at the question.

"Kevin. You'll still be you and you'll still love who you love. The only difference is that now you won't feel the same desperate need for acceptance and hunger for his love and attention that you felt before." Mikey said honestly.

"Good." Kevin said with relief.

"So, are we gonna do this or what?" Kenny asked with a smile at Kevin.

Kevin nodded and returned the smile.

"Hold your brother." Mikey said from the bed.

Kevin walked to Kenny and gave his brother a gentle hug.

Kenny hugged Kevin tightly to his chest and waited to see what was going to happen next.

Lawrence and Deacon took the sphere of light and raised it up between them until it was at eye level.

Carefully they walked together to stand on either side of the brothers, then slowly let the sphere of golden light come to rest on Kenny and Kevin.

Slowly the light was absorbed as the brothers continued to hug.

"That wasn't so hard. It's done." Mikey said happily.

"I don't feel any different." Kenny said as he reluctantly released his grip on Kevin.

"Not yet. But you are different in a fundamental way. Every day of your life until now you've had this little feeling inside you that something is missing. Even if you didn't know what that feeling was, it was always there in the background." Mikey said in concentration.

Kenny nodded as he remembered having that feeling.

"Nothing is missing now. You can rest. You can truly know peace. The two of you have each other now... and forever." Mikey said happily.

"Wow. That sounds really cool but... I still don't feel any different." Kenny said in an apologetic voice.

Mikey chuckled and said, "You will. It's a fundamental change to the core of your being. When you finally notice what's different, it's going to blow you away."

"What do we do now?" Kevin asked in confusion as he looked around.

"I think you guys need to help get Dylan settled in, then get Aaron to take you back to Uncle Chip's house. The rest of us have another situation to sort out here." Mikey said as he held Arlo's unmoving body close to his chest.

Kevin ran to Mikey's side and gave him a quick hug, then said, "Thanks for helping me Mikey. I still think you're the best angel ever."

"Not a problem little guy. I was just fixing something your parents screwed up by separating you two when you were so young. Now go on and have fun showing Dylan around. I've got more work to do." Mikey said gently.

"Okay." Kevin said happily and ran to Kenny who was waiting for him at the foot of the bed.

* * * * *

"Hey Dylan, how are you doing?" Kevin asked happily as he finally found the room that Dylan was in.

"Me? I'm great! Jake fixed it so I could meet Aaron Carter." Dylan said joyfully.

Aaron chuckled and said, "I live right across the street. By this time next week you'll probably think it's no big deal."

"Yeah, and the week after that you'll probably be trying to throw him into a swimming pool." Cory said with a laugh.

Dylan looked at Cory with a wide eye.

"The guys throw me in the pool a lot. It's just something we do." Aaron said shyly.

"Yeah, he'd think we didn't love him anymore if we didn't do something to tease him every now and then." Cory said with a warm smile at Aaron.

After a moment of thought, Aaron said, "I still think my way is better. I just say it... I love you Cor."

Cory was taken aback by the serious note in Aaron's voice and stared at him in wonder.

Jake looked from Cory to Aaron and finally said, "Nah, it's less painful to throw him in the pool."

Cory began to chuckle and nodded his agreement.

"So it looks like all the serious stuff is done in the other room. Is everything okay?" Jake asked curiously.

"Yeah. Mikey fixed everything." Kevin said happily.

"How's everything with you Ken?" Jake asked with concern.

Kenny looked at Jake and gave him a gentle smile as he said, "Really good. Thanks for what you said back there Jake. You know, that thing about trusting me... I'll never forget it."

Jake smiled and said, "I meant it Ken. You've been honest and nice to me since we first met. Even if you weren't Kevin's brother, I'd like you and trust you."

Kenny blushed and said, "If there was a swimming pool here, I'd throw you into it right now."

Jake chuckled and said, "I love you too Ken."

* * * * *

Southcrest: Study

"Yeah?"

"Mr. Winters?"

"Yeah. Who's asking?"

"I'm Ms. Rind. Do you believe in justice?"

"Listen lady. I just had a bitch of a day at work and now I get home to find out my old lady ain't got dinner waiting for me. If you're trying to sell me something. Save it. I ain't buying."

"Your wife is at the police station making a statement against you."

"That bitch!"

"It's not her fault. Teri Short is the one who talked her into it. I was there trying to make sure you got a fair hearing and that everything was done by the book. But Teri Short came in and took custody of your son and talked your wife into making a statement against you."

"When Peggy gets home, I'm going to have a little talk with her about loyalty."

"She won't be coming home. She's going someplace where she'll feel safe. And Teri Short is taking Vincent to her house, you know, out by the Southcrest Ranch."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because it's not right. We have policies and procedures that have to be followed for everyone's good. But Teri Short comes in and takes your son without a hearing or a court order then turns your wife against you... someone has to have the courage to speak out against her. If she isn't stopped, there are going to be others running around taking kids from their parents 'for their own good', without any regard for the laws that govern our country."

"It's my own damned fault. I've been too easy on them. I didn't want to be the heavy handed bastard that my old man was to me, but I let them get out of control. Well it's my home, my castle, I'm the head of this family and they're mine to deal with."

"What are you going to do?"

"Finish it."

CHAPTER 48

"Does anyone have anything else to add before we turn this recording over to the legal boys for prosecution?" John asked as he looked around the room.

"I think that should do it." Brady said distantly as he felt a chill crawling up his spine.

The others in the room silently nodded their agreement.

"Now that we all have a better sense of what happened tonight, it's time for everyone to take what you've learned here and apply it to your own investigations to try and uncover any other evidence that might be relevant. Report in with any significant discoveries, otherwise I'll see each of you when your report is complete." John said as he stood.

The mood was serious as the group of people stood and walked for the door.

"Lieutenant Thompson." John said firmly.

Brady turned and said, "Yes sir?"

"Good work on getting us that recording and handling the locals. I like the way you get things done. If you ever decide that you've had enough of starship life, consider a posting with me. I think I could put your talents to good use." John said seriously.

"Thank you sir. I'll keep that in mind." Brady said as he tried to restrain his smile of pride.

"Now I suppose you'd better get back to the Winters home and look it over again with this new information in mind." John said seriously.

"Yes sir, and thank you for letting me be part of this investigation." Brady said professionally.

John smiled and said, "I can see why Chip is proud of his security staff. Let's go."

* * * * *

"You look really good holding him." Joe said with a smile as he watched Mona holding Vincent in her arms.

Mona chuckled and said, "Sitting here and holding Vincent like this reminds me of when Allen was a little boy. I suppose now that I'm a grandmother I'll get to do a lot more of this."

Allen walked into the room holding Edovina cradled in his arms.

"Like mother like son." Billy said with a tender smile.

Allen glanced at Billy with question for a moment, then noticed that Mona was holding Vincent exactly the same way he was holding Edovina.

"I learned from the best." Allen said with a peaceful smile as he sat beside Mona on the couch.

"Is everything okay with the boys?" Billy asked quietly.

Allen nodded and said, "They're on their way back. Xain should be here any minute, the others are going to Camp Little Eagle to get a friend of theirs settled in."

"I wonder if that's what Deacon and Lawrence had to leave for." Billy said speculatively.

"Probably. But I'm still not sure how they knew they were needed." Joe said honestly.

"There's enough telepathic energy zinging around this place to bake a potato. I'm sure that some of the clan members figured out a way that Deacon and Lawrence could help and contacted them the most efficient way that they could." Allen said quietly as he looked lovingly at the little girl in his arms.

"I'm not that comfortable with the whole telepathy thing. But you seem to be alright with it." Billy said cautiously.

"I work with Vulcans. It's just a part of everyday life for me. You'll get used to it... Does this mean you have some deep dark secret that you're trying to keep hidden?" Allen asked with a playful smile, obviously not believing it to be so.

