Okudai Vignettes
Part 1: Frontier

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Chapter 1-30 of Okudai Vignettes is identical to Frontier 1-30.

At chapter 31, the story follows the Okudai.

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Perfect sense." Joe said quietly.

"What about Daddy Joe?" Vincent asked hopefully.

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

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

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

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

Vincent nodded as he considered the words.

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

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

All of a sudden, he spotted it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vincent smiled and proudly said, "I am."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Crewman?" Vincent and Rory asked simultaneously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vincent looked at Brady and gave a nod of relief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you see that tall building right there?"

Vincent looked where Joe was pointing and nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

"Daddy Joe?" Vincent asked cautiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's that?" Joe asked curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I work in communications." Debbie said seriously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joe looked at the woman with surprise at the question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Danietta looked at Joe with wide, disbelieving eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"KEWL!" Vincent said happily.

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

"Joe?" Danietta whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How horrible." Danietta said distantly.

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

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

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

Danietta smiled at the good news.

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

Danietta reached over and patted his hand in comfort.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You do?" Dani asked in wonder.

"Grandma Mona?" Vincent asked quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

"There it is." Joe finally said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

Vincent nodded his comprehension.

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

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

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

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

Joe looked at Vincent with question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You already have." Joe said quietly.

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I understand." Vincent said carefully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Commander?" Ensign Cooper said cautiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ensign Cooper stepped into the room and looked around.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

Darin looked at Vincent curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes sir." Vincent said seriously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"School work?" Vincent asked slowly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Status?" Joe called out.

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

"Green across." Connie repeated.

"Green board." Jimmy said quickly.

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

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

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

Jimmy was simply watching the control panel intently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Chief Morgan?" Susan said in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

Vincent looked up at her in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Susan and Vincent shared a questioning look and followed behind.

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I noticed." Chief Morgan said with concern.

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

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

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

Vincent and Susan both looked on in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chief Morgan smiled at the pair and nodded.

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Really?" Vincent asked in wonder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vincent nodded and hurried out the door.

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Really?" Darin asked with surprise.

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

"We all did." Joe said with regret.

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

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

"What about Kent?" Susan asked quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

Vincent nodded and ran back to the door.

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

Vincent nodded happily.

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vincent smiled at the statement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

Susan and Jimmy hurried over to offer handshakes and congratulations.

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

Everyone looked at Joe with question.

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The lift doors opened again and four more people emerged.

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

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

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

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

"Vincent?" The man across from Vincent asked.

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

The man nodded for her to continue.

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

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

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

Chief Morgan nodded at the answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lieutenant Simms?" Captain Byrne prompted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Thank you sir." Joe said with astonishment.

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

Joe nodded and quickly stood.

Vincent and Susan followed a moment later.

* * * * *

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

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

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

Connie looked at Joe with wide eyes.

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

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

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

"For money." Joe said simply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Darin." Vincent said quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

"E2." Susan answered immediately.

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

"Tester." She said quickly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vincent looked up and saw her expression of concern.

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

Joe looked up at her and gave a tentative smile.

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

"Your winning personality?" Joe offered weakly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

"Main bridge." Susan said into the air.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay. Thanks." Vincent said quietly.

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

Vincent turned to see Darin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He looked up to see the very tired crewman holding out three control circuit units to them.

"Thanks. I'll bring the old ones down as soon as we've got them out of the console." Vincent said quietly.

"Thanks." Darin said as he accepted the other unit.

The crewman gave a tired little nod, then walked to another person who had just approached the counter.

"Well, I guess we'd better get back to it." Darin said in resignation.

"Yeah. I'll see you later." Vincent said and started for the door.

As he was about to walk out the door, he glanced at the guy behind the counter and felt sympathy for the tired man.

* * * * *

"I brought you two control circuits just in case you needed to change them both." Vincent said as he squatted beside Susan.

"Good work Vincent. I had time to check the other one while you were gone and it was bad too. Hand me the first one, then you can take the bad ones to engineering. This will take me a few minutes and I'm sure they're needing them." Susan said seriously.

Vincent handed her the first control circuit, then picked up the two bad units and said, "I'll be back in just a minute."

"Take your time, these things are really packed in here." Susan said in concentration.

Vincent took the bad control circuit units and headed for the turbo lift.

"P Deck" Vincent said as the doors closed.

* * * * *

As soon as the doors opened, he walked with purpose to the engineer's mess hall.

When he used to study the deck plans, he had thought it was interesting that the engineering crew had their own separate mess hall on the deck below main engineering. But after his first day on the job, he felt that they deserved to have something that they could call their own.

Finally Vincent spotted what he was looking for and went to a coffee dispenser at the end of a long serving line of food.

"I've heard that coffee will stunt your growth." A young crewman said as he watched Vincent filling a cup of coffee.

"You heard right, I'm twenty-six years old." Vincent said as he put a lid on the cup, then picked up the faulty control units to leave.

The crewman laughed at the statement and asked, "You're that new guy in deflector control, aren't you?"

"Yeah. That's me. I'm Vincent." He said as he turned.

"I'm Chance." The young man said with a smile.

Vincent was going to offer his hand but one hand was holding a cup of coffee and the other held two faulty circuit control units.

Chance laughed and said, "It's nice to meet you Vincent. I heard about what you did for Channing and I wanted to say thanks."

"Um... Sure. How's he doing?" Vincent asked timidly.

"Doc Perry says he's going to be fine. She said she'd call me when he wakes up... Oh, you probably need to be going, I bet someone is waiting on those things." Chance said as he looked down at the control circuits.

"These are bad ones, but yeah. I'd better get going. I'll talk to you later." Vincent said with a smile.

Chance nodded with a smile of admiration as he watched Vincent walk out the door.

* * * * *

Vincent waited in line at the supply desk for about two minutes before he made it to the front.

"It'll be about ten minutes." The tired young man said when he saw the control circuits in Vincent's hand.

"No. I already got the replacements, I'm just turning these in." Vincent said as he sat the control units and coffee on the desk.

The crewman looked at the coffee, then up at Vincent with question.

"You looked like you could use this." Vincent said quietly.

"Thanks" The tired crewman said with an almost happy smile.

Vincent smiled and nodded, then got out of the way so the next person could move up in line.

* * * * *

"Are you ready for the next one yet?" Vincent asked as he knelt beside Susan.

"Oh, you have perfect timing. Yeah, hand it in." Susan said with surprise.

Vincent handed the control circuit in to her and waited for her to take it.

Vincent looked around the bridge briefly, then at Susan working in the small space and asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. Just stay there for a minute. The second one isn't in too bad of a place. I'll have it installed in no time." Susan said in deep concentration.

"What do you think we'll have to do next?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I don't know for sure, but if the diagnostics don't show anything dangerous, we'll probably call it a night and you'll be back at 08:00 to work your shift." Susan said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then asked, "Is it always like this?"

Susan chuckled and said, "No. It's always different. No two days are exactly the same. Some days are boring, some are exciting and some are even a little scary."

Vincent smiled and said, "Well I don't know if any day is going to be better than this one."

Susan chuckled again and said, "That's a good sign. If at the end of your first day you're tired and happy, then you've got a good shot at making a career out of Starfleet."

Vincent smiled at the thought, then noticed that Susan was starting to work herself out of the tight space.

"That should do it." She said as she finally backed completely out of the opening under the console.

Vincent took the tester from her when she handed it to him and had the decoupler ready when she needed it.

* * * * *

"So, what did we miss?" Susan asked as she and Vincent walked into Deflector Control.

"One major headache and several small nuisances." Joe said seriously.

"What's the headache?" Susan asked with concern.

"When Connie and Darin replaced the control circuit on the auxiliary bridge console the diagnostic system showed that the central processor for the console is bad." Joe said flatly.

"And they have to basically dismantle the entire console to get to it." Susan said in a tired voice.

"I'm guessing they've got about half an hour of work ahead of them." Joe said frankly.

"Maybe it's not so bad getting stuck with the main bridge console." Susan said in thought.

"Is there anything we can do to help them?" Vincent asked carefully.

"No. It's a two man job at most. Anyone else would just be in the way." Joe said regretfully.

Vincent nodded.

"So Vincent, if you want to go back to our cabin, I'll see you there when everyone's back. It shouldn't be too long." Joe said with a note of regret at not being able to go with him.

"Our cabin?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there when you finished your talk with the captain, but I really needed to check in here before we left TerraMain." Joe said with concern at Vincent's expression.

"I was assigned to quarters on G deck. Darin is my bunk mate." Vincent said carefully.

"Oh... I thought you would be sharing quarters with me." Joe said in a small voice.

Vincent could tell that Joe was disappointed but didn't know what to say to make it better.

"I guess since you're going to be doing an adult job, you should have some independence and live on your own." Joe said in thought.

Vincent looked around and saw that Susan was taking the second control station and Jimmy was walking toward the door.

Quietly, Vincent said, "I'm still going to need kid time. In fact, if you didn't have to stay here with that control panel, I think I'd be asking for some kid time right now."

Joe smiled at Vincent's statement and said, "As soon as Connie gets back, we'll go and have as much kid time as you need."

Vincent smiled, then had a thought.

"You said you'd be here for about half an hour, right?" Vincent asked seriously.

"More or less." Joe said cautiously.

"I've got something I'd like to do. I'll be back before you're done." Vincent said in thought.

"Are you going to tell me what you're going to do?" Joe asked hesitantly.

"Only if you order me to." Vincent said with an impish grin.

Joe shook his head and watched as Vincent left.

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"It'll be five minutes until anymore control circuits are ready." The crewman said in a tired voice.

"My department is done, I just wanted to stop by and see if there's anything you guys in supply needed. You know, like coffee or anything like that." Vincent said quietly.

"Oh, it's you. You're a real lifesaver." The Crewman said with a tired smile.

Vincent smiled at the compliment and waited expectantly.

"Oh, um. Come on back. Let's ask the guys what they want." The Crewman said with distraction.

Vincent walked around the desk and followed the crewman to the back room.

* * * * *

Vincent was surprised to see only two crewmen working on the control circuits.

"I thought there would be more of you." Vincent said in surprise.

"There were, but as the different departments finished, our guys went to work on other things. Gary and Brock are keeping up with the demand fairly well." The Crewman said casually.

"What's the kid here for?" One of the guys asked as he looked up from his circuitry for an instant.

"This is the guy who brought me the coffee a while ago." The crewman said shyly.

Both guys looked up from what they were doing simultaneously, then one of them said, "From the way Randy described you, I thought you'd have wings."

"He came down to see if you guys wanted anything." Randy said with a smile.

"Up." Vincent corrected.

"What?" Randy asked in confusion.

"I came up. I'm in deflector control." Vincent said and pointed at the floor.

"Oh. He came up to see if you guys wanted anything." Randy said with a smile.

"Really? Well it looks like we're going to be here for a while, so one of those coffees Randy was talking about sounds really good." One of the guys said.

"Yeah, make that two." The other one said quickly.

"Do you guys like cream or anything?" Vincent asked casually.

"No way! Cream is a sin against good coffee." One of the guys said forcefully.

The other one nodded his agreement.

Vincent smiled, then asked, "Would you like another one Randy?"

"Um. Sure. I really appreciate it..." Randy trailed off, silently asking for Vincent's name.

"Vincent. I'll be back in a few minutes." Vincent said quickly and rushed out of the room.

* * * * *

Vincent looked around the coffee station and found a cup carrier.

After filling and capping three cups of coffee, Vincent made his way out of the engineering mess hall and nearly walked straight into Chief Morgan.

"Crewman Winters. Our paths seem destined to cross today." Chief Morgan said pleasantly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said shyly.

"It looks like deflector control must be settling in for a long night if Joe sent you out for coffee." Chief Morgan said with a smile.

"No. I think once the auxiliary bridge station is fixed, there's only small stuff left to be done. I'm getting coffee for the guys in the Engineering Supply room." Vincent said timidly.

"Why in heaven's name are you doing that?" Chief Morgan asked with surprise.

"Because I could tell that they were really tired. Everyone on the ship has been coming to them for hours asking for stuff. But every time I asked for control circuit units they were nice about it. So when my work was done and I had some time I thought I'd bring them some coffee to let them know I appreciate the job they're doing." Vincent said in thought.

"Would you mind if I come with you? Now that you've pointed out the fine job that they're doing, I think I'd like to express my own appreciation." Chief Morgan said with a smile.

Vincent giggled as he said, "I bet when they see you, they're gonna think they're in trouble."

Chief Morgan chuckled and said, "You're probably right."

* * * * *

"Chief Morgan, what can I get for you?" Randy asked as he stood from behind the desk.

"Nothing right now. Come in the back for a moment." Chief Morgan said, not betraying any emotion in his voice or expression.

Randy paled slightly and hurried ahead of Chief Morgan into the back room.

Vincent tried to keep his giggles to himself as he followed Chief Morgan.

* * * * *

Brock and Gary dropped what they were doing and stood when Chief Morgan entered the room.

"Please sit down. I've just had a report about the conduct of Engineering Supply that I wanted to discuss with you." Chief Morgan said seriously.

Brock and Gary hesitantly took their seats and waited apprehensively.

"It has been brought to my attention that after the unusual demand that has been put on this department, you've kept up with demand and maintained a level of professionalism and courtesy when dealing with your

fellow crew members. Well done gentlemen." Chief Morgan finished with a grand smile.

The level of tension in the room seemed to wash away in one big gust of relief.

"And I brought your coffee." Vincent said in a small voice as he walked from behind Chief Morgan.

Randy couldn't contain his laughter and fought to say, "Thank you Vincent."

"I thought we'd screwed up one of the control circuits. You scared me half to death." Brock said with nervous laughter.

Vincent smiled as he handed out the cups of coffee.

"No. You've done a fine job. It's in a crisis that people tend to show their true colors. You've shown yourselves to be the type of people that Captain Byrne wants all his crew to be. I'm very proud to have you as part of my Engineering crew." Chief Morgan said warmly.

"Thank you Chief. We really appreciate it." Randy said sincerely.

Chief Morgan nodded, then walked out of the room.

A long moment of silence fell over the room before Randy finally said, "You're the one who told him, aren't you Vincent?"

Vincent nodded and said, "He asked where I was taking the coffee, so I told him."

Gary chuckled as Brock said, "I think Randy was right about you. I'm starting to see the wings."

Vincent smiled at the statement, then said, "I've got to get back to deflector control now. Thanks again for all you did today."

"Thank you too Vincent." Randy said with a genuine smile as he watched Vincent leave.

* * * * *

Vincent walked into deflector control and to Joe's side.

"How are things going?" Vincent asked quietly.

Joe looked at Vincent and gave a gentle smile before saying, "We're going to be busy for a few days, but I think it will be a good experience for you and Darin. By the time we're done with our list of repairs, you'll probably be familiar with most of the deflector control systems."

"How much longer until Connie is done?" Vincent asked curiously.

"A few minutes. He's finished the repairs, he's just waiting on the diagnostic to come back clear before he closes it up." Joe said casually.

"Are we going to get something to eat when we leave?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"That sounds like a great idea." Joe said with a smile.

"I think I want to have the chicken. It looked really good." Vincent said with excitement.

"When were you in the mess hall?" Joe asked curiously.

"Just a few minutes ago. I was getting some coffee for someone who looked even more tired than Lou." Vincent finished with a giggle.

"I'll have to take your word on that because I can't even imagine anyone looking more tired than she did." Joe said with a smile.

"Would it be okay if I invited Darin to have dinner with us? He's probably hungry too." Vincent asked hopefully.

"I don't know if he'd feel comfortable in the officer's mess hall." Joe said in thought.

"I thought we'd eat in the engineer's mess hall. I mean, deflector control is a part of engineering." Vincent said carefully.

Joe shrugged and said, "If that's what you want. I'm just used to eating in the officer's mess because my cabin is on E deck."

"Oh. I didn't think of that. Well, I really want to have dinner with Darin so he doesn't have to eat his first meal on the *Yorktown* alone." Vincent said quietly.

"Works for me." Joe said with a smile, then looked at the door as Connie and Darin entered.

"How are things on the auxiliary bridge?" Joe asked with a smile.

"As exciting as ever." Connie said dryly.

"Are you ready to take the main?" Joe asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah. Go and get some rest. It looks like you're going to have a long day tomorrow." Connie said with a slight smile.

"Why do you say that?" Joe asked hesitantly.

"Oh, I don't know. You and two trainees for an eight hour shift... Who knows? Maybe it'll fly by." Connie said before breaking up into laughter.

Joe shook his head and smiled, then noticed Darin watching them.

"Vincent and I are going to have dinner. Would you like to join us Darin?" Joe asked in a friendly voice.

"Really? I mean yeah. Thanks." Darin said in surprise.

"You ready Vincent?" Joe asked as he stood.

"Ready, starving and able." Vincent said with a grin.

* * * * *

All three made their way through the serving line and filled their plates with something beyond the standard portions of food.

When they finally sat down at a table, Joe looked at Vincent's plate and said, "You weren't kidding about getting some of that chicken."

Vincent smiled and said, "I told you it looked good. I bet you go back for some more."

Darin watched the pair and tried to understand their relationship.

"So Darin, how was it working with Connie?" Joe asked casually.

"It was great. He was explaining everything he was doing while he was doing it. I learned a lot." Darin said happily.

"I'm glad. You'll be the one doing repairs tomorrow." Joe said simply.

Darin looked at Joe with a frightened expression.

Joe smiled and said, "You won't be disassembling an entire console like you did today. Tomorrow you'll probably be replacing faulty relays and switches, little stuff a first year cadet could do. I'm just glad you got to see Connie in action so you'll know how we do things."

Darin smiled in relief and said, "Okay. You had me scared for a second. When he started taking that console apart, I was sure we were never going to get everything back in its right place."

Joe nodded and said, "It can look like that. But if you decide to stay in deflector control, you'll eventually get to the point where you'll be able to do the same thing. You just get so familiar with all the components after a while that you don't even think about it."

"What about you Vincent? Did Susan show you a lot of things too?" Darin asked casually.

"Yeah. But we didn't get to disassemble a console. Just about everything we did had to do with the control circuits. But I got to see her change so many out I could probably do it myself." Vincent said in a cheerful voice.

"And we meet yet again Crewman Winters." Chief Morgan said with a chuckle as he approached the table.

"Hello Chief Morgan, would you like to join us?" Vincent said happily.

"No thank you Vincent. I'm just here to refill my cup. It's good to see you Joe, and... Ensign Cooper is it?" Chief Morgan asked, straining his memory.

"Yes sir." Daren said shyly.

"You three have a good meal. I'm sure you've earned it." Chief Morgan said with a smile.

"We will. Thank you Chief." Joe said in a slightly bewildered tone.

"He seems like a really nice man." Darin said as he watched Chief Morgan walk away.

"He really is. But he also knows how to get things done. I doubt that there are five other chief engineers in all of Starfleet that could handle a situation like today without it breaking into complete chaos." Joe said frankly.

"Hey Vincent, how are you doing?" A voice called from behind him.

Vincent turned and smiled when he saw a trio of crewmen approaching.

"Hi guys." Vincent said as he stood.

"Does this mean you're done in deflector control for the day?" Gary asked casually.

"Yeah. Come over here. I want to introduce you." Vincent said happily.

The three crewmen approached cautiously when they recognized that the other two people at Vincent's table were officers.

"This is Randy, Gary and Brock from engineering supply. Guys, this is Lieutenant Joe Bowers and Ensign Darin Cooper from deflector control." Vincent said happily.

"Nice to meet you." The three crewmen said in unison.

Joe nodded his greeting and Darin was frozen in place.

"So did you guys just get off?" Vincent asked casually.

Randy turned to Vincent and smiled at his casual nature.

"Chief Morgan is giving us a break. All three of us are gamma shift, so we have to be back on duty in about an hour." Randy said with a peaceful smile.

"And we had to come down and get some more of that coffee. That stuff really did the trick." Brock said happily.

"Would you guys like to have dinner with us?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"No thanks. We have some other things to do first. We're just here for the coffee. We saw you here and wanted to say hi." Randy said with a smile.

"Oh. Okay. Well I hope you guys have a good night." Vincent said with cheer.

"Yeah. You too." Randy said as he turned to walk toward the coffee dispenser.

"Was that the tired guy from the supply room?" Darin asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. I guess since he's on gamma shift, it's time for him to be awake now." Vincent said with a shrug.

"It looks like you've made a few friends today." Joe said with surprise.

"I guess so." Vincent said, then noticed someone else approaching.

"Channing wants to talk to you." The young man said seriously as he walked up to Vincent.

"Um. Chance, this is Lieutenant Bowers and Ensign Cooper from deflector control." Vincent said quickly.

Chance looked at the officers and stood a little straighter as he said, "Please excuse me for interrupting your meal. I just had something important to tell Vincent."

"That's okay. Go ahead." Joe said cautiously.

"Channing just woke up and after he found out what happened, he wanted to talk to you. Will you come with me to Sickbay?" Chance asked hopefully.

Vincent looked up into Chance's hopeful eyes, then asked, "Do you mind if Lieutenant Bowers and Ensign Cooper come too?"

"No problem. Just come on before he falls asleep again." Chance said urgently.

Vincent picked up his nearly empty plate and stopped at the feeling of a hand on his arm.

"I'll take care of it. You go ahead and we'll catch up to you in Sickbay." Joe said quietly.

"Thanks." Vincent said with a full smile and handed his plate to Joe.

* * * * *

"He's right in here." Chance said quickly as he led the way.

Vincent followed, and walked into a bright sterile room.

"I got him Chan, just like you wanted." Chance said in nearly a whisper.

"Thanks." Channing said with a small smile, then turned his head slightly to look at Vincent.

"You're just a kid." Channing said with confusion.

Vincent smiled at the statement and said, "Yeah. I am."

Channing got a look of concentration, then asked, "Are you the one who saved my life?"

Vincent quietly said, "When I saw you get shocked, I called for a med team. That's all I did."

Joe and Darin walked into the room in time to see a Vulcan woman approach Vincent.

"Your statement is inaccurate." She said firmly.

Vincent turned and looked at the medical assistant with question, then said, "I remember you, you're Ensign T'Lani daughter of Sufaal of the house of Sukaan of Vulcan."

The Vulcan woman raised an eyebrow, then responded, "And you are Crewman Vincent Winters, son of Clan Short of the house of Surak of Vulcan. And your statement regarding your contribution to Crewman Channing's well being is in error."

Vincent looked at the Vulcan woman with question, then asked in his most reasonable voice, "How am I in error?"

"You called for a medical team immediately following the incident. You stated clearly and concisely where the incident occurred and what had caused the injury, which enabled us to have the supplies and equipment to give proper treatment. Reports indicate that your subsequent action of asking people to stand aside assured that the medical team would not be delayed in their efforts to give immediate aid to Crewman Channing. The result of your actions is that Crewman Channing is expected to make a full recovery. Given the nature of his injury, if you had not taken these actions, Crewman Channing would in all probability be facing months of treatment to deal with the effects of prolonged oxygen deprivation... assuming that he survived." Ensign T'Lani said firmly.

"Um... okay." Vincent said weakly.

Channing giggled and said in a whispery voice, "I guess she told you."

Vincent smiled at the man in the bed and said, "Okay. I guess I did do all that stuff. I'm just glad you're going to be okay."

Channing held out one hand to Vincent, palm up.

Vincent took the hand and held it firmly.

Channing looked him in the eyes and said, "Thank you."

Vincent smiled and said, "Anytime."

Channing closed his eyes and the grip on Vincent's hand went slack.

Vincent looked at Ensign T'Lani with concern.

"His recent trauma has caused fatigue. Do not be concerned, he is sleeping." T'Lani said seriously.

Vincent carefully laid Channing's hand on the bed, then turned to see Joe, Darin and Chance all watching him.

"Thank you." Chance said quietly.

Vincent smiled and nodded.

"Are you guys about ready to call it a day? We have work in the morning and it's getting late." Joe said quietly.

"Yeah. I'm ready." Vincent said as he walked toward the door.

Joe, Vincent and Darin walked slowly out of Sickbay.

Chance looked at T'Lani and said, "It just seems unreal that a kid could save Channing's life like that."

T'Lani looked at Chance with full Vulcan calmness and said, "Crewman Winters is a son of Clan Short. Perhaps if you were to investigate what that means, you would understand how it is so."

* * * * *

"It sounds like you've had a very interesting day." Joe said as the trio walked slowly down the corridor away from Sickbay.

Vincent shrugged and said, "I think if it was Cory or Sean doing that stuff instead of me, no one would have thought anything about it."

"But you're not Cory." Joe said carefully.

Vincent stopped in his tracks and looked Joe in the eyes as he said, "No. I'm not him. But him and Sean and the other guys in the Clan are fathers to me just like you are. For the first time I have people in my life that I want to be like. When I saw the guys in supply all tired and working so hard and still being nice, I thought about what Sean or Cory would do. When I saw Channing get shocked, I thought about what you would do. I didn't really do anything special today, I just did what you guys would have done if you'd been there."

Darin looked at Vincent with wonder and said, "I think I understand something that I never understood before."

Joe and Vincent turned to look at Darin with matching looks of question.

"I've always thought I wasn't good enough to do... anything. I worked hard and did my best but... I never felt like it was enough. It's like I'm... scattered." Darin said with difficulty.

"I would look at people around me and see that they had things like courage or ambition and I couldn't find those things in me."

"But what you just said made sense. I don't have to find those things in myself, I can find them in the people I respect. Then I just have to try and honor them by doing things the way they would... It makes so much sense. I can't believe I never saw it before." Darin finished in wonder.

"Maybe you needed to get to know someone who lives with that philosophy before it would make sense." Joe said with a loving look at Vincent.

Darin looked at Joe and said, "You're probably right. Would it be... um, weird or anything if I... tried to be like you?"

Joe chuckled at the question and said, "No, it wouldn't be weird at all. In fact, I can't think of any greater compliment that anyone could give me."

"Thank you Lieutenant Bowers." Darin said shyly.

"Darin, if you're going to be one of my sons, I'll be very offended if you don't call me Joe."

On impulse, Vincent went to Joe's side and gave him a warm hug.

Joe put an arm around Vincent, then looked at Darin with question.

"Okay Joe." Darin said in a surprised but happy voice.

Joe held out his other arm in invitation.

Darin hesitantly walked to Joe and was pulled into a gentle hug.

Chapter 4

"Are you too tired for your 'kid time'? We can save it for tomorrow if you would like." Joe said quietly as he held Vincent and Darin gently.

"I'm tired, but I think I really need a little bit of kid time before I go back to our cabin." Vincent said in thought.

"Then let's go to my cabin for a little while. You haven't seen it yet, have you?" Joe asked with a gentle smile.

Darin pulled out of the hug and hesitantly said, "That sounds like something private. I should go back to my cabin now."

Vincent pulled away from Joe and said, "I don't mind if you come with us Darin. 'Kid time' is just a time for me to act like a normal kid for a while instead of a crewman. Maybe if you wanted, you could have some kid time too."

Darin looked at Vincent and Joe curiously, not sure what he should do.

"You really are welcomed to join us. I promise that it's not half as strange as it sounds. Besides, I think it would be a good chance for us to sit and talk for a while. We really haven't had the time to get to know each other." Joe said carefully.

"Okay Lieu... Joe. That sounds good." Darin said in thought.

The trio approached the turbo lift and waited for it to arrive.

When the doors opened, Vincent happily said, "Okay Daddy Joe, you get to drive."

Joe looked at Vincent cautiously, then turned to Darin and said, "I think kid time has already started."

Vincent giggled at the statement as they walked into the turbo lift.

"Deck E, Section C2." Joe said into the air.

As the lift started moving, Joe looked down at Vincent to find him looking up at him with a happy expression that was almost glowing.

Joe couldn't help but smile at the expression and gave Vincent a quick one armed hug.

"Please excuse me for asking, but there's something I don't understand." Darin said slowly.

The lift doors opened and Joe stepped out into the corridor.

"It's right here." Joe said and walked the five steps to his cabin door.

After keying in his entry code, Joe stepped aside to allow his guests to enter.

* * * * *

Darin looked around Joe's cabin and was frankly impressed.

It was definitely bigger than the room he was sharing with Vincent.

The double bed in the room was bigger than the bunk bed he had slept in the night before. Also, Joe had a small desk work area with a built in terminal which gave the room a feeling of being something more than a place to sleep.

The built in furniture in this room had a decorative look, appearing to be the regular furniture in a person's home rather than the military style cabinets that he and Vincent shared.

The net result was a cabin that looked comfortable and inviting... a home.

"Come on in and have a seat. You had a question Darin?" Joe asked pleasantly as he walked over and took a seat on the edge of the bed.

Vincent immediately walked over to sit beside Joe and snuggled in under his arm.

Darin smiled at the move, then said, "I just... I don't want to upset you or anything, but I don't understand... Are you Vincent's father?"

Joe chuckled and said, "There's not a simple yes or no answer to that one. Come over and have a seat and we'll tell you the story."

Hesitantly, Daren sat on the bed beside Joe and Vincent, leaving about a foot of space between them.

"Do you want to tell Daren the story?" Joe asked Vincent as he hugged him gently.

"No. I want to hear you tell it. It makes me feel good when I hear you say that you want me to be here." Vincent said happily.

"You got it Champ." Joe said with a smile.

"I guess the story starts when I was a little bit younger than you are Darin. I met a beautiful girl and fell in love." Joe said in a voice of distant memory.

"That was my momma." Vincent interjected.

"Peggy and I had a son, his name is Lawrence... Vincent, would you mind getting Lawrence's picture out of my flight bag over there? It's in the side pouch." Joe asked casually.

"Okay." Vincent said quickly, then hopped off the bed and ran to the piece of luggage.

"Anyway, things didn't work out between me and Peggy and she finally divorced me." Joe said quietly.

"Is this it?" Vincent asked as he held up something that looked like a leather bound notebook.

"Open it and find out." Joe said with a chuckle.

Vincent opened the photo album, then looked at Joe with question.

"Billy snapped that when you weren't looking." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent carried the book over and handed it to Darin.

Darin was surprised when he opened the book to find that there were no pages in it; Just two pictures, one on the inside of the front cover and one on the inside of the back.

The first picture was of Vincent with his hands on his hips and looking like he was about to scream at someone. The other was of a slender boy with the same light blond hair and blue eyes as Joe.

"That's Lawrence, Vincent's half-brother." Joe said as he pointed.

"Half-brother." Darin said in confirmation.

"That's right. I'm Lawrence's father and Peggy was his mother. Peggy was also Vincent's mother but his father was the man Peggy married after she divorced me." Joe said quietly.

"My dad killed my momma then killed himself last week." Vincent said seriously.

Darin looked at Vincent in thought for a moment, then suddenly said, "Wait a minute... Winters... the postal worker that went on a killing spree in Florida and ended up killing two people and shooting a police detective. Then he died trying to attack the home of the Director of Federation Youth Services..."

Vincent nodded sadly.

"THAT was your father?" Daren asked in disbelief.

Vincent nodded again.

"I'm sorry Vincent. It's just that it was all over the news... I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk about it." Darin finished quickly.

"It's okay Darin. If it was gonna bother me, I wouldn't tell you." Vincent said quietly.

"Okay. But I won't tell anyone else." Darin said seriously.

"Thanks." Vincent said, then moved back to Joe's side and was pulled into a warm hug.

"Let's see... I met Vincent on... Wednesday. And before anything happened with his parents, I had already told him that I was his step-father because I used to be married to his mother." Joe said in thought.

Vincent smiled at the memory and turned so he could put his arms completely around Joe and give him a proper hug.

"Then after we got the news about his parents, several people got involved and worked together to help Vincent." Joe said carefully.

"I wanna tell this part. Can I?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Go ahead son." Joe said with a smile.

"So I'm sitting there trying to figure out what I'm supposed to do since I don't have any parents or home or anything at all no more. Then Daddy Joe comes up to me with David... Um... that's David Gallagher from the Richie Rich Christmas movie..." Vincent added in thought.

"You mean David Gallagher from Seventh Heaven?" Daren asked with wide eyes.

"Yeah, that too." Vincent said with a smile.

Daren turned to face Vincent more fully, devoting his complete attention.

"It was Daddy Joe, David, Commander Dodds and um... Aunt Teri." Vincent said in concentration.

"Teri Short, Director of Federation Youth Services." Joe added for clarification.

Vincent nodded, then continued, "Then David said this big long thing that meant that him and Clan Short were adopting me."

Joe considered the statement and finally said, "Something like that."

"So now David and Aaron Carter and Commander Dodds' sons and a whole bunch of other people are my guardians." Vincent said happily.

"When Vincent told Teri that he wanted to be in Starfleet, she remembered the Starfleet mentoring program. So she talked to a few people, Commander Dodds talked to a few people, Patriarch Short talked to a few people and... well, here's Vincent." Joe finished with a smile and a big hug for Vincent.

"Wow. That's really amazing. But I don't really understand about Vincent being a Vulcan." Darin said carefully.

"Oh, that's easy. I was adopted by a Vulcan Clan, so that makes me a Vulcan citizen." Vincent said happily.

Darin thought about it, then slowly said, "Vincent Winters... son of Clan Short... of the house of Surak of Vulcan."

"That's me." Vincent said happily.

"I guess that's about it." Joe said in a considering voice.

"No it isn't. You didn't say it." Vincent said with a tone of warning.

"What? Oh... I'm sorry Vincent." Joe said quietly, then turned to Darin and said in a serious voice, "When Teri told me about her plan to get Vincent into the mentoring program, I told her that I wanted to be his mentor and be like a father to him so he could come and live with me on the *Yorktown*."

"Thanks Daddy Joe." Vincent said happily and hugged Joe gently.

"I'm glad you did. Without Vincent's advice and help today, I'd probably be sitting in my cabin waiting to go back to Earth and wondering what I should do next." Darin said quietly.

"I just did what Cory would have done." Vincent said dismissively.

"You've mentioned him before. Who is Cory? He must be a really great person from the sound of it." Darin said in thought.

"He is. His name is Cory Short. Clan Short is named after him, he's the Patriarch. He's saved a lot of kids' lives and started a camp for kids who don't have any homes and even stopped a bunch of bad people who were using little kids for porno stuff." Vincent said in a rush.

"And he's fourteen." Joe interjected.

Darin looked at Joe with disbelief.

"And he's adopted five kids." Vincent added.

"Do you mean like the way he adopted you?" Darin asked carefully.

"No. The whole Clan adopted me. Cory really adopted them. They had their names changed to Short and they live with him and he's their real dad." Vincent said happily.

Darin thought about what Vincent said, then quietly asked, "Would you like to be adopted like that?"

Vincent tilted his head as he thought about it for a few seconds, then said, "No. If I was adopted like that then I couldn't be a crewman or live on the *Yorktown*. Kid time is nice for a while, but that would be like having kid time all the time and I don't think I'd like that."

"Guys. It's getting late. I think it's about time to call it a night." Joe said with regret.

Vincent gave Joe a tight hug, then said, "Okay, I'm done."

"If you would like, I could stop by your cabin at 07:00 and go to breakfast with you." Joe said to Vincent with a smile, then turned to Darin and added, "Both of you."

"We'll be ready at 07:00. We're on Deck G, Section D7, cabin 4." Vincent said as he straightened his posture and made his voice more mature.

"I'll see you then. You two have a good night." Joe said, sounding just a bit more professional and detached.

"You too Joe. Thank you for... everything." Darin said haltingly.

"It was my pleasure Darin. I'm really glad that Vincent found a good person to share a cabin with. And I was serious about considering you to be one of my sons. If you have any problems or just want to talk or anything like that, I'll be here for you." Joe said sincerely.

"Thank you Joe. I don't think I was really ready for this, I mean leaving Earth. I guess I always had the feeling that if I blew it in Starfleet, I was just a phone call away from my parents. Having you guys as my family on the *Yorktown* will make it a lot easier for me to get used to things... and I was serious about wanting to be like you." Darin finished in a quieter tone.

"I know Darin, and I was serious about it being the best compliment you could have given me. Now you guys had better get going. We've got work in the morning." Joe said gently.

"We'll see you at 07:00." Vincent said with a smile as he walked toward the door.

"Deck G, section D7, room 4." Joe said as he walked to the door and watched them walk to the turbo lift.

* * * * *

When the doors of the turbo lift closed, Darin quietly said, "Thanks for telling me all that Vincent."

"Deck G, Section D7." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift, then he turned to look up into Darin's eyes and said, "Most of the people on the *Yorktown* will only get to know Crewman Winters. I wanted you to know the rest of me."

"Well, just so you know. I like all of who you are." Darin said with a smile.

"You're not going to hug me are you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. I distinctly remember you saying that kid time was over." Darin said, trying to sound serious.

"I'm glad you understand." Vincent said as he turned his gaze toward the front of the lift.

The doors of the lift opened and the pair made their way back to the cabin.

"We'll need to put entry codes on the door... tomorrow. I'm too tired now." Vincent said as he pressed the entry button.

"I'm with you. Maybe we'll feel like it in the morning." Darin said as he started to undo the shoulder strap of his uniform jacket.

"Yeah, right." Vincent said with full sarcasm.

Darin smiled at the response as he took off his jacket.

Vincent took a pair of pajama pants out of his cabinet and looked at Darin with question.

"What is it?" Darin asked casually.

"I never thought about it before, but are we supposed to go in the bathroom to change or do we do it in here?" Vincent asked in thought.

"Honestly, with four of us sharing a bathroom, I doubt that it will be very long before none of us have anything the others haven't seen. Just do whatever makes you most comfortable." Darin said frankly.

"Okay, I just didn't want to do something wrong and make you think I was perving on you." Vincent said with a mischievous grin.

Darin chuckled and said, "Go ahead and get ready for bed. I'm dead on my feet."

Vincent started to get out of his crewman's jumpsuit uniform while Darin pulled off his shirt.

"I never thought about this part of being in Starfleet. I didn't even think about sharing quarters." Vincent said casually as he worked the jumpsuit off his legs.

"Well, we roomed together at the academy, so I'm kind of used to it now. But I'm really glad that I ended up sharing quarters with you. My roommate in the academy was a real jerk." Darin said as he pulled down his pants.

Vincent pulled on his light gray sleep pants then looked at Darin and asked, "How was he a jerk?"

Darin walked to his cabinet and pulled out a pair of sleep pants exactly the same color as Vincent's, then said, "He was loud, forceful and insulting. He seemed to enjoy making my life miserable."

Vincent looked at Darin with wide eyes and said, "So he did stuff to make you feel bad on purpose?"

Darin nodded and said, "Yeah. Everything Skippy said was a filthy joke or some kind of put down. He was a disgusting pig of a roommate and I have no idea how any woman could have been attracted to him, but for some reason they were... He was just nasty."

"Wow. I really got lucky getting you as a roommate." Vincent said with relief.

Darin smiled as he pulled back his covers and said, "Me too."

Vincent stood on the edge of Darin's bed, then hoisted himself up into his bunk.

Darin couldn't help but giggle at the maneuver.

"Don't forget to set your alarm." Vincent said as he set the wake-up alarm built into the wall at the head of his bed.

"Who's the adult here?" Darin asked in a playful voice as he also set his alarm.

"I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know." Vincent said with a smile as he laid back and got comfortable.

"Good night Vincent, sweet dreams." Darin said as he hit the switch by his bed that turned off the lights.

"Good night Darin. Sweet dreams to you too." Vincent said in a sleepy voice.

Before a minute had passed, both were fast asleep.

* * * * *

A soft beeping intruded on Vincent's peaceful sleep.

He reluctantly opened his eyes and looked around in confusion until he focused on the soft light of the alarm button blinking at the head of his bed.

Vincent pressed the button, then the room's light control beside it to bring the lights in the room up slightly.

He smiled as he remembered that he was on the *Yorktown* as a member of her crew.

After a glance at the ship's time, he took a moment to straighten the spread on his bed, then slowly climbed down, careful not to wake Darin.

Vincent noticed that the uniform he had worn the day before was laying crumpled in the floor.

Somehow it seemed wrong to have the symbol of his membership in the crew being treated so disrespectfully.

Vincent picked up the uniform and draped it over his arm, then proceeded to the bathroom.

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Vincent scuffed into the bathroom and dropped his uniform into the laundry fresher unit just inside the door.

He stepped into one of the two bathroom stalls and relieved himself.

Next, he crossed the room and stripped out of his sleep pants and underwear and stepped into the sonic shower.

He had heard the sensation of a sonic shower described before, but the reality of it wasn't what he expected.

From the way people had talked about it, he thought it would be a 'crawly' feeling on his skin.

All he noticed was a hum and he could feel a sensation like brushing or a whispery breeze.

It didn't exactly feel 'good' but it wasn't the unpleasant experience he had been expecting.

As he was finishing, he heard the door of the bathroom open.

Cautiously, Vincent reached out of the shower unit and picked up his sleep pants.

After pulling on the sleep pants, he stepped out of the shower and looked around.

A tall dark haired man wearing only sleep pants was standing there and looking at him with surprise.

"Hi." Vincent said hesitantly.

The man seemed to snap out of whatever trance he had been in, then his eyes widened in an expression of panic.

Before Vincent could utter another word, the man ran to the door that led into Vincent's quarters and looked at the bed where Darin was still sleeping.

"What..." Vincent began to say when the man turned back toward Vincent with an expression of horror.

"I need to call security, stay right here." The man said quickly as he turned toward the opposite bathroom door to enter the other quarters.

"What for? Is something wrong?" Vincent asked in confusion.

The man stopped suddenly, then turned and asked, "Are you okay? I mean, do you need to see a doctor or anything?"

Vincent blinked in confusion at the question then stammered, "I'm fine. What's wrong?"

The man knelt down to be closer to Vincent's eye level, then said in a more gentle voice, "My name is Rad. Everything is going to be fine. I'm just going to call security and they're going to ask you a few questions, then we'll get you back to your parents. Don't worry about anything, it's going to be fine."

Vincent squinted his eyes in thought, then opened them wide as he realized what Rad was thinking.

"Now if you'll just stay here for a few seconds, I'll call security. Okay?" Rad asked gently.

"Will you let me do one thing before you call security?" Vincent asked carefully, not wanting to do anything to cause Rad to react.

"What's that?" Rad asked with concern.

"Will you give me one minute so I can get dressed?" Vincent asked seriously.

"You're not going to leave are you?" Rad asked cautiously.

"No. I won't, I promise. You can even watch me from the door if you want." Vincent said carefully.

"Okay. Go get dressed, I'll be right here." Rad said quietly.

Vincent hurried into his room and noticed that Rad was standing in the doorway, watching Darin intently, making sure that he wasn't waking up.

Vincent quickly grabbed a clean uniform from the closet, then moved where Rad could see that he wasn't going to try to leave.

Reluctantly, Vincent slipped off his sleep pants, very aware that his bare butt was exposed to Rad.

Quickly, he stepped into his uniform and pulled it up in one fluid move.

Vincent was grateful that his uniform was a one piece jumpsuit so he wouldn't have to deal with a shirt and uniform jacket.

He hurried to Rad's side and said, "Okay. If you want to call security now, I'm ready."

Rad looked down at Vincent, then took a step back in astonishment.

"I'm Crewman Vincent Winters, you can call me Vincent if you want to. It's nice to meet you." Vincent said with a mischievous smile.

"You... I thought..." Rad stammered.

Vincent giggled at Rad's expression and said, "I think I know what you thought, but it's okay. I live here. I was assigned to these quarters."

Rad smiled, then broke into relieved laughter.

Vincent giggled and asked, "Is your name really Rad?"

After a moment for the chuckles to subside, Rad said, "My real name is Ensign Rayne Radovanovich, but most people call me Rad."

"Why don't they call you Rayne?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Mainly because I don't like it. I guess it wouldn't be so bad if my middle name weren't Beau." Rad said with a sour look.

"Rayne Beau?" Vincent asked incredulously.

Rad nodded with a pained expression.

Vincent forced down his smile and said, "I understand."

Rad gave Vincent a smile of gratitude.

"Um, Rad. I'm on alpha shift so I need to get ready." Vincent said seriously.

Rad looked down at himself wearing only sleep pants and said, "Me too."

"Oh, and that guy in my room is named Darin, he's an Ensign like you. We're going to breakfast at 07:00. Would you like to have breakfast with us?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure. That sounds like a good idea." Rad said with a smile.

The sound of Darin's alarm drew both their attention.

"I'd better get dressed. I'll be over at 07:00." Rad said casually.

"Okay." Vincent said happily.

Rad retreated into the bathroom as Vincent went to finish getting ready for his day.

* * * * *

Darin had turned off his alarm, but showed no sign of getting up.

"Darin, you need to wake up." Vincent said quietly.

"I don't have class until 09:00." Darin muttered into his pillow.

Vincent smiled at the response, then said in a firmer voice, "Ensign Cooper, you have to be on duty in Deflector Control at 08:00."

Darin's eyes snapped open and he sat up abruptly.

"Good morning." Vincent said with a smile.

Darin looked around, then said, "Yeah. Good morning. What time is it?"

"06:45. Daddy Joe will be here in fifteen minutes to go to breakfast with us." Vincent said as he went to his cabinet.

"Oh, yeah. I'd better get ready." Darin said in a daze.

Vincent smiled, then thought to say, "I met our neighbor in the bathroom. His name is Rad. He seems like a nice guy."

"Um... yeah. That's right. We share a bathroom." Darin said hazily as he forced himself to get out of bed.

Vincent tossed his clean underwear and socks onto the edge of his bunk and looked over in time to see Darin stand up.

Darin glanced at Vincent, then down at himself and turned away quickly to hide his morning erection which was making a decent sized tent in his sleep pants.

Vincent giggled and said, "Too late. I saw it."

"I'm sorry about that Vincent." Darin said quietly.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "You don't need to be sorry, you just need to get ready before Daddy Joe gets here."

Darin smiled with relief as he went to his cabinet and gathered his things

"I think it's going to be great having you as a roommate." Darin said casually.

"Yeah. I think so too. Go on." Vincent said, then started taking off his uniform so he could put something on underneath it.

Darin took his clothes into the bathroom as Vincent finished getting ready.

* * * * *

"Am I too early?" Joe asked when the door opened.

"Nope. Right on time." Vincent said with a big smile.

Joe gave Vincent a quick hug, then looked over and said, "Good morning Darin. How are you today?"

Darin smiled at the warm greeting and said, "I'm fine. Vincent has been keeping after me so you won't have to wait."

Joe smiled, then said, "Well then, I guess we're ready to go."

"Wait a second. I invited our neighbor to eat with us... that's okay, isn't it?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Of course." Joe said with a gentle smile at Vincent.

The door to the bathroom opened as Rad called out, "Are you guys ready to go?"

"Rad?" Joe asked in surprise.

"Joe." Rad said in astonishment.

"Oh, I guess you already know Rad. He lives right next door." Vincent said happily.

"Yeah. How have you been Joe?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Fine... I wasn't sure you were still on the ship. I haven't seen you around for a while." Joe said quietly.

"I've been keeping to the lower decks..." Rad said, then gave a helpless shrug.

"It looks like you changed cabins." Joe said, at a loss for what else to say.

"Yeah, about a month ago." Rad said uncomfortably.

Vincent looked at Darin with question to find the same expression looking back at him.

"Rad and I are old... friends." Joe said, not sounding at all certain of it.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked as he looked back and forth between the two men.

"I just did something a while back..." Rad trailed off with a pained expression.

"...And I overreacted." Joe said, finishing Rad's statement.

"Rad, are you sorry you did whatever it was you did?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Yeah. I really am." Rad said as he reluctantly looked at Joe.

Vincent turned to Joe and asked, "Do you forgive him?"

"It wasn't really his fault..." Joe began to say.

"He feels bad and needs to hear you say it. Do you forgive him?" Vincent asked firmly.

"Yeah. I forgive him." Joe said to Vincent, then glanced at Rad.

"Good. Now, are you sorry you let your mouth get away from you and said stupid things like a big jerk?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Hey! You don't even know what I said." Joe said with a surprised look at Vincent.

Vincent said nothing as he looked Joe in the eyes, waiting for an answer.

Joe thought about it for a second, then said, "You're right. I was a big jerk. I'm sorry Rad."

Vincent turned to Rad and asked, "Do you forgive him?"

Rad opened his mouth to begin to explain, but stopped at Vincent's determined gaze.

"Yeah. He's forgiven." Rad said quietly.

"Good. Now let's go eat." Vincent said firmly.

Joe and Rad both looked at Vincent and broke into laughter.

"This crewman seems to like ordering officers around." Joe said in a teasing voice.

"Only when you're in my cabin and keeping me from my food. Now come on. I'm starving." Vincent said seriously.

"Let's not keep the crewman waiting." Rad said with a smile at Vincent.

* * * * *

The group made their way to the Engineering Mess Hall and made their selections.

As they sat down, Rad cautiously asked, "How have things been going Joe?"

"Okay. Mostly the same old routine." Joe said in thought.

"Yeah. Me too." Rad said carefully.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Joe asked cautiously.

"No. I'm taking a little time off from dating." Rad said as he looked at his plate.

"I met someone." Joe said quietly.

"Really? What's she like? It is a 'she' isn't it?" Rad asked, sounding really interested.

"Yeah. Her name is Mona, she's... amazing. She's strong, independent and beautiful." Joe said in a distant voice.

"Good. I'm happy for you." Rad said with a contented smile.

"Really?" Joe asked, before he could think better of it.

"Yes really. Ever since I've known you, you've always seemed so lonely. I'm really glad you found someone." Rad said, sounding a little bit offended.

"Oh. Well, thanks Rad. I just thought..." Joe trailed off.

"You thought that because I was interested in you that I wouldn't want you to find someone? Just how shallow do you think I am?" Rad asked in an increasing voice.

Before Joe could answer, Vincent said, "Sometimes Daddy Joe's mouth likes to talk before his brain can tell him it's a bad idea."

Rad looked at Vincent with question for an instant, then broke into a smile as he said, "That really explains a lot. Thank you Vincent."

Joe smiled at Vincent and said, "My life would have been a lot easier up to now if I'd had Vincent around to let people know that about me."

"Well, you've got me now Daddy Joe." Vincent said with a smile.

Rad looked at Joe with question.

"Vincent, do you want to tell it?" Joe asked casually, then took a bite of his breakfast.

"Um... Okay... I'm his kid." Vincent said to Rad simply, then looked at Joe and asked, "Is that good enough?"

Joe smiled and said, "That's fine."

At Rad's surprised look of question, Joe said, "There's a whole long story that goes with it, but that's the important part. Vincent is my son... well, at least in my way of thinking if not legally."

"I'll look forward to hearing the whole story sometime." Rad said seriously.

"Maybe after our shift? Do you have any plans at 18:00?" Joe asked with a smile.

"Not a thing. Do you want to meet here?" Rad asked happily.

"Sounds great. What about you guys?" Joe asked Darin and Vincent casually.

"Okay with me, what about you Darin?" Vincent asked in a friendly tone.

"Sure, 18:00." Darin said with a smile.

"Okay, now that that's settled. What do you guys know about the big control circuit mess from yesterday? Do you have any idea what's going on?" Rad asked as he leaned forward with interest.

Before Vincent or Darin could answer, Joe quickly said, "We know something about that. But I think we'd better not spread it around until security has finished their investigation."

"Oh, an ongoing security investigation... and I've already heard that CPO Marks has been detained. I have a feeling that this puzzle doesn't have too many more pieces." Rad said with a smile.

"I wouldn't count on it. I have a sneaking suspicion that what happened yesterday didn't just happen on the *Yorktown*." Joe said carefully.

Rad froze in thought at the statement.

"I tell you what Rad. I'll talk to security today to make sure it's okay to talk about it, then I'll tell you whatever I can at dinner." Joe said seriously.

"Okay. Thanks Joe." Rad said in thought.

"I need some more juice. Would anyone like some more coffee?" Vincent asked as he stood.

"Sure. Thanks Vincent." Rad said in surprise, then handed Vincent his cup.

Joe nodded and also handed his cup to Vincent.

"I'll help you." Darin said and picked up his own cup and Vincent's juice glass.

"Be right back." Vincent said happily as he led Darin away from the table.

* * * * *

Joe and Rad watched as Vincent and Darin walked away.

"He's something else." Joe said with a tender smile.

"I remember you telling me that you had been married and had a son..." Rad trailed off and looked at Joe with question.

"My son's name is Lawrence, he's Vincent's half-brother." Joe said quietly.

Rad fell silent as he thought about that.

Joe looked over to see that Vincent was at the coffee station before quietly saying, "Both Vincent's parents died last week. I was there when he found

out. Apparently he has had an interest in Starfleet for years and he turned out to be a good candidate for the mentoring program."

"But I thought the mentoring program was for gifted fifteen or sixteen year olds." Rad said carefully.

"I think that's what they had in mind when they developed it, but due to the differences in childhood development among the different species of the Federation, they didn't specify a cut-off age in the criteria." Joe said carefully.

"So he really is a crewman?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Yes. And after what I saw yesterday, I think he's doing better than quite a few new crewmen fresh from the academy." Joe said frankly.

Joe looked up as a cup of coffee was placed before him.

"Thank you." Joe said gently.

Vincent smiled, then placed a cup before Rad.

"Thanks." Rad said with a smile then noticed Darin out of the corner of his eye.

Deciding to take the initiative, Rad turned to Darin and asked, "So how are you liking the *Yorktown*?"

Darin nearly choked on his coffee and sat the cup down quickly before saying, "Fine. Everyone's been really great."

Rad smiled at Darin's flustered state and said, "I'm glad. I'm guessing that you're fresh out of the academy. A lot of people find the transition to starship life to be a real culture shock."

Darin thought about it, then said, "I guess it would be for me too if it weren't for Joe and Vincent. They've really made me feel like I fit in here."

"You *do* fit in here Darin." Vincent said firmly.

"See what I mean?" Darin said with a teasing smile.

Rad smiled and nodded his agreement.

"Well, it's time for us to finish up. We've got to be on duty in a few minutes." Joe said reluctantly.

"I'd better go now. I'll see you guys at 18:00." Rad said as he stood.

"I'll see you then." Joe said as he also stood.

They stood facing each other for an instant, neither sure about what they should do.

"Hug." Vincent said firmly as he started gathering the breakfast dishes from around the table.

Both men looked at Vincent with surprise, then started laughing.

Joe put an arm around Rad and pulled him into a friendly hug.

"I'm really glad that's over. I've missed you." Joe said quietly, so only Rad could hear.

"Me too. It's been lonely as hell without my best friend." Rad said in a whisper.

The hug broke and both men smiled at each other before Rad reluctantly turned and left.

Vincent and Darin quickly took care of the breakfast dishes, then joined Joe who was still standing, watching the door that Rad had walked through.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked.

Joe shook himself out of his wandering thoughts and said, "If I were gay, that's the kind of guy I'd want to end up with."

Darin looked at Joe with surprise.

"Come on. It's time." Joe said and led the group out the doors toward the nearest turbo lift.

* * * * *

The trio walked into Deflector Control to find Lou engrossed in her work on the main console.

"How are things this morning Lou?" Joe asked as he walked to her side.

"Pretty good. The Beta crew stayed about an hour over to get some of the worst of it done and Judy has been working all night on the one man jobs... You'll want to look at this." Lou said, then brought up a report on the console.

Joe read for a moment, then said, "Vincent, I think you'd better see this."

Vincent stepped away from the third console and walked to Joe's side.

"It looks like you've made the big time." Joe said as he pointed to a passage of text.

"...Crewman Susan Walker and Crewman Vincent Winters of the *USS Yorktown* have been credited with uncovering a plot to defraud Starfleet of millions of dollars at the cost of the safety of the crews of several ships and star bases throughout the Federation..."

"Later on in the report, it says that nearly fifty people have been taken into custody. Four other starships and three star bases have reported finding the modified control circuits. They're reopening investigations into a few recent 'incidents' in which equipment failures have caused significant damage or a loss of life." Lou said seriously.

"Wow. All I did was ask one little question." Vincent said in wonder.

Lou looked at Vincent and chuckled as she said, "I'm scared to think of what will happen if you ask a big question."

Joe smiled and nodded at Lou with agreement.

"Joe, if you want, I can take the main in Engineering for a few minutes so you guys can make a few repairs on the main in here. It's all minor stuff, but I'd feel better if we got it done now." Lou said seriously.

"Sounds good. Vincent, get your tool kit. Darin, check station three and get a list of what repairs are needed and upload it to a padd." Joe said as Lou walked for the door.

Vincent went to the lockers and grabbed Susan's tool kit.

"That's Susan's. Your tool kit is two lockers down." Joe said with a grin.

Vincent put Susan's tool kit away, then walked two lockers down and took another tool kit out.

"Do we have to go to supply to get all these parts?" Darin asked as he looked at the list.

"You should have most of them in the side pouches of the tool bag. Once I've seen the list, I'll tell you." Joe said seriously.

Vincent opened the tool kit, then looked in the side pouches to see what components he had on hand.

A tone sounded and Joe pressed the button to answer it.

"I've got it Joe." Lou's voice said over the intercom.

"Thanks Lou. We'll try to make it quick." Joe said and switched over control to the console in Engineering.

"You guys go ahead and work this console as if I weren't here. I want to see how you work as a team." Joe said and took a step back.

Vincent opened his tool bag in front of the console and waited for Darin to finish looking over the list.

Joe looked at Vincent and said, "You'll want to grab some extra couplers from the supply locker. You're going to need them for just about every job."

"Where's the supply locker?" Vincent asked as he stood.

Joe opened a locker and showed Vincent where the most common supplies were kept.

"This isn't so bad. It's all simple stuff." Darin said as he handed Joe the data padd.

"You should have all these components except the harmonic wave modulator in the bag. I think..." Joe trailed off, then pulled a small circuit board out of the supply locker.

"...Yes. We have one. We like to keep an extra in here because they degrade with prolonged use." Joe said, then handed the board to Darin.

"Are you ready Vincent?" Darin asked with a smile.

Vincent grabbed a handful of couplers and nodded happily.

Joe watched with pride as 'his boys' went about the work of repairing the main deflector console.

* * * * *

"Hi Joe, how are things going?" Judy asked casually as she walked into the room, carrying her tool kit.

"Just fine. The guys are just finishing up the maintenance on the main console." Joe said with a smile.

"I was able to get a good chunk of the repairs done last night. The only thing left that really bothers me is the power distribution node in J-27. The readings show that it's operating at about 70% which means that it could fail at any time." Judy said as she put her bag away.

"The guys will get right on it. They're just about to close it up." Joe said as he glanced at what Darin and Vincent were doing.

"Do you want a level two on the main?" Judy asked as she walked to the third work station.

"No. I want the guys to do it. They need to get used to the process." Joe said seriously.

"Right. Is there anything else you need done?" Judy asked as she looked around.

"No. Thanks for everything you did last night. That status board was looking like a Christmas tree when I left yesterday. You really got a lot accomplished." Joe said with a smile.

"Go ahead and do a level two Vincent." Darin said as Vincent walked toward station three.

"Level two?" Joe asked Darin carefully.

"Yeah. Everything we just did can be checked by a level two diagnostic and it'll only take a few minutes. I mean, unless you want me to do a level three." Darin said, then looked at Joe with question.

"No. You're exactly right Darin, I just wanted to be sure you understood which was the correct diagnostic level to use and why. You explained it perfectly." Joe finished with a smile.

"All green." Vincent called out from his station.

Judy stepped over to read over Vincent's shoulder, then said, "It looks like I'm leaving you in good hands Joe."

Joe walked to the main console and pressed a few buttons, then said, "I think you're right. Lou will be done in just a minute, do you want to meet her up there?"

Judy smiled and said, "Yeah. Tell her I'm on my way."

Joe nodded and made one more quick system's check before pressing the direct comm link to the Engineering console and saying, "That's it Lou, I'm ready to take it back."

"It's all yours." Lou responded.

"Judy is on her way up. You two have a good morning." Joe said with a smile.

"You too Joe." Lou said peacefully.

"What do we need to do next?" Vincent asked as he walked to Joe's side.

"The most important thing on the list is to replace a distribution node in J-27. It isn't switching efficiently, which means that it could fail at any time." Joe said seriously.

"We'll have to go to supply for something that big." Darin said in thought.

"That's right, you'll also have to go into the jeffries tubes to get to it. And that reminds me, you two will need to carry communicators when you leave." Joe said, then checked some readings on his board.

"Because there aren't any comm stations in the jeffries tubes?" Vincent asked carefully.

"That too. But mainly because I'm tied to this control board. You guys are my hands if anything needs to be done, so I need to be able to call you whenever you leave deflector control." Joe said as he glanced at Vincent.

"Where do we get communicators?" Darin asked quietly, feeling like he should already know the answer.

"On the left side of the door. Just tell me which number you're taking so I'll know who I'm calling." Joe said, then turned his attention back to his board.

Vincent walked to the little rack built into the wall and took down two communicators, then handed one to Darin.

"I've got three." Vincent said, then hooked it on his belt.

"I have four." Darin said and did the same.

"Okay guys. Go get that distribution node and call me as soon as you're done." Joe said seriously.

Vincent quickly picked up his tool bag and hurried to Darin's side.

* * * * *

Darin and Vincent had just left the supply room and were heading for the jeffries tube they needed when a sound stopped them in their tracks.

"What kind of a moron are you? It's just my luck to get stuck with a worthless idiot rookie who can't even tell the lines apart." An angry voice called from ahead of them.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen." Another voice whimpered.

Darin looked at Vincent, trying to decide what was the proper thing to do in this situation.

Vincent looked up at Darin and quietly asked, "What would Daddy Joe do?'

Darin thought for a moment, then straightened his posture and forced himself to walk around the corner.

* * * * *

Just around the corner, Darin saw two men working in a panel.

"Is there a problem here?" Darin asked in a professional tone.

"Yeah. The academy ain't teaching these guys the difference between an input conduit supply line and a distributed feed line. This moron just fried the distribution node." The angry crewman said with disgust.

"Crewman Winters, would you please bring me the distribution node?" Darin asked seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said immediately and took the new distribution node out of his tool bag.

"Do you know how to hook up a distribution node?" Darin asked seriously.

"No sir. I know what it does, but I don't know how to install it." Vincent said carefully.

Darin took a minute to show Vincent where the main power feed connected, and then carefully explained the different connections that went into the unit.

"Do you understand all that?" Darin finally asked.

"Could you show me how to properly seal the connections. I haven't seen that done and I wouldn't want to do it wrong." Vincent said in thought.

Darin showed Vincent the proper way to seal a connection, then stood back and said, "Okay Crewman Winters. It's all yours."

Vincent nodded and went to work.

Darin turned to the two crewmen who had been watching and said, "What you just saw was how we work as a team. I check to be sure that Crewman Winters understands what he's doing, and he knows that if he doesn't understand something he can ask and I'll explain it to him. From what I heard when I walked up, you guys might think about trying something like that."

Darin turned to face the older man who had been yelling and said, "You need to have patience with new people. If you teach them to do it the right way, later on it will pay off for you because they will eventually be doing everything the way you like."

After receiving a nod from the older man, Darin turned to the other man and said, "And you need to tell him if you don't understand something. A

failure of communication like this one could end up costing you more than a few minutes of work. It could cause extensive damage to the ship or might even kill you."

"Ensign Cooper? Will you look to see that I'm doing this right?" Vincent asked from the panel.

Darin turned his attention to Vincent and watched as he sealed a connection.

"That's perfect. Good job." Darin said with a smile, then turned back to the two men.

"What's your name Crewman?" Darin asked the younger of the two.

"Crewman Tidwell." He answered immediately.

"Crewman Tidwell, would you go to the supply room and get a replacement distribution node for me?" Darin asked in a professional tone.

"Yes sir. Right away." Crewman Tidwell said quickly and rushed off.

Darin looked at the other crewman with question.

"Crewman Hartman, sir." He said reluctantly.

Darin looked at the rank insignia on the crewman's sleeve and said, "Crewman Hartman, this isn't a threat, just some advice. You should consider taking a voluntary reduction in rank so you'll only be responsible for your own actions. As a petty officer, you are going to have to train new people and be responsible for them. If you get promoted, you'll have even more people to train and be responsible for."

"Yes sir." Crewman Hartman said quietly.

"If you would prefer to stay at this rank, then you might consider some leadership training. If you can't become comfortable training and supervising new personnel, then you're just going to get more and more frustrated and probably take it out on your trainees. And one of these days you'll either run into a crewman who won't put up with it and will do something drastic to you... or you'll find one who believes what you're saying to him and he'll do something drastic to himself because he believes that he's a worthless idiot."

"I get what you're saying. Maybe I ain't cut out for this..." Crewman Hartman said quietly.

"That's up to you to decide. But seriously consider the leadership training. With just a little work, I bet you'll become more comfortable with training

new people and eventually you won't be able to remember what used to make you so miserable at work every day." Darin finished with a smile.

Crewman Hartman hesitantly nodded.

"Otherwise, I'm afraid that this limitation might cause your career in Starfleet to hit a dead end. To increase in rank, you *have to* be able to lead." Darin said in an imploring voice.

"I'll think about it. Thank you sir." Crewman Hartman said sincerely.

"I'm done. Do you want to check this out?" Vincent asked as he pulled away from the panel.

"I'll be right there Crewman Winters." Darin said with a smile, then carefully checked over Vincent's work to see that everything was connected correctly.

* * * * *

As Darin and Vincent were once again on their way to the jeffries tube, Vincent asked, "Did I really do okay back there?"

"Sure, you did fine. Why do you ask?" Darin asked curiously.

"You guys were talking really quiet and looking at me while I was working and I thought maybe I was doing it wrong or something." Vincent said with concern.

"You installed that distribution node perfectly. I was just giving Crewman Hartman some advice about how to train a new crewman." Darin said in thought.

"So does that mean that maybe he'll stop yelling at that other guy? That made me feel bad for him." Vincent said quietly, then stopped and said, "This is it."

Darin looked at the wall plate beside the opening in the wall to confirm that they were in the right place, then climbed into the jeffries tube, followed by Vincent.

"I hope that Crewman Hartman will do something to make a change. What he's doing now isn't doing anyone any good. He's making himself miserable, he's making his trainees miserable... and I hate to think of what his bunkmate has to put up with." Darin said as he crawled along, then asked, "Where is the distribution node?"

"The deck plans that I had didn't show little stuff like distribution nodes, but it's up ahead of us." Vincent said as he followed, dragging his tool bag.

"If your deck plans don't show where the distribution nodes are, then how do you know it's up ahead?" Darin asked curiously.

"Because it isn't behind us and it isn't here." Vincent said with a smile.

Darin stopped for a second, then said, "That confirms it, you *are* a Vulcan."

* * * * *

"Are you sure?" Darin asked carefully as he looked into the open panel.

"You just showed me how to do it. I need the practice." Vincent said seriously.

"Okay. But I was only showing you so I could demonstrate to Crewman Hartman and Crewman Tidwell the right way to work together." Darin said carefully.

"Yeah, I thought it was something like that." Vincent said, then tested the old distribution node to see that it was unpowered.

"You need to test across all five points. If this distribution node is failing, it's possible that it could be storing a charge in one of the connector points." Darin said carefully.

"Thanks. I didn't know that." Vincent said, then proceeded to check the other points.

"You did a good job back there. It really helped that you asked questions, they needed to see that." Darin said as he watched Vincent carefully.

"I thought you did a really good job too. You explained everything so I could understand it." Vincent said, then sat his tester aside.

Darin pulled the decoupler out of the tool bag and handed it to Vincent before saying, "I just did what I thought Joe would do."

Vincent smiled and said, "It really works, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. They should be teaching that at the academy." Darin said with a smile.

"This one's stuck. I can't get it loose." Vincent said as he tried to get the coupler to release.

"Let me try." Darin said, then moved in and took the decoupler from Vincent.

After a moment, Darin said, "It's jammed. Hand me the laser drill and I'll cut it out."

Vincent pulled out the laser drill and handed it to Darin.

"Move back a little. Sometimes they pop when you cut them loose." Darin said and waited for Vincent to scoot away.

After a moment of work, there was a little pop, then Darin sat the laser drill aside.

"That's got it. Go ahead, but be careful, it's going to be hot." Darin said as he moved away from the distribution node.

Vincent pulled the old distribution node out of the small space, then moved the new node into place.

"Make the first two connections and seal them before you secure the unit. The space is too small for you to get the sealer behind the unit to do it later." Darin said instructively.

"You're really good at this." Vincent said in an impressed voice.

"I guess I am. I never really thought I'd be using these skills when I was taking the engineering classes. I was sure I was going to be a helmsman." Darin said distantly.

Vincent finished sealing the first two connections, then moved the new distribution node into place.

Darin reached into the tool bag and brought out the extra couplers that Joe had asked Vincent to bring and handed them to him.

"Thanks." Vincent said and began to fasten the unit down.

"I never really understood why we use couplers instead of nuts and bolts." Darin said as he watched Vincent work.

"Oh, that's easy. Bolts are threaded, so the vibration of the ship would cause them to work loose. Couplers lock into place so you don't have to worry about that." Vincent said as he fastened the last coupler into place.

Darin chuckled and said, "Well that's another of the mysteries of Starfleet solved. If you ever go to the academy, I think you'll do great. You'll be starting out a lot better off than I did."

Before Vincent could respond, the hum of the ship's engines changed.

"We've increased speed." Vincent said in concentration.

"Scoot over. I'm going to make the connections and you can seal them." Darin said seriously.

Vincent scooted slightly, then sealed the connections as Darin made them.

The sound of an alert klaxon could be heard clearly in the distance.

Darin listened carefully for a moment, then said, "It's a yellow alert."

Chapter 5

"Let's hurry." Darin said abruptly.

"Last one." Vincent said as he concentrated on his work.

The beeping of both their communicators surprised them.

"Go ahead, I've got this." Vincent said as he worked on sealing the last connection.

"Ensign Cooper." Darin said into the communicator.

"Is Vincent with you?" Joe asked with obvious concern.

"Yes. He's right here." Darin said quickly.

"You two get down here right away. We're at yellow alert and I'm going to need you in deflector control." Joe said firmly.

"We're done here. We'll be right down." Darin said seriously.

"Hurry." Joe said, then terminated the transmission.

"Close it up. We've got to go." Darin said as he started putting the tools away.

"I need to test it." Vincent said firmly.

"We don't have time." Darin said impatiently.

"But if we test it and I screwed something up, we can fix it right now." Vincent said in a reasonable tone.

"Crewman Winters, close the panel. We're getting out of here." Darin said seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said reluctantly and put the access panel back into place.

As soon as the panel was in place, Darin secured it with couplers, then threw the decoupler into the tool bag.

"Hand me the bag." Darin said as he turned himself around in the confined space.

Vincent handed him the bag then followed him back the way they came.

* * * * *

As Vincent and Darin ran into deflector control, they noticed that Connie, Susan and Jimmy were also there... in various stages of wakefulness.

"Okay, it looks like there's no rest for the weary. Connie, take the main, Susan, station one, Jimmy, station two, Vincent, station three. Darin stow your tools and be ready to jump in wherever you're needed." Joe said as he worked the console.

"What's going on?" Vincent asked as he took his seat.

"We're at yellow alert and traveling at... warp eight point eight." Joe said in concentration as he stood away from the console and allowed Connie to take the seat.

Darin walked to the locker and put away the tool bag he was carrying.

"The J-27 distribution node is bypassed." Susan called out from her console.

"We just finished replacing it, but we didn't have a chance to test it." Darin said quickly.

"I'm on it." Jimmy said in concentration.

"Status?" Joe called out.

"Green across." Susan said quickly.

"One bypass, the rest operating normally." Jimmy said carefully.

"All green." Vincent said seriously.

"Darin, I need you to make sure the lockers are secured, just in case this turns into a bumpy ride." Joe said as he kept his focus on the main console.

Darin ran to one end of the lockers then started working his way down the line checking to see that each door was securely closed.

"***All hands, we are responding to an automated distress beacon from a Federation colony. We have not been able to establish communication with the colony to ascertain the nature of the distress call. Engineering, Security and Medical teams need to be on standby and ready for mobilization in two hours. We will remain at yellow alert until further notice***." Captain Byrne said firmly.

There was a moment of silence, until Joe finally said, "Darin, I need for you to walk Vincent through all the stations. I was hoping to ease him into it gently, but that's not an option now. Show him the basics of each console so he knows what to do if Connie needs something."

"Yes sir." Darin said immediately.

"Connie, you've got the main. Vincent is going to be your second. You two will have the 04:00 to 16:00 shift. Lou and Judy will have 16:00 to 04:00. Everyone else is with me." Joe said firmly.

"Joe, I wouldn't mind going..." Connie said carefully.

Joe smiled and said, "I know. And if I knew what we were about to face, I'd probably send you. But since we're facing an unknown, I'll take care of it this time. You can have the next one."

"That's what you said last time." Connie said indignantly.

Joe chuckled and said, "Yeah, I did, didn't I?"

Connie shook his head in amusement, then turned his attention back to the main console.

"Darin, you've got one hour. Teach Vincent everything you can in that time, then come down to the hanger bay." Joe said seriously.

Darin looked at Joe with surprise, then motioned for Vincent to come with him to the second console.

"Jimmy and Susan, you know the drill. Grab your tool bags and stock them up. We're heading to the hanger bay." Joe said firmly.

Jimmy and Susan hopped up and ran to their lockers.

"Oh Darin?" Joe called across the room.

Darin looked up from the console quickly.

"Your tool bag is in the next locker past Vincent's. It should be fully stocked, but make sure to grab plenty of extra couplers from the storage locker and some extra power cells from the store room." Joe said as he pointed to a partition in the room.

"Yes sir." Darin said quickly.

Joe nodded, then walked to the first locker and picked up his own tool bag.

* * * * *

"I think that's about it." Darin said in thought as they finished going over console one.

"I don't understand how to run a bypass without disrupting power to the deflector." Vincent said with concern.

"Well, you actually don't have to worry about that. The safety system won't allow you to accidentally disrupt main deflector power. You have to have command codes to do something like that. But let's go ahead and do a bypass so you'll see how it's done." Darin said seriously.

"But won't that cause a dip in power?" Vincent asked in a worried voice.

"No. The power transfer is seamless. Let's just do it so you can see." Darin said carefully.

"What do I do?" Vincent asked as he looked over the various controls.

"Crewman Winters, the E-11 power conduit has just been severed. The safety system automatically switched over to the R-16 battery reserve." Darin said as he stood back from the console.

Vincent thought about what Darin was saying, then traced his finger along the path from the E-11 control to the R-16 control. Suddenly he understood the configuration and quickly programmed the power distribution to bypass the E-11 conduit and route the power through the E-3 conduit. He made a quick adjustment to the distribution node, then pressed the activation sequence to run the program.

"Perfect." Darin said with a proud smile.

Vincent felt a cold sensation wash over him and said in a shaky voice, "I... I just... diverted power from one conduit to another... I mean... I REALLY did it."

Darin nodded in understanding and said, "And now you know that you CAN do it because you've really done it. Remember that. If you end up having to reroute power in an emergency, just remember that you've already done it. You know what you're doing. You've proven it to me and to yourself."

Vincent nodded hesitantly.

"Now I think you should bring E-11 back online. You never know when the Chief Engineer might be looking at your systems." Darin said with a smile.

"Or the guy at the deflector control main." Connie called out from his station.

Darin and Vincent both looked at Connie with question.

"Good job Vincent. I was watching what you were doing on the main board. Go ahead and bring E-11 up. Then come over here." Connie said seriously.

Darin looked at the ship's time on the console and quickly said, "I've got to get to the hanger bay."

"Take care of yourself." Vincent said with a look of concern directed at Darin.

"You too little brother." Darin said with a quick smile, then hurried to the lockers on the other side of the room.

Vincent looked at Darin with surprise for a moment, then turned and quickly pressed in the sequence to switch the power flow back to it's original configuration.

* * * * *

"What do you think is going to happen?" Vincent asked quietly as he stood beside Connie.

"Well, right now Joe and the rest of the team are getting everything together that they could possibly need in an emergency situation. When we arrive, we'll see what the situation is, and if it's something that Deflector Control can help with, the team will beam down and do whatever they can to fix the problem." Connie said as he kept his gaze on the control panel in front of him.

"How long will they be gone?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No telling. If there's nothing for them to do, they'll be right back. On the other hand, they could be down there for days if it's a problem that has to do with their shield generators." Connie said as he turned in his chair.

Vincent nodded in thought.

"Why don't you go over to station two and run a systems check for me? We need to be sure that everything is up to specs before we come out of warp." Connie said carefully.

"What are you worried about?" Vincent asked as he walked to the console and began to run a series of level two diagnostics on the power systems.

"Well, we know that we're going to check on a colony that we've lost contact with. There's a chance that they were attacked from space..." Connie trailed off.

"Shouldn't the team be here in case that's what happened?" Vincent asked as he turned away from his console.

Connie shook his head and said, "If it's something like that, Joe and the guys will come right back here. We can hold it together until they get back. It's more important for them to be ready to go deal with whatever is wrong."

Vincent nodded in thought, then looked over his console.

"The level three diagnostic shows that the J 27 distribution node is hooked up right and ready to use." Vincent said in concentration.

"Bring it online." Connie said without looking up from his panel.

Vincent carefully pressed in the sequence to divert the energy flow back to it's proper circuit, then keyed in the command to run the new configuration.

Connie had station two's console showing on the main board so he could interrupt Vincent if he made a mistake.

"There, it's done." Vincent said with a voice of accomplishment and sat back in his chair.

"Run a level two on the E-9 through E-12 systems that route through that distribution node to be sure that everything is working the way you expect it to." Connie said seriously.

Vincent sat forward in his chair and began to initiate the diagnostics.

"You know what *should* happen when you replace a distribution node. But what *should* happen isn't always what *does* happen. A variation in the harmonics or fluctuation in the power feed might cause something further down in the system to react badly." Connie said instructively.

"I understand. All systems are showing green." Vincent said as the diagnostic results came up.

"Good. Then I think that it would be a good time to make a round of the stations and do a quick status check on everything, starting with station one." Connie said seriously.

Vincent moved to the console and looked it over carefully before initiating a series of diagnostics.

Connie switched his view over to station one so he could watch.

"I'm showing increased power usage in the forward field generators." Vincent said as he looked at the readings carefully.

"That's right. I did that because we're traveling at... warp 8.93. I punched up the shields a little just in case." Connie said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then said, "There's a heat build-up in the primary distribution coils."

"Let me see." Connie said as he pulled up the readings, then said, "That's within tolerance. But if it were too hot, do you know what you'd do?"

Vincent looked at the console to confirm the sequence, then said, "I'd feed backup power to the secondary coil, then tell the computer to switch coils when the secondary field generator was up to full."

Connie smiled and said, "I thought I had you on that one. That's exactly right... how did you know that?"

"Darin mentioned that the field generator needed the coil at full power before it could be used." Vincent said with a smile at the praise.

Connie shook his head and said, "We really lucked out getting you two. You wouldn't believe some of the people who've rotated through here."

Vincent smiled, then moved to console two to start running diagnostics.

Connie got a sudden look of realization, then asked, "The Captain said two hours, right?"

"Yeah." Vincent said as he looked at Connie with question.

Connie started pushing buttons quickly to determine their heading.

After a moment to study the panel before him, Connie absently muttered, "Shit."

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked as he hurried across the room.

"It seemed strange that the captain didn't mention the name of the colony that we were going to check on." Connie said in deep thought.

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Look at this." Connie said and pointed to a star chart in front of him.

"Is that the *Enterprise*?" Vincent asked as he pointed at a symbol on the chart.

"That's right. They were closer, not by much, but when we changed course, they were closer than we were." Connie said seriously.

"So why did they call us?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Because the colony that we're going to check on is called Kimber IV." Connie said in a dark tone.

"I've never heard of it." Vincent said quietly.

Connie turned to look at Vincent and said, "It was just established two years ago. There are about a thousand colonists and one of their leaders is a young man named Cyril Byrne."

Vincent looked at Connie with wide eyes and asked, "Like Captain Byrne?"

Connie nodded and said, "His youngest son."

Vincent looked at the readings on the main deflector console and noticed that they were now traveling at warp 9.02.

"I'm going to get back to my systems checks. I want to be sure we've got everything perfect to help Captain Byrne's son." Vincent said as he walked back to station two.

Connie stared at his console for a moment, then said, "Me too."

* * * * *

There was a sense of overwhelming silence as the loud hum of the ship's engines abruptly stopped.

Vincent looked around, not knowing what to expect, half afraid to breathe and break the silence.

Connie looked carefully at his panel and said, "Good news. There are no other ships in the area."

Vincent went to Connie's side and looked at the readout.

"But look at this..." Connie said with concern and pulled up a filtered image of the local star.

Vincent's eyes went wide as he saw the surface of the bright yellow sun churning and violently spewing out plumes of molten debris in all directions.

"See those dark spots?" Connie asked as he pointed at an area on the star's surface.

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Those areas are cooler than the bright spots on the surface. That's what we call sunspots. Check out these readings." Connie said and pressed a few buttons on the main console.

Vincent looked at the readings and said, "They're all over the place, there's all kinds of radiation and... what's that?"

"That's the subspace interference it's generating. I'm surprised they were even able to get an automated distress beacon through that." Connie said seriously.

"How about that?" Vincent asked as he pointed at another indicator.

"That's our shield output. Don't worry. Our shields can protect us from just about anything it can throw at us except a direct hit with a solar flare." Connie said frankly.

Vincent looked back at the churning and spewing star again with worry.

Connie noticed and said, "If it ejected anything directly toward us, we'd have about half an hour to get out of the way. There's nothing to worry about."

Vincent nodded, then quietly asked, "How's the colony?"

"It's still there. But that's about all I can tell you. I don't have access to the scanners." Connie said as he looked over the readings before him.

"What do we do now?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"We wait. We have to be here in case the ship has to leave suddenly." Connie said quietly.

"I hate to wait." Vincent said in a small voice.

"So do I, but that's part of our job. We have to trust that the people in charge know what they're doing and be ready to do whatever we can to help out as soon as we're asked." Connie said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then walked over to his locker.

"What are you doing?" Connie asked curiously.

"I'm going to stock up my tool bag in case they need me for something." Vincent said in a small voice.

Connie nodded and turned away, knowing that Vincent would probably be the last person on the ship who would be asked to help.

* * * * *

"What's going on?" Lou asked as she and Judy walked into deflector control.

"Oh, a colony distress call, a yellow alert, and that." Connie said as he gestured toward the image of the violently churning star on the main console's view screen.

"Why didn't you call us?" Lou asked seriously.

"I was going to let you sleep until 16:00. Joe put us on 12 hour shifts while the repair team is off the ship." Connie said frankly.

Lou nodded and said, "We fell asleep as soon as we got back to our cabin and just woke up. I noticed that we were at yellow alert and thought I'd check in." Lou said as she looked over the readings on the main console.

"What's our status?" Judy asked in a timid voice.

"On standby. All systems are go." Connie said as he turned in his chair.

"Hurry up and wait." Lou said with a nod.

"It looks that way, but Joe and the team have been gone for a couple hours, so maybe they're doing something to help out the colony." Connie said frankly.

"Well, why don't you go hit the head or grab something to eat or whatever. I'll watch it for a few minutes." Lou said firmly.

"Thanks Lou. I owe you one." Connie said with a smile as he stood.

"No problem." Lou said as she took his place at the console.

"Come on Vincent. It's time for us to take a break." Connie said with a smile.

Vincent nodded and followed.

* * * * *

As Connie and Vincent walked from the turbo lift to the mess hall, Vincent's eyes went wide in disbelief.

There were about thirty civilians in the Engineer's mess hall.

Some of them were soaking wet, some were coated in mud and most of them looked like they were chilled to the core.

"Oh my God. It must be hell down there." Connie said in wonder from Vincent's side.

Vincent looked around, and spotted Brock standing in line to get to the coffee dispenser.

"Let's see if Brock knows what's going on." Vincent said and urged Connie to follow him across the room.

* * * * *

"Do you know what's happening?" Vincent asked in a loud voice.

"Only bits and pieces. It looks like the solar flares and sunspots made the planet's climate go crazy. They've got killer storms that have nearly destroyed the colony. We're evacuating them as quick as we can but there's so much lightning and solar radiation that we're having trouble getting a transporter lock. And you can forget about shuttles..." Brock said, then took a step forward in line.

"They look cold and hungry." Vincent said quietly as he looked around the room.

"I guess their crops were destroyed by the storms and I don't know what else happened, but they've been starving for nearly two weeks." Brock said, then took another step forward in line.

"A thousand people..." Connie said in thought.

Vincent looked up at Connie with question.

"If we end up evacuating the entire colony, we're going to be packed to the bulkheads. I suggest that while we have a few minutes, you get everything that you have packed and ready to move. Most likely we're going to be consolidated into as few cabins as possible so the colonists can have a place to stay." Connie said frankly.

"Yeah, Gary and Randy are getting our stuff ready to go. We'll be ready to move as soon as we get the assignment." Brock said, then took another step forward.

Connie nodded in thought, then said, "Vincent, do you think you could take care of Darin's things? I'll take care of Jimmy and Susan's."

"Yeah. But... What do I do with it once I've got it packed?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Bring it to deflector control. If they call us after Lou and Judy leave we won't be able to go back and get our stuff." Connie said seriously.

"Got it. I'm going to go now. All of a sudden I'm not hungry." Vincent said seriously as he watched the increasing group of people in the serving line.

"I know what you mean. I'll see you back in Deflector Control when you're done." Connie said as he turned to leave.

"If you guys need anything, we're planning on sticking to the supply room. We might end up bunking there." Brock said quickly.

"Same thing if you need anything, we may be sleeping in deflector control." Connie said over his shoulder.

Brock nodded that he heard as Connie walked away.

* * * * *

Vincent ran into his cabin and pulled all the luggage out of the storage locker in the closet.

"You too?" A voice came from the bathroom doorway.

"Me too what?" Vincent asked as he began to pull clothes from the cabinets.

"I was just sent to pack my gear and told to report to the rec hall." Rad said quickly.

"We kind of figured that we'd be asked to move. I'm taking our things to deflector control until I know where we're going." Vincent said as he quickly packed Darin's suitcase.

"Good plan. I can stow my gear in transporter control until I know for sure where I'm going to end up." Rad said in thought.

Vincent's communicator beeped, causing him to freeze in mid motion.

He opened his communicator and quickly said, "Crewman Winters."

"*Crewman Winters, this is Commander M'Butu, you are to transport to my location immediately.*" Commander M'Butu said firmly over a very scratchy connection.

"Yes sir." Vincent said immediately.

Before Vincent could say another word, there was a burst of static, then silence. The connection had been lost.

"I'll take your stuff to deflector control. Go on." Rad said with concern in his voice.

"Thanks Rad." Vincent said as a distinctly uneasy feeling washed over him.

Vincent took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, then walked toward the door.

Rad looked at Vincent and Darin's suitcases for a long moment, before going about the business of packing for them.

* * * * *

As the transporter beam cleared, Vincent could see that he was inside a large building that looked like a warehouse or an industrial workshop.

"Crewman Winters, over here." Commander M'Butu called out in a scream to be heard over the cracks of thunder and howling winds outside.

Vincent hurried over to the Commander and stood at attention.

Joe was standing at Commander M'Butu's side with a look of obvious distress in his eyes.

"Crewman Winters. The building that houses the main reactor for the colony has collapsed and there is no way for us to get in and shut it down. The reactor core has been damaged and is flooding the surrounding area with radiation." Commander M'Butu said in a strained voice.