Billy chuckled and said, "No. No secrets. There are just a few of my thoughts that I wouldn't want transmitted for everyone to see."

Allen thought about the statement, then said, "All the telepaths I've known are very cautious about how they use their abilities. I get the feeling that they're scared that if they use their abilities improperly, then people won't want to be around them because they won't feel safe."

"I'm not sure I understand." Billy said slowly.

"It's the same as if you got the reputation for being a 'Peeping Tom'. Can you imagine how you would feel?" Allen asked quietly.

"Yeah. Okay, I get it." Billy said seriously.

"Where am I?" Vincent asked groggily from Mona's arms.

"You're in the living room at the Southcrest Ranch." Mona said gently.

Vincent looked curiously up at Mona and saw the love for him in her eyes.

"Thanks for taking care of me Grandma Mona." Vincent said as he snuggled into her embrace.

"I'm here for as long as you need me Vincent." Mona said with contentment.

* * * * *

"Here they are." Chip said as he walked into the family room.

Xain walked in next and an almost imperceptible expression of relief came over his face as he saw Edovina in Allen's arms.

"I think she needs her *A'nirih*." Allen said as he stood.

"Thank you Dad. I did not expect to have a feeling of apprehension when I was away from Edovina for an extended period of time." Xain said as he accepted his daughter.

"It's the same thing I've been feeling while you and your brothers have been gone." Allen said honestly, then gave Xain a gentle hug and a kiss on the top of the head.

Xain thought about the words for a moment, then said, "I had not considered that you would be experiencing this same emotion. I understand."

Allen smiled at the statement.

Xain got a distant look in his eyes, then said, "Jake, Kenny and Kevin are returning from Camp Little Eagle. They will be here momentarily."

"I guess I'll go out to welcome them back. I'll send Jake in when he gets here." Allen said as he released Xain from the hug.

"I am in contact with him and he knows where to find me." Xain said frankly.

Allen stepped away from Xain, then turned to the other men in the room and asked, "Do you want to go out with me and welcome the boys back?"

Joe looked at Vincent cautiously, not wanting to leave him.

"He'll be fine here with me. Go on." Mona said softly.

Joe glanced at Billy and received a nod.

Joe, Chip, Billy and Allen walked out of the room to welcome the boys back from their adventure.

* * * * *

JC noticed the group of men walking out of the house and toward the driveway and decided to join them.

"Uncle Chip!" Kevin crowed as he jumped out of the Camp Little Eagle van.

Chip chuckled and held his arms open to Kevin who was running to him.

JC smiled at the sight as he watched the other boys getting out of the van and Aaron's car more slowly.

"How did everything go?" Allen asked as he walked to pull Jake into a quick hug.

"Just fine. We were really able to help someone." Jake said joyfully as he returned the hug.

"Xain's in the living room waiting for you with Edovina." Allen whispered.

"Thanks Dad." Jake said happily, then hurried away.

"How you doing Cute Stuff?" Allen asked as he hugged Kenny tightly.

"I'm great! How are you?" Kenny asked as he enjoyed the hug.

"I'm about one hundred percent better now that you and your brothers are back." Allen said frankly.

After another moment of hugging, Allen noticed that Billy was hugging Deacon and Joe was hugging Lawrence just as joyfully.

"So did you have a good visit with your mother?" Chip asked quietly, not knowing if he should even broach the topic.

"Oh yeah. It was great. I got to tell her how happy I am with my new Poppa and then I got to see her get all mad about it because she could see that it was really true. I guess now she knows that all the stuff she did to me didn't make me be like her and that I'm just like my Dad." Kevin said happily.

"I'm glad it worked out for you." Chip said honestly.

Kevin leaned close to Chip's ear and whispered, "I love you Uncle Chip."

Chip smiled at the statement and whispered, "I love you too, Little One."

Kevin broke loose from Chip's hug and moved to hug JC at his side.

JC gladly accepted the hug.

"I love you Uncle Josh." Kevin said happily.

JC smiled at the loving statement and said, "I love you too Kevin."

* * * * *

As everyone was about to return to the party, a taxi pulled into the driveway.

"Dad, I wanna talk to you!!" A young man said in a demanding tone as he swung open the door of the taxi.

Kevin watched and immediately felt defensive before the angry young man.

"What's the matter Keith?" JC asked with concern.

"Butt out of this Josh," The young man said angrily. "This is between me and my father!"

Kevin's eyes went wide at the statement as he realized that the young man was talking about Chip.

"Hold it right there, young man!" Chip said, raising his voice. "STUDY - NOW!!!"

Kevin watched as the young man followed Chip into the house, leaving JC shaking his head in bewilderment.

"Who was that?" Kevin asked JC quietly.

After a moment of standing with a stunned look on his face, JC shook himself out of it and said, "That's our oldest son, Keith."

"How many kids do you have?" Kevin asked slowly.

JC smiled at Kevin's expression and pulled him into a hug as he said, "We have four. Keith is Chip's son from his first marriage."

"Does he always talk to you like that?" Kevin asked quietly, feeling bad about having yelled at JC earlier in the day.

"No. He's never talked to me like that before. He must be really upset about something. I'm sure Chip will straighten it out." JC said assuringly.

Kevin hugged JC even tighter and said, "I'm sorry I yelled at you before. I didn't really mean the stuff I said and I'm sorry if I made you feel bad."

JC squatted down to be closer to Kevin's eye level and said, "I know that you were really upset and feeling a lot of different things this afternoon. I understood it then and wasn't hurt by what you said. I was just worried about you."

"Thanks Uncle Josh. I really really do love you. If I can't have Uncle Chip, I'm glad he's got you." Kevin said, then moved in to give JC a kiss on the cheek.

JC thought about the statement for a moment, then chuckled as he said, "Thank you... I think."

* * * * *

"Do you want to explain that outburst out there, and why you felt it necessary to bite Josh's head off like that?" Chip asked, barely restraining his anger.

"I wanna know why you changed my orders! Why am I now headed for the *Enterprise* instead of the *Paladin*? I thought we'd agreed I'd make my way through Starfleet without your help?" Keith asked in an increasing voice.

"We did," Chip said as he sat down on the couch.

Keith watched his father cautiously, trying to gain control of his anger.

"If you'll sit down and lose the attitude, I'd be more than happy to explain it to you." Chip said reasonably

Keith slowly took a seat in one of the wingback chairs, watching his father cautiously.

"I routinely check on up-and-coming graduates from the Academy to see if any of them are good enough for the *Enterprise*, per Captain Kirk's orders. I especially check on their marks and their attendance," Chip said seriously.

"You're name was at the top of the list."

"I gave my recommendations to Captain Kirk, and he approved them." Chip said with tears in his eyes.

"You earned that position on the *Enterprise* son. Not because of me, but because of your grades and your attention to duty and details." Chip finished with a proud smile at his son.

"So it wasn't because you're my father that I'm going to the *Enterprise*?" Keith asked cautiously.

"No, it isn't." Chip said as he regained his emotional control.

"You've worked so hard to get where you're at and Josh and I are so proud of you." Chip said with a joyful smile.

"Guess I owe Josh one hell of an apology, huh?" Keith asked timidly.

"Yup," Chip said as he got up from the couch.

Keith also stood, then moved to hug his father as he whispered, "I'm really sorry for blowing up, Dad."

"It's okay," Chip said, returning the hug.

"How about we go find Josh, alright?" Chip asked as he injected cheer into his voice.

* * * * *

"Grandma Mona?" Vincent said quietly.

"Yes?" Mona answered with a smile as she turned her attention away from Jake and Xain fussing over their daughter.

"Are you gonna be my grandma, like, from now on?" Vincent asked in nearly a whisper.

"Yes Vincent. Once you're my grandkid, I never let you go." Mona said with a smile.

"Good." Vincent said peacefully and rested his head on her shoulder.