"There is a maintenance shaft that leads directly into the control room, but it's too narrow for any of us to fit through. There's a possibility that you'll be able to make it through." Commander M'Butu said, and Vincent could detect a note of hesitance in his voice.

"What do I have to do Commander?" Vincent asked loudly to be heard.

"Crewman... Vincent, you don't have to do this. There is a chance that you won't be able to get through. If you do, there's a chance that you won't be able to shut down the reactor before it goes critical. And even if you do..." Commander M'Butu trailed off.

"...There's a chance that you'll absorb a lethal amount of radiation." Joe said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"I wouldn't ask, but we're doing good to get enough of a transporter lock to get fifty people an hour out of here. The reactor is going to go critical before we have even half the colonists evacuated at this rate." Commander M'Butu said, then winced at a particularly close crack of thunder.

Vincent glanced at Joe, then looked Commander M'Butu in the eyes and said, "I understand sir. Please tell me what I have to do to shut it down."

Commander M'Butu nodded and said, "There's an emergency shutdown sequence. Here's a diagram of the console."

Vincent looked at the diagram then asked, "What's the sequence?"

"Bring the emergency systems online, then override the safety protocols." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Could you show me? I don't want to misunderstand." Vincent asked seriously.

Commander M'Butu pointed to each of the buttons on the diagram.

"Okay, I've got that. Then what?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Then you just have to initiate the emergency core shutdown procedure by pressing the fifth button, then acknowledge the override command on the keypad by pressing 'enter'." Commander M'Butu said as he pointed to each button as he described it.

"I've got it. What now?" Vincent asked seriously.

"There's access to the maintenance shaft in the floor over there, you'll just follow the power conduit from this building right to the control room." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"Do you have any extra couplers?" Vincent asked Joe quietly.

"I doubt that you'll need them for this job." Joe said hesitantly.

"Whenever one of us goes to do a job you always make sure we have extra couplers. I just want them... for luck." Vincent finished shyly.

"I have a few. Here you go, but you have to bring them back if you don't use them." Joe said as he forced a smile onto his face and handed Vincent a small handful of couplers.

"It's a deal. I'll make sure to bring them back." Vincent said firmly, then looked up suddenly as the building shuddered and groaned from a sudden gust of wind.

"I'll be waiting." Joe said as his eyes filled with tears.

"Okay Vincent. One last thing. The longer you're in there, the lower your chances for survival. Go in, do what you need to do, then get out as quickly as you can." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said formally.

* * * * *

"He's here. Come on out so he can get going!" A man called into the crawlspace entrance in the floor.

A moment later a thin teenager covered in mud climbed up out of the crawlspace.

"I got as much of it cleared out as I could all the way up to the junction. Three power lines feed into the tunnel at that point and I can't fit through." The teenager said through heavy breathing.

"Are you ready Crewman Winters?" Commander M'Butu asked seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said as he stood at attention.

"You said you had a crewman smaller than Benny, you didn't say you were sending a kid in there." One of the men said as he looked at Vincent.

"Lieutenant Bowers has assured me that Crewman Winters has the skills necessary to do this job. He's also the only one who can make it into the control room in time to shut down the reactor." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"Does my father know about this?" A young man asked as he stepped forward.

The man's slight British accent immediately reminded Vincent of Captain Byrne.

"He knows. He isn't happy about it, but he knows." Commander M'Butu said in a more gentle voice.

The young man shook his head and said, "It isn't right. I can't allow it."

Vincent walked up to the young man and said, "Maybe it's not right. But it still needs to be done. Either I go in there right now or a lot of people are going to die."

"What's your name?" The young man asked gently.

"My name is Vincent, and I'm betting that your name is Cyril." Vincent said with a smile.

Cyril chuckled and said, "You're right. I guess my father's been telling stories about me."

"No, well at least not to me. But maybe when I get back, you could tell me some stories about him?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"It's a deal. Be careful." Cyril said as he stepped back.

"I'll save being careful for next time, this time I'm just going to be quick." Vincent said seriously.

Cyril chuckled and said, "It sounds like you know what you're doing. I'll leave you to it."

"Ready?" Joe asked past the lump in his throat.

"Yeah." Vincent whispered and walked to the edge of the hole in the floor.

"Benny, give him your light." Cyril said firmly.

The mud covered teenager handed the flashlight to Vincent.

Vincent fastened the strap of the flashlight around his forearm so he wouldn't have to hold it, then looked up to see Joe holding out his hand.

Vincent took the offered hand and started climbing down into the hole.

* * * * *

Vincent crawled down the long wet tunnel hearing the trickle of water and the sounds of his own breathing.

Icy cold water was pouring in from above and Vincent absently wondered if he was also in danger of drowning on top of everything else.

As he continued down the tunnel, he noticed a buildup of mud under the water. It was gluey and slowing him down.

The cold of the water was making his hands ache, but he tried to put that out of his mind and focus completely on achieving his goal.

He knew that he had to reach the control room and shut down the reactor. No one else could do it. And if he didn't do it in time, a lot of people would die.

The transporters were having problems with the solar radiation and the weather. If he couldn't stop the reaction, Susan or Darin might be stuck behind when the reactor exploded...

...Or Joe...

The realization came over Vincent that if he didn't shut down the reactor, Joe would probably die.

Joe wouldn't leave someone behind.

He'd stay to help people until the last minute.

Vincent broke out of his thoughts abruptly as he approached the junction where conduits came together from two other tunnels and fed into a third tunnel. Vincent carefully made the turn and realized why he was needed.

The power conduits left barely enough room for him to squeeze into the space.

As soon as he got his shoulders into the opening, he was sure that he wasn't going to have a problem.

A drop of water on his neck got his attention, and he suddenly started backing out of the space.

The water on his neck made him stop and consider just how little water it would take to drown him with his face nearly pressed into the floor of the tunnel.

As soon as he was out, he turned himself over and started scooting himself on his back, rather than crawling face down.

* * * * *

Time lost all meaning as Vincent pulled himself along the power conduits and pushed with his legs.

He was focused on the single thought, the single goal of getting to the control room and shutting down the reactor.

The sounds of trickling water, his own breaths and an occasional grunt were the only sounds to keep him company in the tight darkness.

* * * * *

Finally, Vincent saw a light in the distance and renewed his effort to scoot himself along the tunnel.

As he got closer, he could hear an emergency buzzer going off.

Fighting his tired muscles, Vincent gave another burst of effort and finally came to a grate in the side of the passage.

He curled himself into a ball, then with one forceful kick, forced the grate out and away from the opening.

Vincent crawled out of the tight space and brought himself to standing as his eyes adjusted to the dim emergency lighting in the room.

He quickly found the control panel and hurried over to it.

Using his flashlight to confirm what he was seeing, he surveyed the main console panel.

It was dead.

Vincent quickly looked around the room and found a secondary panel by the opening he had emerged from.

He hurried to the console and was thankful to see that it was similar to the control panel he used on the *Yorktown*.

With a few quick presses of keys, he ran a level two diagnostic and was able to identify the problem with the main console.

The console had lost main power.

A few key presses revealed the power configuration of the building, and Vincent was relieved to find an emergency power feed.

"You can do this. You've already proven it." Vincent said absently as he studied the power system.

He worked a quick override to shunt power from the emergency system to the main.

As he hurried to the main console, he noticed a sensation, a stinging, like he'd been out in the sun too long.

Vincent quickly put it out of his mind as he looked at the main console again.

"Bring the emergency systems online, then override the safety protocols." Vincent muttered as he looked for the yellow button he needed.

After pressing it, he found the two blue toggles and pressed them.

A flashing text message popped up on the screen asking if he needed to initiate an emergency procedure.

Vincent carefully pressed the fifth of six buttons.

The message 'Emergency Core Shutdown?' was displayed on the screen.

Vincent moved his hand down to the keypad and pressed the enter key.

He heard something like rushing air around him and a fine mist of water started to spray from the ceiling.

"I've got to get out of here." Vincent muttered to himself and hurried to the opening in the wall.

Blue lights came on throughout the room and the emergency buzzer stopped.

Vincent wedged himself into the impossibly small space and started the long journey back to the warehouse... back to Daddy Joe.

* * * * *

Vincent felt a stretching sensation on his skin, like his skin was drawing up.

For the first time, he started to consider his own life.

As he pulled himself along the dark tunnel, he thought about how he used to tease Lawrence and say the most horrible and cruel things to him.

Of all the things he had ever done, the things he had said and done to his brother were his biggest regrets.

"I'm going to live." He said firmly as he pulled himself along the pipes with renewed strength.

"I'm going to live long enough to tell you I'm sorry." Vincent said in a voice that almost sounded angry.

After a few minutes of forcing his muscles to continue on, even though they felt past giving out, Vincent finally added, "And that I love you."

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters?" A voice called from the darkness.

Vincent scooted and pulled himself along the tunnel as quickly as he could to get to the voice.

"Crewman Winters. How are you?" The voice asked with concern.

"I think I'm okay. I just feel like I got burnt a little bit." Vincent said as he pushed even harder to reach the voice.

"That's okay. That's why I'm here." The voice said seriously.

Vincent could finally see a small light ahead of him.

"Who are you?" Vincent asked with effort.

"I'm Benny. You saw me upstairs." The voice said hesitantly.

"Oh yeah. The muddy guy." Vincent said as he could finally see the end of the tunnel.

There was a laugh, then Benny said, "Yeah, I guess that's me."

"Well, it's me too now." Vincent said as he finally reached the end of the tight tunnel.

Benny backed away from Vincent and said, "You need to take off those clothes right now and hold still while I hose you down."

"Why?" Vincent asked as he was finally able to get the upper half of his body out of the tight space.

"Because I need to get rid of any radioactive dust that you might have carried out of there. Just strip." Benny said firmly from one of the side tunnels.

"Okay." Vincent said reluctantly.

As he was wriggling out of his clothes, he noticed that his hands were red and had the beginnings of blisters forming on them.

"Worry about that later. Get your clothes off." Benny said in a voice that was almost panicked.

It was hard for Vincent to undress in the small space, but he finally was able to get his boots and socks off. Next he opened the top of his jumpsuit and wriggled to get it down and off his shoulders. It was short work after that to get the jumpsuit off his legs.

In one last triumphant move, he kicked the jumpsuit away.

"Everything." Benny said firmly.

Vincent let out an exasperated sigh, then wriggled out of his underwear.

"Hold still, this is going to be a little bit cold." Benny said, then started to hose Vincent down with a thick liquid that seemed to be nearly freezing.

Vincent let out a yelp of surprise and pulled himself into a ball, trying to block the stream of cold goo.

"Hold still. This might mean the difference between life and death for you." Benny said in an angry voice.

Vincent forced himself to uncurl as Benny hosed him down from head to toe with the thick liquid.

"Roll over." Benny said firmly.

Vincent turned, then flinched when the cold liquid hit him in the back.

"Nice butt." Benny said seriously as he sprayed the fluid over Vincent.

Vincent looked over his shoulder and said, "Thanks, that's what was missing from today. First I get to crawl through cold mud, then I get blasted with radiation, and finally I get some muddy guy perving on my bare butt while he's hosing me down with frozen snot."

Benny laughed and said, "I just wanted to take your mind off the shower. We're done. Come over here, I've got a blanket for you."

Vincent crawled toward Benny and was handed a blanket.

"I need to get my clothes." Vincent said as he turned back around.

"No you don't. Those clothes are still going to be here long after you and I are far away from this place. Come on." Benny said as he started down the tunnel.

"Isn't the warehouse at the end of that tunnel?" Vincent asked in confusion and pointed.

"It used to be. The storm destroyed it about twenty minutes ago. Don't worry, we could tell that it was about to collapse and got everyone out in time. This tunnel leads to the basement of the town hall. Everyone's waiting for us there." Benny said quickly.

"Okay." Vincent said and began to follow Benny down the different tunnel.

* * * * *

"I'm really tired." Vincent said as a wave of exhaustion washed over him.

"Oh, yeah. See if you can come up here beside me." Benny said and came to a stop.

Vincent crawled forward, fighting to keep hold of the blanket with his cold numb hands as he did so.

Finally he made it to Benny's feet, then wedged himself into the space beside Benny in the tunnel.

"Hold it there, I need to be able to use my hands." Benny said seriously.

Vincent stopped with his face just about even with Benny's stomach.

"Give me your arm." Benny said as he worked to get something out of his pocket.

Vincent pulled the blanket away from his shoulder and turned his exposed arm to Benny as best he could.

"This is some medicine to help you deal with the radiation. It should make you feel better." Benny said and injected Vincent with the hypo spray.

"Benny? Can I ask you something?" Vincent asked carefully.

"Anything." Benny said with concern at Vincent's tone.

"If I die, would you give someone a message for me?" Vincent asked seriously.

"You're not going to die. You're going to be just fine." Benny said, forcing cheer into his voice.

"Yeah. Sure." Vincent said sarcastically, then continued, "If I die, would you tell my brother that I'm sorry for... well, pretty much everything I ever said or did to him?"

There was a long moment of silence, then Benny quietly said, "Yeah. Who's your brother so I can find him to tell him?"

"Lawrence Winters of Clan Short of Vulcan." Vincent said seriously.

"I'll remember, and if something happens to you, I promise that I'll tell him." Benny said as a vow.

"Thanks Benny... I don't even know your last name." Vincent said with surprise.

Benny laughed and said, "Benjamin Summers at your service."

Vincent smiled and said, "Summers and Winters. It sounds like we could be a good team."

"I thought of that too. But after what you just did, I don't know if I could keep up with you." Benny said frankly, then started crawling again.

"Like you wouldn't have done exactly the same thing if you could fit through the tunnel." Vincent said as he followed Benny.

"I would have tried. But I wouldn't know what to do once I got there." Benny said in thought.

Vincent thought about the fact that he had to reroute power to the console, but remained silent.

"Do you think someone like me could get into Starfleet?" Benny asked quietly.

Vincent smiled and said, "I bet if you really wanted to, we could find a way to get you in."

"I thought I had plenty of time to decide what I was going to do but..." Benny trailed off.

"You can't change what's going to happen tomorrow and you can't go back and change what happened yesterday. You just have today." Vincent said seriously.

"When I was your age I was such a kid. All I did was play with my friends and never worried about tomorrow." Benny said in a distant voice, then turned his flashlight on Vincent and said, "We're here."

Vincent looked at the side tunnel.

"How long does this one go on?" Vincent asked, making an effort to keep his teeth from chattering.

"Not far. It let's out into the basement of the town hall. Your Commander and Lieutenant are waiting for you there." Benny said as he led the way into the new tunnel.

"Benny, I'm scared." Vincent said quietly.

"So am I Vincent. Not for the same reasons, but I'm scared too." Benny said in thought.

"Don't worry, Captain Byrne and Commander M'Butu will make sure everyone's taken care of." Vincent said with assurance.

"I believe that too. I'm just scared of losing everything that I am. My life, my friends, my home..." Benny said in almost a whisper.

"I know how that feels Benny. If you want, I could help you with it." Vincent said in a considering voice.

"Help me how?" Benny asked cautiously.

"I lost everything and everyone in one day. After it all happened, I was sitting in a woman's lap. She told me to call her Grandma Karen, but I never met her before that day. Anyway, I was sitting there when it came to me. I had nothing. My parents were dead. My home was gone. I had nothing and no one." Vincent said distantly.

"How did you get from being like that to how you are now?" Benny asked in fascination.

"I had lots of people help me. That's why I think I can help you. If you're having trouble with something I went through, I can tell you what they told me, if it's something I don't know how to deal with, I'll find someone who knows how to take care of it." Vincent said seriously.

"Benny? Is Vincent with you?" Joe's panicked voice called into the tunnel.

"I'm right here Daddy Joe." Vincent called out with relief.

"Come on guys. Let's get you two back to the ship. We're getting out of here." Joe said happily.

* * * * *

Benny emerged from the tunnel first and was pulled into a quick hug by Joe.

"Thanks for bringing him back to me Benny." Joe said with relief.

"I was glad to help." Benny said as he enjoyed the hug.

Vincent poked his head out of the tunnel and looked around curiously.

"Come on Champ, let's get you out of there." Joe said and helped Vincent out of the tunnel.

"Okay Daddy Joe. I'm sorry, I wasn't able to bring the extra couplers back to you... they're kind of glowey now." Vincent said as he hugged Joe tightly.

Joe chuckled, then held Vincent out at arms length to look at him.

"I think we need to get you to the ship. You look like you got a pretty good dose." Joe said with concern.

"Can Benny come with me?" Vincent asked quickly.

Benny looked at Vincent with surprise, then at Joe with question.

"Um. Sure. Just a second." Joe said, then hurried to a cluster of people at the other side of the room.

"Why do you want me to go with you?" Benny asked cautiously.

"So we can get started on your new life." Vincent said with a smile.

Benny looked past the blisters and reddening skin on Vincent's face and into his honest and hopeful eyes.

"Okay." Benny said as he tried to force a smile for Vincent's benefit.

Joe approached the pair with Commander M'Butu following him.

"I see what you mean." Commander M'Butu said to Joe, then opened his communicator and said, "*Yorktown*, I have a priority one transport from this location to sickbay."

After a moment and a crackle of static, the technician said, "*I'm detecting an unusually high amount of radiation from your location that might interfere with the subject of transport. Can you move away from the source of radiation?*"

"The source of the radiation IS the subject of transport. And I need you to get him to sickbay. NOW!" Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"*Oh... Yes sir. Right away sir.*" The transporter technician said in a flustered voice. At the same time a crack of thunder echoed through the building.

"I'll see you on board." Vincent said with a smile at Benny.

"I'll be right behind you." Benny said as he watched the transporter beam envelope Vincent.

Commander M'Butu waited a moment for the transporter beam to completely clear, then said, "I have one more to transport from this location."

There was a crackle of static, then the transporter technician could barely be heard saying, "*No one came through. Isn't he still there?*"

Chapter 6

"What do you mean? NO. He's not here." Commander M'Butu said immediately.

There was a moment of crackling static before the transporter technician said, "*Sir. He didn't come through... Wait... There's a procedure to follow if this happens... where is it?*"

"Joe, we need you to look at the transfer bridge." Jimmy said as he ran to Joe's side.

"In a minute Jimmy." Joe said as he waited to see what Commander M'Butu was going to do.

"We don't have a minute. We just received a report. There's a tornado heading our way, it's five miles wide and getting bigger. If we don't get a shield up right now we're all going to die!" Jimmy said desperately.

"I'll take care of him Joe. I promise. Don't let everything that Vincent did be in vain." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Joe looked at Commander M'Butu with pain for an instant, then said, "Oliver, please call me as soon as anything happens. Can you arrange for Benny to beam aboard? When they find Vincent, he might be afraid and I don't want him to have to be alone."

Benny looked at Joe with surprise then saw the anguish in his expression.

"I'll take care of it Joe. Now go on." Commander M'Butu said with sympathy.

"And I promise that I'll take good care of Vincent." Benny added as a solemn vow.

Joe gave Benny a grateful smile and a nod, then turned to Jimmy and said, "Okay, tell me what you've got done so far."

* * * * *

Commander M'Butu turned his attention back to his communicator and firmly asked, "To whom am I speaking?"

"*This is Ensign Bergman, sir.*" The transporter technician said in a frightened voice.

"Commander, the roof just came off the clinic. I think we got everyone out before it went..." An Ensign said as he ran to Commander M'Butu's side.

The Commander nodded to indicate that he heard then carefully said into the communicator, "Ensign Bergman, I need for you to open the transporter's log file and find out where Crewman Winters was transported."

There was a loud crackle of static, then a pop that coincided with a particularly close lightning strike.

"*Um... I just...okay. I've got it.*" The transporter technician said in a desperate voice.

There was a booming crack of thunder that could be felt as well as heard and a trickle of dust fell from the ceiling.

"Where is he Ensign?" Commander M'Butu asked, wishing he could reach through the communicator and shake the answers out of Ensign Bergman.

Benny looked around the room in fright and noticed that the town council were gathered in a tight group around a communications console.

"*There... I've got him... he's in the transporter's buffer... it can't... finish him. Oh God! The pattern's been corrupted. I've got his matter, but the transporter can't put him back together.*" The transporter technician said in panic.

"Ensign Bergman. Lock down the transporter and call Chief Morgan to deal with this. You're out of your depth in this matter." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"*Sir.... yes, sir. I can do that. I'll call him now.*" The Ensign said in a terrified voice.

"Uncle Oliver, you should think about getting your people out of here. There's a tornado closing in on us and it may only be a matter of minutes." Cyril said as he ran to Commander M'Butu's side.

"I think you know that's not going to happen Cyril. There's no way my people would willingly leave anyone behind. Just work to save as many as you can." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Cyril nodded his understanding, then turned to go back to the group of the colony's leaders.

Silence.

For the first time in weeks, the colonists heard nothing.

Everyone looked around in wonder as the devastating storm seemed to completely disappear in an instant.

There was a crackle of static from the communicator in Commander M'Butu's hand, then a familiar voice.

"*Ensign Bergman says we have a bit of a problem here, would you care to fill me in?*" Chief Morgan asked, somehow managing to sound casual.

"Crewman Winters shut down the reactor and was exposed to some radiation in the process. When he tried to transport up a combination of the radiation, the storm and the solar flares must have corrupted his signal. Now his matter is stored in the transporter's buffer and the computer doesn't have enough of a pattern to put him back together." Commander M'Butu said carefully, trying to be brief while providing the most important facts.

"*Oliver, from what I understand, you have quite a situation on your hands down there. Leave this to me. I'll call you when I have this all sorted out.*" Chief Morgan said in a confident voice.

Commander M'Butu smiled with relief and said, "Have I mentioned how happy I am that you're back?"

"*I believe so, but I don't mind hearing it again from time to time. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll attend to Crewman Winters.*"

"Of course Richard. Thank you. M'Butu out." Commander M'Butu said with an aire of relief.

"Morgan out." The Chief Engineer said before terminating the transmission.

Commander M'Butu turned and gave Benny a considering look, then said, "First things first. You have a promise to keep, and in order to do that, you'll need to be on the ship."

* * * * *

After a moment to look over the transporter, Chief Morgan turned to the frightened young Ensign and said, "Ensign Bergman, I have a very important job for you. Are you up for it?"

"Yes sir." Ensign Bergman said as he tried to compose himself.

"Good. Since Crewman Winters was on the surface, he must have transported down. I need you to find out where he transported from and locate his transporter trace file." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"How can I do that? There have been hundreds of people transporting since we got here and no one has kept a record of who was coming and going." Ensign Bergman said helplessly.

Chief Morgan shook his head and said, "Damned sloppy. We'll just have to do this the hard way. Make a ship wide announcement if you have to. Just find out who transported the nine year old Crewman to the surface."

"Nine? I killed a kid?" Ensign Bergman asked as tears welled up in his eyes.

"No. You didn't kill him. He's alive and floating in an electronic limbo inside this device. But if you want to keep him alive, you'll find me his transporter trace." Chief Morgan finished firmly.

"Yes... yes sir. Right away." Ensign Bergman said quickly, then ran out of the transporter room.

Chief Morgan shook his head, then pressed the comm switch on the transporter console.

"Communications." Was the immediate response.

"I need Ensign Radovanovich in transporter room three immediately." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"*Yes, Sir. I'll get him to you as fast as I can. It's good to have you back, Sir.*" The woman in communications said quickly.

After a moment to consider the voice, Chief Morgan gave a gentle smile and said, "Thank you Debbie, It's good to be back. Morgan out."

"*Patterson out*." Debbie said, then closed the connection.

Chief Morgan placed his palm flat on the console before him and said in a gentle voice, "Don't worry Vincent, we'll get you through this."

* * * * *

Commander M'Butu walked up the stairs and into the main room of the town hall to find Joe, Susan, Darin and Jimmy looking at him with anticipation.

"Chief Morgan is personally taking care of Crewman Winters. I'll keep you posted. Would you care to fill me in on what you just did?" Commander M'Butu asked with interest.

"Darin... I mean Ensign Cooper suggested that instead of using the shield generators to create shields over the main buildings, that we synchronize them and create one massive shield to cover the entire colony." Susan said with accomplishment.

"But the units were designed to operate independently and can't cover nearly that much area. How did you manage that?" Commander M'Butu asked curiously.

"Vincent and I were talking about the Yorktown's field generators and how to do a seamless power transfer before I beamed down. That made me think about applying the same reasoning to the modulation of the shield harmonics to make them work in tandem. The synchronous field harmonics allowed us to extend the maximum area of the shielding. We constructed a data transfer bridge to synchronize them and with everyone's help, we made it work." Darin said with excitement.

"How will this effect our evacuation efforts?" Commander M'Butu asked carefully.

"It will actually make things easier. We just have to give the Yorktown our shield frequency and she'll be able to beam people through the shield as if it weren't there. And the way this thing is rigged, we should be able to keep it up until the last person is transported out." Joe said seriously.

"Good work. All of you. I assume that you'll need to stay here and monitor the equipment." Commander M'Butu said in thought.

"Yes sir. The shield is stable, but we should really have the team here to keep it that way. Especially with the tornado that's about to hit." Joe said with a look of regret directed at the commander.

"Understood. I'm going to get back to the business of evacuating this place. I'll let you know as soon as I have any news." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Thank you sir." Joe said, and reluctantly looked over at the bank of portable shield generators all wired into one central unit.

* * * * *

"Ensign Radovanovich reporting as ordered." Rad said as he hurried into transporter room three.

"Come over here, we have a crewman stuck in this thing. I seem to recall hearing that you faced a similar challenge once before." Chief Morgan said seriously.

Rad paled at the statement as he walked over to the console.

"Do you think you can help him?" Chief Morgan asked with hope.

"I don't know... The last time I tried to do this it didn't turn out too well. What came out of the transporter... well, fortunately it didn't live." Rad said grimly.

"Perhaps you have looked back on that experience and wished that you could have done something differently. Now you have that chance. I don't know of anyone else on this ship who would have a better chance of retrieving Crewman Winters from the transporter's buffer." Chief Morgan said honestly.

"Vincent's in there?" Rad asked with horror.

"Yes. And to make matters worse, he was exposed to radiation before he transported up." Chief Morgan said, then pointed to the radiation reading from the transporter's log file.

"I need his trace... we were together in section D when Commander M'Butu told him to transport immediately, so he probably went to transporter room five." Rad said in thought.

Chief Morgan hit the button on the console quickly and said, "Transporter room five, this is Chief Morgan."

"*Yes, Chief, what can I do for you?*" The technician asked quickly.

"A nine year old crewman beamed down to the surface some hours ago. We believe he might have used your transporter." Chief Morgan said hopefully.

"*Yes sir. I remember him.*" The transporter technician said carefully.

"We need his transporter trace pattern. Is there any way you can locate it? We need it desperately." Chief Morgan said urgently.

"*Um... yeah. I went on break right after I transported him. Let's see... yeah. There's the log showing where I signed off... so now I can just go back by the time stamp on the files... yeah, everyone else was beaming up. His was the only outgoing transport I had in that session. Where do you need the file sent?*" The technician asked seriously.

"Transporter room three." Chief Morgan said abruptly.

"*You should have it now. I hope it helps.*" The technician said with concern.

"Thank you, who am I speaking to?" Chief Morgan asked curiously.

"*Ensign Foster, Sir.*" The transporter technician said professionally.

"You may have just helped to save a crewman's life Ensign Foster. Thank you for your help. Morgan, out." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"*Foster, out*." Ensign Foster said, and a smile could be heard in his voice.

"This isn't going to be easy." Rad said as he looked at the transporter trace.

"Just tell me what you need. I can tear one of these things down and put it back together with my eyes closed, but what you're about to make it do is unfamiliar territory for me." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"I've only tried this once before... But I've got to make it work." Rad said in concentration.

"Oh, excuse me. There's one other thing I must attend to." Chief Morgan said absently, then pressed the comm button.

"*Communications*." The voice responded immediately.

"Debbie, would you locate Ensign Bergman and tell him to return to transporter room three." Chief Morgan asked as he watched Rad examining the pattern buffer data.

"*He's right here. He's been trying to get me to make a ship wide announcement, but I can't make sense out of what he wants me to say.*" Debbie said frankly.

"It doesn't matter now, we found what we were looking for." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"*He heard you, he's on his way. Did Ensign Radovanovich make it down there?*" Debbie asked with concern.

"I'm right here, Debs. Kinda busy now, I'll tell you all about it later." Rad said, not taking his eyes off the screen before him.

"*Got it, Rad. Communications, out*." Debbie said quickly and terminated the transmission.

"I think I can make this work. I just need to render the transporter trace pattern and make some adjustments before we can use it." Rad said carefully.

"How do you mean?" Chief Morgan asked as he watched Rad punching in commands.

"When we did this before, we didn't take into account things like clothes, jewelry, the things in his pockets. The transporter usually takes care of those things automatically, but this is like an ultra strict version of the manual mode. We have to be very specific about what's to be done. And even then... well, we can't worry about that." Rad said, then pressed one final button and waited for the image to appear on the screen.

"I honestly didn't know that could be done." Chief Morgan said in an impressed voice.

"Well, it can't without a little reprogramming. I just imported a program that I wrote a while back and prayed that I would never need." Rad said, then started typing in commands.

"Starting with the trace image... First, I'm removing the uniform." Rad said seriously, then executed the commands.

"Next the boots... then the socks... finally the underwear..." Rad said carefully.

"I find the fact that you can do this somewhat disturbing." Chief Morgan said honestly.

"Don't worry Chief, I'd never use my powers for evil." Rad said with a smile, then zoomed in on Vincent's face in the image.

"I didn't think he had any jewelry, but I had to be sure." Rad said seriously, then adjusted the view to look at his hands.

"Good. That's the easy one." Rad said, then stored the altered file.

"How do you mean?" Chief Morgan asked curiously.

The door to transporter room three opened and Ensign Bergman hurried into the room.

"I mean, that his image isn't complete. I don't know how bad it will be, but don't let it bother you. We're going to use his transporter trace to fill in the blanks of whatever is missing." Rad said seriously.

"Proceed." Chief Morgan said, then glanced to see Ensign Bergman standing at his side.

When the image finally resolved, Ensign Bergman took in a gasp of horror at the sight.

Chief Morgan looked away, unable to bear the sight of the grotesque monster before him.

The image showed portions of Vincent's face missing and a claw-like hand clutching a blanket.

The first thing that Rad thought when he saw Vincent's rendered image was 'The Cryptkeeper'.

"Oh Vincent..." Rad said with pain.

"Did... did I do that?" Ensign Bergman asked in a small voice.

"No Ensign. The radiation and the storm did that. Your logs show that you did everything perfectly. None of this was your fault." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Thank you Chief." Ensign Bergman said, not sounding convinced.

"Let's get rid of that blanket..." Rad said carefully as he entered a series of commands.

The image changed to expose large portions of Vincent's body without skin, and his hands were little more than bones.

Rad shook his head and said, "We're going with plan B."

"And what, pray tell, is Plan B?" Chief Morgan asked as he hesitantly looked at the screen again.

"Vincent's core... his brain and neural activity, are the most protected parts of his pattern. I'll have to assume that that's intact." Rad said carefully, then pressed a few buttons and the view changed.

Black patches began to fill in most of the areas of missing skin, the effect was somehow more disturbing than the mass of bones and muscles they had been looking at before.

"This shows his cellular viability. I'm just going on a hunch here. But from the look of it, the radiation has already killed off a significant portion of the skin on his hands and face and... his eyes are severely deteriorated... and his lungs... oh Vincent." Rad said as he looked at the image with pain.

"Keep your focus, you're doing fine." Chief Morgan said quietly.

Rad nodded, then said, "What I'm going to do is an overlay. Wherever there is missing data, we'll fill it in from the transporter trace... that's plan A. If we just left him like that, he would be blind, permanently disfigured and I don't even know how extensive the lung damage would be. I think we can do better."

"Plan B. Wherever we find dead cells in one profile, I'm going to replace them with living cells from the other profile... In theory, the two patterns should have exactly the same amount of mass and when the unified pattern is applied to the matter stream he should come out of it with living skin and eyes." Rad said carefully.

"What about the radiation?" Chief Morgan asked slowly.

"I'll take care of that now." Rad said seriously, then pulled up the transporter log to see the types of radiation and the levels.

"Since the radiation is absent in the original transporter trace, I'll just have the filter flush any traces of radiation that aren't present in both images." Rad said as he keyed in the instructions.

"Why don't you have it flush out all the radiation?" Ensign Bergman asked curiously.

"Because I'm not sure how that would be interpreted by the program. It might stop all neural activity, effectively killing Vincent without any hope of reviving him." Rad said, then activated his program.

"What condition do you expect him to be in when he emerges from the transporter beam?" Chief Morgan asked with concern.

"I wish I could tell you. I'm using every trick I know or have ever dreamed of here. I can't predict how the computer will interpret my commands on an operation of this scale. I've tried to keep it as simple and straight forward as I can." Rad said with worry.

"I'm going to brief the captain then request that a medical team be present when we rematerialize Crewman Winters." Chief Morgan said firmly.

"That sounds like a good idea. I've got a few more minutes of work to do here. I still have to compensate for his digestive processes." Rad said in concentration.

Chief Morgan nodded, then turned and left the transporter room.

* * * * *

When the transporter beam finally faded, Benny looked around cautiously.

"If you'll just move off the transporter pad, someone will be here in a moment to take you to get you some food and find you a place to sleep." The transporter technician said in a sympathetic tone.

"I... um... I'm supposed to find someone named Ensign Bergman." Benny said hesitantly.

"You need to find Terry? Oh, give me a second and I'll find him for you." The transporter technician said and started pressing some buttons on his console.

"He's logged in at transporter station three. Just walk through these doors and right across the hall." The technician said professionally.

"Thank you." Benny said shyly.

* * * * *

"We can watch after the shields if you want to go check on him." Jimmy said quietly.

Joe looked up with pain in his eyes, then said, "Commander M'Butu was right. Vincent went into that reactor to save all these people's lives. If I let anything happen to them, then his sacrifice would mean nothing."

"You're talking like he's dead. He isn't. They just misplaced him. You know that Commander M'Butu will tell you what's going on, even if it's something you don't want to hear... right?" Susan asked firmly.

Joe reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"Then right this minute all we know for sure is that Vincent has been misplaced and Chief Morgan is personally taking charge of finding him. Right?" Susan asked as she looked him in the eyes.

"Right." Joe said as he fought to get his emotions back under control.

"Now lets check out these systems, it looks like the tornado is about to hit us." Susan said as she turned her attention back to the equipment.

Joe let out a resigned sigh, then said, "Right."

* * * * *

"Captain Byrne, do you have a moment?" Chief Morgan asked hesitantly as he walked to the Captain's side on the bridge.

Captain Byrne gave Chief Morgan a considering look and said, "Yes, of course. In fact, I believe it would be a good time to regroup and assess our situation."

Captain Byrne looked at the helm and said, "Lieutenant Morris, you have the bridge."

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Morris said immediately.

"Lieutenant Patterson, please have Cyril, Commander M'Butu, Dr. Perry and Lieutenant Simms meet me in the conference room for a briefing. You should be there as well." Captain Byrne said as he started walking toward the turbo lift.

"Right away sir." Debbie said quickly, and began trying to locate the requested individuals.

* * * * *

"Excuse me?" Benny said as he walked into the transporter room.

"You can't be in here. Just wait a second and I'll get someone to take you to the rec hall so you can get something to eat and get checked in." Ensign Bergman said as he walked toward Benny.

"Vincent's Daddy Joe asked me to come here so I can stay with Vincent when you find him. He doesn't want Vincent to have to be alone." Benny said quickly.

"Come on in. What's your name?" Rad asked from the console.

"I'm Benny." He said quietly.

"Come over here Benny and I'll fill you in on what's going on." Rad said seriously as he watched his program manipulating the image.

Benny walked to Rad's side and gasped when he saw the grotesque image of Vincent covered with huge areas of black.

"What happened to him?" Benny asked in horror.

"Honestly, I don't know exactly what caused this. It appears that the areas most affected by the radiation were... lost." Rad said in a considering voice.

"Can you do anything to help him?" Benny asked desperately.

"That's what I'm doing now. Just hold on Benny. I can't say for sure, but I think I might be able to undo most of the damage." Rad said carefully.

Benny looked at the picture on the screen, then noticed one of the black patches disappear.

"You're putting him back together?" Benny asked as he looked at Rad with question.

"That's right. We have a... well, it's kind of a pattern that was created when he transported down. We're using that to fill in the gaps where there's missing information." Rad said carefully.

"Wow. That's really amazing." Benny said as he looked at the console's screen again.

"Benny, I don't want to get your hopes up. This might work, but what you're seeing on the screen is the composite pattern that I'm constructing. When we try to take Vincent's matter and apply it to the pattern... well, I honestly don't know what will happen." Rad said in a pained voice.

"I don't understand." Benny said with concern, not looking away from Vincent's image on the screen.

"What you're seeing is a very simplified version of the actual pattern. It's a computerized estimation in the same way that a globe is an incredibly simplified representation of the Earth. I'm making corrections based on what I can see here but... I just don't know what condition Vincent will be in when we get him out of the transporter." Rad said, feeling pain at saying the words.

"Is there anything else you can do?" Benny asked quietly.

"No. This is it. This is everything I know to do to help him." Rad said quietly.

"Then it will have to be enough. I promised that I'd stay with Vincent and no matter what condition he's in when he comes out of the transporter, I'll keep my promise." Benny said, trying to sound definite.

Rad nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"It's here." Jimmy said as he looked out the window.

"Do you really think this is going to hold?" Darin asked Joe quietly.

Joe smiled at Darin and said, "I think it's got a good chance of holding up. If this works, you'll know that you saved a few hundred lives."

Darin looked at Joe with wonder.

"The way we were going to set up the individual shields would have offered protection to... maybe two or three hundred people at the most. There's just no way we could have saved everyone from this tornado. On top of that, the Yorktown would have to compensate for each different shield frequency, which would have slowed the evacuation effort. If this transfer bridge holds up, you may have just created something that will be saving lives for years to come." Joe said seriously.

"Wow. And all I did was apply the same logic from power distribution to field harmonics." Darin said in amazement.

Joe chuckled and said, "You sounded like Vincent when you said that."

Darin's smile faded as he thought about Vincent being hurt and missing.

Joe put a hand on Darin's shoulder and said, "Susan's right. All we know for sure is that he's missing. Hopefully they've found him by now and he's back on the ship waiting for us."

Darin nodded. He couldn't find any words of comfort or encouragement to offer in return.

* * * * *

"Commander M'Butu, we'll start with you. What's the situation on the surface?" Captain Byrne asked from his place at the head of the conference table.

"Much improved. Deflector Control was able to put up a shield to blanket the entire colony... or what's left of it. Without having to fight the weather, the search and rescue efforts are going much more smoothly. We've been able to evacuate approximately 50% of the colonists so far." Commander M'Butu said professionally.

Captain Byrne nodded, then asked, "Dr. Perry, what can you tell me about the condition of the colonists?"

"They're cold, hungry and several have been injured as a result of the storm. We're being overwhelmed by the shear number of people in need of medical attention, but the injuries haven't been life threatening for the most part. We've called on personnel with medical training from other departments to aid in the treatment. So far we've been keeping up with the demand." Dr. Perry said in thought.

"Good work. Lieutenant Patterson, what is the status of communications?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Currently, we have no communication outside this system. We're in the process of modifying a series of probes to act as relay buoys away from the local star. It's our hope that when they're launched, we'll be able to have full communication with Starfleet." Debbie said carefully.

"How long until we're ready to launch the probes?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"Five minutes at most. In fact, if I may be excused, I would like to launch them as soon as they're ready." Debbie asked hopefully.

"Yes, go on. And contact me as soon as we have communications with Starfleet." Captain Byrne said in thought.

"Yes sir." Debbie said immediately, then hurried out of the room.

"Lieutenant Simms, any matters of concern with security?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"No sir. I've instructed my people to treat our guests with the same courtesy we'd extend to visiting dignitaries. So far everyone has been very cooperative and things have been running smoothly. But I'm concerned about what's going to happen when the rest of the colonists are brought onboard." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

"What concerns you?" Captain Byrne asked with interest.

"When a large group of people are packed into a small space, violence will erupt. I don't have any suggestions of how to prevent it from happening, I'm just saying that it's a well documented psychological phenomenon. We've been working to disburse the people evenly through the ship, directing them to all the mess halls, assigning them quarters as family units and trying to keep them focused on helping each other. But as the number of people increase, I anticipate problems with short tempers, violent outbursts... possibly even claustrophobia issues." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I see. Keep me informed of any developments that concern you. We'll do our best to minimize the impact on our guests. Any thoughts on the matter Cyril?" Captain Byrne asked of his son.

"The council may be able to rally people to keep a positive attitude. Once communications have been established, it might be helpful if we could get some indication of what's to happen to us. If I can tell everyone where we're going, it would allow them to focus on the future rather than worry about their losses." Cyril said carefully.

"I'll see what I can do. Now Chief Morgan, what can you tell us of the condition of Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked seriously as he turned his attention to the Chief Engineer.

"When he was transported aboard, his pattern was corrupted. We have his matter, but the transporter can't reassemble him." Chief Morgan said frankly.

Captain Byrne looked down at his folded hands in front of him as he said, "I see. What steps are being taken?"

"Ensign Radovanovich has had to deal with a situation like this once before. He's using the transporter trace from when Crewman Winters transported down as a template for his reconstruction... From the level of degradation of the transport pattern, I can't say that I'm optimistic, but it's the only chance Crewman Winters has for survival." Chief Morgan said gravely.

"Is there anything we can do for him?" Captain Byrne asked carefully.

"Yes. I'd like for a medical team to be present when we bring him out of the transporter. There's no telling what condition he'll be in." Chief Morgan said in a reluctant voice.

"Yes, of course. Dr. Perry will see to it that someone is there." Captain Byrne said and spared her a glance.

"I'll take care of it personally." Dr. Perry said immediately.

"I'd also like to have one armed security officer present." Chief Morgan said reluctantly.

Captain Byrne looked at Chief Morgan with surprise.

"It just might end up being the most merciful thing." Chief Morgan said as his gaze fell to the table.

"I'll be there." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"Captain, I have Starfleet Command for you." Debbie's voice came over the intercom.

"Good work. Put them through." Captain Byrne said as he looked at the view screen.

"Leland, I was beginning to worry about you. What's your situation?" Admiral Morrow asked with concern.

"As near as we can tell, when the orbits of the planets of this system brought them all on the same side of the local star, the combined gravitational forces caused a violent reaction in the star. The result being sunspots, solar flares, and subspace interference. The effect on the planet has been devastating. Violent storms are effectively scouring the surface clear of every living thing. The colony has lost an estimated one hundred people and the solar radiation and storms have severely hindered our efforts to evacuate the colony." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"I see. I'll divert the Enterprise immediately to aid in the evacuation. What else can we do to help you?" Admiral Morrow asked with concern as he nodded to someone off screen.

"It's been suggested that the morale of the colonists might be greatly improved if they had an idea of where they were being taken. Uncertainty about their future might contribute to the feeling of confinement that they will almost certainly begin to experience as the reality of their situation begins to set in." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"I understand. We'll get right to work on that and get back to you as soon as possible... The Enterprise is expected to arrive at your location in three hours. Perhaps making preparations to relocate a portion of the colonists to the Enterprise will take their minds off other things for a while?" Admiral Morrow suggested.

"Yes, I believe I'll let the colony's governing council handle those arrangements. They should be able to include their people in the decision making and divert their attention for a time." Captain Byrne said with a considering look at his son.

Cyril nodded his agreement.

"We've received your log reports and sensor data. Contact us immediately if there is any further support we can offer." Admiral Morrow said seriously.

"Yes sir. Thank you." Captain Byrne said respectfully.

"Starfleet out." Admiral Morrow said calmly.

"Yorktown out." Captain Byrne said, then pressed the button to terminate the transmission.

"Anything further?" Captain Byrne asked as he looked around the table.

Everyone looked around and shook their heads.

"Keep me posted. And Richard, let me know immediately how things work out with Crewman Winters." Captain Byrne finished in a sympathetic tone.

"Yes sir. I believe Ensign Radovanovich should be ready to attempt retrieval soon." Chief Morgan said as he stood.

"I'll be down in a few minutes." Dr. Perry said as she got up from the conference table.

"I'll go down with you Chief." Lieutenant Simms said in a low voice.

Chief Morgan nodded and reluctantly began to walk toward the turbo lift.

* * * * *

"How are you doing Joe?" Commander M'Butu asked as he approached the group.

"How's Vincent? Did you find him?" Joe asked desperately.

Commander M'Butu nodded, his expression letting Joe know that all was not well.

"Please, tell me." Joe said in a whisper, bracing himself for the news.

"His pattern was corrupted when he transported. His matter is being held in the transporter's buffer." Commander M'Butu said quietly.

Susan's eyes began to fill with tears as she felt arms come around her.

She turned to see Jimmy looking back at her with tear filled eyes and holding her gently.

"You need to call Rad, he knows what to do..." Joe said in a burst.

"He's already there Joe. Everything that can possibly be done is being done." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Joe fought down his emotions and haltingly said, "Thank you Oliver."

"I'll come and tell you as soon as they've gotten him out of there." Commander M'Butu said quietly.

Joe nodded that he heard.

Commander M'Butu turned and walked to the other side of the room to get back to the business of evacuating the colony.

* * * * *

"Report Ensign." Chief Morgan said as he entered the room with Lieutenant Simms at his side.

"The program should be done with the overlay and substitution any second. After that we just apply the filter, then start the matter stream." Rad said reluctantly.

Chief Morgan nodded.

The doors to transporter room three opened to admit Dr. Perry and two medical assistants.

"Whenever you're ready Ensign Radovanovich." Chief Morgan said carefully.

Rad looked down at his console and said a quick internal prayer for Vincent's protection as he brought the transporter's filter online.

"If you want, I could take over." Chief Morgan said gently.

"No sir. I'll see it through." Rad said quietly.

Chief Morgan nodded and stood away from the console.

"Here we go." Rad said in a shaky voice, then activated the control to apply the pattern to the matter stream.

The transporter sounded like it was straining as the bluish light started to sparkle on the transporter pad.

"It's trying to resolve the incongruities between the pattern and the matter stream. Give it a second." Rad said in concentration.

"I see something." Benny said with worry as he saw a faint outline in the transporter's beam.

"Stay back. We don't know how stable he's going to be." Rad said with concern.

Benny looked at Rad with confusion at the statement.

"He might pop." Ensign Bergman said, then a look of horror came over his face as he realized just how inappropriate it sounded.

Chief Morgan looked at Ensign Bergman with disapproval for a moment then said, "A bit simplistic, but essentially true. Come over here and wait with me young man."

Benny hesitantly walked to Chief Morgan's side.

"Why is it taking so long?" Dr. Perry asked as she watched the barely visible form trying to resolve into being.

"Because the filter is doing about twenty things at once. The process is slow, but with any luck Vincent will come out of there in better shape than he went in." Rad said as he watched the console before him with concern.

"Is it working?" Chief Morgan asked carefully.

"The program hasn't thrown any errors. So it's doing what I told it... I just hope I told it the right things." Rad said as he watched the readings carefully.

A beeping drew everyone's attention.

"Something's wrong." Rad said as he started checking the readings.

"What is it?" Chief Morgan asked immediately.

"It's showing that there isn't enough matter to complete the reconstruction... I screwed something up." Rad said in horror.

"What are you going to do?" Ensign Bergman asked in confusion.

"He needs more matter... wait... 0.00032... it's just a few particles." Rad said with relief.

"I don't understand." Lieutenant Simms said cautiously.

"It's nothing. The transporter was just trying to make an 'exact' match between Vincent's pattern and the available matter. I'll just have it disregard the missing particles and it will be fine." Rad said as he started pressing buttons.

"There." Rad said, then pressed the activation button.

There was a sparkling in the transporter beam and a humanoid shape started to take form.

"It looks like you may have done it." Chief Morgan said as he watched the boy's body resolve into being.

Silence fell over the room as everyone saw what had taken form before them.

It was a mass of misshapen raw flesh and open sores from head to toe, there were ribbons of loose skin hanging in places and only a few small patches of pink skin to let anyone know that the thing before them had once been human.

The sound of the door opening broke the silence as Ensign Bergman dashed out of the room.

Benny's eyes went wide in horror as he took in a gasp at the sight before him.

Chief Morgan instinctively pulled Benny to his side and held him close in a hug of comfort.

Rad's eyes filled with tears at the horrifying sight before him as he felt like there was some horrible force inside him, crushing his soul.

Dr. Perry looked on with amazement at the sight before her. In her nearly thirty years of medical practice, she had never seen anyone in this condition... No one alive anyway.

Lieutenant Simms reluctantly raised his phaser, then adjusted the power setting to 'kill'. He tried to fight down the image of the nine year old boy who sat across from him in the conference room the day before and focus on the necessary and 'merciful' thing that needed to be done.

The moment of silence seemed to stretch on forever as Lieutenant Simms raised his phaser and pointed it at the hideous lump of flesh.

As his finger tightened on the trigger, a small voice quietly asked, "Can someone help me? I can't see."

Chapter 7

Benny broke out of Chief Morgan's arms and stood in front of Lieutenant Simms with his arms outstretched, blocking him from firing at Vincent.

"Vincent? How are you feeling?" Rad asked with disbelief.

"Um... Okay I guess, I just feel kind of heavy... like I'm wearing a mask or something and I can't open my eyes." Vincent said in confusion.

"Let me see what I can do for you." Dr. Perry said as she hurried to Vincent's side.

"Who's that?" Vincent asked in confusion as he stretched his arms out in front of him.

"I'm the Yorktown's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Perry. Would you please hold still for a minute so I can see how you're doing?" She asked slowly.

Vincent put his arms down and said, "Sure. What happened to me?"

"If you'll hold still for just another few seconds I'll see if I can find out." Dr. Perry said as she carefully scanned him with her medical tricorder.

Lieutenant Simms adjusted his phaser back to the 'stun' setting then put it back into the holster on his belt.

Benny reluctantly put his arms down, but continued to watch Lieutenant Simms' every move.

"Crewman Winters, have you ever had a sunburn?" Dr. Perry asked carefully as she continued to scan.

"Yeah, sure. Once when my dad took us out on a boat I fell asleep and I had my feet propped up and I got sunburned on the bottoms of my feet. I couldn't go to school for a whole week because I couldn't walk." Vincent rambled.

Dr. Perry chuckled, then said, "Well, when you're sunburned, you know how your body gets rid of the damaged skin by causing it to peel off?"

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Well my young Crewman. It seems that you've just received the equivalent of a few hundred sunburns. That weight you're feeling is just damaged skin gathered on the surface. I'm happy to say that besides that, you're perfectly fine." Dr. Perry said with a smile.

"So my eyes are just scabbed shut?" Vincent asked carefully.

Dr. Perry considered the question for a moment, then said, "Sure. That's as good a way to describe it as any. Let's get you to sickbay where we can make you comfortable. I'd like to get you on a biobed to do some more detailed scans. It will just take a minute to get a gurney for you."

"I can walk if someone will help me." Vincent said quietly.

"I'll help you Vincent." Benny said and ran to Vincent's side.

"Benny? How did you get here before me?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"Well, I guess even though you're little enough to fit through a conduit pipe, you're still too big to fit through a transporter beam... you got stuck in there for a while." Benny said as he took hold of Vincent's hand and guided it to his arm.

"Oh. Okay." Vincent said in thought.

"If you gentlemen will follow me, we'll go to sickbay." Dr. Perry said with a relieved smile.

"Wait, I thought I heard Rad a minute ago... Is Rad here?" Vincent asked as he stopped in his tracks.

"I'm right here Vincent." Rad said happily.

"Will you tell Daddy Joe that I went to sickbay and that I'm okay? I don't want him to be worried about me." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure thing Vincent. I'll tell him right now." Rad said peacefully.

Vincent nodded, then gripped Benny's arm, letting him know that he was ready to go.

* * * * *

The people in the hallway stood back and stared in horror at the naked boy covered with misshapen flesh that looked like it was rotting off his body.

"Are people staring at me?" Vincent asked as he heard people stop talking as they went by.

"Yeah." Benny said honestly.

"Why? Do I look really bad?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Yeah. You look like ninety pounds of chewed bubble gum." Benny said frankly.

"Oh." Vincent said in thought.

"And you're naked." Benny added.

Vincent stopped in his tracks at the statement.

"Crewman Winters, we're almost there. If you're worried about being exposed, standing in the hallway isn't going to make it any better." Dr. Perry said, trying to fight down a chuckle.

"Don't worry about it Vincent. You look so gross right now I don't think anyone's even noticed that you're naked." Benny said as he placed Vincent's hand on his arm again.

"Um... Okay. I guess that makes me feel better." Vincent said slowly.

Benny chuckled at Vincent's statement.

"Where are we?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Walking from transporter room three to the sickbay." Dr. Perry said then turned as they reached the sickbay door.

"Oh, I see, we're on the same deck. I got the feeling that you were taking me the long way around." Vincent said as he was led into sickbay on Benny's arm.

"Yeah, we just wanted to show you off." Benny said playfully.

Vincent wasn't capable of making any facial expressions in his condition, but for some reason, Benny was fairly certain that somewhere under there, Vincent was rolling his eyes.

"Would you help Crewman Winters onto the bed?" Dr. Perry asked as she gathered some medical instruments.

Benny tried to guide Vincent up on the bed, but wasn't having much luck.

One of the medical assistants that had followed them from the transporter room stepped up and helped get Vincent onto the bed.

"Let's see what we've got here." Dr. Perry said as she turned on the biobed.

Dr. Perry looked carefully at the biobed's reading's and said, "I don't know exactly what your friend 'Rad' did back there, but whatever it was took care of the radiation. I can't find any trace of it."

"Are you going to be able to fix Vincent to like he was before?" Benny asked hopefully.

"Let me see one thing before I answer. Crewman Winters, you may feel a pulling sensation on your arm. Let me know if it causes you pain." Dr. Perry said, then picked up a pair of forceps from beside the bed.

"Okay." Vincent said reluctantly.

Dr. Perry took the forceps to the edge of the loose misshapen flesh on Vincent's arm and began to pull on it gently.

"That feels weird." Vincent said as she began to pull the damaged skin up and away from the layer of pale skin underneath.

Dr. Perry carefully pulled the skin up just a little bit more.

"That hurts." Vincent said through gritted teeth.

Dr. Perry stopped pulling at the skin and held it up like a flap.

"Young man, come over here." Dr. Perry said to Benny insistently.

Benny hurried around the table to Dr. Perry's side.

"I want you to look at this and tell your friend what you're seeing." Dr. Perry said seriously.

Benny leaned in to get closer, then said, "The Doctor is pulling up the scabby skin on your arm and there's new skin underneath. It's not scarred or anything."

Dr. Perry released the piece of damaged skin and allowed it to fall back into place.

After a moment of consideration, Dr. Perry said, "Crewman Winters, from what I can tell of your condition, you're going to be perfectly fine. While it would be possible for me to remove the damaged skin right now, it would be a time consuming task and I'm afraid that other patients would have to go untreated for their injuries while I was working on you. So in the interest of providing the best possible care for the most people, I would like to delay the procedure until those most in need are taken care of. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. I'm not hurting or anything, so it's okay." Vincent said carefully.

"Thank you Crewman Winters. I promise that I'll get you taken care of as soon as possible." Dr. Perry said with a gentle smile.

"Do you think you'll be able to get it taken care of tonight? I have to be at work at 04:00." Vincent asked quietly.

"For the next three days at least, you are officially off duty. That's an order Crewman." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Yes Doctor." Vincent said with disappointment.

"Dr. Perry? Can I stay with Vincent? Y'know, to be like his eyes and hands until he can do things for himself?" Benny asked hopefully.

Dr. Perry gave Benny a smile and said, "That sounds like an excellent idea. In fact, if you two will follow my instructions for Crewman Winters' care exactly, I might authorize him to leave sickbay tomorrow... with your help of course."

"That would be cool. Then I could go to deflector control and find out how everyone is doing." Vincent said quickly.

Dr. Perry motioned for a medical assistant to come to her.

"Please find Crewman Winters a bed in the convalescent ward. Oh, and get him a gown."

* * * * *

"Ensign Radovanovich, would you care to accompany me down to the colony to deliver the good news in person?" Chief Morgan asked with a smile.

"I'd love to." Rad said happily.

Chief Morgan looked around the transporter room and casually said, "It seems that our transporter technician has run off."

"Oh. I forgot about him." Rad said suddenly.

Chief Morgan went to the comm panel and casually said, "Ensign Bergman to transporter room three."

"I'd better clean this up before we leave." Rad said, then began to set the transporter controls back to their regular settings.

Chief Morgan nodded, then pressed the comm again and said, "Chief Morgan to Captain Byrne."

"Go ahead Chief." Captain Byrne said immediately.

"Crewman Winters has been retrieved from the transporter. Dr. Perry says that he's in good condition, although his appearance is a bit... disconcerting at the moment." Chief Morgan said carefully.

"How so?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"He appears to have a covering of dead skin over the majority of his body. Dr. Perry explained that it was something like a peeling sunburn. He didn't seem to be in any pain." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"I'm sure I'll get a report from her soon. Good work." Captain Byrne said with relief.

"I'd like to request your permission to beam down to the colony with Ensign Radovanovich to deliver the good news to Joe and Oliver in person if I may." Chief Morgan asked hopefully.

Captain Byrne chuckled and said, "You two have earned it. Permission granted, and be sure to pass on my congratulations."

"Yes sir." Chief Morgan said happily.

The doors opened to reveal Ensign Bergman looking timid and apologetic.

"He's going to be fine." Chief Morgan said firmly.

Ensign Bergman looked at Chief Morgan with disbelief.

"Terry, all the damage that you saw was to the surface of his skin. He's really going to be okay." Rad said assuringly.

"Really?" Ensign Bergman asked, not able to believe that the thing he saw was alive and well.

"Yes. Really. You can go to sickbay and check on him for yourself... when your shift is over. Right now we need for you to transport us down to Commander M'Butu's location." Chief Morgan finished seriously.

"Chief... I'm sorry. I know I didn't react well..." Ensign Bergman said in a repentant voice.

"I understand Ensign. Take your experiences today and learn from them. Ensign Radovanovich has had to face a situation like this before and was able to take what he learned from that horrible tragedy and use it to save Crewman Winters." Chief Morgan said instructively.

"Thank you sir. I'll do that. Whenever you're ready I'll transport you down." Ensign Bergman said as he walked to the transporter's controls.

Rad and Chief Morgan walked to the transporter and took their positions on the pads.

Chief Morgan gave a nod to indicate that they were ready.

"Thank you for trusting me to do this Chief Morgan. I really appreciate it." Ensign Bergman said, then energized the transporter beam.

* * * * *

"Wow, this place is really packed." Benny said as he led Vincent to the edge of the bed the medical assistant indicated.

"Yeah, it sounds like it." Vincent said as he felt the edge of the bed, so he could get into it.

"You look really funny wearing that gown." Benny said as he helped Vincent onto the bed.

"What do I look like?" Vincent asked curiously.

Benny thought about it for a moment, then said, "Just imagine the Toxic Avenger in a little white dress."

Vincent thought about the description, then broke into a fit of giggles.

"Is he going to be okay?" The man in the next bed asked with concern.

"Oh yeah, he just looks nasty and gross, but underneath this crust he's just fine. The doctor says that he'll be back to normal in a few days." Benny said with cheer.

The man looked uncertain but tried to accept the explanation.

"My name is Benny, what's yours?" Benny asked casually.

"Channing. It's nice to meet you."

Vincent sat up and turned toward the voice.

"Channing? It's me, Vincent."

"Vincent?" Channing asked in horror.

"Yeah. How are you doing? Are you feeling better?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine. The doctor just wants to keep me here for one more day to be sure." Channing said as he looked at Vincent cautiously.

"I'm off duty for the next three days. But Dr. Perry said that if I do everything she says today, that tomorrow maybe she'll let me leave sickbay." Vincent said happily.

"What happened to you?" Channing asked with concern.

"Can I tell him Vincent?" Benny asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Sure." Vincent said and laid back on the bed to listen.

"For the past couple months we've been having some really bad storms. They just seemed to get worse and worse. I didn't know it back then, but the Council lost contact with the Federation about a month ago. Anyway, about three weeks ago we got hit by a storm that didn't stop. There was lightning and hail and really bad high winds. I guess about the second or third day of the storm, a tree came down on the main storehouse where we keep most of our food and supplies and stuff and then it caught fire. By the time we were able to get the fire put out, nearly everything had been destroyed." Benny said in thought.

"Hey, I thought this story was supposed to be about me." Vincent said playfully.

Benny laughed and said, "I'm getting to your part, I just wanted to set the scene."

"Okay..." Vincent said in a playful hesitant voice.

Channing smiled at the boys' banter.

"Okay, so we were all stuck with just the food we each had in our own homes. The council told everyone to bring their food to the town hall and we'd use it to feed everyone... it was pretty good and really cool to have everyone there at once. It was like all of us were one big family." Benny said carefully, then noticed Vincent.

In his condition, Vincent was incapable of making any kind of recognizable facial expression. And his eyes were completely hidden by the mask of dead skin... yet somehow Benny just knew that he was getting 'the look'.

"Don't look at me like that Vincent, I'm getting to it." Benny said impatiently.

Vincent didn't move a muscle, but inside he was laughing at the statement.

"Okay, so yesterday the AGREC building... I don't know what it stands for, it's something about farming... anyway, the wind just picks the whole thing up and drops it right on the power station." Benny said seriously.

"Okay, it sounds like we're coming to my part." Vincent said reluctantly.

Benny nodded and said, "Well, we can't get into the power station to shut it down. It's leaking radiation and we figure it's about to go critical and blow up and kill us all."

Channing turned in his bed, completely enthralled by the story.

"So they figure that since the control room is like, in the belly of the building, it probably survived and if someone could get in there, they could shut it down. But then they realized that there just wasn't any way to do that. Even if we didn't have a major lightning storm trying to kill us if we stepped outside, you'd need some major heavy equipment to get in there." Benny said frankly.

"Wake me up when you get to my part." Vincent said in a serious voice, then broke into giggles.

"My part first, then yours." Benny said with a chuckle, then continued, "So one of the councilmen pulled up the plans to the building and found out that there were underground conduit shafts that carried the power to the town. They thought they could go down into the tunnels and just crawl right into the control room and shut the thing down, but when they went down there they found out that it was too narrow for any of them to fit through."

Channing nodded for Benny to continue.

"Well, I was in the town hall because.... well, because my home was destroyed by the storm. I wasn't there when it happened, but I guess the wind just caved the whole house in and my parents and my sister were in there..." Benny said reluctantly.

Vincent felt around blindly until he found Benny's arm, then patted his way down until he found Benny's hand and took it into a firm hold.

Benny took a moment to choke down his tears, then said, "The council said that since I'm skinny, I could probably fit through the tunnel. They told me how to shut down the reactor then took me down into the tunnels. I tried to squeeze in there, but no matter how hard I pushed, I just wouldn't fit. Anyway, that's when the Yorktown showed up and called us. Commander M'Butu came down and we told him what was going on. He called the ship and they did some tests or sensor readings or something, then they said that transporters wouldn't be able to function in the radiation. Someone would have to get in through the tunnel. That's when Commander M'Butu looked like he was about to throw up."

Channing looked at Benny with surprise.

"All he said is that the Yorktown had a crewman smaller than me. Then he went to talk to someone, I'm pretty sure it was Vincent's Daddy Joe." Benny said in thought.

"So I went down into the tunnel and tried to clear out as much of the mud as I could from down there to help whoever they sent down." Benny said carefully.

Vincent let out a very obviously fake snore.

Benny smiled, then started to tickle his ribs.

After a minute of playful wrestling and tickling, Benny said, "Then they sent Vincent down... I think he should tell you his part."

"I went in, turned it off, came out, then this big old pervert made me get naked then hosed me down with freezing snot." Vincent said in an aggravated tone.

"You suck at story telling." Benny said flatly.

"Yeah. But I've got a cute butt. You said so." Vincent said triumphantly.

Channing couldn't help but laugh at the scarlet blush that crept up Benny's face.

"Anyway, after Vincent got back to the town hall, he beamed up to the ship. But the radiation or the storm or something made the transporter lose part of his signal. So even though it got him, it didn't know how to put him back together." Benny said uncomfortably.

"You mean he was lost in the transporter?" Channing asked in horror, that being one of his biggest phobias.

"Yeah. But Ensign Radovanovanovich was able to put him back together." Benny said happily.

"You gave him an extra 'van'." Vincent said in thought.

"I did?" Benny asked curiously.

"Yeah, his name is Radovanovich, you gave him an extra 'van'." Vincent said seriously.

"Oh well, he earned an extra 'van' for what he did today." Benny said with a smile.

"I'll tell him you said that." Vincent said playfully.

"So what happened?" Channing asked curiously.

"Oh, so Ensign.... the Ensign does all this really high level programming stuff, then hits the button and the transporter sounds like it's trying to pull a heavy load up a steep hill." Benny said in thought.

"Nice simile." Channing said with a smile.

"Thank you." Benny said proudly, then continued, "Then Vincent comes out of the transporter looking all chewed up and gooey."

"Thanks." Vincent said dryly.

Benny stood from the edge of the bed where he'd been sitting, then walked to Vincent's side to look closely at him.

"Is something wrong?" Channing asked with concern.

"No. I don't think so. He's just drying out. I think that's supposed to happen. When he came out of the transporter he was all gooey, but now he's getting crunchy." Benny said as he looked carefully at Vincent's skin.

"You make me sound like a candy bar." Vincent said with a smile.

"More like a prechewed jerky stick." Benny said in a teasing voice.

"Channing, if I asked you really nice, would you hit him for me?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sorry Vincent, I can't... Doctor's orders. But maybe you can talk to Chance about it when he comes in to visit." Channing said with a smile.

"Yeah, then you're gonna get it." Vincent said playfully in the general direction of Benny.

Benny smiled and sat back on the edge of the bed and said, "How about if I just don't call you a prechewed jerky stick anymore."

"That'll work." Vincent said in triumph.

Channing glanced at the boys, then rested back with a contented smile.

* * * * *

Commander M'Butu looked up with concern at the transporter beam forming beside him.

When he saw who it was, all thoughts of evacuation and tornados left his mind.

"He's going to be fine." Chief Morgan said with a glorious smile.

"Thank God!" Commander M'Butu said in a gust of relief.

Chief Morgan chuckled with delight as he nodded his agreement.

"Is he really okay?" Commander M'Butu asked hopefully.

"Well, he looks a little worse for wear, but from the way Evelyn was talking, he'll be just fine in a few days." Chief Morgan said carefully.

"Out with it Richard, what's wrong?" Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"He's perfectly healthy and in no pain. The only after effect seems to be a layer of damaged skin over most of his body that is quite... disturbing to look at. You'll need to talk to Evelyn to be sure, but from what I saw of him, I believe he's going to be just fine." Chief Morgan said seriously.

Commander M'Butu nodded, then noticed Rad standing beside Chief Morgan.

"Thank you Ensign." Commander M'Butu said sincerely.

"I'm just glad that Vincent's going to be okay. I thought for a minute that it didn't work." Rad said honestly.

"I'm going to expect a very detailed report from both of you about what caused the situation and how you resolved it. I believe that there are a few people at Starfleet who will be very interested." Commander M'Butu said speculatively.

"Oliver, do you think we might be able to tell Joe now? I'm sure he's quite concerned for his student." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Come off it Richard. Joe is that boy's father. I don't care what any court paper or DNA test says, all you have to do is be looking into his eyes when you say Vincent's name to know it's true." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Chief Morgan chuckled and said, "Quite right Oliver. Should we go tell him now?"

Commander M'Butu smiled and said, "He's upstairs. Come on."

* * * * *

"Pssst. Benny." Vincent whispered.

"What?" Benny whispered in return.

"Could you sneak out and get me some food? I didn't eat lunch today and I'm really hungry." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Why don't I just ask Dr. Perry if I can go get you something? She seemed nice. I don't think she'd mind." Benny asked seriously.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay. If you want to do it that way."

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Don't go anywhere." Benny said with a smile.

Vincent knew the eye roll was wasted because Benny couldn't see it, but still felt that it had to be done.

"Are you really okay Vincent?" Channing asked from the next bed.

Vincent turned to face Channing's voice and said, "Yeah. I mean, I was scared back when I was on the planet because I thought that the radiation might kill me, but now... I'm fine. I mean, I feel okay and I know as soon as Dr. Perry has time to work on me she'll fix me back to like I was before."

Channing thought about the words, then said, "Vincent, you saved my life and that makes me feel like, not like I'm in debt to you, but like we have a special bond or something. If you're feeling afraid or alone or anything like that, I'm here for you. I'll listen to what you have to say and I'll honestly care."

"Okay. I do have a question for you. But you don't have to answer it if you don't want to." Vincent said carefully.

"Ask me anything you want." Channing said seriously.

"What's your first name? Everybody calls you Channing." Vincent asked with a smile.

Channing laughed and said, "My first name is Ellery."

"Oh. That's um... really.... um..." Vincent said brokenly.

"Yeah, that's what I say. My parents hated the name too. But my grandmother Channing just had to have me named after some guy we're related to from the 1800's that no one ever heard of." Channing said sourly.

Vincent giggled and said, "I never really liked the name Vincent before I came on the Yorktown. But now that I've heard everyone else's names, I don't think mine's so bad."

"Dr. Perry says that it's okay. Is there anything you especially do or don't like to eat?" Benny asked as he walked to the bed.

"Um. Not really. Just the usual stuff. If it's really bad for me, I'll probably love it. Just no milk to drink. I don't like milk." Vincent said seriously.

"No milk. Got it. I'll be back in a few minutes." Benny said, looking unsure about leaving Vincent alone.

Channing looked Benny in the eyes and gave an assuring nod, saying without words that he'd watch after Vincent.

Benny smiled and returned the nod before hurrying out the door.

* * * * *

Joe looked up and icy fingers of dread crept up his spine when he saw Commander M'Butu, Chief Morgan and Rad approaching... without Vincent.

"How is Vincent?" Darin asked desperately before Joe could find his voice.

"He's going to be fine." Chief Morgan said assuringly.

Joe wanted to be happy about the news, but couldn't help asking, "Going to be?"

Rad walked to Joe and pulled him into a tight hug before saying, "He's got some dead skin covering a good portion of his body, but he's really okay. Dr. Perry says that underneath it he's just fine."

"Thank you Rad." Joe said in relief as tears started streaking down his cheeks.

"Really?" Darin asked hopefully.

"Yes Ensign, Crewman Winters came through the experience wondering what all the fuss was about. When you transport to the ship you can see for yourself." Chief Morgan said peacefully.

Joe released Rad from the hug and gave him a grateful smile.

As Rad stepped away, Darin pulled him into a hug and said, "Thank you for saving Vincent. He was my first friend on the Yorktown."

Rad gladly returned the hug and realized just how good it felt to hold Darin in his arms.

"I'm glad I could help." Rad said quietly into Darin's ear.

Darin felt an involuntary shudder run through is body at the sensation of the warm breath on his ear.

Rad noticed the shudder and hoped it meant what he thought it did.

Susan and Jimmy were hugging each other in complete joy at the good news.

Commander M'Butu and Chief Morgan looked on with satisfaction at everyone's happiness.

"I suppose while I'm here I should check on the status of the shields." Commander M'Butu said to Joe with a casual smile.

"They're fine. The synchronized harmonic matrix that we've established is as stable as any shield configuration that I've ever seen. I think we've really accomplished something significant here Oliver." Joe said frankly.

"I think you're right. When this is all done, your team should get together and write a very detailed accounting of what you did here today. I get the feeling that there are some people at Starfleet that are going to be very interested in this new way of using the portable field generators. If I'm right, the new data bridge that you've developed will be standard issue on every Starship and Star base by the end of the year." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"We'll get right on it Commander. I have a feeling that you're right." Joe said in thought.

"And you should think of a name for it. As the inventors of the thing, you get the honor of naming it." Commander M'Butu said with a smile.

"The Cooper Bridge." Joe said without hesitation.

Darin looked at Joe with wonder and said, "I didn't build it, everyone worked on it."

Joe smiled at Darin's expression and said, "We'd be here huddling under shields, each one in a different building if it weren't for your idea. We all worked to construct the bridge, but without your idea, none of the rest of it would have happened."

"Then it should be called the 'Winters Bridge' because it was Vincent who inspired me to think about the shields like this." Darin said firmly.

"I'm sure Crewman Winters would appreciate the sentiment, but I agree with Lieutenant Bowers. Accept this honor and do your best to live up to it." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Yes sir. I'll try." Darin said in thought.

"Besides, I was going to name my transporter retrieval method after Vincent." Rad said with a smile at Darin.

"That sounds like a good idea." Commander M'Butu said in a considering voice.

Rad looked at Commander M'Butu with surprise, then said, "Wait. You're just saying that because my name is so long and difficult to spell, aren't you?"

"Yes Ensign, that is correct." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

* * * * *

"Could I talk to you for a minute?" Lieutenant Simms asked quietly as he walked to Benny's side in the serving line in the Mess Hall.

Benny felt a momentary spark of fear when he recognized the Security Officer, but it passed when he saw the concerned expression in Lieutenant Simms' eyes.

"Sure. I'm just getting some food for Vincent." Benny said hesitantly.

"Benny, what you did in the transporter room was very brave." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

Benny looked at Lieutenant Simms with question.

"Standing in front of me when I was about to fire my phaser. I could have killed you." Lieutenant Simms said with concern.

Benny nodded that he understood, then said, " Vincent risked himself to save all our lives. I couldn't let him be killed. Besides, I promised his father that I'd watch out for him."

"Where are your parents Benny?" Lieutenant Simms asked quietly.

"Dead. Our house caved in and... I wanted to help search for them but... the people in the town hall wouldn't let me. Then the whole thing with the reactor happened and I was the only one old enough and skinny enough who could help." Benny said in thought.

"I'm sorry... Benny, after all this is over I think there may be something I can do to help you." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Help me? How?" Benny asked quietly.

"From what I've seen of you, you're brave and loyal. I think you would be an excellent candidate for Starfleet Security. You don't have to decide right now, but if that's something that would interest you, I can talk to a few people to help prepare you for entry into the academy. I would be honored to sponsor you and help you however I can." Lieutenant Simms said as he looked Benny in the eyes.

"I... yeah. I'd like that." Benny said in disbelief.

Lieutenant Simms shook his head and said, "Your life is in upheaval right now. Wait for things to settle down and see what other opportunities you have. Then when you're ready, think about it and let me know."

Benny hesitantly nodded.

Lieutenant Simms smiled and patted him on the shoulder as he said, "Now you should get Crewman Winters his food. I'm sure he's hungry after the day he's had."

Benny smiled and said, "Yeah. And thank you. I'll really consider it."

Lieutenant Simms smiled again, then walked away, leaving Benny with a variety of food selections before him.

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters, you have an incoming priority one transmission from Earth." Ensign T'Lani said as she pulled a video monitor on a swing arm away from the wall and adjusted it to be focused on Vincent.

"Do you know who it is?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. I was just told that it was a priority message for you from Earth." T'Lani said seriously, then asked, "Are you ready to receive the transmission?"

"Yes, thank you." Vincent said as he sat up a little straighter in the bed.

There was a long moment of silence, before Vincent finally said, "I can't see whoever it is. You'll have to talk to me."

"I'm sorry Vincent. I... I wasn't prepared for the sight of you." A voice said in a hesitant tone.

"I don't know.... Cory? Is that you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry Vincent. The sight of you just shocked me a little. The report that I received didn't mention your... condition." Cory said reluctantly.

"I'm fine Cory. I guess I look bad, but I'm really okay." Vincent said honestly.

There was a long pause before Cory finally said, "When Starfleet received the reports about today's incidents, they contacted the Clan to let us know that you had been injured. I've been given a brief overview of what happened."

"One way of looking at this is that you did a very brave thing and saved a lot of lives. No matter what else happens, I'm very proud of what you did today." Cory said in a firm voice, obviously wanting to stress that he really meant it.

There was another long pause and Vincent felt a sense of apprehension growing in him. He could tell that Cory was building up to something.

"Another way of looking at it is that the people we trusted to train you to become an officer and see to your well being used you and were willing to sacrifice you for their own benefit." Cory added in an emotionless voice.

Vincent was stunned by the statement and couldn't think of any way to respond to that.

"I realize that things aren't always as they appear on the surface. I'm not there to investigate this and don't have any way of finding out what happened for myself so I don't feel that I should make the decision about what should be done next." Cory said in a considering voice.

Vincent could tell that whatever Cory was going to say next would most likely hold the key to his future.

"The Enterprise has been diverted to your location to help in the evacuation efforts. Rory will be there within two hours to talk to you and everyone else involved. Please try to understand that we're responsible for doing what's best for you, even when it isn't what you want. We don't want to shelter you from life or keep you from realizing your dreams, but at the same time, we have to be sure that you aren't being exploited."

Vincent heard Cory take a deep breath, as if bracing himself for something difficult.

"If Rory decides that it's in your best interest to be taken out of the mentoring program and brought back to Earth, I will support his decision completely." Cory said firmly.

Vincent's mouth fell open in shock at the statement.

"It's okay if you hate me for doing this Vincent. I'd rather you be alive and hating me than dead and thinking I'm really kewl." Cory said in a pained voice.

All Vincent could manage was a nod that he understood what Cory was saying.

"Short out." Cory said, then the transmission went silent.

Chapter 8

Rad watched a group of mud covered colonists cross the room and prepare to transport when an idea suddenly came to him.

"Did Vincent have any mud on him when he beamed up?"

"Only from head to toe." Joe said frankly.

Rad shook his head in wonder and said, "That's it. The transporter image didn't render the mud. I thought about his clothes but didn't even consider the mud that was covering him. It makes sense now, I just couldn't figure out why there was so much damaged skin. The substitution matrix I programmed must have substituted the living cells from Vincent's trace pattern in place of the 'dead' mud."

Chief Morgan thought about it for a second, then said, "I think you may be right. So when the dead skin covering is removed, Vincent's own natural skin will be underneath."

"Right. I thought it had something to do with the radiation, but the difference in mass didn't add up."

"Quite right. I don't think this will effect Vincent's treatment, but it will make a significant difference in your report." Chief Morgan said seriously.

The beeping of Commander M'Butu's communicator drew everyone's attention.

"M'Butu here." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"*Commander, it seems our situation has just gone from bad to worse*." Captain Byrne said in a worried voice.

"How so?" Commander M'Butu asked seriously.

"*The planet appears to have reached some sort of saturation point. The upper atmosphere is destabilizing, causing holes to form which allow the solar radiation to reach the surface. Projections show that within the hour there will be no atmospheric protection whatsoever. Given the rate of bombardment, we estimate that within thirty minutes, the area you are in will be unable to sustain life. If there is any good news in all this, it would be that the storms seem to be dissipating as the lower atmosphere breaks down. We should be able to get more dependable transporter locks without the interference*." Captain Byrne said with regret.

"Less than thirty minutes? Then it's time for a change in tactics. Chief Morgan, beam aboard and give every transporter operator on the ship a

section of the colony to sweep. Have them lock onto every speck of a life sign that they can find and beam it aboard. I'll call the search and rescue teams in and get them started up." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"I'll go with you Chief." Rad said as he moved to Chief Morgan's side.

"You guys go too. I'll stay with the shield generators." Joe said to his crew.

"But Joe..." Susan began to say.

"That's an order crewman. All of you, transport up now." Joe said firmly.

"Yes sir." Susan said reluctantly and picked up her tool bag.

"Darin." Joe said more quietly.

Darin walked to Joe's side.

"If something happens to me, will you take care of Vincent?" Joe asked hesitantly.

Darin was astonished by the request, but quickly said, "I will, I promise."

"Thank you Darin, now go on." Joe said as he tried to smile and look unconcerned.

Darin took his place beside Susan and Jimmy and watched Joe until the shower of sparkles completely obscured his vision.

* * * * *

"I will leave you now so you may feel free to express an emotional response to this announcement." Ensign T'Lani said calmly.

"Um, no thank you. I'll probably have an emotional response later... a big one. Right now there's something I need to figure out, would you help me?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"Proceed." Ensign T'Lani said without expression.

"I'm just trying to figure out what I did wrong. I mean, why wasn't it enough? What else was I supposed to do?" Vincent asked in a lost tone.

"Crewman Winters, you appear to be working under a misconception. To my knowledge, you made no error in your decisions or actions. Your patriarch recognizes this and has stated as much by expressing his pride in your accomplishments. His concern appears to be focused on those who are responsible for you. In seeing the outcome of the past days events, he has sufficient reason to question their dedication to your well being. If you look at your current state and recognize that this level of damage occurred in

less than one standard day of being in their care, you will see that the concern is logical." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"But there wasn't anyone else who could do it. I know Cory would have done exactly the same thing I did if he was here." Vincent said in frustration.

"If that is the case, can you speculate on the reaction of the one who is responsible for his care?" Ensign T'Lani asked in a leading tone.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Aunt Teri would probably be mad that he did something dangerous, but I think that she'd be proud of him and understand that he was doing his job."

Ensign T'Lani waited as Vincent put the pieces together in his mind.

"So it's not about what I did, but about what they let me do. What's important right now is to help Rory understand why Daddy Joe and everyone else made the decisions that they did." Vincent said in thought.

"That would seem a logical pursuit. And there is one other action that you could take at this time that may be of benefit." Ensign T'Lani said in a considering tone.

"What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Before I answer, I must ask you some questions." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"Okay. Go ahead." Vincent said as he sat up straighter in the bed.

"Were you ordered to put your life in danger or did you choose to do so of your own free will?" Ensign T'Lani asked carefully.

"Commander M'Butu asked me, he said that I didn't have to do it." Vincent said in thought.

"Did you carry any food or water with you?"

"No. I just had three couplers in my pocket and a flashlight strapped to my arm."

"During the incident, were you completely alone?"

"Yes. I mean, Benny was there after I finished shutting down the reactor, but that was something like fifteen or twenty minutes later after I was done crawling down the conduit pipe."

"Was there any time during today's events that you believed you might not survive the experience?" Ensign T'Lani asked in a notably softer voice.

"Yeah." Vincent said quietly, not wanting to go into detail.

"Then I believe you have satisfied the conditions that would allow what you did today to be considered a successful completion of the *Kahs'wan*." Ensign T'Lani said carefully.

Vincent nodded in thought as Channing asked from the next bed, "What is that?"

"The adulthood test." Vincent said distantly.

"I believe a more accurate translation would be 'The Ordeal of Maturity'. One who has completed the *kahs'wan* is considered an adult by Vulcan law. If you choose to pursue this option, you will need to contact the eldest member of your house and ask that today's events be recognized as your *kahs'wan*." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"How does that help him? I mean, that guy is still coming to see if Vincent was put in danger, right?" Channing asked curiously.

Vincent shook his head and said, "I'm a citizen of Vulcan. If I'm considered an adult by Vulcan law then I can make my own decisions."

"So if that Cory guy tells you that you have to come home, you don't have to listen to him?" Channing asked to be sure.

Vincent thought about the question seriously, then said, "Not exactly. I'll still be a son of Clan Short and a member of the House of Surak. Because of that, they can still tell me what to do. But they can't say it's because I'm too young or because it's not safe here. I'd be allowed to make choices like that for myself... it's kind of hard to explain."

"I believe you have explained it well Crewman Winters. If your request for recognition is accepted, you will be able to speak to your Clan Patriarch as one adult to another rather than as a child to a parent." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"Can you help me do it Ensign T'Lani? I can't see to work the terminal to contact Ambassador Sarek myself." Vincent said as he turned to face where he thought she was standing.

"I would be honored to assist you Crewman Winters." Ensign T'Lani said and moved to the terminal by Vincent's bed and opened a direct transmission.

"*Vulcan High Command*." A female voice said in formal Vulcan.

"I wish to speak with Ambassador Sarek." Ensign T'Lani said in a clear firm voice.

"*The ambassador is en route from Earth to Vulcan, we have just received notice that his ship has been diverted from it's projected course. We are unable to predict when contact will be possible.*" The woman said formally.

"Is he on the ***Enterprise***?" Vincent asked in barely passable Vulcan.

The Vulcan woman on the screen arched an eyebrow of surprise at either Vincent's appearance or his horrible pronunciation, then carefully responded, "*That is correct.*"

"We will contact him directly. T'Lani out." Ensign T'Lani said flatly.

"*Vulcan High Command, out.*" The woman said without emotion and disconnected the transmission.

"Hey Vincent, did you really just speak Vulcan?" Channing asked in wonder.

"Um, yeah. It's not that big a deal. One of my guardians, a guy named Xain telepathically taught me how to speak a bunch of languages... But I didn't say it just right. I know the words in my head but it's hard for me to say them." Vincent said carefully.

"Proper pronunciation requires practice. Your pronunciation in this instance was adequate." Ensign T'Lani said as she opened another transmission.

"*Communications.*" A woman said pleasantly.

"This is Ensign T'Lani in sickbay. Would it be possible to open a channel to the *Enterprise* coded as a Vulcan diplomatic transmission directed to Ambassador Sarek?"

"*Yes. It might take me a few minutes to locate them. If you would like I could call you back when I've established contact.*" The communications worker said efficiently.

"That would be acceptable." Ensign T'Lani said formally.

"*T'Lani, Raul, Baker. I need you in my office immediately.*" Dr. Perry's voice called over the intercom.

"I will return as soon as I am able." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"I'll be fine. Thank you for all your help." Vincent said with a smile in her general direction.

"Should you have need of my assistance, you have but to ask." Ensign T'Lani said formally, then hurried to the back door of the room.

"Vincent, you are full of surprises." Channing said with a chuckle.

"What do you mean?" Vincent asked curiously as he turned in his bed.

"I've never had a woman, Human or Vulcan, talk to me the way she just talked to you. She respects you." Channing said in wonder.

"Yeah. I guess so. But why does that matter to you? I mean, I thought you and Chance were, um... like boyfriends or something." Vincent said carefully.

Channing chuckled and said, "A lot of people think that. Chance and I roomed together at the academy the whole time we were there. I got posted to the *Excelsior* and Chance got posted here. After six months I was transferred to the *Yorktown* and we worked it out so we could room together again. He's like the younger brother that I always wanted."

"So you don't care that people think you're gay?" Vincent asked carefully.

"Why should I care? I'll tell anyone who's interested the truth if they have the guts to ask. If they don't then it's not my problem." Channing said casually.

Vincent smiled and said, "I think you'd like my Daddy Joe, he thinks about stuff the same way you do."

"*Ensign T'Lani, I have your diplomatic channel.*" The communications officer said seriously.

"She was called away, but she was opening the channel for me. Can you put it through for me? I, um... can't see." Vincent finished shyly.

"*Yes, of course*." The woman said, then there was a moment of silence.

"He's waiting for you to start." Channing whispered from the other bed.

"Ambassador Sarek, I am Vincent Winters, son of Clan Short of the house of Surak of Vulcan." Vincent said in his best attempt at formal Vulcan.

"*The members of Clan Short are my grandsons, therefore you are my great-grandson. As such you are entitled to call me great-grandfather or grandfather if that is more comfortable. And please feel free to speak English. I am fully versed.*" Ambassador Sarek said, trying to keep the pained note out of his voice at the butchering of his native language.

Vincent nodded, then continued in English, "Grandfather Sarek, I'm not sure if there's some kind of formal way I'm supposed to do this, but I need to ask you a favor."

"*The most logical way to proceed would be to disregard formality and simply ask what you will.*" Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"I went through something today, I guess you'd call it an ordeal. I don't know exactly what you need to know but I'll tell you the important parts."