"Do you need to talk about anything?" Mona asked gently.

"Yeah. It sounds kind of silly but... I guess... I mean... I'm used to going home and doing homework and taking a bath and stuff like that. Now... I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing." Vincent said quietly.

"I can understand that completely. I'm sure being around all these people isn't helping." Mona said quietly.

"I don't mind people. I just don't know what I'm supposed to do next. I don't even know where I'll be sleeping tonight." Vincent said quietly.

"Then why don't we find out?" Mona asked with a smile.

"Vincent would be welcomed at our house." Xain said from Mona's side.

"What?" Mona turned to face Xain with question.

"Jake and I share a bed so there would be a bed for Vincent at our house if he would like to stay with us." Xain said reasonably.

"Yeah, it wouldn't be any problem at all for us." Jake said seriously.

Mona smiled and said, "Thank you boys. I'm going to see if Joe has made any plans yet. I'll make sure to mention your offer."

Xain nodded, then turned his attention back to Edovina in his arms.

* * * * *

Kevin stayed close to JC's side, wanting to make sure that Keith wouldn't return and yell at him again.

Billy and Allen had witnessed the outburst in the driveway and couldn't help but notice Kevin's protectiveness toward JC.

"Is everything okay?" Allen asked cautiously.

"I'm sure it will be." JC said, then noticed that Kevin had put an arm around his waist to hold him in a loose, protective hug.

"Let us know if there's anything we can do to help." Billy said seriously.

"I know that Chip is getting everything sorted out." JC said and forced a smile of assurance onto his face.

"Josh?" A weak, trembling voice said from behind JC.

A shiver of dread ran up JC's spine at the tone of voice and he whirled to see Ethan Nichols, Keith's boyfriend, standing with a devastated expression on his face and a backpack slung over his left shoulder.

"Oh my God Ethan, what's wrong?" JC asked with his parental instincts going off like flares.

"They... I told my parents and... they... they cut me off. I don't know what I'm going to do." Ethan said, barely restraining his tears.

"What do you mean by 'cut off'?" JC asked cautiously, wanting to be sure he understood the situation before doing anything about trying to resolve it.

"No more college. No more dorm. No more... anything. I'm not even allowed to go to their house or call them..." Ethan said as the tears started running down his cheeks.

Kevin looked around the gathering and spotted Kenny talking with Justy and Dean.

Without even thinking about what he was doing, Kevin focused on the thought that he needed Kenny and urged him to look up.

Kenny glanced at Kevin curiously, not consciously aware that his brother had just contacted him.

Kevin made a 'come here' gesture, then walked to Ethan's side to pull him into a firm hug.

Ethan looked down with surprise at the skinny pale kid who started hugging him.

"Ethan, this is Kevin." JC said as he thought about what he needed to do.

A moment later Kenny joined the hug.

"That's his brother Kenny." JC said, then smiled at the confused look on Ethan's face.

"Ethan, you're hurting. They just want to make you feel better." JC said with sympathy at the look of pain in Ethan's eyes.

"Thanks guys." Ethan said in a whisper as he returned the hug.

"Ethan, why don't you walk with the guys for a minute while I check on some things. Try not to worry, I think things are about to get better." JC said with an assuring smile.

"Okay. Thanks Josh." Ethan said hesitantly, then started to walk as the two brothers guided him away.

* * * * *

"Joe, I've got someone here with some very serious questions for you." Mona said as she walked out of the house with Vincent at her side.

Joe looked away from Billy and Allen, then smiled when he saw that Vincent was looking better.

"How you doing Champ?" Joe asked as he walked to give Vincent a quick hug.

"I'm feeling a lot better. I was just kind of wondering where I'm going to be sleeping tonight." Vincent said seriously.

"Hmmm. That's a good question. I suppose we'd better figure that out." Joe said carefully.

"My grandson Xain said that Vincent could share his room. He has a spare bed." Mona offered with a gentle smile.

"What do you think about that?" Joe asked casually.

"Um, well. He seems nice and everything but... I really don't want to sleep in the same room with gay guys if I don't have to." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Oh." Joe said thoughtfully.

"My grandsons wouldn't try to do anything to you. You'd be perfectly safe with them." Mona said with assurance.

Vincent looked at Mona and realized that she might think he was insulting her grandkids.

"I'm sorry Grandma Mona. I didn't mean for it to sound like that. Xain and his... um, boyfriend, they seem like they're really nice and everything and I don't think they'd do bad stuff to me while I'm sleeping or anything like that... It's me that's the problem. I don't think I could feel comfortable sleeping in the same room with someone I know is gay. I'm sorry if that makes me a bad person but it's how I feel." Vincent said as tears welled up in his eyes.

Mona pulled Vincent close for a hug and said, "I don't think that makes you a bad person Vincent. You're just being honest about what you're feeling. I hope that one day soon you'll get past this and realize that people are people. But until then, just keep being honest with everyone and with yourself and we'll do our best to make you comfortable."

"Mona's right. As long as you're being honest about your feelings, we won't be mad at you. What would you think about us getting a motel room for the night?" Joe asked with a smile.

"Not a good idea." Teri said as she approached.

"What?" Joe asked with confusion.

"Oh Teri, how are things?" Mona asked with a gentle smile at her new friend.

"The jury is still out on that one. And if you were just talking about taking Vincent to a motel for the night, that's not a good idea at all." Teri said frankly.

"Why not?" Joe asked curiously.

"Let's see. Child protective services would love to get their hands on Vincent. I'm sure the local police would like to ask him a few questions. The media would like nothing more than a photo op with an emotional child.... do you need more?" Teri asked seriously.

"No. That's enough." Joe said reluctantly.

"Off the top of my head, I can think of five very good choices where you could spend the night that will be secure." Teri said in a considering voice.

"Five? I think I know two of them. What choices do you have for us Teri?" Mona asked with interest.

"Well, the first choice is here. I mean, you're already here and I happen to know that Chip and Josh have plenty of room." Teri said frankly.

Joe hesitantly nodded.

"Next would be my place at the Short Compound. It's just as secure as this place and we have plenty of room too. You'd both be welcomed to stay with us." Teri said with an inviting smile.

Vincent looked up at Joe curiously, not sure which option he would go with.

"Next is Camp Little Eagle. Their compound is secure and with one phone call we could have a place for Vincent to stay." Teri said seriously.

Joe nodded hesitantly.

"Choices four and five would be the *Enterprise* and the *Yorktown*. They're both in orbit and I doubt that it would take much convincing to get either one of the captains to allow you to spend the night on their ships." Teri said with a smile at Vincent.

Vincent perked up at the last suggestion.

"At ease Champ. I know how much you'd enjoy spending the night on a starship, but I think we'd be better off spending the next few days on Earth. We have too many things to take care of here and it just doesn't make sense to be transporting back and forth." Joe said seriously.

Vincent tried to hide his disappointment as he said, "I guess that makes sense."

"Vincent, if we can get everything done before Sunday you'll be living on a starship. You're going to need to get medical clearance and take at least a dozen different tests before you can be cleared to go. I really think this is going to be the best place for us to stay." Joe said, trying to ease Vincent's disappointment.

"Us?" Vincent asked in confirmation.

Joe smiled at the question and said, "Us. I'm sticking with you for as long as you need me, Champ."

"Okay. Then I guess it doesn't matter where I stay as long as you're with me." Vincent said with a smile.

* * * * *

Chip and Keith returned to the party where they found JC talking to Billy and Allen. "You having fun, guys?

"Oh yeah," Billy replied as he looked at Keith cautiously, not knowing what to expect from him.

"Josh?" Keith said timidly.

"Yeah, Keith." JC replied, already knowing that Keith was feeling regret at his outburst.

"I'm sorry Josh," Keith said. "I didn't mean to blow up at you."

JC pulled Keith into his arms as he said, "It's okay, kiddo. We all have our moments."