"I went into a damaged reactor that was leaking radiation to shut it down. It was my choice to go and I could have turned around and gone back to the ship whenever I wanted.... I don't think anyone would have been mad at me if I'd changed my mind... I don't even think they would have been disappointed in me."

"But I made up my mind and did what needed to be done to help a lot of people. I went alone and took no food or water..."

"...And I really thought I was going to die."

"Grandfather Sarek, as the head of the house of Surak I'm asking if you'll accept what I did today as my *kahs'wan*." Vincent finished quietly.

There was a long moment of silence, then Vincent said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you that I'm blind right now. If you're nodding or something I can't see it."

"*No. I am considering the conditions of the kahs'wan. The* ***Enterprise*** *will be at your location shortly. I will review the facts of the matter. When the* ***Enterprise*** *arrives, I will transport to the* ***Yorktown*** *and inform you of my decision*." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"*Din-tor heh smusma - sa'mekh'al*." Vincent said carefully, trying as hard as he could to get the pronunciation just right.

Ambassador Sarek cringed slightly, then hesitantly said, "*Peace and long life, grandson.*"

The screen went dark, then Channing whispered, "He's gone."

Vincent let out a gust of breath in relief, then flopped himself back on the bed.

"You did good Vincent." Channing said encouragingly.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "Wait. Did I just say *dif-tor* or *din-tor*?"

"Um, the second one I think." Channing said in thought.

"Are you sure?" Vincent asked more quietly.

"Yeah. Pretty sure."

"Oh, that's just great!" Vincent said sarcastically.

"What's wrong?" Channing asked slowly with concern.

"That was my Vulcan great-grandfather, the guy who's deciding if I'm mature enough to be considered an adult..." Vincent said seriously.

"Yeah."

"I think I just told him to 'Misunderstand Me and Prosper'." Vincent said in a pained voice.

"Really?" Channing asked as he tried to fight down his laughter.

Vincent nodded, then stopped when he heard Channing lose the fight.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry I took so long. You wouldn't believe how many people are in the cafeteria and now the hallways are starting to fill up." Benny said as he walked to Vincent's bed.

"Thanks, Benny." Vincent said quietly as he sat up.

"Is something wrong?" Benny asked with concern as he tried to get the collapsible tray table built into the side of the bed to lock into place.

"Yeah. There's someone coming who might make me go back to Earth because he thinks it isn't safe here for me." Vincent said quietly.

"You've got to be kidding. Why would he think something like that?" Benny asked in disbelief as the tray table finally did what it was supposed to.

"Um... Look at me." Vincent said and held out his arms.

"Oh yeah. I guess I'm getting used to seeing you like this." Benny said as he placed the plate of food on the tray table.

"There's really not anything I can do until Rory gets here." Vincent said in thought.

"You can eat. Open wide." Benny said as he cut a bite size chunk of roast beef.

"What are you going to feed me?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Old prunes and goat cheese." Benny said playfully.

Vincent chuckled, then felt the food touch his lips.

He opened his mouth and accepted the bite of food.

"I got to see some people I know down there. They seemed really scared about what's going to happen to us next." Benny said as he speared a chunk of potato.

Vincent swallowed his food, then said, "I bet Captain Byrne is already working on finding you a new place."

"Open." Benny said firmly.

Vincent obediently opened his mouth and was fed the chunk of potato.

"You said this guy is coming to make sure that you're safe, right?" Benny asked carefully.

Vincent nodded as he chewed.

"Well, if we find a new place to live, you know, a new colony. That would be a safe place, wouldn't it?" Benny said conversationally.

Vincent swallowed, then asked, "Are you asking if I want to come and live with you?"

"Open." Benny said, then in a quieter voice he said, "Yeah, kind of. I don't know what my life will be like now that my family is gone. But I know that the colony is my family too and they'll make sure I don't have to do without stuff until I can find a way to make a living."

Vincent accepted a fork full of steamed green beans, and nodded his agreement as he chewed.

"So maybe we could share a place, the house of Summers and Winters." Benny said with a smile.

Vincent swallowed and said, "That sounds nice."

"Crewman Winters, I'm sorry to interrupt your meal but I need to do a quick scan." Dr. Perry said as she rushed to his side.

"Okay." Vincent said with caution at her tone.

She quickly scanned him with the tricorder, then said, "Good, you're doing fine. I need for you and your friend to go directly to deck T and find a comfortable place to relax there."

"What's going on?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"Too much to tell. It just looks like we're about to get very busy and we'll need every bed that we can free up. Anyone who doesn't need critical care is being moved." Dr. Perry said as she turned and scanned Channing.

"Is Channing going to deck T with us?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Yes. I'll have one of the doctors join you down there shortly to oversee everyone. Please hurry now." Dr. Perry said as she moved to the next bed.

"Come on Vincent. We'll do it just like before, you can take my arm." Benny said as he helped Vincent to stand.

"Channing, do you need help to walk?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I'm just a little shaky, I think I'll be okay." Channing said as he tried to gain his balance.

"Benny, why don't you let Channing hold on to you. I'll walk on his other side and he can guide me." Vincent said seriously.

"That's okay Vincent..." Channing began to say.

"If you feel yourself getting weak, you can hold on to us and we'll keep you up." Vincent said firmly.

"I know better than to argue with you. Let's go, it looks like everyone is going down with us." Channing said as he looked around the room.

With Benny's help, Vincent made his way to Channing's side and took hold of his arm.

"He's the one." Someone whispered as the trio started across the room.

Vincent didn't know how many people were in the room, but he felt like there were a thousand eyes staring at him as he caught bits and pieces of whispered conversations.

"...Is that really him?"

"...Look at what happened to him..."

"...just a little boy..."

Vincent felt a hand on his arm as a girl's voice whispered close to his ear, "Thank you."

* * * * *

Vincent heard the acoustics change as they walked into the hallway, then asked, "Who was that?"

"Her name is Samantha." Benny said quietly.

"What was she thanking me for?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I'm not sure. Just about everyone from the colony knows that you're the one who shut down the reactor. So she was either thanking you for saving her life or for saving the lives of the people she loves." Benny said as the trio walked.

Channing guided Vincent to walk a little bit in front of him as they stepped into the turbo lift.

More and more people crowded in and finally the doors closed.

"Deck T." Channing said into the air.

The lift started to move horizontally until it reached the central shaft, then changed direction and began the long journey to one of the lowest decks in the ship.

* * * * *

The transporter beam cleared to show a twelve or thirteen year old boy hunched over, digging at the floor with his hands.

"Send me back! I can save them!" The boy begged as tears streaked down his cheeks through the mud that was covering him.

"No one is going back. Were you looking for someone from where I beamed you up?" Rad asked with sympathy.

"Yeah. I got knocked out when the wall fell in on me, but I'm okay so they have to be okay too. Please let me go back. They're my family, they're all I've got!" The boy begged in a panicked voice.

The security officer walked toward the transport chamber to move the boy off the pad when Rad raised a hand in a 'stop' gesture and shook his head.

"I tell you what, if you'll move off that transporter pad, I'll scan the area where you were and beam anyone I find up. But to do that I need you to move." Rad said, carefully walking the fine line between being sympathetic and demanding.

The boy looked at Rad with a lost expression, then stumbled off the transporter pad and waited expectantly.

"Okay, watch now. I'm going to target the area where I found you and lock on to everything I can find." Rad said as he looked at the transporter's scans with pain.

There was a faint blip and he locked onto it as quickly as humanly possible.

Rad initiated the transport and his hopes fell as he saw a small animal appear on the transporter's pad.

"Fizgig!" The boy said happily and ran to the small wet animal.

Rad shook his head as he looked at the area devoid of other life signs.

After a moment of watching the boy comforting the cold and frightened animal in his arms, Rad came to a decision and pressed the comm button.

"Sickbay." Rad said carefully, then waited for the computer to direct his call.

"*Sickbay here. What can I do for you?*" A frantic voice asked.

"Is there any way I can speak to Crewman Winters? It's kind of important." Rad asked hopefully.

"*He was moved to deck T with all the other convalescent patients.*"

"Thank you, I'll try there." Rad said, then rekeyed the comm.

"Pool area, general announcement." Rad said, then waited a second for the computer to route the command.

"Crewman Vincent Winters, please contact transporter room two. Crewman Vincent Winters, please contact transporter room two." Rad said desperately.

The boy looked up from his dog, then over at Rad with question.

With a stab of pain through his heart, Rad shook his head at the boy.

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"Vincent, be glad you can't see this." Channing said as the trio stepped off the turbo lift on Deck T.

"I can hear them, is it as crowded as it sounds?" Vincent asked as he held tightly to Channing's side.

"Probably more. We'll be doing good to find a place to sit down in here." Channing said as he looked around.

"Channing? How are you feeling?" A security officer asked as he approached the group.

"Hi Neil, I was feeling better until I saw this." Channing said seriously.

"What are you doing down here? Shouldn't you be in sickbay?" Neil asked cautiously.

"Dr. Perry's sending all the convalescent patients down here from sickbay because she's expecting to get overrun with new patients." Channing said carefully.

As if to prove his words, the turbo lift doors opened to reveal another load of patients.

"There's got to be someplace else for them to go, we're packed in here already." Neil said to no one in particular, then walked away.

Someone bumped into Vincent and knocked him into Channing's side which made them both have to fight for balance.

"This is no good. You guys aren't in any condition to have to deal with this." Benny said in a firm voice.

"***Crewman Vincent Winters, please contact transporter room two. Crewman Vincent Winters, please contact transporter room two.***" Sounded over the public address speakers of the pool area.

"Get me to a comm station." Vincent said loudly to be heard over the increasing voices in the tightly packed room.

"There's one in the observation bay, come on." Channing said and started to guide the trio to the observation lounge directly across from the turbo lift.

As the trio approached the comm station, Neil noticed them and said, "I'm sorry guys but the comm stations are off limits until the colony is evacuated. We need them open for the emergency services."

"This is Crewman Vincent Winters, he was just paged." Channing said seriously.

"Crewman? Oh, you're the one who... um, go ahead." Neil said in astonishment.

Channing pressed the comm station button and said, "Transporter room two."

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"*This is Crewman Winters.*" Vincent said through the speaker.

"Vincent, this is Rad. I really need your help. I've got a boy here who just lost his whole family, is there any way you can find someone to bring you up here? I know you've got your own problems right now, but this kid really needs help. I can't help him, I have to keep transporting people up." Rad said as he divided his attention between the crying boy and his scans of the surface.

"*Yeah, I'll be there as quick as I can.*" Vincent said immediately.

"Thanks Vincent." Rad said appreciatively as he continued to scan.

The security officer looked at Rad with question.

Rad noticed and said, "Just leave him be. Someone will be here to help him in a minute."

"What do I do now?" The boy asked in a lost and helpless voice.

"Just wait for one minute. Someone is on his way to help you." Rad said seriously.

"No one can help me..." The boy said distantly.

"...everyone who helps me is dead..."

"...I should be dead."

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"Do you want to come with us or stay here Channing?" Vincent asked as he took firm hold of Channing's arm.

"Honestly, right now I'd gladly get into a space suit and cling to the side of the ship to get out of this room. I'm going with you." Channing said as he looked around.

"What about you Benny?" Vincent asked, not knowing where to direct his voice, but knowing that Benny was still around.

"Where you go, I go." Benny said firmly.

"Then let's go... one of you guys should probably lead the way." Vincent finished with a teasing smile.

As the trio approached the turbo lift, a security officer said, "I know it's miserable down here, but we're trying to work something out. We can't let anyone go up until we have another place for you to go."

Before Vincent could say anything, Neil spoke up from behind him, "It's okay, Matt. These three were just called to transporter room two to help with an emergency."

Matt looked at the young boy who looked worse than the burn victims in the Starfleet training videos, then at the skinny teenager who looked like he had been dipped in a vat of mud. Finally his gaze stopped on Channing who was ghost pale and looking like he would pass out at any second.

"Think about it Matt. If there's someone who needs these three to help, they must be in pretty bad shape up there." Neil said seriously.

"Yeah, go on. Good luck guys." Matt said as he stood aside.

The turbo lift doors opened to let another group of people off. Neil and Matt tried to direct them out of the way to keep some sort of a path open.

As soon as the last of the people had passed, Channing guided Benny and Vincent onto the lift, letting them support most of his weight.

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"JonJon?" Benny asked in surprise as the trio walked into transporter room two.

"Benny?" The boy asked in confusion.

"Guys, can you take him down to the pool area with you? He can't stay here." Rad asked as he locked onto three people and began the transport.

"No way. It's packed down there. We could hardly breathe." Vincent said frankly.

"They're dead." JonJon said in a hollow voice as he approached the trio with Fizgig in his arms.

Vincent heard the words and froze, everything else was forgotten in an instant.

"I know it hurts. The same thing happened to me and Vincent." Benny said as he did his best to hug JonJon with one arm while still supporting Channing's weight.

JonJon looked at Vincent curiously and asked, "What is it? A Suloban?"

"A what? No. He's a human, he's just got a full body scab." Benny said carefully.

Conversation stopped as the security officer led the three people away from the transporter and into the hallway.

Rad looked carefully at the readings on his transporter station, then hit the comm and called out, "Sickbay!"

"*Sickbay here*." A young man answered in a shaky voice.

"I need a med team to transporter room two immediately." Rad said quickly as he worked the transporter's controls.

"*We don't have anyone to send you. We're treating patients in the hallways here*." The young man said franticly.

"I've got three people who need emergency care. How about this? Clear out a spot for me and I'll beam them directly into sickbay." Rad said firmly.

"*It'll take me a few minutes to clear a space, we're packed in here.*"

Rad looked at his scanner and said, "I don't have a few minutes. I'll beam them in here and you call me when you've cleared a place for them."

"*It'll just be a few minutes.*" The young man said desperately.

"Call transporter room two when you're ready to receive them. I can't tie up the transporter any longer." Rad said quickly, then initiated the transporter.

A pile of three intertwined bodies appeared on the transporter pad, then just as suddenly disappeared and reappeared on the floor beside the transporter's control console.

Benny looked away from the horrific scene as Channing quietly asked, "Is there anything we can do to help them?"

"I don't know. Maybe you can separate them so I can transport them one at a time when there's a place for them to go." Rad said as he began to scan his area of the colony for other life signs.

"But shouldn't we leave them like they are until a doctor can see them?" Channing asked as he looked at the pile of twisted bodies helplessly.

"I really don't know, I just think the one on the bottom probably needs to breathe." Rad said, then spotted a cluster of life signs on his scanner.

"Right. Let's shift them." Channing said with resignation.

"JonJon and I can do it. You're too weak. Stay here so Vincent can hold you up." Benny said firmly.

Channing wanted to argue, but could barely stay upright when Benny carefully got out from under his arm.

"Leave Fizgig with Vincent and help me." Benny said firmly to JonJon.

"It won't eat Fizgig, will it?" JonJon asked cautiously as he looked at Vincent with fear.

Benny smiled and said, "I told you, this is Vincent. He's a Human. He'll take good care of Fizgig for you, won't you Vincent?"

"Yeah, I promise I won't hurt him." Vincent said with effort as he supported the majority of Channing's weight.

Benny and JonJon hurried to the pile of twisted bodies and stopped to try and determine how to separate them.

"Benny?" JonJon called out in a squeak.

"Come on JonJon, help me." Benny said as he reluctantly took hold of the top person's arm.

"Benny, that's your mom." JonJon said with wide horrified eyes as he pointed.

Benny looked where JonJon was pointing and was overwhelmed by the sight.

"Mom?" Benny said in a small child's voice as tears filled his eyes.

The transporter energized and six people appeared looking cold and haggard.

"Step off the transporter and someone will be here in a minute to take care of you." Rad said quickly as he began to scan again.

After a few careful pulls and tugs, Benny was able to get his mother separated from the others and carefully turned her so he could get a grip under her arms.

JonJon took hold of her legs and helped Benny to move her as gently as possible.

The door opened and the security officer hurried in.

"If you'll go with him, he'll see that you're taken care of." Rad said quickly, then energized the transporter to beam three more people into the room.

"There's no place to take them. They'll need to stay here for a minute while I check in." The security officer said quickly.

Benny and JonJon worked to gently turn the next body over.

"Dad?" Benny said as the tears continued to flow.

"Oh God." The security officer gasped as he saw the girl who had been underneath Benny's father.

Her small thin body was twisted into an impossible position. Her arm was turned and twisted enough to prove that her bones weren't just broken, they were mashed.

Rad took one look at her, then started pressing buttons on his console.

As soon as he found enough floor space in Sickbay to fit her body, he initiated transport and said, "Ready or not."

Benny looked at the spot where the mashed girl had been laying and whispered, "Callie?"

"Vincent, I really think you need to get him out of here." Rad said as he continued to scan.

"*Transporter room two, we've got the first one, and I've got a place for the other two now.*" A man's voice called over the intercom.

Rad locked in on the voice and verified the location, then initiated the transport.

"*I've got them.*"

"Are they going to be okay?" Benny asked in a trembling voice.

"*I hope so. I promise that we'll do whatever we can to help them.*"

"Can I go to sickbay to stay with them?" Benny asked hopefully.

"*I'm sorry. Sickbay is packed. If you can tell me your name and where you'll be, I'll call you as soon as I know anything.*"

"His name is Benny and he'll be in Deflector Control." Vincent said from across the room.

Benny looked at Vincent with question.

"*Got it. Benny, I'll call you as soon as I know anything.*" The man said with distraction.

The sound of the transporter energizing drew everyone's attention.

"Oh thank God!" A woman said in a gasp as she stumbled off the transporter pad.

"It's like hell down there. Things are starting to catch fire... Nothing's starting it, everything's just bursting into flames." A man said as he followed her.

"Please step down, we don't have much time." Rad said desperately.

As soon as the last person stepped out of the transporter chamber, the transporter activated again and six people materialized on the pad.

"Everyone step off the transporter pad. We need to hurry." Rad said as he continued scanning.

"Guys? It's getting crowded in here, Channing's getting really heavy and I think Fizgig just peed on me. We need to get to deflector control now." Vincent said loudly to be heard across the room.

Benny shook himself out of his thoughts and put a comforting arm around JonJon to guide him across the room.

The transporter energized again and two men materialized, clutching to each other desperately both with wisps of smoke coming off their clothes.

"Thank you! Oh, thank you!" One of the men said in a gasping voice.

"Rad, will you please make sure the deflector control team gets out?" Vincent asked hopefully in Rad's general direction.

"Joe is the only one still down there. Don't worry Vincent, I've got a lock on his communicator. He'll want to stay until the last minute, but I'll make sure he gets out in time." Rad said as he kept his focus on his scans.

"Thanks." Vincent said, then felt someone take Fizgig out of his arms.

"How are you doing Channing?" Benny asked with concern at the hollow look in Channing's eyes.

"I think I can make it... but we'd better hurry." Channing said in barely a whisper.

"Help us to the turbo lift." Vincent said seriously as he tried to steady Channing.

"It's just a few steps out this door." Benny said encouragingly.

JonJon cuddled Fizgig to his chest and followed behind the trio as they left the transporter room.

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"I thought it was packed in the hallway outside the transporter room. It's worse here." Channing said as the turbo lift doors opened.

"Left, down the catwalk and through the doors." Vincent said with effort at supporting Channing's weight.

"Dear God! You need to see a doctor!" One of the colonists exclaimed when he saw Vincent.

"The doctor's busy with people hurt worse than me." Vincent said firmly.

"Can you please let us through? We need to get to that door." Channing said in as loud a voice as he could manage.

"Please, can't you see they're hurt?" Benny called out as he tried to force his way through the crowd.

"They won't let you in there. It's a restricted area." A woman said seriously.

"Vincent works in there. They'll at least let him in." Channing said weakly.

"You don't look so good. Maybe you should stop and rest." An older man said with concern as they made their way down the catwalk.

"No. Just a little bit more." Channing said with effort.

"Vincent. We're here. You need to talk to them and ask them to let you in." Channing said seriously.

"Okay. Hit the comm button." Vincent said tiredly.

"*I'm sorry, but this is a restricted area. No entry.*" Connie's voice said over the comm unit.

"Connie, this is Vincent. There's no place else for me to go. Can you please let four of us in?" Vincent asked hopefully.

There was a moment of silence, then the door opened.

"Hurry." Susan said and pulled the trio of Vincent, Channing and Benny through the door.

Benny reached back and plucked JonJon out of the crowd behind him just before the doors closed.

"I think someone got their math wrong because that looks like more than a thousand people." Susan said, then looked at Vincent in horror.

"Oh Vincent. How are you feeling? Does it hurt?" Jimmy asked before Susan could find her voice.

"I'm fine, but Channing needs to lay down. I think he's about to pass out." Vincent said seriously.

"Come with me, we've laid out some sleeping bags in the supply room." Susan said and took firm hold of Channing's arm.

"What about the rest of you guys. Do you need anything?" Jimmy asked as he looked at Benny and JonJon cautiously.

"Benny's family is in sickbay and they're hurt pretty bad. We told them to call here to let him know how they're doing." Vincent said seriously.

"I'll call you if we hear anything. Why don't you guys get some rest, you look like you could use it." Connie said frankly.

"Yeah, do you want to lay down? There's plenty of beds." Jimmy said quickly.

"I've been laying down for a while. I think I'd rather sit down. Is anyone at the auxiliary stations?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"No. Let me help you." Jimmy said and guided Vincent to sit in one of the two auxiliary station chairs.

Jimmy looked at Benny and JonJon consideringly for a moment, then said, "You can sit here if you want or go in there and lay down."

Benny hesitantly took the seat beside Vincent.

JonJon walked to Benny and slowly climbed onto his lap, asking with his eyes if it was okay.

Benny gave a faint smile and a nod to say that it was.

"How bad is it out there?" Susan asked cautiously as she walked back into the main room.

"They're packed in tight on every deck we've been to so far. It's a nightmare." Benny said as he hugged JonJon tightly.

"*Cooper to Deflector Control*." Darin said loudly over the comm to be heard over the voices talking in the background.

"Deflector Control here." Connie said seriously.

"*I can't find Vincent anywhere. Sickbay said he was sent to Deck T but there's at least a hundred people down here and I can't find him anywhere... Someone could be standing on top of him and I wouldn't even know it*." Darin said on the verge of tears.

"Calm down Darin, he's here with us in Deflector Control." Susan said quickly.

"*Really?*" Darin asked hopefully.

"Yeah, he just got here and he's fine. Come on up." Susan said with concern.

"I'm just waiting on you, 'big brother'." Vincent called out playfully.

"*I'll be there in ten or fifteen minutes*." Darin said loudly as he tried to make himself heard over the clamor of voices.

"Where else are you going?" Susan asked loudly in response.

"*Nowhere. It's just going to take me that long to get through all these people*." Darin said frankly.

Before Susan could respond she heard Darin say, "*Ouch! Shit!*" Then the comm went silent.

"The *Enterprise* had better get here quick, these people aren't going to stay friendly for very long in conditions like this." Connie said gravely.

Susan nodded her agreement.

A whimper drew everyone's attention as Fizgig squirmed to try and get out of JonJon's grasp.

"I bet this little guy is hungry. Let me take him for a minute to get him some food and water." Susan said gently.

JonJon looked at Susan with fear then turned more into Benny's chest to hide Fizgig from her.

"JonJon, Fizgig will get sick if he doesn't eat and drink. This woman is just trying to help him." Benny said quietly.

JonJon looked up at Benny with tears in his eyes and whispered, "But he's all that's left. I can't let him go."

Vincent heard the words and carefully said, "Then why don't you go with him? I bet if you asked Susan nicely, she'd show you where the food and water are so you could feed him yourself."

JonJon glanced at Vincent, then at Susan with hope and question in his eyes.

Susan gave him a gentle smile and said, "Come back to the supply room and I'll show you where we keep the emergency rations."

JonJon reluctantly got off Benny's lap, then followed Susan into the supply room.

There was a long moment of silence in Deflector Control until it was broken by Connie asking, "He's an android, isn't he?"

Chapter 9

Benny looked at Connie cautiously for a moment, then said, "Yeah, he's an android. But please don't treat him like he's a thing because of it. His dad made a big deal when we moved to the Kimber colony to be sure that JonJon would be treated like everyone else. I don't know what JonJon's going to do without him."

Connie turned back to his console and looked it over as he said, "Back in the village where I grew up there was a rich old man on the outside of town who had an android like JonJon, the same model I think. Some of the old folks in town thought it was wrong or unnatural or something, but all us kids treated him like he was one of us."

Connie slowly turned in his chair to look at Benny before saying, "No one saw Leander for over a week. Um, that was his name. Anyway, we went up to the house to see if he was okay and we found them both dead."

Benny felt a chill run up his spine at the words.

"The coroner said that Mr. Tselios died in his sleep. All we could think is that after Leander found Mr. Tselios, he must have torn the cord off the toaster and hooked it into his data port... then plugged it in." Connie said slowly.

"Stop it." Vincent said firmly as he felt beside him to find Benny and take his hand.

"Vincent, I'm not trying to be mean. I'm trying to make you realize that JonJon might decide to do something like that now that his father is gone." Connie said with sympathy.

"Not just his father." Benny said quietly.

Connie looked at Benny with question, silently asking him to continue.

"JonJon lost both his parents and his brother." Benny fought to say past the lump in his throat.

"Guys, I don't know how an android thinks or feels, but I know without a doubt that they can love." Connie said seriously, then turned back to his console when a beeping drew his attention.

* * * * *

"What's our shield status Joe?" Commander M'Butu asked as he hurried into the main room of the town hall.

"Stable for the most part. A few microwave bursts have gotten through. I keep readjusting the electro-magnetic properties of the field generators to block the worst of the radiation... I just wish there was something I could do about the diminishing atmosphere." Joe said as he looked at Commander M'Butu with concern.

"It'll have to be enough. There are less than fifty people on the surface now. Get ready to pack it in." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"We're not going to be able to save the equipment. I don't know if you realize how bad it is out there right now. The instant the shields go down, everything here is going to go up in a burst of flame." Joe said and pointed to the scanner readings that were focused outside the shield.

Commander M'Butu looked at the read-out and his eyes went wide. The conditions outside the shield were far worse than he expected. The upper level of the atmosphere had completely broken down and was offering no protection from the solar radiation.

"It's a miracle that we're still alive with that hanging over us." Commander M'Butu said in amazement.

"I give it ten more minutes before the radiation overpowers the shields. Not that it matters since the oxygen level will drop below minimum safe levels in less than seven minutes." Joe said seriously.

"Everyone will be out in less than five. Do a detailed scan of the 'Cooper bridge', then call for a beam out. You've done everything that can be done here." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"I'd really like to stay until everyone else is out, just in case there's something I can do to buy them one or two more seconds." Joe said frankly.

"It's your decision Joe. I'll call you when the last person is beaming up. But don't wait any longer than you have to. I don't want to have to face Vincent if anything happens to you." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

"Yes sir." Joe said with a smile.

"Oh, and Joe?"

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to turn out the lights when you leave." Commander M'Butu said with a smile, then walked for the door.

Joe chuckled at the statement, then said, "I'll do that."

* * * * *

"Deflector Control." Connie answered cautiously as he glanced at Benny.

"*Connie, do you have any idea where Vincent might be? I've got a diplomatic transmission for him and he's not answering the page in the pool area.*" Debbie said in frustration.

"He's here with me Debs. Put it through to Deflector Control Auxiliary two." Connie said with a gentle smile.

"*Will do. Thanks Connie.*" Debbie said, sounding much relieved.

Vincent turned his chair and grasped the edge of the console to orient himself.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" Benny asked quietly as the screen came to life.

"No. Would you mind staying here? I can't see and might need some help." Vincent said shyly.

"*Vincent?*" A voice asked in nearly a squeak.

"Yeah. Who is this?" Vincent asked carefully.

"*OH MY GOD!!!! What happened to you?*" Lawrence wailed.

"It's my brother." Vincent said quietly in Benny's general direction.

"*How did this happen? Does it hurt? How... how...*" Lawrence screamed, then broke down into hysterical crying.

"He's freaking out." Benny said hesitantly as he watched the blond boy crying on the screen.

"I noticed." Vincent whispered to his side, then in a stronger voice directed at the console, Vincent said, "Lawrence."

"*You shouldn't have gone. You're just a little kid. You should have stayed here with me where you'd be safe. I know you can't stand me, but I should have found a way to make it work.*" Lawrence said in anguish.

"Lawrence!" Vincent barked.

"*Why did this have to happen to you? It's my fault. I should have tried harder to get you to stay. Cory said you were hurt but he never said...*" Lawrence cried, then let out a heart wrenching sob.

"LAWRENCE!" Vincent screamed at the crying voice.

"Um... he's gone." Benny said hesitantly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Deacon, are you there?"

"*Right here*." Deacon said with distraction as he fought the urge to run to Lawrence and comfort him.

"Good. Will you tell Lawrence that I'm really okay? I've just got this crust of dead skin on me. As soon as they have time to peel me, I'll be fine." Vincent said seriously.

"*Are you really okay?*" Deacon asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I really am, I promise. Can you try to calm him down? I need to tell him something important." Vincent asked hopefully.

"*I'll try... I'm glad you're alright*." Deacon finished quietly.

"Thanks Deacon." Vincent said shyly.

"Now he's gone too." Benny said from Vincent's side.

"That was my brother's um... boyfriend." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Oh." Benny said quietly, sensing that Vincent wouldn't want to talk about it now.

There was a moment of silence, then Benny whispered, "I can see them on the other side of the room. They're kissing."

"Yeah. They do that a lot." Vincent said in a tone of long suffering.

"No. You don't get it. I mean, they're REALLY kissing. I think maybe they're gonna do it." Benny said in shock as he watched the two boys kissing passionately.

Vincent shook his head, then said in a loud firm voice, "Guys. We're on subspace."

Benny chuckled at Lawrence and Deacon's surprised expressions as they realized that they weren't alone in the room.

A moment later Lawrence took his seat before the terminal and shyly said, "*I'm sorry Vince. When I saw you I just kind of...*"

"...screamed like a girl. I heard you. Lawrence, can you just listen to me for one minute? Then you can get back to your freaking out or making out or whatever." Vincent said sternly.

Lawrence nodded that he would listen.

"He's nodding." Benny whispered.

"Lawrence, when I was down on the planet, I thought I was going to die." Vincent said seriously.

Lawrence let out a little 'eep', but did a reasonable job of keeping calm and quiet.

"I was alone down there and had time to think about a lot of stuff." Vincent said carefully.

Lawrence calmed down and focused his attention on what Vincent was saying.

"I'm sorry for the way I treated you Lawrence. I know that I was just doing what Dad did but... well, that's no excuse. I promise that I'll never make fun of you or call you names again." Vincent said firmly.

"*It's okay Vince. You were just a kid, you really didn't know any better.*" Lawrence said quietly.

Vincent nodded and said, "Maybe not, but I do know better now and I feel bad about all that stuff. I love you Lawrence and from now on I'll try to be the kind of brother you deserve."

"*I love you too. And you're just perfect the way you are.*" Lawrence said, and it was obvious that he was crying again.

Vincent chuckled and said, "I'm a long way from perfect, but I'm really trying to be better. Can I talk to Deacon for a second?"

"*Oh. Um... sure.*" Lawrence said with surprise.

A moment later Deacon took Lawrence's place in front of the terminal and said, "*I'm here.*"

Vincent ducked his head shyly and said, "I'm sorry I wasn't nice to you when I was on Earth."

"*That's okay. I wasn't that nice to you either.*" Deacon said honestly.

"If you'll tell me what I can do to make it up to you, I'll do whatever I can." Vincent said quietly.

There was a long moment of silence, then Deacon said, "*I know it's going to sound silly, but there's something you could do that would really mean a lot to me.*"

"What's that?" Vincent asked carefully.

In a whisper Deacon said, "*Sometime when you send Lawrence a letter or card or something, I don't know... just kind of include me, I guess.*"

"I don't understand." Vincent said slowly.

"*I hate feeling left out and ignored. When I met you the first time, that's kind of how I felt. I just thought that if you were sending Lawrence a message and you thought about it, maybe you could say 'hi' or something to me too.*" Deacon said hopefully.

"I will Deacon. I promise." Vincent said peacefully.

"*Lawrence has something else he wants to say.*" Deacon said quickly.

"Okay. I'll talk to you later Deacon." Vincent said with a gentle smile.

"*I just wanted you to tell my dad that I love him and miss him.*" Lawrence said quickly.

"I'll tell him, I promise." Vincent said with a smile.

"*I'd better get going now. I'm glad you're okay. I love you Vince.*" Lawrence said as tears began to well up in his eyes.

"I love you too." Vincent said with a gentle smile.

When the terminal went dark, Benny whispered, "He's gone."

Vincent nodded a little bit sadly, then said, "Thanks for helping me Benny."

"No problem." Benny said cheerfully.

"Would you mind helping me with something else? I need to get changed. I smell like dog pee." Vincent finished quietly.

"Sure, let's go." Benny said as he stood and guided Vincent's hand to his arm.

* * * * *

Joe smiled as his scan of the 'Cooper Bridge' completed.

He glanced at the readings on the shield generator and noticed that the microwave radiation was increasing faster than expected and as a result, the entire system was on the verge of overload.

After a split second of consideration, Joe shook his head and grabbed the communicator off his belt, then heard a sound from above him.

Before he could dodge completely out of the way, a large chunk of plaster and a wooden beam had fallen on top of him, pinning him to the floor.

As he strained to work his left arm free, he heard a beeping from his communicator.

Joe looked around the room quickly and finally spotted his communicator in the floor, nearly four feet away.

An alarm sounded from the field generators and Joe could only speculate on which of many horrible scenarios was about to play out.

His vision seemed to narrow into a long white tunnel as he felt himself fighting for breath.

* * * * *

It took a few minutes for Benny to find where Rad had stored Vincent's suitcase.

While Vincent was changing into a uniform, Benny looked around the supply room.

There were two women he didn't know sleeping snuggled together at the far end of the room. A few sleeping bags down from them Channing was fast asleep.

A sound drew Benny's attention and he watched with amusement as Susan and JonJon were feeding Fizgig.

"I'm ready." Vincent said as he pulled on his boots.

Benny hurried to Vincent's side and helped him to stand.

As Vincent and Benny walked back into the main room of Deflector Control, a general announcement sounded over the comm.

"*Attention all hands, please stand by for an announcement from the captain.*"

There was a long moment of silence as Vincent heard the murmur of voices outside Deflector Control begin to quiet.

"*This is Captain Leland Byrne, may I please have your attention.*" The Captain said firmly.

"***Please accept my apologies for the current conditions, circumstances didn't allow us much choice in the matter. If you will listen carefully, we can begin to take steps to make everyone more comfortable.***"

"***We will rendezvous with the 'Enterprise' in approximately ten minutes. At that time the cargo and personnel being transported to the Alpha Centauri station will be transferred to the 'Enterprise'.***"

"***Likewise, we will transport the critically injured and those who wish to return to Earth.***"

"*When the 'Enterprise' departs, the 'Yorktown' will be traveling to a distant star system listed on the charts as SA-14.*"

"*The Soleen-Avalla are a rather... isolated race. In point of fact, no Federation representative has ever been allowed in their area of space. We have only ever had contact with them via subspace.*"

"*Be that as it may, Starfleet Command made a general announcement of the recent events and the Soleen-Avalla offered our displaced colonists a new home.*"

A moment of silence fell over the ship as everyone absorbed the statement.

"*I don't have many details to share with you about your new home. I only know that the outpost is located in a solar system that borders the Soleen-Avalla system and that it has stood unmanned for over one hundred years.*"

"*The 'Yorktown'will transport you to your new home and remain in orbit until we are certain that you will be able to sustain yourselves.*"

"*Now on to our current situation.*"

"*Those who will be transferring to the Enterprise, please contact Commander M'Butu's office to receive shuttle assignments. Those guests who will be remaining on the 'Yorktown', please gather yourselves into groups or families, then find one of the security officers that will be circulating all decks. They will assign you quarters.*"

"*If everyone will be patient for just a bit longer, we will get this sorted and be on our way as quickly as possible.*"

"*There is one other thing. Would the person or persons responsible for the livestock on the northern edge of the colony please report to cargo bay two immediately. Your animals didn't react well to being transported.*"

"*I will make further announcements as information becomes available. Thank you for your attention.*"

* * * * *

Joe noticed that music had started playing in the distance, it was an unfamiliar tune, but it was pleasant.

He looked around cautiously and recognized where he was. It was the gymnasium of his old high school. It was decorated in the school colors with crepe paper and hand made signs announcing homecoming.

As he looked around, he didn't recognize any of the couples dancing around him, then he looked down at himself and noticed that he was wearing his Starfleet dress uniform.

"It's good to see you again Joe." A delighted feminine voice said from behind him.

Joe turned and looked at the vaguely familiar woman curiously.

"Well, how's that for a kick in the ego. I go to all the trouble of setting the perfect scene, and my favorite ex-husband doesn't even recognize me." She said dramatically.

"Peggy?" Joe asked with shock.

She nodded and gave him a gentle smile.

"How are you?" Joe asked in wonder.

"Dead." She said frankly.

"Oh yeah. I'm sorry. Does that mean I'm dead too?" Joe asked hesitantly.

"Maybe, but I don't think so. I was just checking on Vincent and noticed your um... situation. You were so close to the veil, that I just couldn't miss the opportunity to talk to you again. How about a dance for your dearly departed ex-wife?" Peggy asked peacefully.

Joe reluctantly nodded and took her into his arms.

"You're just as gentle as I remember." She said with a smile as she began to move to the music.

Joe looked into her eyes and smiled at the peace and love that shined there.

"I really loved you. Did you know that?" She said quietly.

Joe hesitantly shook his head.

She giggled and said, "Well, admittedly, not while we were married, but years later, after I married Victor... Oh, did I love you. When I was at my lowest points, I'd remember back to some of the silly, sweet things you used to do for me and I'd know that at least once in my life, someone really loved me for me."

"I loved you too Peggy. I'm sorry things worked out the way they did." Joe said sadly as he continued to glide her around the dance floor.

"I'm not. Well, I have my regrets of course. But I had two beautiful, wonderful children who made the rest of my life worth it. And thanks to you I know that they're both going to have wonderful futures. Thank you for taking care of Vincent. I can't think of anyone else in the world... or the universe for that matter, who could have put him on the right path." Peggy said peacefully.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do now." Joe said as he looked around the room in confusion.

"What do you want to do?" Peggy asked gently.

"I want to go back and take care of Vincent." Joe said hopefully.

"Well, I'm not sure, but I think you need to go through that door." Peggy said and stopped dancing long enough to point to a doorway.

"I've got to go now. Vincent needs me." Joe said with regret.

Peggy smiled peacefully and said, "And you need him too. Go on."

Joe nodded and released her.

"Let the boys know that I love them." Peggy whispered, then gave Joe a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"I'll never let them forget." Joe said as he walked toward the door.

Peggy gave a joyful smile and a small wave as Joe walked through the door and into the light.

* * * * *

"Wow. They really found us a new colony." Benny said in wonder.

"The Captain said that no one's been there for a hundred years. I hope it's still in good enough shape for you to live there." Vincent said speculatively.

"We don't need much. You should have seen what we started with at Kimber." Benny said frankly.

A beeping comm signal drew everyone's attention.

"Deflector control." Connie answered hesitantly.

"*This is Nurse Young from Sickbay. I need to speak with Benny.*"

"I'm here. What happened? How are they?" Benny asked in panic as he ran across the room to Connie's side.

"*Your father regained consciousness during the captain's announcement and is asking for you.*" The young man said carefully.

"I'll be right there." Benny said quickly.

"*Ask for Nurse Young when you get here or they might not let you in.*"

"I will. Thank you." Benny said as he rushed toward the door, then froze in his tracks as he saw Vincent sitting blind and alone.

"I'll take care of him, go see your father." Jimmy said assuringly.

Benny glanced at Jimmy, then back at Vincent with indecision.

"I'll be fine. Go." Vincent said sternly.

"But JonJon..." Benny began to say.

"We'll take care of him. Go!" Vincent said firmly.

Benny nodded and nearly walked face first into the door.

"I've got to release it from here." Connie said and pressed the door release.

When the door opened, Benny quickly rushed out.

Before the door could close, someone else slipped in.

* * * * *

Joe walked down the tunnel and could see vague images of people all around him.

He recognized his third grade teacher, then the old doctor that he used to go to when he was a kid.

Each of the people invoked a different memory as he passed them.

Finally at the end of the tunnel, he saw a vague shape standing before him.

"Am I dead?" Joe asked the shape cautiously.

A very familiar grin was the only answer.

* * * * *

As Benny stepped out the door, he noticed a complete difference in the mood.

When he had entered Deflector Control, he had felt hopelessness and despair in the hallway. Now there was a buzz of excitement and happiness flowing through the room.

"Benny, did you hear it? They found us a home." A woman asked Benny as he walked down the catwalk.

"Yes. I heard." Benny responded and couldn't help but smile at her joy.

"I was so afraid that we were all going to get shipped off to Earth and split up and never see each other again." She said with a radiant, peaceful smile.

"Please excuse me. My father is waiting on me. I'll talk to you later Mrs. De Luca." Benny said quickly.

"Yes you will. We'll be having our regular class as soon as we have a school to conduct it in... And you still owe me a book report." Mrs. De Luca said firmly.

Benny stopped and looked at her with disbelief.

She chuckled and said, "Just kidding, go on."

Benny smiled at the joke, then hurried down the catwalk toward the turbo lift.

* * * * *

As the haze cleared from Joe's vision, the grin remained before him.

"Do you think I'd let you die?" Rad asked with a huge grin as he walked to the transporter pad to help Joe to stand.

"Ow. My shoulder." Joe said with effort as he stood.

"I've been watching your life signs for the past ten minutes. As soon as they started to flicker, I beamed you out of there." Rad said seriously.

"Thanks. The ceiling caved in on me and I dropped my communicator." Joe said semi coherently.

"Now I see where Vincent gets it." Rad said with a chuckle.

"Do you know where he is? I need to see him." Joe said with effort.

"Hold on Joe. The last thing he needs is to see you like this. Go to the sickbay and get your shoulder taken care of, then get cleaned up. You'll just worry the hell out of him if you go to him now." Rad said seriously.

"Do I really look that bad?" Joe asked cautiously.

"You're all bloody, your hair is singed and... wait, why do you have lipstick on your cheek?" Rad finished with a wide eyed expression.

Joe looked Rad in the eyes and gave a shy smile.

"You go now. I'll stop by Deflector Control after my shift and you can tell me all about it." Rad said as he stopped at the door.

"I'll do that. Thank you Rad." Joe said seriously.

"Anytime my friend." Rad said with a smile.

* * * * *

"I didn't think I was going to make it." Darin said past his panting breaths.

"What happened to you?" Connie asked with concern and noticed that Darin's right eye was swollen and blackening.

"Someone hit me, it's nothing. Where's Vincent?" Darin asked in a rush.

"I'm right here." Vincent said from his seat.

Darin stared at Vincent in horror.

Vincent waited and tried to imagine Darin's expression.

"Does it hurt much?" Darin finally asked in a whisper.

Vincent smiled and said, "No. It doesn't hurt at all. I'm fine."

Darin looked at Vincent carefully, then cautiously said, "I know it isn't kid time, but if you'd let me, I'd really like to give you a hug right now."

Vincent chuckled and said, "Okay. Just this once."

Darin walked to Vincent and guided him to stand, then pulled him into a tight hug of relief.

Vincent smiled and returned the hug.

* * * * *

Benny finally got off the catwalk and worked his way through the groups of happily chattering people, toward the turbo lift. As he got closer to the turbo lift he noticed that there were four security officers, each one talking to a group of people.

After a few more seconds of squeezing past people, Benny stepped toward the turbo lift and one of the security officers held up a hand to caution him to stop.

After the officer excused himself from the group he was talking to, he took a small step to stand before Benny and said, "I'm sorry, but you'll need to get in line and wait to be assigned quarters."

"I'm not here for that, I need to go to sickbay." Benny said hesitantly.

"Oh? Are you feeling sick?" The security officer asked as he looked Benny over for signs of illness or injury.

"No. I just got a call that my father is awake in sickbay and asking for me." Benny said urgently, hoping that the security officer wasn't going to give him too much trouble.

"I see." The officer said and stopped to consider what he should do.

"He's hurt really bad and... I don't know if this might be my last chance to talk to him." Benny choked out as his eyes filled with tears.

The security officer took hold of Benny's arm.

Benny looked down at his arm, then at the officer with question.

No one in line made any protest as they watched Benny being guided past the other security officers and toward the turbo lift.

"Go take care of your dad. I hope everything works out for you."

"Thanks." Benny whispered.

The officer nodded, then released Benny's arm as the turbo lift door opened.

* * * * *

As Benny stepped off the turbo lift, he was surprised to see people laying, lined along the walls leaving a walking path open down the middle of the hallway.

Medical teams were efficiently working their way up and down the corridor and checking on the condition of each patient.

Benny looked down at the people as he slowly passed them and recognized almost every one of them.

There was a security officer standing by the sickbay door watching Benny approach.

"My dad's in there and Nurse Young called me and said that he's asking for me." Benny said seriously.

"If your father is well enough to speak then you'll need to go into the room down there. We only have critical care patients in here."

Benny realized that the other door was the door to the convalescent ward and nodded.

"Good luck kid." The security officer said as he watched Benny walk away.

* * * * *

Benny cautiously stepped into the Sickbay door and looked around.

What had seemed like such a large and sterile room earlier in the day was now crowded and almost claustrophobic.

Every bed had been filled and so had the cots that had been placed between the beds.

"I'm sorry, only patients are allowed in here." Dr. Perry said quickly as she ran her medical tricorder over a young girl.

"Nurse Young told me to come up here. He said that my dad was asking for me." Benny offered quietly.

"Oh. *You're* Benny?" Dr. Perry asked carefully as she looked up from the tricorder.

Benny nodded cautiously.

"Nurse Young had to go to Deck T. Come with me, your father is right over here. He's been very insistent about talking to you. Please try not to keep him awake too long." Dr. Perry said as she led him across the room.

"Okay. Thank you, Doctor." Benny said, then rushed to his father's side.

"Benny?" His father asked as he looked around.

"Yeah Dad, I'm right here." Benny said and looked closely at his father who seemed to look small and frail in the bed.

"How are you doing Benny-boy?" His dad asked as he squinted and strained to see his son.

"I'm fine Dad. I'm not hurt at all." Benny said as he noticed that his father's eyes were nearly swollen shut.

"Did you hear what the Captain said?"

"Yeah Dad, I heard it." Benny said past the lump in his throat as his eyes filled with tears.

"You need to go to the new colony and get us a place set up."

"But I want to go with you and mom and Callie and make sure you're all okay." Benny said quietly.

"Listen son. I know the doctors will do everything they can to fix us up. But if you come with us, we won't have anyplace to go when we're better. I need you to go to the new colony and make a place for us."

"Okay Dad, I'll go." Benny said quietly as he fought back his tears.

"If you can send us pictures and tell us all about our new home, it will give us something to look forward to."

"Dad, JonJon's family was killed in the storm. I was wondering if it'd be okay if he came to live with us." Benny asked quietly.

"Son, I've been watching you struggle to try and discover who you are. Some days you're my little boy, and others you're an independent young man."

"I wish I could give you a little more time to be a child, but we don't have that luxury anymore. I'm going to have to depend on you to take charge of things at the new colony and be the man of the family for a while. You decide what you think is the right thing to do and I'll stand by your decisions."

"Okay Dad. I'll make you proud." Benny said with tears in his eyes.

Benny felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Dr. Perry looking at him sympathetically.

"Your father needs his rest." She said quietly.

"I'll send you a picture of the new place as soon as I get there. I love you Dad." Benny said in a whisper.

"I love you too Benny-boy, now go and make our future." His father said as his eyes drifted shut.

Benny stood for a moment and watched his father drift into sleep, then started silently crying.

* * * * *

"Vincent, your little friend needs you." Susan said as she hurried out of the back room.

"Can you take me to him?" Vincent asked as he stood.

Susan took hold of Vincent's arm and guided him into the supply room.

"I don't know what happened, he was petting his dog, then he just started crying and won't stop." Susan said quietly.

"I don't know if he'll listen to me, but I'll try to help him until Benny gets back." Vincent said as he took unsteady steps across the sleeping bags in the floor.

"Sit down, you're right beside him." Susan said gently.

Vincent heard JonJon's whimpering and carefully sat down.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Susan asked with concern.

Vincent felt beside him and found JonJon curled into a ball, crying quietly.

"No. I think I'll be okay. I'll call you if I need help." Vincent said seriously.

After a moment to be sure that Susan had left the room, Vincent laid down beside JonJon and did his best to hug the boy.

"You're not alone." Vincent whispered as he laid his head against JonJon's back and hugged him tightly.

"Yes I am." The boy whispered in return.

"JonJon, you've got people who love you and care about you or you wouldn't be here right now." Vincent said carefully.

JonJon thought about the words, then turned himself around and hugged Vincent in return.

"It's going to be okay JonJon." Vincent said quietly.

"How can it be?" JonJon asked desperately.

"I don't know yet, but I've got lots of friends who can help me make sure that you'll be okay." Vincent said quietly.

"You're nice. I think I like you." JonJon said as he snuggled into Vincent's chest.

"I think you're nice too. Now try to get some rest. I'm sure you'll feel better after you've had some sleep." Vincent said as he gently smoothed JonJon's hair with one hand.

Vincent thought he felt something wet on his fingertips and wished for the thousandth time that day that he could see.

* * * * *

Benny felt an arm come around him and looked up in surprise.

"How are you doing Benny?" Joe asked in a gentle voice.

Benny turned and hugged Joe tightly.

Joe held Benny gently, then looked up as Dr. Perry approached.

"Come back tomorrow and I'll check out that shoulder again. And try to take it easy Joe." Dr. Perry said gently.

"I'll do my best." Joe said in a quiet voice as he held Benny carefully.

"You two should get out of here now." Dr. Perry said quietly.

"We will." Joe said in nearly a whisper as he tried to guide Benny to walk with him.

"How are my mom and my sister?" Benny asked suddenly.

Dr. Perry looked at Benny with concern and said, "I think your mother will probably recover just fine, in fact, she has a better chance of a complete recovery than your father."

"What's wrong with my dad?" Benny asked desperately.

"His spinal cord was severely injured. It's a real mess and there's no way to tell just how bad it is until the swelling has gone down... there's a chance that he may not walk again." Dr. Perry said seriously.

Joe held Benny more tightly to offer whatever comfort he could.

"What about my mom and Callie?" Benny asked in a small voice.

"Your mom's injuries are severe and it will take several months and quite a few surgeries to get her put back to right. But I've seen people fully recover from worse." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"And Callie?" Benny asked, even more quietly.

"I just don't know Benny. I wish I could say that she's going to be fine, but the truth is that she could go either way right now. We're doing everything we can." Dr. Perry said quietly.

"Can I see them?" Benny asked hopefully.

"No, I'm sorry. It just isn't possible. They're both in the critical care ward and... you just can't." Dr. Perry said with regret.

"Will you call us if there's any change?" Joe asked quietly.

"I promise that I'll call you right away if anything at all happens." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Come on Benny, let's get out of here." Joe said as he urged Benny to walk with him.

* * * * *

Vincent heard a whirring noise in the supply room with him and turned to face it, even though he couldn't see.

"Vincent?" A small shaky voice asked.

"Yeah." Vincent said hesitantly, not sure of who was in the room with him.

After a long moment of silence, Vincent hesitantly said, "Can you tell me who it is? I can't see you."

"It's Rory."

Vincent turned slightly to be more comfortable and continued to hold JonJon who had fallen asleep against his chest.

"Hi Rory." Vincent said quietly, not sure about what he should do.

"I'm sorry that I'm the one who has to do this Vincent. Cory called me and told me that since I'm the only Clan member out here, that I need to check this out." Rory rambled.

Vincent smiled peacefully and said, "You don't have to worry about that. I know you're just doing what needs to be done and I'm not mad at you at all."

"Oh good. Thanks Vincent. I really wasn't wanting to upset my only friend in this part of the galaxy." Rory said with relief.

Vincent smiled at being called Rory's friend, then said, "I don't know exactly what you're going to do, but I'll help you however I can."

"I just need to figure out why this happened to you. Maybe if you tell me what happened, it will help." Rory said seriously.

"Um. Okay, I guess it's really pretty simple. There was this damaged reactor that was going to explode and kill a few hundred people if someone didn't shut it down. They couldn't transport anyone in there because of the radiation and none of the adults could fit through the underground pipe to get into the control room."

"They asked me if I would go in and shut it down, so I did. I got some radiation, but I really don't know if I would have got sick or died from it. This thing with my skin is what happened to me in the transporter. It was kind of an accident and there wasn't any way anyone could know that it was going to happen." Vincent said carefully.

Rory thought about the words, then asked, "If the adults couldn't go into the control room and shut it down, couldn't they send some other kid?"

Vincent shook his head and said, "The main control panel was dead and I had to reroute power from the emergency systems to the main before I could shut it down. You could tell a kid how to shut down the reactor, but there's no way some other kid would have known how to shunt the power into a new power configuration. I bet there's some crewmen on the *Yorktown* right now who don't know how to do that."

"Okay, so you were the only person small enough who knew how to do the job." Rory said slowly.

"Yeah. It sounds really simple when you say it that way." Vincent said distantly.

"What do you mean?" Rory asked carefully.

"Think about it Rory. Captain Byrne and Commander M'Butu had to decide what to do. I had the easy part, all I had to do was go in there and risk my own life. Captain Byrne and Commander M'Butu had to ask someone else to risk their life while they were safe... Can you imagine how that must have felt? I don't know if I'd have the guts to make a decision like that."

"I never even thought about that." Rory said quietly.

JonJon snuffled against Vincent's chest for a moment, then came to rest.

Vincent started stroking JonJon's hair gently, then quietly said, "Rory, this is JonJon. He'd probably be dead right now if I hadn't gone down there and shut down the reactor. Him and a few hundred other people are still alive right now because Captain Byrne and Commander M'Butu had the guts to ask me to go in there. They did what was right and if we ever end up facing the same kind of problem again, I would want them to do exactly the same thing."

"No. Even if you stay, they're going to have to promise that they won't put you in danger like that again." Rory said firmly.

"Then I might as well go back to Earth with the *Enterprise*. Captain Byrne doesn't need another passenger on his ship. He needs a crewman to do a job; A real job that's sometimes dangerous." Vincent said firmly.

"But Vincent, you weren't even on board for a full day." Rory said in an imploring tone.

"It happened when we got the distress call. It doesn't matter if that was my first day or fiftieth day or five hundredth day on the ship." Vincent said firmly.

"You really want to stay here, don't you." Rory asked quietly.

"I belong here. The people I work with don't treat me like a kid. They depend on me to do my job. Instead of sitting in school and studying so I can dream about 'someday' doing 'something' I'm out here actually doing stuff that matters." Vincent said seriously.

Rory nodded in thought, then asked, "They really don't treat you like a kid?"

"If you need proof, just look at what happened today. If they thought I was just a kid, there's no way they would have even let me transport down to the surface. But instead they looked at me as a crewman who could do what needed to be done... I just hope that they'll keep looking at me that way after all this." Vincent finished quietly.

"I don't think you need to be worried about that Crewman Winters." A firm voice said.

"Captain Byrne?" Vincent asked in confusion, then tried to gently shift JonJon off his chest.

"At ease Crewman. That young man looks like he needs the rest." Captain Byrne said in a more gentle tone.

"Grandfather Sarek and Uncle Chip came over here with me, Captain Byrne met us in the shuttle bay and came down here with us." Rory said quietly.

"I'm sorry Captain, I didn't know you were here." Vincent said shyly.

"Crewman Winters, when you came aboard the *Yorktown* I tried to explain what it means to be a member of the crew. I wasn't sure if you understood what I was saying, but now I have no doubt. Even if circumstances force you to leave us for a time, I will be proud to claim you as a member of my crew." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Thank you sir." Vincent said in his 'mature' voice.

"Captain Byrne. With your permission I'd like to take Crewman Winters to the *Enterprise* so Doctor McCoy can help him with his condition." Chip said firmly.

"It's okay Commander Dodds. I'm not hurting and I can wait until the people from the colony are taken care of." Vincent said as he tried to determine where Chip was in the room.

"From the look of things, it still may be some time before Dr. Perry can attend to you. Since the most seriously injured patients will be transferred to the *Enterprise* when Dr. McCoy is prepared to receive them, I believe the doctors should have time to take care of you if you go now." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Can JonJon come with me? He doesn't need to be alone, and I promised Benny that I'd take care of him." Vincent asked hopefully.

"I don't see any problem with that. Just hold still for a second and I'll get him." Chip said quietly.

Vincent laid back and let Chip pick JonJon up from his chest.

After a moment, Vincent stood then said, "I'm going to need someone to help me. I can't see."

"Come Grandson. I will guide you." Sarek said peacefully.

"Thank you Grandfather."

* * * * *

"Where is Vincent?" Joe asked as he walked into Deflector Control with Benny at his side.

"You just missed him." Connie said frankly.

"Where did he go?" Joe asked with concern.

"I'm guessing he went to the *Enterprise*. He left with Captain Byrne, Commander Dodds from the *Enterprise*, someone who I'm pretty sure was Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan and a red headed kid in a wheelchair." Connie said seriously.

"Rory." Joe said absently.

Benny walked into the supply room, then back into the main room and looked around before asking, "Did JonJon go with Vincent?"

"Yeah. Commander Dodds was carrying him." Jimmy said from across the room.

Joe glanced at Darin and found him looking back with concern.

"I'm okay." Joe said before Darin could ask.

"What happened?" Darin asked quietly.

"Not much. I just stayed with the shield generators until the building started coming down around me. I was hit in the shoulder by... something. A piece of the ceiling I guess. The next thing I knew I was laying in transporter room two with Rad grinning at me." Joe said with a smile.

"You look like you got singed." Susan said from her station.

"A little bit. I needed a haircut anyway." Joe said with a shrug, then winced at the movement of his shoulder.

"Should we go make sure Vincent's okay?" Benny asked with concern.

"Don't worry about Vincent. There are almost as many people on the *Enterprise* who care about Vincent as there are on the *Yorktown*." Joe said seriously.

Benny nodded his acceptance, but didn't look convinced.

The comm alerted everyone to an incoming message.

Connie reluctantly pressed the button and said, "Deflector Control."

"*Yorktown Deflector Control, this is the shuttlecraft Galileo...*"

Chapter 10

"What?" JonJon asked as he looked around in confusion.

"Don't worry JonJon, we're just going to the *Enterprise* for a few minutes so the doctor can look at me." Vincent said calmly.

"Where are we?" JonJon asked in a daze.

"You are on the shuttlecraft Galileo." Chip said from the front of the shuttle.

"How did I get here?" JonJon asked as he noticed the red headed boy in a wheelchair looking at him.

"Commander Dodds carried you. Don't worry, as soon as I get done seeing the doctor we'll go back to the *Yorktown* and find Benny." Vincent said assuringly.

"Where's Fizgig?" JonJon asked in panic as he started looking around.

"He's back on the *Yorktown*, you'll see him in a few minutes." Vincent said, feeling that he was losing control of the situation.

"I can't lose him. He's all that's left. He's all I have..." JonJon said in a voice that abruptly broke into sobbing.

Vincent felt his way over to JonJon and pulled him into a hug.

"What happened to him?" Rory asked in a sympathetic voice.

"His whole family died down on the planet. Fizgig is his dog, it's all that JonJon has left of his old life." Vincent said as he held the sobbing boy to his chest.

"I will return shortly." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

After a moment, Vincent whispered, "Is he gone?"

"Yeah. He's up front with Uncle Chip." Rory whispered in return.

"I keep forgetting that Grandfather Sarek is here. He's so quiet." Vincent said as he rubbed JonJon's back gently.

"Shhh. Here he comes." Rory said with a smile.

"I have made arrangements to have the young man's companion animal transported to the *Enterprise*." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"Thank you Grandfather." Vincent said sincerely, then in a quieter voice, he asked, "Did you hear that JonJon?"

"Hear what?" JonJon asked in confusion.

"Ambassador Sarek fixed it so Fizgig would be transported to the *Enterprise*. You'll have him back in just a minute." Vincent said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Really?" JonJon asked hopefully and looked at Ambassador Sarek to receive a single nod.

"Thank you Ambassador." JonJon said shyly as he cuddled into Vincent's chest.

"To ease distress is logical." Ambassador Sarek said simply.

* * * * *

"We're inside the *Enterprise* now." Rory said seriously.

"I finally get to visit the *Enterprise* and I can't see her." Vincent said in a grumble.

"Well, with any luck, you'll be able to see her when you leave sickbay." Chip said as he walked from the front of the shuttle.

"Yeah." Vincent said then coaxed JonJon to stand.

"Where are we going?" JonJon asked in a fearful tone.

"To the sickbay." Vincent said seriously as he felt someone take his hand to guide him.

"You said Fizgig was going to be here, where is he?" JonJon asked as he looked around the shuttle in panic.

"Look out the window. There he is." Rory said quickly.

JonJon hurried to the window and yelped with delight as he saw Benny carrying Fizgig toward the shuttle.

Chip opened the door of the shuttle and was surprised to see JonJon dart past him to the boy that was approaching.

"Your friend is really a mess." Rory said to Vincent quietly.

"Yeah. I guess losing his family messed with his head." Vincent said carefully.

"Come Grandson." Ambassador Sarek said peacefully and guided Vincent to the door.

"There are two steps down." Sarek said calmly.

Vincent felt with his foot until he found the first step, then took the second step more easily.

"Do you require assistance Rory?" Ambassador Sarek asked calmly as he guided Vincent to stand aside.

"No thank you Grandfather. Uncle Chip has it." Rory said as Chip gently eased him down the steps.

* * * * *

"We brought you a patient Christine." Chip said as he pushed Rory into the sickbay.

"Oh, aren't you feeling well Rory?" Christine asked with concern.

"Not me, him." Rory said and motioned to Vincent who was holding on to Ambassador Sarek's arm.

"Oh, I see." Christine said with surprise.

"Do you have someone available who can take care of him?" Chip asked casually.

"Of course. Dr. McCoy is taking care of preparations for the critical care patients who will be transported from the *Yorktown*. While he's doing that, I can take care of this young man." Christine said gently.

"You're Dr. Chapel aren't you?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yes I am. And who are you?" Christine asked as she looked at Vincent carefully.

"I'm Vincent. I met you Wednesday night at Commander Dodds' house. I asked you about your electrolyte replacement therapy to help people who've been hit with high stun phasers." Vincent said seriously.

"Oh. What happened to you Vincent?" Christine said with wide eyes.

"The transporter made a little mistake." Vincent said with a small smile.

Christine's eyes got even wider.

"Vincent got into some radiation on the surface which caused a transporter malfunction when he tried to beam up through the storms and solar

radiation. Dr. Perry says he's okay underneath, he's just covered with lots of scabby skin." Benny said, hoping he was explaining it well.

"Oh, I see. Well that shouldn't be too much of a problem to fix, come with me to the biobed and I'll see exactly what needs to be done." Christine said as she took Vincent's hand and guided him to the nearest biobed.

"Um, Dr. Chapel, could you do something for me?" Vincent asked in a whisper.

"Sure, just name it." Christine whispered in return as she helped him up on the bed.

"Would you look at my friend JonJon to make sure he's okay? He's acting really funny and I think he might be bleeding on the back of his head. I'm really worried about him." Vincent said seriously.

"Which one is he? The blond or the brunette?" Christine asked in a whisper.

"The blond I guess. I've never seen him but Benny has brown hair. JonJon's the one holding the dog." Vincent said in thought.

"Lay still for a moment so I can get some good readings from the biobed and I'll talk to him." Christine said assuringly.

"Thanks." Vincent said with a small smile.

Christine walked across the room and said, "Excuse me, but are you JonJon?"

JonJon looked up at her and nodded cautiously.

"Do you think you could help me for just a minute?" Christine asked in a friendly voice.

"What can I do?" JonJon asked with surprise.

"I just need to be sure the other biobed is working properly before the people from your colony get here. If you wouldn't mind I'd like for you to lay down on it for a minute to see that it's working." Christine said with a gentle smile.

JonJon reluctantly nodded and started walking toward the bed.

"You'll need to leave the dog with your friend. Two bio-signs might confuse it." Christine said gently.

JonJon handed the dog to Benny then walked to the biobed and climbed on.

"Just lay still for a few seconds and we'll be done." Christine said, then turned on the bed.

After a moment of looking at the readings, Christine quickly grabbed a hypo spray and pressed it to JonJon's neck.

"What are you doing to him?" Benny asked in panic.

"Commander, I need Dr. McCoy, STAT." Christine said in a rush as she started gathering surgical instruments.

Chip nodded and ran to the doctor's office.

"What's wrong?" Benny asked in confusion.

"No time." Christine said as she began to lay the surgical instruments out on a tray.

"What is it Dr. Chapel?" McCoy said as he hurried into the room.

"See for yourself." Christine said and gestured to the readings on the biobed.

"Dear God! Hand me a scalpel and get ready to assist." McCoy said as he rushed to JonJon's side.

"What's wrong with him?" Benny asked in a small voice.

"Chip, get them out of here." McCoy said firmly.

"Come on Vincent. It looks like you're going to get to wait a little while longer." Chip said with resignation.

Vincent climbed off the biobed and held onto Chip's arm as he walked out of sickbay.

* * * * *

"Would it be okay if I go in the other room? I think Solak is in there." Rory asked quietly.

"I think that will be fine." Chip said as the group sat and waited to find out what was wrong with JonJon.

Rory nodded, then moved his wheelchair down the hall to the other sickbay door.

"Could you see anything to tell you what's wrong?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"No. I couldn't see enough of his readings to get a sense of what was going on." Chip said honestly.

Silence fell over the group as they waited and each thought their own thoughts.

* * * * *

"Vincent, Solak says that he can take care of you if you want." Rory said as he entered the hallway again.

"I want to be here when the doctors are done with JonJon." Vincent said quietly.

"Grandson. It is logical to assume that the opportunity to rectify your condition will lessen as the patients from the *Yorktown* are brought on board the *Enterprise*. You can wait just as effectively while having the procedure done and we will see that you are notified when there is any new information." Ambassador Sarek said firmly.

"Okay Grandfather. I guess that's logical." Vincent said in resignation and stood.

Benny looked at Vincent, then at the door to where JonJon was being operated on.

"I'll go with him. Come get us when you have news." Chip said seriously.

Benny nodded, then cuddled the dog in his arms.

* * * * *

"Please disrobe." Solak said without emotion.

"Now I know why crewmen wear jumpsuits, it seems like I've been spending half my day dressing and undressing." Vincent grumbled.

"Please lay on the bed and I will cover you to accommodate your modesty." Solak said in a professional tone.

Vincent climbed up on the bed with Chip's help, then felt a sheet being draped over his lower body.

Solak scanned Vincent carefully, then said, "A most curious condition. While I work, perhaps you could tell me how you came to be in this state."

Vincent thought about it, then finally said, "I got a pretty good dose of radiation, then transported up. I guess the transporter lost part of me and

when they put me back together, I ended up with too much skin or something."

"Fascinating." Solak said as he took a small pair of scissors and began to cut sections from the dead skin covering Vincent's left arm.

"Does it hurt?" Rory asked with concern.

"No. It feels kinda good when the scabby stuff is pulled off. It kinda feels like when you take off a pair of socks you've been wearing all day." Vincent said with relief.

"*Commander Dodds, please report to the bridge*." Sounded over the intercom.

"I'm on my way." Chip answered quickly into the nearest comm station, then said, "Just call the bridge if you need me for anything."

"Okay. Thank you for all your help Commander Dodds." Vincent said seriously.

"Anytime Crewman Winters." Chip said with a fond smile before leaving the room.

"Do you need anything Vincent?" Rory asked with concern.

"Yeah. Could you check to see if they've heard anything about JonJon yet?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I'll be right back." Rory said seriously and left the room.

* * * * *

Solak finally finished Vincent's arms, then decided that it was time to do the most difficult part of the job.

"I will need you to be very still during this part of the procedure. I am going to remove the covering from your face and would not want to cause you an injury." Solak said seriously.

"I understand." Vincent said as he tried to relax.

The sensation of the cold metal on his overly sensitive skin made Vincent want to flinch away, but the free feeling of each patch of uncovered skin was reward enough to keep him in his place.

Solak carefully began to take small snips as he worked his way along the edge of Vincent's eyebrow when Vincent had a sudden realization.

For the first time since he left the planet, he could see light.

Even though Vincent's eyes were closed, Solak had made enough of an opening to allow some light to get to his left eye.

After another moment of snipping, there was a little bit of a pulling sensation on Vincent's eyelid, then all of a sudden, his entire left eye was uncovered.

"Can I open my eye?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Proceed." Solak said calmly, then watched as Vincent opened his left eye and looked around.

"Hey. You're the guy from the shuttle in Orlando. I didn't realize that that's who you were." Vincent said as he looked at Solak.

"I will now proceed." Solak said calmly and started to work on Vincent's other eye.

"Nothing yet." Rory said as he maneuvered his wheelchair into the room.

"So they still don't know what's wrong?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No. Both the doctors are still in there." Rory said quietly.

Vincent felt the pulling sensation on his right eyelid, then could feel the covering of dead skin peel away.

"Thank you Dr. Solak. It's really tough not being able to see." Vincent said with relief.

Solak gave a half nod, half bow of acknowledgement of the statement, then went to work on removing the covering from Vincent's scalp.

"It will be necessary for me to cut your hair to remove the damaged tissue. It will be possible for me to stimulate your follicles to induce hair growth when the procedure is concluded, if that is desirable."

"Let me see how it looks when you're done. I usually wear it pretty short anyway so I may decide to keep it." Vincent said seriously.

"My apologies for interrupting, but the surgery has been completed." Ambassador Sarek said from the doorway.

"Can I go and find out what's wrong with JonJon and finish this when I get back?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"That would be acceptable. I will accompany you." Solak said calmly.

"Um... Could I have a gown or something?" Vincent asked as he looked under the sheet to find himself naked.

"Yes. Of course." Solak said and retrieved a gown from a nearby cabinet.

* * * * *

Vincent walked into the back hallway that connected main sickbay to the convalescent ward and found everyone waiting anxiously.

"You may proceed." Ambassador Sarek said peacefully.

"Your friend had a piece of metal, something like a nail, stuck in his head." Christine said frankly.

"How did that happen?" Benny asked in confusion.

"I don't know, but it was driven nearly three inches into his brain. If he had been human it would probably have killed him but since he's an android, it just caused a few malfunctions. That's probably why his behavior seemed strange."

"Is he going to die?" Benny asked quietly.

"No, I don't think there's any danger of that." Christine said gently.

"So he's going to be okay?" Vincent asked carefully, suspecting that she was holding something back.

"It's hard to say. A human who survived this kind of injury would develop new neural pathways around the damage but there is no way to know what will happen to an android. I couldn't find any record of an android being damaged in a similar manner in the data library."

"Can't you fix him, you know, repair the damage?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Dr. McCoy and I repaired as much as we could. What we couldn't repair, we disabled so he won't be generating random signals anymore. Anything more we could try to do would be just as likely to make matters worse." Christine said professionally.

"So what's going to happen to him now?" Benny asked quietly.

"Since the damage is not organic, he'll be free to go when he wakes up from the anesthetic. He'll just have a tender spot behind his left ear where we removed the piece of metal. It should heal quickly." Christine said slowly.

"But..." Vincent prompted.

"But it's impossible to predict how this damage will effect him in the long term. Given the area that was damaged, I can guess that it will have something to do with his emotional development but how severe or for how long, we'll just have to wait and see." Christine said helplessly.

"Is he going to need to be in a hospital or institution or something?" Benny asked carefully.

"No. Nothing like that. I think what he needs is to be with someone who will accept him as he is. Someone who can understand that he might not ever be able to develop further or reach a level of maturity to be able to fully take care of himself." Christine said quietly.

Benny nodded.

"You can go in and wait with him if you like." Christine said gently.

"Thank you Dr. Chapel." Benny said and stood.

"Solak, it looks like you've been busy. Would you mind if I help you finish up?" Christine asked as she looked at Vincent.

"That would be acceptable." Solak said calmly.

"I'll be right in there if you need me." Vincent said to Benny quietly.

"Okay. Thanks." Benny said as he walked toward the door, followed by Ambassador Sarek.

* * * * *

"This is really embarrassing." Vincent said as Solak and Dr. Chapel worked on removing the damaged skin from his lower torso.

Solak arched an eyebrow at the statement, then continued to work.

"Do you want me to leave?" Rory asked quietly.

"No. Thanks for staying with me. This is just embarrassing, but it's better having you here with me to keep my mind off it." Vincent said honestly.

"Just hold on for a few more minutes and we'll be finished." Christine said as she removed a large patch of skin.

Vincent nodded, then thought to ask, "Is JonJon really going to be okay?"

"Medically, I think he'll be fine. Emotionally... well, we'll just have to see what happens." Christine said in thought.

"Doctor, I mean Doctors, the first shuttle of critical care patients just landed in the shuttle bay." A medical assistant said as he rushed into the room.

"Notify Dr. McCoy and find out where he wants you to put them." Dr. Chapel said as she moved to Vincent's groin area to start removing a thin layer of skin.

"Um, be careful." Vincent said in a shaky voice.

"Don't worry Vincent, there's hardly any damaged skin in this area. It will just take a few seconds." Christine said as she worked.

Vincent gritted his teeth and tried to hold perfectly still as he felt the metal instruments moving across his highly sensitive skin.

"I believe it is nearing time to work on his back." Solak said as he stepped back to look over Vincent's entire body.

"I think you're right. And that shouldn't take nearly as long." Christine said as she peeled a film of dead skin away from Vincent's thigh.

"Turn over honey and we'll finish it off." Christine said gently.

Vincent quickly turned over and tried to relax.

"If you'll work on his head, I think I can get everything else." Dr. Chapel said as she looked at Vincent's back.

"Agreed." Solak said and began working on the thick skin covering Vincent's head.

"Just a few more minutes." Christine whispered as she began to remove a patch of dead skin on his shoulder blade.

* * * * *

"Where am I?" JonJon asked in confusion.

"You're in the sickbay on the *Enterprise*." Benny said as he rushed to JonJon's side.

"Am I sick?" JonJon asked in confusion.

"I guess when your house caved in, a nail got stuck in your head. The doctors took it out and you're going to be okay now." Benny said quietly.

JonJon felt the side of his head and said, "I feel funny."

"Does it hurt?" Benny asked with concern.

"No. It just feels weird." JonJon said as he sat up.

"Do you want to hold Fizgig?" Benny asked in a small voice.

JonJon smiled and nodded.

Benny handed the dog to JonJon and felt relief rush over him at the contented look on JonJon's face.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. I mean, my father..." JonJon trailed off with tears forming in his eyes.

"I'm going to move to the new colony and get a new place to live. If you wanted, you could go with me and live with me and my family." Benny said quietly.

JonJon looked at Benny with surprise.

"My family is all hurt really bad and won't be able to go to the new colony for months, maybe even years. I could really use your help to set up the new place." Benny said quietly.

"So I could live with you... and be like your brother?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"Only if you want to. You could stay on the *Enterprise* and go back to Earth to try and find a new family if that's what you wanted to do." Benny said carefully.

JonJon shook his head and said, "You took care of me when I was sad and afraid. If you really want me to live with you... I'd like to be your brother."

"Of course I want you, that's what I'm doing here." Benny said with a smile.

JonJon thought about it as he petted Fizgig in his lap, then said, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do next."

"I don't know either. I guess we'll figure it out together." Benny said with a peaceful smile.

JonJon looked up at Benny curiously, then gave a small smile in return.

"Let's go in the other room and see how Vincent's doing." Benny said as he offered his hand.

JonJon took the offered hand and worked his way down off the biobed.

"Oh, I see you're awake. If you'll hold still for a second, I want to scan you to make sure that you're okay." Dr. McCoy said as he hurried into the room.

"Who's that?" JonJon asked with a note of fear in his voice.

"He's one of the doctors on the *Enterprise*. He took the nail out of your head." Benny whispered.

Dr. McCoy picked up a medical tricorder and scanned JonJon quickly.

"It looks like you're doing just fine. Make sure to keep that wound clean for the next few days to prevent infection and you shouldn't have any problem." Dr. McCoy said as he looked at the scan results.

"Am I really okay?" JonJon asked quietly.

"Son, I'm going to be honest with you. There was some damage to your brain. But you're past the worst of it now and I think you're going to be fine." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

JonJon moved to Benny's side and hugged him with one arm.

"See that he gets something to eat. My scans show that he hasn't had much food in the past few days." Dr. McCoy said with a sympathetic look at JonJon.

"I will doctor." Benny said as he returned JonJon's hug.

"Doctor, the *Yorktown* patients are here." A medical assistant said as he pulled a gurney into the room.

"Now if you'll excuse me, it appears that I'm about to become very busy." Dr. McCoy said as he hurried to his patient.

"Come on, Vincent's in the next room." Benny said and urged JonJon to walk with him.

* * * * *

"I think a nice long sonic shower should be able to remove the little bits that are left." Christine said as she looked Vincent over.

"I concur." Solak said simply.

"Would you like for us to stimulate hair growth? Your hair is pretty short." Christine said cautiously.

"Can I see?" Vincent asked as he sat up.

"There's a mirror right over here." Christine said as she walked across the room.

"Where's my uniform?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"In the fresher, I'll get it." Christine said and moved to the small fresher unit.

Vincent pulled on the hospital gown, then made his way across the room and looked at himself in the mirror.

There was a peach-fuzz covering of hair on his head that allowed his scalp to show through.

"I kinda like it. I'll keep it like this." Vincent said as he was handed his uniform.

Christine considered for a moment, then said, "I think it suits you."

Vincent stepped into his uniform and pulled it up to his hips, then quickly removed the gown.

When he turned around, he was surprised to see that Benny, JonJon and Ambassador Sarek had entered the room.

"Nice butt." Benny said with a chuckle.

Vincent rolled his eyes at the statement, then started to laugh as he finished putting on his uniform.

"Who's that?" JonJon asked in confusion.

"That's Vincent. That's what he looks like under all that gross skin that was covering him." Benny said seriously.

JonJon thought about it for a moment, then said, "I got used to him being the other way."

Vincent walked to JonJon's other side and said, "I'm still the same person that I was before. Are you feeling okay?"

"I think so. I just feel a little funny." JonJon said in confusion.

"Chapel, I need you in here. You too Solak." McCoy's voice said over the intercom.

"Rory, I didn't want to ask you before with all the other stuff going on, but... have you made a decision about if I get to stay or not?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Not yet. I still need to talk to a few people before I decide anything for sure." Rory said carefully.

Vincent nodded, then turned to Sarek and asked, "Grandfather, have you decided anything about my *kahs'wan*?"

"Yes. However I will withhold announcing my decision until Rory has completed his investigation. I would not want to influence his decision." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"Is there anything else for us to do here?" Benny asked as he looked around.

"I don't think so. We should probably get back to the *Yorktown*." Vincent said in an uncertain tone.

"I would be honored if you would join me for the evening meal before you disembark." Ambassador Sarek said formally.

"Is that okay with you guys?" Vincent asked Benny and JonJon.

"Can Fizgig have something to eat too?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"I am certain that provisions can be made." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

* * * * *

"Do you think he's okay?" Darin asked with concern.

"I'm sure he's fine. Commander Dodds treats Vincent like one of his own kids. He won't let anything happen to him." Joe said with assurance.

"So you're not worried about him?" Darin asked carefully.

Joe chuckled and said, "I'm about to go out of my head with worry. But no amount of reason or logic will make that go away. I won't stop worrying until I'm able to hold him in my arms and know in my heart that he's okay."

"Good. I'm glad it's not just me." Darin said with a smile.

Darin looked at Joe with question as the hum of the ship's engines changed.

Joe immediately walked to the main console to see what was going on.

"It looks like we're just moving out of the solar system. We don't seem to be in any hurry." Connie said as he examined the readings.

"Good. All that radiation bombarding our shields was making me a little nervous." Joe said frankly.

"Why is that? You know better than anyone how stable our shields are. You should be the least worried person on the ship." Connie said seriously.

"The day that I trust the shields to completely protect us from everything is the day I need to move to another department. I'm good at what I do because I never feel safe, I'm always trying to figure out how many

different ways the shields might fail." Joe said as he watched the console carefully.

"I bet you sleep well at night." Connie said sarcastically.

"I sure do. Nervous exhaustion is a great sleep aid." Joe said with a chuckle.

Darin stood by silently watching and listening.

* * * * *

"I hope no one noticed how much I ate. I didn't even realize I was hungry until I started eating." Benny said as soon as the transporter beam cleared.

"I don't think anyone noticed. All four of us were pigging out... five if you count Fizgig." Vincent said, then noticed that Rad was the transporter operator.

"And besides that, Grandma Amanda kept on talking about how skinny we all were and was trying to get all of us to eat more." Rory said, then looked at the step down from the transporter chamber.

"Yeah, she even thought Fizgig was too thin." Vincent said with a chuckle.

"Why don't they put ramps on these things?" Rory asked in frustration at the step.

"Because most people who can't walk use anti-grav chairs." Vincent said seriously.

"Have you ever tried to steer one of those things? It's like riding on an air hockey puck. I'd wreck half the ship before I got where I was going." Rory said with irritation.

"I can help you down." Rad said as he walked to the transporter chamber.

"Thanks." Rory said to Rad with a small smile.

"Did you get Daddy Joe back okay?" Vincent asked hopefully as he watched Rad ease Rory down the step.

"I sure did. In fact, I bet he's in deflector control right now waiting for you." Rad said with a smile.

As soon as Rad had finished helping Rory, Vincent walked up to him and gave him a firm hug.

"Thanks for taking care of him... and for saving me." Vincent said sincerely.

"It was my pleasure, now you'd better get down to deflector control before Joe works himself into a tizzy worrying about you." Rad said with a smile as he returned the hug.

"Will you come down and visit us when your shift is over?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure thing. Expect me in about an hour." Rad said gently.

Vincent broke loose of the hug, then turned to the other boys and said, "Come on guys."

JonJon walked from Benny's side to stand before Rad and whispered, "Thank you."

Rad reached down and petted Fizgig in JonJon's arms as he said, "I'm just sorry I couldn't do more for you."

"You saved me three times today. So I know you did everything you could." JonJon said quietly.

"Three times?" Rad asked in confusion.

"Yeah, the first time you saved me was when you beamed me up from the planet. The second time was when you brought Fizgig back to me. And the third time was when you called Vincent and Benny to come and help me. If you hadn't done all those things, I'd probably be dead right now or wishing I was. But thanks to you I think I'm going to be okay." JonJon said quietly, then gave Rad a small smile.

Rad smiled at JonJon and said, "Well if there's anything else I can do for you, just call me. That smile made the whole day worth it."

JonJon nodded shyly, then walked to the others who were waiting by the door.

* * * * *

As the boys moved down the catwalk, Benny and Vincent were amazed by the fact that there were no colonists standing around.

"Where did they all go?" Vincent asked in wonder.

"To the *Enterprise* I guess, but it wasn't crowded over there either." Benny said as he looked around.

"Maybe they were all assigned quarters." JonJon said carefully.

As they approached the door to deflector control, it opened automatically.

* * * * *

Joe looked up from the main console at the sound of the door opening and saw the four boys enter the room.

After a glance to see that Connie was taking the console, Joe hurried across the room to pull Vincent into a one armed hug.

"How are you feeling?" Joe asked in a whisper.

"I feel great... well, except for needing a shower." Vincent said as he enjoyed the hug.

Joe closed his eyes and soaked in the feeling of relief and joy of knowing that Vincent was really safe.

"I talked to Lawrence today." Vincent said into Joe's chest.

"Oh really? What did he have to say?" Joe asked as he continued to hold Vincent tightly.

"He freaked out because I got hurt, but after that, he told me to tell you that he loves you and misses you." Vincent said seriously.

Joe chuckled and said, "We'll have to call him later and let him know that everything turned out for the best."

After a long moment of silence, Vincent whispered, "Daddy Joe."

"What is it son?" Joe whispered in return.

"Could we do this later, like, when the guys aren't watching?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

Joe smiled and released Vincent from the hug.

Vincent stepped back and looked around before asking, "Where did they go?"

As Connie was about to answer, a scream sounded from the supply room that drew everyone's attention.

Rory's wheelchair backed out of the supply room first.

He was quickly followed by Benny and JonJon who both looked terrified.

A moment later Lou stumbled out of the supply room wearing a sweat suit and a distinctly unhappy expression.

"What's wrong Lou?" Joe asked cautiously.

"I was laying there asleep then I felt someone watching me. When I opened my eyes, these three were staring at me." Lou said as she pointed at Benny, JonJon and Rory all in a row.

"We were just trying to give Vincent some privacy." Benny said in a frightened voice.

"Yeah. We weren't doing anything wrong." Rory said defensively.

"What's all the noise?" Channing asked as he stumbled out of the supply room, rubbing his eyes.

"It was just a misunderstanding... who are you?" Joe asked quietly.

"This is Channing, you saw him in sickbay yesterday. Benny and JonJon and me brought him here so he could rest." Vincent said seriously.

"Benny, JonJon and I." Joe corrected automatically.

"No. You weren't there. Just Benny and JonJon and me." Vincent said seriously.

Joe was about to explain what he meant when he saw the twinkle of mischief in Vincent's eyes.

"Do you mind if I use one of the terminals for a minute? I bet there's someone in Engineering freaking out trying to find out where I went." Channing asked quietly.

"Go ahead, you can use auxiliary station two by the door." Joe said and pointed.

After a moment of typing, Channing looked up with a smile and said, "Chance is down in the rec-hall helping to get the colonists settled in. I'm going to head down there and see if he found a place to sleep tonight."

"Are you going to be okay?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Yeah. I'll be fine. But if I have any problems, I'll come right back here." Channing said with a fond smile at Vincent.

"You'd better." Vincent said firmly.

Channing smiled and quickly rubbed Vincent's 'peach fuzz' hair as he passed.

"Have you heard anything about my family?" Benny asked as Channing walked out the door.

"Doctor Perry called to let you know that they're being transferred to the *Enterprise*, that's all." Connie said quietly from the main console.

Benny nodded that he heard.

"And who is this?" Joe asked with a smile at the boy holding a dog.

"This is JonJon and his dog, Fizgig." Benny said with a smile.

"It's nice to meet you JonJon, you too Fizgig." Joe said with a teasing grin.

"Hi." JonJon said shyly.

"Well, I guess while we're all here, I'll explain the sleeping arrangements for the next three or four weeks." Joe said carefully.

Glances flew around the room as everyone wondered what was going on.

"We've all been assigned to my quarters." Joe said frankly.

"But there's eight of us." Jimmy said in shock.

"He can count." Lou said dryly.

Joe turned to the main console and brought up a listing of cabin assignments, then said, "Actually, it's more like ten."

"Ten people. In your cabin." Lou said in confirmation.

"Just a second Lou and I'll explain." Joe said as he did a quick search of the cabin assignment list.

"Is that your dad?" JonJon asked Vincent in a whisper.

"That's my Daddy Joe. He's not my real father, but he loves me just the same as if he was." Vincent said happily.

JonJon smiled and nodded that he understood.

"Benny, your last name is Summers, right?" Joe asked from the console.

"Right." Benny said as he glanced to see what Joe was doing.