"Dad explained everything to me," Keith said with relief, knowing that JC really understood and accepted his apology.

"Good," JC said then pulled out of the hug and took hold of Keith by the shoulders.

JC turned Keith to face the driveway and said, "Because right now, someone needs you badly."

Keith looked out over the driveway to see Ethan walking up with two boys holding him.

* * * * *

Teri, Mona, Joe and Vincent walked over in time to see Keith walk away from Chip and JC.

"Do you have a minute to talk with me Chip?" Teri asked quietly.

"Let's see what's going on first." Chip whispered, keeping his focus on Keith and his boyfriend.

Teri glanced at Joe and received a nod of agreement, then waited to see what was going to happen next.

* * * * *

Keith's heart broke at the sad look on Ethan's face.

"What happened?" Keith asked in panic as he ran to Ethan's side.

Kenny and Kevin simultaneously pulled back from Ethan to allow Keith to hug him.

"My parents... I finally came out to them and... It's worse than I imagined. They disowned me. They completely cut me off and said they never wanted to see me again." Ethan said as tears fell down his cheeks.

"Then you're better off without them. If they can suddenly stop loving you because you're gay, then it's not really love, it's just their way of trying to control you." Keith said quietly, then pulled out of the hug to look Ethan in the eyes.

"I love you Ethan. No matter what." Keith said firmly.

"You don't have to do anything or be anything other than yourself for me. I love the person that you are and I'll never stop loving you." Keith said as he kept a firm gaze.

"I knew that." Ethan said with a watery smile of joy as he looked deeply into Keith's eyes.

"I know, but I thought you might need to hear it." Keith said gently, then pulled Ethan into a deep, passionate kiss.

"Guys?" JC said, feeling that they needed to be reminded that there were other people around.

Keith broke out of the kiss, and looked at JC with question.

"From the look of it, you two have some things to talk about. So before you go upstairs, I just want to say one thing." JC said seriously.

Everyone watching was silent, waiting to see what JC was going to say.

"Ethan, you've been a part of our family since Keith brought you to meet us the first time." JC said seriously as he put an arm around Chip.

JC glanced at his husband and received a nod to continue.

"Chip and I want you to know that this is your home now. You don't ever have to worry about being 'cut off' by us." JC said with assurance.

"But what if..." Ethan started to say, but couldn't continue past the lump in his throat.

"We aren't doing this because Keith loves you. We've gotten to know you and consider you one of our kids. From now on. You'll *never* be cut off." JC said firmly.

"Thanks." Ethan whispered as he held Keith close to his side.

"And I'm going to take care of your college expenses." JC said seriously.

"I can't let you do that." Ethan said quickly.

"Ethan, you've been working on this degree for years and it only makes sense that you finish. It would be a crime to let all your hard work go to waste." JC said more quietly.

"I'll pay you back." Ethan said firmly.

"If you feel you have to, that's fine. But this isn't about the money. It's about helping you have the best possible future." JC said, then looked at Chip to find him nodding in agreement.

"Now you two should go inside. I have a feeling that you two need to talk." JC said with a smile.

"Yeah. Thanks Josh. I don't know how I'll ever repay you for all this." Ethan said as the tears started flowing down his cheeks again.

JC released his husband and walked to Ethan to pull him into a hug of comfort.

"Just make the most perfect future that you can for yourself. That's all the payment I'll ever ask." JC said from the hug.

* * * * *

After Keith and Ethan had left the gathering, there was a long moment of silence that was finally broken by Chip asking, "Did you need to ask me something Teri?"

Teri thought for a moment, then said, "Oh, yes. Joe and Vincent need a secure location to stay in tonight. You know, to keep Vincent away from the media and CPS."

"I already asked Hazel to get a room ready for them. I just naturally assumed that they would be staying here." Chip said frankly.

"Oh, well then, if that's alright with you guys, I guess it's settled." Teri said happily.

"Is that okay with you, Champ?" Joe asked quietly.

"Let's see, is it okay with me if I get to stay in the mansion where Commander Dodds from the *Enterprise* lives..." Vincent said in a playful, considering voice.

"Should I take that as a yes?" Joe asked with a chuckle.

"Well DUH. Can you think of anyplace on the planet that would be better than this?" Vincent asked seriously.

Joe laughed and said, "No Vincent, I can't."

* * * * *

"What's going on Dad?" Jake asked as he walked out of the house with Xain at his side and Edovina in his arms.

Allen looked around, then cautiously said, "I don't know. I think the gathering is finally starting to wind down."

"Does that mean we can leave?" Jake asked hopefully.

"Sure. Is something wrong?" Allen asked with concern.

"No. We've just been here all day and I'd really like to just be at home where I can relax." Jake said honestly.

"I'll go tell Juana and Billy that we're going. You two can go get your brothers." Allen said quickly.

"Three." Jake said as he lifted Edovina.

"Right. Go on." Allen said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Mona, were getting ready to leave. Are you going to come with us or do you want to take a cab?" Allen asked as he approached Joe, Mona and Vincent.

"If you'll give Joe your address and phone number I'll go with you." Mona said with a smile.

Allen looked at Mona with question.

"We're going on a date tomorrow." Joe said with a happy smile.

"Oh, okay. Do you have something to write on?" Allen asked quickly.

Joe reached in his pocket and pulled out a small address book and a pen.

Allen filled in the information quickly, then handed the address book back to Joe.

After a moment of looking at the address, Joe flipped a few pages back and said, "Your address is almost the same as Billy's."

"Yeah. He lives right across the street from me." Allen said with a smile.

"Oh, well that works out fine." Joe said happily.

"I'll see you tomorrow Joe." Mona said with a girlish twinkle in her eyes.

"I'll see you then." Joe said, then moved in to give her a quick kiss.

Allen glanced down to Vincent, feeling funny about intruding on his mother's personal life.

"He said he was straight." Vincent said with a smile.

Allen giggled at the statement and smiled at the young boy.

* * * * *

"Are you guys ready to go? Dad's about ready to leave." Jake said as he walked to Kenny and Kevin.

"Yeah. It's been fun but I'm really tired." Kevin said seriously.

"Same here. It feels like this day has gone on forever." Jake said honestly.

Kenny nodded his agreement.

"Come on. Let's see if Lawrence and Deacon are ready to go too." Jake said with a smile at his brothers.

"Deacon's right over there." Kenny said as he pointed.

Jake looked where Kenny was pointing, then took off across the pool area.

* * * * *

Allen walked to Juana and said, "We're about to leave. Do you want to come with us?"

Juana considered for a moment, then said, "I would like to stay so I can help to clean up after the gathering."

Allen smiled and said, "That sounds like a good idea. Would you like me to take the boys home with me? That way Ricardo can lay down when he gets sleepy."

"Yes. If it wouldn't be a problem for you." Juana said shyly.

"I've got Mona and all the boys to help me watch after them so it won't be a problem at all. You'll have the beamer so you can stay as long as you want and have fun." Allen said gently.

"Thank you Allen. I didn't even realize before how limited my life had become. I am very happy in my new life here." Juana said timidly.

"Having you here makes all our lives a lot easier. Have a good night." Allen said frankly.

Juana nodded, then went back to tidying up the snack food table by the pool.

* * * * *

"Hey Deacon. We're about to take off. Do you want to come with us?" Jake asked happily as he approached.

Deacon looked around and saw that Billy was just a few feet away.

"Billy, the guys are leaving. Do you want to hang around or go with them?" Deacon asked curiously.

"I just have one thing to do, then I'll be ready to go. Why don't you guys go find Lawrence while I talk to Chip and Josh?" Billy asked casually.

"Okay." Deacon said with a happy smile, then looked at Jake to see if he was going to go with him.

"I think he's inside, let's go get him." Jake said happily.

The ever increasing group of boys headed for the house as Billy looked around the pool area trying to find their hosts.

* * * * *

"Hey Lawrence, what's up?" Deacon asked as he walked into the family room and approached Lawrence cautiously.

"Hey Deke, I just needed a couple minutes of peace and quiet." Lawrence said, then noticed the rest of the boys entering the room.

"We're getting ready to leave and wanted to see if you're ready to go." Deacon said with a gentle smile.

"Very ready. That whole thing with Mikey is still blowing my mind." Lawrence said in a tired voice.

"I wasn't even thinking about that. I just want to be alone with you for a little bit." Deacon said timidly.

Lawrence smiled at the statement, then said, "That sounds perfect Deke, let's go."

* * * * *

"Did the guys already talk to you?" Allen asked as he approached Billy.

"Yeah. I just need to talk to Chip or JC for a second before we leave. Do you know where they went?" Billy asked as he continued to look around.

"Yes. I saw them go inside a few minutes ago." Allen said, then noticed that Mona had joined him.

"There's JC, let's go." Billy said quickly and started walking toward the door.

Allen and Mona followed to see what Billy was planning.

"JC, do you have a minute?" Billy asked as he ran to JC's side.

"Sure, what's up?" JC asked casually.

"Before we leave, I just wanted to ask you if it would be okay if I did a photo shoot here." Billy asked quickly.

"What kind of photo shoot?" JC asked cautiously.

"Well, I've got this children's fashion shoot that I've been trying to get done for a while now but I haven't been able to get it together. I think your home would be the perfect location for the shoot." Billy said honestly.

"Why?" JC asked curiously.

"The color scheme and architecture would be the perfect compliment to the clothing line. I still need to find the right model, but I wanted to be sure that I could use your house as a location before I started working on that." Billy said seriously.

JC considered for a moment, then smiled as he said, "I think that sounds nice. Sure. Come by whenever you want."

"Thanks Josh. Finding the right location was half the battle. If I can find the right model, this layout will be a work of art." Billy said happily.

"Make sure you send us a copy of the prints when you're finished. I'd like to see what you come up with." JC said, drawn into Billy's enthusiasm.

"I'll do that. Thanks again. I'd better get going, there's a group of boys staring at me to get a move on." Billy said as he glanced at the gathering in the driveway.

JC looked over and chuckled at the intent expressions on all the boys faces.

"Yeah, you'd better go before they come and get you." JC said with a smile.

* * * * *

Allen glanced in the rearview mirror to find Kenny and Kevin both wearing beaming smiles.

"Is everything alright?" Allen asked curiously.

"Everything is great." Kevin answered immediately.

"Something must have happened on your trip, you really seem to be in a much better mood than when you left." Allen said speculatively.

"Yeah. We went to see Kevin's mom, then we went to Chicago and helped this guy who Kevin and Jake know who got shot in the face and then... well, some stuff happened at the camp and now we're here." Kenny said happily.

"Stuff?" Mona asked curiously.

"Yeah. Stuff." Kevin said with a chuckle.

Mona glanced at Allen with a smile, then decided to play along and asked, "What kind of stuff?"

"Good stuff." Kenny said with a mischievous grin.

"I don't think they're going to tell you." Allen said as he tried to restrain his laughter.

"I wouldn't be so sure." Mona said, then turned to look at the two brothers side by side.

Kenny and Kevin saw the determined look in Mona's eyes and simultaneously broke into uncontrollable laughter.

Jake smiled at the reaction and said, "I think they've got you outnumbered Grandma."

"Then why don't you tell me what's going on?" Mona said seriously as she turned her determined gaze on Jake.

"Because I don't know. I was in the next room when whatever it was happened. But they're happy, so why mess with it?" Jake asked with a smile.

Mona looked consideringly at the boys for a moment, then turned to face forward in her seat.

"So is everyone doing alright now?" Allen asked with a happy smile.

"We're good." Kenny said happily.

"Yeah, us too." Jake said as he put an arm around Xain.

"How about you Reuben?" Allen asked as he peeked in the rearview mirror.

"We had fun with all our new brothers." Reuben said happily.

"Timmy and Ricky told me I was bestest at giving hugs." Ricardo said proudly.

"I have to agree with that." Allen said happily as he pulled his car into the driveway.

"It's good to be home." Allen said as he sat for a moment and stared at the house.

"It's better than my best dream for you." Mona said as she was captivated by the peaceful mood that had fallen over the group.

"When I left for Chicago, I thought I was leaving my home forever. I was just going to my new home. This is where I belong." Kenny said honestly.

"I always lived in apartments and never felt like anyplace was home until I was here with all of you." Kevin said and hugged his brother happily.

"When I was on the streets, I dreamed about what it would be like to have a home where I didn't have to worry about finding food or a safe place to sleep... but I never dreamed anything like this." Jake said as he pulled Xain to his side.

"My home on Vulcan was filled with the memories of my mother and the sadness of her loss. This home is filled with hopes and dreams for the future." Xain said in a quiet, contemplative voice.

"I've got to pee." Ricardo said loudly.

Everyone started laughing at the statement. The peaceful spell that had fallen over the group was broken and everyone started to get out of the SUV.

Allen opened the front door and stood aside as his family entered the house.

Kenny stopped at Allen's side and said, "When Dad died, I thought everything good in my life was gone. I never thought I'd be happy again."

Allen pulled Kenny into a hug and said, "I know Cute Stuff. But that's just the way life is sometimes. Every now and then things seem to fall apart all around you and you don't know what to do next. But later you realize that everything fell apart so that something new could take it's place."

"I love you Pop." Kenny said as he held Allen tightly.

"I love you too. Come inside now, we're home."

CHAPTER 49: Epilogue

Allen awoke to an overwhelming sense of peace.

He got out of bed and walked to look out over the lake as he enjoyed the peaceful serenity of his life.

Long minutes passed as he thought about how perfect his life had become in less than a week.

A slight knocking on his door broke him out of his thoughts.

Allen turned and smiled to see Kevin standing in his doorway.

"Come on in Little One. How are you feeling this morning?" Allen asked with a contented smile.

"I feel good. I just... I don't know what I'm supposed to do." Kevin said as he walked to Allen's side.

"Well, I have some errands to run this morning, so if you want to, you can get dressed and come with me." Allen said as he gave Kevin a gentle hug.

"Where are we going?" Kevin asked curiously.

"Oh, to the bank and we're going to stop by an interior design place to drop off the key to my old house." Allen said quietly.

"Just you and me?" Kevin asked quietly.

"That's right. Just you and me." Allen said with a gentle smile.

Kevin hugged Allen again and said, "I love you Poppa."

"I love you too Little One. Now go get dressed so we can get our running done." Allen said happily.

Kevin pulled Allen down and gave him a kiss on the cheek, then hurried out of the room.

Allen smiled, then started to get ready for his day.

* * * * *

"Good morning Jake. How are you doing this morning?" Allen asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"I'm fine. Are you going somewhere?" Jake asked curiously, noticing that Allen was fully dressed.

"Kevin and I are just going to run a few errands. Would you mind watching over things while I'm gone?" Allen asked as he poured himself a small glass of juice.

"Um, sure." Jake said uncertainly.

"I won't be gone long and if there's any trouble, Juana is in her apartment." Allen said carefully.

"Okay. Do you want me to make breakfast or anything?" Jake asked as he looked around.

"If you want to that's fine. But we have cereal and juice if you want to let everyone get their own. I'll leave it up to you." Allen said with a smile.

"Okay. Thanks Dad." Jake said happily.

"We'll be back in about half an hour." Allen said as he saw Kevin walking into the kitchen.

"I think I'm going to try to make breakfast, so be ready to eat when you get back." Jake said happily.

"That sounds nice. See you soon." Allen said, then gave Jake a quick hug.