"What about JonJon?" Joe asked a moment later.

"Jonathan Daniels." JonJon said timidly.

Joe nodded as he keyed in the information.

"There, it's done. We're all assigned to my cabin until we reach the new colony." Joe said seriously.

"Spill it Joe. How's it going to work." Lou asked darkly.

"Basically, the guys get to sleep in the supply room and the ladies get to sleep in my quarters. We'll all use the lavatory in my quarters for showers and laundry." Joe said simply.

"Well, it sounds good to me except for the part about dividing us up by gender. I was thinking of something more along the lines of boy-girl-boy-girl..." Connie said playfully.

Lou turned slowly to look at Connie with an icy stare.

"On second thought, it works just fine like you said. Good thinking Joe." Connie said quickly.

Lou nodded firmly as she maintained her glare at him.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Joe asked as he looked around.

For a long moment there was silence, then Rory hesitantly said, "I need to have a private talk with you before I go back to the *Yorktown*."

Joe saw the serious look in Rory's eyes and hesitantly nodded.

The sound of the comm drew everyone's attention.

"Deflector Control." Connie answered seriously.

"*Ensign Cooper is to report to Captain Byrne's office immediately.*" The familiar voice said professionally.

Darin got a look of surprise, but quickly composed himself and left the room.

"He's on his way. What's up Debs?" Connie asked quietly.

"*I don't know, but whatever it is came directly from Starfleet*."

Chapter 11

Darin stepped off the turbo lift and could hear Commander M'Butu talking to someone in the office before him.

After a moment to collect his courage, Darin turned and walked down the short hallway into Captain Byrne's office.

"Ensign Cooper reporting as ordered sir." Darin said and was proud of the fact that he kept his voice calm and steady.

"At ease Ensign. Please have a seat." Captain Byrne said as he looked at Darin's black eye.

Darin carefully took a seat before the desk and waited.

"Ensign Cooper, by the order of Starfleet Command you are to return to Earth as soon as possible to face a Judicial Board of Inquiry." Captain Byrne said as he looked Darin in the eyes.

Darin was stunned by the statement, but quickly overcame his shock and asked, "May I know why?"

"You were promoted to the rank of Ensign for fraudulent reasons. It will be the purpose of the Judicial Board of Inquiry to investigate the events that lead you to your assignment to the *Yorktown* and to your promotion. If they find that your promotion was not justified, you will be stripped of your rank and summarily discharged from service in Starfleet." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Darin's mind raced over the statement, then something seemed to stand out over all the rest.

"You said that they will be reviewing what happened before I was promoted, does that mean that nothing I've done since my promotion will be taken into account?" Darin asked carefully.

"That is my understanding of the process." Captain Byrne said gravely.

"Then there is no reason for the review. I've never disputed the fact that my promotion was a mistake... a cruel joke that someone played on me." Darin drifted off darkly.

"Not just you Ensign Cooper. Six of your classmates were also targets of this ill-conceived scheme. I have been told that five of them have already returned to Earth to face the review board. The remaining one, a Miss Sayat-Ali, has resigned her commission so that she may remain at the Utopia Planetia shipyards as a consultant." Captain Byrne said carefully.

Darin thought for a moment, then said, "So my choices are to quit or be fired."

"Please understand that you aren't being accused of any wrongdoing. But Starfleet cannot allow you to continue with a rank that you have not rightfully earned." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"I do understand sir. Would it be possible for me to make a formal statement for the record?" Darin asked quietly.

Captain Byrne started the recording, then said, "You may proceed."

"This is the statement of Ensign Darin Cooper. I understand that I have been called to a Judicial Board of Inquiry to investigate the allegation that I received my rank by improper and fraudulent means. I would like to state for the record, that I had no prior knowledge of the events that lead to my promotion and was in no way responsible for what happened. But I also understand that I do not deserve to wear the rank that I have been assigned. So to correct that situation, I hereby resign my commission effective immediately. It is my hope that this will resolve the situation in regard to me. If there is any further need for inquiry into the matter, I will be available and cooperative. This ends my statement." Darin said carefully, then removed the rank insignia from his uniform and sat it gently on Captain Byrne's desk.

Captain Byrne stopped the recording and said, "Well said Mr. Cooper."

"Thank you Captain. May I have your permission to stay on the *Yorktown* for the trip to the new colony?" Darin asked apprehensively.

"Yes, of course. And I'll send this statement to Starfleet straight away so we can get a reply before the *Enterprise* leaves." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Thank you sir. It was an honor serving on your ship... for the day that it lasted." Darin finished with a pained smile.

"I have the feeling that you've made a few friends in your brief time on my ship." Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"Yes sir. In one day I feel closer to the people in deflector control than I do my own family." Darin said with an expression of worry.

"Then, if I may offer a suggestion..." Captain Byrne trailed off, waiting for a reaction.

Darin nodded his acceptance.

"...Talk to your friends about what has happened, especially those who have been in Starfleet for a while." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Darin looked at Captain Byrne inquisitively for a moment, then began to ask, "Does that mean..."

"Mr. Cooper. I have said all that I can on the matter. Please be assured that this matter may yet turn to your advantage. Now if you will excuse me..."

"Yes sir. Thank you." Darin said in deep thought as he stood.

Captain Byrne gave a serious nod, then turned his attention to the latest reports on his terminal.

Darin walked down the hallway, as he puzzled over what Captain Byrne might have meant.

* * * * *

"I have time now, will the hallway be private enough?" Joe asked with concern.

"Yes, that's fine." Rory said seriously.

Everyone watched as Joe and Rory left the room.

"Wow, I didn't know a little kid in a wheelchair could be so intimidating." Connie said as he looked at the closed door.

"Rory is here to decide if I can stay on the *Yorktown* or if I have to go back to Earth." Vincent said as he took a seat at the second auxiliary station.

"He can do that?" Connie asked cautiously.

"Yeah. He's my guardian... well, one of them. I guess the way it works is that all of Clan Short are my guardians. Clan Short decided that Daddy Joe could be my mentor and watch out for me while we're on the *Yorktown*. But since I got hurt, they may decide that it's too dangerous for me here and make me go back to Earth where I'll be safe."

"You mean Rory might make you go away?" JonJon asked with a tone of anger creeping into his voice.

"Please don't be mad at Rory. He's just going to do what he thinks is best to keep me safe." Vincent said quietly.

"Do you think he's going to send you away?" Susan asked gently.

"I don't know. I hope not. I really like it here." Vincent said as tears started welling up in his eyes.

"We like having you here too. Not only do you do a good job, but you make Joe happier than I've seen him in a long time." Connie said frankly.

Vincent felt a hand on his shoulder and slowly looked up.

Benny was standing beside him, offering his support.

A moment later JonJon was on his other side, gripping his other shoulder.

"I think that if Rory decides that it isn't safe here for me, I may not go back to Earth anyway." Vincent said quietly.

"The new colony?" Jimmy asked carefully.

Vincent turned and gave him a nod.

* * * * *

"What did you want to know?" Joe asked Rory cautiously.

"First I need to tell you that I'm here because Cory asked me to check on Vincent and find out why he was hurt. It's going to be up to me to decide if Vincent gets to stay here or has to go back to Earth." Rory said seriously.

"Okay. I guess I can understand that." Joe said in thought.

"I talked with Vincent and I understand why he was chosen to shut down the reactor. So I guess my biggest question for you is why you would even consider taking a nine year old kid with you on a starship. You know how dangerous it is out here. How could you do that to him?" Rory asked firmly.

Joe thought about the question for a moment, then responded, "Vincent is at a crossroads. He has to choose a path, and once he's on it, he will probably continue to follow that path into his adult life. If you look carefully at Vincent's life story so far, you'll see that he has every excuse to become a rebellious delinquent teenager. His father was abusive and trained him for years in how to hate, then in a final act of violence, Mr. Winters killed his wife and took away the only person who Vincent had ever been allowed to love. So with his parents both dead, Vincent was left alone, feeling isolated and confused. Not even considering the publicity about his father, I can't see any way that Vincent could have anything close to a happy life on Earth. A lot of kids have cracked under a lot less pressure than Vincent's had to face."

"Rory, I honestly can't think of a better place for him to be than here on the *Yorktown* with me. He's gaining self-confidence, he's learning a useful skill, he's forming good healthy relationships with a variety of people, and while he's doing all that, he's contributing to his community... the ship. He has a variety of strong role models to choose from here and he's learning discipline and respect." Joe said passionately.

"But what about the danger?" Rory asked quietly.

"There's danger no matter where you are. Something might happen to you when you leave your house to go to the grocery store. There are drive by shootings and hit and run accidents every day. That doesn't mean that you should never leave your house, it just means that you should look around you and be as safe as you can within reason." Joe said thoughtfully.

"Okay. Thank you Joe. I hadn't considered that thing about Vincent's past but I understand what you're saying." Rory said carefully.

"So does that mean Vincent can stay?" Joe asked quietly.

Rory shook his head and said, "I still have to talk to a few more people. Would you tell Vincent that I'll be back in a little while? I need to see if I can talk to Commander M'Butu right now."

"I'll tell him. Good luck with your talk." Joe said with a gentle smile.

Rory nodded, then turned his wheelchair and headed down the catwalk toward the turbo lifts.

* * * * *

As Rory approached the turbo lift, the door opened to reveal a man with short brown hair and a black eye that could officially be classified as a 'shiner'. Rory remembered that he was the one who had been called to talk to the Captain. Concern welled up in Rory as he noticed that the man seemed to be fighting back tears.

"Are you okay?" Rory asked hesitantly.

"Been better." Darin whispered as he fought to regain his emotional control.

"Is there anything I can do?" Rory offered weakly, not having any clue as to what the problem might be.

Darin gave a defeated chuckle before saying, "Not unless you know a senior Starfleet officer who would be willing to give me some career advice."

Rory thought about the statement and was about to answer when Darin continued, "Don't worry about it. I'll figure it out."

"No. Wait. Were you serious about needing to talk to a senior officer?" Rory asked quickly.

"Well, Captain Byrne hinted that someone who had been in Starfleet for a while might be able to... do something. I just resigned my commission and... I don't know what to do next." Darin said and felt another wave of emotion welling within him at the statement.

"Come with me." Rory said firmly.

"I need to change out of this uniform..." Darin said hesitantly.

"You can change later. I need for you to come with me to the *Enterprise*. I think I can help you." Rory said firmly.

Darin recognized something in Rory's voice and said, "You sounded just like Vincent when you said that. You're a friend of his, aren't you?"

Rory chuckled as he said, "Yeah, I'm also one of his legal guardians. Come on, we don't have a lot of time."

Darin nodded hesitantly and turned to follow Rory into the turbo lift.

"Transporter Room Two." Rory said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Darin and said, "My name is Rory."

"I'm Darin."

"Are you a friend of Vincent's?" Rory asked casually.

"Friend, co-worker, roommate, big brother... take your pick." Darin said with a stab of pain at the thought that he might have to leave his new family so soon after finding them.

Rory glanced at Darin and hesitantly asked, "Did you just say brother?"

Darin chuckled and said, "Yeah. Vincent and I have started calling each other 'big brother' and 'little brother'."

Rory shook his head and absently said, "I'll need to talk to grandfather about this."

"Is something wrong?" Darin asked with concern at Rory's contemplative expression.

After a moment of thought, Rory said, "No. It's nothing bad, I promise."

The lift stopped, and the pair exited as Darin asked, "Then what has you worried?"

Rory looked up at Darin and said, "I'm not worried, it's just... you'd just have to hear the Clan Short history to understand. When one of us claims someone as a brother it means something to the whole clan."

"Oh, we weren't trying to do anything like that. We were... I guess we were trying to put how we feel about each other into words... to kind of set the ground rules about how we're supposed to act... Does that make any sense?" Darin asked as he stopped by the transporter room door.

"Perfect sense. Come on. We have some people to talk to." Rory said as he led the way into the transporter room.

* * * * *

"What happened? Are you okay?" Rad asked with immediate concern when he saw Darin's black eye.

Darin looked at Rad curiously for a moment, then realized why he was asking, "Oh. It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

Rad walked to stand before Darin and gently reached up to trace the edge of the bruise with his fingertip.

Darin shuddered under the sensation of the gentle touch.

"You should still see a doctor about it, they can give you something for the swelling and the pain." Rad said quietly as he examined the black eye carefully.

Darin looked into Rad's eyes and quietly said, "I will, just as soon as I get back."

Rad reluctantly pulled his hand away and said, "Good, I'd hate to think of you in pain."

"Thanks." Darin whispered.

"Um, excuse me. But we really need to get to the *Enterprise*." Rory said reluctantly, not really wanting to interrupt the tender scene before him.

Rad looked down at Rory, then said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Sure. Let me help you up on the pad."

Darin automatically moved to Rory's other side and helped to lift him up the single step into the transport chamber.

"I'm going to beam you over to the cargo transporter instead of the personnel transporter if that's okay with you. There aren't any steps there." Rad said as he walked back to his console.

"Yeah, thanks. That'll help." Rory said as he prepared himself for transport.

Darin made eye contact with Rad and gave him a small smile just before the transporter energized.

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The cargo transporter operator looked up in surprise when Rory and Darin appeared on his transporter pad.

Rory noticed his expression and said, "It's easier for me to beam in here with the wheelchair."

The transporter technician nodded that he understood, then quickly turned his attention back to his work.

"Come on Darin. We don't have a lot of time." Rory said as he led the way to the turbo lift.

Darin hurried to keep up.

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"Main bridge." Rory said as they got on the lift.

"Who are we going to talk to?" Darin asked cautiously.

"I don't know yet. We'll see who's available." Rory said seriously.

A moment later the doors opened to reveal the main bridge of the *Enterprise*.

Darin looked around in wonder, not able to make himself believe that it was real. Being on the bridge of the *Enterprise* had always been a secret dream of his.

"Captain Kirk, is Commander Dodds or Captain Spock available to talk with me for a few minutes? It's a family matter." Rory asked seriously.

"As far as I know, both of them can spare a few minutes. Uhura, would you call Spock to the conference room?" Captain Kirk asked professionally.

"Yes sir." Uhura answered efficiently.

Chip stood as a lieutenant came over to take his place at the helm.

Darin glanced over at the communications console and was surprised to see a familiar face. One of his classmates from the academy was sitting at the secondary communications console.

"Would you also request that Ambassador Sarek join us if he is available." Rory asked seriously.

Uhura nodded at Rory and gave him a gentle smile.

Rory's serious mood gave way to Uhura's smile and he couldn't help but smile at her in return.

The young Lieutenant at the second communications console was looking at Darin with concern.

Darin noticed, then ducked his head and looked away. He felt a stab of humiliation and loss at the fact that he had just resigned his commission.

"Come on, we don't want to keep them waiting." Rory said firmly.

Darin broke out of his dark thoughts, and followed Rory back to the turbo lift where they were joined by Chip.

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Chip walked with Rory and a young man with a black eye off the turbo lift, then automatically cleared a place for Rory's wheelchair by the conference table.

A moment later Sarek and Spock entered the room and took their seats.

"So what's going on Rory?" Chip asked curiously.

"This is Darin... um, Cooper?" Rory strained to remember, having only heard it once.

Darin nodded.

"He needs to talk to a senior officer to get some advice." Rory said frankly.

Chip nodded, then asked, "I'll be glad to help however I can, but why did you request that father be present?"

"Because Vincent and Darin have claimed each other as brothers. I don't know for sure if that changes anything, but I thought Grandfather Sarek should be here in case it does." Rory said seriously.

Chip nodded that he understood.

"Okay Darin, we're here. The rest is up to you." Rory said and turned his full attention to Darin.

After a long moment of silence, Darin said, "I guess what it boils down to is that someone at the academy thought it would be really funny if some of us were promoted and assigned to jobs that we weren't capable of doing. When Starfleet found out what happened, they ordered all of us to Earth for a Judicial Board of Inquiry so they can decommission us and throw us out, because we didn't earn our rank honestly. Rather than go through all that, I decided to resign my commission. I mean, even though it wasn't my fault, I didn't deserve the promotion so there's no reason that I should try to hold on to my rank."

Chip nodded in thought.

"Logical." Sarek said without inflection.

"Could you explain how you became a brother to my nephew?" Spock asked calmly.

Darin looked at Spock in confusion.

"Vincent." Rory said in clarification.

Darin was surprised by the question, mainly because it seemed so far off topic, but quickly answered, "Vincent and I were assigned to share quarters... no, wait, that's not it. It started when we were welcomed aboard the ship, Vincent was the first one to talk to me like a person. He talked to me and really listened to what I was saying. I guess after that, I started to think of him as a friend and somewhere along the way I began to think of him as my little brother."

"Does Vincent also claim you as a brother?" Ambassador Sarek asked calmly.

"Yes. Just a little while ago after I transported up from the planet, he called me his big brother." Darin said in thought.

Chip looked at Sarek curiously and received a nod.

"Darin, can you tell me how you would like this to work out?" Chip asked seriously.

Darin looked at him blankly for a moment, then said, "I don't know. I guess since I resigned my commission... I'll either go to the new colony or back to Earth."

"No. You're not understanding my question. Ignore the commission and all of that for a minute and just tell me how you would like things to end up when everything else is resolved." Chip said firmly.

Darin thought for a moment, then carefully said, "Well, I think I'd like for things to be like they were before this whole mess about the academy blew up. I mean, I thought I was doing a pretty good job as an Ensign. I was really happy rooming with Vincent, and I love working in Deflector Control with Joe. For twenty-four hours, I was happier than I've been in my entire life."

"Mr. Cooper, may we have your permission to discuss this matter with others, including Starfleet Command and your former commanding officers on the *Yorktown*?" Spock asked seriously.

"Yes. If there's something you can do, that would be great." Darin said with hope.

"We won't know what's possible until we've talked to a few people, but I think we have enough to start with. Would you go down to the officer's lounge and wait while we discuss this?" Chip asked seriously.

"Yes, of course. Thank you for helping me." Darin said quickly as he stood.

"It is logical to aid one's family." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

Darin glanced at Ambassador Sarek with question for a moment, then turned and left the room.

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"Do you mind if I join you?" Someone asked, breaking Darin out of his thoughts.

Darin looked up to see his former classmate from the academy.

"Sure, have a seat." Darin said and offered a small smile.

"You're Darin Cooper aren't you?" The young Lieutenant asked cautiously.

"That's right, and you're Keith Wilson." Darin said carefully.

Keith nodded.

"How are you enjoying your first assignment?" Darin asked quietly.

"Are you kidding? It's the *Enterprise*!" Keith said with a glow of happiness.

Darin smiled and said, "I see what you mean. But I'd be just as happy with the *Yorktown*."

"I heard about what happened with the fake promotion." Keith said quietly.

Darin nodded.

"I'm sorry we never got to know each other back at the academy. I guess we traveled in different circles." Keith said weakly.

Darin chuckled and said, "I guess we did. You hung around with the other straight A students while I was on the fringes trying to find somewhere to fit in."

"Your eye looks pretty bad. Do you want to go to sickbay to have that looked at?" Keith asked as much with concern for Darin as a desire to change the subject.

"No, after the day I've had, it's the least of my worries." Darin said honestly.

"Is there anything I can do?" Keith asked quietly.

"You're doing it. It's good to have someone to talk to while I'm waiting to find out what's going to happen to me." Darin said quietly.

"Commander Dodds asked me to come down and sit with you. He didn't want you to have to wait by yourself." Keith admitted shyly.

Darin looked at Keith with surprise.

"I would have come down and talked to you anyway if I knew you were here, but I was on duty at my comm station." Keith said quickly.

Darin nodded and said, "I'll have to thank Commander Dodds for that. It's good to have someone to talk to."

"Darin, I know Commander Dodds well enough to tell you that he'll do whatever he can to help you." Keith said with assurance.

"So you knew him before you came on the *Enterprise*?" Darin asked with interest.

Keith looked around the room, then whispered, "If I tell you something, can you keep it a secret?"

Darin nodded seriously.

"Commander Dodds is my father." Keith whispered in a barely audible voice.

"Really? It must be great to have a Commander for a father." Darin said in wonder.

Keith shook his head.

"It isn't?" Darin asked cautiously.

"I'm afraid that no matter what I do, I'll always be compared to him and never be able to measure up. Besides that, people will think I have an unfair advantage and that he's helping me with my Starfleet career." Keith said quietly.

Darin thought for a moment, then said, "I guess I can understand that. But I saw how hard you worked at the academy. If anyone deserved to be assigned to the *Enterprise* straight out of the academy, it's you."

"Thanks for saying so. I worked hard to get here. But I'm still afraid that if it gets out that Commander Dodds is my father there will be people who will be sure that I'm here because he arranged things for me." Keith said frankly.

"Thanks for telling me, I won't spread it around." Darin said quietly.

"Dad told me that you're part of the family. So I know I can trust you." Keith said with a small smile.

"I am? How?" Darin asked cautiously.

"He said that Vincent has claimed you as a brother. Vincent is my nephew, so that makes you a part of the family too... it's a Vulcan thing, just go with it." Keith finished with a smile.

Darin shook his head and said, "The Vulcan thing again. So let me see if I got this straight, Commander Dodds sons, your brothers, are members of the Vulcan Clan who adopted Vincent. So that makes all of them like his fathers and you like his uncle."

"Right, and now that you've claimed Vincent as a brother, I'm your uncle too." Keith said with a playful grin.

Darin thought about the statement for a moment, then smiled.

"I think I like the sound of that." Darin said happily.

Keith nodded that he did too.

After a moment of silence, Keith hesitantly asked, "What happened to your eye?"

"Someone hit me." Darin said automatically.

"Come on, I told you my big whopper of a secret. What happened?" Keith asked with concern.

"Okay, but you've got to promise not to tell anyone." Darin said reluctantly.

"I swear. What happened?" Keith said impatiently.

"Well, I was down on the pool deck looking for Vincent and couldn't find him anywhere." Darin said quietly.

"Yeah." Keith said in an urging tone.

"Then I called Deflector Control and found out that Vincent was up there." Darin said, even more slowly.

"And..." Keith prompted.

"And I accidentally stepped on someone's sore foot and they punched me in the eye." Darin said shyly.

"Okay, so what's the big secret?" Keith asked hesitantly.

Darin looked around to see that no one else was listening and whispered, "I think she was about thirteen years old."

Keith fought to control his laughter and whispered, "I'll never tell."

"Thanks." Darin said with a blush.

The sound of Uhura's voice interrupted any further conversation.

"*Lieutenant Wilson, Mr. Cooper, report to conference room one.*"

"I guess it's time to find out what the future holds for me." Darin said with resignation as he stood.

"Whatever it is, I'll be there to help you." Keith said with assurance.

"Thanks Uncle Keith." Darin said with a smile then walked toward the turbo lift.

* * * * *

"I feel really gross." Vincent said as he scratched an itchy spot under his arm.

"You can go up and shower if you want. You're still officially off duty until Dr. Perry clears you as fit for duty." Joe said seriously.

"I'll go when Darin gets back. I want to find out what's wrong." Vincent said with concern.

"Do you have any idea what the problem might be?" Connie asked curiously.

"Yeah. But I'd rather not say in case I'm wrong." Vincent said in deep thought.

"Well, whatever it is, I'm sure it will be fine. He's one of the better people we've had assigned to Deflector Control. He seems to have a natural talent." Susan said carefully.

"I think we're all agreed that whatever his problem is, we'll work together to resolve it." Joe said seriously.

"That's right. Darin is one of us, so we need to act like it." Jimmy said firmly.

Vincent smiled as he looked around the room and saw that everyone was in agreement.

* * * * *

"Are you ready for this?" Rory asked as soon as the transporter beam cleared.

"I guess so... what?" Darin said as he noticed that the entire cargo bay was filled with livestock.

"Try not to step in anything before you go to talk with the Captain." Rory said with a chuckle as he moved his wheelchair off the transporter pad.

"Yeah. That's all I'd need." Darin said as he followed closely behind Rory.

"While you're in talking to the captain, I need to talk to Commander M'Butu." Rory said as they waited for the turbo lift to arrive.

"Why do you need to speak to Commander M'Butu... I mean, if you don't mind me asking." Darin asked quietly.

"I've been asked by our Clan's patriarch to find out why Vincent was hurt. I'm talking to the people who were in charge of Vincent's well being to try and understand their reasons for letting him go into that reactor today." Rory said seriously.

"It's good that your Clan is watching out for Vincent like that. I mean, investigating why it happened instead of giving a knee-jerk reaction and automatically pulling him out of here." Darin said as the lift doors opened.

"Commander M'Butu's office." Rory said to the ceiling of the lift, then glanced at Darin and said, "Thanks for saying that Darin. I was starting to feel like the villain in all this."

Darin chuckled and said, "After what you just did for me, I couldn't think of you as anything but a hero."

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"Commander M'Butu, do you have a few minutes to talk with me?" Rory asked hesitantly from the doorway to Commander M'Butu's office.

"Yes, of course. Please come in." Commander M'Butu said with a friendly smile.

Rory carefully guided his wheelchair in front of Commander M'Butu's desk and thought about what he was going to say.

"I'm Commander Oliver M'Butu." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Oh, excuse me. It's nice to meet you, I'm Rory Teeter of Clan Short of Vulcan." Rory said shyly.

Commander M'Butu stood and leaned across his desk so he could shake Rory's hand.

"Since you're from Clan Short, can I assume that you're here about what happened to Crewman Winters today?" Commander M'Butu asked as he took his seat again.

"Yes. I'm talking to everyone involved in the decision to send him into the reactor to find out why it happened." Rory said seriously.

Commander M'Butu nodded and said, "You don't need to talk to anyone else. It was my decision to ask him to go into the reactor and I accept full responsibility for everything that happened as a result."

Rory looked at Commander M'Butu appraisingly for a moment, and noticed the pain in his eyes.

"I wish there had been another way..." Commander M'Butu added in almost a whisper.

"Will you tell me about it?" Rory asked in a more gentle voice.

"It was like the *Kobiashi Maru* scenario... that is to say, a no win situation. I had hundreds of colonists stranded on a planet being terrorized by killer storms. There was solar radiation so intense that it nearly made our transporters inoperative. Then to top it off, there was a damaged reactor leaking radiation and quickly approaching the critical level. I was searching through every possible solution to the problem, I was even contemplating

vaporizing the reactor from space with the *Yorktown's* phasers when I remembered Vincent." Commander M'Butu said distantly.

"At first I didn't even want to consider it, but... there just wasn't any other way. Even though he came through it safely, the sight of him with red blotchy skin and blisters on his face will haunt me until my dying day." Commander M'Butu said quietly.

"If you had to face the same decision again, would you do the same thing?" Rory asked quietly.

Commander M'Butu sat silently for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"Thank you for talking with me Commander." Rory said carefully.

"He faced death as bravely as anyone I've ever seen." Commander M'Butu said as he looked into Rory's eyes.

Rory nodded at the statement, then asked, "Do you think Vincent should be allowed to stay on the *Yorktown*?"

Commander M'Butu gave an ironic chuckle and said, "I don't know about that, but I can't think of anyplace else in the universe where he'll have so many people who respect and admire him. There are five hundred people on this ship who would fight to defend him with their lives... and that's not including the colonists."

"Thank you Commander." Rory said as he reversed his wheelchair.

"There's going to be a celebration in about ten minutes in the Recreation Hall. If you're about to give Vincent some bad news, could you hold it until after the ceremony? I think he's earned a little happiness after everything he's done." Commander M'Butu said honestly.

Rory nodded, then quietly asked, "May I use your comm to make a call?"

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"Captain, may I speak with you for a moment?" Darin asked from the doorway.

"Yes. Of course Mr. Cooper." Captain Byrne said as he looked up from his desk.

"The Starfleet JAG office has accepted my resignation and confirmed that my part in the incident is closed, so now I'm officially a civilian." Darin said carefully.

"Yes, I had a discussion with Captain Spock and Commander Dodds about the matter. Please continue." Captain Byrne said calmly.

"Sir, as a civilian, I'd like to formally request permission to join the crew of the *Yorktown* as a crewman and be assigned to Deflector Control." Darin said respectfully.

"I will take your request under advisement and get back to you shortly." Captain Byrne said formally.

"Thank you sir." Darin said as he stood a little straighter.

"Are you aware of the celebration that is being planned on both ships?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"No sir. I've been otherwise occupied." Darin said carefully.

"No matter. The *Enterprise* and the *Yorktown* will be having a celebration for the colonists and both crews before we part company. When the celebration begins, the Deflector Control team will be called to the stage. I believe it would be appropriate if you stood with them."

"Thank you sir, I'd like that." Darin said quietly.

"Then shall we go? It won't hurt to be a minute or two early." Captain Byrne asked as he stood.

"Yes sir." Darin said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Can I borrow Vincent for a few minutes?" Rory asked from the doorway.

"As long as you give him back when you're finished." Joe said, only half jokingly.

Vincent reluctantly stood and walked to join Rory at the door.

As the door closed, Joe quietly said, "I guess this is it."

"What do you think he's going to do?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"I don't know. Anyone with a drop of common sense would tell you that a starship is no place for a child... So I guess I'm praying that Rory doesn't have even one drop of common sense because I want Vincent to stay." Joe said quietly.

Connie chuckled as he said, "I never thought there would be a day when I'd pray for a child to be ignorant. But I'm with you Joe."

* * * * *

"Does this mean you've decided?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

Rory nodded.

"Well tell me! I'm about to go nuts!" Vincent exploded in frustration.

Rory chuckled at Vincent's expression and said, "You're cute when you're angry."

Vincent froze at the statement, then began to chuckle.

"That's better." Rory said with a smile, then whispered, "You can stay."

Vincent froze and quietly said, "Can you say that again? I want to be sure I heard it right."

"I said that you can stay. Even though I don't like that they put you in danger, I understand that they risked one life to save hundreds and that every person that I talked to would have taken your place if they could." Rory said seriously.

Vincent giggled as he said, "That's what it means to be in Starfleet. Check around when you get back to the *Enterprise* if you don't believe me. Everyone there would have done the same thing too. It's just what we do."

"I'm beginning to see what you mean." Rory said with a small smile.

Vincent hugged Rory tightly and said, "Thank you, I'll never be able to repay you for this."

Rory chuckled and said, "You don't need to thank me. I only did what was logical. I needed to be sure that this was the best place for you to be... and it is. Oh yeah, and I have a message for you."

"What's that?" Vincent asked as he released Rory from the hug.

"Uncle Chip wanted to know when I made a decision, so I called to tell him and Grandfather Sarek was there." Rory said with a smile.

Vincent fought to be still, nearly vibrating with anticipation.

"Grandfather told me to tell you that your ordeal met the conditions of the *kahs'wan* and your successful completion has already been recorded back on Vulcan." Rory said with a smile, already knowing what was going to happen next.

As expected, Vincent swooped in and pulled Rory into another joyful hug.

"I need to be leaving now, but I bet there's some people through that door who would be very interested to hear your news." Rory said with a smile.

"Don't you want to come in with me? I bet they'll want to thank you too." Vincent asked hopefully.

"That's alright. I really need to be going. Remember to keep in touch." Rory said as he started away.

"I will, and make sure you write to me and tell me how you like Vulcan. I want to hear all about it." Vincent said with excitement.

"I'll do that. Go on, I bet they're worried." Rory said as he continued down the catwalk.

Vincent watched Rory for a moment longer, then hurried back to deflector control.

* * * * *

Vincent stepped through the door and was confronted by everyone's expectant gazes.

He toyed with the idea of teasing them for a second, but when he saw the concern in Joe's eyes, he quietly said, "I can stay."

Everyone gave a cheer of joy at the news, and Joe ran to pull Vincent into a tight hug.

Benny and JonJon couldn't wait for their turns and hugged Joe and Vincent from each side.

Vincent and Joe automatically reached back and pulled Benny and JonJon in to make it a four-way hug.

"Did he tell you why he decided to let you stay here?" Connie asked with a smile at the scene.

"Yeah. He figured out that I'll be safe here." Vincent said happily as he enjoyed the four-way hug.

"What happened? Did I miss something?" Rad asked as he walked into the room.

"Vincent gets to stay." Joe said happily.

"Good. I'd hate to think I went through all that trouble to pull him out of the transporter just to have someone come along and take him away from us." Rad said with a teasing smile.

"Come over here, there's room for one more." Vincent said as he opened the hug to include Rad.

"Wait, what time is it?" Joe asked as he looked at the nearest terminal.

"Just a few minutes before 18:00, why?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Because Lou and Judy should be here..." Joe said when the door opened.

"...now." He finished with a smile.

* * * * *

"Where are we going?" Vincent asked in confusion as everyone in Deflector Control except Lou and Judy funneled out of the room.

"To the turbo lift." Joe said seriously.

Vincent glanced up at Joe with aggravation.

Joe smiled at the expression, but said nothing more.

"Recreation Deck." Connie said when the last of the group were finally on the lift.

"Do you know what's going on?" Vincent asked Benny in a whisper.

Benny shook his head.

Vincent glanced at JonJon and received another negative response.

"You're just too curious for your own good." Joe said with a chuckle.

"I bet you'd say the same thing to the cattle in the chute being led into the slaughterhouse." Vincent said firmly.

Joe chuckled at the statement and said, "I promise that we won't be going anywhere near a slaughterhouse."

The doors opened to reveal the entire recreation deck of the *Yorktown* packed with people.

"Right over here." Joe said and led his group to the stage at the front of the room.

Vincent noticed that there was a large view screen over the stage, and what appeared to be the *Enterprise's* rec hall was showing on it, and it was just as crowded with people.

When Vincent realized that they were going up on the stage he slowed down and said, "No. I'm not going to get up in front of people. I haven't even had a chance to shower today."

"Neither has anyone else. Now come on." Joe said insistently.

"No. I was just doing my job. I don't want this." Vincent said firmly as he planted his feet and refused to walk any further.

Joe glanced around at the rest of the Deflector Control crew, then knelt before Vincent to look him in the eyes.

"You did something very brave and special today. It's important for the colonists to be able to express their appreciation so they can focus on what's ahead of them rather than what they've lost. All you need to do is get up there and smile for a few minutes while we say nice things about you. After that you can be as timid and anti-social as you want and I won't say a single word about it. Vincent, it comes with the job. Sometimes you have to do things like this." Joe said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Okay. I guess I'll do it... But you should have told me first so I could get cleaned up. I feel nasty." Vincent said darkly.

Joe smiled and gave Vincent a quick hug as he said, "I didn't want to take the chance of spoiling the surprise."

Reluctantly, Vincent walked with the Deflector Control crew, Rad, Benny and JonJon onto the stage.

Vincent was happy to see that Darin was there too, he had been worried when Darin didn't return to Deflector Control after his meeting with the Captain.

"Everyone, may I have your attention." Captain Byrne called out to the crowded room as he stood behind a podium.

"It has been a tradition on the *Yorktown* for many years to have a mixer whenever the *Yorktown* leaves Earth to welcome the new members to the crew. This mixer will be unique by the fact that we will be able to include the members of the Kimber colony and the crew of the *Enterprise* in our celebration."

"It is also our tradition to grant promotions only when we are in dock so that the families of those being promoted may witness the ceremony. But I feel that it is appropriate to break with that tradition this once so all of you can be a part of this. Crewman Winters, please step forward." Captain Byrne said in a booming voice.

Vincent forced himself to take a single step forward on shaking legs.

"Cyril, I believe you had something to say?" Captain Byrne said, then stepped away from the podium.

Cyril walked forward and said, "Vincent, on behalf of the entire Kimber colony, I'd like to express our heartfelt appreciation for saving so many lives at the risk of your own. When we reach the new colony, you will be listed as our first citizen and you will always have a home with us."

A round of applause spread over the room, and Vincent could hear an equal amount of applause over the speakers, coming from the colonists aboard the *Enterprise*.

When the applause died down, Cyril turned to look at Vincent and said, "Thank you Vincent."

Vincent shyly nodded.

When Cyril had stepped away from the microphone, Captain Byrne stepped forward and said, "Commander Dodds, I believe you had something to say?"

Chip walked to the podium and said, "I was the one who had the honor of sponsoring Vincent in the mentoring program. I just wanted to come up here and say that I'm very proud of you Vincent, and if Captain Byrne ever gives you any trouble, we'll have a place for you on the *Enterprise*."

Captain Byrne gave Chip a severe look, but he couldn't maintain it for very long and broke into a smile.

"Now Crewman Winters, after careful consideration of your contribution to the well being of the Kimber colony, I have come to the following decision. In recognition of your heroic act of shutting down the damaged reactor, I am honored to grant you a field promotion to enlisted rank 2, Able Seaman." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Applause began to swell, but Captain Byrne raised his hands to quiet everyone.

After a moment for the crowd to settle, Captain Byrne said, "In recognition of your part in detecting a plot that threatened the safety of ships and star bases throughout the Federation as well as your part in saving a crewman's life in Engineering, I am further advancing your rank to that of enlisted rank 3, Petty Officer 2nd class. Step forward Petty Officer Winters and receive your rank insignia."

Vincent took another step forward and lifted his arm to allow Captain Byrne to attach the octagonal pin to the forearm of his uniform.

Applause swelled out of control on both ships as Vincent stood, not knowing what he was supposed to do next.

After a full minute of clapping, the sound started to die down.

"Thank you Crewman Winters. Crewman Walker, please step forward." Captain Byrne said and turned to see her surprised expression.

Susan hesitantly stepped forward, not having a clue as to why she was being singled out.

"Crewman Susan Walker, it has been brought to my attention that Crewman Winters would not have been able to achieve the things he did without your instruction and encouragement. So in recognition of your demonstration of leadership and training skills I am honored to grant you a field promotion to enlisted rank 4, Petty Officer 1st class. Please step forward Petty Officer Walker and receive your new rank insignia." Captain Byrne said with a smile at her shocked expression.

Susan stepped forward and watched as Captain Byrne removed her plain octagonal rank insignia and replaced it with an octagon with four braided sides.

After a moment of applause, Captain Byrne said, "Thank you Crewman Walker, and now to one final matter. Mr. Cooper, please step forward."

Darin hesitantly walked to stand before the captain.

"Due to a series of actions that were committed without Mr. Cooper's knowledge or consent, he was assigned to the *Yorktown* and promoted to the rank of Ensign for fraudulent reasons. When the facts came to light, Mr. Cooper resigned the rank that he had mistakenly received and expressed a desire to be allowed to remain on the *Yorktown* as a member of the crew. While investigating the matter, some interesting facts came to my attention. So without further adieu, Mr. Cooper, in recognition of the ingenuity you displayed in your creation of the 'Cooper Bridge' that saved many hundreds of lives today, I am honored to welcome you as a member of my crew. Further, in recognition of the display of leadership that you demonstrated in an incident involving Crewman Hartman and Crewman Tidwell in Engineering earlier today, I am restoring you to the rank of Ensign. A rank which I feel that you truly deserve. Please step forward Ensign Cooper and receive your rank insignia."

Darin took another step forward and watched as the captain pinned the triangular rank insignia on his uniform.

Applause rose up through both ships.

"Everyone, thank you for your attention. Please enjoy the celebration." Captain Byrne said happily.

A swell of cheering and applause rose up as music started playing.

* * * * *

Vincent stood in silence as he looked down at the rank insignia on his forearm.

"Petty Officer Winters. That sounds pretty cool." Benny said with a smile.

Vincent looked at Benny blankly, completely overwhelmed by what had just happened.

"That means he's the same rank as me now. Way to go Vincent." Jimmy said cheerfully.

Vincent looked at Jimmy with question, then a huge smile broke out on his face.

"Come on, lets get some food before all the good stuff is gone." JonJon said as he petted Fizgig in his arms.

"You go on. I want to talk to Daddy Joe for a minute." Vincent said absently.

Benny and JonJon hurried down off the stage and to the food tables where a wide variety of snack foods were laid out for everyone to enjoy.

"How are you doing Vincent?" Joe asked with a smile.

"It's... I can't believe it." Vincent said in wonder.

"Don't try. Just enjoy it. The reality will set in later." Joe said with a proud smile.

"I've never been this happy. I just wish my momma could have been here to see this." Vincent said quietly.

Joe pulled him into a gentle hug and said, "I know for a fact that your mother is watching out for you and is very proud of everything that you've achieved."

Vincent snuggled into the warm hug and decided not to question what Joe was saying. Joe had never lied to him about anything, so just this once he would accept that Joe knew what he was talking about and believe that his mother was here to see the proudest moment of his life.

Chapter 12

Vincent stared vacantly at the crowd as people milled around and were generally having a good time.

"You did that." Joe whispered as he hugged Vincent from behind.

"So did you." Vincent said as he craned his neck to look up at Joe.

"And so did everyone else on the *Yorktown*. This is why we're out here." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent nodded and turned his attention back to the crowd.

"Congratulations Vincent. I've never met anyone who scored two promotions at once like that." Brock said as he approached the pair on the stage.

"I didn't have any idea that I was going to get promoted at all. I've only been on board for one day." Vincent said with a smile.

Brock chuckled and said, "You keep this up and you'll be commanding the ship by the time we get to the new colony."

Vincent laughed at the idea and said, "I don't think I'll be ready for another promotion for a while. This one kind of wore me out."

"Well, if you're not too tired, some of us guys are going to have a poker game later tonight in the supply room. You guys would be welcomed to join us if you like." Brock said as he glanced at Joe.

"That sounds like fun, but I don't think so. I still have to go to sickbay and get checked out so I can work in the morning." Vincent said in a quieter voice.

"That's fine. We'll probably be having a poker game every night and you'll always be welcomed." Brock said happily.

"Would you mind if I bring some friends with me?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No problem. If they're your friends, I'm sure they'll fit in." Brock said with a smile.

"Okay, it sounds like fun. Maybe later this week." Vincent said happily.

"Like I said, you'll always be welcomed." Brock said, then noticed that Randy and Gary were trying to get his attention.

"Gotta go. The guys need me for something." Brock said quickly.

"Have fun." Vincent said with a warm smile and watched him go.

"I was afraid you would have problems making friends because of the age difference." Joe said seriously.

"I've already got more friends here than I ever had back on Earth." Vincent said honestly.

* * * * *

"Vincent, there's someone I'd like you to meet, you too Joe." Chip said with a grand smile and motioned for them to follow.

Vincent and Joe shared a glance at each other, then followed Chip off the stage and down into the crowd.

"He's right over here." Chip said loudly to be heard over the happily chattering people.

A moment later, they emerged from the crowd, about half-way down the length of the rec-hall.

"Vincent and Joe, I'd like you to meet a good friend of mine, this is Ellery." Chip said with a grand smile.

"Uncle Chip, please don't call me that. Everyone here calls me Channing." He said in a pained voice.

Joe and Vincent chuckled at Channing's embarrassed expression.

"Sorry Peanut, I wasn't trying to embarrass you." Chip said quietly.

"Oh God! Go ahead and call me Ellery if you want. Just don't get everyone started calling me... that." Channing said quickly.

"Don't worry, no one gets to call you 'that' but me." Chip said quietly, then turned to face Joe and Vincent again and said, "Vincent and Joe, I'd like for you to meet Channing."

"We met yesterday." Vincent said, trying to restrain his laughter.

"Yeah, when Vincent saved my life." Channing said hesitantly.

"He did? This is the first I'm hearing of it. And just what were you doing to cause your life to need saving?" Chip asked in a fatherly tone.

"I... um, I was testing a control circuit to see if it was good...." Channing said quietly.

Chip raised an eyebrow and waited for Channing to continue.

"And I guess I forgot to test to see that everything was powered down before I started digging around in there." Channing said in almost a whisper.

Chip shook his head in disappointment, then pulled Channing into a hug and said, "You've got to be more careful Peanut. You're very special to me and I don't want to see you hurt."

"I'll be careful. Everything was just so crazy yesterday with everyone from all shifts called to duty that I kind of got caught up in it." Channing said in a small voice.

"Do you remember what you're supposed to do when things get crazy like that?" Chip asked in a leading tone.

"Stop. Breathe. Center." Channing said quietly.

"Good. Then that's all I'm going to say about it... I won't even mention it to your grandmother. I'm glad you came through it safely." Chip said as he hugged Channing again.

"Only because Vincent was there. Dr. Perry said that if Vincent hadn't called for the med-team right away and told them what was wrong with me, I probably would have died. In fact, she said that I was technically dead for almost two minutes before they got to me and that if they'd been a few seconds later, they wouldn't have been able to bring me back." Channing said seriously.

"Are you sure you wouldn't be happier on the *Enterprise* where I can keep an eye on you?" Chip asked with concern.

"No thanks Uncle Chip. I just made a stupid mistake and I won't let it happen again." Channing said firmly.

"Besides, I'll be here to take care of him." Vincent said with an impish grin.

"Then I know he'll be safe." Chip said with a big smile.

Vincent noticed something in Channing's expression and quietly asked, "Are you feeling okay? You look like you're getting tired."

"I'm alright. But I should probably find a place to sit down." Channing said seriously at Vincent's concern.

"Why don't you come to sickbay with me? I'm going to see if Dr. Perry will release me for duty tomorrow, I think maybe she should look at you too. You shouldn't be getting tired so fast." Vincent said in a worried tone.

"I'll be fine. I just need to sit down for a while." Channing said insistently.

"Crewman Channing, report to sickbay. That's an order." Chip said firmly.

Channing looked into Chip's eyes, looking for something to tell him that Chip wasn't serious, finally Channing reluctantly said, "Yes sir."

"Daddy Joe, will you tell Benny and JonJon where I went?" Vincent asked quickly.

"I'll tell them." Joe said with a smile, then watched as Vincent walked away with Channing at his side.

"I worry about him." Chip said as he watched the pair walk away.

"Which one?" Joe asked quietly.

Chip looked at Joe consideringly for a moment, then said, "Good question. I suppose I have enough worry for two."

Joe smiled and nodded his agreement.

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"Sickbay." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Channing and said, "It sounds like you've known Commander Dodds for a long time."

"Yeah. Since I was a kid. He's friends with my family." Channing said quietly.

"He's really nice. I just met him Wednesday, but he's helped me a lot." Vincent said cheerfully.

"I just don't want him to be disappointed in me, I kind of look at him like a father." Channing said quietly.

The doors of the turbo lift opened and Vincent led the way out.

"He *is* proud of you. If he wasn't, he wouldn't have wanted me and Daddy Joe to meet you." Vincent said simply.

Channing thought about the words as they walked into the sickbay.

"Oh, I see you came back. Five minutes later and you would have missed me." Dr. Perry said as she walked around the room checking on her patients.

"You're black." Vincent said in astonishment.

Dr. Perry looked at Vincent with surprise.

"I'm sorry Dr. Perry. I shouldn't have said that." Vincent stammered, then quickly said, "Channing and I just came to get checked out and see if we're fit for duty."

Dr. Perry walked to Vincent's side and said, "That's okay Vincent." Then she leaned in to whisper, "Black isn't a bad word."

Vincent giggled and said, "Okay. I was just surprised because I was blind when I met you. I guess I thought you looked... um... different."

Dr. Perry smiled and said, "Come over here and lay down, then tell me what you thought I looked like. You too, come on."

Vincent and Channing went to the beds and laid down.

"Well, I kind of imagined that you looked like Dr. Chapel from the *Enterprise*, except with red hair like my Grandma Mona's." Vincent said as she scanned him with the tricorder.

"Oh, well Christine is a very beautiful woman, so I'm not at all bothered if you thought I looked like her." Dr. Perry said as she looked at the readings.

"Yeah, and she's really nice too. She's one of the doctors that helped get rid of the scabby skin." Vincent said as he watched her expression carefully.

"You know, when I found out that they were bringing a nine year old boy on the ship as a crewman, I thought it had to be a joke." Dr. Perry said as she scanned Vincent again.

"No joke. Here I am." Vincent said simply.

Dr. Perry shook her head and said, "I don't like what I'm seeing here."

"What is it? Is something wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Maybe. It might just be a side effect of your transporter incident and all the other excitement you've had today. I'm going to declare you fit for duty on the provision that you come back next week so I can check you again." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Is there something wrong with me?" Vincent asked slowly.

Dr. Perry smiled and said, "Ask me again next week and I'll have an answer for you."

Vincent sat up and nodded.

"And now for you Crewman Channing..." Dr. Perry said and started to scan him.

She made a few 'tsk tsk' sounds as she shook her head.

"You've pushed yourself too hard and now you're paying the price. Have you been assigned quarters?" Dr. Perry asked quietly.

"Some of us are going to be bunking in the observation lounge on Deck J in the Dorsal section." Channing said hesitantly.

"As lovely as that sounds, I'm afraid that at least for the next three days you are going to be confined to bed rest, and for that you will need a bed, not a sleeping bag." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"But..." Channing began to say.

"The other choice is for you to stay here for the next three days." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Yes Doctor." Channing said reluctantly.

"Good, give me a second." Dr. Perry said, then walked into her office.

"I'm sorry you're not going to get to go with everyone else. I didn't mean to cause you trouble. I was just afraid if you stayed up too long you might make yourself sicker." Vincent said with concern.

Channing saw the remorse in Vincent's eyes and gave him a gentle smile.

"Thanks for looking out for me Vincent. I'm a little disappointed because I won't be able to go with the guys, but you're right, I've got to do what's best so I can get well." Channing said reluctantly.

"Me and JonJon and Benny will make sure you don't get too bored while you're stuck in bed." Vincent said seriously.

Channing smiled and said, "It sounds like it's going to be an interesting three days."

"Well Crewman Channing, it appears you will be able to sleep in your observation lounge after all." Dr. Perry said as she walked back into the room.

Channing smiled at the statement.

"I contacted security, since they have been assigning quarters, and have been informed that there are no more quarters available. So it seems that your choices are to stay here or for us to set up a cot in your observation lounge." Dr. Perry said frankly.

"I'll take the lounge." Channing said with a smile.

"I thought you might. I've already asked that a cot be delivered to the observation lounge for you." Dr. Perry said with a wisp of a grin.

"Now here are my instructions for you for the next three days. Rest. Relax. Stay in bed. I can make arrangements to have your meals delivered to you if you would like." Dr. Perry finished carefully.

"Benny and JonJon could take care of that if you want. I bet they'd like to be able to do something to help out." Vincent said quickly.

"Very well. Someone will stop in to check on you from time to time, and if I find out that you're not following my instructions, I'll confine you to sickbay and order complete bed rest. And let me warn you, I have the coldest bedpans in all of Starfleet." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"I'll follow your instructions, I promise." Channing said quietly.

Dr. Perry nodded and said, "Good. Then I'll see you again in three days."

Channing nodded, then got up to leave.

"Crewman Winters." Ensign T'Lani said as Vincent stood at Channing's side.

"Yes?" Vincent said as he turned.

"You must contact Ambassador Sarek before the *Enterprise* departs." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"Oh, okay. Thank you Ensign T'Lani." Vincent said with a smile.

Ensign T'Lani gave a single nod, then returned to her duties.

"I can call him from the observation lounge." Vincent said as he walked with Channing out of Sickbay.

"You don't have to bother with me, I can get there by myself." Channing said seriously.

"I don't mind, besides, I want to see where you'll be staying." Vincent said with a smile.

"It's nice. It's one of my favorite places on the ship because most people forget it's there." Channing said as they entered the lift, then he said, "Deck J, Dorsal."

"Yeah, I guess most people think of Deck J being one of the lower decks of the saucer and they forget that there's another Deck J that's part of the dorsal that connects the saucer to the drive section." Vincent said seriously.

"Wow, you really know the layout." Channing said with a smile.

"I've been studying the deck plans for years, but this is the first time I'm actually going to see it." Vincent said with excitement.

The turbo lift doors opened to reveal a small room.

"It's over here." Channing said and led Vincent into the Observation Lounge.

"Hi Neil. How are you doing?" Channing asked happily when he saw the security officer setting up a cot.

"I'm doing great. I'm going off shift just as soon as I get this thing set up." Neil said as he unfolded the cot.

"How do you like my place?" Channing asked as he made a sweeping gesture to indicate the whole room.

"Nice. Great view. I'm going to be bunking in a cargo hold... at least it's not the one with the farm animals." Neil quickly added.

Channing chuckled and said, "I'm glad to hear it. Well, if you have trouble sleeping in your cargo hold, just come up here. As far as I know there are only three of us assigned to this observation lounge."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind. But I'm so tired right now that I think I could fall asleep standing up." Neil said honestly.

"I thought we were all going to have to do that from the way it was looking on the pool deck." Channing said frankly.

"You and me both. I'm glad it all worked out... Hey, aren't you Crewman Winters?" Neil asked suddenly.

"Yeah. We met down on the pool deck." Vincent said shyly.

"Congratulations on the promotion. I heard about the stuff you did today. Way to go." Neil said with a friendly smile.

"Thanks." Vincent said shyly.

"Well, I've got to get going. Have a good night Channing. You look like you could use some rest." Neil said casually.

"Yeah, you too. And remember what I said, we've got an open spot here if you need a place." Channing said with a smile.

"I'll remember." Neil said, then left the room.

A moment of silence fell over the room as Channing and Vincent looked out at the stars.

"It's really pretty." Vincent whispered.

"Yeah. Just wait till you see it while we're moving." Channing said distantly.

Vincent shook himself out of his wandering thoughts and said, "I need to call Grandfather Sarek."

"The comm's right over there." Channing said and pointed.

Vincent walked to the comm panel and pressed the main communications button.

"*Communications*." The voice answered professionally.

"Can you open a diplomatic channel to Ambassador Sarek on the *Enterprise*?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"*Just a moment*." The communications worker said quickly.

Vincent looked over and saw that Channing was laying out his sleeping bag on the cot.

"*This is Ambassador Sarek*."

"Grandfather Sarek, I was told that you needed me to call you before the *Enterprise* left." Vincent said seriously.

There was a moment of silence, then Ambassador Sarek said, "*I made no such request*."

"Ensign T'Lani said that I needed to contact you." Vincent said in confusion.

"*T'Lani of the house of Sukaan?*" Ambassador Sarek asked cautiously.

"Yes, the daughter of Sufaal." Vincent said quickly.

"*I see. I was not going to discuss this matter with you until I had time to consider all the implications.*" Ambassador Sarek said carefully.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"*It is simply a Vulcan tradition that the people of Earth tend to think of as... unrealistic.*" Ambassador Sarek said in a measured tone.

"Will you tell me?" Vincent asked quietly.

"*Within one hour of officially recording your successful completion of the kahs'wan, I was contacted by T'Seela, the matriarch of the house of Sukaan about the possibility of arranging a marriage.*" Ambassador Sarek said simply.

"A marriage... to me?" Vincent finished with a squeak.

"*Correct*." Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"Wait. I think I remember this... you and T'Seela would figure out if this marriage was a logical pairing and if you both agree that it is, then... I'm married... I mean, just like that... but then later, like when I'm something like twenty one, we would have the official ceremony and that's when we would start living together... right?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"*Correct. That is the tradition. But Humans use criteria other than logic to determine the suitability of a prospective mate. Therefore, it would be illogical to arrange a marriage in the traditional manner.*" Sarek said thoughtfully.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then asked, "What if the Human really liked the Vulcan, then would it be logical?"

There was a long moment of silence, then Ambassador Sarek said, "*Possibly.*"

"Is it okay if I know who T'Seela wants me to marry?" Vincent asked carefully.

"*It is permitted.*" Ambassador Sarek said slowly.

"Is it Ensign T'Lani?" Vincent asked, even more quietly.

"*That is correct.*" Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Grandfather. I like Ensign T'Lani, she's smart and pretty and she's been really nice to me. If you figure out that our pairing is logical, I would really like to do this."

"*You must understand that Vulcans do not have divorce. Our marriages continue until death.*" Ambassador Sarek said slowly.

"Grandfather, I saw how my parents lived in a Human marriage. At dinner tonight I saw how you and Grandma Amanda live in a Vulcan marriage. If that's what a logical pairing of a Vulcan and Human is like, then I want what you have." Vincent said seriously.

"*Vincent, you honor the house of Surak and the traditions of Vulcan by doing this. I will contact T'Seela and begin the discussion of the logic of the proposed union. I will contact you when we have reached consensus.*" Ambassador Sarek said peacefully.

"I'll be waiting for the call. Live long and prosper, Grandfather." Vincent said with a smile.

"*Peace and long life, Grandson.*" Sarek responded calmly.

Vincent turned off the comm, then turned to find Channing fast asleep.

Quietly, Vincent left the observation lounge deep in thought.

* * * * *

"Where's Vincent?" Benny asked as he and JonJon ran to Joe's side.

"He went to the Sickbay to see if he's allowed to return to duty." Joe said with a smile at the boys.

"Is he coming back here when he's done?" Benny asked seriously.

"I don't know, he didn't say." Joe said frankly.

"Maybe you can help us. Fizgig is starting to squirm around a lot and JonJon thinks that maybe he needs to... um... you know... use the bathroom." Benny said reluctantly.

"Oh, I guess we'd better find a way to deal with that. Is Fizgig paper trained?" Joe asked carefully.

"Yeah. We were just starting to try and get him to go outside when the storms started up. Dad decided to wait until after the storms stopped before we tried again." JonJon said and a note of sadness crept into his voice.

"Then why don't we go to the quartermaster's office for a few supplies? Then we can take Fizgig down to Deflector Control and fix a place for him to do his business." Joe said with a smile.

"Thank you Daddy Joe... Um, I mean Lieutenant Bowers." JonJon corrected shyly.

"You had it right the first time." Joe said with a smile and gestured toward the nearest turbo lift.

* * * * *

Vincent was still lost in thought when he walked into Deflector Control.

"Congratulations Vincent. We saw the whole thing on the monitor." Lou said with a big smile and pointed at the screen which was still showing the celebration in the rec-hall.

"Thanks." Vincent said happily and walked over to her to show off his new rank insignia‡.

"Come over here and look at this Judy." Lou said with delight.

"Oh, look at that, now we're a matched set." Judy said as she held out her forearm to display her identical rank insignia.

"Cool!" Vincent said with a smile.

"What are you doing here? I thought you'd be enjoying the party." Lou asked curiously.

"I'm waiting on a call from my Grandfather, and besides, I'm really tired and I'd like to sit somewhere quiet for a little bit." Vincent said shyly.

"I can certainly understand that. If you'll log in on one of the auxiliary stations, your message will be routed to you automatically." Lou said casually.

"Oh, thanks Lou. I didn't know that." Vincent said happily and hurried to auxiliary station two.

Lou and Judy went back to their work, both wearing smiles at Vincent's obvious happiness.

After a long silence in the room, Vincent curiously asked, "What's a bar mitzvah?"

Lou and Judy looked at each other with surprise at the unusual question, but Judy finally answered, "It's a Jewish ceremony that celebrates a boy becoming a man. I don't really know too much about it."

Vincent nodded and said, "Thanks, that's what I needed to know... what does 'Mazal Tov' mean?"

"I think it's Yiddish or Hebrew. It means congratulations... what are you reading?" Lou asked curiously.

Vincent smiled and said, "There's this place back on Earth that my Clan set up called 'Camp Little Eagle'. The whole place is filled with other guys like me who've been adopted by the Clan. A guy named Uri sent me an electronic Bar Mizvah card and I didn't know what those words meant. Now I understand."

"A whole camp of kids like you?" Lou asked hesitantly.

Vincent nodded and said, "Yeah. They're all my brothers."

Lou looked at Judy and absently said, "They could change the universe."

Judy nodded her agreement.

As Vincent opened the next message, another window opened to signal an incoming video transmission.

Vincent accepted the transmission and smiled when he saw who it was.

"Hi Grandma Amanda." Vincent said happily.

"*Hello Vincent. Sarek tells me that you've decided to accept a traditional Vulcan arranged marriage*." Amanda said seriously.

"Yeah, I did." Vincent said shyly.

"*Vincent, this is a very serious step that will effect the rest of your life. You should consider it carefully.*" Amanda said with concern.

"I know it is Grandma, but I think I really need to do this." Vincent said in a considering tone.

"*How do you mean?*" Amanda asked carefully.

"I don't want to grow up to be like my momma and my dad were. I'm afraid that when I get old enough to want to start dating and stuff that, I'll make a big mess like they did and end up married to someone I don't really like. I'd probably be really unhappy and maybe even end up hurting my kids. If Grandfather Sarek says that it would be logical for me and T'Lani to be married, then maybe we can be happy. She's really smart and nice and pretty and she's already helped me a lot by helping me to look at stuff logically. I think I need someone to help me do that because I don't always remember to." Vincent said in deep thought.

"*And what would you do for her?*" Amanda asked carefully.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I'd try to do the stuff to make her proud of me so she'd be proud to be my wife. I'd try to help her do the stuff she wants to do so she can be proud of herself and I can be proud to be her husband. And I think that I would love her... I think maybe I do a little bit already."

There was a long minute of silence as Amanda considered the statement.

"Do you think I'm making a mistake?" Vincent asked quietly.

Amanda smiled gently and shook her head.

"*No Vincent, I think you've made one of the most important decisions that anyone can make. I know that Sarek is pleased that one of his grandchildren is following the traditional ways and allowing him to perform one of the most sacred duties the leader of a Vulcan family can perform*." Amanda said peacefully.

"It's kinda scary, but it feels good too... It's like, I feel like I'll never have to be alone again. Daddy Joe and the Clan and my friends will be there too, but... I don't know, T'Lani and I will be... beside each other, walking on the same path, going the same place. I won't be just me, I'll be part of us too... I'm sorry if I'm messing this all up. I'm not good at talking about feelings and junk like that." Vincent finished in frustration.

"*No, my grandson, you're doing just fine. I think your vision of the future is beautiful. I've known peace and fulfillment for many years walking the path beside your grandfather and it is my wish for you to enjoy the same with your wife*." Amanda said gently.

"Thank you Grandma Amanda." Vincent said quietly.

"*I'm going to go now. I need to talk to your Grandfather to give him my 'Human' perspective about your marriage*." Amanda said with a warm smile.

"Bye Grandma. I love you." Vincent said gently.

"I love you too, my grandson. Peace and long life." Amanda said peacefully, then ended the transmission.

* * * * *

"Let's hurry up guys, I think he's about to blow." Joe said as he rushed into Deflector Control with an armload of supplies.

Benny and JonJon came in next and quickly followed Joe into the supply room.

Vincent noticed movement and saw Lou silently summoning him to come to her.

Quickly, Vincent crossed the room and waited expectantly.

In a whisper, Lou asked, "Did I just hear you right? Are you getting married?"

Vincent looked from Lou to Judy, then nodded cautiously.

"You haven't told Joe about this yet, have you?" Lou asked carefully.

Vincent shook his head slowly.

"Tell him. Now." Lou said firmly.

"But he's probably going to say that I'm too young or something like that and I don't want to fight with him." Vincent said in a small voice.

"If you tell him now, he may be a little bit upset. But if you tell him after it's all over and you left him completely out of it, he'll be hurt forever. Tell him." Lou said seriously.

Vincent nodded and hurried toward the storage area.

As he reached the edge of the partition, Vincent turned and said, "Thanks Lou."

Lou smiled and nodded, then made a quick shooing motion.

* * * * *

"Daddy Joe, I need to talk to you." Vincent said as he walked around the partition.

"Oh, um, yeah. JonJon, will you make sure Fizgig doesn't... miss it, or overflow it or anything." Joe said as he watched the dog inspecting the improvised litter box.

JonJon nodded at Joe, then turned his full attention back to Fizgig.

"Come on." Vincent said urgently.

"I'm coming." Joe said hesitantly, becoming concerned.

Vincent led him out the door into the hallway outside Deflector Control.

Joe's concern turned to full worry when he saw the tension in Vincent's expression.

"Um, Daddy Joe, I need to tell you something and I, um, don't know what you're going to think about it." Vincent said reluctantly.

Joe took a step forward and pulled Vincent into a firm hug.

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it will be just fine. Go ahead and tell me." Joe said soothingly.

"I... um. Okay, I don't know if you know this, but I kind of asked Grandfather Sarek if he could count the stuff I did down on the planet today as my *kahs'wan*." Vincent said carefully.

"I don't know what that is." Joe said hesitantly.

"It just means that because I did something really scary and didn't run away like a little kid, that by Vulcan law I am considered an adult." Vincent said seriously.

"Oh, I remember reading about that at the academy. So did he accept it?" Joe asked curiously.

Vincent nodded.

"Oh Vincent, that's nothing to be worried about. That's great!" Joe said as he hugged Vincent happily.

"That's not it." Vincent said slowly.

"Oh... Go ahead." Joe said and released Vincent from the hug.

"Well, when Grandfather recorded that I was an adult, the head of another family asked him if they could arrange a marriage for me." Vincent said quietly.

"You've got to be kidding. You're nine!" Joe said abruptly.

"Vulcan families usually arrange marriages for their kids. Some of them younger than me." Vincent said quietly.

"Ambassador Sarek didn't do it did he? I mean, I'm sure he's realized that you're Human and that you wouldn't want a marriage arranged for you like that... You should call Cory and tell him. He can explain it..." Joe said quickly.

"I told Grandfather that I want to do it." Vincent said, and a small tremble of fear could be heard in his voice.

Joe froze for an instant and stared at Vincent in disbelief.

"Daddy Joe, this is like the *kahs'wan*. It's something I needed to do by myself. If I asked you or anyone else about it you might have talked me out of it and then I'd blame you. Or if you tried to talk me out of it and then I did it anyway, then you'd be mad and maybe even yell at me and stuff... I'm sorry if this makes you mad at me. I really didn't want that." Vincent said as tears welled up in his eyes.

Joe looked into Vincent's worried eyes and said, "When I married your mother, I did it without my parents' approval. When I finally told them what I'd done, they were very angry with me and said things that made me feel like an irresponsible child. I love you Vincent and I think I understand why you felt that you had to do this on your own."

"Even though I passed my *kahs'wan*, you're still my Daddy Joe and I still need you." Vincent said seriously.

Joe gave an ironic chuckle and pulled Vincent into a gentle hug as he said, "Oh Vincent, what am I going to do with you?"

"Love me and hug me a lot?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"It was a rhetorical question, but... yeah. That's what I'm going to do with you." Joe said with contentment.

"I need to get back inside, Grandfather will be calling me soon to let me know if I'm married or not." Vincent said quietly.

"Do you really want to do this?" Joe asked with concern.

"Yeah Daddy Joe. I really do." Vincent said seriously.

"Then I'm happy for you." Joe said peacefully.

Vincent leapt on Joe and hugged him as tight as possible as he said, "Thank you Daddy Joe. I was so scared that you'd be mad at me for doing something grown up without talking to you about it first."

"Will you try to do something for me?" Joe asked quietly.

"Sure, anything you want." Vincent said, bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"So far today you've gotten two promotions, saved hundreds of lives, been declared an adult and now you're waiting to find out if you're married. Do you think you could tone it down a notch or two? I don't think I could handle every day being like this." Joe said with a hint of desperation in his voice.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Okay Daddy Joe, I promise that I won't do anything else for a while... if I can help it."

"Close enough." Joe said, then put a casual arm around Vincent's shoulder and guided him back to the Deflector Control room door.

* * * * *

As the pair walked into Deflector Control, Vincent abruptly stopped.

"Is something wrong?" Joe asked with concern.

"I just thought of something that I need to do right now." Vincent said seriously.

"Then I guess you'd better go and do it. I have a feeling that time is running out." Joe said quietly.

Vincent nodded and rushed out the door.

Judy walked to Joe's side and said, "I think he knows what he's doing."

"How can he? He's only nine." Joe said as he turned slowly to look at her.

"I have the feeling that Vincent can see things more clearly than a lot of adults. His perception of the world isn't clouded by hormones and obligations and all the other things that cause the rest of us to make stupid mistakes. I think he has a decent chance of making it work." Judy said speculatively.

Joe thought about the words for a moment, then said, "I suppose you're right. I just want to protect him from what's going to happen if it doesn't turn out the way he expects."

"You and every other parent in the universe since the beginning of time." Judy said frankly.

"Thanks for putting it into perspective for me Judy. I guess I'll have to trust him and hope for the best." Joe said quietly.

"We'll all be hoping right along with you." Judy said gently, then walked to station one to do a status check.

* * * * *

Vincent walked into Sickbay and spotted T'Lani immediately.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Vincent asked as he rushed to her side.

"Proceed." T'Lani said calmly.

"How old are you?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Twenty two. But Vulcans age differently from Humans, when you achieve the age of twenty one, I will appear to be of a comparable age." Ensign T'Lani said very precisely.

"I figured that part out for myself, the reason I'm asking is because I want to know why your family hasn't arranged a marriage for you before now. I mean, are you marrying me because there isn't anyone else?" Vincent asked seriously.

T'Lani considered the question for a moment, then responded, "You are the first prospective mate who exhibits the personality traits that would be a compliment to my own. I believe we are uniquely suited to each other. From a Human perspective, the pairing may seem unconventional. However, given the circumstance of our differing life cycles, I believe that this course of action is quite logical."

Vincent nodded and said, "Thank you Ensign T'Lani. I just needed to be sure that you were doing this because you wanted to and not because you didn't have any other choice."

"I am gratified by your concern. Be assured that it is my desire to become your wife and enjoy a mutually fulfilling future together." T'Lani said seriously.

"Okay. That's all I wanted to know. I'd better get back to deflector control and wait for Grandfather Sarek's call." Vincent said happily.

"May I also ask a question?" T'Lani asked calmly.

"Sure. Anything you want." Vincent said quickly.

"I have concerns about the differences between Vulcans and Humans. These things could become a source of conflict in our future relationship. I would be interested to know your thoughts on the matter." T'Lani said slowly.

Vincent thought about it for a minute before answering, "As long as you don't try to make me act like a Vulcan, I won't try to make you act like a Human. I think as long as we don't try to change each other, everything will be fine."

T'Lani considered the words, then carefully said, "I concur."

"I've got to go now. I'll talk to you later." Vincent said, immediately back to his full excitement.

T'Lani gave a single nod, then watched as Vincent rushed out of the room.

* * * * *

"Did Grandfather Sarek call yet?" Vincent asked as he ran into Deflector Control.

"Not yet. I would have paged you if he had." Joe said gently.

"Thanks. I just had to talk to... Um, someone..." Vincent trailed off uncertainly.

"It's okay Vincent. You don't have to tell me who it is if you don't want to." Joe said quietly.

Vincent looked at Joe with a flash of panic and said, "It's not that I don't want to, it's just that I don't want to tell you right now in case it doesn't happen because then you might act funny around her."

"Her? Well that narrows it down some." Joe said with a smile.

Vincent looked at Joe curiously, then chuckled.

"Um... Daddy Joe, could you... um... help?" Benny called from beside the partition.

"Uh oh. That doesn't sound good." Joe said as he gave Vincent one more quick hug before leaving.

"How are you holding up?" Lou asked gently.

"I'm kinda scared." Vincent said honestly.

"You'd be nuts if you weren't." Judy said gently.

"Either nuts or Vulcan." Lou added with a grin.

"Hey, no Vulcan jokes." Vincent said in mock offense.

The door to Deflector Control opened to reveal Connie, Susan, Jimmy and Darin.

"It's about time!" Lou groused.

"Hey. There's still plenty of party left, it's just getting warmed up. Besides, it's not my fault that someone needs to stay at the station." Connie said as he took Lou's place at the console.

"Yeah. See? They've just started dancing." Jimmy said and pointed at the monitor still displaying the events in the rec-hall.

"What do you say Judy? Do you feel like dancing?" Lou asked with a smile.

Judy glanced at Vincent, then said, "I'd really like to be here when Vincent gets his call."

Lou thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah. Me too."

"What's going on little brother?" Darin asked curiously.

Vincent's only response was to walk to Darin and give him a firm hug.

Darin looked around, then quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just really need a hug." Vincent said quietly.

Darin returned the hug and looked around at the other people in the room with concern.

Lou and Judy exchanged a look, but remained silent.

"Make sure you let Fizgig know that he did a good thing. He needs to know that that's the place for him to do his business." Joe said over his shoulder as he walked around the partition.

"He's a good dog. I think he understands now. He was just confused at first." JonJon said as he followed Joe into the room with Fizgig in his arms.

Benny walked into the room next, then looked around the room with confusion at the serious mood.

"Still waiting?" Joe asked as he walked to Darin and Vincent's sides.

"Yeah." Vincent said in a small voice.

"Do you want to tell everyone?" Joe asked quietly.

"The answer might still be no, so I don't want everyone to get excited about it." Vincent said carefully.

"But if you tell them and the answer is 'no' then they'll be able to help you deal with it." Joe said quietly.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah, I guess so."

Before Vincent could go any further, the beep of an incoming message came from auxiliary station two.

"I think that's probably for you." Joe said in nearly a whisper.

Vincent nodded and reluctantly released Darin to answer the call.

"What's going on?" Benny asked with concern.

"Just watch." Joe said in a whisper.

Vincent reluctantly accepted the transmission and waited.

"*Greetings Grandson.*" Sarek said without inflection.

"Greetings Grandfather." Vincent said apprehensively.

"*It has been determined that the marriage of Vincent Winters of the House of Surak and T'Lani of the House of Sukaan is a logical pairing. The union is to be consummated when Vincent Winters has attained his twenty first year.*" Ambassador Sarek said calmly.

"Thank you Grandfather." Vincent said past his shock at the declaration.

"*It is my hope your union will be productive and fruitful. Live long and prosper, Grandson.*"

"Live long and prosper, Grandfather." Vincent said, still feeling nothing but shock.

Joe reached around Vincent to disconnect the transmission.

"That sounded like Vincent just got married." Benny said cautiously.

"He did." Lou said frankly.

"What? I mean, how? I mean, you're nine." Darin said in confusion.

"Vulcans do it a little differently." Joe said quietly as he watched Vincent with concern.

"He said yes." Vincent said in wonder.

"That's right Champ. You are now a married man." Joe said gently.

"No way. I mean, out of all of us, the nine year old is the only one that's married? That's just not right." Jimmy said disbelievingly.

"For once I agree with you." Lou said in a firm voice.

Jimmy stopped, stunned by the fact that Lou agreed with him about anything.

Lou turned to Judy and said, "I've loved you for years, but I've never felt like it was time for us to take that final step. Now I think it is. So while we're here with all our friends I want to ask you, Judy, will you marry me?"

Judy's eyes went wide with surprise, but as soon as the words fully registered, she nodded vigorously.

Everyone gathered around Lou and Judy to offer their congratulations.

After the excitement had calmed down, Joe looked around the room and asked, "Anyone else?"

Jimmy looked at Susan with question.

"No." Susan said firmly.

Jimmy looked down to the floor and nodded.

"But I wouldn't be against a date or two... If that's something you'd be interested in." Susan said gently.

Jimmy looked up suddenly and said, "Yeah. Let's do that."

"Jimmy, you have a way with words." Susan said with a tender smile.

"Well, if that's everyone..." Joe began to say.

"Not quite." Connie said to the group.

Everyone turned their attention to Connie.

"You know I've been seeing a girl on Earth from my home village for a couple years now, right?" Connie said reluctantly.

A few of the people around the room nodded.

"Well, right before we left Earth I asked Melina if she would marry me. She said yes." Connie said shyly.

"Really?" Joe asked in shock.

"Yeah. Debbie is the only one who knows. I told her on the shuttle." Connie said quietly.

"Why did you wait so long to tell us. This is wonderful news." Joe said and pulled Connie into a firm hug.

"I waited because... I'm going to request a transfer to a planetary posting." Connie said reluctantly.

"Oh." Joe said quietly as he carefully released Connie.

"You're leaving us?" Susan asked with disbelief.

"Yeah Suze, I am. I know some people can make a long distance marriage work, but I don't think Melina and I could... and I don't want to. I want to go back to Greece and live a normal life and raise a family." Connie said with a hint of desperation in his voice.

After a long moment of silence, Joe said, "Good for you. I'm glad you understand what's most important."

"Yeah. Judy and I will probably be roaming the universe for a few more years, but it won't be too long before I think we'll be doing the same thing... well, except for going to Greece... I'm thinking of something more tropical." Lou said peacefully.

"When are you going to transfer?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"Not for a while. It might be as long as a year. Melina has four sisters and a ton of aunts who will want to help plan the wedding. We've decided not to set a date until we can get them all to agree that we have enough time to get everything done so we can do it right." Connie said carefully.

"Then you probably won't be leaving anytime soon." Susan said with a smirk.

"That's what I thought. I wouldn't be surprised if they try to get the Pope himself to officiate." Connie said with a chuckle.

"It's too early for me to make any marriage plans, but I've met a special woman that I'm really serious about. So don't be surprised if I have an announcement of my own sometime soon." Joe said with a smile.

"Are you going to marry Grandma Mona?" Vincent asked suddenly.

"Like I said, it's too soon to be talking marriage, but... I haven't felt like this about anyone since your mother. It could happen." Joe said with a smile.

"Hey Vincent, when do we get to meet your fiancée?" Jimmy asked with a smile.

"Wife. They're married now." Joe said seriously.

Jimmy shrugged and said, "Okay, when do we get to meet your wife?"

"Right now... well, if she can leave sickbay and if she wants to." Vincent added quickly.

"Go on. I'd really like to meet her." Joe said with a smile.

"I'll be right back." Vincent said happily and dashed out of the room.

* * * * *

"Ensign T'Lani, do you have time to talk?" Vincent asked as he rushed into Sickbay.

"Of course husband." T'Lani said as she looked over a data padd.

"I just wondered if you have time to come down to Deflector Control and meet the people I work with. They'd all like to meet you." Vincent said happily.

"Yes. My shift reports will be completed momentarily, then I will be available to accompany you." T'Lani said seriously.

"Is there anyone here you want me to meet?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Not at this time. My coworkers have gone to enjoy the festivities on the recreation deck. I have had little interaction with those on duty at this time." T'Lani said as she focused on her reports.

"Oh. I guess we can do it later. I just want to be sure to meet all your friends." Vincent said with cheer.

"I will introduce you at the first opportunity... My reports are complete." T'Lani said and turned off her data padd.

"Cool. I know everyone is going to like you. They're all really great." Vincent bubbled.

T'Lani gestured toward the Sickbay door to indicate that she was ready to go.

Vincent fell into step beside her as they left the Sickbay.

"What will your reaction be if your friends do not find me to be acceptable?" T'Lani asked curiously.

Vincent thought about the question for a moment as they entered the turbo lift, then muttered, "Deflector Control" to the ceiling of the lift.

Once the lift started moving, Vincent said, "If they don't like you, then I guess I won't want to be around them as much."

"Please do not allow the circumstance of our marriage to disrupt your other relationships. It would be illogical to isolate yourself from others for the fact of our union." T'Lani said carefully.

Vincent shook his head and said, "You are my wife. That means you come first. If someone want's to mess with that, then I don't need them around me. My real friends will accept you *because* you're my wife. Then when they get to know you, they'll like you because of who you are."

"You honor me husband. What you say is logical." T'Lani said as the lift doors opened.

* * * * *

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet my wife, Ensign T'Lani daughter of Sufaal of the House of Sukaan of Vulcan." Vincent said proudly.

"It's nice to meet you Ensign T'Lani, I'm Joe Bowers, Vincent's surrogate father and mentor. Welcome to the family." Joe said happily.

"A pleasure." T'Lani said as she gave a respectful bow of her head.

"And this is my big brother Darin." Vincent said with excitement as he ran to Darin's side.

"It's um... nice... how old are you?" Darin finished abruptly.

"Twenty two. However, when my husband reaches the age of twenty one, my appearance will be virtually the same." T'Lani said frankly.

"Yeah, and by the time I'm sixty, I'll probably look a lot older than her." Vincent added with a smile.

"Let's all relax and let Vincent introduce Ensign T'Lani around. This is starting to feel way too formal for my liking." Joe said seriously.

"The friends and family of my husband are welcomed to forego my title and simply address me as T'Lani." She said calmly.

"T'Lani it is." Joe said happily, then said, "I see that you're in medical. Are you a nurse?"

"I have the requisite studies and certifications to function as a nurse. However, when I have completed my tour of duty on the *Yorktown*, it is my intention to complete my final year of medical training and become licensed as a doctor, then serve my residency on board a Starfleet vessel." T'Lani said seriously.

"That's impressive. From what I understand, there's quite a bit of competition to be a doctor on a starship." Joe said in thought.

"Yes, that is why I accepted the posting on the *Yorktown* when it came available. Previous experience on a Starfleet vessel should prove advantageous when my medical training is complete." T'Lani said frankly.

"I see what you mean. The rank and experience you've already achieved should make your career path in Starfleet a lot easier." Joe said speculatively.

"It seems the logical course." T'Lani said in agreement.

"So are you planning to be the Chief Medical Officer on a Starship someday?" Darin asked curiously.

"That is one possibility, though I believe a position at Starfleet Medical would be equally satisfying." T'Lani said calmly.

"That would be quite an achievement too. Only the best of the best get appointed to Starfleet Medical." Joe said with a considering nod.

"I know that T'Lani will make it if that's what she wants to do." Vincent said firmly.

"I think you're right. Her decisions so far have proven that she knows how to get things done." Joe said with a smile.

Darin looked from Vincent to T'Lani and nodded his agreement.

"I want to introduce T'Lani to everyone before people start leaving." Vincent said quickly.

Joe nodded and smiled as Vincent hurried away with T'Lani at his side.

"As weird as it sounds, I think they're perfect for each other." Darin said distantly.

"I know what you mean. A few hours ago I couldn't have imagined Vincent with a wife. Within a few minutes of seeing them together, I can't imagine him without her." Joe said frankly.

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Vincent guided T'Lani to the main Deflector Control console and said, "T'Lani, this is Connie."

"It's nice to meet you T'Lani. Vincent's done a lot of things that impressed me today, but finding a woman as beautiful as you to marry beats everything else by a long shot." Connie said with a grin.

T'Lani considered the statement for a moment, then said, "Our union is based on our psychological and behavioral compatibility. My physical appearance was not a determining factor in the decision of our family elders to arrange our marriage."

"Really? You mean that they still would have married you two if you'd been as ugly as a Tarkalian wildebeest?" Connie asked hesitantly.

"That is correct." T'Lani said frankly.

"Then Vincent, that means you have *got* to be one of the luckiest people I've ever met." Connie said seriously.

Vincent looked up at T'Lani and smiled as he said, "Yeah, I think so too."

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"T'Lani, I'd like you to meet Lou and Judy. They're going to get married." Vincent said happily.

"It is a pleasure to meet you and may I offer my congratulations on your impending nuptials." T'Lani said formally.

"Thank you. It's nice to meet you too. When I heard Vincent talking to his grandmother about how he felt about marrying you, it made me stop and

think about what I wanted for my own future." Lou said, then smiled at Judy warmly.

"It is gratifying to know that my husband's thoughts on the matter were favorable to the point of being inspirational." T'Lani said carefully.

"He helped put things in perspective for me." Judy said timidly.

"I believe that is a natural talent that he possesses." T'Lani said simply.

* * * * *

"Hey Jimmy, come over here." Vincent called as he walked with T'Lani toward Susan.

Jimmy hurried away from station two to be introduced.

"Jimmy and Susan, this is my wife T'Lani." Vincent said proudly.

"It's wonderful to meet you. I think you have quite a husband." Susan said with a warm glance at Vincent.

"I concur." T'Lani said calmly.

"I couldn't believe it when Ambassador Sarek said that you two were married. I mean, wow. Just like that." Jimmy said with excitement.

"Once it was established that we, as a prospective couple were compatible, there was no logical reason for delay." T'Lani said simply.

"How do they decide if two people are compatible?" Susan asked curiously.

"The family elders review the psychological profiles of the persons in question, then review the achievements of each to establish behavioral patterns. If the resulting composite profiles compliment each other, then the union is seen to be logical and the marriage is confirmed." T'Lani said in an instructive tone.

"Where did they get a psychological profile of Vincent?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"I had to do a whole bunch of tests and stuff before I left Earth. I guess that was part of it." Vincent said seriously.

"The psychological profile is a prerequisite for Starfleet service." T'Lani stated impassively.

"I guess without emotions to muck everything up, using the psychological profiles would be the best way to do it." Susan said carefully.

"Yeah, but what if the two people don't like each other?" Jimmy asked hesitantly.

"If the individuals in question trust in the judgment of their family elders, then they will attempt to look past any preconceived notions they might have adopted toward their prospective mate and accept a bonding that will ensure their union. The biological imperative of *pon'farr* makes it something of a necessity." T'Lani said frankly.

"But I've heard about challenges to an arranged marriage... how does that work?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Such a thing is a disgrace to the family elders and to both houses involved. It is a flagrant display of emotionalism over logic." T'Lani said firmly with a trace of disgust.

"Yeah. It would be like me saying to Grandfather Sarek that his decision wasn't logical and that I don't trust him." Vincent said seriously.

"Also, a marriage in defiance of logic would most likely result in a disharmonious and nonproductive union." T'Lani added carefully.

"Wow. You two really think alike. That's so cool." Jimmy said with a smile.

"A perfect match." Susan said with a chuckle.

T'Lani looked down at Vincent and said, "Our union is logical."

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"T'Lani, I'd like you to meet my friends Benny and JonJon. Oh yeah, and Fizgig, JonJon's dog." Vincent added quickly.

"A pleasure to meet you." T'Lani said carefully, then added, "JonJon, you are an artificial life form are you not?"

JonJon was surprised by the blunt question and hesitantly nodded.

"There was a time when I considered the creation of artificial life forms to be illogical. But I have since come to realize that androids add to the diversity that defines humanity. It is good for my husband to have such a friend." T'Lani said seriously.

"Thank you." JonJon said shyly.

"Um, how did you know that he was an android?" Benny asked cautiously.

"As part of my medical training I have become familiar with the physical characteristics of all commercially produced androids. It is necessary to be

able to identify an android by sight so proper care can be given in an emergency situation. JonJon is a M.A.R.C. model android with the optional upgrade characteristics." T'Lani said professionally.

"Optional upgrade? What's that?" Benny asked curiously.

"No. Please don't... Um, I mean, I'll tell you later." JonJon said quickly as he flushed with embarrassment.

T'Lani gave JonJon a single nod to confirm that she would not explain further.

* * * * *

"***All hands, prepare for departure in fifteen minutes***." Sounded over the comm.

"I guess it's about that time." Joe said as he looked around the room.

"Are you guys going to be okay tonight? You didn't get any sleep." Connie asked Lou with concern.

"We slept earlier in the day. We'll be fine." Lou said seriously.

"That's good, but if you start having trouble, just call me. Remember, I owe you one." Connie said with a smile.

"You owe me more than one, but I'm sure we'll be fine." Lou said with a grin.

"I must return to Sickbay to ensure that everything is secured before departure." T'Lani said seriously.

"Thank you for coming down to meet my friends. It was really great getting to spend time with you." Vincent said gently.

"Tomorrow when your duties permit, perhaps you could come to Sickbay and meet my coworkers." T'Lani said more quietly.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Vincent said with a smile.

T'Lani brought her hand to the side of Vincent's face and gently stroked his cheek with her thumb as she said, "I will see you tomorrow my husband."

Vincent looked up at T'Lani with love shining in his eyes and said, "Until tomorrow my wife."

Silence filled the room as T'Lani walked out the door.

"Damn! That's some powerful stuff." Connie said, breaking the introspective mood that had fallen over the room.

"Connie, you're one class act." Lou said with a chuckle.

"Well everyone, as soon as we're underway, what do you say we call it a night? I don't think I'm up to any more surprises." Joe said with a smile as he walked to the main console.

"Sounds good to me. It's been some kind of day." Darin said with a smile.

"Tomorrow will be too. We'll all be writing our reports about everything that happened today." Joe said with a smile.

A collective groan filled the room.

"There goes the *Enterprise*." Connie said as he watched his console carefully.

"At warp five. I wonder what the rush is?" Joe said curiously.

Everyone turned as the door to Deflector Control opened to admit an Andorian wearing a Starfleet uniform†.

Silence fell over the room as the Andorian looked around for a moment, then walked to face Joe by the main control panel.

Finally, in a firm voice the Andorian said, "Ensign Thaelan reporting for duty sir."

Chapter 13

"Excuse me Ensign Thaelan. This is the first I've heard about this." Joe said hesitantly.

There was a beep from the main console and Connie quickly checked to see what it was.

"We've just received Ensign Thaelan's orders." Connie said seriously.

Joe read over the orders quickly, then said, "I see. You are approved to work the main deflector console. That'll be a big help."

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said rigidly.

"At ease Ensign. I'm Lieutenant Joseph Bowers, you're welcomed to call me Joe. You can stow your gear in the storage room over there if you like. We'll be bunking in there until the colonists are delivered to their new home." Joe said as he pointed.

Ensign Thaelan sat his rucksack on the floor beside him and stood at attention again.

"We'll keep the duty schedules pretty much like they are for the moment. Ensign Thaelan can take the lead on alpha shift. Darin can be his second and Vincent can be his third. Connie, Susan and Jimmy can take beta shift and Lou and Judy can have gamma. We'll run it that way for a while until our new people are comfortable with their positions. If anyone starts feeling like they need a day off, come and talk to me and we'll work something out." Joe said in thought.

"I've logged Ensign Thaelan's cabin assignment." Connie said seriously.

"Thanks Connie. Ensign Thaelan, this is Ensign Constantine Agropos, we call him Connie. He's my second in command in here so if you have any questions or concerns when I'm not around, he'll be the one to ask." Joe said formally.

Connie looked at Ensign Thaelan expectantly, ready to exchange a greeting or shake hands. Ensign Thaelan's only acknowledgement to Joe's introduction was a disinterested glance.

Joe gestured for Ensign Thaelan to walk with him and led him to Susan.

"At station one we have Crewman Susan Walker. She's qualified on all the positions except the main console and is one of the best troubleshooters we have." Joe said with a smile at Susan.

Once again, Ensign Thaelan didn't do more than spare a glance at her.

"At station two we have Crewman Anthony James Tullis, we call him Jimmy. He's relatively new and has been operating as general help and doing minor repairs for quite a while. Even though he hasn't been tested on all positions yet, he has the knowledge and experience to serve as your second if the need arises." Joe said seriously.

Jimmy smiled at the statement.

"Sitting at station three is Crewman Judy Wills. She's been with us for quite a while and she's fully qualified to work second position and has performed as Lou's second since she arrived." Joe said with a smile at her.

"Sitting at the first auxiliary station is Ensign Lourdes DeGama, we call her Lou. She works the main on gamma shift and has been here the longest after Connie. If you're having any difficulty, Lou should be able to answer any question you have." Joe said, then gave her a quick smile.

"At the second auxiliary station is Crewman Vincent Winters. He just joined us yesterday and is learning the stations. He serves as general help and is learning the basic maintenance. Vincent will be working on your shift, so part of your job will be to contribute to his training. " Joe said, then gestured for Ensign Thaelan to walk with him to the trio standing by the storage lockers.

"The Ensign with the black eye is Ensign Darin Cooper. He'll be serving as your second. Darin just joined us yesterday, but he is fully qualified on all but the main position and has proven to be innovative and level headed in a crisis. What he lacks is practical experience, so it will also be part of your job to guide him and help him until he learns all the ins and outs of deflector control." Joe said seriously.

"Next we have Benny and JonJon, they are from the Kimber colony and will be staying with us until we reach the new colony. They're both responsible young men so I doubt that you'll have any problem with them." Joe said with a smile at the boys.

Ensign Thaelan glanced at the boys, then turned his attention to Joe.

"The men will be sleeping in the supply room and the women will be sleeping in quarters. We will all use the bathing and laundry facilities in the quarters located on deck E section C2 room 2." Joe said seriously.

"Deck E?" Ensign Thaelan asked hesitantly.

"On the *Yorktown* we tend to refer to the decks by letters rather than numbers. The turbo lift's control system will recognize the command

whether you say deck E or deck 5 so it shouldn't be much of a problem for you." Joe said seriously.

Ensign Thaelan nodded his understanding.

"Now that you've been introduced to everyone, do you have any questions for me?" Joe asked curiously.

"Not a question, more of an observation." Ensign Thaelan said in a slow voice that barely contained his hostility.

"I know that the official reason I was transferred from the *Enterprise* was because the *Yorktown* was about to embark on a long voyage and was short a key person in deflector control. But the reason *I* was chosen for this assignment is because I refuse to be silent about the duplicitous nature of Starfleet. To all the worlds of the Federation they preach about equality when in reality it is a military force of Humans with a few token representatives from other worlds who are displayed as proof of their equal representation. The people of Andor were founding members of the Federation and yet we are treated as if we are some sort of oddity because we do not appear Human." Ensign Thaelan said vehemently.

"I see... Do you think that you are capable of behaving in a civil manner toward your coworkers?" Joe asked seriously.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said coldly.

"Will you be willing to instruct Crewman Winters in his duties and follow up to see that he understands your instructions?" Joe asked without any emotion in his tone.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said again.

"Will you assist Ensign Cooper to become familiar with his duties and instruct him how to help you train Crewman Winters?" Joe asked without inflection.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"Good. Then there is just one more thing for me to say. I don't agree with your opinion of Starfleet. But since I enjoy having an intelligent discussion with someone who has an opinion different from my own, I think we might both enjoy a discussion of politics and Starfleet policy after our duty shift sometime. However, I'm going to ask that you not dwell on the subject while we're on duty. It could easily cause tempers to rise, which is distracting from our purpose for being here." Joe said as he looked into Ensign Thaelan's eyes.

"I understand Lieutenant Bowers." Ensign Thaelan said in his cold voice.

A beeping from the main console drew Joe's attention.

"Good. Ensign Thaelan, please take the main console. It sounds like we're about to get underway." Joe said and stood aside.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said hesitantly and walked to take the seat at main deflector control.

"Ensign Cooper and Crewman Winters are now at your command. Everyone else, please stand away from the work stations." Joe said firmly.

Vincent quickly signed off auxiliary station two, then hurried to stand by station three.

"Ensign Cooper, go to station one and give me a power status report. Crewman Winters, go to station three and give me a control console status report." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

Darin and Vincent took their stations and began running the requested status checks.

"Power systems nominal, primary field generator at maximum." Darin said professionally.

"All consoles functioning normally." Vincent said carefully.

"Ensign Cooper, bring the secondary field generator up to full power. Crewman Winters, move to station two and give me a system status report." Ensign Thaelan said forcefully as he started to work the controls.

Joe, Connie and Lou watched the unconventional way Ensign Thaelan was setting up the main deflector field properties.

"All systems show as operational." Vincent said quickly.

"Crewman Winters, put secondary control systems on active standby." Ensign Thaelan said in a voice between anger and panic.

Lou and Connie exchanged a look at the strange order.

Vincent quickly worked the controls, then said, "Secondary systems are active and standing by."

A moment later the hum of the main deflector could be heard as well as felt throughout the room.

"Primary deflector status?" Ensign Thaelan called seriously.

"Operating within normal parameters." Darin said as he watched the readings carefully.

"Primary control system status?" Ensign Thaelan demanded as he tuned the field harmonics to optimum efficiency.

"All primary control systems show normal function." Vincent said as he looked over the board.

"Secondary control system status?" Ensign Thaelan barked out abruptly.

"Secondary control systems all functioning normally." Vincent said quickly as he looked over the entire board again.

The hum of the ships engines could be felt as the ship quickly approached warp speed.

Joe watched Ensign Thaelan carefully and noticed that he had his fingers poised, ready to switch over to the secondary systems at the first sign of any trouble.

Once the ship had made the transition into warp, Ensign Thaelan slowly withdrew his hand from the system transfer controls.

"Ensign Cooper, power down the secondary field generator. Crewman Winters, switch secondary control systems to inactive standby." Ensign Thaelan said firmly as he made some adjustments to the field harmonics.

"Secondary field generator power reduced and in standby mode." Darin said carefully.

"Secondary control systems inactive and standing by." Vincent said next.

"Ensign Cooper, run a status check on the primary power system. Crewman Winters, run level two diagnostics on all primary first-level control systems." Ensign Thaelan barked out harshly.

"Ensign Thaelan, Lou is going to relieve you now. Would you come out into the hall to speak with me?" Joe asked seriously.

Ensign Thaelan was surprised by the order, but quickly said, "Yes sir."

When Ensign Thaelan stood, Lou quickly took his place at the main console.

Feeling the stares of everyone in the room on him, Ensign Thaelan followed Joe out the door.

* * * * *

"Do you think Joe's chewing him out for yelling like that?" Jimmy asked cautiously.

"Knowing Joe... no. He's probably out there telling him to tone it down a notch or two." Connie said frankly.

Vincent giggled at the statement.

"What's so funny?" Darin asked curiously.

"Daddy Joe said those exact same words to me just a little bit ago." Vincent said with a smile.

"What do you think about this new guy?" Jimmy asked as he looked around the room.

"Personally, I think he's a prick." Lou said casually as she adjusted the main deflector control console back to it's normal settings.

"And we all know how you hate those." Connie quipped.

Vincent broke into laughter at the statement.

"Well, you made a nine year old laugh... that must mean your humor is getting more sophisticated." Lou said over her shoulder.

"Do you think he's going to yell at me and Fizgig like that?" JonJon asked quietly.

Silence fell over the room at the serious question.

"We won't let him scream at you JonJon. We all like you and no one is allowed to scream at you." Connie said warmly.

"That's right. You're one of us so you've got all of us on your side." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Wait. We shouldn't be picking sides." Vincent said as he stood from station two, then continued, "This isn't right. Yeah, he's a prick, but that doesn't mean that he can't be one of us."

"Vincent, you can't change people..." Lou began to say.

"No, but he can change himself if he really wants to. But he won't want to if we're treating him like he doesn't belong here." Vincent said seriously.

Connie shook his head and said, "If he screams at JonJon or Benny..."

"...or Fizgig." JonJon added quickly.

Connie nodded and said, "...or Fizgig, then all bets are off. I don't care what kind of problem he's got. If he takes it out on one of the kids, then I'll personally go to the Captain and see about getting him put off the ship at the next M-class world we pass. That is, if I don't punch him out first."

Vincent shook his head and said, "I don't want him to scream at anyone either, but wouldn't it be better to try and help him fit in here instead of trying to get him thrown out?"

"You and Darin are the ones who are going to have to work with him. So if you can get him to adjust his attitude, then I'll be willing to give him another chance. Otherwise, I'm taking this to the top." Connie said firmly.

"And maybe the guys could go somewhere while you're on duty so you won't have to worry about Thaelan going off on them." Jimmy said speculatively.

Vincent nodded, then looked at Benny and JonJon with surprise.

"I forgot that Dr. Perry ordered Channing to stay in bed for the next three days. If you guys wouldn't mind, I was wondering if you could go over and keep him company and bring him food and stuff so he doesn't get too bored. I mean, he needs someone to take care of him while he's sick and I thought you guys might want to help him out."

Benny looked at JonJon with question and shrugged.

"Can Fizgig go too?" JonJon asked quietly.

"Yeah. I bet Fizgig will be all kinds of help keeping Channing from being bored." Vincent said happily.

"Okay. It sounds like fun. Let's go figure out what we're going to do. Three days is a lot of time." JonJon said with growing excitement and rushed into the storage room.

Benny smiled at Vincent with admiration and said, "Thanks for thinking of us Vincent."

Vincent nodded and watched as Benny walked into the supply room to join JonJon.

"You win." Connie said in resignation.

Vincent looked at Connie with question.

"I'll give him a chance and give you time to get him turned around." Connie said without enthusiasm.

"Yeah. Work your magic, little man." Lou said with a smile.

Vincent giggled at Lou's name for him.

All conversation stopped as the doors opened.

* * * * *

"At ease Ensign." Joe said seriously.

Ensign Thaelan remained at attention.

"That was your first time wasn't it?" Joe asked as he leaned against the wall casually.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said reluctantly.

"I thought so. The simulator does a good job of preparing you for every possible scenario but one; the routine departure where nothing goes wrong. Your service record shows that you have served in Deflector Control on three ships in the past year and a half, not counting the *Enterprise* where you've served a day and a half. Do you know why you haven't been operating the main?" Joe asked curiously.

"Prejudice." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

Joe considered for a moment, then said, "I can't say for sure that prejudice wasn't a factor at some point, but I think it was your attitude that caused the problem." Joe said frankly.

"My attitude does not effect my ability to perform my duties. To deny me the opportunity to use my skills and advance my career because I refuse to be silent about the injustices I witness is a form of oppression of the highest order." Ensign Thaelan said in an increasing voice.

"I disagree." Joe said calmly.

"How can you disagree when the evidence clearly shows that I have been routinely scheduled to work the stations beneath my ability and shifted from ship to ship like a piece of cargo?" Ensign Thaelan asked desperately.

"After what I saw in there, I have no doubt about your technical skills or abilities. What concerns me is your ability to lead and train people that you openly despise." Joe said as he looked Ensign Thaelan in the eyes.

Ensign Thaelan froze at the statement, so Joe continued, "I believe the reason that you weren't scheduled to operate the main console is because no one thought you had the social skills that are necessary to build a cohesive team. No one wants to follow the orders of a tyrant who barks orders at them all day long. And I believe that none of your former

commanding officers wanted to put their people through the ordeal of being subject to your authority."

"But I follow the code of conduct exactly..." Ensign Thaelan said distantly.

"Those codes are in place as limits, that's the extreme that you are not permitted to pass. To function as a team, it's necessary to build mutual respect and understanding. Your current command style will only cause animosity and resentment." Joe said seriously.

"Lieutenant Bowers, would it be possible for you to... help me?" Ensign Thaelan asked reluctantly.

"I could. But I won't." Joe said frankly.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with surprise.

"I can't tell you how to behave, that's a very personal and individual thing. Your behavior is something that's your own responsibility to determine. I may offer some suggestions along the way and you'll be free to accept them or reject them as you see fit, but it's going to be up to you to become something more than a petty dictator on a power trip. You're starting out with a clean slate here. Darin and Vincent are going to be your team. They're both brand new and need to be trained in the best way to do their jobs, not just what's in the textbook but also what an officer with a year and a half of experience doing their jobs has learned along the way." Joe said seriously.

"So you're still going to let me run the main?" Ensign Thaelan asked carefully.

"Not just run the main, but command your crew. I'll be working your shift until you've become a little more comfortable in your position, but it will be up to you to make your group a team." Joe said seriously.

"No one has ever said these things to me before." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"I suspect that they felt it was easier to move you to someone else's duty shift or to someone else's ship rather than confront your attitude and be accused of bigotry." Joe said frankly.

"Thank you for being honest with me Lieutenant Bowers." Ensign Thaelan said as he straightened his posture.

"Your welcome. And I have one piece of advice to offer before we go back in... that is, if you're interested." Joe said in a more casual voice.

"Yes sir, I am." Ensign Thaelan said quickly.

"You know how others have made you feel just for the fact that you're an Andorian?" Joe asked cautiously.

Ensign Thaelan nodded hesitantly.

"My advice is to try to avoid making your coworkers feel the same way just because they *aren't* Andorians." Joe said seriously.

"I'll try. I'm not really used to considering the feelings of others." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Oh really?" Joe said with a smirk.

Ensign Thaelan hesitantly nodded.

"Sorry. That's something called sarcasm. I get the sense that once you get used to it, you'll be good at it." Joe said with a smile.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with confusion.

"Spend some time with Vincent and you'll figure it out in no time." Joe said, then gestured toward the door.

Ensign Thaelan squared his shoulders, then followed Joe into Deflector Control.

* * * * *

"So what are you guys talking about?" Joe asked as he walked in with Ensign Thaelan following a step behind.

"Ensign Thaelan." Vincent said seriously.

"What about him?" Joe asked cautiously.

"We were just trying to decide if we want to keep him or not." Vincent said as he looked Joe in the eyes and silently urged him to play along.

"And what did you decide?" Joe asked slowly.

"We decided that he's a keeper. He knows his stuff on the console, that's the hard part. So now we just need to get him to lighten up some and everything will be fine." Vincent said with a smile.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Vincent with shock.

"What do you think Ensign? Do you want to be one of us or would you rather do everything all by yourself and scream when you want something?" Vincent asked seriously.

Ensign Thaelan thought about the question for a moment, then said, "I think I would like to try being one of you... I'm just not sure how to do that."

"Don't worry, we'll all help you. Especially me and Darin." Vincent said with a smile.

"That's right. Us new guys need to stick together." Darin said firmly.

"And I'll be there to answer any questions any of you guys have." Joe said happily, amazed at the way Vincent handled the situation.

"Lou, can you think of any way to help Ensign Thaelan?" Vincent asked as he ran to her side.

After a glance of irritation at Vincent, Lou hesitantly said, "I suppose that after everyone settles in tonight, I could walk him through the controls to show him how we do things."

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with question.

Joe thought for a moment, then said, "Ensign Thaelan, your way of setting the controls was fine, but it wouldn't hurt for you to see another way of doing it. As long as it works, I don't mind which method you use."

Ensign Thaelan nodded, then turned to Lou and said, "Thank you Ensign DeGama, your instruction will be appreciated."

Lou glanced at Ensign Thaelan's tight, formal posture, then muttered, "Um... yeah. Sure."

"Connie, what can you do to help Ensign Thaelan?" Vincent asked with enthusiasm.

"I can welcome Ensign Thaelan to the team." Connie said seriously as he walked to Ensign Thaelan and offered his hand to shake.

Ensign Thaelan hesitantly accepted the offered hand and shook it with a firm grip.

"If you have any problems with anything, just feel free to ask." Connie said with an amused smile.

"Should the need arise, I will remember your offer." Ensign Thaelan said slowly.

"Does anyone else have any ideas about how we can help Ensign Thaelan to fit in?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"I could introduce him to my friends. I bet they'd like to meet him." Jimmy said with a happy smile.

"You'd better watch out Ensign Thaelan, Jimmy's friends are a hyper bunch. They'll try to talk your ears off." Susan said with a teasing smile at Jimmy.

Jimmy started to object, but after a moment of thought, he nodded his agreement.

"I would be honored to meet your friends." Ensign Thaelan said cautiously.

"Cool! After all that stuff Ensign Thaelan will probably be fitting in here better than I am." Vincent said happily.

A chuckle spread through the room at the statement.

"I think it's time to start getting ready for bed. Why don't we let the boys go up and get showered first, then we can take our turns." Joe said seriously.

"I'll go get the guys." Vincent said quickly and rushed into the supply room.

Ensign Thaelan watched Vincent leave the room then asked, "Is that the child who was promoted during the ceremony earlier today?"

"That's right, so were Susan and Darin." Connie said proudly.

"The children on Andor aren't given such responsibilities. It is believed that childhood is the time to acquire knowledge and skills for use later in life." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"Daddy Joe, we need to stop by the quartermaster's office for clothes for the guys before we shower." Vincent said as he hurried out of the storage room with Benny and JonJon following close behind.

"Good idea champ. When you get to the cabin, the pass code is 1717. Just don't take too long up there. We all need to take a turn at the shower." Joe said seriously.

"We'll be quick." Vincent said with a cheerful smile and hurried to the door.

Joe turned his attention back to Ensign Thaelan and said, "It's the same way on Earth, but if there were an Andorian child who had a special gift for art or music, would he be encouraged to develop it or would it be put off until he was an adult?"

"The child would be encouraged to develop the gift." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"That's why Vincent is here. He has a gift. I can't say exactly what it is, but since he's been on the *Yorktown*, he's made some significant contributions. He's thriving in this environment and we're all helping to guide him in the most productive direction." Joe said contemplatively.

"Thank you, I understand." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"If you would like, you can stow your gear in the supply room then go and get something to eat or explore the ship." Joe said casually.

"I had a meal before leaving the *Enterprise* and I am familiar with the constitution class of starship." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

Joe smiled at the statement and said, "I was just trying to say that you're off duty and have free time to do whatever you would like. You are welcomed to stay here if you want. We won't be doing much of anything until the boys get back."

"If you would allow it, I would like to review some personal correspondence." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Sure, you can use one of the auxiliary stations." Joe said with a smile.

"Thank you Lieutenant Bowers." Ensign Thaelan said respectfully.

"You're welcomed to call me Joe." He said and noticed discomfort in Ensign Thaelan's expression.

"...whenever you're ready." Joe added, more quietly.

Ensign Thaelan nodded, then went to auxiliary station one and signed in.

"You know, that's not a bad idea. I need to see if Melina sent me anything." Connie said with a grin.

"Does this mean you two are going to be exchanging intergalactic love notes for the next year?" Joe asked in a teasing voice.

"Jealous?" Connie asked with a raised eyebrow.

Joe made a show of thinking about it for a minute before answering, "Maybe a little."

"Thought so." Connie said, then went to auxiliary station two to sign in.

* * * * *

"Thaelan, do you want to see a picture of my fiancée?" Connie asked quietly.

Ensign Thaelan turned and saw a picture displayed on Connie's station.

"I normally do not find Human characteristics to be attractive, but your fiancée is a very handsome woman." Ensign Thaelan said in a considering voice.

Connie considered the statement for a moment before responding, "Yeah, she is, isn't she."

Ensign Thaelan opened a file and brought up a picture on his screen.

"This is my wife." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

Connie looked at the picture of a smiling Andorian woman with long flowing white hair and said, "She's really beautiful."

"She died nearly five years ago. That is why I left Andor." Ensign Thaelan said distantly.

Connie glanced at Thaelan's pained expression and said, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"She died from a complication with her pregnancy. Neither she nor our child survived." Ensign Thaelan said in a low voice.

"I guess some things are the same no matter what world you're from." Connie said gently.

Thaelan looked at Connie with question.

"I have a brother back on Earth who went through exactly the same thing. I saw how it destroyed his life... it's been almost ten years now and he still hasn't gotten completely past it. He just seems to be wandering aimlessly through his days, not really caring about anything." Connie said quietly.

"That's easy to do when everything you care about has been taken away." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"I guess so. But it seems like such a waste. Nicky was always such a friendly guy, always so happy. Now it's like the light went out in his eyes. It hurts to see him like he is now." Connie said as he looked back to his console.

"My family has made the same comment toward me. It made my decision to enter Starfleet easier. At least they won't have to suffer with me." Ensign Thaelan said distantly.

"It doesn't work that way." Connie said as he turned to face Thaelan again.

Thaelan looked at Connie with question.

"I'm just as worried about Nicky out here as I would be living in the same house with him... maybe even more. At least if I were there I could be sure that he was taking care of himself." Connie said seriously.

"Perhaps you're right. My decision to enter Starfleet was more about getting away from the reminders of my previous life than helping those around me." Ensign Thaelan said consideringly.

"Yeah. Well, I think that's okay. Sometimes you have to consider other people's feelings, but other times it's important to consider your own and do what you need to do to heal yourself." Connie said frankly.

Ensign Thaelan nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

The door to deflector control opened to reveal Rad wearing a big smile.

"Hey Rad, what's up?" Joe asked happily.

"I've been talking with Chief Morgan since the ceremony... where's Vincent? I need to congratulate him." Rad said quickly.

"Up taking his shower. What were you two talking about?" Joe asked with a smile at Rad's excitement.

"We've been talking about the new transporter retrieval method. Joe, I'm really excited about this." Rad said enthusiastically.

"Funny, it doesn't show." Joe said with a grin.

"That was sarcasm, right?" Ensign Thaelan asked from the auxiliary station.

"That's right. You're getting it." Joe said with a smile, then continued, "Ensign Thaelan, I'd like you to meet Ensign Rayne Radovanovich, we call him Rad. Rad, this is Ensign Thaelan. He transferred from the *Enterprise* and he'll be in charge of the alpha shift of Deflector Control." Joe said with a smile.

"Do you know Ensign Tabitha Brooks from the *Excelsior*?" Rad asked curiously.

"I am somewhat acquainted with her." Ensign Thaelan said hesitantly.

"I thought so. God, that woman hates you with a passion! I was stuck in a departure lounge with her for nearly three hours and all she could do is bitch about how horrible you were." Rad said with a chuckle.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with confusion.

Rad noticed Thaelan's expression and chuckled as he said, "Don't worry about it man. Tabby isn't happy unless she's bitching about something. If she ever had a day that she didn't have something to complain about she'd probably just self destruct. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that no one takes her seriously... it's nice to meet you."

"A pleasure?" Ensign Thaelan said uncertainly.

Rad laughed at the confusion in Ensign Thaelan's eyes.

"Rad is the essence of deportment and tact." Joe said with a smirk.

Ensign Thaelan considered the statement for a moment, then said, "More sarcasm, right?"

Joe chuckled and said, "Very good. You're getting it."

A beeping from the main console drew everyone's attention.

After a moment, Lou said, "I have a diplomatic transmission for Vincent."

"Call the cabin and see if he's there yet. If not, you'll need to page him." Joe said casually.

"Got it." Lou said seriously.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe curiously, hoping for an explanation.

"I'm sure it's someone from Vincent's clan." Joe said without concern.

"Clan? I didn't realize that Humans had clans." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"They usually don't. Let's see... after Vincent's parents died last week, he was adopted by a Vulcan clan which made him a citizen of Vulcan. Clan Short has been recognized by the Federation as a diplomatic entity, so any communication from them is automatically considered a diplomatic transmission." Joe said as efficiently as possible.

"It sounds like the child has known considerable pain in his short life." Ensign Thaelan said speculatively.

"You have no idea." Joe said frankly.

Rad looked at Joe with concern.

Joe glanced around to see that no one else was listening, then moved closer so only Rad, Connie and Thaelan could hear.

"I'm telling all of you about this so you can help me if Vincent has a problem." Joe said in prelude.

"The day I met Vincent, he had just come back from the hospital." Joe said quietly.

"What was wrong with him?" Rad asked with concern.

"His father had hit him and knocked him down. Vincent hit his head when he landed and received a concussion." Joe said, trying to control the emotion in his voice.

"Please tell me it was an accident." Rad said quietly.

Joe shook his head and said, "I've seen the bruises. The bastard punched Vincent hard enough that you could count the knuckles in each bruise."

Connie shook his head as tears started to well up in his eyes.

"Guys, I'm telling you this because I don't know what might cause Vincent to flash back on those abusive times of his life. He was physically and emotionally abused and that's got to leave some kind of a scar. If you notice him having trouble, help him through it the best you can and call for help from the rest of us if you need it." Joe said seriously.

"He always seems so happy, I had no idea." Connie said distantly.

"Earth held nothing but painful reminders for him. He is happy here. I just wanted to ask you guys to help me keep him that way." Joe said seriously.

"I understand why you would ask your friends to help you in this matter, but I fail to see why you would include me." Ensign Thaelan said curiously.

"Because you are going to be Vincent's commanding officer for the foreseeable future. You need to be aware of potential problems so you'll be prepared to deal with them if the need arises." Joe said carefully.

"Thank you Lieutenant Bowers, I understand." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"You can call him Joe." Rad said frankly.

"Whenever he's ready. There's no rush." Joe said with a smile at Rad.

"You just like someone calling you by your rank for a change don't you?" Rad asked with a grin.

Joe chuckled and said, "I actually prefer the more relaxed environment where we're all on a first name basis. But until Ensign Thaelan is comfortable with that, I don't mind being called lieutenant."

"Come off it Joe, you get a thrill every time someone calls you lieutenant." Rad said with a grin.

"Maybe a little bit, but let's wait and see if Lieutenant Radovanovich thinks it's as funny when it's his time." Joe said consideringly.

Rad's grin transformed into a full smile at the thought.

Connie started laughing and said, "From the look on his face, I think that Lieutenant Radovanovich might enjoy it a little too much."

Ensign Thaelan felt amusement bubbling up within him at the statement and was shocked to realize that he was smiling.

* * * * *

"Hurry and get it before they hang up." Benny said as the trio rushed into the cabin.

"Crewman Winters." Vincent said as he slammed the button to accept the transmission.

"Vincent, you have a diplomatic transmission." Lou said seriously.

"Thanks Lou." Vincent said as he took a seat at the desk.

"Do you want us to leave?" Benny asked from behind Vincent.

"I don't care if you stay, but you guys could get started on your showers while I'm doing this if you wanted." Vincent said casually as he logged in and accepted the diplomatic transmission.

"You go first." Benny said to JonJon with a smile.

JonJon nodded and went to the bathroom to start his shower.

"There you are Vincent. From as long as it took, I thought they'd lost you." Cory said in frustration.

"No, we were just leaving the quartermaster's office when you called. It took a few minutes to get to the cabin. What's up Cory?" Vincent asked casually.

"Vincent, speaking strictly as your guardian and someone who cares about you there's something I need to say." Cory said seriously.

"Okay." Vincent said hesitantly.

Cory nodded, then cleared his throat.

After a moment to collect his thoughts, Cory said, "ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR FREAKIN MIND!?"

Vincent's eyes went wide at the question.

"Sorry Vincent, I think it's hard coded into our DNA or something that when one of your kids runs off and gets married without telling you that you have to say that. Now that I've got that out of the way, maybe you could tell me how this happened." Cory said reasonably.

"T'Lani's family contacted Grandfather Sarek and wanted to arrange a marriage. When Grandfather told me about it, I said that I wanted to do it." Vincent said simply.

"Vincent, we're talking about the rest of your life here. What were you thinking?" Cory asked with his concern showing through his voice.

"I was thinking that I trust Grandfather Sarek to protect me and do what's best for me. I was thinking that T'Lani really wanted to marry me or she wouldn't have started all this. I was thinking that I want to be happy like you and Sean and like Grandfather Sarek and Grandma Amanda. I was thinking that now I'll have someone who will be there even if things don't always turn out the way I want them to. I was thinking that once I do this, I'll never have to worry about finding a girl that likes me and dating and all that other stuff that drives old guys like you crazy..."

"Hey! I'm not old." Cory said in offense.

"Whatever you say Dad." Vincent said with a roll of his eyes.

Cory shook his head and muttered, "Kids these days..."

Vincent smiled and said, "Today Grandfather Sarek said that I'm an adult. He wouldn't have done that unless he believed it was true. I didn't go to him and say, 'Grandfather, please find me someone to marry right now'. The head of another family called Grandfather Sarek and asked him if it would be logical for T'Lani and I to get married."

"Okay, I get that." Cory said carefully as he considered the statement.

"Cory, when you became my guardian, you made me a Vulcan citizen. That means a whole lot more to me than a bunch of words on a piece of paper. I'm allowed to be a crewman on the *Yorktown* because I'm a Vulcan. I'm allowed to have you as my family because I'm a Vulcan. Everything good that's in my life right now can be traced back to when you made me a Vulcan citizen. I'm a part of Vulcan now and because of that, I'm going to trust in Grandfather Sarek and the old ways of Vulcan. If he says that T'Lani and I are a logical pair then I'll believe him."

Cory thought about Vincent's words and finally nodded.

"Does that mean you're okay with it?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sort of. I mean, I think I get what you're saying. I still don't know if this is a good idea, but I guess we'll find out together. Vincent, since you've been declared an adult and you are allowed to make choices for yourself, but would you please *try* to include me in your decisions? I'll always think of you as one of my kids and if you'll talk to me about things before you decide them, maybe I can give you a different point of view or just be there to tell you that you're making a good choice." Cory said imploringly.

"Yeah. I can do that." Vincent said quietly.

"Benny, can you come here for a minute?" JonJon called from the bathroom doorway.

Benny shook himself out of his thoughts and hurried to the bathroom.

"When are you going to tell Lawrence?" Cory asked quietly.

"Tomorrow. I want to do it when T'Lani is with me so he can meet her." Vincent said with a smile.

"He's going to freak out." Cory said with a chuckle.

"At least." Vincent said with a smile.

"I'm going to go now. Congratulations on... everything." Cory said peacefully.

"Thanks Cory. I'm sorry I didn't call you before, things got a little bit crazy for a while." Vincent said timidly.

"I can imagine. Do you want a little piece of advice from your Clan's patriarch?" Cory asked with a smile.

"Sure." Vincent said suspiciously.

"Make sure you're well rested and ready for one massive party when you get back to Earth. You have a lot of people who want to celebrate everything you've achieved today." Cory said with a smile.

"I'll try but I really don't like stuff like that." Vincent said carefully.

"Well, since you probably won't be back to Earth for at least two months, it'll give the guys some time to settle down about it. We're still going to have a party when you get back, but it won't be nearly as crazy as if you came home today." Cory said happily.

"Thanks Cory. Tell everybody thanks for all the great cards and messages. I haven't had a chance to read them all yet, there's about a hundred of them." Vincent said with a smile.

"Yeah. All the Clan members and everyone at Camp Little Eagle wanted to send you their own message so you'd know how many people care about what happens to you." Cory said seriously.

"I didn't know there were that many. I'll have to make sure to meet them all when I get back." Vincent said happily.

"Yeah, we'll do that at the party. It's getting late, I'd better be going. Good night Vincent." Cory said gently.

"Good night Cory." Vincent said peacefully and ended the transmission.

Benny walked out of the bathroom with a stunned expression and slowly blinking his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked with concern at Benny's apparent stupor.

"Um...Optional upgrade... characteristics." Benny responded in puzzlement.

Vincent looked at Benny with confusion and said, "What? Wait. On second thought, I don't want to know."

Chapter 14

JonJon walked to Vincent's side and watched for a minute as Vincent read one message after another.

"What are you doing?" JonJon asked quietly.

Vincent gave JonJon an incredulous look, then realized that JonJon just asked that because he didn't have any better way of starting a conversation.

Finally Vincent answered, "Reading messages from a lot of different people congratulating me about getting married and stuff."

"I'm really glad you got married. I think your wife is nice." JonJon said quietly.

Vincent glanced down and noticed that JonJon's gray coveralls had the pants legs rolled up to keep them from dragging the ground.

Vincent smiled as he said, "Thank you JonJon. I think so too. I never even thought about me getting married before today, but I'm really glad that it happened."

"I'll never get married." JonJon said in a whisper as he cuddled Fizgig in his arms.

"Why not?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Because I'm an android. I'll always be a kid. I'm never going to grow up and find someone who'll love me the way T'Lani loves you." JonJon said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Sure you will. I bet that someday you'll find a girl who'll think that having a husband who doesn't get older is the greatest thing ever." Vincent said as he stood to pull JonJon into a gentle hug.

"But she'll get older. She'll get old and die someday. Everyone I love will get old and die and I'll always be the same. Besides, it doesn't matter anyway. I'm not real. "JonJon said as a tear escaped.

Vincent pulled back, then brought his hand to JonJon's cheek and caught the tear on his fingertip.

"This tells me that you're real. A machine doesn't feel pain. A computer doesn't worry about being loved. I can tell that you love Fizgig and that you care about me and Benny. That proves to me that you're a real person." Vincent said carefully.

"I love you and Benny. You're my new family." JonJon said in a whisper.

"I love you too JonJon. You and Benny both. You're the best friends that I've ever had and even though I'm going to have to go away when the Yorktown leaves, I'll still be your friend forever." Vincent said seriously.

"Vincent, the shower's free." Benny said as he walked out of the bathroom wearing gray coveralls that hung on him like a sack. To top it off, the pants legs didn't quite reach his ankles.

Vincent smiled at the sight and said, "Thanks Benny. I really need a nice long shower."

"JonJon, did you see the jacuzzi tub in there?" Benny asked curiously.

JonJon nodded that he did.

"Would you like to give Fizgig a bath in there? I could help you." Benny offered with a gentle smile.

"Yeah. His fur is really dirty. I bet he'd feel a lot better if he was clean." JonJon said happily.

"Come on and help me find some shampoo or soap." Benny said with a smile as he turned to walk back into the bathroom.

Vincent signed off the terminal then stopped and sat for a moment, just enjoying the peace and quiet before getting up to take his shower.

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"Thaelan... is it okay if I call you Thaelan? I mean, I'll call you Ensign if you want me to." Jimmy asked excitedly.

"You may address me as Thaelan while we are not on duty if you wish." Ensign Thaelan said slowly.

"Cool. Susan and I are going down to the ship's store and I wondered if you wanted to go down there with us." Jimmy said hopefully.

"What are you intending to purchase?" Thaelan asked curiously.

"I don't know yet. I just wanted to see what they have to pass the time when we're off duty. Besides, I haven't checked out the new videos since we left Earth, maybe they have something we'd all like to see." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Thank you for the invitation but I believe I will remain here. Perhaps at a later time." Ensign Thaelan said cautiously.

"That's fine. Just let me know when, I'm always ready to go shopping." Jimmy said happily.

Ensign Thaelan nodded slowly.

"Are you ready to go Susan?" Jimmy asked, nearly bouncing with enthusiasm.

"You know, it's just not right. Women are supposed to be the ones to get excited about shopping." She said with a smile as she walked to Jimmy's side.

"And most of those women would be glad to find a man who would enjoy shopping with them." Connie said from auxiliary station one.

"Okay Connie, you got me there." Susan said with a smile, then noticed Jimmy's urging expression and said, "Don't worry, I'm ready. Let's go."

Jimmy gave a glowing smile and preceded Susan out the door.

"How are you doing Ensign Thaelan? Do you need to get away from this bunch yet?" Joe asked casually as he approached.

Ensign Thaelan thought about the question for a moment, then said, "No. Although I am not accustomed to being included in this... casual behavior, I don't find it unpleasant."

Joe smiled at the statement and said, "Please try to remember that we aren't expecting you to be anyone but yourself. Just because we act casually doesn't mean that we expect you to do the same. Do what makes you comfortable and we'll interact with you on your terms."

Ensign Thaelan thought carefully about the words for a moment, then said, "Thank you Lieutenant Bowers, I will remember that. I didn't realize that my discomfort was so evident that you could determine it's source."

"Don't worry about it, you hid it well. I just tried to imagine how I would feel in your situation. I had a similar feeling the first time I visited Vulcan." Joe said frankly.

"Did you try to adopt their mannerisms?" Ensign Thaelan asked curiously.

"Not really. I was just a little more emotionally controlled than I usually am... you know, out of respect. I'm too emotional to even consider trying to act like a Vulcan." Joe finished with a smile.

"We appear to have that trait in common. I am not good at hiding my emotions." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

Joe gave Ensign Thaelan an incredulous look.

Ensign Thaelan studied the expression for a moment, then suddenly said, "Ah, I see. Sarcasm without words."

* * * * *

"That felt good." Vincent said as he stepped out of the sonic shower.

"Yeah, I think I had a pound of mud on me." Benny said as he focused on holding Fizgig in place while JonJon worked the shampoo into his fur.

"Are you guys going to need any help?" Vincent asked as he pulled on his underwear.

"No. We're just about done washing him. Then we'll just have to rinse him." Benny said seriously.

"He's being a really good dog." JonJon said proudly as he slowly scrubbed Fizgig.

"While you're finishing up I'll get our clothes out of the laundry fresher and get ready to go. I don't want everyone else to have to wait too long." Vincent said as he pulled on a pair of faded blue jeans.

"That sounds like a good idea. Do you think there's any way we could find a brush for Fizgig? When he dries, we're going to need to brush out his fur." Benny asked as he kept his attention on the dog.

"They should have one down at the ship's store. I can go and get one while you guys finish up." Vincent said as he pulled on a red T-shirt.

"Thanks. It will take us a few minutes to get him dry. Just make sure it's a really stiff brush, his fur is really thick." Benny said in thought.

Vincent put on his socks and boots, then started pulling the clean laundry out of the fresher.

"You look just like a normal kid dressed like that." Benny said with a smile.

Vincent glanced at Benny, then said, "I am a normal kid."

Benny chuckled and said, "You know what I mean. When you're wearing the uniform you look like a crewman. Dressed like this you look like a regular person."

Vincent shook his head in amusement and said, "I am a regular person. Being a crewman doesn't make me different from anyone else. It's just my job."

"It's more than a job. It's part of who you are. I don't care what you say, you're different from me and JonJon. You've got something that we don't have and it's because you're a crewman." Benny said seriously.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay. Maybe you're right but when I'm off duty I still feel like just another kid... Do you guys need anything else from the store while I'm down there?"

"I can't think of anything. The quartermaster gave us most of the stuff we'll need. But if you find anything like a chew toy or a treat for Fizgig, that would be nice." Benny said in thought.

"I don't know if they'll have anything like that, but I'll look. I'll be back in a few minutes." Vincent said with a smile as he carried their clean clothes out the bathroom door.

"You really like him, don't you?" JonJon asked seriously.

Benny looked at JonJon with surprise.

"I'm mean, like more than a friend." JonJon added more quietly.

Benny thought about it for a moment, then said, "I do, but not the way you're thinking. I admire him. Vincent's doing the things I've only dreamed about. I don't want to be *with* him. I want to be *like* him."

JonJon smiled at the statement and said, "I think you are like him."

Benny looked at JonJon with question.

"You gave me and Fizgig a home when we were all alone. You made me your brother. In every way that's important, you *are* like Vincent." JonJon said honestly.

Benny smiled at the statement and said, "If my hands weren't full of wet soapy dog right now I'd give you a big hug."

"Then let's rinse him off so you can." JonJon said happily.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent, did you feel like doing some shopping too?" Susan asked as she noticed him enter the ship's store.

"I needed to get a brush for Fizgig. What are you guys doing up here?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"Jimmy wanted to see if we picked up any good movies when we were in dock... but they must have moved them, we can't find them anywhere."

Susan said as she glanced over to see Jimmy working his way through the store aisle by aisle.

"Why don't you just ask?" Vincent asked simply.

"The clerk's been busy since we came in." Susan said frankly.

Vincent walked to the checkout counter and said, "Excuse me. Could you tell me where the movies are?"

The clerk glanced at Vincent, then said, "We've pulled them all to the back. Starting tomorrow, we're going to be showing the entire movie library on the big screen in the rec-hall. Ship's services will be posting a list of show times as soon as they have it all set up. After each movie is shown, they'll be put back out so you can buy them if you want."

"Okay, thanks. Sorry to interrupt." Vincent said quickly as he hurried back to Susan.

"He said..." Vincent began to say.

"I heard him. That sounds like a really good idea. I think that will make the next few weeks pass a little bit faster for the colonists. All of us will enjoy it." Susan said happily.

"Enjoy what?" Jimmy asked as he approached.

"They're going to be showing all the movies on the big screen in the rec-hall so everyone can enjoy them." Susan said with a smile.

"Cool. What do you say Susan? Would you like to go out for dinner and a movie with me before our shift tomorrow?" Jimmy asked with anticipation.

Susan considered the offer for a moment, then said, "If you can find a movie that we'll both enjoy, I think I'd like that very much."

"Then it's a date... It is, isn't it? A date, I mean." Jimmy asked hopefully.

Susan chuckled at Jimmy's hopeful expression and said, "Yes Jimmy. It's a date."

"Awesome. I hope someone thought about having popcorn and sodas for the movie." Jimmy said with a big smile.

"I'm sure they will." Susan said tenderly.

Vincent started looking around the store and spotted a small display of pet supplies.

As he started walking away, Jimmy asked, "What did you find?"

"Some stuff for Fizgig." Vincent said as he looked at the selection.

"Cool. I never noticed that stuff there before. What do you want to get him?" Jimmy asked as he looked over the selection.

"Um... All of it. I mean, one of everything. He doesn't have anything at all right now." Vincent said, then opened one of the small bins to look at a squeaky chew toy in the shape of a pork chop.

"Vincent, you might want to think twice about anything with a squeaker or a bell. We're all going to be in close quarters for the next three or four weeks..." Susan said reluctantly.

Vincent nodded and put the chew toy back into the bin.

"Why don't we just get him one of the rawhide bones for now, then when he's finished with that you can come down and get him something else?" Jimmy asked casually.

"Yeah. That sounds good... Oh, how am I going to pay for it? My wallet was in the uniform I left back in the tunnel at the colony. It had my Starfleet ID and credit card and everything..." Vincent trailed off in thought.

"Please allow me to take care of it." A voice answered from behind the trio.

Vincent turned and smiled when he saw Cyril and a young man he hadn't met watching them.

"Oh, okay. Thank you Cyril." Vincent said happily.

"Vincent, this is my boyfriend, Roger. Roger, this is the young man I was telling you about, Vincent Winters." Cyril said in a loving voice.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Vincent. Cyril has been going on all day about how brave you are." Roger said quietly.

"It's nice to meet you too Roger. These are my friends Susan and Jimmy from Deflector Control." Vincent said with a note of shyness in his voice.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both." Susan said seriously.

Jimmy nodded his agreement.

"Now Vincent, did I hear you say that you lost your wallet in the tunnels under the colony?" Cyril asked gently.

"Yeah. I didn't even think about it until just now." Vincent said shyly.

"Go ahead and get whatever you want and we'll take care of it for you." Cyril said warmly.

"Thank you, I just came down here to get a few things for JonJon's dog." Vincent said as he opened a bin and pulled out a stiffly bristled brush.

"How is JonJon handling the loss?" Cyril asked quietly.

"He's hurting a lot, but Benny and I are trying to keep him busy with other stuff so he doesn't think about it all the time." Vincent said seriously as he took a rawhide bone out of another bin.

"That's good of you. I'm glad JonJon has someone he can depend on in this difficult time." Cyril said quietly.

"JonJon has everyone in Deflector Control watching out for him." Susan said seriously.

"Yeah, we kind of adopted JonJon and Benny when they showed up with Vincent. They'll be staying with us until we reach the new colony." Jimmy added with a smile.

"I'm glad to hear that. If either of them needs anything at all, contact me and I'll see to it." Cyril said firmly.

"Okay, I will." Vincent said happily as he looked at Cyril expectantly.

"Do you have any more shopping that you'd like to do?" Cyril asked gently.

"No. This is it. The guys are waiting on me." Vincent said simply.

"Well, we mustn't keep them waiting." Cyril said with a warm smile and led the way to the checkout counter.

* * * * *

"Do you think they got lost?" Connie asked as he looked at the door.

"I'll give them five more minutes, then I'll call to see how they're doing." Joe said seriously.

"I don't think Vincent will let them get sidetracked. He's really responsible... a lot more responsible than I am." Darin trailed off shyly.

Rad chuckled at the statement and said, "We'll see. You get three teenage boys together and responsibility can fly out the nearest airlock."

Just then the boys walked into deflector control. JonJon had Fizgig wrapped in a heavy towel.

"You three look like you're about ten pounds lighter. I bet you feel better." Joe said with a smile.

"Yeah, I was feeling really gross." Vincent said shyly.

"Well, it's getting time to turn in for the night. Do you guys have anything else you need to do before bed?" Joe asked gently.

"We need to brush Fizgig so his fur doesn't get all tangled." JonJon said seriously.

"Well then, I guess you'd better get to it." Joe said with a smile at Fizgig's snout sticking out of the large towel.

JonJon smiled and carried Fizgig into the supply room.

"Well Darin, do you want to go next?" Joe asked casually.

"Sure. I just need to get my things." Darin said and walked to the supply room.

Rad had a loving smile on his face as he watched Darin walk away.

"You're interested in him, aren't you?" Joe asked curiously.

Rad looked at Joe with surprise, then said, "Yeah. That's not a problem is it?"

"Not at all. From the way he looks at you, I think he's interested too." Joe said happily.

"He's just so timid, I don't want to scare him away." Rad said with concern.

"I think Darin is a lot stronger than he appears. I get the feeling that he's just timid because everything is so unfamiliar here." Joe said introspectively.

"I guess that could be it." Rad said, then smiled when Darin walked out of the supply room with a small duffel bag.

"Do you mind if I go with you? I need a shower too." Rad said happily.

Darin looked at Rad with complete shock.

"Way to be subtle Rad." Joe said with a chuckle.

"What I meant to say is that I'll walk out with you, not that I want to shower with you... I mean, not that I *don't* want to..." Rad trailed off helplessly.

"Darin. Rad likes you and would like to accompany you to the turbo lift. Would that be alright with you?" Joe asked as he tried to restrain his chuckles.

Darin looked from Rad to Joe, then back to Rad again before shyly nodding.

"Go on you two." Joe said with a smile.

Rad gave Darin a gentle smile, then started walking toward the door.

A moment later Darin was following a step behind.

After Darin and Rad had left, Ensign Thaelan cautiously asked, "You encourage same-gender relationships among your crew?"

Joe turned to face Thaelan and noticed his puzzled expression.

"I just encourage everyone to find someone who makes them happy. I think Rad and Darin can do that for each other." Joe said, then noticed movement out of the corner of his eye.

"What's up sport?" Joe asked with a smile as he held out his arm to invite Vincent into a hug.

"I just wanted to come out and say goodnight. I'm really tired so I'm going to go to bed now." Vincent said as he hugged Joe from the side.

"You have a good sleep. I'll be in after I've had my shower." Joe said as he hugged Vincent gently.

"Thanks for letting me be here with you. I love it here on the Yorktown." Vincent said from the hug.

"Everyone is glad that you're here. Now go on and get to sleep. I love you." Joe said as he gave Vincent one final squeeze of the hug.

"I love you too Daddy Joe." Vincent said happily, then hurried back into the supply room.

Ensign Thaelan stared at the doorway of the supply room for a moment, then quietly said, "Lieutenant Bowers, you are a fortunate man to have such a remarkable son."

Joe smiled at the statement and said, "I agree. But I think we're all fortunate to have Vincent here. It's like he brings a feeling of wonder and joy to this place. I think working with Vincent will make our duties a pleasure rather than a job."

Ensign Thaelan considered the words for a moment, then said, "I was offered no choice in my assignment to this ship. I had the sense that I was being discarded at the first opportunity. Since I have come to know you and your crew, I believe that this assignment will provide many rewards."

"Come back here." JonJon said in a loud whisper, catching both men's attention.

Ensign Thaelan looked down to see a scraggly wet animal sniffing his foot.

"Fizgig!" JonJon whispered harshly, still crouched in the doorway.

"You may come and retrieve your rodent if you wish. I promise that I will not harm you." Ensign Thaelan said when he noticed JonJon's hesitant expression.

JonJon looked up at Ensign Thaelan and firmly said, "Fizgig's not a rodent. He's a Shih-Tzu."

Ensign Thaelan looked down at the wet animal and quietly said, "That would have been my second guess."

Joe smiled at the dry tone of Ensign Thaelan's voice, then reached down and picked up the wet animal.

"Don't Andorian children frequently have small animals as pets? In fact, I seem to remember hearing that hamsters are becoming very popular on Andor." Joe said as he petted Fizgig gently.

"That is correct." Ensign Thaelan said and held out his hands for the dog.

Joe handed Fizgig to Thaelan and smiled.

Ensign Thaelan petted Fizgig for a moment, then walked to the supply room doorway and handed him back to JonJon.

"He seems to be a fine animal, very evenly tempered." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"He doesn't like to be called an animal. His name is Fizgig." JonJon said seriously.

"Of course." Ensign Thaelan said, then turned his attention to Fizgig and said, "Fizgig, please forgive me if I frightened you earlier today. I was angry and did not behave as well as I should have."

As Ensign Thaelan petted the dog in JonJon's arms, Fizgig turned and began to lick his hand.

"Fizgig forgives you." JonJon said with a smile.

"That is good. I will try to behave properly in the future so I won't have to ask his forgiveness again." Ensign Thaelan said quietly as he continued to pet the dog.

"It's okay Ensign Thaelan. I know how it is to be different from everyone around you. The trick is to ignore that and try and look at how we're all the same." JonJon said with a smile.

Ensign Thaelan looked at JonJon curiously.

"I'm an android, so I know how it feels to be the different one when everyone around you is Human." JonJon said seriously.

Ensign Thaelan looked at JonJon with surprise for a moment, then said, "Perhaps the two of us can help each other understand these Humans."

"The three of us." JonJon said seriously, then leaned close to Ensign Thaelan and whispered, "Fizgig isn't Human either."

Ensign Thaelan smiled and said, "Of course. When the others start acting 'typically Human' the three of us can help each other through the experience."

"That would be nice... I've got to finish brushing Fizgig before he gets all tangled." JonJon finished quickly.

"I will return to Lieutenant Bowers now. I still have much to learn about fitting in here." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

JonJon nodded, then hurried into the supply room.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you Darin. I really wasn't trying to do that." Rad said as they walked slowly down the catwalk.

"That's alright. I was just caught off guard." Darin said quietly.

Rad stopped and looked into Darin's eyes as he said, "Darin, I don't want you to feel pressured into anything."

"I don't. I'm just... a little surprised." Darin said slowly.

"But you're not against the idea... you know, of us maybe becoming a couple?" Rad asked in a hesitant voice.

Darin smiled at Rad's hopeful expression and said, "No, I'm not against the idea at all."

Rad let out a relieved gust of breath and said, "I'm so glad you said that."

Darin smiled at Rad nervously and said, "I'm a little worried because I've never done anything like this before."

"You've never been with a man before?" Rad asked gently as he looked into Darin's eyes.

"Not exactly. Before I went to the academy I had a friend and we... did stuff. But I knew him all my life and... I don't know, it was just different." Darin said with a note of confusion in his voice.

"I think I understand. It sounds like it's the emotional side of things that you're not sure about." Rad said quietly.

"I guess so. I mean, I want it, I'm just scared that I'll mess it up. I don't know what to do." Darin said desperately.

"To be honest, I don't know either. I'm not sure anyone does because it's different for each couple." Rad said thoughtfully.

Darin nodded distantly.

Rad thought for a moment, then began, "Darin, I'm very attracted to you physically. I think you're one of the most handsome men that I've seen in a long time."

Darin's eyes went wide at the statement, no one had ever said such a thing to him before.

Then Darin abruptly said, "Me too... I mean you."

Rad smiled at the bumbling statement, then quietly said, "After I got past the initial attraction, I got to know you a little and realized that you're incredibly gentle and kind."

Darin watched Rad's expression cautiously, reluctant to believe that Rad really wanted him.

"I'm really sorry if me saying that is intimidating to you. I just want you to know what I'm feeling so there won't be any misunderstanding." Rad said gently.

"It's not intimidating, just surprising." Darin said quietly.

After a moment of consideration, Darin continued, "I like that you're strong and outspoken. I admire that."

"I'm glad it doesn't put you off. I grew up in a large family and... I guess I'm a little more expressive than most people." Rad said thoughtfully.

"I guess what frightens me is that my father is something like you. He's forceful and sure of himself. The difference is that he always tried to

dominate me. I always felt like he was trying to control me." Darin said distantly.

"I never want to make you feel like that." Rad said with concern.

"You don't. With you I don't have the feeling that you're trying to take control from me. You can be strong without making me feel weak." Darin said carefully.

"Did you ever stand up to your father?" Rad asked gently.

Darin hesitantly nodded and said, "When I entered the academy. He was completely against it. He said that I would be a failure and disgrace the Hargrove family name."

"I thought your last name was Cooper." Rad said slowly.

"On my birth certificate my last name is Hargrove-Cooper. When I entered the academy, I asked that they just call me Cooper. I didn't want to be associated with him anyway, I wanted to make my own way." Darin said shyly.

"I think you have a lot more strength than you know. It's easy to be assertive when you're sure of yourself, but to stand up to the biggest authority figure in your life to follow your dream... that takes a lot of courage." Rad said with admiration.

Darin blushed at the praise.

"What would you like to happen between us now?" Rad asked quietly.

"I don't know... I mean, I've never even been on a real date before so I don't know what to do." Darin said helplessly.

"Then that sounds like the perfect place to start. How would you feel about having dinner with me tomorrow after our shifts?" Rad asked hopefully.

"That sounds great." Darin said with a delighted smile.

"I'll stop by Deflector Control at 19:00 to pick you up." Rad said happily.

"I'll be ready." Darin said with a grand smile.

"Then it's a date! Come on, we'd better get moving so the rest of your team can get a chance at the shower tonight." Rad said as he started walking again.

"Oh yeah." Darin said quickly and hurried to Rad's side.

* * * * *

"It looks like you made a new friend." Joe said as Ensign Thaelan walked to his side.

"Yes. It appears that I have." Ensign Thaelan said cautiously.

"Is something wrong?" Joe asked with concern at Ensign Thaelan's pensive expression.

"No, not at all. I am just surprised by the feeling of inclusion that I am experiencing since I have arrived." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"I'm glad. Not everyone who is assigned to this department feels included. We've had a few new people request a transfer to a more 'military' posting." Joe said frankly.

"I can't imagine why someone would wish to avoid this atmosphere of unity." Ensign Thaelan said as he looked Joe in the eyes.

"I can't say that I understand it either. But I suppose it's not for everyone." Joe finished with a shrug.

The doors opened and silence fell over the room.

"Captain on the deck." Joe said firmly.

Everyone in the room stood to attention.

"As you were." Captain Byrne said seriously as he walked into the room.

Captain Byrne walked to stand before Joe and Ensign Thaelan and said, "Ensign Thaelan, I just wanted to come down and welcome you personally to the Yorktown."

"Thank you sir." Ensign Thaelan said, still at attention.

"At ease Ensign." Captain Byrne said calmly.

"Captain, that is 'at ease' for him." Joe said with a small smile.

"Oh, I see. Ensign Thaelan, my first officer, Commander M'Butu has brought a concern to my attention that I would like to discuss with you." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said in a forced military voice.

"We can step outside if you would prefer to discuss this matter privately." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"No thank you sir. I would not object to Lieutenant Bowers or the other members of Deflector Control being included in this conversation." Ensign Thaelan said frankly.

"As you like. By the nature of your orders and the comments attached to your file, Commander M'Butu came to the conclusion that you were assigned to the Yorktown under protest. If that is the case, I would like to know what we can do to accommodate you for the duration of your assignment with us." Captain Byrne said seriously.

After a moment to consider his words, Ensign Thaelan carefully said, "When I was given my new orders I did object to this assignment. I felt that I was being transferred from the Enterprise without being given a fair chance to demonstrate my abilities and prove my worth."

"I can see how that would be frustrating. I can assure you that you will be given the opportunity to work to your full potential while you are onboard my ship." Captain Byrne said in a measured tone.

"Thank you sir. Lieutenant Bowers allowed me to take control of the main console when we got underway and has already assigned me a shift to lead and a crew. I am quite content with my assigned duties." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"I'm glad to hear that. I was given to understand that you would object to any posting that required you to work with a group of Humans. Do you believe that you will have difficulty working in this environment?" Captain Byrne asked frankly.

Ensign Thaelan was surprised by the blunt statement, but at the same time, appreciated the Captain's honesty.

"No sir. I came onboard with a certain attitude firmly in place. However Lieutenant Bowers provided counsel and insights into the matter that allowed me to see things from a different perspective. After that, Crewman Winters offered his assistance to help me integrate into the Deflector Control team." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"Very good. Then I will leave you to your duty. If you have any concerns that Lieutenant Bowers is unable to address, please feel free to come to either Commander M'Butu or myself. It is of the utmost importance to us that all members of the crew are given the proper encouragement to reach their full potential." Captain Byrne said professionally.

"Thank you sir. From what I have witnessed in the past few hours, Lieutenant Bowers shares your philosophy and actively seeks to make it so." Ensign Thaelan said formally.

"That's good to know. Welcome aboard Ensign Thaelan." Captain Byrne said seriously and extended his hand to shake.

Ensign Thaelan shook the offered hand, then watched as Captain Byrne left the room.

* * * * *

"Well, since the Captain brought it up, is there anything you can think of that I can do to help you in running your shift in the morning?" Joe asked as he turned to face Ensign Thaelan again.

"Nothing beyond what you have already done. If I have any problems, I will seek your assistance." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"Good. I was afraid that you might be reluctant to ask for help." Joe said with a smile.

Before Ensign Thaelan could respond, the door to Deflector Control opened to reveal Darin wearing a radiant smile.

"Good shower?" Joe asked with a chuckle.

Darin nodded happily, then walked into the supply room.

Joe chuckled at Darin's reaction, then said, "The shower is free, who's next?"

"I'll go. It won't take me long." Connie said as he stood.

Joe nodded.

"Thaelan, do you want to come with me? I'll show you where it is." Connie asked casually.

Ensign Thaelan was surprised by the offer and hesitantly said, "I believe I can find my way to the cabin..."

"Yeah, probably. But it's faster if we do it like this, and if you come with me we can talk along the way." Connie said frankly.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with question to receive a shrug in response.

After a moment to consider, Ensign Thaelan hesitantly said, "I will accompany you."

"Then grab your stuff and let's go." Connie said with a smile and walked to the supply room where his gear was stowed.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with question again.

"It's just another way for him to tell you that you're accepted here." Joe said quietly.

Ensign Thaelan nodded, then picked up his rucksack from beside the lockers.

* * * * *

"So what do you think Joe?" Lou asked after Ensign Thaelan and Connie had walked out the door.

"I think he might fit in." Joe said thoughtfully as he walked to her side.

Lou nodded as she turned her attention back to the main console.

"Do you think you're going to have a problem with him?" Joe asked curiously.

"Maybe. At first, his snotty attitude was really pissing me off but now... I don't know, I get the feeling that underneath there might be someone worth getting to know." Lou said speculatively.

"I think you're right. Most of the Andorians I've met have an attitude of... superiority..." Joe trailed off uncertainly.

"Yeah. That's it. It makes me want to just slap the blue right off him." Lou said firmly.

Joe turned when he heard Judy's chuckle come from station one.

"Resist the urge Lou. I think it's just a cultural thing that most Andorians learn as they're growing up. I don't know his story, but I just have the feeling that there's quite a bit more to him than we're seeing." Joe said speculatively.

"I suppose so. I guess I can look at this as my chance to really get to know someone from a different culture. I mean, that's one of the reason's we're out here isn't it?" Lou asked in thought.

Joe smiled at the question and said, "One of the most important reasons."

* * * * *

"What did you want to say to me that you could not say in front of the others?" Ensign Thaelan asked seriously as he and Connie walked toward the turbo lift.

"I just wanted some company..." Connie began to say when he was stopped by Thaelan's incredulous stare.

"You caught me." Connie said with a chuckle.

Ensign Thaelan raised an eyebrow and waited for an answer.

"Well, I was really wanting to work up to this..." Connie said in prelude as the lift doors opened.

"Deck 5 Section C2." Ensign Thaelan said as they walked onto the lift.

"You remember that I told you about my brother Nicky." Connie said hesitantly.

"Yes." Ensign Thaelan said patiently.

"Well, since you two went through basically the same thing, I was wondering if maybe you could help me to help him." Connie said with difficulty.

"What can I do to help?" Ensign Thaelan asked carefully as the doors to the lift opened.

Connie led Thaelan to the cabin door as he said, "I really don't know. But I'm out of ideas of what to do for him. He's not healing. He's not getting better."

Ensign Thaelan nodded his understanding as he and Connie walked into the room.

"I know I just met you, and I hate to ask you for a favor like this but I'm really worried about him." Connie said frankly.

"I don't know what I'll be able to do to help you, but I will try." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Thank you. Even if we can't come up with anything, thank you for trying." Connie said sincerely.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to use this terminal to compose a letter to my family while you shower." Ensign Thaelan said carefully.

"That's fine. I'll be done in a few minutes." Connie said and walked to the bathroom door.

Ensign Thaelan sat before the terminal, then waited a long silent moment before writing his letter.

* * * * *

"Joe, come look at this." Darin said in a whisper.

Joe walked to the edge of the partition where Darin was standing and glanced inside.

Vincent was fast asleep with a happy smile on his face.

"That's what I needed to see." Joe said peacefully.

Darin turned at a movement out of the corner of his eye and noticed that Benny and JonJon were also watching Vincent sleep.

"You guys had better think about getting to bed soon too." Darin said in a whisper.

"Yeah, we just finished brushing Fizgig. We're going to get ready now." Benny said quietly.

"Then come over here and give me a hug in case I don't see you again before you go to sleep." Joe said with a gentle smile.

JonJon happily walked to Joe to receive his hug as Benny followed a little more hesitantly.

Joe hugged JonJon tightly and said, "I'm really glad that you and Fizgig are here."

"Really?" JonJon asked in wonder.

Joe pulled back to look into JonJon's eyes and said, "Yes. Vincent has made quite a few new friends since he came on the Yorktown, but you and Benny are the only ones close to his own age. He can be a kid around you. I think he needs that."

JonJon smiled and said, "Thank you. I thought you just invited us to stay here because you felt sorry for us."

"No. I invited you to stay here because you're Vincent's friends, and now that I've had some time to get to know you, you're my friends too." Joe said gently.

JonJon smiled, then moved out of the way so Benny could get his hug.

Joe recognized the hesitance in Benny's expression and said, "Thank you for everything you did today Benny."

Benny looked at Joe with question.

"You were there for Vincent when I couldn't be. If there's ever anything I can do for you, all you have to do is ask." Joe said quietly.

"Vincent is a good person. I was happy to help him." Benny said with a gentle smile.

Joe slowly pulled Benny into a hug, ready to pull back at Benny's first sign of resistance.

After a long silent moment of hugging, Joe felt a tremble in Benny's body and realized that Benny was crying.

"It's okay Benny. Everything is going to be fine." Joe whispered soothingly.

Benny didn't respond except to tighten his hug until he was clutching Joe desperately.

"Go on Benny. Let it all out. I'm here for you." Joe whispered as he rubbed Benny's back.

Joe glanced over and noticed JonJon's look of concern.

In a slightly louder voice, Joe said, "After a day like you've had, it's okay to cry. Sometimes you just need to let it out so you can feel better."

JonJon picked up Fizgig and hesitantly walked to Joe's side.

Joe gave him a small nod to indicate that it was okay and held out one arm to include JonJon in the hug.

JonJon tucked in under Joe's arm and also began to silently cry.

"Everything is going to be fine. I'm here for you for as long as you need me." Joe whispered as he felt tears begin to form in his own eyes.

* * * * *

Beloved Mother,

I have been reassigned yet again, this time to the USS Yorktown. In less than one hour of my arrival, my new commanding officer assigned me a crew and allowed me to take control of the ship's main deflector console.

My new commanding officer spoke with me briefly and in just a few minutes was able to make me understand what you have been trying to explain to me for years. The bigotry and isolation that I have been enduring since I joined Starfleet isn't something that has been directed at me, but rather, is something that I have been carrying with me.

One of my new crewmates has also been able to give me some valuable

insights about dealing with my personal tragedy. I believe it is time for me to begin to heal.

Please tell my brothers and sisters that my period of mourning is coming to an end and that when I am next in a position to return to Andor, I will visit and we can have a feast to celebrate life.

In your response, please apprise me of Father's condition. In my attempt to distance myself from my painful memories I have also distanced myself from my family. Please accept my apologies for neglecting my responsibilities as your eldest son.

For several years all the light seemed to have been absent from my life, but at last the dawn of a new day has come.

Your loving and devoted son,

Thaelan

Chapter 15

Vincent opened his eyes and looked around curiously at his surroundings.

It took a moment for him to remember that he was sleeping in the supply room of Deflector Control.

He quietly got out of his sleeping bag and pulled on his T-shirt from the night before.

He moved quietly and was careful not to wake anyone else as he crept out of the room.

* * * * *

"Good morning Vincent, did you have a good sleep?" Lou asked pleasantly as she watched Vincent walk to the main console.

"Yeah. What time is it?" Vincent asked groggily.

"It's almost 04:45. There's still time for you to get some more sleep if you wanted to." Lou said gently.

"I went to sleep early enough that I think I'm done sleeping now. Where's Judy?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"We had a control circuit failure on one of the R cell nodes so she's switching it out. I guess that's going to be happening a lot until we can get back to Earth and get stocked up on good control circuits." Lou said casually.

"Oh yeah. I guess so." Vincent said as he came more awake.

"Since you're up, would you mind running a quick level two on the main console? I'm getting some strange readings here and I'd like to make sure that they're for real." Lou said as she looked at her board carefully.

"Yeah. It'll just take a second." Vincent said and walked to station three to run the diagnostic.

"If this isn't a problem with the sensor display, then you guys may be having an interesting day." Lou said speculatively.

"The level two diagnostic shows that the console is running fine, but I'm going to run a level three just to be safe." Vincent said as he keyed in the command.

"Thanks, I was going to suggest that." Lou said as she examined the readings more closely.

"While that's running, I'm going to go get dressed." Vincent said and walked to the supply room.

After a moment, Lou muttered, "Yeah. Fine."

* * * * *

Vincent walked out of the supply room wearing his uniform and walked directly to station three to check on the status of the diagnostic.

"It's not showing anything wrong so far. I'm going to run to the bathroom and I'll be right back." Vincent said quickly.

"Wait Vincent. Before you go could you wake up Joe, I think he needs to see this." Lou said in deep concentration.

"Yeah, I'll get him now." Vincent said as he started feeling concern at the tone of her voice.

* * * * *

"What's going on Lou?" Joe asked as he hurried to the main console.

Lou glanced up and smiled at the sight of Joe in his pajamas.

Before she could answer he saw the strange readings and asked, "Have you run a diagnostic to see that it's not a faulty sensor image?"

"Vincent has a level three running right now, but I'm beginning to think that it's for real." Lou said as she stared at the sensor data.

"I don't recall ever seeing readings like this before." Joe said as he examined the sensor data carefully.

"I think I have." Lou said quietly.

"Really? Where?" Joe asked curiously.

"Back in my Astrophysics class at the academy. These are the types of readings you would get from proto-matter." Lou said hesitantly.

"It's too soon to be jumping to a conclusion like that. This could be something as simple as a particulate matter build-up on the sensor array." Joe said cautiously.

"Or it could be the first recorded instance of naturally occurring proto-matter that anyone has ever seen." Lou said seriously.

"Is everything okay?" Vincent asked as he hurried back into deflector control.

"Everything is fine. Lou's just getting her hopes up about something that's probably just a hardware maintenance issue." Joe said, trying to hide his excitement at the prospect.

"You know... it could take hours to check every possible hardware cause for this reading... but it would just take a few minutes to rule out proto-matter." Lou said in a leading tone.

Joe thought about the statement for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"So you're going to do it?" Lou asked hopefully.

"Give me a minute to get dressed, then I'll go up to the bridge and try to convince whoever the duty officer is to come out of warp long enough to collect a sample." Joe said as a hopeful smile crept onto his face.

"Thanks Joe... This could really be it." Lou said with excitement.

"Try not to get your hopes up too much. Right now it's only a possibility." Joe said seriously, then walked to the supply room to change.

* * * * *

After Joe walked into the supply room, Vincent curiously asked, "So what's going on?"

"The area of space that we're traveling through is virgin territory..." Lou began to say, then trailed off when she noticed Vincent's wide eyed expression.

Lou fought down her chuckles as she said, "That just means that no Federation starship has taken this course through space before. The space beyond the Kimber colony is mostly virgin territory. We've done all kinds of detailed long range scans, but this is the first time we're actually traveling through this space.

"Oh, okay. I get it." Vincent said timidly at his original misunderstanding.

"Well, now I'm detecting some particulate matter impacting the shields that appears to have some characteristics of a theoretical substance called proto-matter." Lou said carefully.

"What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

Joe walked behind Vincent and pulled him into a gentle hug from behind and said, "Some scientists believe that proto-matter may be what the 'big

bang' exploded out into empty space and it was the catalyst that caused the formation of the universe."

"But so far it's all been just a theory. Some scientists have created something in a lab that they named proto-matter but it was unstable and didn't have the properties that would be necessary for the formation of the universe. But what I'm detecting on the sensors *could* be the real thing." Lou said as she looked at the readings again.

"I'd better go now so I can settle this before we're both lost on a flight of fancy." Joe said with a smile and gave Vincent one final squeeze.

"Let me know as soon as you find out." Lou said firmly.

"I will Lou, I promise." Joe said gently, then thought to ask, "Would you like to come with me Vincent?"

"Sure. That'd be great." Vincent said with a happy smile.

* * * * *

Joe and Vincent walked onto the bridge and directly to the command chair.

"Lieutenant Walking Bear, would it be possible for us to come out of warp long enough to collect some samples of the particulate matter that we're traveling through?" Joe asked hopefully.

"Can't you just beam a sample aboard?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked cautiously.

"Not this time. The transporter might corrupt the sample. We have to be very careful to avoid any possibility of contamination." Joe said seriously.

"What is it that you think you've found?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked curiously as he turned his full attention to Joe.

Joe looked around the room, then leaned close to whisper, "Proto-matter."

"Seriously?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked with astonishment.

"It's a possibility. But there's no way to know for sure without a sample." Joe said urgently.

Lieutenant Walking Bear thought for a moment, then said, "It may take me a few minutes to round up a shuttle pilot for you. Everyone got thrown off schedule with the evacuation efforts yesterday."

"Darin trained on helm and navigation. He could probably do it if you wanted. I know he'd want to help if he could." Vincent offered quickly.

Lieutenant Walking Bear looked at Vincent curiously.

"Crewman Winters is right. If you can bring us out of warp and have a shuttle prepped for us, we can provide a pilot." Joe said with a smile at Vincent.

"Then consider it done." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously, then looked at Vincent and said, "And it's a pleasure to meet you Crewman Winters, I've been hearing some good things about you."

"It's nice to meet you too." Vincent said shyly.

"Go wake up Darin while I get the sample containers that we'll need. I'll meet you two on the flight deck." Joe said seriously.

"Yes sir." Vincent said quickly, then hurried to the turbo lift.

"I know how the gossip on the ship can distort the truth of the things you hear. I've been hearing such fantastic things about him, I just have to ask. What is he really like to work with?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked carefully.

"He's still new and has quite a bit to learn. But he's picking up on things quickly and has a strong work ethic. I'd have to say that he's better than most of the new crewmen that have been assigned to me in the past few years." Joe said consideringly.

"It's hard to believe. At his age I was just beginning to look up at the stars and dream." Lieutenant Walking Bear said distantly.

"I know what you mean John. I think I was probably older than Vincent before I started stargazing... I'd better get down to sciences and get some level 5 containment jars for the samples. I wouldn't want to keep Vincent waiting." Joe said with a smile.

"You'd better hurry Joe. From what I've been hearing about him, he might just go do it without you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a teasing smile.

Joe chuckled and walked to the turbo lift.

As he stepped on the lift, he heard Lieutenant Walking Bear say, "Helm, prepare to take us out of warp..."

* * * * *

Joe walked to the shuttle craft pushing a cart with four carry-all containers.

"Let me help you with that." Darin said quickly as he rushed to Joe's side.

"No Darin. Vincent and I will get this. Go ahead and start your pre-flight. We need to get this done as quickly as possible so the *Yorktown* can get underway again." Joe said seriously.

Darin nodded and rushed to the shuttle craft.

"Take one side and lift it gently. These containers are fragile." Joe said as he locked the wheels of the cart.

Vincent took hold of one side and gently lifted the box off the cart, then walked backward to the steps of the shuttle craft.

"Gently. We don't need to rush this part." Joe said quietly.

Vincent slowly walked backward up the two steps, then turned once he was inside the shuttle so Joe could lead the way to where they were going to store it.

After a moment to maneuver the carry-all to the back of the shuttle, Joe finally said, "Good. Now we just need to do that three more times."

Vincent nodded and hurried off the shuttle to get the next container.

* * * * *

"Are you guys ready?" Darin asked over his shoulder.

"Go ahead Darin. While you're getting us into position, we're going to be prepping these containment jars." Joe said seriously.

"What do we need to do?" Vincent asked carefully.

"These containment jars are designed to hold a sample in a level 5 quarantine field. Anything that's put inside the jar will be completely isolated so that no light, heat, magnetic fields... not even gravity will be effecting it. What we need to do is make sure that all the properties of the force field are tuned to completely enforce the isolation. I'm going to set up the sample jars, then you can do the fine tuning." Joe said as he opened the first carry-all container.

"Me?" Vincent asked with a squeak.

Joe smiled at him and said, "It's just another force field. You know how to adjust field properties well enough to do this. Besides, Darin and I will be here to answer any questions you have and I can look it over when you're done if you're not sure."

"Um, yeah. If it has to be perfect, then it would be better if you'd look at it. Even if I was sure about what I was doing, that would probably be the smartest thing to do." Vincent said in thought.

Joe smiled at the statement and said, "That's a very good way of looking at it. Watch what I'm doing in case you have to prep a containment canister someday."

* * * * *

"We're outside the shield, what should I do now?" Darin asked cautiously.

"Contact Lou and find out where we need to go to collect a sample." Joe said seriously.

"Got it." Darin said, then opened the comm channel.

"Shuttle craft *Victoria* to *Yorktown* Deflector Control." Darin said professionally.

"*I'm here Darin. Turn to heading 322.4 mark 7, ahead 86.74 meters for your first sample*." Lou said seriously.

"With coordinates like that, you don't even need a pilot out here. You could pilot the shuttle by remote." Darin said with a smile as he maneuvered the shuttle to the proper trajectory and nudged the thruster to move them the short distance to the sample.

"*I could, but I don't think Joe would let me hog all the glory.*" Lou said playfully.

"Firing reverse thrusters. All forward momentum stopped." Darin said once he was in position.

"Vincent, how's the first sample container coming along?" Joe asked as he walked to the front of the shuttle.

"It'll just be a few seconds, then you can look at it." Vincent said in deep concentration as he made minute adjustments to the field properties.

"Lou, where is it?" Joe asked as he looked over Darin's shoulder at the scanners.

"*Z minus two meters.*" Lou said seriously.

"Ouch. You couldn't have brought us any closer could you?" Joe asked as he looked at the scanner carefully.

"*I could have, but I've never seen Darin pilot before. I wanted to leave a margin for error.*" Lou said frankly.

"How did I do?" Darin asked with a smile.

"*Let's just say that you'll be even closer to the next three samples.*" Lou said and a smile could be heard in her voice.

"Daddy Joe. Are you ready to check this?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Sure thing, Son, I'll be right there." Joe said and hurried to Vincent's side.

After a moment of close inspection, Joe finally said, "You set it up perfectly. If it gets out that you can prep a containment jar this well, sciences might try to steal you away from us."

"I won't go without a fight." Vincent said firmly, then broke into a smile.

"Help me move it to the collection airlock. As soon as we've got it secured, Darin will fire the maneuvering thrusters so we can collect the sample." Joe said with a smile.

* * * * *

"I'm evacuating the atmosphere from the collection container." Joe said in concentration.

"Containment and quarantine fields on standby." Vincent said as he double checked all the field properties.

"Sterilization complete and confirmed. Initiate containment field." Joe said seriously.

Vincent was surprised by the command, but immediately pressed the button to activate the containment field.

"Okay Darin. It's up to you now." Joe said into the air.

"I'm lined up on it. I've just got to tap... tap... angle the descent just a little bit..." Darin said in concentration as he maneuvered the shuttle craft into the perfect position.

"How close are we now?" Joe asked quickly.

"We're at point five meters." Darin said in concentration.

"Will you give me a countdown?" Joe asked as he put his finger on the airlock release.

"Point four five." Darin called out in an absent voice.

"Vincent, get ready to activate the quarantine field. We only get one chance at this." Joe said seriously.

"Point three five."

"I'm ready." Vincent said as he followed Joe's example and placed his finger on the activation button.

"Point two five." Darin said as he worked his controls.

"*Looking good flyboy.*" Lou's voice called out over the comm.

"Point one five."

"Point one."

"Point zero five."

"Get ready..." Joe said in concentration as he pushed the airlock control firmly.

A second later he pushed the control again as he said, "Activate."

There was a long moment of silence, until it was broken by Lou asking, "*Did you get it?*"

Joe picked up his tricorder and scanned the collection canister carefully before saying, "We got something."

"*What do you mean?*" Lou asked slowly.

"I mean that the tricorder can't identify what we've collected. That doesn't mean that it's proto-matter, but whatever it is, it's not something that the tricorder has been programmed to recognize." Joe said frankly.

"Are we ready to do another one?" Darin asked from his place at the front of the shuttle.

"Hold on, the quarantine field is reacting to the sample... give me a second to fine tune it." Vincent said in concentration.

"It's going to take us a few minutes to secure the sample jar and set up a new one. I guess you could be getting into position while we do that." Joe said as he started looking over the sample jar to make sure everything was secure.

"Do you have another one ready for me Lou?" Darin asked hopefully.

"*Heading 207.88, mark 293.1, ahead 366.42 meters.*" Lou said firmly.

"I'll take that as a yes." Joe said with a chuckle as he disconnected the sample container from the airlock.

* * * * *

"Would you look at this. We're back on board and we've still got nearly an hour to kill before our duty shift." Joe said happily.

"Do we have to unload the sample containers right now? I really wanted to do something with Benny and JonJon real quick before I have breakfast." Vincent said in a rush.

"No. I don't think anyone will mind if we leave the samples on the shuttle for the time being. I'm not sure which department of sciences should get custody of them anyway. Once we're on duty we can write a report for Commander M'Butu and he can decide what to do next." Joe said casually as he walked to the door of the shuttle.

"Won't someone mess with them while we're gone?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Not if we ask them not to..." Joe said as he stepped off the shuttle, then walked to the ensign who was in charge of the Gamma shift crew.

"Ensign Mahoney, we've just collected some very sensitive samples and left them on that shuttle. Would you please see that no one disturbs the shuttle until I can make some arrangements?" Joe asked professionally.

"Yes sir. I don't think that will be any problem. Do you want me to contact you in deflector control if we need to move the shuttle?" Ensign Mahoney asked calmly.

"That will be fine. If I'm not there, they'll know where to find me." Joe said seriously.

Ensign Mahoney nodded his understanding.

"Well Vincent, why don't you go do what you need to do and we'll meet you in the mess hall." Joe suggested casually.

"Okay. I'll be there as quick as I can." Vincent said happily and rushed ahead of them.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent. I was wondering where you went." Benny said with a contented smile as he sat up in his sleeping bag.

"If you guys will hurry up and get dressed, I want to take you up to where Channing is staying so you can take care of him... I mean, if you still want to." Vincent finished shyly.

"Oh yeah. I forgot. It'll just take me a minute." Benny said as he got out of his sleeping bag and walked to get his clothes.

"You said it was okay if Fizgig went with us, right?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Channing is a really friendly guy and I think he'll enjoy playing with Fizgig." Vincent said with a gentle smile.

JonJon smiled, then hopped up and began to get dressed.

"Are we going to have time to get something to eat before we go?" Benny asked as he was pulling on his shirt.

"I thought that you guys might want to check and see what Channing wanted to eat, and then you could get food for all of you and eat with him." Vincent said seriously.

"That sounds like a good idea. It'll be like a picnic." Benny said happily.

"Should I bring Fizgig's um..." JonJon trailed off and pointed at the litter box.

"Not right now. You can come back for it later if you want or bring Fizgig down here when he needs to use it." Vincent said seriously.

"Okay. Then I guess I'm ready." JonJon said as he picked Fizgig up and cuddled him gently.

"Let's go." Vincent said urgently and led the way out of the supply room.

* * * * *

"Shhh. I don't know if he's awake yet." Vincent whispered as he led the way into the room.

"Don't worry about it Vincent. We're all awake, we were just talking." Channing said with a smile.

"Channing, you already met Benny. This is our friend JonJon and his dog Fizgig." Vincent said as he motioned to them.

"Nice to meet you." Channing said with a smile, then said, "Guys, I'd like for you to meet Chance and Harmon, my roommates for the next few weeks."

"Hi." JonJon said and gave a little wave.

"I've got to go now so I can eat before I have to go to work." Vincent said seriously.

"Hold on Vincent. We'll go with you." Chance said quickly as he stood.

"You guys have fun today. I'll stop by after my shift." Vincent said with a smile.

Chance and Harmon straightened their uniforms as they waited for Vincent by the door.

"Have a good day Vincent. We'll be fine." Channing said happily.

* * * * *

Vincent approached Joe and Darin's table carrying his tray of food.

Joe saw him approaching and casually asked, "Did you get everything taken care of that you needed to?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to introduce Channing to JonJon and make sure they were going to be okay before I left." Vincent said as he took his seat.

"Oh, I forgot to ask last night. How is Channing?" Joe asked curiously.

"He's fine, he was just up too long yesterday. Dr. Perry said that he needs to rest for three days." Vincent said, then took a bite of his food.

"Is that the guy you went to visit in sickbay night before last?" Darin asked with interest.

"Yeah. He was also in the bed next to mine in sickbay yesterday." Vincent said casually.

"So you arranged for Benny and JonJon to take care of Channing while you're working?" Joe asked speculatively.

"Uh huh. I thought that that way they could be doing something that really matters instead of being bored all day with nothing to do."

"Good thinking. Guys, we'd better hurry up. It's just about that time." Joe said seriously.

"I'm almost finished." Vincent said quickly.

"Excuse me gentlemen, may I have a moment of your time?" A voice asked from behind Vincent.

He turned to see a familiar face and happily said, "Hi Neil. Would you like to join us?"

"Do you know everyone on this ship?" Joe asked Vincent with a smile.

"I'm working on it." Vincent said with a giggle.

"Are you Ensign Darin Cooper?" Neil asked Darin seriously.

"Yes. Why do you ask?" Darin replied cautiously.

"I've been ordered to 'discretely' ask the three of you to come to conference room one immediately." Neil said firmly.

"What's this about?" Joe asked curiously.

"I've been ordered to inform you that you are not to speculate on the reason for the meeting in my presence. I don't know and I don't need to know. Please proceed to the conference room without drawing undue attention." Neil said seriously.

"You heard the man. Let's go." Joe said as he stood and picked up his plate.

* * * * *

"Do I have time to swing by deflector control and arrange coverage for while we're gone?" Joe asked as he led the way to the cafeteria window to drop off his plate.

"No sir, I don't think you do." Neil said seriously.

"You were a lot more fun yesterday in the observation lounge when you were tired." Vincent said playfully as he looked up at Neil.

Neil broke into an involuntary smile and said, "I'm just acting this way so you guys will know that I'm serious."

"We know you mean it, so you can stop being growley now. I want to talk to the nice guy who helped me when I was on the pool deck and I couldn't see." Vincent said hopefully.

"Okay Vincent. Just for you." Neil said with fond amusement.

As the group approached the turbo lift, Neil stepped away and said, "This is as far as I go."

Darin looked at Joe with question, then reluctantly followed him onto the turbo lift.

"If whatever this is keeps me busy for a while, will you check to see that Channing is okay?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Neil smiled and said, "I'll check on him the first chance that I get."

* * * * *

Joe, Darin and Vincent walked into the conference room to find Lieutenant Walking Bear, Lou and Captain Byrne waiting for them.

"Gentlemen, please have a seat. We have an important matter to discuss." Captain Byrne said firmly.

Joe looked at Lou curiously and received a puzzled look in return.

Captain Byrne pressed his comm control and said, "Lieutenant Patterson, I need a priority one secure channel directed to Admiral Morrow at Starfleet Command."

"*Yes sir.*" Debbie said quickly.

"Captain..." Joe began to say but was stopped as Captain Byrne raised his hand.

"*Admiral Morrow for you sir.*" Debbie said professionally as the monitor came to life.

"*Leland, may I assume that this is somewhat urgent from the early hour and the need for a secure channel?*" Admiral Morrow asked as he sat back in his chair.

"Yes sir. Something happened this morning of which I thought you should be aware. We have not had any discussion of this matter so that you can be involved from the beginning." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"*Well, you certainly have my interest. What have you got for me?*" Admiral Morrow asked as he sat forward.

"It appears that my deflector control team may have come across some naturally occurring proto-matter." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"*Dear God! Who else knows about this?*" Admiral Morrow asked immediately.

Captain Byrne looked around the room, obviously waiting for an answer.