Jake smiled as he watched Allen and Kevin walk out of the kitchen, then concentrated as he mentally asked, '*T'hy'la*, how do you make breakfast?'

* * * * *

"Lookit!" Reuben called from the utility room doorway.

Kenny, Jake and Xain all looked up at the abrupt exclamation.

"What is it Reuben?" Kenny asked with concern.

"Come on." Reuben said and ran out the door.

"You are in charge while Dad is away *T'hy'la*. I will continue the food preparation." Xain said seriously.

"Okay. I'll be right back." Jake said, then rushed to see why Reuben was so excited.

* * * * *

Kenny was staring, not sure what to do when Jake walked to his side.

"Ricardo, get away from that dog, you don't know if he's friendly or not." Jake warned as he rushed to Ricardo's side.

"He's nice. He's a Possum." Ricardo said seriously as he hugged the dog.

"No Ricardo, that's not an opossum. That's a dog, a big dog." Jake said as he tried to coax Ricardo to let loose of the dog.

"Nuh uh. He's a Possum." Ricardo said firmly as he continued to hug the dog.

Jake noticed the collar that the dog was wearing and tried to find if there was a name on it.

Kenny was surprised when Jake started laughing.

"What's funny?" Kenny asked with concern.

"Ricardo was right. His name is Possum." Jake said with a smile.

Reuben walked to Jake's side, holding a children's book.

"What's that you've got?" Jake asked curiously.

Reuben opened the book to a particular page and held it out for Jake to see.

The book was a picture book of the letters of the alphabet. On the letter 'O' there was a picture of an opossum. The picture of the animal in the book had the same coloring and general facial features as the large dog.

"Well, I guess we know where he got his name." Jake said as he noticed that the dog was enjoying Ricardo's attention.

"What should we do?" Kenny asked as he hesitantly approached.

"There's an address on the collar. It looks like it's right down the street. Let's wait till Dad gets home, then we can take Possum back to where he belongs." Jake said as he knelt by the dog's side and started to pet him gently.

"You don't think he's dangerous do you?" Kenny asked cautiously.

"I don't think so. Possum looks like he's been taken care of. He's clean and looks like he's well fed and he's wearing a collar." Jake said as he continued to pet the dog.

"I want Possum to stay with us." Ricardo said firmly.

"Ricardo, I bet there's a kid a few houses away who's upset because his dog ran away from home. You wouldn't want someone to be unhappy would you?" Jake asked seriously.

Ricardo reluctantly shook his head.

"We'll make sure that Possum has a good home. If he only lives a few houses away, maybe you'll be able to go visit him." Jake said with a gentle smile.

Kenny hesitantly took another step toward the large dog.

"Don't worry Ken, he's really nice." Jake said with assurance as he stood and took a step away to let Kenny have a chance at petting him.

"Okay." Kenny said hesitantly as he took the final step, then knelt beside the dog.

After holding his hand out where Possum could sniff it, Kenny hesitantly began to pet him.

"There you go Ken. I think you've made a new friend." Jake said with a smile.

"Possum's hungry." Ricardo said as he looked at Jake seriously.

"Hmmm. I bet he is." Jake said as he looked at the dog carefully.

"Can Possum have some food?" Ricardo asked hopefully.

"Dad should be home any minute. We'll ask him if it's okay." Jake said seriously.

Ricardo thought about the answer for a moment, then renewed his hug.

* * * * *

Allen pulled into the driveway of his home to see all the boys gathered around a large dog.

"It looks like you guys have made a new friend." Allen said as he got out of the car.

"Yeah. His name is Possum. Ricardo says he's hungry but I didn't know if you'd want him to come in the house or not." Jake said as he walked to Allen's side.

Allen looked over the dog for a moment, then said, "He looks like he's been well cared for. I think it would be okay."

"The address on the collar is right down the street. I thought that after breakfast that we could take him back to his home." Jake said seriously.

Allen smiled at Jake and said, "That sounds like a good idea. I'll leave it up to you."

Jake smiled at Allen's trust in him and said, "Okay, breakfast is almost ready. Let's all go inside."

* * * * *

"What's this?" Allen asked as he walked into the kitchen and spotted a bowl in the floor.

"I prepared a bowl of food for the canine in anticipation of your approval that he join us for the morning meal." Xain said as he carried a bowl and a tray to the table.

"Thank you Xain." Allen said with a chuckle as he took his seat at the head of the table.

"It looks like we're going to need another chair." Jake said as he took a head count.

"I'll get it." Kenny said as he rushed out of the kitchen.

Reuben and Ricardo walked on either side of Possum through the utility room and guided him to the kitchen.

"His food is right there. We should probably get him a bowl of water too." Allen said as he began to stand.

"I will get it Dad. Please enjoy your breakfast." Xain said as he stood.

"Thanks Xain." Allen said, then looked over the selection of breakfast foods before him.

"This looks great Xain. I was really just expecting cereal." Allen said as he scooped a helping of scrambled eggs from a bowl.

"Cereal does not fulfill the nutritional requirements for a meal. It is preferable to have a substantial meal at the beginning of the day to sustain a healthy energy level." Xain said seriously as he placed a bowl of water in the floor for Possum.

The dog sniffed the bowl of food, then began to wolf it down hungrily.

"He must have been really hungry." Kenny said as he carried a chair to the table.

"Maybe, but I think most big dogs eat that way." Allen said speculatively.

"Do you think we could get a dog?" Kevin asked quietly.

Allen thought for a moment, then said, "I don't see any problem with that. Let's put that on our list of things to do this weekend while we're out sightseeing."

Kevin smiled and said, "Thanks Poppa."

"Aren't you going to eat anything Ricardo?" Reuben asked curiously.

Ricardo turned away from the dog, then looked at his brother with question.

"Aren't you hungry?" Reuben asked with concern.

Ricardo looked around the table full of food, then nodded.

"Why don't you help him fill his plate Reuben?" Allen asked gently.

Reuben smiled and started dishing out the food that he knew his brother liked.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" Mona asked as she walked into the kitchen.

Kenny picked up his plate and glass and moved it to the kitchen counter.

A moment later he returned with an empty plate and glass for Mona.

"Here you go Grandma. It's ready for you." Kenny said with a smile.

Mona took the offered seat and smiled at the selection before her.

Allen smiled with pride at Kenny's thoughtfulness as he watched Kenny climb onto the barstool at the kitchen counter.

"You really do eat like royalty." Mona said as she started dishing out food.

"I don't know about royalty, but Xain is making sure that we're getting a good solid breakfast to get us through the day." Allen said happily.

The sound of a bowl scooting on the floor drew Mona's attention and she looked in wonder at the massive dog eating by the utility room door.

"That's Possum. He's just visiting." Jake said with a smile at Mona's curious expression.

"He seems to be right at home." Mona said, then continued to fill her plate from the selections before her.

"Is that what I think it is?" Mona asked as she pointed to a small bowl.

"If you believe it to be grits, then yes." Xain said seriously.

Mona chuckled at the statement and said, "That's exactly what I thought it was. I haven't had grits in years."

"Would you like syrup or cream to accentuate the taste?" Xain asked curiously.

"No. Butter is all I need." Mona said happily.

"I didn't notice the grits, would you pass them this way?" Allen asked with a smile.

"You never liked grits." Mona said before taking a bite of her breakfast.

"I guess my tastes changed as I got older." Allen said as he scooped out a serving of grits for himself.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sleep so late." Juana said as she rushed into the kitchen, pushing Edovina's stroller.

"It's fine Juana. Please sit down and have breakfast with us." Allen said with a smile.

Kevin picked up his juice glass and moved it to the barstool beside Kenny, then got an empty glass and sat it beside the empty plate where he had been sitting.

"Go ahead Juana. There's plenty." Allen said with a smile.

Kevin moved the barstool beside Kenny and turned to watch.

"Thank you. This looks very good." Juana said as she took the seat.