"I haven't discussed it with anyone outside this room." Joe said carefully.

"I told Judy, but I asked her not to tell anyone else until we were sure." Lou said quietly.

Captain Byrne pressed the comm button and said, "Lieutenant Simms."

"*Yes sir.*" Was the immediate answer.

"Crewman Judy Wills." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"*Right away sir.*" Lieutenant Simms said quickly, then the comm went silent.

"Anyone else?" Captain Byrne asked as he looked at Vincent and Darin.

"No sir. I didn't tell anyone." Vincent said shyly as Darin shook his head.

Captain Byrne looked at Lieutenant Walking Bear and received another negative response.

"*Very good. Now how sure are you?*" Admiral Morrow asked intensely.

Captain Byrne looked at Joe with question.

"We collected four samples of the... substance. The tricorder wasn't able to identify it." Joe said carefully.

"*Where is that tricorder?*" Admiral Morrow asked seriously.

"I left it on the shuttle craft with the samples." Joe said in a professional tone.

"*You left proto-matter sitting unattended in a shuttle bay?*" Admiral Morrow asked with disbelief.

"No sir, not exactly. I told Ensign Mahoney that we had some sensitive samples on the shuttle craft and asked him to call me if the shuttle needed to be moved. He assured me that no one would bother it." Joe said in a quieter voice.

The sound of the turbo lift doors opening caused all conversation to stop.

Judy hesitantly walked into the room and stood at attention.

"Crewman Wills, have you discussed the possible discovery of proto-matter with anyone outside this room?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

Judy glanced at Lou, then said, "No sir."

"Very good. Then please have a seat so we may continue." Captain Byrne said professionally.

There was a moment of silence that was finally broken by Admiral Morrow quietly asking, "*Given the sensitivity of proto-matter, how did you manage to collect samples.*"

"Ensign DeGama spotted the proto-matter with the *Yorktown's* sensors, then guided Ensign Cooper to where he needed to be. Once there, he used the maneuvering thrusters to slowly lower the shuttle until the sample airlock lined up with the proto-matter then dropped the shuttle over it." Joe said proudly.

"*That sounds like a very precise maneuver.*" Admiral Morrow said seriously.

"He's the best pilot in deflector control." Joe said with a proud smile.

"*How are the samples being stored?*"

"In level five sample containers with full containment and quarantine fields." Joe answered professionally.

Admiral Morrow keyed something into the console in front of him, then hesitantly asked, "*Do you happen to know the frequency of the quarantine field that you're using?*"

"108.11 cycles per millisecond." Vincent answered immediately.

There was a long moment of silence before Admiral Morrow asked, "*Please confirm, did you say 108.11 cycles?*"

"Yes sir." Vincent said firmly.

"*Could you tell me how you arrived at that precise modulation?*" Admiral Morrow asked slowly.

"Once we had the sample contained, I tuned the quarantine field to prevent any particle leakage." Vincent said cautiously.

Admiral Morrow shook his head and began to chuckle.

Vincent looked at Joe with puzzlement and received a shrug in response.

"*According to the theoretical research on the subject, true proto-matter could only be contained in a quarantine field modulated at precisely 108.11 cycles per millisecond. I believe that this is all the evidence I need to proceed with this matter. Leland, shortly you will be receiving rendezvous coordinates, when you reach the coordinates you will transfer the proto-matter samples to the Enterprise so the samples can be transported to Earth.*" Admiral Morrow said firmly.

Captain Byrne nodded his understanding of the instructions.

"*Your people need to understand the gravity of the situation so I am authorizing you to brief them on Project Genesis and the related facts concerning the Mutara Nebula. Their security clearances should be adjusted accordingly.*" Admiral Morrow said seriously.

"Yes sir." Captain Byrne said immediately.

"*I think it would be prudent if one member of this group were reassigned to serve as an escort for the proto-matter all the way back to Earth. I believe that only someone who knows all the facts could appreciate the*

importance of keeping the proto-matter safe and I would like to limit the number of people brought in on this." Admiral Morrow said firmly.

Captain Byrne nodded his agreement.

"*All of you, this matter is highly classified. Once you have been briefed, you are not to discuss this matter with anyone outside this group. The dissemination of this information in any form would constitute an act of high treason punishable by a life sentence on a prison planet. I believe you will understand the need for secrecy when your briefing has concluded.*" Admiral Morrow said gravely.

A moment of silence fell over the room until it was broken by Admiral Morrow saying, "*Captain Byrne, the safe transport of the proto-matter is your first priority. You have in your possession the most valuable substance in the universe. You are hereby authorized to use any and all means necessary to safeguard it's transport and prevent it falling into the wrong hands. Am I understood?*"

"Yes sir. I understand." Captain Byrne said in a somewhat reluctant voice.

"*I'm going to brief the Enterprise command staff, then you'll be contacted with the rendezvous coordinates.*" Admiral Morrow said seriously.

"Yes sir, we'll be standing by for your message." Captain Byrne said with distraction.

"*Starfleet Command out*." Admiral Morrow said firmly.

"*Yorktown,* out." Captain Byrne said in a hollow voice, then disconnected the transmission.

Vincent looked at Captain Byrne with concern.

"I believe Admiral Morrow adequately expressed the seriousness of the situation, so now I will tell you the rest of the story." Captain Byrne said reluctantly.

"Perhaps some of you know or have heard of Dr. Carol Marcus." Captain Byrne asked in prelude.

"I met her once when we did a supply run to the Regula One station., but I don't know much about her." Joe said quietly.

"I've read a few of her published reports. It was a little too theoretical for my taste." Lou said with a shrug.

"Dr. Marcus undertook a project for the Federation code named Project Genesis. The essence of the project is that a device that Dr. Marcus and her

team developed could be introduced into a dead world and the 'Genesis Effect' would transform a lifeless planet into a living world complete with atmosphere, water, even plant and animal life which would develop at an accelerated rate." Captain Byrne said in concentration.

"That sounds wonderful. What am I missing?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked slowly.

"If the Genesis Device were detonated on a planet where life already existed, the Genesis Effect would destroy every living thing on that world... within minutes." Captain Byrne finished reluctantly.

A long moment of silence fell over the room as everyone digested the statement.

Finally Captain Byrne added, "The key to the Genesis Device was proto-matter."

"Excuse me. You said 'was'... does that mean that Dr. Marcus actually built the device?" Lou asked suddenly.

"Yes." Captain Byrne said simply.

"Admiral Morrow mentioned the Mutara Nebula... it wasn't consumed by a black hole the way the official reports said, was it? Dr. Marcus detonated the Genesis Device and the Genesis Effect consumed the entire nebula." Joe said in a speculative voice as he figured it out.

"The Genesis Device was stolen from Dr. Marcus and detonated by someone else, but the rest of what you said was spot on." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Dear God! It was powerful enough to consume an entire nebula? No wonder Admiral Morrow is scared to death of it." Lou said in wonder.

"The nebular matter was drawn together by the Genesis Effect and formed a planet. But the artificially created proto-matter that was the basis of the device was, by it's very nature, unstable. The Genesis planet was born and lived for only a few short months before it finally decayed and became nothing more than an unremarkable rock in space." Captain Byrne finished quietly.

"But with naturally occurring proto-matter they could construct a Genesis Device that would result in a stable and habitable planet." Lieutenant Walking Bear said speculatively.

"That is the assumption that we're working under. An examination of the samples that you collected would prove or disprove that theory." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Captain Byrne, I don't understand exactly what the Admiral meant when he said 'any and all means'." Vincent said slowly, feeling that it was the key to the Captain's suddenly somber mood.

"That was the Admiral's way of saying that you and I and this entire ship are expendable. We will be sacrificed to protect the proto-matter or we will destroy it and ourselves to prevent the proto-matter from falling into the wrong hands, should the need arise." Captain Byrne said in a toneless voice.

"Oh. Um... wow." Vincent said quietly.

Joe smiled at Vincent's reaction, then turned back to the captain.

"So, do I have any volunteers to accompany the proto-matter back to Earth?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Captain, if I may, I would like that honor." Lieutenant Walking Bear said firmly.

"Very well Lieutenant Walking Bear, the protection of the proto-matter is now your personal responsibility." Captain Byrne said decisively.

"Captain, may I suggest that we leave the proto-matter on the shuttle craft so that when the Enterprise arrives, it won't have to be shifted unnecessarily." Joe said carefully.

"That sounds like a sensible idea. Lieutenant Walking Bear can stay on the shuttle and I'll post security to the area to prevent the possibility of anyone trying to gain entry." Captain Byrne said firmly.

"Would it be okay if the rest of us were allowed to go on the shuttle too? I mean, so we could take Lieutenant Walking Bear food or bring him stuff from his cabin if he needs it?" Vincent asked quietly.

After a moment of consideration, Captain Byrne nodded and said, "I'll make sure that security knows that you are allowed entry."

"Captain, I'm sorry I didn't bring this matter to you earlier. I thought the proto-matter would be a significant discovery to the scientific community, but I didn't consider that it might have a practical purpose." Lieutenant Walking Bear said repentantly.

"No need to be sorry. You had no way of knowing. The information about Project Genesis is only known by the higher ups at Starfleet and a few select ships captains." Captain Byrne said sincerely.

"Thank you sir." Lieutenant Walking Bear said quietly.

"I believe the next order of business should be for each of you to compose a report detailing your involvement in this matter. Include sensor readings wherever possible to corroborate your statements. Write the reports on secure data padds and deliver them to Lieutenant Walking Bear on the shuttle so they can be transported with the sample containers. No record of this event is to be made in official or personal logs. Do you understand?" Captain Byrne finished forcefully.

"Yes sir." Was the collective response.

"Then you are all dismissed." Captain Byrne said professionally.

Everyone stood and walked immediately to the turbo lift.

Once inside, Joe said, "Deflector Control."

"Hanger bay." Lieutenant Walking Bear said next.

"Lieutenant Walking Bear?" Vincent asked quietly.

Lieutenant Walking Bear looked at him with question.

"If you need anything like food or whatever, you can call me in deflector control and I'll get it for you... since it's kind of our fault that you're going to be stuck on the shuttle." Vincent finished shyly.

"Please don't feel responsible for this Crewman Winters. I have a sense that the Great Spirit has a hand in what's happening here. That is why I was so quick to volunteer for this duty. But I will keep your kind offer in mind and call you if I need anything." Lieutenant Walking Bear said gently.

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment, then asked, "Would you mind telling me about the Great Spirit... I mean later, after our reports are done?"

"I will be happy to answer whatever questions you have. So when you visit, be sure to bring your questions with you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a smile.

"You'd better watch out what you're asking John. One of Vincent's questions sparked an investigation that spread through the entire Federation." Joe said with a teasing smile at Vincent.

"That is good. The proper question carries more power than a hundred answers." Lieutenant Walking Bear said sagely.

The doors to the turbo lift opened and Joe said, "It looks like it's time for us to get to work."

"There you are!" Jimmy said in a frustrated voice.

"Observant, isn't he?" Lou said dryly.

Joe smiled at the statement, then said, "Ensign Thaelan, I'm sorry for having to do this to you on your first full day with us, but would you mind running the majority of this shift alone? We'll be here if you need anything, but we all need to work on our reports."

Ensign Thaelan looked at Joe with surprise for a moment, then said, "I will not mind at all. I will do my best not to interrupt your work."

"No Ensign Thaelan. Even though these reports need to be done, deflector control comes first. If you need anything, one of us will take care of it for you." Joe said firmly.

"I understand. If there is a need I will inform you immediately." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"That'll work. Everyone else, it's time to get to work." Joe said to the group.

"What *exactly* do we need to do?" Jimmy asked carefully.

"What *you* need to do is write a detailed report about your contribution to the 'Cooper Bridge'. All of us have our own reports to write and when everyone is finished, we can work to compile them." Joe said seriously.

"Are you serious? That's going to take forever." Jimmy said irritably.

"Just do it Jimmy. Vincent has more reports to write than you do and you don't hear him complaining." Joe said frankly.

Jimmy glanced over at Vincent and said, "Bosses pet."

"Whiner." Vincent said quickly in response, then stuck out his tongue.

"Jimmy, you're off duty. You can do it later if you want, but just remember... It has to be done." Joe finished firmly.

Jimmy thought for a moment, then said, "I'll do it now. I want to get it done so I'll have time to take Susan to a movie in the rec hall before our shift."

"That sounds nice. Do you know what movie you'll be seeing?" Joe asked curiously.

"Well, I don't really pay much attention to movies, but when I was looking at the list I found a romantic comedy that Susan and I might both like." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Oh? What's it called?" Joe asked curiously.

"Jiggley." Jimmy said with a grin.

"A romantic comedy called 'Jiggley'?" Joe asked with confusion.

"Yeah. It looks like kind of a chick flick, but maybe there will be enough funny parts so I'll enjoy it too." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Oh, well I hope you two have fun. Have you asked her yet?" Joe asked casually.

"I asked her to go to dinner and a movie but I haven't told her which one yet. In fact, I think I'm going to go and see if I can arrange something special for dinner..." Jimmy said with increasing excitement.

"Go ahead, just remember that you have reports to write." Joe said with a friendly smile.

Jimmy hopped up and ran for the door.

As soon as the door had closed, Darin said, "That movie has been called one of the worst movies ever made. A few of the reviews that I've read compared watching it to having food poisoning."

"Why didn't you warn him?" Joe asked curiously.

"Because he was being mean to Vincent." Darin said frankly.

Joe considered for a moment, then said, "Works for me. But I've honestly never heard of a movie called 'Jiggley'."

Darin smiled and quietly said, "It's pronounced 'Gigli'."

Chapter 16

"I don't know where to start." Vincent said as he looked at the blank padd in his hand.

"Let me show you a trick. I think you'll like this." Darin said as he walked to Vincent's side.

Vincent smiled and held the padd out so Darin could access it easily.

"I'm going to import a template for you. It's just something I came up with at the academy to help me with reports." Darin said as he tried to access his personal files.

"Hold on, the built in security won't let me import the file, I'll sign in on my padd and send it to you." Darin said and went back to his chair.

"What does the template do?" Vincent asked curiously as he waited to receive the file.

"It just asks you questions. I tried to make it as interactive as possible, but there are still a few quirks to work out. It should be just what you need to help you get started." Darin said, then looked up from his padd and said, "You should have it now."

"Okay. What do I do?" Vincent asked as he opened the file.

"All you have to do is answer the questions. Talk to it like you're visiting with a friend. When you're finished, you should have most of your report written and you'll just have to 'fine tune' it." Darin said seriously.

After a few minutes of Vincent typing and reading, he looked up from his padd and hesitantly asked, "Um, Darin. Why did the padd just call me 'honey'?"

"I wanted it to be friendly. What do you think?" Darin asked with a smile.

"Well, it's either really friendly or really creepy. I'm not sure which yet." Vincent said as he keyed in his answer to the next question.

"If you have any suggestions on how I can improve it, just let me know." Darin said casually.

After a moment of reading and typing, Vincent said, "It's asking me questions like someone who's trying to get to know me."

"That's the whole point. Instead of filling in blanks that say 'NAME:_____ RANK:_____' and so on, and then trying to figure out what to say in that big empty space in the middle, you have a conversation with the padd and

it asks you a bunch of questions about why you have to write a report. You end up saying just about the same thing, but it feels like you're talking to a friend instead of doing paperwork." Darin said without looking up from his padd.

"Okay. I guess I can understand that, but it just called me 'babycakes'." Vincent said hesitantly.

"It must like you." Darin said with a smile.

"Would you mind if I tried it too? It sounds like fun." Jimmy asked hopefully.

Darin looked at Jimmy with surprise for a moment, then said, "Sure. Crewman Tullis, right?"

"Yeah." Jimmy said with a smile.

Darin keyed in a few commands, then transmitted the template to Jimmy.

Vincent giggled as he filled in an answer on his report.

"What's so funny?" Jimmy asked curiously as he opened the template.

"I was filling in the stuff that happened and the padd broke in and asked me if I was feeling okay now, you know, like it really cared." Vincent said with a smile.

"It's just trying to find out your current medical status for the report. Is it being too friendly? I can change the parameters so it's not quite so casual." Darin said seriously

"No, it's fine. I really like it this way. I have a whole bunch of reports to write and I think this is going to make them fun." Vincent said with excitement.

"Darin, your program just called me a butthead." Jimmy said in astonishment.

"How did you get it to do that?" Darin asked as he stood and walked to Jimmy's side.

"I don't know. I was just answering the questions and it started going off on me. Look at this." Jimmy said as he held out the padd.

Darin read it for a moment then said, "I copied the basic personality template from the archive at the academy. I don't know why it's reacting to you that way."

After a few seconds of going through the options menu, Darin handed the padd back to Jimmy and said, "Go ahead and try it now. I've reset the personality matrix to neutral."

"Thanks." Jimmy said quietly as he started keying in information again.

After a moment, Darin asked, "Is it acting better?"

"Yeah. It's not exactly being friendly, but at least it's stopped calling me names." Jimmy said as he concentrated on his work.

"Good. If you have any other problems with it, just let me know. It's still a work in progress." Darin said as he took his seat again.

As Darin took his seat, Vincent looked at him curiously.

Darin got a mischievous smile on his face and gave Vincent a conspiratorial wink.

Vincent fought to keep his giggles to himself as he went back to work.

* * * * *

As Vincent was filling in the details of what happened earlier that day, he noticed that he was having trouble focusing his eyes. He blinked a few times to try and clear his vision.

Darin jerked as he felt himself starting to drift into sleep and vaguely noticed a ringing in his ears.

Without thought, Darin's recent Starfleet training kicked in and he reached under station three where he had been working on his report and pulled out the emergency breather unit that was stored there.

As he was pulling the breather unit onto his face, he noticed Ensign Thaelan slump over on the main control panel.

"Everybody! Get breathers on! Something's happened to our air." Darin called out in a muffled voice through the breather.

Vincent turned his chair at the sound, then his eyes rolled back as he fell unconscious.

Darin jumped up from his chair and ran to Vincent.

"Hang on little brother. You're going to be fine." Darin said as he pulled a breather out from under auxiliary station two and carefully put it on Vincent.

As soon as Darin was sure the breather unit was functioning properly, he looked around to see that everyone else was unconscious.

"Sorry Joe, I'll be right back." Darin whispered as he ran to the main console to help Ensign Thaelan.

"Wake up Thaelan. You've got to run the main." Darin said as he tried to fit the straps of the breather around Thaelan's head without injuring his antennae.

"What happened?" Vincent asked in a groggy, muffled voice.

"I think we lost atmosphere. Help Joe." Darin said as he moved to station one to help Connie.

"What... what do I do?" Vincent asked helplessly.

"There's an emergency breather unit under each station, watch what I'm doing." Darin said as he pulled out the breather unit, then eased Connie back in his chair so he could put the breather on him.

"Okay." Vincent said as he started to work.

"When you're done with Joe, take care of Jimmy. I'm going to call for help." Darin said as he pressed the comm button on station one.

The only response was a discordant beep.

Darin tried again with the same result.

"This console is down." Darin said and rushed to the main console where Ensign Thaelan looked like he was waking up.

Ensign Thaelan's body jerked once and he fell out of his chair.

Darin knelt by his side and gently slapped his cheek, trying to wake him up.

Ensign Thaelan's body suddenly went rigid, then he started jerking uncontrollably.

"He's having a seizure! Vincent, call for a med team!" Darin said as he moved around to Ensign Thaelan's head and held the sides of it firmly.

After a moment Vincent said, "All the consoles are locked up. I can't do anything."

"Then go get help!" Darin screamed as he continued to hold Thaelan's head.

Vincent ran to the door and nearly ran face first into it when it didn't open.

Darin noticed that Thaelan was looking at him with wide, frightened eyes as his body jerked and thrashed uncontrollably.

"I think there's something in the air that's caused you to have a seizure. You're breathing clean air now so it should pass in a few minutes. I'm protecting your antennae so you can just let the seizure happen until it works out of your system. I won't let anything happen to you." Darin said quietly in an assuring voice.

"The door's locked. I can't get out." Vincent said with a note of panic in his voice.

Darin glanced down in time to see a wet spot forming on Thaelan's uniform pants.

"Vincent, get me a blanket for Thaelan." Darin called out forcefully.

Thaelan continued to look at Darin with fear.

"Here." Vincent said as he ran to Darin's side carrying a sleeping bag.

"Go see if you can wake up Joe. He'll know what to do." Darin said as he quickly spread the sleeping bag over Thaelan's lower body.

Darin leaned close to Thaelan's ear and quietly said, "Everything will be fine. Vincent didn't see and I'll never tell."

Vincent ran to Joe's side and started to shake him to try and wake him up.

Joe slowly opened his eyes and looked at Vincent with confusion.

Vincent hugged Joe tightly and said, "Something is wrong with the air and Ensign Thaelan is sick or something and all the computers are locked up and now the door won't open."

Joe looked around the room groggily, then whispered, "Communicator."

Before Vincent could acknowledge the statement, the door opened to reveal a man wearing a hooded cloak.

"Hide!" Joe gasped and pulled Vincent behind him.

Vincent ducked down and curled himself under the console.

The intruder looked around the room quickly, then walked to Darin.

"You. Hargrove. Come with me." The intruder said in a low muffled voice as he pointed a weapon at Darin.

Darin looked at the intruder in shock as he continued to hold Thaelan's head and said, "I can't."

Joe forced himself up from the chair and made a dash to try and subdue the intruder.

As soon as Joe had stepped away from the console, Vincent darted to the door to find it locked again, then grabbed one of the communicators from the rack by the door and ran into the supply room.

The intruder saw movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see Joe coming at him.

* * * * *

"Security. We need help in deflector control!" Vincent said into the communicator as he huddled between two storage bins in the supply room.

The sound of a weapon firing sent a chill up Vincent's spine.

"*Security has been dispatched. Please advise of your situation.*" A professional voice asked calmly.

"Someone has done something to our air and locked up our computers and... and now someone is in here and I just heard a phaser fire." Vincent said in a trembling voice.

The sound of an alert klaxon could be heard and Vincent heard Debbie's voice on the intercom saying, "***Security to Deflector Control. This is not a drill. Intruder Alert. Reports of weapons fire and compromised atmosphere. Security to Deflector Control***."

"*Crewman Winters, is that you?*" The voice on the communicator asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Please help us. Ensign Thaelan is having a seizure or something and Connie and Jimmy are passed out and Daddy Joe or Darin might be dead." Vincent said as he felt tears falling down his cheeks.

"*Vincent, this is Lieutenant Simms. Where are you? Are you some place safe?*" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"I don't know how safe it is here. I hid in the supply room so I could call for help." Vincent said in a trembling voice.

"*You did exactly the right thing. Just stay where you are and remain silent. The security team is just outside Deflector Control.*" Lieutenant Simms said assuringly.

"You need to check on Lou and Judy and Lieutenant Walking Bear. They may need help too." Vincent said quickly.

"*Do you know where they are?*" Lieutenant Simms asked calmly.

"Lou and Judy should be in Daddy Joe's quarters. Um... that's on deck E section C2 room 2." Vincent finished in a rush.

"*I'll have a team check on them.*" Lieutenant Simms said with assurance.

"Lieutenant Walking Bear should be on the shuttle craft Victoria in the hanger bay, there should already be some security people there." Vincent said as he tried to think clearly.

"*They're checking on him now... Crewman Winters. Security has gained entry to Deflector Control and it's safe for you to come out now.*" Lieutenant Simms said assuringly.

"Okay. Thank you for talking to me." Vincent said as he crawled out from between the storage containers.

"*I'll be down to talk with you in person in just a moment. Take care of yourself.*" Lieutenant Simms said warmly.

"Okay." Vincent said as he wiped his eyes and cautiously walked to the door.

* * * * *

As Vincent walked into the main room of Deflector Control he saw Joe sprawled on the floor with one of the security team knelt by his side, examining him.

"How is he?" Vincent asked as he ran to Joe's other side.

"Alive. You'll need a doctor to tell you any more than that." The security officer said in a muffled voice through his breather unit.

Vincent looked quickly around, then saw the med team walking into the room.

"If he wakes up will you call me?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Are you Crewman Winters?" The security officer asked slowly.

"Yeah, and this is my Daddy Joe." Vincent said as he looked down at Joe again.

"If he wakes up, I'll call you right away. I promise." The security officer said in a tender voice.

"Thanks." Vincent said, then stood.

After a quick look around the room, Vincent walked to T'Lani's side as she scanned Ensign Thaelan.

"Husband, I am gratified to see that you are well." T'Lani said calmly as she looked at the medical tricorder's readings.

Vincent looked around and said, "I'm glad you're here. How is Ensign Thaelan?"

"His body is overcoming the effects of a foreign substance introduced into the air supply. If you will excuse me, I must speak to Dr. Raul." T'Lani said seriously.

"I'll wait for you here." Vincent said as he watched her walk away.

Vincent slowly knelt by Ensign Thaelan's side and said, "I'm sorry I couldn't do more to help you."

Ensign Thaelan struggled to ask, "You called help?"

"Yeah. I hid in the store room and called them on the communicator." Vincent said, feeling ashamed by his cowardly act of hiding.

"You did good." Ensign Thaelan said with effort.

"But when that guy came in, I... I wanted to be able to do something to stop him... I couldn't do anything." Vincent said quietly.

"You. Did. Good." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"Okay." Vincent said reluctantly.

"Ensign Thaelan, Dr. Raul will be here shortly to assess your condition and administer medication to ease your symptoms." T'Lani said seriously.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you." Vincent said in a quiet voice that could barely be heard through the breather unit.

T'Lani reached down to place her hand on the side of Vincent's face and caressed his cheek with her thumb.

Vincent smiled at the gesture, then placed his hand over hers.

"I must attend to Ensign Thaelan. Perhaps we could share a meal after our duty shifts have concluded." T'Lani said quietly.

"That sounds nice. Just call me here when you go off duty." Vincent said with a happy smile.

T'Lani nodded her agreement, then turned her attention back to Ensign Thaelan.

* * * * *

Vincent walked to Darin and pulled him into a tight hug.

Darin returned the hug firmly as he felt at least a small portion of his tension release.

"What happened?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Whoever that was that shot Joe, pointed his weapon at me and told me to go with him. But before he could do anything else the alert sounded and he ran off." Darin said as a tremble ran through his body at the memory.

"I took a communicator into the supply room and called for help." Vincent said quietly, still feeling that he had behaved cowardly.

Darin picked up on something in the tone of Vincent's voice and firmly said, "I would either be laying there beside Joe or been taken by that guy if it hadn't been for you."

He then knelt to be on Vincent's eye level and said, "You did exactly the right thing."

"Thanks Darin." Vincent said and pulled him into another hug.

"Gentlemen, may I please speak with you for a moment?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he walked into the room.

"Yes sir." Darin said as he stood and came to attention.

"At ease Ensign Cooper." Lieutenant Simms said in a neutral tone.

"Did you catch him?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Not yet Crewman Winters. That's why I need to ask you both some questions. From the look of it, you two will be the only ones who might have any answers." Lieutenant Simms said as he looked around.

Vincent looked around the room, then quickly said, "No one's watching the main!"

"It's okay. Chief Morgan is watching it for the moment and Ensign DeGama and Crewman Wills are on their way to the bridge." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

Vincent smiled with relief.

"Do either of you have any idea of who went to all this trouble to break in here and what he was looking for?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

Before Vincent could say anything, Darin quickly asked, "Have you checked on Lieutenant Walking Bear?"

"Yes. He's fine. You're the fourth person to ask me. Does what happened here have something to do with him?" Lieutenant Simms asked cautiously.

Vincent and Darin shared a look before Darin finally said, "It might. I really don't know for sure."

"Ensign Cooper, Ensign Thaelan wishes to speak with you." T'Lani said seriously.

Darin gave Lieutenant Simms a questioning look.

"Crewman Winters and I can talk while you're doing that." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"Thank you sir." Darin said and ran to see what Ensign Thaelan wanted.

* * * * *

"So Vincent, what can you tell me about what happened here?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"Well, we were all working on our reports while Ensign Thaelan was running the main console. I guess my eyes started going all funny and my ears started making this weird squealy sound. Darin... I mean Ensign Cooper said something about the air being wrong or bad or something. Then the next thing I know, I'm wearing a mask and Darin is over at the main console putting a mask on Ensign Thaelan." Vincent said in thought.

"Do you recall any kind of odor or maybe a strange taste in your mouth when you woke up?" Lieutenant Simms asked slowly.

"Yeah. It was really weird. When I woke up I thought I tasted almonds." Vincent said as he concentrated on the vague memory.

"What can you tell me about the intruder? Did you get a good look at him?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

Vincent closed his eyes for a moment, then said, "No. He was wearing a cape thing with a hood. I couldn't see his face at all. But he was a little bit taller than Daddy Joe and kind of big, like big with muscles, not fat."

"Do you have any idea what the intruder was after?" Lieutenant Simms asked cautiously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Well, at first I thought he was after... um... something that I can't talk about. But he didn't say anything about that. The only thing he asked for when he was in here was Darin. He wanted Darin to go with him."

"Can you remember *exactly* what he said?" Lieutenant Simms asked slowly.

"I don't know. I was still feeling kind of dopey from whatever I was breathing. I think he called Darin 'Harvey' or something like that. I can't really remember that part too good." Vincent said as he struggled with his memory.

"That's fine Crewman Winters. Ensign Cooper may remember the exact wording of what he said. How are you feeling now?" Lieutenant Simms asked with concern.

"Me? I'm fine. But I'll feel a whole lot better when I know Daddy Joe and everyone else is going to be okay." Vincent said seriously.

"Dr. Raul, how is Lieutenant Bowers doing?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he turned and led Vincent to Joe's side.

"As far as I can tell, he was hit with a low yield disruptor. We can take care of the damage in sickbay, but he'll just have to sleep off the rest of the effect." Dr. Raul said as he looked at his tricorder.

"But that doesn't make sense. A disruptor of any yield should have triggered the ship's internal sensors." Lieutenant Simms said, obviously thinking out loud.

"I don't know anything about that, but this...", Dr. Raul paused as he pulled open Joe's jacket and pulled up his shirt to reveal a large red welt on his chest, "...is a disruptor burn."

Lieutenant Simms pulled out his communicator and said, "I need a team to investigate the contamination of Deflector Control's air supply, a team to trace the computer access that disabled Deflector Control's consoles and a team to do a level three sweep of internal sensors to determine how an energy weapon was able to be fired on this ship without raising an alarm."

"Do you want me to pull the team from the shuttle bay to aid in the investigation?" The security officer asked cautiously.

"No. Call all shifts to duty until we can get some answers. In fact, double the detail in the shuttle bay." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"All shifts, yes sir." The security officer said quickly.

"One more thing, enact security protocol Bravo. Preliminary evidence indicates that security may have been infiltrated." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"Yes... yes sir." The security officer responded with surprise.

* * * * *

"May I speak privately with Ensign Cooper?" Ensign Thaelan asked in a whisper.

"Of course. But do not exert yourself. Your body has had to deal with significant stress." T'Lani said firmly.

"I will remain still. Thank you." Ensign Thaelan said, then watched her walk away.

"What did you need to tell me?" Darin asked quietly.

"I wish to express my appreciation for your actions earlier. The substance that was tainting the atmosphere caused me to experience a feeling of disorientation. Your assurances eased my mind and your action of holding me so I did not injure my antennae gave me a feeling of security that helped me endure the experience of the seizure. I will not forget this act of kindness and will some day find a way to repay you." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"We're a team Thaelan. We help each other to help the team." Darin said gently.

"I understand, but to hide the evidence of my... loss of control. And the fact that you thought to protect me in the manner you did is still much appreciated. Had my antennae been injured during the seizure I might have been incapacitated for several days." Ensign Thaelan said reluctantly.

"I know. I also know that it's a sensitive subject that you would rather not talk about. I'm just glad that I was able to help. I'd better get back to the Lieutenant to answer some questions." Darin said as he glanced away.

"Before you go, I also had a question for you." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Sure, what is it?" Darin asked as he leaned in closer.

"Did I understand correctly when I heard the Vulcan nurse refer to Crewman Winters as her husband?" Ensign Thaelan asked slowly.

"That's right. T'Lani is Vincent's wife. I think they're good for each other." Darin said with a warm smile.

"The child is full of surprises." Ensign Thaelan said as he glanced over to see Vincent at Joe's side.

"You don't know the half of it. Remind me later and I'll tell you how he asked one question that sent a security alert through the entire Federation." Darin said with an amused smile.

"I didn't realize the honor I was receiving by being assigned to lead your crew." Ensign Thaelan said as he looked Darin in the eyes.

"I'm glad you think so. As our leader, anything we do also reflects on you." Darin said with a smile.

"I will try to live up to the challenge." Ensign Thaelan said peacefully.

* * * * *

"Jimmy!" Susan called as she ran into the room.

Lieutenant Simms raised his phaser automatically at the abrupt entry.

"It's okay, she's his girlfriend... well almost." Vincent said quickly.

Lieutenant Simms reluctantly lowered his phaser and watched as Susan looked around the room with tears in her eyes.

"You'd better put on a breather until we're sure that the air in here is clean." Lieutenant Simms said to Susan quietly.

Susan walked to the supply locker and pulled out a breather unit.

"I'm sorry sir, she rushed past us." A security officer said as he walked into the room.

"If you can't adequately secure this room then call for reinforcements." Lieutenant Simms said harshly.

"Yes sir." The young ensign said quietly.

"Get back to your post." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"Yes sir." The ensign said quickly and hurried out of the room.

"Susan was just worried about Jimmy, I know she didn't mean to get anyone in trouble." Vincent said quietly.

"That isn't the point. My people are posted to keep anyone from getting in until we figure out exactly what happened here. What you just saw was a breach of security that could have cost someone their life if it had been our intruder returning." Lieutenant Simms said with concern.

"I just hate to see anyone get into trouble like that." Vincent said in thought.

"I know, I don't like yelling at my staff. But the fact of the matter is that if I let something like that slide, someone could die. You don't get second chances in life and death situations." Lieutenant Simms said reasonably.

"I understand. If you yell at him when something like this happens and no one got hurt, then he's more likely to do the right thing when it really does matter." Vincent said carefully.

Lieutenant Simms smiled and said, "Exactly. Now if you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to talk to Ensign Cooper and see what he can tell me about the incident."

Vincent nodded and watched as Lieutenant Simms walked away.

* * * * *

"Please excuse me Ensign Cooper, but I have some questions to ask you and time may be a factor." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"That's fine Lieutenant. Do we need to speak privately?" Darin asked as he stood from Thaelan's side.

"No, that won't be necessary. I just need to know what happened from your point of view." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I was working on my reports when I started feeling sleepy and heard a strange ringing in my ears. All of a sudden I remembered the emergency training from the academy and I pulled on a breather unit. When I looked around I saw that Ensign Thaelan was falling onto the console. I tried to warn everyone, but they were already falling asleep. I saw Vincent, I mean Crewman Winters, when he passed out so I put a breather on him first. Next I ran to Thaelan because he was running the main and he needed to be awake." Darin said in careful thought.

"Why did you put the breather on Crewman Winters first?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"Because he's my little brother I guess... I didn't really decide who I'd help first, I just did it." Darin said uncertainly.

"Go on." Lieutenant Simms said in thought.

"So while I was putting the breather on Ensign Thaelan, Vincent started waking up. I told him what to do and he put the breathers on Lieutenant Bowers and Crewman Tullis." Darin said in slow concentration.

"Go ahead." Lieutenant Simms said in a leading tone.

"I don't know, um... I tried to call for help and station one was inoperative. Then Ensign Thaelan fell out of his chair and started having convulsions. I went to help him and told Vincent to call for help." Darin said, then looked down at Ensign Thaelan who was listening intently.

"Vincent figured out that all the consoles were locked up and started to try to wake Joe up so I told him to ask Joe what to do. The next thing I knew, someone was walking into the room and he had a weapon of some kind. It looked something like a phaser, but it wasn't standard issue." Darin said carefully.

"Could you see his face?" Lieutenant Simms asked quietly.

"No. He was wearing a hood and his face was covered with a gas mask." Darin said in distant thought.

"A gas mask, not a breather?" Lieutenant Simms confirmed.

"That's right. A gas mask, the full face kind." Darin said carefully.

"Then what?" Lieutenant Simms asked slowly.

"Then he wanted me to go with him." Darin said distantly.

"Can you remember his exact words?" Lieutenant Simms asked in nearly a whisper.

Darin closed his eyes and carefully said, "He said, 'You. Hargrove. Come with me'."

"Hargrove?" Lieutenant Simms asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, that's my father's last name. I've been using my mother's maiden name since I entered Starfleet. My legal name is Hargrove-Cooper." Darin said, just realizing how strange it was that the intruder called him Hargrove.

"Who else knows your father's last name?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"I don't know. Anyone who looked at my personnel file would see it. But the only person I've told since I've been on the *Yorktown* is Rad." Darin said thoughtfully.

"Rad? As in Ensign Radovanovich from transporter control?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I mentioned to Ensign Radovanovich that my father's name was Hargrove last night. I haven't told anyone else... the subject just hasn't come up." Darin said in thought.

"Excuse me Lieutenant, we need to transport Ensign Thaelan to sickbay." Ensign T'Lani said as she led a crewman with a gurney to Ensign Thaelan's side.

Lieutenant Simms looked around quickly, then opened his communicator and said, "I need five security officers to Deflector Control for escort duty. And please ask Ensign Rayne Radovanovich to come to security as soon as possible to have a talk with me."

Darin looked at Lieutenant Simms curiously while Ensign T'Lani looked on impassively.

Rather than answer Darin's questioning gaze, Lieutenant Simms walked to the center of the room.

"Everyone, please wait a moment for a security escort before you leave." Lieutenant Simms said to everyone as he looked around.

There were several curious looks, but no one asked why.

"Dr. Raul, can you give me a preliminary report?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he walked to his side.

"It appears to have been an anesthetic gas. By all indications, they should awake soon." Dr. Raul said seriously as he examined Connie.

Vincent put an arm around Susan's waist and said, "Daddy Joe and I both woke up when we started breathing clean air again. So I know that Jimmy's going to be okay."

"Then why hasn't Jimmy woken up yet?" Susan asked as she hugged Vincent with one arm.

"I think because he was breathing the bad air longer than I was. He breathed more of it so he'll be asleep longer." Vincent said carefully.

"The young crewman is right. Also, Crewman Tullis and Ensign Agropos were nearer the ventilation duct so they probably received a more concentrated dose of the anesthetic gas. Excuse me, it appears that our security escorts are here so we're going to transport our patients to the sickbay now." Dr. Raul said seriously.

"Can I come with you?" Susan asked quietly.

Dr. Raul considered for a moment, then said, "Of course. His condition isn't such that he should need to be isolated."

"Why do we need security?" Susan asked as she looked at Lieutenant Simms with confusion.

"This is just a precaution for your own safety. As soon as I have a better idea of what I'm dealing with, I'll relax the restriction if it's possible." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

Susan nodded, then glanced at the group of security officers entering the room.

Vincent went to Joe's side and waited to leave with him when Lieutenant Simms said, "Ensign Cooper and Crewman Winters, would you stay behind so we can try to make some sense of why this happened?"

Darin reluctantly stepped away from Thaelan's side and said, "Yes sir."

Vincent took a step back from Joe's side as the medical assistants wheeled him out of the room.

* * * * *

"Report, Lieutenant." Captain Byrne said firmly as he walked into Deflector Control.

"What appears to have been anesthezine gas was introduced into the air supply of Deflector Control. All the computer systems were disabled and the door control was overridden. An intruder entered Deflector Control and was subsequently encouraged to leave when the security alert was announced." Lieutenant Simms said in a professional voice.

"Do you have any idea of what the intruder was after?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"Given the preliminary evidence, I would have to conclude that the intention of the intruder was to abduct Ensign Cooper." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

Captain Byrne considered for a moment, then said, "Have you developed any theory as to a motive?"

"Without investigation, the only plausible theory is that Ensign Cooper would be either 'convinced' to disclose information about your meeting this morning or would be used as a hostage to gain access to whatever is being protected." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I regret that it is necessary to withhold certain information from you." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"I understand sir, I'm simply stating that at this point, I can't think of any other motive that anyone would have to abduct a Deflector Control ensign." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

"Begin your investigation. I want to be updated immediately about any findings. Make this investigation your top priority." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Of course sir." Lieutenant Simms said slowly, wondering why the captain would think that he would do otherwise.

* * * * *

"I don't suppose you can tell me anything about what happened in the meeting this morning?" Lieutenant Simms asked absently as he thought about how to proceed.

Before Darin could answer, Vincent quickly said, "I can tell you that Captain Byrne thinks that this is so important that he won't even tell Commander M'Butu what it is."

Lieutenant Simms nodded and said, "I won't ask anymore. It's just frustrating to be searching for answers and know that there is information being withheld."

"We can't tell you anything about what the meeting was about, but since we know what it is, maybe it will help if we're around." Darin said carefully.

"I suppose so. It's better than taking the chance of overlooking something significant just because I was left out of the loop." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Just believe me when I say that you don't want to be in this loop." Darin said with a worried look.

Lieutenant Simms looked at Darin with question.

"Yeah. It could end up dumping us on a prison planet for the rest of our lives." Vincent added seriously.

Lieutenant Simms nodded as he realized that they were serious.

"Let's go to my office to get this investigation rolling. My teams should be reporting in soon." Lieutenant Simms said decisively.

Darin put a hand on Vincent's shoulder and said, "We need to collect these padds and either take them with us or to the shuttle."

"Oh yeah." Vincent said immediately and hurried to grab the padd he had been working on.

"Help me remember to ask Lou for hers when we see her again." Darin said as he picked up the padd he had been working on.

"Yeah. Maybe we should ask her now." Vincent said as he picked up the padd Joe had been working on.

"I believe she took a data padd to the Victoria before she went to the bridge." Lieutenant Simms said as he watched them carefully.

"Thanks, then do you mind if we go down there now too? After that we can go to your office." Vincent asked hopefully.

"From the sound of it, I think going to the shuttle bay is a good idea." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"I think we have everything. Let's go." Darin said as he looked around.

Lieutenant Simms looked around the room one last time, then said, "I think we can leave the breathers here."

"Good. That thing was rubbing me on my neck." Vincent said as he took off the mask.

"It's better than having to go to sickbay." Darin said frankly as he also took off his mask.

"Been there, done that." Vincent said with a smile as he walked toward the door.

Lieutenant Simms discretely held up two fingers to let his people know that two security officers needed to accompany them.

* * * * *

"Vincent, it's good to see that you're alright. I heard the intruder alert, then Lou came by but didn't know much about what was going on." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with concern.

"Someone tried to take Darin... Ensign Cooper, I mean." Vincent quickly amended.

"Your pilot, I remember." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a concerned glance at Darin.

"Whoever it was... He... he shot... Daddy Joe." Vincent said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Would you guys mind if I talk to Vincent alone for a minute?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked quietly.

"We'll be right outside the shuttle." Lieutenant Simms said reluctantly.

"Yeah. You know where to find us if you need us Little Brother." Darin said with a forced smile, then followed Lieutenant Simms off the shuttle.

After a moment to gain control of his emotions again, Vincent looked at Lieutenant Walking Bear with question.

"It's your choice whether the events today lead to a bright and wonderful future or into a future of desolation and destruction." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

Vincent felt fear at the statement and was about to respond when he saw the anticipation in Lieutenant Walking Bear's eyes.

After a moment to think about the statement, Vincent carefully said, "I had the same choice yesterday. And if I survive today, I'll have the same choice tomorrow."

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled brightly and said, "It took three years for my grandfather to teach me that. You got it without any prompting from me. Very good. Did you bring any questions with you?"

"I brought a lot of them... but I think you just answered most of them before I could ask. I guess the biggest one I've got right now is why did Daddy Joe have to get hurt?" Vincent asked in a small voice.

"You have a bigger question, this one is just a part of it." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then nodded and asked, "Why do bad things have to happen?"

"That's a very big question and it has quite a few answers. I have a feeling that you know most of those answers already, even if you haven't ever said them out loud." Lieutenant Walking Bear said quietly.

Vincent nodded again and said, "Sometimes because people choose selfish things. Sometimes it's just because things happen, like flipping a coin... And I think that sometimes there's a reason for things, but we're usually too close to see what the reason is."

"I think you're right. Sometimes the Great Spirit allows things to happen that seem horribly unfair, but in reality he is working to put things in a certain order for the benefit of all his children." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"Then how do you know when you're supposed to do something and when you're just supposed to let it happen?" Vincent asked in thought.

"Now that's a question that carries some power. I can only tell you what I do, perhaps that will be enough." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

Vincent nodded and waited expectantly.

"When I have the feeling that the Great Spirit may be at work, I try to watch what is happening very carefully to determine how I might move things in the most favorable direction." Lieutenant Walking Bear said carefully.

"I don't understand. Like how?" Vincent asked curiously.

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled and said, "Like when proto-matter is discovered on my shift, then a Crewman asks me about my personal beliefs."

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment, then asked, "So what am I supposed to do?"

"Do what you believe is right. Follow your own moral compass as to what's right and wrong and don't let anyone else dictate what you 'should' believe." Lieutenant Walking Bear said firmly.

Vincent looked at Lieutenant Walking Bear speculatively for a long, silent moment, then said, "You know what's about to happen, don't you?"

Lieutenant Walking Bear shook his head, then said, "It doesn't work that way. I just know when I'm being drawn toward a specific action. When you asked me what you were supposed to do, that's the first thing that came to my mind. I have no more knowledge about the future than you do, but I can watch for omens and follow my instincts."

"Thank you Lieutenant Walking Bear, I understand." Vincent said as he turned.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Why are you surprised?" Vincent asked with a chuckle.

"It just seems quite a lot to take on faith." Lieutenant Walking Bear said frankly.

Vincent giggled and said, "I'm a kid. After believing in stuff like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, this is no big deal."

"Just remember to listen to your heart." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"I will. I need to go now. Lieutenant Simms has to try and figure out what just happened."

"Tell me all about how things went when we meet again." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a smile.

"I will if you will." Vincent said with a cheeky grin.

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled and watched as Vincent left the shuttle.

* * * * *

"Did you two come up with anything about who might be behind the attack?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"No, we didn't really talk about that." Vincent said as he followed Lieutenant Simms onto the turbo lift.

"Is everything okay?" Darin asked with concern.

"Yeah. I think it is." Vincent said in slow concentration.

Lieutenant Simms led the way off the turbo lift and toward his office when his communicator suddenly sounded.

"Simms." He said immediately into the communicator.

"I think someone is trying to override the transporter lockout." A voice said in a rush.

"RUN!" Lieutenant Simms said and took off running down the hall.

A moment later he said, "Get in that holding cell and I'll activate the transport inhibiter."

Darin ran into the cell and watched as the force field was put in place.

An alarm sounded from the control console.

"We just barely got him in there in time. Whoever is doing this is trying to lock onto him now." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"How would they know which one of us is Darin?" Vincent asked as he looked at the readings.

"Good question. All I can think is that he must have been painted." Lieutenant Simms said as he tried to trace the transporter signal back to it's origin.

"Painted? What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

"It just means that someone took Ensign Cooper's transporter trace file and used it as search criteria. I don't know exactly how the term 'painted' came into use, but I suppose it's like having a painting to compare with every person that you scan." Lieutenant Simms said as he continued to search.

"Rad would know how to do that." Vincent said in thought.

"Probably, but he should be waiting in my office to speak with me." Lieutenant Simms said absently, then abruptly said into the comm, "Computer, security override authorization Simms Beta Four. Transporter room two, Isolation protocol. Disable transporter. Erect force field containment."

Vincent watched with wide eyes as Lieutenant Simms worked the controls of his console.

"Isolation protocol confirmed." Was the toneless response from the computer.

"I need a security team to transporter room two. Don't enter until I arrive." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

Vincent watched the proceedings with question.

"Ensign Cooper, I'm going to ask you to remain in the holding cell until I can confirm that we have your would-be kidnapper in custody." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Yes sir." Darin said from behind the force field.

As Lieutenant Simms walked toward the door, Vincent hurried to follow.

"Crewman Winters, it would be best if you stayed here with Ensign Cooper. I don't know what we're going to find down there and it might not be safe for you." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I know about some stuff that you don't. If this has anything to do with that then you may need me." Vincent said firmly.

"I'll just have to take your word on that Crewman." Lieutenant Simms said reluctantly, then looked at the two security escorts and said, "Don't lower those shields for anything. Keep your weapons handy and be on the alert for any sign of attack."

Both security officers immediately stood a little straighter and simultaneously each put a hand on his phaser.

"Let's go." Lieutenant Simms said as he walked out the door.

* * * * *

"Report, Ensign?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he approached the door to transporter room two.

"No attempt has been made to breach the containment field." The security officer said seriously.

Lieutenant Simms pressed the button on the comm panel and said, "Computer, security override authorization Simms Beta Four. Release the door and lower the shields on transporter room two."

"Vincent, stay here for a minute." Lieutenant Simms said firmly, then walked through the door.

After a long moment of waiting, Vincent finally saw Lieutenant Simms walk out of the transporter room carrying a small device.

"Someone was controlling the transporter by remote." Lieutenant Simms said distantly.

"Let's check on Darin." Vincent said in a rush.

"Hold on." Lieutenant Simms said, then opened his communicator and said, "Ensign Margoles, what is the status of our guest?"

There was a long moment of silence.

Lieutenant Simms expression turned to one of panic as he ran to the nearest turbo lift with Vincent following close behind.

* * * * *

Vincent felt a chill run through his body at the sight of two unconscious security officers laying in the floor.

He ran to the holding cell to find the shields deactivated and the cell standing empty.

Chapter 17

"Vincent, would you go in there and see if Ensign Radovanovich is waiting for us?" Lieutenant Simms asked quickly as he ran to the first unconscious security officer.

After trying unsuccessfully to open the door, Vincent said, "It's locked."

"Medical team to Main Security." Lieutenant Simms said quickly into the comm, then ran to Vincent's side.

"Only one of my security people would know this locking code." Lieutenant Simms said as he quickly unlocked the door.

"What happened?" Rad asked as soon as the door opened.

Vincent quickly hugged Rad and quietly asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I was just waiting to talk with Lieutenant Simms and someone locked me in." Rad said as he enjoyed the hug.

"How long have you been here?" Lieutenant Simms asked seriously.

"Maybe fifteen minutes. I thought I heard you guys in here a few minutes ago, but no one came in to talk to me. Then I thought I heard weapons fire, but when I tried to look, the door was locked." Rad said uneasily.

"Someone took Darin." Vincent said as he continued to hold Rad tightly.

"Just a second." Lieutenant Simms said firmly and started keying in commands on the main console.

After a moment of carefully watching the display, he said, "There. I got him."

Vincent and Rad ran to Lieutenant Simms side.

"Captain Byrne, we've discovered the identity of our kidnapper." Lieutenant Simms said quickly into the comm.

"*Proceed.*" The captain said with interest.

"It is Security Ensign Matthew Gianni. When I ordered a Bravo protocol, all the surveillance cameras were activated. I have video evidence of Ensign Gianni stunning the security guards on duty and abducting Ensign Cooper." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"*Do you have any idea where they might have gone?*" Captain Byrne asked slowly.

"No sir. But since the abduction of Ensign Cooper seems to have been his primary goal, my guess would be that his next move will be to try and get off the ship." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"*Agreed. Get to work on it. I want Ensign Cooper found. This has gone too far.*" Captain Byrne said with a tone of menace.

"I agree captain. Consider it done." Lieutenant Simms said as a vow.

Vincent looked up at the sound of a ship wide announcement, "***All hands. Security Ensign Matthew Gianni is to be considered armed and dangerous. Please remain in your quarters or at your duty stations and report any contact immediately.***"

"If I can go back to the transporter room, I can scan the ship and I may be able to locate Ensign Cooper that way." Rad said hopefully.

"You painted him?" Lieutenant Simms asked cautiously.

"Yes sir, while he was down at the Kimber colony. He's new and I didn't want to take the chance that if something happened unexpectedly that he would be stuck there." Rad said in a pained voice.

"Did anyone else know that you painted him?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"I think I mentioned it when I was having dinner in the engineering mess... oh my God. Matt was there." Rad said in realization.

"He has the skills, he had the opportunity, now if we only had a motive we might be able to do something to get ahead of him." Lieutenant Simms said in frustration.

"Go see if you can find anything with your transporter scanners. I'm going to start coordinating a deck by deck search." Lieutenant Simms said as the med team came into the room.

"Do you need me to do anything?" Vincent asked seriously as he watched Rad hurry out of the room.

"The best thing you could do right now to help me is to go to the bridge and keep yourself safe. Hold on..." He said before running out of the room.

Less than a minute later Lieutenant Simms came back in followed by a stout woman with a look of ferocity in her eyes.

"Ensign Barnhill will be your personal escort until everything is resolved. Now you should stay with her until we have this all sorted out." Lieutenant Simms said firmly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said seriously.

* * * * *

"Ensign Barnhill, can I go tell my friends that I'm okay? If they heard the intruder alert then they'll be worried about me." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Where are your friends?" Ensign Barnhill asked firmly.

"They're on deck J in the dorsal observation lounge." Vincent said quickly.

"Let's go." Ensign Barnhill said and stepped into the lift.

"Deck J, Dorsal." She said firmly into the air.

"Do you really need to have your phaser out like that?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Yes. I do." She said without looking at Vincent.

* * * * *

As the doors to the lift opened, Vincent hurried out and said, "I'm just going to let the guys know what's going on. You can wait here if you want."

"No. I'm your escort." Ensign Barnhill said as she walked to his side.

"IT'S A TRAP!" sounded from the observation lounge, just before the sound of a weapon firing.

Vincent recognized the voice as Benny's then could hear JonJon crying.

Ensign Barnhill opened her communicator and said, "Deck J, Dorsal Lounge. Weapon's fire."

"Who's out there?" Ensign Gianni called hesitantly from just inside the doorway.

"Get behind me." Ensign Barnhill said in an angry whisper as she trained her phaser on the door.

"No. He'll get us like this. I'll distract him. You get ready to shoot him." Vincent whispered as he walked on shaking legs toward the door.

"Come back here!" Ensign Barnhill whispered loudly and tried to grab hold of Vincent before he got away.

Vincent took a deep breath, then let out the loudest, shrillest scream that he could possibly manage as he ran into the observation lounge.

"WHERE IS MY BROTHER!?" Vincent screamed in his most childish voice.

"I'm here. I'm fine." Darin said quietly from the other side of the observation lounge.

"Yeah, calm down kid, he's fine. Is anyone with you?" Ensign Gianni asked absently as he kept his disruptor pointed at the door.

Vincent saw Channing holding Benny's unconscious body and Darin trying to comfort JonJon who was sobbing uncontrollably.

"YOU HURT MY BEST FRIEND YOU BIG MEANIE!" Vincent screamed and gave Ensign Gianni the hardest kick in the shin that he could manage.

"Ouch! You little..." Ensign Gianni said as he automatically raised his injured leg and reached down to soothe it.

Vincent balled up his fist and put every bit of his nine year old strength behind the uppercut to the security officer's jaw.

The punch was hard enough to throw Ensign Gianni the rest of the way off balance and he fell over and landed on his butt.

"Hold it right there Matt. Drop your weapon." Ensign Barnhill said as she walked into the room.

Matt dropped his disruptor and reached up to caress his jaw.

"Good work Ensign Barnhill." Lieutenant Simms said as he hurried into the room, leading two other security officers.

"You can thank Crewman Winters. He's the one who distracted Matt long enough for me to get in here." Ensign Barnhill said with a small smile at Vincent.

"I should have known." Lieutenant Simms said with a chuckle as he watched his men taking Matt into custody.

Vincent walked to the comm panel and quickly said, "Sickbay, can you send someone to Deck J in the dorsal section? My friend Benny was hit by a disruptor blast."

"*Your wife heard you and is on her way... By the way, congratulations.*"

Vincent considered the voice for a moment, then asked, "Dr. Perry?"

"*That's right. And you need to come to sickbay as soon as possible. There is a Lieutenant who won't be able to get proper rest until he can see for himself that you're not hurt.*" Dr. Perry said in a gentle voice.

"If Lieutenant Simms doesn't need me to do anything right now, I'll go down with Benny." Vincent said seriously.

"I'm just going to need you to write a report." Lieutenant Simms said as he waited for Vincent to finish.

"You and everyone else." Vincent said with exasperation.

Just as the security officers were leading Matt out of the room, he stumbled and landed flat on his face.

"Watch out, it may be a trick." Lieutenant Simms warned as he trained his phaser on the fallen man.

Ensign Barnhill cautiously placed her fingers on his throat and said, "I don't think so. He's dead."

"How?" Lieutenant Simms said in confusion, then suddenly said, "Get him to sickbay immediately. He's probably poisoned himself to keep from being questioned."

The lift door opened to reveal T'Lani and two medical assistants with a gurney.

"Help him. I think he may have poisoned himself." Lieutenant Simms said quickly.

T'Lani opened her tricorder and scanned Matt carefully, then said, "There is nothing to be done. He has ingested a lethal dose of cyanide."

"So much for getting some answers about why all this happened." Lieutenant Simms said with regret.

"Perhaps there is a way that I may be of assistance." T'Lani said as she placed a hand on the side of Ensign Gianni's face.

"What can you... a mind meld?" Lieutenant Simms asked with astonishment.

"His body has failed, but there is still a flicker of activity in his mind... it may be possible for me to retrieve some useful information..." T'Lani said in concentration.

After a moment, she quietly said, "...He is gone." as she slowly withdrew her hand.

"Were you able to get anything useful?" Lieutenant Simms asked hopefully.

"I have retrieved some fragments. I believe what I have retrieved should be disclosed in a more secure environment." T'Lani said seriously.

"I'll go with you to sickbay. As soon as your duties permit I'd like to discuss it with you" Lieutenant Simms said thoughtfully.

"Did you see anything bad?" Vincent asked from T'Lani's side.

T'Lani looked down at Vincent, then put a hand on the side of his face as she said, "Nothing of consequence Husband."

Vincent put his hand over hers and snuggled against it for a moment, then said, "I don't think I'll be able to have dinner with you tonight. I just have too many reports to write."

"I too will have additional duties. Perhaps tomorrow." T'Lani said softly.

"Yeah. Just let me know when." Vincent said with a gentle smile.

"We're ready." One of the medical assistants said as he began to pull the gurney out of the room.

"Before you go, will you look at Benny to see if he's going to be okay? He got stunned." Vincent asked quickly.

T'Lani took out her medical tricorder again and ran a quick scan.

After a moment of looking over the readings she said, "I will return shortly for your friend. Do not be concerned, he is simply in a mild state of neural shock and will recover in a short time."

"Thanks T'Lani. I'll wait here for you to come back." Vincent said with a small smile.

* * * * *

"Is Benny going to be okay?" JonJon asked from Darin's lap with tears streaking down his cheeks.

"Yeah. T'Lani said that he just needs a little bit of rest to get better." Vincent said with assurance.

"You did a good job taking that guy down. I thought that punch was going to knock him out." Darin said quietly as he continued to hug JonJon.

Vincent smiled at the praise and said, "If I didn't do something, we were going to be stuck outside the room until that guy came out and shot us both."

"You have a pretty good screaming voice. It made the hair on my neck stand on end." Channing said as he held Benny gently.

"That guy said he was going to take Darin away. He said that his friends would be here any minute." JonJon said with a tremble of fear.

"Did he say who his friends were?" Vincent asked suddenly.

"N... no. He just said that they'd be here any minute and that they'd take him and Darin back to Earth." JonJon said fearfully.

Vincent hopped up and ran to the comm station.

"Crewman Winters to the Captain." Vincent said in a rush.

"*Go ahead Crewman.*" Captain Byrne answered immediately.

"JonJon says that Ensign Gianni was waiting on another ship to pick him up and that they should be here any minute."

"*Understood. Anything else?*" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"No sir. But if I find out any more I'll let you know."

"*Good work Crewman. Do you have security there?*"

Vincent glanced around the room, then looked outside the observation bay before answering, "No sir. I think they all went to sickbay."

"*Crewman, I want you to escort Ensign Cooper to security and get him inside the containment cell.*"

"Yes sir." Vincent said in his most military voice.

"*Now Crewman!*" Captain Byrne said abruptly, then disconnected the transmission.

"Come on Darin. We've got to hurry." Vincent said quickly.

"Where?" Darin asked as he shifted JonJon off his lap.

"To security. I'll tell you about it on the way." Vincent said as he ran for the turbo lift.

"Hold on, I'm coming." Darin said quickly.

* * * * *

"So what's this all about?" Darin asked as the lift took them to main security.

"I don't know all of it, but someone is still after you and if Ensign Gianni sent them that painting thing of you, then they might be able to beam you

off the ship." Vincent said impatiently as he waited for the lift doors to open.

"The shields should be able to prevent anything like that." Darin said in thought.

"Yeah, and the internal sensors should be able to detect a disruptor being fired." Vincent said firmly as the doors opened.

Darin thought about the words as he followed Vincent.

"Come on!" Vincent said as he hurried into main security.

"Vinc...." Could be heard as Darin was enveloped in shimmering sparkles.

Vincent ran to the nearest comm station and screamed, "Captain! Someone's got Darin! They're transporting him now!"

"*Hold on Crewman Winters, Ensign Radovanovich has a transporter lock on him as well. They won't get him that easily.*" Captain Byrne said firmly.

Darin seemed to be struggling inside the transporter beam as the two transporters played tug-of-war with his molecules.

A column of shimmering light appeared about two feet away from Darin.

Vincent looked around and spotted a phaser laying on one of the desks.

He checked to see what power level the phaser was set to, then fired a long, sustained blast of phased energy into the second transporter beam.

The beam abruptly stopped and left an unconscious person laying in the floor.

Darin's transporter beam also abruptly stopped and he fell to his knees.

"Come on Darin. You're too big for me to carry. You've got to get to the holding cell before they can try to transport you again."

"Help me." Darin whispered as he held an arm out to Vincent.

Darin forced himself to crawl as Vincent pulled him by the arm.

As soon as they were inside the containment cell, Vincent quickly said, "That's good enough. I'll turn it on."

"What's going on here?" Ensign Barnhill asked as she rushed into the room.

"They tried to beam Darin out. Can you turn on the thing that stops transporters? I can't find it here." Vincent asked franticly.

"Yes, this is it." Ensign Barnhill said as she activated the transport inhibitor.

"And whoever that is, tried to transport in here while the transporters were fighting over Darin." Vincent said and pointed to the motionless person in the floor.

Ensign Barnhill ran to the body and turned it over carefully.

"I used high stun. I didn't kill him, did I?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. No, you didn't kill him." Ensign Barnhill said as she rushed to the main console and pressed the comm.

"Lieutenant Simms to Main Security immediately." Ensign Barnhill said firmly.

"Did I do something wrong?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Hardly." Ensign Barnhill said with a chuckle.

"Then what is it?" Vincent asked with confusion.

"What is it Ensign?" Lieutenant Simms asked as he rushed into the room.

"It seems that Crewman Winters subdued an intruder who was trying to beam aboard the ship." Ensign Barnhill said frankly as she gestured toward the intruder with her phaser.

Lieutenant Simms looked down at the intruder, then up at Vincent with question.

"He tried to beam in while they were fighting over Darin. I shot the phaser into the transporter beam then both transporters stopped... Um, then I helped Darin into the holding cell so he wouldn't get transported again." Vincent said in a diminishing voice.

"Good work Crewman. Ensign Barnhill, call for a med team, then get our uninvited guest into a holding cell." Lieutenant Simms said firmly, then went to the comm station.

"Lieutenant Simms to Captain Byrne." Lieutenant Simms said professionally.

"*Report Lieutenant*." Captain Byrne said shortly.

"Ensign Cooper is in the holding cell where he is safe from any further transport attempts. And apparently during the struggle for Ensign Cooper, an intruder tried to board the ship by transporting in close proximity to the excessive transporter activity to mask his signal. He was subdued by Crewman Winters."

"*Crewman Winters subdued an intruder single handed?*" Captain Byrne asked in confirmation.

"It's not that hard when you have a phaser on high stun and the intruder is still in the transporter beam." Vincent interjected.

"*I see. However you did it, good work Crewman.*" Captain Byrne said firmly.

"We will begin interrogation as soon as the prisoner becomes conscious." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"*Perhaps we can finally get some answers.*" Captain Byrne said in a considering voice.

"We can hope." Lieutenant Simms said as he watched the intruder carefully.

* * * * *

"Please have a seat everyone." Captain Byrne said firmly.

Vincent quietly took his seat between Darin and T'Lani.

"Lieutenant Simms, you are aware that we have a ship in the area that can evade our sensors and penetrate our shields. Are you certain that Ensign Cooper won't be transported out of this meeting?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Yes sir. Ensign Cooper has been outfitted with a portable transport inhibitor. He's perfectly safe." Lieutenant Simms said with assurance.

"Ensign DeGama and Crewman Wills found the transmitter that was broadcasting our shield frequency. They can't penetrate our shields anymore." Chief Morgan said seriously.

Vincent took hold of Darin's arm and gave it a quick squeeze to convey his happiness that Darin was safe.

"Does anyone here have any clue as to a motive for the attempted abduction of Ensign Cooper?" Captain Byrne asked frankly.

"I have information that may lead us to discover the motive." T'Lani said without inflection.

"I asked Ensign T'Lani to join us since she was able to mind meld with Ensign Gianni as he was dying." Lieutenant Simms said quickly.

"Which would probably invalidate the use of this information as evidence." Captain Byrne said with a questioning look at T'Lani.

"That is correct sir. There was insufficient time to cross reference and verify the information. It would be inadmissible in a court of law." T'Lani said calmly.

"Everyone, please keep that in mind. What information did you find?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Ensign Gianni had an allegiance with an old Earth crime family long before he entered Starfleet or came aboard the *Yorktown*. Earlier today he received a message instructing him to kidnap Ensign Cooper then call for a ship to transport him to Earth." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"I see. Do you know if the stealth ship belongs to the crime family?" Lieutenant Simms asked cautiously.

"Unknown. But Ensign Gianni sent them the information to allow them to penetrate our shields and locate Ensign Cooper." Ensign T'Lani said seriously.

"Do you know why the crime family wanted Ensign Cooper?" Captain Byrne asked carefully.

"No sir. Ensign Gianni was simply following his orders. He was given no explanation."

"So, what was Ensign Gianni doing on this ship in the first place? He's been here for nearly two years." Lieutenant Simms asked in thought.

"He was a sleeper. He was to function normally until there was a need for his service. Had his initial plan succeeded, he would have entered Deflector Control while all the personnel were unconscious, then called the stealth ship to transport Ensign Cooper out before anyone was aware of a problem." Ensign T'Lani said carefully.

"Why would anyone go to such lengths to abduct a Deflector Control ensign?" Captain Byrne asked as he looked around the table.

"For ransom?" Dr. Perry asked speculatively.

"Hargrove." Lieutenant Simms said in realization.

Everyone looked at him with question.

"Ensign Cooper, you said that your father's last name was Hargrove, would you be any relation to someone in Hargrove Industries?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"Yes. Hargrove Industries is my dad's company." Darin said in a small voice.

"They're also the company implicated in the recent control circuit mess. The majority of the upper management of Hargrove industries is under indictment, however, Mr. Hargrove himself seems to have evaded any legal problems thus far." Chief Morgan offered in slow thought.

"He may not be in trouble with the law, but perhaps he has business partners who aren't very happy with him at the moment." Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"So they could be trying to kidnap his son to get him to make good on some deal that they made." Lieutenant Simms said as he glanced at Darin.

"I guess it could be that, but I doubt that Dad would give two dollars to get me back." Darin said weakly.

"Don't be so sure Ensign Cooper. Parents don't always express their emotions obviously, but that doesn't mean that they don't have them." Captain Byrne said, saying with his tone that he had some personal experience with that situation.

Darin nodded uncertainly.

"Dr. Perry, what is the status of our guest?" Captain Byrne asked, obviously wanting to change the subject.

"He's suffering a moderate phaser burn to much of his upper body, it's more uncomfortable than anything. Besides that, he's just a bit subdued and not altogether cooperative. I also removed a neural toxin packet that was hidden under his skin before he had a chance to commit suicide." Dr. Perry said frankly.

"Lieutenant Simms, I assume that you haven't had an opportunity to speak with our guest." The Captain asked seriously.

"No sir. Dr. Perry finished with him right before the meeting." Lieutenant Simms said reluctantly.

"Then would you bring him in so we may speak?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Simms responded in surprise.

"Perhaps we can get the remainder of the information we require by simply asking." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Simms said quickly.

Vincent reached beside him and placed his hand over T'Lani's on the conference table.

Captain Byrne noticed the gesture and smiled.

"I suppose now is as good a time as any to offer my congratulations on your marriage." Captain Byrne said with a smile.

"Thank you sir." Both Vincent and T'Lani said in matching respectful tones.

"I realize that by Vulcan tradition that the official ceremony won't occur for many years, but if you would like to mark the occasion in some way, you would find me receptive to the idea." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "There's just one thing I would like."

"If it is something within my ability to provide, you will have it." Captain Byrne said with a fond smile at the couple.

Vincent turned to T'Lani and took her hand into his.

"T'Lani, it's kind of an old Earth custom that when two people get married, one of them, usually the wife, changes her name so that they'll both have the same last name. Since you don't really have a last name, I'd like for you to have mine if you want it." Vincent said hopefully.

T'Lani looked at Vincent for a moment as she thought about what he was asking.

"I mean, you don't have to. I'll still love you and want to be your husband and I won't even be mad if you don't want to... But I just figured that when we have kids, it'll be good if their parents both have the same last name..." Vincent finished shyly.

"I would be honored to accept your family name, my husband. However, I would like to continue to be addressed as Ensign T'Lani while on duty if that is acceptable." T'Lani said seriously.

"That's great. That way when I become an Ensign too, people won't get all confused by us having the same name." Vincent said happily.

"If you would like, I can make those arrangements after the meeting." Captain Byrne said with a tender smile.

"Yes. Thank you Captain." T'Lani said peacefully.

* * * * *

The door opened to reveal Lieutenant Simms and two other security officers escorting the prisoner.

"Please remove the restraints so he may sit comfortably." Captain Byrne said in a firm, neutral tone.

Lieutenant Simms looked at Captain Byrne with question for a moment, then reluctantly removed the restraints from the prisoner's hands.

"Please sit down so we may begin." Captain Byrne said frankly.

The man looked around the table and his gaze stopped on T'Lani for a moment, then fixed on Darin.

"Please have a seat. We have much to discuss." Captain Byrne said in a more urging tone.

"What if I don't want to discuss whatever you're wanting to talk about?" The man asked coldly.

"That is your choice of course, but I have a feeling that you will want to hear what I have to say." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"And what is that?" The prisoner asked suspiciously.

"It seems to me that your superiors are very interested in obtaining Ensign Cooper. Of course the welfare of all my crewmembers is of the utmost importance to me and I would never allow that to happen. But perhaps if I were to speak to your superiors we could come to some sort of an arrangement that would be mutually satisfying." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Me and my ship don't work directly for the people you'd want to talk to. We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time and decided to take up this contract. We're just supposed to pick up and drop off. That's the only stake we have in all this." The prisoner said cautiously.

"I see. So what seemed on the surface to be a simple way to make some easy money ended up getting you captured and your ship at odds with a Federation starship." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"Yeah. The only reason we didn't cut and run earlier is because we accepted the contract and felt honor bound to deliver the goods." The prisoner said as he sat straighter in his chair.

"That being the case, perhaps if I were to speak with the captain of your vessel, we could resolve this entire situation peacefully and you could be on your way.

"You would let me go?" The prisoner asked cautiously.

"Regardless of your intention when you transported aboard, the fact is that you didn't have an opportunity to commit any crime. I suppose we might have grounds to prosecute you under Federation law for trespassing, but I see no purpose in pursuing that avenue." Captain Byrne said honestly.

"Thank you." The prisoner said reluctantly.

"Your welcome. If you would be so kind as to contact your captain, perhaps we can also come to terms and have you on your way?" Captain Byrne said with a smile.

The man considered the words and reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"There is a comm panel by your left hand. You can make the call from there." Captain Byrne said as he looked the man in the eyes.

After keying in the frequency of his ship, he quietly said, "This is Korrigon, the captain of the *Yorktown* has a proposition to make that may interest you."

"*I have nothing to say to you. You failed in your mission and then betrayed us to your captors.*" A vague shadowed female shape said with disgust from the view screen.

"I was attacked during transport and my poison was taken away." Korrigon tried to explain.

"*Captain, I believe you had something to say?*" The woman said casually, dutifully ignoring Korrigon's words.

"Yes. As I understand your situation, you have nothing to gain by pursuing this matter any further. We've disabled the transmitter that revealed our shield frequencies and we've adjusted our sensors to compensate for your stealth technology. There is no way for you to complete your contract, so you should be on your way." Captain Byrne said reasonably.

"*It appears that you're correct. And just so you know, I thought this was a bad idea from the beginning. Kidnapping is a cowardly way of doing business.*" The woman said coldly.

"I agree. If you will give us the coordinates, we will return your man to you so you can be on your way." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"*Don't bother. Getting rid of him is the only good thing to come out of this whole mess.*" The woman said coldly, then cut off the transmission.

"Your captain seems to be less than sympathetic to your situation." Captain Byrne said to his stunned prisoner.

"That was... my wife." Korrigon said quietly.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Captain Byrne said with a note of sympathy.

The sound of an incoming message stopped further conversation.

"*Captain, the stealth ship has left the system at maximum impulse*." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Understood, continue sensor sweeps in case they decide to change their minds." Captain Byrne said firmly.

"*Aye sir.*" Commander M'Butu said and ended the transmission.

"Captain, if you will return my poison to me, I will relieve you of the burden of my presence." Korrigon said bravely as he assumed a straighter posture.

"Nonsense. Allow me to make some inquiries on your behalf and If all goes as I expect, you will be welcomed to start a new home in a new colony that we will be establishing in a few short weeks. You'll be able to start a fresh life and perhaps even be able to find a new wife." Captain Byrne said with a smile.

Korrigon looked around the room with confusion.

"I have a lot of friends who are starting new lives. If you need any help, just ask." Vincent said with a smile.

"I feel as if I know you." Korrigon said as he looked carefully at Vincent.

"Um... I'm the one who shot you when you tried to transport in. But if you'll promise to not try to hurt my brother or take him away, I'll help you however I can." Vincent finished with a smile.

"Your brother?" Korrigon asked cautiously, then saw that Vincent was indicating Darin.

"Well, I guess you all just saw that I'm not wanted back on my ship. I have no reason to want to harm you or your family." Korrigon said, then winced with pain.

"Come with me Korrigon and I'll get you something to soothe that burn." Dr. Perry said as she stood.

"Just a moment." Captain Byrne said forcefully.

Dr. Perry and Korrigon turned to look at the Captain with question.

"Korrigon, for the time being I am going to require you to have a security escort. I hope this won't be a problem for you." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"No, not at all Captain. You are being more than generous." Korrigon said quietly.

"Good. Now go and get that phaser burn taken care of. And remember to drink a lot of fluids, that helps with the soreness." Captain Byrne finished with a friendly smile.

"Thank you sir. I will." Korrigon said shyly, then walked to Dr. Perry's side.

"If there's nothing else, the meeting is dismissed." Captain Byrne said as he stood.

"Hang on Dr. Perry. I want to go down to sickbay with you to check on Daddy Joe and Benny." Vincent said quickly.

"I'll go too." Darin said quietly as he walked to Vincent's side.

* * * * *

As Vincent walked into sickbay, he noticed that nearly every bed in the convalescent ward was filled.

Vincent finally spotted Joe and ran to him. As he pulled him into a tight hug, he said, "I'm glad you're alright."

"I'm glad that you're okay too Vincent. You too Darin." Joe said tiredly.

"I had my doubts for a few minutes, but Vincent rescued me." Darin said gently.

"That's my boy." Joe said with a tender smile and rubbed Vincent's 'peach fuzz' hair.

"Benny is the one who really saved Darin. If it wasn't for him, I would have walked right into the observation lounge and been shot." Vincent said seriously.

"Yeah, that was one of the bravest things I've ever seen." Darin agreed as he glanced over to the next bed to see Benny sleeping peacefully with Channing and JonJon watching over him.

"Crewman Winters, may I have a moment of your time?" Dr. Perry asked seriously as she walked to his side.

"Um, yeah. Sure." Vincent said uncertainly.

Dr. Perry motioned for Vincent to follow her into the next room.

"Are you really going to be okay? You look awfully tired." Darin asked with concern.

"I'm going to be fine, but it may take me a while to sleep this one off. I don't remember the last time I felt this drained." Joe said honestly.

"Don't worry about a thing. We'll make sure that everything is taken care of." Darin said with assurance.

"Connie is in charge until I'm fit for duty." Joe said seriously.

Darin looked two beds over at Connie who was sleeping.

"I don't think he's in any shape to be in charge at the moment." Darin said honestly.

"Maybe not at the moment, but I have a feeling that he'll be back on his feet before I am." Joe said quietly.

"How bad is it?" Darin asked with renewed concern.

"I've been pushing myself since we left Earth. When the ceiling caved in on me at the Kimber colony I suffered some mild radiation burns and was banged up quite a bit. I've been in pain, but I've just tried to ignore it. If I had started off at full strength, I could probably recover from this inside a day, but Dr. Perry thinks that it may take three to five days before I'm ready to go on duty again. And considering the way I'm feeling right now, I agree with her." Joe said quietly.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Darin asked gently.

"Just take care of Vincent. As long as I know that you're watching out for him, I'll be able to relax and concentrate on healing." Joe said with a contented smile.

"I will Joe, I promise." Darin said as a vow.

"You're supposed to be laying down." JonJon said firmly.

Darin and Joe both turned to see JonJon looking disapprovingly at Channing.

"You'd better do what he says Channing. He's got a Shih-Tzu and he knows how to use it." Joe said with a teasing smile.

Channing laughed at the statement and walked to the nearest unoccupied bed to lay down.

Dr. Perry walked back into the room then stopped to look at Channing with question.

"I'm feeling fine. I just wanted to be here to see that Benny is going to be alright and JonJon reminded me that I should be laying down." Channing rushed to explain.

Dr. Perry considered for a moment, then said, "I'll consider this proof that he's taking good care of you."

JonJon smiled with pride at the statement.

"Ensign Cooper, could I have a few minutes of your time?" Dr. Perry asked seriously.

"Is something wrong?" Darin asked cautiously.

"No, just go into my office with Crewman Winters and wait for me. I'll be there in just a minute." Dr. Perry said seriously.

Darin gave Joe a questioning look before hesitantly walking away.

* * * * *

Vincent looked up as Darin walked into Dr. Perry's office.

"What's going on?" Darin asked curiously.

"I don't know. Dr. Perry had me get on a biobed and took a lot of readings, then asked me to come in here." Vincent said apprehensively.

"Don't worry little brother. Whatever it is, we'll get through it together." Darin said as he sat beside Vincent and gave him a gentle hug.

"She seemed worried when she scanned me last night. I think maybe there's something really wrong with me." Vincent said from the hug.

"She'll tell us in just a minute. Just hang on for a little bit longer." Darin said in a soothing voice as his worry increased.

Vincent nodded into Darin's chest and continued to hug him tightly.

* * * * *

"Ensign Thaelan, I'm happy to say that you are fit for duty." Dr. Raul said with a smile.

"Thank you. The medication you administered seems to have counteracted all the effects of the foreign substance I inhaled." Ensign Thaelan said as he sat on the edge of his bed.

"Yes. Anesthezine has an unfortunate effect on Andorian physiology, but the effect is easily countered. The effect isn't as severe in Humans, but the treatment isn't as effective." Dr. Raul said as he indicated Jimmy and Connie still fast asleep.

"How long will it be until they recover?" Ensign Thaelan asked with concern.

"A few hours. I could wake them up now, but their thought processes and coordination would be impaired to the point that they wouldn't be fit for duty. It's best to let them sleep it off." Dr. Raul said seriously.

"Thank you Doctor. May I have my uniform?" Ensign Thaelan asked as he looked around.

"Oh yes. I'll get it for you." Dr. Raul said quickly and walked away.

Thaelan walked to Joe's bedside and said, "Lieutenant Bowers, I've been declared fit for duty."

Joe smiled and said, "I'm really glad to hear that. If you'll hold on for a few minutes, we'll wait for Darin and Vincent to finish their meeting with Dr. Perry, then the three of you can relieve Lou and Judy."

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said formally, then in a quieter tone he asked, "Are you going to be well?"

"Eventually. But I may be down for a few days." Joe said in a tired voice.

"Please let me know if there is anything I can do to aid your recovery." Ensign Thaelan said quietly.

"Just watch out for Vincent and Darin. They're both new and need someone with experience to guide them." Joe said gently.

"I am honored that you trust me with that responsibility." Thaelan said honestly.

"I do Thaelan. But if you need any advice about anything at all, I'll be here." Joe said seriously.

"I have come to respect your opinion and value your advice. If I have any questions, I promise that I will come to you." Thaelan said as he looked Joe in the eyes.

"Then I won't worry." Joe said with a smile, then glanced at the door that Vincent and Darin had walked through.

Thaelan followed his gaze and said, "Don't worry about them Joe. I'm sure they'll be fine."

Joe looked at Thaelan with surprise and cautiously said, "You called me Joe."

Thaelan thought for a moment, then slowly nodded.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting gentlemen, I just wanted to see that everyone was being attended to before I sat down with you." Dr. Perry said as she walked to her desk.

"What's wrong with me?" Vincent blurted out.

"Not a thing Crewman Winters." Dr. Perry said with assurance, then noticed the nearly panicked expression on Vincent's face.

After a moment to consider, Dr. Perry continued, "I suppose I can see how you could come to the conclusion that there is a serious problem from the way I asked you to come in here. But please believe me when I say that there is absolutely nothing wrong with you and you have no reason to be concerned."

Vincent wanted to believe her, but felt the tension coiled within him, waiting to deal with whatever she was about to tell him.

"I suppose I'll get right to it then. In over thirty years of medical practice, I've never had the opportunity to say this to a crewman before. Congratulations Crewman Winters, you are entering puberty." Dr. Perry said with a tender smile.

"Do what?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I became concerned yesterday evening when I saw the variation in your readings from when I first examined you. I had planned to wait a week to give your blood chemistry a chance to stabilize before coming to any conclusions, but the readings I took of you just now confirmed that you are definitely in the first stages of puberty." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Why did you bring us in here to tell us that?" Darin asked curiously.

"I brought Crewman Winters in here because he might not want the status of his sexual development to be common knowledge among his coworkers. I

brought you in, Ensign Cooper, because when I asked Crewman Winters who he would like to be here with him for this discussion, he chose you." Dr. Perry said frankly.

"Oh." Darin said quietly, then looked at Vincent with question.

Vincent nodded and said, "Daddy Joe looks like he needs his rest. I thought that my big brother could handle this one."

Darin smiled and gave Vincent a quick one armed hug.

"Good. Now Crewman Winters, you are beginning some very drastic hormonal changes in your body. It's important for you to know what to expect so you understand that what you are going through is normal." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Isn't he a little young to be starting... this?" Darin asked with difficulty.

"That was my initial reaction, but I did some investigation and found that the normal age for a boy to start puberty is between nine and a half and eleven years of age. And studies indicate that a sudden increase of stress can 'jumpstart' puberty in a child who is on the threshold." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"I think Vincent qualifies on all counts." Darin said frankly.

"Crewman Winters... Vincent, the main reason I wanted you to have someone here when I told you this is because I'm going to ask Ensign Cooper to help you through the changes you're about to face." Dr. Perry said carefully.

"Can you just tell me what's going to happen?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Well, first your testes will begin to increase in size and begin to descend." Dr. Perry said clinically.

"My wha... Oh jeeze." Vincent said and buried his face into Darin's shoulder as he blushed all the way down to his toes.

Dr. Perry smiled at the reaction and continued, "At the same time or soon thereafter, your penis will begin to lengthen and increase in size."

Vincent continued to hold Darin tightly and kept his face buried.

"The second stage..." Dr. Perry began to say.

"Do you think we could just deal with the first stage for now? I think Vincent needs a little time to deal with this before he's ready for more." Darin said honestly as he rubbed Vincent's back.

Dr. Perry considered for a moment, then said, "I suppose that we can postpone the next part of the talk for a bit if Vincent will make me a promise."

After a long silent moment, Vincent hesitantly pulled back from Darin's chest and glanced at Dr. Perry.

"Vincent, Ensign Cooper has gone through these very same changes not too long ago. If you'll promise to go to him about any concern you have, no matter how small it may seem, then I'll save the rest of our talk for a later time." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"What kind of changes?" Vincent asked hesitantly, pretty sure that he didn't want to know.

"Let's see, you may start having unusually vivid dreams that make you feel strange. Or perhaps you'll have a question about how to deal with body odor..."

"I'm going to stink?" Vincent interrupted.

"It's possible. Strange things can happen when you have a drastic change in your hormonal balance or body chemistry. That's why you need to talk to Ensign Cooper about these things. If it's something he also faced when he went through puberty, then he can tell you how to get through it. If it's something he didn't experience, either he or you can come to me and ask for my advice." Dr. Perry finished with accomplishment.

There was a long moment of silence, then Vincent hesitantly said, "There was one thing I kind of wanted to know."

"What would that be?" Dr. Perry asked professionally.

"I was just kind of wondering when I'm, uh, gonna get... you know, hair... um, down there." Vincent finished in a mumble.

"You're entering stage one now, there's no specific timetable for such things, but the beginning of stage two is characterized by a change of texture and coloration of the scrotum and a sparse amount of pubic hair at the base of the penis. A matter of months most likely." Dr. Perry finished consideringly.

"Oh, um... thanks." Vincent said as he felt his face redden and fought the urge to hide in Darin's shoulder again.

"Don't worry little brother. If you'll just keep me posted, I'll let you know if the stuff that's happening is normal and what to expect next." Darin said quietly.

"That's what I had hoped. Then, unless you have any other questions, I believe that we're done here." Dr. Perry said with a warm smile.

"Um, no. No more questions. Thanks for, you know, not telling me in front of everyone." Vincent said shyly.

"I wouldn't do that to you Vincent. I know that this is a very personal thing and I would never embarrass you like that. I wouldn't have asked that you invite Ensign Cooper to be here, except that I feel that he will be able to give you more valuable insights into what you are about to experience than I can." Dr. Perry said as she stood and walked to the door.

Vincent stood with Darin at his side and said, "Daddy Joe is gonna flip when I tell him."

"Just make sure I'm close by when you do, in case the shock is too much for him." Dr. Perry said with a smile as she led the way out of the door.

Chapter 18

As Vincent and Darin left Dr. Perry's office, T'Lani walked immediately to Vincent's side.

"Are you well Husband?" T'Lani asked as she placed her hand on the side of his face.

Vincent smiled at the gesture and said, "Yeah, I'm fine. Dr. Perry just told me that I, um, well... just started puberty."

T'Lani froze at the words for an instant and seemed to be lost in thought.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked with immediate concern.

"No. I was simply concerned for your well being." T'Lani answered slowly.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "There's something else. Please tell me."

T'Lani arched an eyebrow at Vincent, then quietly said, "When the Captain asked if there were any type of ceremony that we would like, I did not respond. My silence could be taken as a negative response when the truth of the matter is otherwise."

Vincent thought about the words for a moment, then asked, "So does that mean that there is a ceremony that you would like to have?"

"When our family elders discussed our marriage, they decided to postpone our bonding ceremony in deference to your age and human physiology." T'Lani said quietly.

"Our bonding ceremony?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yes. Normally, when the family elders perform a union such as ours, there is a bonding ceremony to ensure the union. But our elders were reluctant to allow such a bonding in this instance due to your prepubescent state. They were concerned that the bonding could have adverse consequences." T'Lani said carefully.

"Wait. The bonding is a Vulcan telepathic thing. Right?" Darin asked cautiously.

"It is more. There is a telepathic element by which we will each carry a part of the other. There is also the cultural significance that the bonding ensures our unity." T'Lani said thoughtfully.

"So does that mean we're not really married?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"No. Our elders have concluded that we are married. That is sufficient." T'Lani said firmly.

"But without that ceremony, it means that we're not married like the other people on Vulcan because we don't have a bond." Vincent said speculatively.

T'Lani looked at Vincent with surprise at his interpretation.

"And since I started puberty, there isn't any reason we can't have the bonding ceremony now... Is there?" Vincent asked before she could answer.

"The ceremony must be conducted by a senior member of one of our families. Since we are traveling away from Earth and Vulcan, it will likely be weeks, perhaps months, before we could have the opportunity." T'Lani said seriously.

Vincent felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Darin's expectant expression.

"I bet if you talked to the Captain, he could arrange it when... you know." Darin said quietly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then looked back to T'Lani and said, "I can't promise that I can make it happen, but if you want to do it, I can talk to the Captain and maybe we can find a way to have the ceremony sooner."

T'Lani looked at Vincent curiously, then glanced at Darin speculatively.

"T'Lani, you are a Vulcan by birth. I am a Vulcan by choice. I understand why our family elders were willing to make an exception, but our marriage is too important to be done half-way. I'll do whatever I can to fix it so we can have our bonding ceremony as soon as possible." Vincent said firmly.

"You honor me, my husband." T'Lani said quietly.

"Actually, I'm kind of glad that it worked out this way." Vincent said with a speculative smile.

"Why's that?" Darin asked curiously.

"Because now we get to have a ceremony. I grew up thinking that getting married was a certain thing. Then when Grandfather said that we were married, just like that, I guess I felt like... there was something missing." Vincent said in thought, then turned to T'Lani and hurried to say, "I don't mean that I don't feel married to you."

"I understand, my husband. I too had a preconceived idea of how my wedding would one day be. I had no reason to believe that it could be otherwise." T'Lani said peacefully.

"Don't worry you two. We'll find a way to work this out." Darin said gently.

Vincent nodded his agreement.

"Dr. Perry is attempting to gain my attention. I must go." T'Lani said as she caressed Vincent's cheek again.

"I'll tell you as soon as I have things worked out so we can have our ceremony." Vincent said quietly.

"Be well, my husband." She said tenderly as she caressed his cheek with her thumb.

Vincent put his hand over hers and snuggled into it for a moment then said, "Be well, my wife."

* * * * *

"Is everything alright champ?" Joe asked with concern as Vincent and Darin walked into the room.

"Yeah. It's fine." Vincent answered with a gentle smile.

Vincent walked to Joe's bedside and noticed that Thaelan was watching, unsure if he should step away to give them privacy.

Vincent crooked his finger for Thaelan to come close.

When he was sure that Joe and Thaelan were listening, Vincent shyly said, "Dr. Perry just told me that I'm starting puberty."

Thaelan's eyes went wide at the statement as Joe broke into a tender smile.

Joe reached out to pull Vincent into a gentle hug as he said, "That's wonderful. If you need to talk about anything I'll always have time to listen."

Vincent returned the hug and said, "Thanks Daddy Joe. Darin said he'd help me too so I know everything is going to be fine."

Joe looked up at Darin and gave a grateful smile.

After another minute of hugging, Joe quietly asked, "Did you get to finish your report?"

"Almost. I've got most of it written but I still need to go through it and make sure it's good enough for Starfleet." Vincent said as he stood from the hug.

"I don't know how long it's going to be before the rendezvous so you should probably get that finished." Joe said gently.

"Do you need to finish yours?" Vincent asked quietly.

"No. I was just proofreading when everything went crazy. I'm sure it's fine." Joe said peacefully.

"Well, mine is close to being done, but I might need help to make sure it's good enough." Vincent said seriously and looked up at Darin with question.

"We can go take care of it now." Darin said softly.

"Thaelan, if you'll go to Deflector control and make sure everything is running properly, Vincent and Darin have some reports that need to be completed right away. As soon as they return to deflector control, you can relieve Lou and Judy so they can get some rest." Joe said seriously.

"Yes sir. I would like the opportunity to verify that the sabotaged systems have been restored to working order." Thaelan said formally.

"We shouldn't be gone too long." Vincent said to Thaelan with assurance.

"If this is a report for Starfleet Command, take the time you need to do it correctly." Thaelan said seriously.

"Okay." Vincent said with a smile.

"I guess we'd better go." Darin said slowly, not wanting to leave Joe alone.

"I'll be fine. Go on." Joe said gently.

As Vincent took a step away from Joe's bedside, he noticed JonJon standing beside Benny's bed.

"JonJon, would you do something for me?" Vincent asked as he walked to JonJon's side.

"Yeah. What can I do?" JonJon asked quietly.

"When Benny wakes up, would you tell him 'Thank You' and that I'll be up to visit with him as soon as I get off duty?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"I will. He's really going to be okay isn't he?" JonJon asked quietly.

Vincent pulled him into a quick hug and said, "He's going to be just fine. But if you need to hear it from someone else, you can ask Dr. Perry or T'Lani. They'll both tell you the same thing."

"Okay. I will." JonJon said quietly.

"Don't forget to take Fizgig down to use his box. I wouldn't want him to get in trouble for doing his stuff in here." Vincent said quietly.

JonJon looked down at the dog in his arms and said, "I don't want to leave Benny."

"Come here." Vincent said and guided JonJon to Joe's bedside.

"Daddy Joe, will you watch out for Benny while JonJon takes Fizgig to the bathroom and gets him food and water?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure. I tell you what JonJon, Thaelan is going down to deflector control right now. If you go with him, I can call him if anything at all happens." Joe said seriously.

"Okay. Thanks Daddy Joe." JonJon said shyly.

"Give me a hug." Joe said as he reached out an arm to JonJon.

After a moment of hesitation, JonJon leaned over the bed and was pulled into a firm hug.

Vincent looked at Thaelan, hoping he wouldn't mind taking JonJon with him.

"Do not be concerned Crewman Winters. I will attend to your friend." Thaelan said quietly.

"Thanks Thaelan. I'd better get going now so I can get back to work." Vincent said quickly.

Thaelan gave a small smile and a nod of agreement.

* * * * *

"Hello Crewman Winters, it's good to see you again." Lieutenant Walking Bear said casually.

"Hi Lieutenant. This is Darin, um, Ensign Cooper. I don't think you got to meet him before." Vincent said uncertainly.

"I saw him in the meeting. It's nice to meet you Ensign Cooper." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a gentle smile and extended his hand to shake.

Darin shook the offered hand and said, "It's nice to meet you too."

"I'm assuming that you two aren't here for a social call." Lieutenant Walking Bear said speculatively.

"Not this time. We need to finish our reports." Vincent said quietly.

"The padds you brought me are right over there by the storage containers." Lieutenant Walking Bear said as he gestured to the back of the shuttle.

"Thanks. Darin, do you have time to help me now or do you have stuff to do on your own?" Vincent asked seriously.

"I just have to do a proofread. It will only take a minute, I can do it after I've helped you." Darin said with a gentle smile.

"Is Joe going to be okay?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked cautiously.

"He's going to be fine. He just needs some rest." Darin answered assuringly.

"He's a good man. I'm glad he's going to be alright." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with relief.

"Would you look at what I've got done so far and tell me what I need to do next?" Vincent asked as he handed his padd to Darin.

"Sure." Darin said with a smile and began to read.

* * * * *

"JonJon, could you tell me what happened to your friend? In all the excitement of the day, I didn't hear." Thaelan asked casually as they walked toward the turbo lift.

"Yeah. Channing is sick and needs to stay in bed so Benny and I were helping him to not be too bored. Anyway, this kidnapper guy comes in with Vincent's brother and is being really mean to him. He had a phaser and made us all sit still while he called his friends to come and get him and Vincent's brother." JonJon said in thought.

"Deflector Control." Ensign Thaelan said to the ceiling of the lift, then looked at JonJon with question to prompt him to continue.

"Well, we heard the turbo lift door open and the kidnapper guy was about to go out and shoot whoever was out there. So Benny screamed that it was a trap and then the bad guy... shot him." JonJon said as tears welled up in his eyes.

Thaelan automatically pulled JonJon to his side into a gentle hug.

"But then Vincent came in and he was screaming really loud and acting like a little kid. He kicked the guy then punched him hard enough to knock him over." JonJon said from Thaelan's side.

"Which he never would have been able to do if not for your friend Benny." Thaelan said gently.

JonJon nodded into Thaelan's side, then said, "Then security came and were about to take the bad guy away when he just dropped over dead."

"I did hear about that part when I was in sickbay. Ensign Gianni... the bad guy, had an artificial tooth that was filled with poison. When he knew he had been captured, he broke the tooth and swallowed the poison." Ensign Thaelan said as he walked off the turbo lift, still holding JonJon at his side.

"Vincent says that Benny is going to be okay. I'm just so worried about him. I've lost my whole family. I don't want to lose Benny too." JonJon said as tears began to form in his eyes again.

Thaelan stopped and turned JonJon to face him.

"Sometimes bad things happen and there is nothing you can do to prevent that. Worrying about what might happen and being afraid to lose someone you love can prevent you from risking your heart and loving anyone else." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

JonJon nodded hesitantly.

"Don't make my mistake JonJon. Enjoy the time you have with the people you love and try not to focus on the things you can't change. Let them know that you love them so you'll always have memories of happiness to carry with you, no matter what adventures the universe throws in your life path." Thaelan said intensely.

JonJon thought about the words, then quietly said, "I'll remember that. I mean, I'm still scared of losing Benny and Vincent. But what you said is right. I need to let them know I love them and enjoy them while I have them. So a hundred years from now I can look back at the fun times I had with my best friends."

Thaelan nodded and draped an arm around JonJon's shoulders as they continued toward deflector control.

* * * * *

"It looks good Vincent. I made a few small changes for grammar, but besides that, I think you just need to read it over to make sure it says everything you want it to say, then finalize it." Darin said seriously.

"Thanks Darin. If you hadn't let me use your template I'd never be able to get this thing finished."

"I'm sure you would have eventually been able to finish it, but it probably would have taken a little longer." Darin said with a smile as he read over his own report one more time.

"And been really boring." Vincent said frankly.

Vincent read his report carefully, then finalized it and put his electronic signature on the file.

"Did you need us to bring you anything Lieutenant Walking Bear? You must be hungry by now." Vincent asked as he put his padd on the stack with the others.

"No. Thank you Crewman Winters. I asked the security personnel to bring me something to eat earlier. I'm fine." Lieutenant Walking Bear said peacefully.

"Well, just call me if you need anything at all. I think I'm just going to be working on reports all day, so I won't mind taking a break for a while to bring you something." Vincent said seriously.

"I'll call if I need anything. I promise." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a fond smile.

"Mine's finished, are you ready to go?" Darin asked as he put his padd on top of Vincent's.

"Yeah. Do you think anyone would mind if we stopped to talk to the Captain for a minute, then maybe stopped by the mess hall and got something to eat before we go to deflector control?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"I think it will be okay as long as we don't take too long." Darin said with a smile.

"We'll come back and see you after our shift if you're still here." Vincent said quickly as he walked toward the shuttle door.

"I'll look forward to it." Lieutenant Walking Bear said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Captain Byrne, do you have a minute to talk with me?" Vincent asked from the doorway to the captain's office.

"Yes. Of course Crewman Winters, Ensign Cooper, do come in and have a seat. What can I do for you today?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Well, I guess it's pretty simple. When T'Lani and I got married, our family elders decided that I was too young to bond with her because I'm Human and I hadn't um, entered puberty yet." Vincent said uncomfortably.

"I don't have enough of an understanding of Vulcan bonding to know why that is, but I'm sure your family elders had their reasons." Captain Byrne said in a considering voice.

"Yeah. Well, you see... it's like this... I just... um..." Vincent trailed off.

"Dr. Perry just told him that he has officially entered puberty." Darin added quietly.

Vincent nodded, and hurried to continue, "So that means that we could have the bonding ceremony now. But one of our family elders has to perform the ceremony."

"And we were thinking that since we'll be meeting up with the *Enterprise* soon, that maybe there would be some way that we could arrange it so Vincent and T'Lani could have their bonding ceremony before the *Enterprise* leaves." Darin said seriously.

"I see. Have you discussed this plan of yours with Ambassador Sarek?" Captain Byrne asked quietly.

"No sir. We haven't talked to anyone about it. I just told T'Lani that I was going to try to work something out." Vincent said quickly.

Captain Byrne nodded, then said, "Crewman Winters, what you're asking may not be possible. The proto-matter must be delivered to Earth with all due haste. I will make some inquiries and see if there is some way that we might be able to make an accommodation."

"Thank you sir. If we can't do it today, then we'll just have to wait till we get back to Vulcan. That's not so bad." Vincent said seriously.

"A very good attitude Crewman. Logical." Captain Byrne finished with a grin.

"Yes sir. Thank you." Vincent said with a smile.

"Crewman, Ensign, you are dismissed." Captain Byrne said with a fond smile.

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"Please wait while I make sure that the atmosphere is suitable for us." Ensign Thaelan said as he pressed in a sequence of commands in the panel by the deflector control room door.

"Do you think something might be wrong with the air?" JonJon asked hesitantly.

"No. But the bad man you were telling me about, he was down here earlier and he put something in our air to make us all sleepy. I just want to make sure that it's all gone." Thaelan said as he looked at the small digital display.

"So is that why everyone is in sickbay?" JonJon asked as he clutched Fizgig tighter to his chest.

"That's right. But everyone is going to be fine after they get some rest." Thaelan said with assurance as he opened the door.

"Is it safe?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"Yes. Completely safe. I need to make sure everything is operating correctly while you are attending to Fizgig." Thaelan said seriously.

"Thanks Thaelan. I feel a lot better knowing that you're here." JonJon said with a smile.

Thaelan thought about the statement, then finally said, "You are the first person in a very long time to say such a thing to me. Thank you JonJon, and I am glad you are here too."

JonJon smiled as he carried Fizgig into the supply room to attend to his needs.

* * * * *

"Hi Thaelan, did you have a chance to get anything to eat before you came back here?" Darin asked as he entered deflector control.

"No. It did not occur to me to do so." Thaelan said as he moved from station two to station one.

"Good. Vincent brought you something." Darin said with a smile.

Thaelan looked up in surprise as Vincent carried a small boxed lunch to him.

"I didn't know what kind of food you liked so I brought you a roast beef sandwich." Vincent said shyly.

"I have become accustomed to Human food. I'm sure I will enjoy it. Thank you Vincent." Thaelan said with a small smile.

"No problem. Is everything okay?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"Yes. All systems appear to be operating normally. We can relieve Ensign DeGama now." Thaelan said as he walked to the main console.

"I don't think Lou will mind waiting a minute or two more so you can have your lunch." Darin said quietly.

Thaelan looked at the boxed lunch in his hands and quietly said, "I believe you are right. I will contact her when I have finished this."

"While you're doing that we'll run a quick status check on all the systems and sub-systems." Darin said, then glanced at Vincent with question.

Vincent nodded and walked to the third console to begin working.

Thaelan ate his lunch and watched as 'his' crew efficiently went through the status checks.

"Darin, would you look at this?" Vincent said as he looked at a reading on station two.

Darin walked to his side and read for a moment before saying, "Either the R7 battery backup lost 2/3 of it's charge or the control circuit is giving false readings."

"Do you want me to go look at it?" Vincent asked seriously.

"You haven't worked with the R cells yet have you?" Darin asked in concentration.

"No, Susan and I just worked with the conduits." Vincent said as he looked up at Darin.

"Then I'll go take care of it. You need to stay here in case Ensign Thaelan needs anything when he takes the main." Darin said seriously.

"Do you think you can show me how to work on the R cells later so I can do it next time?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Darin smiled and said, "Sure. Just remind me and we'll go down together and I'll show you around."

Vincent nodded and said, "I'll remember."

"Ensign Thaelan, we're showing a fault in one of the R cells. I need to go down and check it out." Darin said as he turned.

Thaelan thought about the statement and said, "Take a communicator with you and keep an open channel. Working on R cells is very different from working on any other system in deflector control."

"Yes sir." Darin said as he walked to the locker to get his tool kit, then grabbed a communicator.

"I have number eight." Darin said as he waited by the door.

Thaelan turned to the main and keyed in his instructions.

"Your communicator is now tied into the main comm." Thaelan said seriously.

Darin nodded, then said, "Vincent, would you run a bypass of R7 and let me know when it's offline."

"Yeah. I'm on it." Vincent said and hurried to station one.

"I'll be right back." Darin said and walked out the door.

After a moment of keying in the new power configuration, Vincent initiated the program, then hurried to station two to run a diagnostic on the cell to verify that it was unpowered.

"*Is it switched over?*" Darin asked over the comm.

"Hold on. I just want to make sure it did what I told it to." Vincent said with concentration.

"Ensign Cooper. Be sure to ground yourself and use full static protection while working on the R cell." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"*I'm getting my static band on now.*" Darin said seriously.

Thaelan sat the remains of his lunch aside, then pressed the dedicated comm line to the bridge and said, "Ensign DeGama, this is Ensign Thaelan. I am ready to relieve you and assume control."

After a moment, Lou's tired voice could barely be heard saying, "*It's good to hear your voice Thaelan. It's been a very long night. You should have control now. I stand relieved.*"

"Acknowledged." Thaelan said as he accepted control from the bridge station.

"Wow. She really sounded tired." Vincent said with concern.

"We will be sure to allow her and Crewman Wills sufficient time to rest before they return to duty." Ensign Thaelan said with assurance.

"*This control circuit is fried. I think I'm going to need to replace the entire housing. I wouldn't trust these connections.*" Darin's voice said over the comm.

"Acknowledged. I will forward a request to supply for the necessary items. They should be waiting for you when you arrive." Thaelan said as he began to type on his panel.

"I never thought of that." Vincent said with a smile.

"It increases maintenance efficiency when you have a dispatcher to do such things." Thaelan said seriously.

The doors of deflector control opened to admit Chief Morgan looking unusually serious.

Vincent and Thaelan automatically stood to attention.

"As you were. I just heard about Joe and came down to get a status report." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"All systems show normal function. We have a maintenance issue with the R7 cell, but Ensign Cooper is working to resolve it now." Ensign Thaelan said professionally.

"Very good. Crewman Winters, do you know how to run a primary system status check?" Chief Morgan asked as he walked to stand beside station two.

"Yes sir." Vincent said as he started the level two diagnostic.

"Very good." Chief Morgan said as he watched Vincent work.

After a moment of looking over the board, Vincent said, "All systems showing normal function. Would you like a secondary system check while I'm here?"

"No thank you Crewman. I just wanted to be sure that you had been trained on the essential systems to support Ensign Thaelan should the need arise." Chief Morgan said warmly.

"Both Crewman Winters and Ensign Cooper have demonstrated their understanding of the basic systems. I have no doubt in their abilities." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"That's good to know." Chief Morgan said with a smile.

"*Vincent, would you run a quick status check on the R cell switches before I try changing out this housing?*" Darin called over the comm.

"Yeah. Hang on." Vincent said as he pulled up the sub-system display and started a status check on every switch that connected to R7.

Chief Morgan watch as Vincent efficiently worked the console.

"The I-14 switch indicator isn't working. Let me check the console status real quick. It'll just take a second." Vincent said and hurried to station three.

After a moment of looking at the readings, Vincent called into the air, "I can't tell if it's good or bad so you need to change it out."

"*You'll need to divert power from the E-7 and E-10 conduits before I can change it.*" Darin said seriously.

"E-7 and E-11." Vincent corrected automatically as he walked to station one.

Darin chuckled and said, "*I just wanted to make sure you were paying attention. Would you see if there is an inter-connector to R-8? I don't think there is, but I'd like to be sure.*"

"Um, yeah. Just a second." Vincent said as he reprogrammed the power configuration.

"I'll get that for you Crewman Winters." Chief Morgan said as he walked to station two and brought up the system controls.

"There is no interconnection between R-7 and R-8 Ensign Cooper." Chief Morgan called out into the air.

After a moment, Darin answered, "*Thank you Chief Morgan.*"

Vincent pressed the key to activate the new configuration and said, "It should be unpowered now. But make sure you check it out first."

"*I will Vincent. I've had more than enough excitement already today. The last thing I need is to get my hair straightened.*" Darin said in a playful voice.

"Chief Morgan, would you look at this wave pattern?" Ensign Thaelan asked from the main console.

Chief Morgan walked to Ensign Thaelan's side and looked at the readings carefully.

"Curious. Can you bring up a visual?" Chief Morgan asked cautiously.

Ensign Thaelan switched to visual mode on the main screen.

"Nothing visible." Chief Morgan said in thought.

"Perhaps I should do an overlay of particle movement." Ensign Thaelan said speculatively.

"It's worth a try, do it." Chief Morgan said with interest.

"There it is... but what is it?" Ensign Thaelan said as he looked carefully at the readings.

"The dense particulate matter is emitting enough electro-magnetic radiation to mask it." Chief Morgan said quickly, then hit the comm and said, "Main bridge, we are detecting a dark matter cluster at heading 004 mark 3 at a distance of 22,000 kilometers."

"*Scanners don't detect anything*." A voice said cautiously.

Chief Morgan quickly transferred the overlay image to the bridge.

"*Thank you Chief. We have it, we're changing course*." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"I'll get to work on a sensor modification to nullify the effect of the EM particulate matter." Chief Morgan said with relief.

"*Thank you Chief. It appears that we were running through a mine field without even knowing it*." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"I'll let you know when the sensor modification is ready. Morgan out." Chief Morgan said firmly.

"*M'Butu out*." Commander M'Butu said and closed the transmission.

"Do you need assistance with the modification?" Ensign Thaelan asked seriously.

"No thank you Ensign. It will be a simple matter to negate the EM effect now that we are aware of it. Good job of detecting it though. How did you realize that something was hidden out there?" Chief Morgan asked curiously.

"I like to watch the eddies and currents of the particulate matter that we're passing through. I noticed a disruption in the particle flow which normally indicates a solid mass in the stream, but there was nothing there." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"It's good to see that the academy isn't training all the instincts out of the next generation. Trust those instincts and you'll move on to great things, mark my words." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said with a smile of pride.

"I'm going to work on those sensor mods now. Call me in main Engineering if you need anything before Joe comes back to duty." Chief Morgan said as he walked toward the door.

"Yes sir. I will." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

Chief Morgan gave a nod that he heard before walking out the door.

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"*Well now you did it Thaelan*." Darin's voice said from the comm.

"What is that Ensign Cooper?" Thaelan asked curiously.

"*By spotting that dark matter before we ran into it, you've probably saved a few hundred lives. What do you say Vincent? Is he officially one of us now?*" Darin asked with an obvious smile in his voice.

"Not yet." Vincent said in thought.

There was a beeping that drew Thaelan's attention away from the casual conversation.

"Deflector control." Thaelan said quickly.

"*Ensign Thaelan, I'll need you to write an incident report detailing how you spotted the dark matter. I'd like to be able to present it to the Captain to help explain the need for the sensor modifications*." Chief Morgan said seriously.

"Yes sir. Right away." Ensign Thaelan said formally.

"*Now* he's officially one of us." Vincent said with a cheeky grin.

Ensign Thaelan looked up at the sound of Darin's laughter.

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters?" Thaelan asked as he muted the comm, so Darin couldn't hear.

"Yes?" Vincent replied as he turned in his chair.

"This morning, when the intruder tried to abduct, Ensign.... your brother..." Thaelan said with difficulty.

"Yes?" Vincent said in a quieter voice.

"It appeared that you regretted not being able to do more to defend him and yourself." Thaelan said carefully.

"Yeah. Everyone says I did the right thing, but I really felt like a little kid because there wasn't anything I could do if he tried to hurt Darin." Vincent said quietly.

Ensign Thaelan nodded at the response, then said, "Among my people, it is the father's responsibility to teach his children to defend themselves. I realize that Lieutenant Bowers has taken up many of the duties of being your father. But if you have no objection, I could do this for you."

Vincent recognized the seriousness of what Thaelan was offering and said, "I would like that Thaelan. I want to learn as much as you're willing to teach me."

Thaelan smiled at the serious response and said, "When our schedules have become more stable, we could set aside a time each day to train."

"Do you like to get up early or are you someone who likes to sleep until the last minute?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I am typically an early riser." Thaelan said casually.

"Me too. If you want, we can get up a little bit early and have our training before we go on duty. Darin likes to sleep until the last minute, so we can train, take our showers, then wake up Darin and go to breakfast." Vincent said in thought.

Thaelan nodded and said, "That would work very well for me. Some physical activity before work helps me to be more focused."

Vincent giggled, then noticed Thaelan's curious look directed at him.

"It's just hard for me to imagine you being *more* focused." Vincent said with a chuckle.

Thaelan smiled at the statement, then turned off the mute on the comm system.

* * * * *

"Is the diagnostic done yet?" Darin asked as he walked back into Deflector Control.

"The level two showed it being fine, but I'm running a level three on R-7 and all the connected systems before we bring it back up." Vincent said seriously.

"Good. I'll go ahead and fill out the maintenance report if you guys want." Darin said as he put away his tool kit.

"Yes. And send a copy to Environmental Control since their backup systems are also connected to the R cells." Thaelan said seriously.

"Will do." Darin said as he started on his report.

"Now that Darin is back, I should probably start working on my reports. I've got a bunch of them that I have to get done today." Vincent said hesitantly.

"What reports do you have to write, if I may ask?" Thaelan asked curiously.

"Um, I have to write the one about finding the modified control circuit, one about helping Channing when he got shocked, then the one about what happened when I went into the reactor, I guess I'll have to do another one about what happened in the transporter, even though I don't have much to tell in that one, then... is that it?" Vincent asked as he turned to look at Darin.

"Lieutenant Simms asked you to write one too." Darin said with a look of apology.

"Oh yeah, I forgot that one." Vincent said distantly.

"Then you should sign in at one of the auxiliary stations and allow Ensign Cooper and I to attend to deflector control. We will call on you if we have need of your assistance." Thaelan said seriously.

"Okay. Thank you Ensign Thaelan. Darin, could you give me another copy of the template. I left the other one on the secure padd." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure, I'll have it to you in just a second." Darin said with a smile.

"Ensign Cooper, do you have a significant number of reports to work on today?" Thaelan asked cautiously.

"Just about the kidnapping and the Cooper Bridge." Darin said in thought.

"Then perhaps when our shift is over we could work on our reports together. I also have to write a report about the intruder, then another about the dark matter detection." Thaelan asked cautiously.

"That sounds good... But, I'm supposed to go on a date with Rad at 19:00, as long as it's before or after that, then yeah." Darin said carefully.

"Since we don't know when Ensign Agropos and Crewman Tullis will be fit for duty, I don't think it will be possible to set a more definite time." Thaelan said in thought.

"The way things seem to work around here, we should probably get used to that." Darin said with a smile.

Thaelan nodded his agreement, then turned at a giggle from Vincent.

"The template just called me 'Honey Muffin'." Vincent said with a chuckle.

Darin smiled at Vincent's enjoyment of his program, then turned and began to run systems checks.

* * * * *

"Hey guys, does anyone need a break?" Susan asked as she walked into deflector control.

Darin looked up from his work and thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"I think we're fine." Vincent said as he looked around.

"I don't know what procedure you use on this ship when the person at the main console needs to... visit the lavatory." Ensign Thaelan said reluctantly.

Susan smiled and said, "You just look over everything to see that it's working normally, then get me to watch it while you're gone. I'm not qualified to run the main, but I know enough to keep an eye on it for the two minutes that you'll be gone."

"Would you mind watching for me now? I won't be long." Ensign Thaelan asked hopefully.

"Go ahead. I've got it." Susan said with a smile.

Ensign Thaelan nodded gratefully, then hurried out of the room.

As soon as he was gone, Susan said, "He seems to have mellowed out a lot."

"Yeah, I like working with him." Vincent said, then went back to working on his report.

Darin nodded his agreement and said, "Even if Joe hadn't put him in charge of our shift, I think I'd like to hang around with him. He's interesting and he's really good at his job."

Susan slowly nodded in thought.

"Any word on when Connie and Jimmy will be fit for duty?" Darin asked casually.

"Oh yeah. They're both awake now and Joe told them to relieve you guys at 18:00. And if you guys wouldn't mind coming in at 06:00 then Lou and Judy will have the day off and we'll go back on our normal schedule starting with beta shift tomorrow. Joe thinks Lou and Judy need a little extra time off after the really long day they've had." Susan said frankly.

"Sounds good to me." Vincent said absently.

"Well, I'm not an early bird like you Vincent. Someone will probably have to wake me up." Darin said seriously.

"I'll make sure you're up in time. What are brother's for?" Vincent said as he looked away from his report.

"Thank you Crewman Walker." Ensign Thaelan said as he hurried back into the room.

"No problem, and you can call me Susan if you want." Susan said gently.

"Yes, of course. Thank you Susan. Please let me know if I can ever return the favor." Thaelan said respectfully.

"I'll do that. Well, if you guys don't need anything, I'm going to go check on the guys and I'll see you at 18:00." Susan said cheerfully.

"Okay, see you then." Darin said with a warm smile.

Vincent turned and gave her a little wave.

Susan smiled at the gesture and left the room.

* * * * *

"Thaelan, you won't have a problem coming in at 06:00 tomorrow will you?" Darin asked casually.

"No, that won't be any problem at all." Thaelan said seriously.

"Joe want's Lou and Judy to have the night off since they basically pulled a double. The Beta shift will work 18:00 to 06:00 and then we'll work until 16:00 tomorrow." Darin said in thought.

"That would be satisfactory." Thaelan said carefully.

A beeping on Vincent's console drew everyone's attention.

"This is Crewman Winters." Vincent answered cautiously.

"*Vincent Winters?*" The early middle aged man asked pleasantly.

"Yes." Vincent said hesitantly.

"*I'm Mr. Chilton from the Federation's tutoring center. Your name was submitted to us for enrollment in a subspace classroom.*" The man said seriously.

"Yeah, but I thought they were going to wait until next week to set it up so I could have a chance to get used to living here." Vincent said cautiously.

The man smiled and said, "*Yes, the new class that we're organizing won't be starting until next week, I just needed to tell you about the way the classes will be structured before we begin.*"

"Oh, okay." Vincent said hesitantly.

"*The application said that it would be preferable for you to have limited class time and submit completed academic assignments at your own pace. Our classes are formed into study groups so you can develop your group problem solving skills. To be part of a team, you will need to attend the classes when they are offered.*" Mr. Chilton said seriously.

"That may be difficult for me. I have a job and I can work on my assignments on my days off. My commanding officers will work around my school schedule, but I'd rather not have to take a bunch of time away from work if I don't have to." Vincent said honestly.

"*Oh... I wasn't aware before I called that you were a crewman. I had just assumed that you were the child of a Starfleet officer that needed tutoring while traveling with his family so he could maintain his academic standing.*" Mr. Chilton said in a neutral tone.

"I'm a Petty Officer, Second Class. I'm assigned to Deflector Control on the *USS Yorktown*. But I'm also nine, so I still need to be in school." Vincent said seriously.

"*I see. How well do you think you'll be able to focus on your academic studies while maintaining a work schedule?*" Mr. Chilton asked cautiously.

"I won't know until I try." Vincent said honestly.

Mr. Chilton shook his head and said, "*I need to speak to your parents about this. This is unacceptable. A child of your age needs to focus on his academic studies.*"

"Mr. Chilton, if you want to talk to my parents, you'll need to get an Ouija board. Besides, I am an adult by Vulcan law and I'm allowed to make my own decisions. If you can't accept my decisions, I'll make other arrangements for my education." Vincent said firmly.

"*That might be best. We want our students to make their education a priority.*" Mr. Chilton said coldly.

"You want to make everything in my life revolve around your schedule. That's not going to happen. Getting an education is very important to me... but you are not. Winters out." Vincent said, then slammed the comm button on his console.

"Gee Vincent, I'm guessing you didn't like your new teacher, huh?" Darin asked hesitantly.

"Oh, that wasn't a teacher. *That* was a principal." Vincent said frankly, then took a slow deep breath to try and calm his temper.

"And I suspect from your tone that he is not the first principal you've met." Thaelan said speculatively.

"Oh no. I've talked to a few principals, they were all jerk wads like this one... I need to get this taken care of before he can call Cory or Daddy Joe." Vincent said as he pressed the comm on his terminal.

"*Communications*." Debbie said seriously.

"Hi Debbie, could you get me a connection to Vulcan High Command?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"*Sure, it'll just take a second*." Debbie said casually.

"*Vulcan High Command, How may I direct your call?*" A young Vulcan man asked in precise English.

"I am Crewman Vincent Winters, Son of Clan Short of the House of Surak of Vulcan. I'm not sure who I need to speak to. I'm a Vulcan citizen serving as a Crewman on a Starfleet vessel. The Federation tutoring center is not willing to work around my duty schedule and I was hoping that there might be a Vulcan school that I could attend by subspace that would be willing to work with me." Vincent said firmly.

"*Allow me a moment to make some inquiries. Please hold*." The man said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then the Vulcan High Command logo filled the screen.

"Wow, you're going right to the top." Darin said cautiously.

"It'll probably be faster than starting at the bottom." Vincent said simply.

A moment later the young man appeared on the screen again.

"*I will direct your call to Saakmal, the Secretary of Education. I have apprised him of your situation.*" The young Vulcan man said efficiently.

"Thank you." Vincent said in a toneless voice, then watched as the screen changed.

"*I am Saakmal. You wish to make accommodations for your education?*" The middle aged Vulcan man asked seriously.

"Yes sir. I am an active duty crewman serving on a Starfleet vessel. I would like to arrange to take my school classes during my off duty hours, if that's possible." Vincent said calmly.

"*Petty Officer Winters, I have accessed your personal file and found the record of your academic progress thus far.*" Saakmal said seriously.

Vincent waited, knowing that he wasn't expected to respond.

"*It appears from your files that you have the requisite understanding to begin your studies in our third standard course of study. You will be given access to your academic materials via subspace and can work at your own pace. Your Starfleet service will satisfy several of your course requirements, thus easing your workload to a manageable level.*" Saakmal said slowly.

Vincent nodded his understanding.

"*Your file indicates that you speak eight Earth languages as well as Formal Vulcan and Vulcan Standard, is this correct?*" Saakmal asked carefully.

"Yes sir." Vincent said respectfully.

"*That would satisfy the language requirement for the third standard course, but if you have an interest, there is a language course being offered for the first time that you may find rewarding. It would require you to attend classes via subspace so you can hear and speak the language in a real-time setting. The class is provided at non-standard times so that those who require scheduling flexibility may attend.*" Saakmal said seriously.

"It sounds perfect for me. What is the language?" Vincent asked seriously.

"*Conversational Klingon.*" Saakmal said without expression.

"I would like to take the class." Vincent said, trying to contain his enthusiasm.

"*Very well Petty Officer Winters. You are officially enrolled in classes to begin at your convenience. A schedule of available times for you to attend*

your Conversational Klingon class via subspace will be forwarded to you. You have been officially enrolled at the Vulcan Academy of Science." Saakmal said formally.

"Thank you Saakmal. Live long and prosper." Vincent said respectfully.

"*Peace and Long Life, Petty Officer Winters.*" Saakmal said reverently.

A moment after the screen went blank, Vincent turned to see Darin and Thaelan looking at him curiously.

"What?" Vincent asked self consciously.

"You just enrolled for school by talking to the Secretary of Education." Darin said slowly.

"Yeah, so? He's just a secretary... they're usually a lot nicer than the principals they work for." Vincent said hesitantly.

"No, you misunderstand. He is not A secretary. He is THE secretary. Saakmal is the Secretary of Education. He's in charge of ALL education on Vulcan. His office coordinates every school and every college on the planet." Thaelan said seriously.

"Oh... kewl." Vincent finished with a happy smile.

Darin shook his head and said, "Only my little brother could get enrolled in school by talking to the Secretary of Education himself."

"How are your reports coming Crewman Winters?" Thaelan asked in a casual voice.

"Oh, um. Okay I guess. I've finished two of them, but I'm about to start on the one about the reactor and that's probably going to take some time." Vincent said reluctantly.

"If you would like, you could take a break for a few minutes before starting the next report." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"Yeah. I need to get a drink and maybe a snack. Can I get you guys anything?" Vincent asked as he signed off his terminal.

"I'm fine." Darin said as he looked over his console.

"I too am well, but thank you for the offer." Thaelan said with a smile.

"Okay, I won't be gone long." Vincent said and hurried out of the room.

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"Ensign Cooper, I just wanted to say again that I am grateful for your help this morning." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"You'd do the same for me wouldn't you?" Darin asked as he turned in his chair.

"Yes. I would." Thaelan said firmly.

"Then don't worry about it. I would have done the same thing for anyone on our team... even Jimmy." Darin finished with a grin.

"You do not like Crewman Tullis?" Thaelan asked cautiously.

"I like him fine. It's just fun to tease him." Darin said with a smile.

Thaelan quirked an eyebrow at the statement.

"I wouldn't ever do anything to really upset him, but it's fun to do stuff to aggravate him. The funniest thing is that he doesn't even realize that I'm doing it on purpose." Darin said with a smile.

"I don't think I will ever understand Humans." Thaelan said distantly.

"Well, I am one and I probably won't either. But if you'll ask about what's confusing you, I'll explain as much as I know." Darin said honestly.

"There was one thing. I get the sense that Crewman Winters was the one who led everyone else to want to... include me. I don't understand his motivation." Thaelan said honestly.

"I don't know either. But if you really want to know, ask him. Vincent isn't shy about saying what he thinks and feels." Darin said frankly.

Thaelan thought about the statement, then slowly nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent, how are you doing?" Chance asked as he saw Vincent approaching.

"Great. I've just been writing a bunch of reports and I'm taking a quick break before I have to get back to it." Vincent said happily.

"Channing told me how you clocked that security guy. You're just full of surprises." Chance said with a smile.

Vincent chuckled at the statement and said, "I'm not the only one. I just did what I had to do because there was no other choice. Benny called for help and got shot. That took a lot more guts than I have."

"From the way Channing tells it, Benny thinks the same thing about the way you went into that reactor." Chance said frankly.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay. I guess maybe we're both kinda brave. But if people don't stop talking about it pretty soon our heads are going to get too big to fit through the doors."

Chance chuckled at the statement.

"Excuse me, would you guys like some cookies? We just got them out of the oven." A crewman asked as he walked around the serving line with a basket of chocolate chip cookies.

"Yeah. That sounds great!" Vincent said happily.

The crewman handed Vincent a napkin and held the basket out to him.

"Do you want some milk?" Chance asked as he also took some cookies.

"Yuck, no. I can't stand milk." Vincent said with a crinkled nose.

"You're a weird kid." Chance said with a smile.

"What are you going to have?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Coffee." Chance said simply.

"I think I'll have some too." Vincent said consideringly.

"It might stunt your growth." Chance said with a teasing smile.

Vincent chuckled at the statement and said, "I'll take my chances."

* * * * *

"I know you said you didn't want anything, but they just made some cookies." Vincent said as he walked into deflector control.

"Thanks Vincent, that sounds good." Darin said with a smile.

"I brought you some coffee to go with it. I brought you some too Thaelan." Vincent said happily.

"Thank you Vincent. That was very kind." Thaelan said quietly.

"I was in the neighborhood." Vincent said with a smile as he walked back to the console where he had been working.

After a long moment of silence, Thaelan quietly said, "Vincent, I appreciate all that you've done to make me feel included here, but I'm curious to know

why you went to such lengths to help me when I behaved so badly toward you."

Vincent looked up from the report template for a moment to think, then said, "Because I used to be a lot like you."

Thaelan looked at Vincent curiously.

"I was mean to people and really angry all the time and I was really really alone. When you walked in here... I saw you being how I used to be. Daddy Joe made me feel like I belonged somewhere and that someone cared about me and I guess I wanted to do that for you." Vincent said in deep concentration.

"I see. So you sought to provide the type of comfort that you had been lacking earlier in your life." Thaelan said speculatively.

"Yeah. Since I know what it feels like to be that way, I thought I'd try to help you so you didn't have to feel that way if you didn't want to." Vincent said seriously.

"I remember you saying that you didn't want to change Thaelan, you wanted to give him a reason to want to change himself." Darin said in realization.

"I thank you for that Vincent. I have been in a very dark place in my life for far too long." Thaelan said in a low voice.

"Yeah. Been there, done that. I guess that most people think that people will automatically like them... Jimmy's like that. People like you and me, we kind of just expect that people don't like us until they prove us wrong. At least that's how I used to be. Anyway, now we're on the other side of all that and we can help other people when we see them drowning in it." Vincent said frankly.

"I don't know if I can." Thaelan said in thought.

"You already did." Vincent said with a smile.

"I did?" Thaelan asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I took Daddy Joe and JonJon some cookies in sickbay before I came here. JonJon told me about how nice you were to him. You weren't just nice to him, you made him feel like he's not alone. Like he's got someone that he can go to who really understands him." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"I feel the same toward him." Thaelan said in a whisper.

Vincent giggled at the statement.

"What is funny?" Thaelan asked cautiously.

"When you came here you were angry at life, now you're living it. Having someone you love and who loves you in return is being alive." Vincent said happily.

Thaelan thought about the words for a moment, then said, "You have uncommon wisdom."

"Yeah, but so do you. I think going through all that stuff that we did that made us angry and then getting to the other side of it made us wiser." Vincent said with a grin.

"Perhaps so."

Chapter 19

"Hey guys, did we miss anything?" Connie asked with a smile as he walked into Deflector Control.

"Just the usual, how are you feeling?" Darin asked with a happy smile.

"Well rested. I heard that you're the one who got breathers on everyone. Thanks for taking care of us." Connie said as he walked to the main control panel and casually looked it over.

Jimmy walked into the room looking a bit subdued.

Vincent hopped up from auxiliary station two and pulled Jimmy into a quick hug.

Jimmy looked down at him in surprise.

"I'm glad that you're okay Jimmy. I was worried about you." Vincent said honestly.

After a moment for the words to sink in, Jimmy smiled and said, "Thanks Vincent. I'm glad everyone is okay."

"Hey, where's mine?" Connie asked in playful mock-offense.

"Darin, I'm not done here, would you mind?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"I've got it." Darin said happily and gave Connie a quick hug.

"I'm glad you're okay. We were all worried about you." Darin said quietly.

Connie accepted the brief hug and smiled.

Susan walked into the room and asked, "So are you guys ready to call it a day?"

Vincent finally released Jimmy from the hug and said, "Yeah. Everything is running fine. You should have an easy night."

"What's the shield status Thaelan?" Connie asked as he walked to Thaelan's side.

"All systems are nominal. I have no variations to report. You may assume control of the main at your convenience." Thaelan said professionally.

Connie stopped at one of the system status panels and said, "This looks good, but why do you have the field harmonics tuned to this band? We normally use a lower EM setting."

"The particulate matter that we're traveling through emits a weak electromagnetic signal. I tuned the shields to a higher frequency to negate the possibility that a random confluence of the electromagnetic signals might be able to penetrate the shields." Thaelan said seriously.

"I suppose that could happen. It's better to be safe. Thank you Ensign Thaelan, I have control." Connie said seriously.

"I stand relieved. Have a good evening and call me if there is any way I can be of assistance." Thaelan said as he stood.

"I'll do that Thaelan. Enjoy your off time. Did you hear about the schedule for tomorrow?" Connie asked as he glanced back at Thaelan.

"Yes. We will relieve you at 06:00." Thaelan said seriously.

"Good. From the look of things, it should be a fairly uneventful evening." Connie said as he ran a quick series of system checks.

"We can only hope." Thaelan said cautiously.

"Thaelan, I've grabbed us some padds so we can work on our reports while we get some dinner." Darin said as he walked out of the supply room.

"Thank you Darin. Vincent, will you be joining us to work on reports?" Thaelan asked casually.

"Um, no. I've been working on reports all day. I really need to give it a rest for a few minutes. I'm going to check on Daddy Joe and Benny right now." Vincent said as he signed off the auxiliary station.

"Unngh. Reports." Jimmy said with a groan.

"Call me and I'll help you if you need me to." Vincent said seriously.

Jimmy looked at Vincent with surprise.

"I've been working on reports all day and I think I'm getting pretty good at them. I wouldn't mind helping you." Vincent said honestly.

"No. That's okay. I'm sure I can do them... I just won't enjoy it." Jimmy said quietly.

"Such is the nature of duty." Thaelan said sagely.

Vincent glanced at Thaelan and nodded his agreement.

"Why don't you guys get out of here. I bet you're ready for a change of scenery." Susan said with a smile.

"Okay. We'll be back later to see if you guys need anything." Vincent said happily.

"We'll be fine, you don't need to do that." Susan said with a warm smile.

"Um, we sleep here. So it won't be a problem, honest." Vincent said frankly.

Susan chuckled and said, "Good point."

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent." Benny said happily when he saw Vincent walk into the room.

"Hi Benny. You look like you're feeling a lot better." Vincent said as he hurried to Benny's bedside to give him a gentle hug.

"Yeah. JonJon has been taking really good care of me and Channing moved over to the bed next to mine when the security guy who was there was released and T'Lani has been making sure that I wasn't in any pain and even brought me a bowl of ice cream." Benny rambled with uncharacteristic energy.

"How long will it be before you can get out of bed?" Vincent asked with a smile at Benny's cheery state.

"Well, Dr. Perry says that I'm going to be completely fine but wants me to stay here tonight in case I have any pain from the burn." Benny said, then reached under the blanket to pull up his gown to show off his burn.

Vincent looked at the burn for a moment, then said, "It looks kind of like a rabbit."

"JonJon thinks so too. I think it looks more like a cartoon mouse." Benny said with a smile.

"So you're feeling okay?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Oh yeah. Everyone has been really great about seeing that I'm not in pain. It's kind of weird to have so many people fussing over me." Benny said as he put down his gown.

Vincent glanced over at the next bed and saw that Joe was fast asleep.

"He's fine. He just needs his rest." Benny said more quietly.

Vincent nodded that he heard.

"He's been talking with me all afternoon. I promise Vincent, he's really fine." Benny said more seriously.

Vincent turned back to face Benny and said, "Even though I'm sorry you got hurt, I'm glad that you're here with Daddy Joe so he won't have to be alone while he's here."

"If I wasn't hurt, I'd be here anyway to watch after him. He's my Daddy Joe too now." Benny said with a gentle smile.

"Mine too." JonJon said firmly.

"How are you doing JonJon?" Vincent asked as he moved to give JonJon a hug from the side.

"I'm fine. Fizgig has been really good all day, but I think I need to take him down to use his box again and maybe somewhere so he can run around for a while." JonJon said as he looked at the dog in his arms.

"Well, there's this place on the ship that's kind of like a park, it's a garden. It's down on the pool deck. I bet he'd like to run around there." Vincent said quietly.

"I don't want to leave Benny alone." JonJon said as he glanced at Benny.

"I'm fine. You were here to take care of me while I was hurt. Now I just need to rest for a while to get better. Go take care of Fizgig then come back and tell me all about it." Benny said happily.

"Are you sure? I don't want you to be alone." JonJon said with concern.

"JonJon, this is the least alone I've felt in my entire life. I know you and Vincent are here if I need you..." Benny said happily.

JonJon opened his mouth to say something, but Benny continued before he could say it.

"... and Fizgig too." Benny finished with a smile.

Vincent giggled at the statement and nodded his agreement.

"Besides, I think I could use a little bit of alone time to think about things. Go take care of Fizgig and I'll be here waiting when you're done." Benny said peacefully.

"Are you sure?" JonJon asked cautiously.

"Completely sure." Benny said with a smile.

JonJon reluctantly nodded, then slowly carried Fizgig to the sickbay door.

After the door had closed, Benny turned back to see Vincent looking at him with concern.

"I'm really fine." Benny said seriously.

"You probably saved my life today." Vincent said as he looked Benny in the eyes.

"I did?" Benny asked hesitantly.

"I was the one who got off the turbo lift on the J deck. You screamed that it was a trap, then Ensign Gianni shot you." Vincent said seriously.

Benny nodded, then said, "I was afraid it was you. I remember you saying that you'd check on us."

"You saved me Benny. Because of you, I didn't get hurt or captured." Vincent said seriously.

"Then it was worth it." Benny said with a peaceful smile.

Vincent returned the smile and was happy that Benny was at peace with everything that happened.

"Is there anything you need right now?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Well, yeah. But it's going to sound kind of weird." Benny said frankly.

"You're not going to ask me to give you a sponge bath or something like that are you?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Benny chuckled and said, "No. I wouldn't do that to you."

Vincent waited to find out what he could do for Benny.

"I don't know if you ever saw that security guy, but he's the one who helped us on the pool deck." Benny said as he pointed across the room.

Vincent looked over and saw who Benny was talking about.

"Yeah. That's Neil. I saw him this morning." Vincent said seriously.

"I've been watching him for a while now. I mean, not staring at him, but... he's really worried about something." Benny said with concern.

"Do you know what?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No. But it must be pretty bad. Every now and then another security guy will come in and give him a break, then he'll come back in here looking more worried than before." Benny said seriously.

"I'll talk to him when JonJon gets back." Vincent said decisively.

"I was serious when I told JonJon that I could use some alone time. If you could take care of Neil it would really make me feel better." Benny said as he looked into Vincent's eyes to convey his sincerity.

"Okay, but you call me if you need me." Vincent said firmly.

"Count on it." Benny said with a contented smile.

* * * * *

"How is Korrigon?" Vincent asked as he approached Neil.

After a glance at his prisoner, Neil responded, "He's going to be fine. He's been asleep most of the day, from the pain medication I think. He, um... has a burn."

Vincent smiled at the statement and said, "A phaser burn, I know. I'm the one who shot him."

Neil looked at Vincent with surprise and said, "I was just told to watch him. Lieutenant Simms isn't really in a mood to be giving out details right now."

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked curiously.

"What do you mean?" Neil asked as a facade of unconcern came over his face.

Vincent giggled and said, "Nice try, but I already saw that you're worried about something. If you tell me, maybe it's something I can help with."

Neil glanced at his prisoner again, then said, "I don't think there's anything you can do to help with this. I'm just worried about Lieutenant Simms."

"What's wrong with him?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I think he sees just about everything that's happened since we left Earth as a failure of his security department. The modified control circuits, the chaos of the evacuation of the Kimber colony and now finding out that Matt was a spy and everything else that happened because of it..." Neil trailed off, unsure of how to voice his concerns.

"Are you afraid that he's going to quit?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I think that's a very real possibility. He's good at his job, he's done his best and not only wasn't it good enough, but if the rumors are true, the only reason Matt wasn't able to get away with his plan was because of you, Ensign Cooper and that kid in the bed over there." Neil said as he glanced at Benny who was watching them.

"That kid's name is Benny and he's worried about you." Vincent said quietly.

"He is?" Neil asked with surprise.

"Yeah. He saw how worried you are and wanted me to find out what's wrong." Vincent said simply.

"Why?" Neil asked with confusion.

"I guess because you were nice to us on the pool deck. That kind of makes you our friend and we worry about our friends." Vincent said frankly.

"Oh. Well, that's what I'm worried about. Like I said, I don't think there's anything you can do to help." Neil said with concern.

"Maybe not. But I can try. I doubt that I could make things worse." Vincent said in consideration.

Neil nodded his agreement.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I've got to make a quick sub-space call, then I'll talk to him."

"It looks like you have a plan." Neil said speculatively.

"Not yet, but that's why I need to make the call." Vincent said with a smile and hurried away.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Simms, can I talk to you for a minute?" Vincent asked from the doorway to his office.

"Is it important? I'm kind of busy at the moment." Lieutenant Simms said with distraction.

"I think this will only take a minute or two." Vincent said carefully.

Lieutenant Simms looked up from his terminal and asked, "What can I do for you Crewman? Is this about your report?"

"Um, no. I'm almost done with that. Is there any way we could talk to each other like people instead of like Lieutenant to Crewman?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Lieutenant Simms considered for a moment, then said, "We can do that. For the next few minutes we will disregard rank. Have a seat and tell me what's on your mind."

"What do you do when you do your best and it isn't good enough?" Vincent asked seriously.

"You're new. I don't think anyone expects you to know everything yet." Lieutenant Simms said thoughtfully.

"No, it's not that. It's more like, trouble seems to be following me around. Wherever I go there's another disaster." Vincent said carefully.

"I don't think that's the case. Several incidents have come up since we've left Earth and you seem to have been involved in most of them in one way or another. Things happen that way sometimes." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"So these things just happened and I was there? It's not my fault?" Vincent asked slowly.

"No. I've read the reports. Unless you're talking about some kind of bad karma or something like that I don't see any evidence that you're the cause of anything that's happened." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

"Are you?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Am I what?" Lieutenant Simms asked in confusion.

"Are you the cause of all this? Or is it like you said, a series of things just happened?" Vincent asked firmly.

"That's different Vincent. It's my job to make sure that this ship is kept safe from malicious attacks. Since we've left Earth we've had one security failure after another... and the worst part is, I've followed procedure all along the way. I've checked and rechecked and I can't find where I've made an error in my judgment... That being the case, it could happen again." Lieutenant Simms said distantly, working out his own thoughts more than talking to Vincent.

"So you followed procedure and did what you were supposed to do and everything still went wrong?" Vincent confirmed.

"That's right." Lieutenant Simms said as he looked down into Vincent's eyes.

"Then maybe that's your problem." Vincent said carefully.

"I don't follow." Lieutenant Simms said cautiously.

"The procedures. The guys who rigged the control circuits knew about the procedures so they knew what you would and wouldn't check. That let them work around security and get their stuff on the ship. Ensign Gianni knew the procedures and was able to figure out ways to disable the shields

and mess with the internal sensors. I think it's like football, the other team has your playbook. If you're thinking about leaving, you're not solving the problem, you're just giving it to someone else." Vincent said seriously.

Lieutenant Simms thought about it for a moment then slowly nodded his head.

"You've got a guy down in Sickbay who could probably give you some ideas about where you need to make changes." Vincent said carefully.

"Korrigon?" Lieutenant Simms asked incredulously.

"Yeah. I bet he knows all kinds of ways to work around Starfleet security. And from the way he was acting in the meeting, I bet all you'd have to do is ask him and he'd help you." Vincent said speculatively.

Lieutenant Simms nodded slowly in thought.

"I think my two minutes are up. Thanks for talking to me." Vincent said as he stood.

Lieutenant Simms nodded and said, "Thank you Vincent. You've given me some things to think about. You're a pretty smart kid."

"Well, I need to be honest about something. I didn't come up with all that stuff on my own. Before I came in here to talk to you I made a call and got some advice." Vincent said shyly.

"From who, if you don't mind me asking." Lieutenant Simms asked curiously.

"From my Uncle Brady." Vincent said with a smile.

"Brady Thompson?" Lieutenant Simms asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. Before I came on the *Yorktown* he said that I could call him if I ever needed anything." Vincent said and finished with a dismissive shrug.

"Vincent, you were smart enough to ask for help when you didn't know how to identify a problem for yourself. I think that's a skill that will serve you well in the future and one that I may need to consider using more often." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"I hope it helped. I've got to go to the shuttle bay now. I'll have your report done before the end of the night." Vincent said as he walked for the door.

"I'll be looking forward to it." Lieutenant Simms said with a smile as he watched Vincent leave the room.

* * * * *

Vincent walked onto the shuttle and noticed that Lieutenant Walking Bear was sitting in the pilot's seat with his eyes closed.

As Vincent was about to leave, Lieutenant Walking Bear opened his eyes and said, "I'm glad you came to visit again."

"If you're sleeping I can come back later." Vincent said quietly.

"No. I was just resting for a few minutes. Have a seat and tell me what questions you brought with you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said peacefully.

"I wanted to know if you would tell me about the Great Spirit." Vincent said as he took the copilot's seat.

"Tell me what you already know." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"I don't think anyone's ever told me anything about him before." Vincent said in thought.

"Perhaps not. But don't tell me what you know here..." Lieutenant Walking Bear said as he placed his fingertips on Vincent's temple.

"...Tell me what you know here." He continued and placed his hand over Vincent's heart.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I guess that the Great Spirit is everywhere. Part of you and me and this shuttle and even the dust that we're traveling through."

"So you think that the Great Spirit is all matter?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked in a leading tone.

Vincent considered the words, then said, "No. Not just matter. The Great Spirit is also the movement of the stars and the colors of light."

"So matter and energy then..." Lieutenant Walking Bear said more quietly.

Vincent shook his head and said, "Probably more than that. The Great Spirit would probably be everything that has already happened and is happening and... I guess what will happen..."

"...Might happen." Lieutenant Walking Bear said carefully.

Vincent looked at him in question.

"The Great Spirit is all those things, but he is also a force of will that exists in all possible futures. It is by his guidance that we grow into something better than we currently are." Lieutenant Walking Bear said calmly.

"I still don't know what I should do. I mean, how I can know when I'm helping the Great Spirit or when I'm working against him." Vincent said seriously.

Lieutenant Walking Bear looked down at Vincent's leg for an instant, then reached into his shirt and pulled out a small leather pouch on a necklace.

"Do you know what this is?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked quietly.

"Rawhide leather?" Vincent asked curiously.

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled at the response and said, "Yes, it is that. But it's more. This is my medicine bag. Do you know what that means?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Not really. I've heard of a medicine bag before, but I never really thought about what it is."

"This carries my personal totems." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"What's a totem? Is that like the poles that I've seen in books?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Something like that. A totem is something that holds a special spiritual power. It can be an oddly shaped stone or a strand of someone's hair. The person who holds the totem is the only one who knows the power that it possesses." Lieutenant Walking Bear said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"So how do you get a totem?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"They are provided to you. Only you can recognize the power of a totem and it's power is just for you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said firmly.

"But how will I know when I find one?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Tell me Vincent, do you have something in your pocket right now? Something that you carry for luck?" Lieutenant Walking Bear asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah, I have..." Vincent began to say but was interrupted.

"I don't need to know what it is. That's your totem and it's power is yours. Keep it with you and when you need to draw on the strength that it provides, it will be there for you. As you continue your spiritual walk, you will find other totems and may get a pouch like this to store them in so you'll always have them with you." Lieutenant Walking Bear said softly.

"I think I understand... But how did you know I had one?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Instincts and omens. I carry my medicine bag all the time and generally don't give it a thought. While I was talking to you, I felt it. I noticed it's presence. That prompted me to discuss totems with you. Make sure you carry your totem because it is there for a reason." Lieutenant Walking Bear said seriously.

"I will." Vincent said in thought.

"And a time may come when someone else needs the strength of your totem. Don't be afraid to give it away. When the Great Spirit is leading you to do such a thing, you end up gaining much more than you give away." Lieutenant Walking Bear said distantly.

Vincent studied Lieutenant Walking Bear's expression for a moment, then quietly asked, "Have you ever done that?"

Lieutenant Walking Bear seemed surprised by the question, then quietly answered, "No, I have never been blessed in that way."

Vincent nodded and stood.

"I have a feeling that it will be quite a while before we see each other again Crewman Winters." Lieutenant Walking Bear said as he stood.

"Yeah. I feel that too. But I know you'll be there when I have more questions." Vincent said peacefully.

Lieutenant Walking Bear smiled and said, "I am honored with the blessing of being one of your guides on your spiritual path."

"I think the Great Spirit is honoring us both." Vincent said, then on impulse said, "Dif-tor heh smusma - Lieutenant Walking Bear."

"Peace and Long Life - Crewman Winters." Lieutenant Walking Bear said reverently.

Vincent gave a small smile, then walked out of the shuttle.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent, how are you doing?" A familiar voice called from behind him.

Vincent turned from his dinner to see Brock, Gary and Randy approaching from the serving line.

"I'm fine. Would you guys like to sit with me?" Vincent asked happily.

"Yeah, thanks. How are things going?" Randy asked as he sat his tray on the table.

"Pretty good. I'm just having dinner before I get back to working on my reports." Vincent said with a happy smile.

"I've been hearing some stuff about you today and wanted to know how much is true." Gary asked quickly.

"What have you heard?" Vincent asked with a smile, then took a bite of his grilled cheese sandwich.

"Okay, true or false. Did you capture an intruder all by yourself?" Gary asked with an expectant smile.

Vincent thought about the question and finally answered, "True."

"Cool. I heard that you shot him with a phaser when he was trying to beam aboard." Brock said as he leaned forward with interest.

"Yeah. That's it. He was beaming in, there was a phaser laying out on the desk beside me, I made sure it wasn't set to kill, then shot him." Vincent said seriously.

"Wow. I've been on the ship over a year and never had anything like that happen to me." Gary said in wonder.

"Beginners luck." Vincent said with a smile.

"True or false. Did you hit the security guy who took hostages so hard that you knocked him out?" Randy asked with a grand smile.

"False." Vincent said seriously, then continued, "I hit him in the jaw and knocked him over, but he wasn't knocked out."

"Close enough." Brock said happily.

"Yeah." Gary interjected.

"Okay, my turn. True or false. Did you really get married?" Brock asked curiously.

"True." Vincent said with a big happy smile.

"Come on. Give. What happened?" Randy asked with excitement.

"My Vulcan grandfather arranged my marriage. It's a Vulcan tradition." Vincent said, trying to keep his smile restrained.

"But you wanted to, didn't you?" Randy asked with concern.

"Oh yeah. But I think that because I'm Human, grandfather wouldn't have arranged the marriage unless I wanted him to. It just wouldn't be logical." Vincent said in thought.

"Okay, it's my turn again. True or false..." Gary began to say, but was interrupted by the public address speakers.

"***Crewman Vincent Winters, report to sickbay. Crewman Vincent Winters, report to sickbay.***" A female voice said tonelessly.

"We'll have to save the rest for later. I've got stuff to do." Vincent said as he stood and started to gather his dishes onto his tray.

"We'll take care of it. Go on." Randy said with a smile.

"Okay, thanks. I'll talk to you guys later." Vincent said, then hurried away.

"Five bucks says that he's about to have another adventure." Brock said seriously.

"No bet. I think that's a given... you know, suddenly I think I'm not feeling quite right. I think I need to go to sickbay... you know. Just to be safe." Randy said speculatively.

"Yeah, me too... I bet it's this roast beef." Gary said with a playful smile.

"Well, someone needs to go with you two to make sure you get there okay." Brock said with a chuckle.

"Let's hurry before we miss seeing him in action." Randy said quickly as he picked up the remains of his dinner.

The other two quickly followed suit and were soon rushing to the nearest turbo lift.

* * * * *

Vincent walked to Dr. Perry and seriously said, "Crewman Winters reporting as ordered."

"At ease Crewman. It wasn't me who called you. If you'll go into my office, Ensign Collins is waiting for you." Dr. Perry said with a smile.

"Thank you Doctor." Vincent said seriously, then walked to Dr. Perry's office as he tried to remember who Ensign Collins was.

As he walked in the door of the office he smiled as he recognized her. Ensign Collins was the woman who had sat with him and his Daddy Joe on the trip from San Francisco to TerraMain.

"It's nice to see you again Ensign Collins." Vincent said happily.

"Please Vincent, call me Dani. I'm not conducting Starfleet business right now." She said warmly.

"Oh, okay Dani. Why did you need me here?" Vincent asked curiously.

"To take some measurements of you." She said as she pulled out a tricorder.

"What kind of measurements?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Well, if all goes as planned, you're going to be attending a ceremony in a few hours and you'll need ceremonial Vulcan wedding clothes." Ensign Collins said with a smile.

"Really? Captain Byrne was able to figure out a way to do it?" Vincent asked happily.

"Hold still or you're going to look like your wearing a potato sack at your wedding." She said sternly, then in a more pleasant voice she said, "Yes. Captain Byrne explained that you and your wife didn't get to have a key part of your wedding ceremony, so the *Enterprise* and the *Yorktown* are both being diverted from their courses to meet up so you two can have your bonding ceremony... isn't that just the most romantic thing ever?"

Vincent thought about the statement, then smiled as he realized that his bonding ceremony was giving a public reason for the two ships to meet up.

"I'm finished. I'd love to stay here and ask you about a million questions, but I've got to hurry and get T'Lani's measurements if I'm going to have your wedding clothes done before the ceremony." Dani said with excitement as she rushed out of the room.

* * * * *

Vincent walked out of Dr. Perry's office to find Randy, Brock and Gary looking at him expectantly.

"We kind of figured that you were about to have another adventure and thought maybe that if we were here, we could be part of it." Randy said shyly.

Vincent giggled at the statement, then said, "The Captain is just trying to work it out so T'Lani and I can have a bonding ceremony. We didn't get to have one when we got married."

The three men looked at each other and almost seemed to be speaking telepathically.

"Husband, are you well?" T'Lani asked as she approached him.

"I'm fine. Did Ensign Collins get your measurements?" Vincent asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes, though she did not explain the purpose. She seemed to be in quite a hurry." T'Lani said seriously.

"She's going to make our clothes for our bonding ceremony." Vincent said with a smile.

"You have made arrangements for a ceremony?" T'Lani asked with surprise.

"I talked to the Captain and he's working on it. Since Ensign Collins is taking our measurements, it looks like it's probably going to happen." Vincent said happily.

T'Lani reconfirmed her emotional control and said, "It pleases me that you have done this husband."

"It pleases me to do this for you, my wife." Vincent said, then took her hand and placed it on his cheek and held it there.

T'Lani caressed his cheek for a moment with her thumb, then noticed the three men shyly watching them.

Vincent followed her gaze and said, "T'Lani, these are my friends from Engineering Supply, Gary, Randy and Brock. Guys, this is my wife, Ensign T'Lani.

"Wow." Randy said in wonder as he looked at the beautiful Vulcan woman.

The other two snickered at his reaction, then Gary said, "It's nice to meet you Ensign T'Lani. Vincent has been our friend since we first met him, so now that you're married, that includes you too."

"If my husband claims you as his friends, then it is logical for me to do likewise." T'Lani said formally.

"So you two are about to have some kind of wedding ceremony?" Randy asked quickly.

"The bonding ceremony is traditionally a component part of the Vulcan wedding." T'Lani said carefully.

"Cool. Then, if you don't have anything else planned, we could throw together a bachelor party." Gary said happily.

"I'm not a bachelor." Vincent said firmly.

Gary rolled his eyes, then said, "Okay, call it whatever you want, it's just a little celebration before your bonding ceremony."

Vincent looked at T'Lani and asked, "Is it acceptable?"

T'Lani considered for a moment, then said, "There is no Vulcan equivalent for this tradition, but perhaps it fulfills some Human need to receive the acceptance of one's peers before the impending ceremony."

"Okay guys. But you've got to promise, no drinking, no strippers, no porn." Vincent said firmly.

"Where would we get those things?" Gary asked innocently.

"That wasn't a promise." Vincent said firmly.

"Very observant, husband." T'Lani said with approval.

"Yeah. We promise. It'll be a nice party and we won't do anything that your wife would disapprove of." Gary said reluctantly.

"Okay." Vincent said with relief.

"Be well husband. Thank you for making the arrangements for our bonding." T'Lani said quietly as she caressed his cheek again.

"I don't know what the bond will feel like, but I don't think it's possible to love you more than I already do. Be well, my wife." Vincent said as he put his hand over hers and snuggled against her palm for a moment.

"We seriously need to find some girlfriends." Gary said at the touching sight.

"At least." Randy said with a note of longing in his voice.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent, congratulations!" Rad said as he and Darin walked into the cargo bay that was filled with music and happily chattering people.

"Hi guys!" Vincent said happily.

"We were going to go get something to eat and heard about a 'married-bachelor' party and decided to check it out." Rad said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. The supply guys came up with this. Are you guys hungry? They've got snacks over there by the cargo transporter." Vincent said happily.

"Sounds good." Rad said and was about to go when the music changed to something with a hard pounding beat.

"What do you say Darin? Want to dance?" Rad asked with a smile.

"I don't really know how." Darin said shyly.

"Just move to the music. Come on." Rad said and guided Darin out into the middle of the room.

A few other people followed their example and moved as couples to start dancing to the music.

Vincent hurried over to Gary, Randy and Brock who were watching everyone with happy smiles.

"Come on guys, let's dance." Vincent said happily.

"Vincent, we're not..." Randy said uncomfortably.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "I'm not talking about close dancing. But there's more guys than girls here and I want to have some fun."

"Care to dance?" Gary asked Brock and extended his elbow in a gentlemanly manner.

"You dork." Brock said and took hold of the elbow to drag Gary out to the dance floor.

"Let's do it." Randy said with a smile and followed Vincent to begin dancing.

Rad saw that Vincent was dancing and smiled with delight.

He even stopped dancing long enough to show Darin.

The party went into full swing after that as more and more people arrived and were caught up in the uninhibited atmosphere.

* * * * *

"***Crewman Winters and Ensign Cooper, report to conference room one***." Interrupted the music in the cargo bay.

Randy quickly moved to the computer console and stopped the music then called out, "It looks like it's time for our guest of honor to go and have his bonding ceremony. Come on everyone and let's send him off with a cheer!"

"Hip Hip HOORAY!"

"Hip Hip HOORAY!!"

The sounds of the cheers could still be heard in the distance as Vincent and Darin boarded the turbo lift.

"That was the best party I've ever been to." Darin said as effervescent bubbles of laughter welled up within him.

"Conference room one." Vincent said with a smile, then looked at Darin and said, "It's the first real party that I've ever been to, but I can't even imagine a better one."

"You were dancing like you've been doing it all your life." Darin said with a glorious smile.

"You were looking pretty good too. You and Rad look really good together." Vincent said happily.

"Thanks. Your approval means a lot to me Little Brother." Darin said peacefully.

As the doors to the turbo lift opened, Vincent said, "You've got it, Big Brother."

* * * * *

Vincent and Darin walked into the conference room to find Captain Byrne and Captain Spock waiting for them.

"I can't say that I understand all that is about to happen because, quite frankly, very few Humans have ever been witness to this ceremony. But Captain Spock is here to prepare Crewman Winters for what is to come." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Nephew, it will be necessary for me to awaken the Plak Tow within you." Spock said reverently.

"Um, I'm all sweaty and stuff. Should I go shower before we start?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"That will not be necessary Nephew. Your mate will be instinctively drawn to your natural scent. Proceeding as you are will only enhance the effectiveness of the coming ceremony." Spock said carefully.

Vincent nodded that he understood.

"Be at ease Nephew. There is no need for apprehension." Spock said as he slowly raised his hand to the side of Vincent's face.

Vincent smiled and said, "I think I'd worry if it was anyone else but I trust you Captain Spock."

Spock slightly inclined his head in acknowledgement of the statement, then in a trance-like voice he whispered, "My mind to your mind... My thoughts to your thoughts..."

* * * * *

"Are you okay Vincent?" Darin asked as the turbo lift left the conference room.

"Yeah. I can feel it though." Vincent said carefully.

"What's it like?" Darin asked quietly.

"It's like my blood's on fire. It's like every cell in my body knows what I have to do." Vincent said in concentration.

"What do you have to do?" Darin asked cautiously.

"Join with my wife. Become one. That's the only thing that will keep the fire from consuming me from within." Vincent said in a distant voice as the turbo lift doors opened.

"You don't sound like yourself. Did Captain Spock give you those words?" Darin asked as he led the way to Deflector Control.

"He gave me understanding of what is happening to me and what is to come." Vincent said in a measured tone.

"Well, just so you know, you sound really Vulcan right now." Darin said with concern.

"Don't worry Big Brother, trust that our family won't let anything bad happen." Vincent said and glanced up at Darin with an assuring smile.

"Okay. I think I can do that." Darin said with a smile and led the way into Deflector Control.

* * * * *

"Hey Vincent! It seems like every time I turn around you're getting married." Connie said happily.

"Who told you?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Well, let's see... Rad, Joe, Thaelan, Debbie, Benny, JonJon, Lieutenant Simms, Ensign Collins..." Susan said absently.

"Everyone knows?" Vincent asked in wonder.

"Well, I think there might be a hermit on the far side of Mizar who hasn't heard yet, but I'm sure he'll be filled in before the end of the day." Connie said with a smile.

"Word of the party probably spread. Let's get you dressed, they're waiting on us." Darin said seriously.

"Oh, um, yeah." Vincent said with distraction then turned to walk into the supply room where he knew his wedding clothes would be waiting for him.

"Congratulations." Jimmy called to Vincent's back as he walked into the supply room.

"Thanks."

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"*I have a diplomatic message for Crewman Winters.*" A voice called over the comm professionally.

"He's in the next room. Put it through to deflector control auxiliary two if you would." Connie said quickly.

Jimmy jumped up from his station and ran to the supply room doorway.

"Vincent, you have a diplomatic message." Jimmy said quickly.

"Thanks Jimmy." Vincent said absently as he walked to the auxiliary station.

"*Hi Vincent, I just thought after all the stuff that happened yesterday that I'd check to see how you're doing. Has everything calmed down?*" Cory asked happily.

"A security guy tried to gas all of us, then he shot my Daddy Joe, kidnapped my brother Darin, shot my friend Benny and I hit him and knocked him over and now he's dead and then this other guy tried to beam onto our ship and I stunned him with a phaser and Mr. Chilton from the Federation tutoring center was a dickweed so I enrolled at the Vulcan Academy of Science and right now I've got the Vulcan Blood Fever so I'm going to go get bonded. Gotta go. Bye." Vincent finished gruffly, then slammed the comm button to disconnect the transmission.

"Winters out." Vincent mumbled absently as he walked for the door.

"He's going to have to replay that a dozen times before he can begin to make any kind of sense of it." Darin said as he hurried to follow.

"They're waiting on us. Let's go." Vincent said as sweat was starting to form on his forehead and upper lip.

"Um, yeah." Darin said cautiously and followed Vincent down the catwalk.

* * * * *

"Are you feeling alright. You look kind of flushed." Darin said as he led Vincent off the turbo lift.

"I'm... the fire... it's growing." Vincent said in a gruff voice.

"Captain Spock is right there by the shuttle. He'll know what to do." Darin said as he started walking faster.

As they got closer to the shuttle, Darin quickly said, "I think something is wrong with Vincent."

"Nephew, please trust that this is the proper way. Vincent must experience the Blood Fever to fully accept the bonding." Spock said seriously and extended his arm to indicate for them to enter the shuttle.

Vincent seemed not to notice the gesture, so Darin gently guided Vincent to walk.

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"Is he supposed to be sweating like that?" Darin asked in a whisper.

"Yes Nephew. His body is generating the scent that his mate will imprint upon." Spock said seriously.

Joe looked at Spock with question, and finally said, "It sounds so... animal."

"Mating is one of the most primal urges of any species. It is logical that our mating rituals recognize and accommodate this fact." Spock said calmly.

"Why isn't T'Lani going down with us?" Darin asked carefully.

"The separation is necessary at this point of the Blood Fever so my nephew will be in the proper state of mind when he participates in the ceremony." Spock said calmly.

"Is this... Plak Tow the reason that the family elders were worried about Vincent bonding before he reached puberty?" Darin asked speculatively.

"That is correct. The consequences of awakening the Blood Fever in a prepubescent Human could have adverse and life long consequences to his psyche. The increased hormone production and resulting change in body chemistry associated with puberty will allow Vincent to endure the Plak Tow without lasting effect." Spock said seriously.

Joe and Darin both watched Vincent sitting quietly with a look of intense concentration as sweat beaded on his face.

* * * * *

"I thought we were going to the *Enterprise*." Darin said as he stepped out of the shuttle onto the sandy ground.

"Father found this location to be acceptable for our purposes." Spock said as he emerged from the shuttle.

Joe guided Vincent out of the shuttle, steering him by the shoulders.

"Are you well enough to be out of sickbay?" Darin asked Joe in a whisper.

"I'd be here on two broken legs to attend Vincent's wedding." Joe said seriously.

"You didn't answer me." Darin said as he looked Joe in the eyes.

"I'm fine. As soon as the ceremony is over I'm going back to sickbay. Dr. Perry approved me being here." Joe said sincerely.

"Okay. I'm glad you're going to be here for this. I wouldn't want to miss it either." Darin said with a smile.

A moment later several columns of light appeared revealing Ambassador Sarek, Captain Kirk, Captain Byrne, Commander Dodds, Lieutenant Keith Wilson and Rory.

"Follow." Ambassador Sarek said and led the way to an outcropping of rocks some twenty meters away.

"Is it really okay for us to be here for this?" Darin asked Joe in a whisper as they guided Vincent between them.

"It is permitted." Vincent replied in a neutral tone. "The male's closest friends and family are permitted to attend this ceremony."

"You're sounding even more Vulcan now Little Brother. Are you really alright?" Darin asked with concern.

"Yes. But I must prepare myself mentally. We will begin soon." Vincent said as the group emerged into a wide clearing surrounded by rocks.

"Captain Spock, can you tell us more about this ceremony?" Joe asked as he surveyed the area.

"It is a ceremony that is deeply rooted in Vulcan tradition." Spock replied solemnly as Vincent walked over to look at a large metal disc that was suspended from a tubular frame.

"It was the best Scotty could come up with on such short notice." Chip said as he noticed Vincent's careful inspection.

"It will be sufficient." Spock said seriously.

Vincent took the hammer that had been hanging on the side of the frame and struck the gong with all his might, causing it to go off.

Within minutes, the wedding party, led by Sarek's wife, the Lady Amanda walked into the clearing.

T'Lani followed next, dressed in traditional Vulcan wedding attire. Accompanying T'Lani was Dr. Perry, Dr. Raul and Nurse Young.

Once the Lady Amanda was in place, she turned her attention to Vincent and asked, "Are thee prepared, young one?"

Spock whispered to Joe and Darin, "As matriarch of the house of Surak, Mother is performing the ancient rite in the traditional fashion as is her proper place."

Vincent, looking at T'Lani with a deep and intense desire in his eyes, strained to keep his emotions in check. The Blood Fever was running rampant inside him, causing him to sweat profusely. "I am, Ko'mekh-il (Grandmother). My eyes are flame. My heart is flame."

"Come forward, Vincent," the Lady Amanda instructed. Vincent slowly walked over to her and knelt in front of her. Amanda looked to her husband and waited as he walked to her side.

"Being Human, Mother is unable to perform the telepathic aspects of the bonding, so father is doing this in her stead. She will conduct the ceremony, but he will perform the bonding. The balance seems somehow symbolic." Spock finished speculatively.

Sarek placed his left hand on Vincent's pressure points, initiating a mind meld.

Amanda then turned and said, "T'Lani, come forward."

T'Lani walked to where Ambassador Sarek and the Lady Amanda were standing side by side and knelt in front of them, beside Vincent.

Sarek placed his right hand on T'Lani's pressure points and initiated a mind meld.

Amanda then looked down on the couple in front of her and said, "Face one another, my children."

Vincent and T'Lani turned to face each other.

Sarek released his melds on the pair as the Lady Amanda reverently said, "T'Lani, bond with thy mate. Make him one with you."

T'Lani placed her right hand on the pressure points on the left side of Vincent's face.

Within seconds, T'Lani was whispering, "My mind to your mind, my heart to your heart, my love to your love."

Vincent instinctively placed his right hand on the pressure points on the left side of T'Lani's face and repeated what T'Lani had said. "My mind to your mind, my heart to your heart, my love to your love."

The couple remained in their trance for several minutes with their eyes closed.

Once they broke the meld with each other, Vincent and T'Lani turned to face his grandmother and said, "It is done, Ko'mekh-il."

Vincent whispered in a distant voice, "I can feel T'Lani in the back of my mind, a warmth I've never felt before. One of contentment and love. I feel the love she has for me."

The Lady Amanda turned and gently asked, "And you, T'Lani?"

T'Lani looked up at Amanda, with her eyes also glazed over, and quietly said, "I feel the warmth. I feel Vincent in my mind as though he had always been there. I feel the love he has for me as well."

Ambassador Sarek returned his hands to the pressure points on the couple as Amanda looked to the assembled crowd and announced, "Vincent and T'Lani have bonded and are one with each other. The Blood Fever that possessed Vincent has passed."

Once Sarek broke his second meld with them, Vincent and T'Lani faced each other again, their lips joining in a long, tender kiss.

After many silent minutes, Vincent and T'Lani finally stood as one and walked to the gathered friends and family.

"Thank you Grandfather Sarek and Grandma Amanda for bestowing this honor on me and my wife." Vincent said reverently.

"We wish to thank Captain Kirk and Captain Byrne for allowing us the opportunity to be bonded. There are no words to adequately express our appreciation." T'Lani said honestly.

"We also want to thank our Vulcan family, Captain Spock, Commander Dodds and Lieutenant Wilson, for being here to show your support of our marriage." Vincent said sincerely.

"I wish to thank Rory Teeter who is here to represent my husband's Clan. You grant us a great honor with your presence." T'Lani said as she looked Rory in the eyes.

"I want to thank my Human family, Daddy Joe and Darin for being here to see me get married. And don't worry I still love you both." Vincent finished with an impish grin.

"And I wish to say to my co-workers and friends, Dr. Perry, Dr. Raul and Nurse Young. You, my Human family have adequately served in the place of my Vulcan family who could not be present. You have done me a great service... Thank you." T'Lani said as she looked each in the eyes as she said their names.

Vincent took firm hold of T'Lani's hand and said, "Thank you. All of you who have attended. It is our sincere wish that each and every one of you have the opportunity to know the love and peace that we have found today. We love you all... now let's go home."

Chapter 20

In the week and a half since leaving Earth, things on the *Yorktown* had finally fallen into a familiar routine.

Each morning Vincent would wake early and go to the gym to train in hand-to-hand combat with Thaelan. After a good physical workout, both would enjoy a leisurely breakfast with Joe and Darin before their duty shift. Vincent would work half the day at his duty station, then after lunch he would move to an auxiliary station to work on his lessons for school. The only excitement that occurred is when Joe thought that Vincent had started choking during his lessons. It turned out that Vincent was just trying to perfect the 'K'Agh' sound for his conversational Klingon class.

After work each day Vincent would spend some time with Benny, JonJon and Channing either in the J Deck observation lounge or in the Rec Hall watching people. Even though Channing had been certified as fit for duty, he continued to spend his off duty time with the boys, enjoying it as much as they did.

Vincent and T'Lani would have dinner together each evening after her duty shift ended, then they would spend an hour or so together either meditating while joined in their bond or quietly talking in one of the many observation lounges on the ship.

Each night Joe would check on Vincent after he had fallen asleep and find him snuggled into his pillow with a contented smile.

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After a series of warm up stretches and one time through the standard fighting stances, Thaelan motioned for Vincent to walk with him to the other side of the gym.

"Thus far you have been practicing different techniques and stances. Today you will have an enemy to fight." Thaelan said seriously.

"I'm going to fight you?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

"No. There will come a point when we will spar to develop your timing and fighting technique. But for now, *this* will be your enemy." Thaelan said as he indicated a heavy workout bag.

"He does look kinda mean." Vincent said with a smile.

"This bag is your enemy. He has offended you personally and besmirched your family name." Thaelan said intensely.

"Um, Thaelan. My family's name was smirched up pretty bad before this bag ever showed up." Vincent said honestly.

"Very well, then he has insulted your Daddy Joe." Thaelan said seriously.

Vincent got a determined look in his eyes and moved to attack.

"Ha CHA." Vincent screamed as he punched with the heel of his hand the way Thaelan had taught him.

"You have the proper intent, but you need to focus your attack deeper. You are not trying to slap your enemy, your target is inside. Try again, but this time focus your attack a few centimeters inside your target." Thaelan said patiently.

"Okay, but you need to get me started again... What did he say about Daddy Joe?" Vincent asked as he held his focus on the bag in front of him.

"This miserable training bag said that your Daddy Joe was an undisciplined officer and unworthy to be in Starfleet." Thaelan said grimly.

"Ha CHA!" Vincent screamed as he attacked the bag again. After he had impacted the bag with the heel of his right hand, Vincent followed through with an uppercut with his left hand.

Thaelan nodded his approval and watched carefully so he could offer suggestions.

Vincent's eyes narrowed and he gritted his teeth as he began to lose himself in the experience.

Thaelan watched silently as Vincent continued to hit the work out bag with more and more intensity.

"Vincent..." Thaelan said hesitantly as he noticed the fury in Vincent's expression.

Sweat started running into Vincent's eyes as he pounded the bag faster and harder.

"Vincent, the training bag is sorry and has taken back everything he said about Joe. You need to stop now." Thaelan said with concern.

A series of growls emanated from Vincent as he put the force of his entire body behind the punches.

"Crewman Winters. Stop!" Thaelan said forcefully.

Vincent suddenly stopped and looked at Thaelan with wild eyes as he was shaking with his rage.

"Breathe Vincent. Draw calm and peace into yourself with each breath." Thaelan said slowly.

Vincent had his hands clenched at his sides as his body stood rigid.

"Vincent. Calm yourself." Thaelan said quietly.

A confused look came over Vincent's face, then his eyes started to well up with tears.

Thaelan didn't understand exactly what was happening in Vincent's mind, but he recognized emotional pain when he saw it.

Without thought, Thaelan stepped forward and pulled Vincent into a comforting hug.

Vincent started crying and buried his face into Thaelan's chest.

Thaelan put his hand on the back of Vincent's head and quietly said, "I think this exercise has awakened some forgotten pain within you. It is good to let it out. You don't need to keep it inside."

Vincent heard the words and nodded as he continued to cry.

"If you want to talk about your pain, I am here to listen. I swear to you that nothing you say will go any further." Thaelan said in a whisper.

"I saw... I was thinking about my dad... not Daddy Joe. My real dad... I saw him and... and..." Vincent said before erupting into a fresh wave of tears.

Thaelan closed his eyes in pain as he remembered Joe telling him that Vincent had been physically and emotionally abused by his biological father.

"Vincent. This is a safe place to let out your pain. I will help you. We will continue to do these exercises until you have worked out all the hurt and pain that you carry... And I will be here to listen whenever you need me." Thaelan finished quietly.

"Thank you Thaelan." Vincent said as he began to regain control.

"You saw my pain when we met and sought to ease it. Now it is only right that I do the same for you." Thaelan said gently.

"I don't even know what that was... I just... I wanted to hurt it. I wanted to make the bag feel pain." Vincent said in confusion as he tried to identify what he had been feeling.

"Vincent. Every starship carries a staff of mental health professionals..." Thaelan began to say.

"You think I'm crazy?" Vincent asked as he pulled away.

"No. Not crazy. But I think that this... rage that you carry has a source. Our training is allowing you to release your feelings in a physical manner, and I believe that this is a good thing. But I also think you should consider seeking advice about how to deal with what is at the core of what you are feeling." Thaelan said carefully.

"I... What if I just stop training? I mean, if I don't train, then that won't happen again, right?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Vincent, I believe that keeping this bottled up within you would be the worst thing that you could possibly do because it will allow the rage to grow inside you and get stronger... until one day something may trigger this feeling again and it could end up being too powerful for you to control." Thaelan said seriously.

Vincent nodded slowly.

"You have the opportunity to deal with this while it is still relatively minor. Please consider carefully and do the wise thing." Thaelan said imploringly.