"And we have a guest this morning. This is Possum." Allen said as he indicated the dog by the utility room door.

"Oh my. That is a very big dog." Juana said hesitantly.

"Yeah, but he's really nice." Jake said with assurance.

"Poppa says that we can look for a dog this weekend." Kevin said happily.

Juana looked at Allen with question.

"I think it will be good for the boys to have a dog to play with and take care of." Allen said honestly.

A knock on the front door surprised everyone gathered around the table.

"It's Billy." Kenny said with a smile as he hopped off his bar stool.

"I'll get another chair." Jake said as he carried his plate to the breakfast bar.

Xain carried his plate and glass to the breakfast bar, then returned to the table with three empty plates.

"How do you guys know it's Billy?" Allen asked curiously.

"Who else would it be?" Kevin asked with a smile.

Allen chuckled and said, "You've got me there."

"You're just in time for breakfast. Come on in." Allen said happily as Billy, Deacon and Lawrence walked into the room.

"I actually came over to invite you out to breakfast." Billy said as he looked at the three empty places set at the table.

"Next time. Come on before it gets cold." Allen said with a grand smile.

"It looks like you were expecting us, so thanks." Billy said as he took his seat.

"Sufficient food was prepared for all who might attend." Xain said from his place at the breakfast bar.

"What's that?" Deacon asked as he pointed.

"Grits." Billy said with a smile.

"I don't know what that is, but just the name says that I don't like it." Deacon said as he looked at the other selections.

"Just take a spoonful and give it a try. It's really good with butter." Billy said as he dipped out a portion for himself.

"Okay." Deacon said hesitantly.

"Oh, and that's Possum." Allen said as he pointed at the dog who was watching everyone curiously.

"When do you get a dog?" Billy asked with surprise.

"He's just visiting. He's a really well behaved dog." Allen said seriously.

"Yeah, he was out in the yard this morning. His collar says that he belongs to someone about four or five houses that way." Jake said and pointed.

Billy thought for a second, then said, "I don't really know too many people in the neighborhood. I don't spend too much time here."

"We're going to take Possum home after breakfast." Jake said casually.

"So what do you have planned for today?" Billy asked curiously before taking a bite of food.

"A day off." Allen said frankly.

"That sounds perfect." Mona said with a contented smile.

Billy nodded his agreement.

"I was thinking that we could just bum around here this morning and do whatever we feel like, then this afternoon maybe we could swim." Allen said with a smile.

"That sounds perfect." Billy said with a loving smile at Allen.

"What do you think of the grits Deke?" Billy asked curiously.

"I don't know. I think I like them." Deacon said slowly.

Billy chuckled at the response.

"How are you this morning Lawrence?" Allen asked cheerfully.

"Um.. fine. Still not awake." Lawrence said groggily.

"Did you guys stay up late?" Allen asked curiously.

"Yeah. We were talking and stuff. The next thing we knew it was after midnight." Lawrence said with a tired smile.

"I think I need to hang out at Billy's place. These old ladies were in bed by ten last night." Mona said frankly.

Billy and Deacon laughed at the statement.

"It was a long day." Allen said in his defense.

"Are you finished with your plate?" Xain asked from Allen's side.

Allen nodded and moved slightly so Xain could take his empty plate away.

Within a minute, Jake, Kenny and Kevin were also helping to clear the table.

"I'll be done in a second." Billy said, then hurried to take another bite.

"There's no rush Billy. We're just getting the empty dishes out of the way. Take your time." Kenny said as he picked up the empty plates from Reuben and Ricardo.

"Yeah. It's better for us to do it like this than waiting until everyone is finished before we start cleaning up.... It's logical." Jake finished with a grin at Xain.

Billy smiled and said, "Thanks Jake, that makes perfect sense."

"Did you guys figure out if you want to go to Camp Little Eagle or not?" Billy asked casually.

"I'll go if Lawrence does." Kenny said immediately.

Lawrence looked at Kenny with confusion.

"Me too." Kevin said with a serious look at his brother.

"What's so special about me?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

Kenny looked at Deacon, waiting for him to explain.

"I talked to the guys and we decided yesterday that if you don't like Camp Little Eagle, then we'll find someplace that you do like and go there with you." Deacon said quietly.

Lawrence looked at Deacon with confusion, then realized what he was really saying.

"So, if Camp Little Eagle didn't want me because I was a cross dresser, then all three of you wouldn't go?" Lawrence asked in confirmation.

"No. All of us. I don't think Jake or Xain would want to go to a school that wouldn't take you just because of the way you like to dress." Kenny said seriously.

"Yeah. We all like you Lawrence and we won't let anyone hurt you." Kevin said firmly.

Lawrence smiled at Kevin and said, "Thanks guys, but I don't think it's going to be a problem. Cory made me a member of Clan Short so I could help other people like me. I think that Camp Little Eagle is the perfect place for me to go to school because it's where I'll have the best chance of helping people. But if anyone ever gives me any trouble it's good to know that I'll have all of you watching out for me."

"So have you all agreed that you want to go to Camp Little Eagle?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Yeah. The guys seem nice. Trent and Jose and Obie are really funny." Kevin said with a big smile.

"And Dylan is there." Kenny said more quietly.

"Oh, yeah. Poppa, can Dylan come over and visit us sometimes? He's our friend and I think he'd feel better if he didn't have to stay at the Camp all the time." Kevin said seriously.

Allen looked at Jake with question.

"Kevin's right, I think it would be good if Dylan could come over and hang out with us. He's from my old neighborhood and went through a lot of the same stuff that I did and I think it would help him if we had a chance to talk about stuff away from the camp." Jake said with concern.

"Are you talking about the Chinese boy from the next block?" Juana asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But he was only doing the stuff he had to back then. He's really okay." Jake said quickly.

"He was always kind to me and my family." Juana said quietly.

"If we can clear it with the camp and if Dylan wants to come over, then I see no problem with it." Allen said cautiously.

"Thanks Dad. He's really alright. I promise." Jake said seriously.

"That's all I need to know." Allen said with a smile at his son.

"Are you done?" Kevin asked from Billy's side.

"Yeah. I couldn't eat another bite." Billy said happily.

Kevin smiled as he took Billy's plate.

"How about you guys?" Kenny asked as he stood between Lawrence and Deacon.

"Oh yeah, I'm done." Deacon said as he pushed away from the table.

"Me too. Everything was great." Lawrence said with appreciation.

"Then why don't we go into the living room for a while and relax. I don't think I'd be able to do much else after a meal like this." Allen said happily.

"I believe Edovina needs to be changed. I will attend to her needs before starting the dishes." Xain said seriously.

"Don't worry about the dishes *T'hy'la*. You did most of the cooking, so we'll do the dishes." Jake said with a gentle smile.

"We want to help too." Deacon said as he stood.

"We can get it..." Jake began to say but was interrupted.

"Either you let us help or we won't be able to eat over here anymore. We're either family or we aren't." Lawrence said firmly.

Jake looked at Lawrence with surprise, then broke into a smile and said, "Well, if you can say something like that, you're family."

"Yeah. How are you at loading a dishwasher?" Kenny asked with a smile.

"Just watch me go." Lawrence said happily and moved into position.

* * * * *

"I feel that I should be helping in the kitchen." Juana said quietly as she took her seat in the living room.

"Let the kids do it Juana. Once we're all going to work and school, there's going to be plenty for you to do around here." Allen said seriously.

"Besides, it makes them happy to be able to help out. I wouldn't want to take that away from them." Mona said gently.

Juana nodded her agreement.

"Dad, Ken and I are going to take Possum over to the address on his collar. We'll be right back." Jake said as he poked his head into the living room.

"I thought you were doing dishes." Allen said curiously.

"I was going to, but there's not enough jobs for everyone so Ken and I thought we could go do this." Jake said frankly.

"Do you want one of us to go with you? I mean, you don't know these people." Allen said cautiously.

"Don't worry Dad. Ken has his phone and I can call Xain through our bond if there's any trouble." Jake said with a smile.

"Okay, but be careful." Allen said seriously.

"I will." Jake said with a smile and hurried out.

"He'll be fine." Mona said quietly.

"I know he can take care of himself, but I can't help but worry." Allen said helplessly.

"You did the right thing. Jake needs to know that you trust him to do things on his own." Mona said honestly.

"I know." Allen said with resignation.

* * * * *

"What do you guys want to do now?" Kevin asked as he wiped down the kitchen counter tops.

"I don't know. What do you feel like doing?" Deacon asked curiously.

"I kinda feel like playing a game." Kevin said carefully.

"What about Monopoly?" Deacon said with a beaming smile.

"You'll have to show me how to play... and maybe read for me." Kevin said timidly.

"No problem. We'll show you how to play and all of us will help you read." Lawrence said happily.

"Can Ricardo play too?" Reuben asked slowly.

"Let me see. Ricardo, how many is this?" Deacon asked and held up three fingers.

"That's three." Ricardo said with a smile.

"Good enough. If you'll show him what to do, he can move your piece for you." Deacon said with a smile.

"Yeah. That sounds good." Reuben said happily.

"I'll go get the game and we can play." Deacon said as he hopped up from the table.

* * * * *

"Did you remember to drop off the key to the interior decorator this morning?" Billy asked as he relaxed back into the couch.

"Yeah. First thing." Allen said in a drowsy voice.

"Any idea of what he's planning to do?" Billy asked as he turned to glance at Allen.

"Not a clue. Damon just said that he ordered everything he would need yesterday and that he'd start work later today." Allen said with a smile.

"So it doesn't bother you to have this work being done without knowing exactly what he's doing?" Billy asked cautiously.

"No. I know that Damon is very good at what he does. Even though some of his designs are a little bit over the top, they're always really good." Allen said honestly.

"I guess I'll just have to go with it. I just hope the guys will like it." Billy said as he rested back again.

"From the way you describe them, they'll probably be happy with anyplace that has a roof and a refrigerator." Allen said frankly.

Billy considered the statement for a moment, then said, "Yeah, pretty much."

* * * * *

"We're back." Jake said as he walked into the living room with Kenny on one side and Possum on the other.

"What happened?" Allen asked curiously.

"No one was home." Jake said simply.

"Oh. I guess you'll have to try again later." Allen said in a relaxed tone.

"Where is everyone?" Jake asked curiously.

"You know, I don't have a clue. I never heard them leave the kitchen." Allen said in realization.

"Come on." Billy said as he hopped up from the couch.

Allen was following a step behind.

Allen, Billy, Jake and Kevin all stood in the doorway and watched as the boys were sitting around the kitchen table setting up the Monopoly board.

Billy smiled as he felt Allen pull him into a gentle hug.

"I wanna be the doggie, I call him Possum." Ricardo announced loudly.

"Okay Ricardo, since you're going to be moving Reuben's piece for him you can have the dog... I think I want the cannon." Kevin said as he looked through the playing pieces.

"Will you get me the top hat?" Lawrence asked as he unwrapped the bundles of play money.

Kenny tugged on Jake's arm then tilted his head, silently asking him to 'come on'.

Jake smiled and walked to the table at Kenny's side.

"Did you save me the shoe?" Jake asked as he approached.

"Yeah, no one got it yet." Kevin said happily.

"There's too many of us." Lawrence said as he looked around.

"That's okay, I'll be your banker." Deacon said as he walked behind Lawrence and gave him a hug.

"Will you be my banker *T'hy'la*?" Jake asked Xain with a loving smile.

"I will be your everything." Xain said as a simple statement of fact.

"Later..." Jake said with a wink.

Allen turned and gave Billy a quick kiss, then devoted his attention to the boys playing the game.

"Kev, I'll be your banker and read for you if you need it." Kenny said seriously.

"I don't have a banker." Reuben said as he looked around.

"Don't worry Reuben. I'll be your banker too." Kenny said with a smile.

Reuben smiled and nodded his agreement.

"Let's go." Allen whispered and guided Billy back to the living room.

* * * * *

"Is everything okay in there?" Mona asked as Billy and Allen walked back into the living room.

"It's fine. I would have thought that a group of this many boys would be tearing the place apart and driving us all crazy but they're in there entertaining themselves and cooperating with each other." Allen said honestly.

"They've adjusted the rules of Monopoly to include eight people and they even gave Ricardo a job." Billy said with a tender smile.

"What are you going to do about the ox?" Mona asked as she looked at the large dog sitting quietly by the living room door.

"The boys can try to take him home again after they're done playing their game." Allen said thoughtfully.

A long moment of silence fell over the room as everyone sat and considered the events of the past few days.

"Don't be surprised if I start spending a lot of time in Orlando." Mona said distantly.

"We'll always have a place for you." Allen said with a gentle smile.

"And all the boys love having you around." Billy said honestly.

"I love spending time with them too. But what I was really thinking is that my manager can run the bar just fine without me constantly being there. I think that maybe it's time for me to start taking some time for myself to do the things that I really want to do." Mona said distantly.

"That sounds nice. I think that after all these years of devoting every waking moment to that bar that you deserve to be able to get up and go if you want to." Allen said frankly.

"It hasn't been a burden. I really haven't had anything else that I've wanted to do. I've passed up a few motorcycle rallies and monster truck shows because I didn't feel comfortable leaving the bar, but I could have worked it out if I really wanted to." Mona said thoughtfully.

"I know what you mean. I'm the same way with my work. I'm under contract for some of it but the rest is just there, needing to be done, so I do it. I don't really need all the jobs I do but I don't have anything better to do... well, at least I didn't until this week." Billy said with a tender smile at Allen.

"Are you planning to make some changes?" Mona asked curiously.

"Nothing major. I think I'm just going to slow down a little so I can spend more time at home. I'll still do my major projects, but I won't take on the little jobs to fill my time like I've been doing." Billy said thoughtfully.

"I'm glad. I like having you and the boys around." Allen said with a loving smile at Billy.

"We like being here too. Coming over here is like having a real home." Billy said with contentment.

* * * * *

All the adults continued to talk casually as the boys played their game.

"Dad, we're going to try and take Possum home again." Jake said from the doorway.

"Is your game over?" Allen asked casually.

"Yeah. Deacon and Lawrence beat the stuffing out of all of us." Jake said with a smile.

"Deke will do that. He's a real hardass when it comes to Monopoly." Billy said frankly.

"It was fun. He took it easy on Reuben and Ricardo so it's okay." Jake said gently.

"I'm glad you had a good time. I think Juana is making lunch, so don't take too long." Allen said seriously.

"Yeah, she's got some soup cooking that smells great. We'll be back before you know it." Jake said with a smile.

"Okay. Just remember to be careful." Allen said cautiously.

"I will Dad." Jake said with a smile, then took hold of Possum's collar to guide him out of the room.

* * * * *

"This is it." Jake said to Kenny as he looked at the house number on the curb.

"Let's go. I'm really getting hungry." Kenny said as he started up the walkway.

Jake pressed the doorbell and waited for a moment as he looked around at the neat little house.

"Hello?" A woman said curiously as she answered the door.

"Hi. I'm Jake and this is my brother Ken. We found your dog." Jake said with a friendly smile.

The woman looked confused for a moment, then broke into a happy smile and said, "Oh, that's wonderful. Rory's going to be so happy to know that Possum is back. Please come in, I know he'll want to thank you."

"No, that's alright..." Jake began to say.

"Come on Jake. We don't know anyone here." Kenny said urgently.

"Okay Ken. I wouldn't want to pass up the chance to make a new friend." Jake said with a smile.

The End