"You're not going to make me?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No Vincent. This decision must be yours. I will offer my advice, but in the end, I will abide by whatever decision you make." Thaelan said seriously.

Vincent slowly nodded, then said, "Thank you Thaelan. I really don't want to do it... but I guess being an adult isn't always about what you want. Sometimes it's about what you need."

Thaelan smiled at the statement and said, "If only more adults came to that realization, the universe would be a much more peaceful place."

Vincent smiled at the statement, then looked at the clock to see how much time they had left.

Thaelan followed his gaze and said, "I think we've done enough for today."

"When I go to talk to someone about this will you go with me?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"I had assumed that you would want Joe to go with you." Thaelan said as he started walking toward the shower room.

"I don't want to hurt him..." Vincent said quietly, then hurried to say, "I don't want to hurt you either, but I don't think it will hurt you as bad as it would Daddy Joe or Darin."

Thaelan smiled at the statement, then said, "I understand what you mean and I agree with your reasoning. If your counselor will allow it, I would be honored to go through this experience with you."

"Thank you Thaelan. I'm sorry if I'm being a little kid by not wanting to do this alone." Vincent said shyly.

Thaelan smiled and said, "Asking for the support of ones friends and family is not a sign of immaturity, quite the reverse."

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment then smiled.

"Unless you want to watch me disrobe, I suggest you move to another cubicle." Thaelan said as he began to take off his shirt.

Vincent looked around and realized that he was in the changing area of the shower room.

"Um. No thanks Thaelan. I'm sure you've got a nice butt and everything..." Vincent trailed off as he walked away.

Thaelan smiled at the statement, then got to the business of changing out of his workout clothes.

* * * * *

"Did you two have a good workout this morning?" Joe asked as he approached the table with a tray of food.

Vincent looked at Thaelan with question, not knowing how he should respond to that.

"Vincent has progressed to the next level of his training." Thaelan said calmly.

"Way to go Champ." Joe said with a smile of pride at Vincent.

"Hey guys." A friendly voice said from nearby.

"Hi Channing, how are you guys doing this morning?" Darin asked happily as he watched Channing placing a tray of food on the next table.

"I'm fine but the guys are a little bit down." Channing said as he glanced back at Benny and JonJon taking their places at the table.

"What's wrong?" Joe asked with concern.

"Well, since it looks like we have about three more weeks till we reach the new colony, the governors of the colony decided that the kids need to be in school." Channing said with a shrug.

"You don't have to go to school do you JonJon?" Vincent asked slowly.

"No. But Benny's going to be in school and Channing's going to be at work. There's nothing for me and Fizgig to do all day." JonJon said frankly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Let me check on some stuff and maybe I can come up with something for you."

"Like what?" Channing asked curiously.

"I don't know for sure, but I bet I'll find something. I have an idea." Vincent said with a smile.

"Uh oh. When my little brother has an idea, we're all in trouble." Darin said in a teasing voice.

"Watch it. I know where you sleep." Vincent said with menace.

Darin blushed as Joe looked at him inquiringly.

Vincent looked back and forth between the two, trying to figure out what was going on.

"I kind of spent the night with Rad." Darin said shyly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "How did you 'kind of' spend the night with Rad?"

"Darin came back to deflector control about half an hour before you got up for your training." Joe said with a mischievous smile.

"I'm sorry if I woke you up. I was trying to be quiet." Darin said shyly.

"Don't worry about it, you didn't wake me. Lou told me about it when I got up." Joe said with a smile.

"So did you guys, um... Do it?" Vincent asked uncomfortably.

"What do you and T'Lani do when you're alone?" Darin asked seriously.

Vincent looked at Darin with surprise at the question.

"Rad and I stayed up late talking and lost track of time. But when something physical does happen between us, I would rather it be just between the two of us." Darin said gently.

"I'm sorry Darin. I didn't mean to be nosey. It's just that I really like Rad and... I guess I want to know how things are going. I promise I won't ask again." Vincent finished quietly.

"That's fine little brother. I tell you what, right now Rad and I are dating each other exclusively. If and when the day comes that we choose to make a more formal commitment, you'll be the first person to know." Darin finished with a smile.

"That'd be great." Vincent finished happily.

"Where is Rad this morning?" Channing asked curiously from the next table.

"Chief Morgan wanted to talk to him before his shift this morning. They're having breakfast in the Engineering conference room." Darin said irritably.

"Don't worry Darin. You'll get to see him after work." Vincent said with a sympathetic smile, understanding how much Darin wanted to spend every off-duty moment with Rad.

"Guys. It's almost that time." Joe said as he gathered his breakfast dishes.

"Already?" Vincent asked irritably.

"What's wrong? You're usually eager to get to work in the morning." Joe asked with concern.

"I just feel... I don't know... kind of achy. I think maybe I worked out too hard." Vincent said as he considered how he was feeling.

"Then why don't you go on up to sickbay for a quick scan before you take your station this morning?" Joe asked quietly.

"It doesn't really hurt or anything, it's just... there." Vincent said slowly.

"Crewman Winters. Report to sickbay." Joe said firmly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said reluctantly.

"I'll go with you Vincent." JonJon said as he gathered his dishes.

"Okay... Where's Fizgig?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"I took him to the observation lounge with me this morning and he fell asleep. He was sleeping so good when it was time to go to breakfast that I didn't want to wake him. We could go check on him on the way to sickbay if that's okay." JonJon asked hopefully as they stood.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Vincent said with a smile as he carried his dishes away from the table.

* * * * *

"Husband, are you well?" T'Lani asked when she saw Vincent and JonJon walk into the sickbay.

"I think so, I think I just worked out a little bit too hard this morning. My joints are kinda achy." Vincent said as he looked into her eyes.

"Please lie down on a biobed so I may take some preliminary readings." T'Lani said seriously.

Vincent climbed onto the biobed and waited as T'Lani initiated the scans.

T'Lani looked at the readings carefully, then said, "I will return shortly."

Vincent nodded, then watched as she left the room.

"Does it hurt a lot?" JonJon asked quietly.

"No, it's kind of like the way you feel a few hours after you've skinned your knee. It doesn't really hurt that bad, but you can still feel that it's there." Vincent said consideringly.

"What do we have here?" Dr. Raul asked as he walked into the room.

"I think I might have worked out too hard this morning. I'm feeling a little achy." Vincent said quietly.

Dr. Raul looked at the readings carefully, then at T'Lani who was approaching with a data padd.

"Here is the chart." She said quietly.

"I see." Dr. Raul said, then began to work the controls on the head of the biobed.

"What's wrong with me?" Vincent asked carefully.

"Just give me a moment and I'll be able to tell you for sure." Dr. Raul said in concentration.

JonJon moved from Vincent's side to get a better view of the biobed's readings.

"You did a good job spotting this T'Lani. I would have been inclined to accept your husband's explanation about the workout." Dr. Raul said in thought.

"What is it?" Vincent asked as he turned to see the monitor for himself.

"Crewman Winters. I would suggest that you make arrangements to get some new uniforms made soon. It appears that you are beginning a growth spurt." Dr. Raul said with a smile as he pulled a hypospray out of the bedside cabinet.

"I'm getting taller?" Vincent asked with confusion.

"Exactly right. I'm going to give you a very mild pain reliever that should help with the discomfort and a vitamin supplement to compensate for what is being used by the tissue building that is going on in your body." Dr. Raul said professionally as he pressed the hypospray into Vincent's neck.

"Don't be concerned if you find that you have an increased appetite for the next few weeks. Your body simply needs building materials." Dr. Raul said professionally.

"Okay. Thank you Doctor." Vincent said as he sat up on the biobed.

"I'm making a note in your file. If you have need of further pain medication, all you need to do is come to sickbay and ask for it. The nurse on duty will be able to get it for you." Dr. Raul said seriously.

"Thank you Dr. Raul. I need to get to work now." Vincent said as he realized that the achy sensation in his joints had stopped.

"Just come and see us if anything else concerns you. That's what we're here for." Dr. Raul said with a kind smile.

Vincent hopped down off the bed and walked to T'Lani.

"I'll see you tonight." Vincent said as he took her hand into his.

"At the conclusion of your duties, come to sickbay and we can assess your condition and administer more vitamins and medication if it is warranted." T'Lani said quietly.

"As you say, my Wife." Vincent said happily.

After a moment of holding T'Lani's hand and looking into her eyes, Vincent reluctantly let go and left to begin his day at work.

* * * * *

"So what's the verdict?" Joe asked curiously as Vincent and JonJon walked into Deflector Control.

"Growth spurt." Vincent said timidly.

"Oh. I guess we'd better look into getting you a new supply of uniforms." Joe said carefully.

"Yeah. That's what Dr. Raul suggested." Vincent said as he took his seat at station three.

"So what are you going to do today JonJon?" Joe asked casually.

"I don't know. With Vincent at work and Benny at school, there's not much for me to do." JonJon said as he cuddled Fizgig to his chest.

Vincent started typing on his station and drew the attention of everyone in the room.

When he had finished keying in his message and sent it off, he turned to see all eyes in the room focused on him.

"I kinda had an idea for JonJon, but it's not something I can really talk about." Vincent said shyly.

"Can you give me a hint?" JonJon asked carefully.

"Nope. You're just going to have to trust me." Vincent said with a smile as he started going through his system checks.

"I do trust you Vincent... but I still want to know." JonJon said impatiently.

"I'm showing a green board on all consoles. I'm beginning a subsystem diagnostic." Vincent said as he worked the controls of his station.

"Acknowledged." Thaelan said from the main console.

Vincent nodded, then saw the icon of an incoming text message on his screen.

After a moment to get all his diagnostics started, Vincent opened the message window, then began to smile.

"What is it?" JonJon asked hopefully.

"Well, I thought that since you don't need to go to school, that maybe you could get a job." Vincent said with a mischievous smile.

"A job? Doing what?" JonJon asked hesitantly.

"I don't know yet, but Cyril is going to meet you up on the recreation deck to talk about getting a job that you can do while everyone else is busy... and he said that you can bring Fizgig with you." Vincent finished with accomplishment.

"Really? Okay. I'll go see what he can figure out for me." JonJon said happily.

"Let me know what you come up with." Vincent said with a smile.

JonJon gave Vincent a quick nod, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

The hum of the engines abruptly changed as everyone looked around.

"***All hands, battle stations. This is not a drill. Battle stations***." Came over the comm.

After a moment, Connie and Jimmy hurried out of the supply room, pulling on their uniform jackets.

"Alpha, deflector control. Beta, Engineering. Gamma, Auxiliary Bridge. I'm on the main bridge, lets go." Joe said quickly.

"I've got one." Joe said as he grabbed a communicator on his way out the door.

Vincent and Darin hurried to their stations and began to assess the status of the shields.

Jimmy ran to the lockers and grabbed two tool cases.

Connie walked to the rack of communicators by the door and said, "Beta's got 2, 3 and 4."

A moment later Judy rushed into the room and grabbed a tool case.

She ran to the communicator rack then called out, "Gamma, 5 and 6." as she ran out the door.

The hum of the engines changed again and the 'red alert' klaxon sounded.

The level of tension in the room increased as everyone ran through their system checks.

The moment of intense concentration was broken by Debbie's voice on the intercom saying, "***All Hands. Brace for impact***."

"Hold on!" Ensign Thaelan called as he took hold of the main console.

Just as Darin and Vincent were taking firm hold of the consoles in front of them, the ship was rocked by a jolt.

A second jolt shook the room, then a beeping sounded at the main console.

Ensign Thaelan hit the comm and quickly said, "Go ahead."

"*The engineering console just went completely dead.*" Connie said quickly.

"Standby Ensign Agropos. Crewman Winters, perform a diagnostic of the Engineering console." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"Yes sir." Vincent said quickly as he moved to station three.

Vincent grabbed the counter as the ship rocked again, then started running a level 2 diagnostic on the Engineering console's systems.

The room was jolted again, then Vincent heard a 'pft, pft, pft' sound and looked around.

"We just launched photon torpedoes." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

There was a beeping from console one that distracted Vincent for a moment as he waited for the status check to complete.

"I'm showing a failure of the E1 power conduit, I'm bypassing." Darin said professionally.

Vincent looked down at his console and quickly said, "Engineering console shows a primary power feed interruption just inside the console... It's physical."

"Ensign Agropos, we are reading a primary power feed interruption in your console. Crewman Winters suggests that you plug the console in and try again." Thaelan said in a teasing voice.

"*We'll do that*." Connie said quickly.

Suddenly there was a shrill sound that filled the room, then multiple 'pft' sounds.

"Phasers and photon torpedoes." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"*Have Vincent look at it now.*" Susan said quickly over the comm.

Vincent immediately initiated another level 2 diagnostic.

"Vincent?" Connie called out.

After a moment of waiting, Vincent happily said, "Engineering station shows as fully operational."

"Crewman Winters confirms that your console is fully operational." Ensign Thaelan said seriously as he worked the controls.

"I think it's over." Darin said as he looked around.

Vincent listened for a moment and realized that it had become quiet again.

"So what happened?" Vincent asked carefully.

"There were six enemy ships. One appears to be disabled, the others have fled. Beyond that, you know as much as I do. I am certain that by this time tomorrow the entire crew will know what happened. Humans are notorious gossips." Ensign Thaelan said with a teasing smile.

Vincent smiled at the statement and said in his most logical voice, "As a Vulcan citizen, I must agree."

"Hey you two. No fair teaming up against me!" Darin said playfully as he worked the station one controls.

Ensign Thaelan smiled as he kept a close watch on his console.

"So who do you think attacked us? I mean, who could it be in this section of space?" Vincent asked curiously.

"A chance encounter with pirates would seem to be the most likely answer. The nearest inhabited system is Okuda and it's nearly two days away at maximum warp." Ensign Thaelan said consideringly.

"So you think that someone was just in the wrong place at the wrong time when we happened by?" Darin asked curiously.

"I cannot say. I was simply speculating on the most likely opponent in this area of space." Ensign Thaelan said casually, then in a more serious tone asked, "What is the status of the E1 power conduit?"

"From the look of these readings, I'd guess that the conduit has been physically severed." Darin said in concentration.

Ensign Thaelan thought for a moment, then pressed the direct link to the Engineering console.

"Ensign Agropos, could you spare Crewman Tullis to visually inspect the E1 power conduit? Our readings indicate physical damage." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"*He's already on his way.*" Connie said seriously.

"Keep me posted. Thaelan out." Ensign Thaelan said firmly, then disconnected the transmission.

Before Ensign Thaelan could ask, Darin called out, "Power systems are stable. Field strength optimum."

"All systems and sub-systems show normal function." Vincent called from station two.

Ensign Thaelan smiled at the efficiency of 'his' team.

"*Tullis to Thaelan.*" Sounded over the main comm.

"Go ahead." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"*There was a control failure in one of the torpedo launchers. Fortunately the torpedo only tore apart one of the launch tubes and some conduits. It didn't detonate.*" Jimmy said with relief.

"Understood. What is the damage to the E1 conduit?" Ensign Thaelan asked seriously.

"*There's not enough left to repair. It's a total loss. We'll need to have it replaced when we're in dock.*" Jimmy said frankly.

"Understood. Compose a damage assessment report for Lieutenant Bowers immediately. Thaelan out." Ensign Thaelan said firmly, then disconnected the transmission.

"Jimmy didn't make the news. He just reported it." Darin said in a concerned voice.

Ensign Thaelan thought about the words for a moment then quietly said, "I get caught up in the moment and forget courtesy. It is more difficult than it appears."

"Just remember to tell Jimmy that you're sorry next time you see him and I'm sure he'll understand." Darin said seriously.

"I will do so at the first opportunity." Ensign Thaelan said as he looked over his console.

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"*Ensign Thaelan, report.*" Joe's voice said firmly over the intercom.

"The E1 power conduit has been severed. We have bypassed it. All other systems operating normally." Ensign Thaelan said efficiently.

"*Acknowledged. When the captain stands down the red alert, I want all deflector control personnel to remain at battle stations until further notice.*" Joe said seriously.

"Yes sir." Ensign Thaelan said firmly.

"*Bowers out*." Joe said abruptly, then discontinued the transmission.

"Status?" Ensign Thaelan called out absently.

"Power distribution to the deflector is stable. E1 is bypassed. I show all standby circuits operating normally." Darin said carefully.

"It looks like a few things got knocked loose in the sub-sub-systems, but nothing that will effect performance. The field generators are working at optimum and the deflector dish shows no damage." Vincent said as he looked over the readings on his console.

"Console status?" Ensign Thaelan asked carefully.

Vincent hurried to the third station and glanced at it before saying, "All the consoles read as operational. The bridge station is showing a slight heat build-up, but it's not at a dangerous level. It always runs a little bit hot because the circuitry is packed in there so tight."

* * * * *

"So what's happening now?" Vincent asked into the silence that had fallen over the room.

"Nothing. My guess is that the Captain is calling for the surrender of the disabled ship." Thaelan said as he looked at his readings carefully.

"Do you think they're going to try to attack us again?" Darin asked quietly.

"I doubt it. My readings indicate that the ship is severely damaged... in fact, I don't think we're the ones who caused the damage." Thaelan said carefully.

"What do you mean?" Darin asked curiously as he stood from station one.

"Remain at your station Ensign. There are still five other ships unaccounted for." Thaelan said firmly.

Darin immediately sat back in his seat and said, "Yes sir."

"I was just assuming that all six ships were our enemies during the battle, but the damage of the ship before us is inconsistent with Federation weapons. Perhaps they are asking for political asylum." Thaelan said speculatively.

"Have we sent any repair teams or medical teams over to them?" Vincent asked in thought.

"No. I don't see any indication that we are offering any type of assistance." Thaelan said distantly.

"So we're not helping them or fighting them... what could that mean?" Vincent asked slowly.

"A plague ship?" Darin asked suddenly.

Thaelan thought about the question for a moment, then said, "That would be a possible explanation to fit the circumstances. But we can't jump to that conclusion. To know the answer for sure, we will just have to wait."

"And it's possible that we'll never know the answer." Vincent said in thought.

"Why do you say that?" Thaelan asked curiously.

"Because sometimes things happen that are classified and either no reason is given or stories are made up to cover up the truth." Vincent said darkly.

Darin thought about the proto-matter incident and nodded that he understood.

"You are correct Vincent. There are times when the truth is withheld to protect the greater good." Thaelan said slowly.

"I guess all we're going to be able to do right now is stay at our stations and wait." Vincent said with resignation.

"And be as prepared as we possibly can for another attack." Thaelan added seriously.

Vincent and Darin both began running their system checks with renewed commitment.

* * * * *

A beeping sound surprised Ensign Thaelan and he quickly switched over to the main comm unit.

"Deflector control." Ensign Thaelan said formally.

"*Please have Crewman Winters go to briefing room one*." Joe said in a serious voice.

"Right away sir." Ensign Thaelan said with surprise.

Vincent looked at Darin with concern.

"Go on. You'll be fine." Darin said with a smile of assurance.

Vincent reluctantly nodded and got up from his seat.

He walked to the supply locker and grabbed a small handful of couplers before heading for the door.

Ensign Thaelan looked at Darin with question.

"I can't explain why, but he thinks they're lucky." Darin said with a shrug.

Ensign Thaelan glanced at the door again, then went back to monitoring the main console.

Chapter 21

Vincent stepped into the briefing room and noticed that the Captain was the only person there.

"Crewman Winters reporting as ordered sir." Vincent said as he stood at attention.

"At ease crewman. Please have a seat." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Vincent took the seat to the Captain's right.

Captain Byrne considered his words carefully before saying, "The Okudai are a relatively peaceful people. They are not members of the Federation, but they have maintained a non-aggression pact with us for many years. We received a distress call from the Okudai transport ship '*Dorsa*'... it was in desperate need of assistance. We were able to dispatch her attackers, but not before their ship sustained significant damage."

Vincent watched the captain with interest, trying to guess at why he was being told all this.

"The *Dorsa* was being attacked because they were transporting 'The Holy One', the Okudai's highest religious leader. As I understand the Okudai traditions, when 'The Holy One' returns to Okuda Prime after being away for longer than one sidereal year, he has the authority to depose the political leader and call for a free election." The captain said seriously.

"Um, I'm sorry, but I don't know what a sidereal year is." Vincent said shyly.

"It's simply a year measured by the traditional method as opposed to a Starfleet standard year. In this instance it would mean one complete revolution of Okuda Prime around it's sun which is approximately fifteen months by our method of measuring time." Captain Byrne said carefully.

Vincent nodded that he understood.

"The captain of the *Dorsa* has asked that we bring 'The Holy One' aboard the *Yorktown* because the *Dorsa* is no longer safe." Captain Byrne said in thought.

"Excuse me Captain, may I ask a question?" Vincent asked carefully.

"Go ahead crewman." Captain Byrne said in thought.

"What were the O'Cooties doing so far from their world? I mean, if we're over two days away." Vincent asked carefully.

"It's pronounced Okudai, and that is a very intelligent question. When the ship was originally attacked, they were within their own system. They were set upon by some three dozen ships in an ambush. The *Dorsa* had no hope of defeating so many in direct combat, so they fled. Their attackers have been driving them away from Okuda Prime which is why they are so far from their world now. Apparently the ship has been trying to outrun it's attackers for two days at maximum warp and has managed to outrun all but five of them before we received their distress call." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Vincent nodded.

"They have requested that one member of our crew be assigned to act as a cultural guide while 'The Holy One' is amongst us. If you would be willing Crewman Winters, I would like that guide to be you." Captain Byrne finished carefully.

Vincent looked at the Captain with surprise.

Captain Byrne saw Vincent's surprised expression and added, "By our measure of time, 'The Holy One' is ten years old. His high priest suggested that one of an equal or lesser age would not be psychologically threatening to him."

Vincent nodded, then said, "I understand. It would be my honor to be a guide."

"Very well then. Crewman Winters, for the duration of the stay of 'The Holy One' amongst us, you will be assigned to be his personal guide. Remember that you will be representing not only the *Yorktown* in this matter, but also Starfleet and the entire United Federation of Planets."

"I understand sir." Vincent said as he sat straighter in his chair.

"Very good. Commander M'Butu and Lieutenant Simms will be taking a travel pod to visit the *Dorsa*. The Okudai are aware that we have transporters but believe that transporters might somehow taint or pollute 'The Holy One'." Captain Byrne said seriously as he stood.

Vincent nodded his understanding as he walked to Captain Byrne's side.

"Report to the flight deck. The others await you." Captain Byrne said as he led the way to the turbo lift.

Vincent smiled and said, "Yes sir."

* * * * *

"It's hard to believe that there's anyone still alive on that ship." Lieutenant Simms said as he looked at the extent of the damage through the view port.

"Scans show that over half their ship is hard vacuum. They must have lost a good share of their crew." Commander M'Butu said as he stared at the horrific sight.

Vincent couldn't find any words as he surveyed the damage to the alien ship.

He knew that for as long as he lived, the horrible image would be burned into his mind.

* * * * *

"*Dorsa*, this is the *Yorktown*'s travel pod requesting permission to dock." Ensign Smith said seriously.

"*Our automated docking system is not functioning, but you are clear to dock at our uppermost hatch.*" A staticky voice said in frustration.

"Confirmed." Ensign Smith said intently.

"Rotating 180 degrees on the Y axis." Ensign Marin said in concentration.

After a moment, Ensign Smith said, "I have visual alignment on the docking clamps."

"Slow and steady... that's got it." Ensign Marin said in a voice of accomplishment.

"We don't get to do that every day." Ensign Smith said with a smile.

"Not since the academy, and that was a simulator... Docking complete. Magnetic seal is confirmed. I show acceptable atmosphere... barely." Ensign Marin said with concern.

"Docking complete." Ensign Smith said into the intercom.

Commander M'Butu looked at Lieutenant Simms and Vincent seriously before saying, "Gentlemen, remember this is their most holy and respected leader. No fart jokes."

Vincent's eyes went wide at the statement then he broke into laughter.

"Good. I thought you were being too serious. You need to be respectful, but also be yourself... we wouldn't want 'The Holy One' to think that Humans don't have a sense of humor."

Vincent nodded as he joined Commander M'Butu and Lieutenant Simms at the door.

* * * * *

Commander M'Butu stepped through the hatch first and was immediately concerned by what he saw.

He could see the bodies of two of the ship's crew on the floor just a few feet from the hatch and there were people working frantically on equipment, obviously fighting for their lives. The air was difficult to breathe and stank of ozone.

When Vincent stepped through the hatch, the first thing that caught his attention was that these people looked fully human. There was no characteristic that he could see that would make him suspect that they were of any other species. For some reason he had expected them to appear 'alien' to him.

"Please come with me. 'The Holy One' must judge you to be acceptable before he will go with you." An elderly man said in a nearly hysterical voice.

Commander M'Butu motioned for his team to follow.

"'Holy One' may I present the representatives of the Federation ship that came to our rescue?" The elderly man asked into something that appeared to be a comm unit by a closed door.

"*Yes. Please show them in.*" A young voice said calmly.

* * * * *

The door opened to reveal a bright room filled with elegant furnishings and beautiful murals painted on all the walls. The air in the room was fresh and clean which was a definite contrast to the harsh fumes that they had been breathing in the hall outside.

There was a small boy with fair skin and long jet black hair sitting on a small couch. He was wearing a flowing robe made of multiple nearly transparent layers.

The first thing Vincent thought of when he saw the boy is that the robe looked like one of his mom's nightgowns.

"'Holy One, may I present..." The elderly man began to say, but was stopped as the ten year old boy raised his hand.

"No you may not. Oluf, you are dismissed." The boy said firmly.

"But 'Holy One'..." the elderly man began to say.

"Will you defy me? Oluf, you are dismissed." The boy said firmly.

"Yes 'Holy One'." The elderly man said quietly, then withdrew from the room.

After the door had closed, 'The Holy One' looked at the three before him and quietly asked, "Why are you willing to offer to protect me?"

"Because your Captain said that you are very important to your people and he can't promise that you'll remain safe here." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

"What do you expect in exchange for the protection you offer?" The boy asked cautiously.

"Perhaps the good will of your people at some future time." Commander M'Butu said carefully.

The boy considered the words, then said, "I am not a political leader, but I do have some influence in our government. I will promise to use what influence I have to promote the good will you seek... provided that I am returned to my people."

"Thank you 'Holy One'." Commander M'Butu said reverently.

The boy considered the response for a moment, then said, "I feel that you speak honestly. I approve of you. Let us leave quickly so the people of this ship can attend to their own safety and well-being. Their concern for me has cost them dearly."

"We're docked at the airlock just down the hall." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Come then. Every minute that I remain here only causes more hardship for them." The boy said as he walked toward the door.

* * * * *

As soon as the door opened, the elderly priest appeared and said, "I have arranged for your belongings to be loaded onto their transport. It will just take a matter of minutes."

"No. It is thanks to you and everyone on this ship that I continue to have my life. I need nothing more. I will leave immediately with these people who have agreed to keep me safe. It is my wish that you focus on the well being of the ship's crew now." The boy said firmly.

The priest led the way to the airlock and began to step through when the boy said, "I am going alone."

"'Holy One', please reconsider. I cannot allow you to go with these strangers without any protection. Please 'Holy One', allow someone to accompany you." The priest begged.

'The Holy One' looked around and spotted a member of the crew who had one arm hanging useless at his side and was working one handed, trying to get a panel opened on the wall.

"Him. He can accompany me. No other." The boy said firmly.

"Yes 'Holy One', thank you." The priest said and ran quickly to the young man.

"Let's hurry before he thinks of something else." The boy said as he stepped through the hatch.

Commander M'Butu, Lieutenant Simms and Vincent quickly followed.

* * * * *

"The High Priest Oluf said that I was to protect you..." The injured young man said as he hesitantly walked onto the shuttle.

"Yes. Please be seated. We are leaving." The boy said firmly.

"Yes 'Holy One'." The man said and sat down in the nearest chair.

Commander M'Butu closed the hatch, then pressed the comm button by the door and said, "Ensign Marin, we're ready to leave."

"*Yes sir.*" Was the immediate response.

"Please excuse my abrupt behavior... my high priest takes his duties very seriously." The boy said in a low voice.

"I understand that it was necessary." Commander M'Butu said formally.

Vincent looked on with concern at the man beside 'The Holy One' as he cradled his injured arm.

There was a slight sensation of movement as the shuttle broke away from the Okudai ship.

"I am Commander Oliver M'Butu, this is Lieutenant Wayland Simms and Crewman Vincent Winters." Commander M'Butu said formally.

"I do not understand the meaning fully. Is Lieutenant a title or a name?" The Holy One asked carefully.

"It is my rank. It simply says that I have the training and experience to lead those of a lesser rank than myself." Lieutenant Simms said carefully.

"I understand. I am unfamiliar with such things... Crewman Winters, may I presume that your rank is the least due to your age?" The Holy One asked in thought.

"Yes, my rank is the least. But I'm new to the crew of the *Yorktown*. If I work hard and learn my lessons, then I'll get a higher rank. Age is just a number. I already outrank some of the people back on our ship." Vincent said seriously.

"May I assume that your presence here is at the request of my priest?" The Holy One asked as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Yes. He thought it would be good to have someone close to your age to explain how we do things." Vincent said and finished with a smile.

"If he had not requested your presence, what duty would you be performing now?" The young boy asked seriously.

"I'd be working in Deflector Control." Vincent said simply.

The Holy One shook his head and said, "That has no meaning to me. I do not understand starship operations."

Vincent looked out the view port, then pointed and said, "Do you see that round thing on the front of the drive section under the saucer?"

The Holy One looked where Vincent was pointing, then nodded.

"That's the deflector dish. It puts out an energy field that keeps rocks and dust from hitting the ship as we move through space." Vincent said as he sat back in his seat.

"And you are the one who is given the duty to operate that device?" The Holy One asked in surprise.

"I'm part of the team that makes sure it's working right." Vincent said proudly.

"That is a very important duty." The Holy One said thoughtfully.

"Captain Byrne says that every member of his crew has a purpose. All of our duties are important because we depend on each other." Vincent said carefully.

"It sounds like a harmonious arrangement." The Holy One said in consideration.

"Yeah, it is." Vincent said happily.

"It is one of my duties to see that the members of the crew are working in harmony. If there is a problem of some sort, then I make adjustments in schedules or personnel to restore the peace." Commander M'Butu said carefully.

The Holy One thought about the statement carefully, then said, "I see the importance of your function. What is your function Lieutenant Simms?"

"I'm in charge of security. I help keep the peace by enforcing the rules that we all live by." Lieutenant Simms said in thought.

Ensign Marin walked through the travel pod and opened the hatch.

"That was a smooth docking Ensign, I didn't even feel it." Commander M'Butu said with a smile as he stood.

"Thank you sir." Ensign Marin said proudly.

"If you'll follow me, I'll take you to meet the Captain." Commander M'Butu said as he stood by the travel pod's door.

The Holy One stood and walked toward the door.

Vincent quickly stood and hurried to his side.

"Right this way." Commander M'Butu said as he led the way to the turbo lift.

"Briefing room one." Commander M'Butu said when they were all aboard.

The Holy One jerked when he felt the turbo lift move.

"It just takes us where we want to go on the ship." Vincent said quietly.

When the lift changed to horizontal movement, The Holy One flinched again.

"Don't worry. We're almost there." Vincent said with concern at The Holy One's reaction.

The boy looked curiously at Vincent, then broke into a smile as he said, "I am not worried. This is fun."

Vincent returned the smile and said, "Yeah, it is."

* * * * *

The turbo lift doors opened to reveal the Captain standing, waiting to greet them.

Commander M'Butu stood forward and said, "Captain Leland Byrne, may I introduce The Holy One of the Okudai."

"It is an honor to meet you 'Holy One'." Captain Byrne said sincerely.

"I thank you for helping my people in their effort to keep me safe." The Holy One said seriously.

"About that. Our sensors show that your ship is very seriously damaged but your captain will not accept our help." Captain Byrne said with concern.

"Do you have the capability to contact my ship? Perhaps I might be able to persuade him." The Holy One said carefully.

"Yes. You may use this view screen if you wish." Captain Byrne said as he walked across the room.

Commander M'Butu walked to the comm station by the door and pressed a button before saying, "Open a channel to the *Dorsa*. Put it through to briefing room one."

"*Yes sir.*" Was the immediate response.

"*'Holy One', it is good to see that you are well.*" The captain said with relief.

"Yes. I am well. Captain Marr, you have succeeded in keeping me safe. Now to complete your mission, you must conduct me safely to Okuda Prime. To do that you need a functioning ship and crew. I have judged these people to be sincere in their offer of aid. Please accept the help that these good people have offered so you may complete your mission." The Holy One said seriously.

"*It is forbidden to associate with outsiders... but if you, 'The Holy One', say it is acceptable to do so, then I will accept the offered help.*" The captain said humbly.

"I thank you for your loyalty and faith Captain Marr. Be expecting help to arrive shortly." The Holy One said carefully.

Captain Byrne pressed the button to end the transmission.

"I'll see to the repair and medical teams." Commander M'Butu said quickly.

Captain Byrne nodded, then turned his attention to The Holy One.

"I don't know how I will repay you for this generosity, but the universe has a way of making all things even. This act of kindness will return to you." The Holy One said in an introspective tone.

"It is my hope that you will feel welcomed and enjoy your time on my ship. We will make every effort to see to your comfort." Captain Byrne said reverently.

"Thank you Captain." The Holy One said calmly.

A sharp inhale of breath drew everyone's attention.

They all turned to see the crew member from the *Dorsa* holding his injured arm protectively and an obvious expression of pain on his face.

"Lieutenant, perhaps you could take this gentleman to sickbay?" Captain Byrne said professionally.

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Simms said immediately.

"I would like to go too." The Holy One said seriously.

"Are you injured?" Captain Byrne asked with concern.

"No. But I am interested to see the methods of your healers." The Holy One said serenely.

"Captain, I can take them to Sickbay if you want." Vincent offered quietly.

Captain Byrne looked at Vincent, then said, "Yes Crewman Winters, please escort our guests to the medical facility and see that they get a proper tour."

"Yes sir." Vincent said with a smile.

Vincent walked to the turbo lift, then stood aside to allow his guests to enter first.

* * * * *

"Sickbay." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift.

"Does this machine understand your spoken words, or is there a person who listens for someone to enter this device?" The Holy One asked curiously.

"It's a computer, a machine that understands certain words." Vincent said casually.

The Holy One looked at the injured crewman for a moment and got a distant look in his eyes.

When he seemed to come back to himself, he said, "Audge, son of Heliak, will you allow their healer to treat your injury?"

The injured man's eyes went wide and he seemed to pale, then hesitantly said, "If you wish me to 'Holy One'."

"I wish it. I want you to be healthy and without pain." The Holy One said firmly.

"Then I will be." Audge said as his pained expression changed to one of peace.

The lift doors opened and Vincent said, "It's right over here."

* * * * *

Vincent led the way into Sickbay and spotted T'Lani at the far side of the room.

"T'Lani, this is Audge, he's hurt. Where do you want him?" Vincent asked quickly.

"Have him lie down on the first biobed. I will notify Dr. Perry of his presence." T'Lani said quickly.

The Holy One watched as T'Lani left, then asked, "She is of a different species, is she not?"

Vincent turned his attention back to The Holy One and said, "Yes. She's from Vulcan."

"Oh yes, of course. I have heard of the Vulcan people but I have not previously had the opportunity to meet any... Please forgive me, we rarely have contact with people outside our own solar system." The Holy One said in thought.

"Dr. Perry is organizing medical teams to visit the Okudai ship. She will be here to assist you shortly." T'Lani said seriously.

"T'Lani, this is the Holy One of the Okudai and Audge, his protector. This is my wife, Ensign T'Lani." Vincent said in his most formal voice.

"A pleasure to meet you." T'Lani said as she started working the biobed's controls.

Vincent looked around, then said, "Holy One, if you would like, I could show you around sickbay while T'Lani and Dr. Perry are working on Audge."

"Yes, I would be interested to see your medical facility." The Holy One said in a considering voice.

"Audge, we'll be right back. I just want to show The Holy One the rest of the sickbay." Vincent said more quietly.

"'Holy One', I am supposed to remain with you to protect you." Audge said desperately.

"Stay and allow their healer to help you. Then you will be much better able to protect me should the need arise." The Holy One said firmly.

"As you say 'Holy One'." Audge said with resignation.

"Audge, we're just going through this door and down the hallway to the next room. We'll be right back." Vincent said as he pointed to a second door leading out of the sickbay.

"I will remain." Audge said, sounding slightly relieved by the assurance.

* * * * *

"The room we were just in is main sickbay. Dr. Perry's office is right there." Vincent said as they approached the window.

"It looks like she's busy talking to someone on her terminal right now, so I'll show you the convalescent ward first." Vincent said, then turned to walk toward the other door in the hall.

"I do not understand that word." The Holy One said carefully.

"I think convalescent means something like 'getting better'. If someone needs surgery or something serious like that, they do it in the sickbay. But after the surgery, they go to the convalescent ward so someone can take care of them until they're well enough to take care of themselves." Vincent said as he led the way into the convalescent ward.

"So many people can recover with one or two people to watch over them." The Holy One said speculatively as he looked around the room.

"That's right. My wife is one of the people who does that." Vincent said proudly.

"It is the custom of my people to wait until adulthood to choose a mate." The Holy One said quietly.

"Yeah, that's the way it is on Earth too. But I'm a Vulcan citizen, so my family elder chose my wife for me." Vincent said, then made a gesture back to the door they had just entered through.

The Holy One slowly followed Vincent back into the hallway and said, "I do not understand. You are one of the Earth people yet you claim to be a Vulcan."

"It's a really long story. Dr. Perry's gone so she's probably with Audge. Let's go back to the sickbay so you can see her work. I'll tell you about me later when we have more time, if that's okay?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yes. I would like that." The Holy One said with the beginning of a smile.

* * * * *

Audge smiled with relief at the sight of The Holy One and Vincent entering the room.

"How is he Dr. Perry?" Vincent asked as he led the way to Audge's bedside.

"Not too bad, all things considered. He has a compound fracture. It will need to be splinted for at least two days to properly align the fractures before I can try the knitter on him." Dr. Perry said professionally.

"Will he be able to leave sickbay when you're done with him?" Vincent asked in his mature voice.

"Yes. I'm going to give him some pain medication that might make him a little sleepy, but he'll be free to leave." Dr. Perry said with a fond smile at Vincent.

"What is that device?" The Holy One asked as he pointed to the head of the biobed.

"This is the scanning unit of the biobed. It has many functions, but basically it scans the person on the bed and attempts to detect anything abnormal." Dr. Perry said professionally.

"Would it be possible to see it in operation?" The Holy One asked curiously.

"Of course. Audge, if you will lay still for a moment, I'm going to do another scan." Dr. Perry said as she worked the controls.

After a moment, she pointed at the monitor and said, "Do you see that? The bed has detected the fractures in his arm."

She pointed at the scaled readings in the center of the unit and said, "These indicators show his breathing, heart rate and neural activity."

"Thank you Doctor. It is an impressive machine." The Holy One said in a considering voice as he looked at the biobed's readings carefully.

"It's one of many tools we have to evaluate and treat whatever illness or injury might affect us on our missions." Dr. Perry said professionally.

"Here is the splint you requested." T'Lani said as she walked into the room.

"Thank you T'Lani. Are you familiar with the procedure for splinting this type of fracture?" Dr. Perry asked, indicating the monitor.

"I am familiar with the procedure, however I have not had the opportunity to splint this type of fracture before." T'Lani said carefully.

"Go ahead and I'll observe." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Yes Doctor." T'Lani said as she stepped forward to put the splint on Audge's arm.

"Let's step back and give T'Lani room to work." Vincent said in a whisper.

The Holy One slowly took a step back to stand with Vincent by the next biobed.

"Do you think it would be possible for us to visit the place where you work?" The Holy One asked carefully.

"Yeah. That's where I wanted to take you next." Vincent said with a smile.

"*Dr. Perry, would you look at these scans and give me your opinion?*" A voice called from the terminal.

Dr. Perry walked to the terminal and looked at the scanner readings carefully.

"He's going to need surgery. The internal injuries are too severe to heal otherwise." Dr. Perry said gravely.

"*That was my conclusion as well, but their medical facilities don't have the support equipment that I would need to perform the surgery and the crew of the Dorsa refuse to leave their ship.*" Dr. Raul said quietly.

"I suppose you can't force someone to receive medical treatment, but make sure they know that if you don't perform the surgery within the hour, this patient will die." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Doctor. If you would like, perhaps I can convince them to accept medical attention." The Holy One said quietly.

"If there's anything you can do, please do it. I hate to see a life thrown away for no good reason." Dr. Perry said seriously.

The young boy nodded, then walked to stand before the terminal.

"This is 'The Holy One'. It is my wish for all those who require medical attention that is beyond our ability to provide to come to the *Yorktown* to receive medical care." He said firmly.

"*But the law...*" A voice said hesitantly.

"I AM THE LAW! It is my command that those who need medical attention receive it. Those who are fit to work, repair the ship so we may be underway as soon as possible." The Holy One said in a strong, authoritative voice.

"*Yes 'Holy One'. It will be as you say.*" The timid voice responded.

"*Dr. Perry, this patient isn't stable enough for transport. Can you send a shuttle for him?*" Dr. Raul asked hopefully.

"Yes. I'll send T'Lani with the shuttle so you won't have to leave your other patients." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"*Thank you. Raul out.*" He said with relief.

"Perry out." She said absently, then looked to see how T'Lani was doing.

"Very good. As soon as you have the arm immobilized, take a shuttle over to collect Dr. Raul's patient." Dr. Perry said professionally.

"Yes Doctor." T'Lani said as she worked a strap around the back of Audge's neck.

"If you'll excuse me gentlemen, I need to check in with the other medical teams to be sure that everything is going well." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Thank you for taking care of Audge." Vincent said with a smile.

"Yes, thank you. You are providing a great service to my people." The Holy One said reverently.

"Just let me know if there's anything else I can do." Dr. Perry said with a quick smile, then hurried to her office.

"Return to sickbay before you retire for the evening for additional pain medication." T'Lani said as she finished putting his splinted arm into a sling.

"I will, thank you." Audge said timidly.

"You are free to leave." T'Lani said as she stepped away.

"T'Lani." Vincent said quietly.

T'Lani stopped before her husband and gently caressed his cheek with her thumb.

"Be careful." Vincent whispered.

"I will take every precaution so I may return to you without delay." T'Lani said softly.

Vincent put his hand over hers, then turned to place a kiss in her palm.

"I must go." She whispered with regret.

"I know. I love you." Vincent said as he released her hand.

"I love you as well, my husband." T'Lani said quietly, then hurried out of the room.

"*This* is what a marriage should be." The Holy One said to Audge in a serious voice.

"I agree Holy One." Audge said with a tender smile.

Vincent turned away from the door that T'Lani had walked through and said, "Are you guys ready to see Deflector Control?"

"Yes. I would like that very much." The Holy One said with a look of admiration at Vincent.

* * * * *

"Ensign Thaelan, would you mind if I bring some new friends in and show them where I work?" Vincent asked from just inside the door.

"As long as your friends won't mind if I put you to work for a few minutes." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"Okay, but I've been assigned to escort these guys while they're on our ship." Vincent said as he walked slowly into the room.

"Understood. But, if in the course of your escort duty, you could do a systems check for me it would be much appreciated. Your brother was called to the bridge a few minutes ago and I don't know when he will return." Thaelan said as he kept his focus on the main deflector.

"Sure, I'll do that while I'm showing the guys what I do on the ship all day. But I thought you could run these checks on the main if you needed to." Vincent said casually as he walked to station one.

"It is possible to run system checks from the main, but it is not advisable when we are at battle stations. I have to be ready to react at a moment's notice." Ensign Thaelan said seriously.

"Got it. The deflector is operating at optimum efficiency. Primary field generator is functioning within normal parameters. Request permission to bring secondary field generator out of standby and up to full power." Vincent said as he worked the controls.

"For what purpose?" Ensign Thaelan asked curiously.

"I'd like to switch the secondary control systems to active and shunt them to the secondary field generator. By doing that I can run a level three on the entire secondary system at once instead of having to switch over each of the primary systems to do the checks." Vincent said as he turned to look at Thaelan.

"Go ahead Crewman Winters. I don't recall hearing of the diagnostic being done that way before, but I can't see any reason that it wouldn't be an efficient way of checking everything at one time." Ensign Thaelan said in a considering voice.

"Yeah. And if we do run into trouble while the diagnostic is running, you can switch over to the secondary system with one button." Vincent said with a smile as he brought the secondary field generator online.

"This is your job?" The Holy One asked quietly.

"Yeah. I'm still learning, but this is where I work. My brother Darin is usually here too, but he's doing something else right now." Vincent said as he moved to station two.

"This seems a complicated task for someone your age." The Holy One said quietly.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Being the Holy One seems like a complicated job to me. I guess when you're doing it, it doesn't seem as big and scary as when you watch someone else do it."

The Holy One smiled at the statement and said, "Perhaps you're right."

"Okay. Everything is showing green except for the E1 conduit. I've started a level three running on the entire secondary system. It will take a while to run, but if it comes back clean, we can switch over and check the whole primary system the same way." Vincent said with accomplishment.

"Thank you Crewman Winters. I feel better knowing that the backup systems are on active standby." Ensign Thaelan said honestly.

Vincent started a system check on all the consoles then said, "Ensign Thaelan, I'd like you to meet "The Holy One' of the Okudai and his protector, Audge."

Ensign Thaelan stood from the console and gave a respectful bow, then said, "It is an honor to meet you Holy One. I had the honor of meeting the Holy One named Austir when I was a child."

"You're the boy who traveled to Okuda Prime with the Andorian delegation?" The Holy One asked with surprise.

"Yes. I'm surprised that you know about that. It was hardly a noteworthy meeting." Thaelan said as he turned to glance at his console.

"Well, it was notable in that it was the last." The Holy One said frankly.

Thaelan nodded and said, "It is regrettable that our governments could not come to terms. I liked your people very much, especially Austir."

The Holy One smiled at Thaelan and said, "He was quite fond of you too. When we take on the responsibility of being 'The Holy One', we rarely use our given names. It is a sign of his admiration that he told you."

"I was not aware of the significance of his sharing his name with me. I only know that I spent many hours with Austir walking through the gardens and talking." Thaelan said distantly.

"Yes. The tranquility of the gardens was a welcomed relief after all the meetings." The Holy One said with a quiet smile.

Vincent looked at The Holy One carefully and said, "You have Austir's memories, don't you?"

The Holy One looked at Vincent with surprise.

"I can see that you remember Thaelan. It's not something you were told, you were there." Vincent said with certainty.

"Yes... I have Austir with me. I have all the Holy Ones who came before." The young boy said quietly, then glanced at Audge to see his reaction.

"Kewl." Vincent said with a smile, then looked at the station three console.

Audge looked at The Holy One with wide eyes of wonder.

"This is not something that is common knowledge and I would prefer that you do not repeat it." The Holy One said quietly.

"As you wish Holy One." Audge said reverently.

"I've got a green board on the console status and the level three is still running. Do you need me to do anything else right now?" Vincent asked as he looked at Thaelan expectantly.

"No. I can't think of anything at the moment." Thaelan said simply.

"Then I'm going to show The Holy One and Audge around some more." Vincent said as he walked to the door.

"Crewman Winters, it would please me if you and Ensign Thaelan would call me by my given name. Before I was given the honor of being 'The Holy One' I was called Tyce, son of Jessub." The Holy One said quietly.

"Thank you Tyce. And you can call me Vincent if you want to." Vincent said happily.

"Yes. That would please me." Tyce said gently.

"My true name is extremely complicated, but you may address me as Thaelan if you wish." Ensign Thaelan said reverently.

"I remember when you told Austir your full name. It took almost ten minutes." Tyce said with a chuckle.

"Are you guys ready to go?" Vincent asked as he walked toward the door.

"Yes, but I would like to return later." Tyce said with a fond smile at Thaelan.

Vincent nodded, then took a communicator from the rack by the door and said, "I've got number seven if you need anything. I'll come back before the diagnostic is finished."

"I will call you if there is a need before that time." Thaelan said, then turned back to his console.

Chapter 22

"You surprised me with your reaction when you realized that I carry the knowledge and experience of the former Holy Ones." Tyce said timidly.

"Well, I guess if I'd just been around Humans all the time I might think that it was really weird or something, but I've been studying about the things that Vulcans can do with memory transference and I understand how it works... well, basically." Vincent said as he led the way down the catwalk.

"Among my people it is very rare to find a person with the gift. It took Austir nearly ten years to find me. When I reach the age of eighty years I will begin the search for the next Holy One." Tyce said distantly.

"Wow. The memory transfer thing isn't a big deal to me, but you knowing what you'll be doing seventy or eighty years from now is a little freaky." Vincent said with a smile.

Tyce smiled at Vincent and said, "I agree."

"Would you guys like to get something to eat?" Vincent asked as he turned to face the pair.

"Yes. If it wouldn't be an imposition." Tyce said quietly.

"It's no problem at all. You've seen where I work, now I'll show you where I eat." Vincent said with a smile.

Tyce nodded his agreement and waited for Vincent to lead the way into the turbo lift.

"What about you Audge? Are you hungry?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"The rations should be saved for those who are operating the ship." Audge said quietly.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "You're the protector of the Holy One. Not only should that give you the right to eat, but I think you should be able to ask for seconds if you want."

Tyce smiled and said, "I agree with our host. If you are hungry, you should eat."

"If that is your wish Holy One." Audge said reverently.

After the trio boarded the turbo lift, Vincent said, "Engineer's Mess."

Tyce giggled at the sensation of the turbo lift moving.

Vincent smiled at his enjoyment.

When the doors opened, Vincent led the way toward the Engineer's Mess Hall.

"Audge, if you'll pick out the stuff you like, I'll carry your plate, then when we've got yours, I'll go back and get mine." Vincent said cheerfully.

"I couldn't ask you to do that for me." Audge said humbly.

"You didn't ask... and neither did I. You can't load a plate and carry it with one hand, so I'm doing this for you. Get over it." Vincent said sternly.

Audge nodded hesitantly.

Tyce giggled, then said, "I like the way you deal with people. It's very straightforward and honest."

"Yeah. Honesty. That's what I'm going for. If you'll grab a plate, you can choose whatever you like from the food they have made here. There are salads over in the cold case and drinks at the far end of this line." Vincent said as he picked up a tray and a plate.

Tyce picked up a tray and a plate to follow Vincent down the line.

"Audge, bring your good arm over here and pick out what you want to eat. Just put it on the plate." Vincent said as he stood aside.

Audge looked over the hot food selections, then hesitantly scooped some macaroni and cheese onto the plate.

"Yeah. I like macaroni and cheese too." Vincent said with a smile.

Audge smiled at the statement, then placed a country fried steak on his plate.

"Those things are breaded and look a lot bigger than they really are. If you're hungry, you'd better get two." Vincent said seriously.

"Thank you. I will." Audge said timidly and picked out a second steak.

"What is this?" Tyce asked from behind Vincent.

Vincent turned and said, "Those are stuffed pork chops. They're really good."

Tyce put one on his plate, then started looking at the other selections.

"Audge, that white gravy is for the steaks. It just makes them taste even better." Vincent said seriously.

"Should I get that too?" Tyce asked as he watched Audge ladle the gravy over the pair of steaks.

"Well, since you have a stuffed pork chop, you'll probably only want to get one. But yeah, I think you'll like it." Vincent said happily.

"Which vegetable would you recommend to go with this food?" Audge asked hesitantly.

Vincent looked over the selections, and said, "I think these green beans look pretty good. The corn on the cob looks good too, but you'd probably have a lot of trouble with that using one hand."

Audge pointed to the pan of green beans with question.

"Yeah, that's them. I think you'll like them." Vincent said with a smile.

"How do you have so much fresh food so far from home?" Tyce asked as he took a small spoon of each of the vegetables.

"Some of the food is kept in stasis coolers to keep it fresh. Other things are made in the protein processors." Vincent said as he moved Audge's tray to the next line of food.

"So you have a device that creates food?" Tyce asked with interest.

"Kind of. The computer has something like a recipe that it follows to take the protein and change it into regular food. It can make things like soups and sandwiches and probably that gravy really good. But there's some stuff it can't make so we carry that stuff with us." Vincent said as he watched Audge pick out three different types of dinner rolls.

"My people could do so much with this technology." Tyce said in thought.

"Hey Audge. Save some room for the salad." Vincent said with a smile.

Audge nearly ran to the next line to see what other selections were available to him.

"I'm guessing that you have a food shortage on your ship." Vincent said speculatively.

"I really don't know." Tyce said quietly.

Vincent sat Audge's tray on the salad line for Audge to add his selections.

"My priests have protected me from so much. I really don't know everything that was going on. I only know that many sacrificed their lives to keep me safe." Tyce said quietly.

"Then they must have thought you were worth it. I guess the best way to honor the ones who died to protect you is to prove that they were right." Vincent said seriously.

Tyce nodded his agreement, then smiled when he saw Audge's tray filled with food.

"We can come back and get more if you're still hungry." Vincent said as he lifted the tray.

Audge hurried to get a bowl of orange Jell-O before Vincent could move the tray away.

Vincent smiled at the move and led the way to an unoccupied table.

Vincent placed the tray on the table and asked, "What would you like to drink?"

Audge looked at him with question.

"I tell you what, I'll get you something and if you don't like it, you can have something else." Vincent said with a smile.

Audge hesitantly nodded.

"I will come with you. I did not get a drink." Tyce said as he placed his tray on the table.

"Okay". Vincent said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Hi Vincent, I thought you'd be working now." JonJon said as he approached the table.

"I've been assigned to show these guys around the ship while they're visiting with us. JonJon, this is 'The Holy One of the Okudai' and Audge, his protector. Guys, this is JonJon, one of my best friends." Vincent said happily.

"It is nice to meet you JonJon. Since Vincent claims you as his friend, you would be welcomed to join us if you like." Tyce said quietly.

JonJon looked at Vincent with question.

"Yeah, there's one open spot. Grab it." Vincent said happily.

"Thanks. I'll be right back." JonJon said quickly and hurried away.

"Is he a crewman like you?" Tyce asked with interest.

"No. JonJon and a bunch of other people on the ship right now are moving to a new colony." Vincent said seriously.

"What is the purpose of their colony?" Tyce asked curiously.

"I don't understand what you mean." Vincent said as he turned his full attention to Tyce.

"Among my people, colonies are established when there is a need to be away from the home world. Usually it has to do with a differing philosophy. The people in the new colony are free to live with their own 'different' philosophy while the home world maintains the old ways." Tyce said in thought.

"Oh. I guess that's a good way of doing it. What was your colony like?" Vincent asked casually.

"It's an old colony. My people are united by the belief that every citizen has the responsibility to participate in the government. When there is any decision that needs to be made, our entire colony is encouraged to vote on it." Tyce said quietly.

"That sounds like a lot of work. But I guess it would be good if everyone understood what was happening in their local government." Vincent said, then smiled as JonJon approached with a plate of food.

"I'm glad they have stuffed pork chops today. They're my favorite." JonJon said happily.

Tyce cut a piece of his pork chop and cautiously took a bite.

Vincent watched carefully, then smiled as he noticed Tyce's pleased expression.

"Aren't they good?" JonJon asked happily.

Tyce nodded, then cut another bite.

"So did you and Cyril come up with a job?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yeah. He said that he woke up this morning with so many things to do that he didn't know where to start. So if I want, I can be his assistant and help him keep organized and do stuff for him and things like that." JonJon said happily.

"That sounds great." Vincent said with a smile.

"Yeah. And he said that when we get to the new colony, that if he likes the job I'm doing and if I still like doing the job, then I can keep on working for him there." JonJon said with a peaceful smile.

"That's great." Vincent said with contentment.

"And he likes Fizgig and said that Fizgig can come to work with me." JonJon said with a big smile.

"That sounds perfect." Vincent said happily.

"Who is Fizgig?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"Oh, that's JonJon's dog." Vincent said as he turned his attention back to Tyce.

"Dog? I've heard the word but... it has no meaning to me." Tyce said to JonJon with regret.

"If you'll tell me where you'll be, I'll bring Fizgig to meet you." JonJon said peacefully.

"We'll be in Deflector Control at least for a little bit." Vincent said seriously.

JonJon nodded, then thought to ask, "So what were you guys talking about when I interrupted?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "The Holy One was just telling me about his colony. He said that it was founded because the people wanted to live differently than the people on the home world. Was Kimber anything like that?"

JonJon thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I guess so. Kimber was supposed to be like taking a step back from all the technology of Earth. We had stuff like the power station and our clinic was really good. But we didn't have a lot of video games or televisions or radios. I mean, we had terminals to get news and keep in touch with people back on Earth. But we raised animals and grew vegetables too... It was nice."

"It sounds nice." Tyce said with a gentle smile at JonJon.

"How are you doing Audge?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"I think I took too much." Audge said with a regretful look at his plate.

"If you're done, I'll get rid of your plates." Vincent said quietly.

"No. It would be wrong to waste this wonderful food. It was my own fault for being greedy." Audge said in an ashamed voice.

"It won't get wasted. Leftover food is deconstructed and returned to the protein stores." Vincent said seriously.

"So the food that he did not finish will be used to create other food for someone else later?" Tyce asked in wonder.

"That's right. We're on a starship so we have to be careful about wasting stuff like food and water." Vincent said seriously.

"My people could benefit so much from this technology." Tyce said absently.

"Then why don't they?" Vincent asked curiously.

Tyce looked at Vincent for a moment, then said, "Because we do not want to lose our culture. We do not want to become blended with the other worlds of the Federation and lose our identity as a people."

Vincent looked Tyce in the eyes and said, "Then I guess that I'm an example of what you don't want to happen to your people."

"No, I didn't mean you..." Tyce said quickly.

"I'm a Human who was adopted by a Vulcan Clan and married a Vulcan woman. Vulcan is my home even though I wasn't born there. My kids will be Vulcans by law, but they will be half Human." Vincent said simply.

"I'm sorry Vincent. I didn't mean to offend you." Tyce said quietly.

"I'm not offended, but I don't think I agree with what you believe." Vincent said carefully.

"It is not proper to speak in such a way to 'The Holy One'." Audge said in a tone of warning.

"Really?" Vincent asked as he looked at Tyce.

"Among my people, it is forbidden." Tyce said hesitantly.

"Then how do you have discussions or settle disagreements?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I decide what is right. There is no further need for discussion and everyone agrees." Tyce said frankly.

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment, then asked, "So, if your priests lie to you to 'protect' you from the truth and you don't allow anyone to tell you their side of the story, how can you make good decisions?"

"I don't understand what you are asking." Tyce said slowly.

"If you're the one who decides what is right, you need to have all the facts to make a good decision. But it sounds like the important facts are being kept from you." Vincent said in thought.

Tyce considered the statement for a moment, then slowly said, "There is some truth to what you are saying."

Vincent's eyes became distant as he said, "I bet that way way back in the past, the Holy Ones lived with the people and understood their problems and what they needed."

Tyce looked at Vincent with surprise at the statement.

An alert klaxon sounded, immediately stopping all conversation in the mess hall.

"***Battle stations. All hands. Battle stations.***" Sounded over the comm.

"Come on guys. Just leave your plates. We need to get to Deflector Control." Vincent said as he stood.

"I'm going to get Fizgig in the observation lounge." JonJon said quickly.

"Good idea. It might get scary and it's best if he's not alone." Vincent said as he hurried toward the nearest turbo lift.

* * * * *

The various people on the lift called out many different decks.

"Deflector Control." Vincent called out, followed by JonJon's "Deck J, Dorsal."

"Do you believe we are in danger?" Tyce asked quietly from Vincent's side.

"No. But Thaelan might need my help if Darin isn't back." Vincent said quickly.

As soon as the lift doors opened, Vincent said, "Come on guys."

Vincent, Tyce and Audge hurried down the catwalk to the door to Deflector Control.

* * * * *

"Where do you need me?" Vincent asked as he hurried into the room.

He was relieved to see that Darin was already sitting at station one.

"Take station two." Thaelan said immediately.

"You guys can sit there if you want." Vincent said as he pointed to the auxiliary stations.

"It appears that the enemy ships have returned to finish what they started. We have moved to block them from firing on the *Dorsa*." Thaelan said gravely as he watched his readout carefully.

"How many are there?" Vincent asked as he worked his controls.

"Three. They're maneuvering to get into position." Thaelan answered as he watched his screens carefully.

A beeping from the main console drew everyone's attention as Thaelan examined his readouts.

"We are attempting to extend our shields to protect the *Dorsa*." Thaelan said in a voice of deep concentration.

"They're not going to hold up very long like that." Darin said as he ran through his systems checks.

"The secondary system is still active and ready to switch over at your command." Vincent said as he verified his readings.

"Lieutenant Bowers has assumed control of the main and is aware of the secondary system status." Thaelan said as he watched the board carefully.

"What are the ships doing?" Darin asked with concern.

"The ships have positioned themselves in such a manner that we cannot block them from firing on the *Dorsa*." Thaelan said with a note of panic in his voice.

"What do they want Tyce?" Vincent asked quickly.

"Me. Dead." Tyce answered honestly.

"But why? Why are they willing to stand against a Federation starship to kill you? What will they gain if you're dead?" Vincent asked firmly.

"***All hands. Brace for impact***." Sounded over the comm.

"Hold on." Vincent said, then noticed that Audge was having difficulty holding on to the counter before him with one hand.

Vincent ran to Audge's side and held him tightly as he gripped the counter firmly.

The ship rocked with the impact of weapon's fire.

"Tyce! What do they want?" Vincent asked fiercely.

"They want Okuda to join the Federation." Tyce answered reluctantly.

Vincent looked at Tyce with disbelief, then tightened his grip on Audge when the ship was jolted again.

"Can't we talk with them? Isn't there some way to end this without anyone else dying?" Vincent asked desperately.

"I can't! Austir declared that the people of Okuda would not join the Federation. He was right. Within a dozen generations we would become little more than a forgotten culture. I must defend my people's right to exist." Tyce said imploringly.

"I think I understand." Vincent said in a speculative voice.

"You do?" Tyce asked with surprise.

"Yes. I think I do. Like I told you, I am a Vulcan. Even though I am of the Human species, I am a Vulcan citizen. I survived the Ordeal of Maturity to be declared an adult by Vulcan law. I had my marriage arranged by my family elder just like it's been done for thousands of years. I have a telepathic bond with my wife because it's part of Vulcan tradition. I respect the ancient ways of Vulcan and live by them. If I found out that there was a group trying to get rid of the ancient ways of Vulcan, I would fight to defend them because, in my heart, I am a son of Vulcan." Vincent said firmly, then looked up at the sound of phasers firing.

"Without our traditions, my people will lose faith in themselves. Without that faith, our civilization will lose it's identity. How can you deny your own culture to take on the culture of another race?" Tyce asked in confusion.

"Because it's my *choice*. Given the choice, some of the Okudai might decide to explore other cultures and adopt their ways, but some would hold to the ancient ways because they believe they are worth preserving. If you take away that choice, then is it really faith?" Vincent asked seriously.

"One of our attackers has been disabled." Thaelan called out as he kept his focus on the main.

"Tyce. You can end this. You don't have to agree with them, but I bet that if you would agree to let them speak and really listen to what they have to say, you might be able to work something out... I don't know, maybe start a colony on the edge of your system where the citizens are allowed to have contact with outsiders." Vincent said quickly.

"Will you take me to the captain?" Tyce asked in thought.

"I'll race you to the turbo lift." Vincent said as he released Audge.

Tyce stood and began to walk toward the door.

"Will you guys be okay without me for a few minutes?" Vincent thought to ask as he released his hold on Audge and helped him to stand.

"You will do more good by ending this fight than you would by helping here." Thaelan said firmly.

"We'll be back soon." Vincent said as he hurried out the door.

* * * * *

"Captain, may I bring 'The Holy One' on the bridge to speak with you?" Vincent asked from the door of the lift.

"Yes, of course, but we are a bit busy at the moment." Captain Byrne said in concentration.

"If you will open a transmission to the lead vessel, perhaps I can end this." Tyce said as he walked confidently onto the bridge.

"Lieutenant Patterson, open a channel." Captain Byrne said immediately.

"*Stay out of this Federation vessel. This is an internal affair of the Okudai people.*" A shadowed man said in an angry voice.

"I am not on the ship you are attacking. You will gain nothing by the destruction of the *Dorsa*." Tyce said as he faced the screen.

"*YOU'RE ON THE FEDERATION VESSEL!?*" The man screamed with disbelief.

"Correct. My hosts have suggested that if we speak, we might be able to come to terms." Tyce said seriously.

"*This is a trick! There's no way 'The Holy One' would associate with outsiders or talk with those who disagree with him.*" The man said suspiciously.

"That has been the tradition. But it has been brought to my attention that without dialogue, there cannot be true agreement. If you will cease your hostilities and select a representative to speak for you, we can meet and possibly come to some sort of agreement." Tyce said calmly.

"*I don't trust you.*" The man said cautiously.

Vincent leaned close to Tyce's side and whispered, "If they don't trust you, maybe they'll trust Captain Byrne."

"I am sorry to hear that. I may be your adversary, but I haven't given you reason to mistrust my word. I suppose it doesn't matter... Will you trust the captain of this Federation vessel?" Tyce asked seriously.

The man considered for a moment, then said, "*I will*."

"Captain, if this gentleman will agree to a cease fire, will you also?" Tyce asked calmly.

"Yes. Of course." Captain Byrne said immediately.

"*Thank you Captain. Please relay instructions to my people and we will make every effort to behave in a reasonable manner.*" The man said respectfully.

"This is my first officer, Commander M'Butu. He will coordinate the arrangements with your people. I look forward to meeting you in person momentarily." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"*As do I. Treifa out*." The man said with a gentlemanly bow before the screen went blank.

Tyce's eyes went wide when he heard the name.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked quietly.

"I can't believe I didn't recognize him... This man, Treifa, nearly twenty years ago he was a priest to Austir. There was a time when they were friends." Tyce said uncomfortably.

"Maybe you can be again. If you'll listen when he talks, maybe he'll be willing to do the same." Vincent said hopefully.

"Holy One, the arrangements have been made. If you'll follow me, we'll go down to the transporter room to meet our guest." Commander M'Butu said as he gestured toward the turbolift.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Vincent asked in a whisper.

"Yes. I'm counting on you to remind me to really listen during this negotiation. I'm out of practice." Tyce said with a smile.

"Audge and I will make sure to keep you on the right track." Vincent said with a smile at Audge.

Audge's eyebrows went up in surprise for a moment, then he nodded his agreement.

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As Vincent walked into transporter room two, he noticed that Rad was on duty.

"This is another one of my friends, his name is Rad." Vincent said happily.

"Nice to meet you. Cool nightgown." Rad said with a playful smile.

"Um, Rad. This is 'The Holy One' of the Okudai. He's their most respected holy leader." Vincent said cautiously.

"Oh..." Rad said hesitantly, then smiled and said, "Well, it's still nice to meet you."

"I like you. You're funny." Tyce said with a genuine smile.

Rad looked down at his console and said, "If we're all ready, the *Mingot* is signaling ready to transport."

"Energize." Commander M'Butu said formally.

The sparkle of three transporter beams appeared in the chamber.

"Captain, I'm detecting concealed weapons on two of the subjects transporting in." Rad said with concern.

"Can you bring the third out of transport and hold the other two?" Captain Byrne asked seriously.

"Yes sir." Rad said, then keyed in the commands on his console.

A single man resolved into being on the center transporter pad.

After a moment to look around, Treifa asked, "What is the meaning of this?"

"These men are carrying concealed weapons. We can either bring them out of the transporter and disarm them or send them back. What is your preference?" Captain Byrne asked without accusation.

"Bring them out and I'll tell them to leave their weapons here. Will that be acceptable?" Treifa asked seriously.

"Ensign Radovanovich, please disable their weapons and have security join us before you bring them out of the beam." Captain Byrne said simply.

"I give you my word Captain." Treifa said firmly.

"You have attempted to bring concealed weapons onto my ship. Please forgive me if your word doesn't inspire my complete trust." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Treifa reluctantly nodded at the statement.

Two security officers walked into the room and stood at attention.

"You already met Lieutenant Simms, that's Ensign Barnhill. She acts tough but she's really nice." Vincent whispered to Tyce at his side.

"These gentlemen have concealed weapons. Their weapons have been deactivated, but they may still pose a threat." Captain Byrne said to the two security officers.

Treifa moved aside as the two officers approached the transport chamber.

"Here they come." Rad said as he completed the transport.

When the transporter beams cleared, both men surveyed the room.

When they spotted Tyce, they simultaneously raised their weapons and pulled the triggers.

Audge and Vincent moved as one to step in front of Tyce to shield him with their own bodies.

"Treifa, you're welcomed to come with us to talk or you may return to your ship. Those two are not invited to stay." Captain Byrne said and turned to walk out of the room.

"You can't go with him! He's the oppressor of our people!" One of the men called out as Ensign Barnhill blocked him from walking out of the transport chamber.

Rad quickly initiated the force field around the transport chamber and contained the two men.

"You heard the Captain. Send them back." Commander M'Butu said with a look of disappointment at the men.

Rad nodded, then worked the controls to establish contact with the *Mingot* to link with their transporter.

"Treifa, I am Tyce." Tyce said firmly as they walked out of the transporter room.

After a hesitant moment, Treifa said, "Your predecessor would only allow me to address him as 'Holy One'.

"Austir was quite old and set in his ways. I am still young enough to be flexible... to a point." Tyce said carefully.

"Does that mean that you're willing to let the people of Okuda join the Federation?" Treifa asked hopefully.

"Conference room one." Captain Byrne said when everyone was on the lift.

"I am not quite that flexible. But my hosts aboard this ship have suggested that there might be a possibility for negotiation between us. If you can also be flexible, we might be able to find some common ground." Tyce said carefully.

The lift doors opened and Captain Byrne stepped out.

"If you will please take your seats we may begin this process." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Tyce took a seat. A moment later Vincent and Audge were sitting on either side of him.

Captain Byrne took his seat at the head of the table and waited as Commander M'Butu and Treifa walked around the table to sit opposite Tyce.

"Treifa, please tell me what you wish to gain by having the people of Okuda join the Federation." Tyce said firmly.

"Advanced methods of food production, medical advances, new technology... basically, a future for our children." Treifa said seriously.

"The future I want for our children is one of knowing who they are as a people. I want the children of Okuda to be proud of who they are and be able to trust in the traditions that have served our people for a thousand years." Tyce said carefully.

"There is little consolation to know that you come from a proud, old people when your belly is empty. It's of little comfort to a child to know that he is of pure blood when he's watching his mother die from a disease that the Federation has been able to cure for a hundred years. The traditions that served our people a thousand years ago in our ascendance provided a perfect way of life... a thousand years ago. Today, the governing class has all the wealth and power and the common man has nothing. You worry about preserving our traditions for the next generation, but there may not be a next generation if the social issues that are plaguing the working class aren't addressed." Treifa said passionately.

"Is it really that bad?" Tyce asked with concern.

"Yes. Well, not everyplace, not yet. But the poverty is spreading as greed and corruption overtake the governing class." Treifa said seriously.

Captain Byrne quietly said, "Treifa, I'm sorry to tell you that the Federation will be of little help in this circumstance."

Treifa looked at Captain Byrne with question.

"It sounds like what you have is a fundamental problem in your government. Membership in the Federation might be able to give some superficial aid to your people for a short time. But if the government is corrupt, then whatever help we offer will eventually be absorbed by corruption and it wouldn't surprise me to find that your people end up worse off than when they started." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Which is why we need to overthrow the government and start off with a new system." Treifa said firmly.

"Then you're trading one set of problems for another. Don't you remember your history Treifa? When we overthrew the feudal lords to become a democratic society, we treated our elected leaders like royalty and within two generations were in the same state that we had started in." Tyce said seriously.

"Perhaps it's not the system of government that is at fault, but the leaders that you've chosen?" Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"When I return to Okuda Prime, I have the authority to call for free elections. We can change the government from top to bottom if I call for it." Tyce said frankly.

"But who will replace them? You're just trading one group of corrupt politicians for another." Treifa said in defeat.

"Why don't you run for election Treifa?" Vincent asked curiously.

"There's no way I could be elected. The politicians spend millions to spread their lies and convince people to vote for them. The only reason I have ships is because the politicians don't want the 'Holy One' to stir things up." Treifa said seriously.

"So it *was* Malif's people who set this up?" Tyce asked in confirmation.

"Not really. Malif is just a pawn. The people who are really in charge run both political parties. No matter who wins, they still come out on top. If you were killed, then their puppets could petition to join the Federation so their masters could increase their power base beyond our system." Treifa said gravely.

Tyce shook his head as he said, "I had no idea it had gotten so bad."

"How could you know? You live in your grand tower with your priests to protect you from the ugly truths. The sad thing is that the people really are devoted to you. They love and trust you and are convinced that your every word is the law." Treifa said imploringly.

"I'm beginning to see that. I'm just not sure how to change things." Tyce said speculatively.

"Are you allowed to tell your people who you would like them to vote for?" Vincent asked quietly.

Tyce and Treifa looked at each other for a moment, then Tyce said, "Six hundred years ago a Holy One endorsed a candidate for the presidency. That president was elected in eleven consecutive free elections, and the last time he didn't even run for the office, the people wrote him in and elected him by popular mandate. It was decided at that time that the Holy One should refrain from endorsing any candidate. It subverts the purpose of an election by influencing the will of the people."

"But if the will of the people is to have a fair and working government, then aren't you just guiding them in the right direction to get what they really want?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Crewman Winters, we are here to arbitrate, not influence." Commander M'Butu said firmly.

"No Commander. He's right. If there were ever a time when I should use my position as Holy One to help my people, this is it." Tyce said seriously.

"I think I agree with you... but what about the Federation?" Treifa asked hesitantly.

"Crewman Winters had a thought about that... why don't you tell him Vincent?" Tyce said with a smile.

"Um... yeah. I was just thinking that since you guys already set up colonies for people who want to live differently from the people on your home planet. Why don't you set up a colony that is allowed to deal with the Federation? That way you can see how it works and if it causes any problems before you decide if you want to join the Federation for real." Vincent said cautiously.

Treifa thought about the suggestion for a moment, then said, "It sounds like a reasonable compromise. If I could get the Holy One's endorsement on the idea I know I could get my people to go along with it. They'll be climbing all over each other to join the colony."

"I'm afraid that won't work." Tyce said seriously.

"Why not?" Treifa asked cautiously.

"Because, if we can come up with a plan to make this work, I expect you and your people to be running for every public office that they can possibly fill. With a little hard work and my endorsement, every one of them should be able to be elected... Well, except for those two who tried to shoot me. I don't think I want to endorse them." Tyce finished with a smile.

"Don't worry about them. They are willing to fight and die for the benefit of our people. Once they see that you're really trying to provide a better future for us instead of trying to keep us in the stone age, they'll be your most devoted followers." Treifa said with conviction.

"Perhaps. But I'll still feel better knowing that Audge is by my side to protect me." Tyce said with a smile.

Audge looked at Tyce with surprise.

"This trip has shown me that I don't need someone to protect me from the truth, but I do need someone to protect me. Audge, if you'll be willing to serve, I would be happy if you would consent to be my personal security guard from now on." Tyce said with a smile.

"I would be honored 'Holy One'." Audge said reverently.

"Good. Then your first duty as my personal security guard is to call me by my name. I don't like the idea of being called 'Holy One' in my own home for the next eighty or so years." Tyce said with a smile.

"Yes, of course Tyce." Audge said shyly.

"Very well then. It appears that everything has been resolved." Captain Byrne said happily.

"Not quite everything. I think this may take a good deal of explaining on my part before 'The Holy One' will be safe among my companions. But it does sound like a good beginning." Treifa finished with a hopeful smile at Tyce.

"And the *Dorsa* is far from being ready for the trip back to Okuda Prime." Commander M'Butu said reluctantly.

"Mere details. The most challenging part has been accomplished. We've sat down and come to an understanding. All the rest of it is just means to accomplish what has been decided here today." Captain Byrne said happily.

"I think I agree with you Captain." Treifa said with a smile.

"As do I." Tyce said happily.

"Treifa, I understand that you will need to return to your ship and discuss what has been said here with some others. Perhaps you would care to invite one or two others to join us for a meal this evening so they can see for themselves that everyone is in agreement." Captain Byrne asked hopefully.

"I would be honored to attend. And I will notify my guests to leave their weapons behind this time." Treifa said with a barely contained smile.

"I believe that would make the evening run much more smoothly." Captain Byrne said with a considering look.

"We could also invite Captain Marr." Commander M'Butu said speculatively.

Captain Byrne nodded his agreement, then asked, "Is there anyone you would care to invite Holy One?"

"Yes. My High Priest Oluf. Although you shouldn't expect him to be very good company. He's about to find out that his job description has drastically changed." Tyce said with a smile.

"And of course Crewman Winters will be attending as your cultural liaison." Captain Byrne said with a fond smile at Vincent.

"Thank you Captain. Although I did not agree with my priest's request for Crewman Winters to be my guide, Vincent has been a great help to me. Thank you for assigning him to accompany me while I am visiting your ship."

Vincent smiled happily at the praise.

"Captain, would it also be possible for Ensign Thaelan to join us for dinner? I believe it would be fitting for him to be present since he was a member of the last Federation delegation to visit Okuda Prime." Tyce said in careful thought.

"I was not aware of that. Yes, it sounds fitting that Ensign Thaelan should be invited to join us." Captain Byrne said happily.

Chapter 23

The group escorted Treifa to the transporter room and watched as he left the ship.

Once he was gone, Vincent casually asked, "Tyce, would you and Audge like to take a shower and have your clothes cleaned before the dinner?"

Tyce considered for a moment, then said, "We did not bring other clothing and would not wish to be an imposition."

Vincent smiled and said, "The fresher doesn't take very long to work. It should be finished by the time you're done showering. Or if you'd like to change into other clothes, I bet mine would fit you and Audge could probably borrow something from Darin."

Tyce looked down at his diaphanous robes for a moment, then said, "Since I have received the honor of being 'The Holy One' I have only worn the official robes of my position. If you are sincere in your offer, I believe I would like to borrow some of your clothing."

Vincent smiled at the formal statement, then looked at Audge and asked, "How about you, would you like to get a shower and change into some other clothes?"

Audge timidly nodded that he would.

"Alright, let's go to Deflector Control' to get you something to wear, then we'll go to Daddy Joe's cabin and get showered. I'm pretty sure that Lou and Judy are still on the Auxiliary Bridge so there won't be anyone there." Vincent said as he led the way to the turbo lift.

"Vincent, I appreciate your courtesy. I realize that you were ordered to accompany us during our time on your ship. But to offer the use of your own clothing goes beyond that duty. Thank you." Tyce said quietly.

"Deflector Control." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Tyce and said, "Friends share stuff. You and Audge are both my friends and it wouldn't matter if you two were crewmen on your ship, I'd be doing exactly the same thing."

Tyce smiled and said, "I have no doubt in the truth of your words."

The turbo lift doors opened, as Audge said, "Thank you for including me in your declaration of friendship. I do not understand why it is so, but I know that you are sincere."

Vincent led the way to Deflector Control as he said, "Boy, you guys sure are serious about this stuff."

Tyce nodded at the statement as the trio walked into Deflector Control.

* * * * *

"Hey Darin, would you mind if we borrow some of your clothes for Audge? His stuff is a little torn up from the battle." Vincent asked casually.

"Help yourself. My bag is in the storage bin just inside the door. My name is on the tag on the handle." Darin said as he glanced away from his console for a moment.

"Thanks." Vincent said happily as he turned to lead the way into the supply room.

"Vincent, aren't you going to introduce me?" Joe asked from beside Thaelan at the main console.

Vincent giggled, then said, "Daddy Joe, this is 'The Holy One' of the Okudai and his protector, Audge. Guys, this is Lieutenant Joe Bowers, he's kinda like my father."

"A pleasure, you must be very proud of Vincent." Tyce said reverently as he bowed slightly to Joe.

"A little more every day. It's a pleasure to meet both of you." Joe said as he respectfully returned the bow.

"The guys need to get cleaned up before dinner. I'm just going to get them some clothes, then we're going up to the cabin to use the shower." Vincent said quickly.

"I think that if you check with Commander M'Butu, you'll find that he's arranged for our guests to have their own quarters while they're staying with us." Joe said seriously.

"Oh. Um, okay. I didn't think of that." Vincent sputtered.

Joe chuckled, then said, "Why don't you get their clothes together while I find out where their cabin is?"

"Thanks Daddy Joe. We'll be right back." Vincent said happily and hurried into the supply room.

Tyce and Audge followed more slowly, both enjoying the scene of family caring before them.

* * * * *

After finding some casual pants and a pull over knit shirt for Audge, Vincent began to look through his own things.

"What do you think of these?" Vincent asked as he pulled out a pair of black slacks and a mint green button up shirt for Tyce's inspection.

Tyce smiled and said, "They will be fine."

Vincent folded the clothes, then sat them on top of a storage bin so he could gather under garments to go with them.

Tyce slowly walked closer to Vincent and quietly whispered, "Vincent?"

As Vincent turned at the sound, Tyce closed the distance between them and pulled Vincent into a firm hug.

Vincent smiled at the action and responded by putting his arms around Tyce.

After a moment of hugging, Tyce moved in and gave Vincent a full kiss on the mouth while his hands drifted down to Vincent's ass.

In a heartbeat, ice flowed through Vincent's veins and he broke out of the embrace.

Tyce looked at Vincent with confusion at the move.

"You... you tried to..." Vincent said in an increasing voice as rage began to fill his eyes.

Audge moved to Tyce's side in a protective gesture.

"I do not understand. We are friends." Tyce said with confusion as he took a step toward Vincent.

"Stay away from me..." Vincent said in a barely contained scream.

"Is something wrong?" Joe asked as he hurried into the supply room.

"He kissed me." Vincent said in a growl as he pointed.

Joe walked to Vincent's side and gently put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" Vincent warned as he staggered a few steps back.

"Did I do something improper?" Tyce asked quietly.

"I don't know. As soon as we can get Vincent calmed down, we'll sort this out." Joe said in thought.

Vincent saw the look of confusion in Tyce's eyes, the look of warning in Audge's and the concern in Joe's.

It was Joe's concern for him that finally broke the rage and Vincent closed his eyes and took in a trembling breath as he tried to regain control.

"Okay. I think he's past it now. Would you tell me what happened?" Joe asked quietly.

"Vincent has stated that he is my friend. I simply wished to give physical expression to our emotional closeness." Tyce said reasonably.

"But I'm married." Vincent snapped.

"I am male." Tyce responded quietly.

Vincent looked at Tyce with confusion as Joe said, "We don't have much information about the customs of your people. Could you explain why you being male makes a difference?"

Tyce thought for a moment, then said, "Vincent is married to a woman. She is his mate and the only one to satisfy his chi. But to maintain balance he must also satisfy his ieb. I sought to express my friendship for Vincent and help to satisfy his ieb."

"My what?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"I think we need to define some terms here Holy One. What is chi?" Joe asked carefully.

"Chi is the love for the opposing gender." Tyce said carefully.

"So that means ieb is the love for ones own gender." Joe said quietly.

"Correct. To have both satisfied brings balance and harmony to ones life." Tyce said seriously.

"Stop! Don't go in there!" was heard from Deflector Control.

T'Lani walked into the room with a phaser raised.

"Husband. I sensed an attack upon you. Do you require assistance?" T'Lani asked as she held the phaser before her.

Vincent was in shock for a moment, then quickly said, "No. I'm fine. Tyce just... I mean, the Holy One..."

"The people of Okuda have a different philosophy about marriage and relationships. The Holy One was trying to express his feelings of friendship in a very normal and natural way for him, but by our standards, it seemed to Vincent that he was being attacked." Joe said carefully.

"Is this correct Husband?" T'Lani asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I guess on Okuda, married people have sex with their friends or something." Vincent said as he walked to T'Lani's side.

T'Lani lowered her phaser, then pulled Vincent into a one armed hug.

Tyce felt like he needed to explain and said, "Every person has the chi and the ieb. They are the forces that draw us to form relationships with those around us. When a person marries, they dedicate their chi or ieb to their partner. But the opposing force must also be satisfied or it will bring disruption and eventual ruin to the relationship."

"So if a man gets married to a woman, he's supposed to have sex with other men?" Joe asked carefully.

"Only with his closest friends or his wife's brother if that is more convenient." Tyce said seriously.

"I see. Well, we do it differently. When a man marries a woman, he takes a vow to be only with her for the rest of his life." Joe said in an informative tone.

"But how can this be? The imbalance would cause chaos." Tyce said speculatively.

"I don't understand what you mean." Joe said cautiously.

"To satisfy only the chi leaves the ieb to grow and become an increasing distraction. Making such a vow would cause even the thought of satisfying the ieb to be coupled to guilt. And if the ieb were indulged, then the marriage vow would be broken. I can see no good coming from this arrangement." Tyce said darkly.

Joe considered the statement for a moment, then said, "You have to understand that we have different cultural customs. Over a period of millennia our people have built definitions of what it means to be married and committed in a relationship. Logically, I can see what you're saying, but I know that if I were married, I would still believe I was being unfaithful to my wife if I had sex with anyone else."

Tyce considered the words carefully, then quietly said, "Since meeting your people I have felt that the people of Okuda were primitive and backward in

comparison. Upon learning of this... attitude that you have regarding relationships, I feel that, at least in some way, we are more advanced."

Joe smiled at the statement as he said, "I think you may be right about that. Not every advancement of a civilization is an invention. Sometimes it's a philosophy."

"This may significantly change my people's view of the Federation." Tyce said in thought.

"How so?" Joe asked curiously.

"For my people to know that they would be among people who do not balance their chi and their ieb will be disconcerting to many. Some will refuse any contact based on that fact alone." Tyce said in a distant voice.

"I don't understand why." Joe said carefully.

Tyce looked Joe in the eyes and said, "It is a common belief among my people that a person who does not live in harmony is mentally unstable."

"They would think that we're all insane?" Joe asked cautiously.

"Not necessarily insane, but suffering from the stress of being imbalanced. The results of that stress could be aggressive behavior, territorialism... and in the most extreme cases, rape and murder." Tyce said seriously.

Joe's eyes went wide at the statement, then he glanced at Vincent who was still at T'Lani's side.

"My apologies Lieutenant Bowers. It is not my intent to make you feel that I believe these things of you." Tyce said quietly.

Joe turned his attention back to Tyce and smiled as he said, "I wasn't offended. Besides, I'm balanced, I'm not getting any chi or ieb."

Audge laughed at the statement, then quickly tried to hide it.

Tyce glanced at him with a fond smile, then said, "I think that means you aren't the only one."

"Holy One, would you mind very much if I asked Vincent's brother, Darin, to escort you to your cabin so you can get your showers? I have something that I would like to discuss with Vincent for a moment." Joe asked hopefully.

"That would be fine. Should we return here after our showers?" Tyce asked curiously.

"That sounds like a very good idea." Joe said with a smile.

"Um, wait." Vincent said hesitantly, then looked at T'Lani with indecision.

T'Lani nodded to him to continue.

Vincent stepped forward and looked Tyce in the eyes, then said, "I'm sorry I yelled at you like that. I really am your friend and I'm sorry if me doing that made it seem like I wasn't."

"I understand now Vincent, and your apology is accepted." Tyce said gently.

Vincent stepped forward and pulled Tyce into a gentle hug, then hesitantly started to kiss him.

Tyce responded just as gently and enjoyed the kiss.

When the kiss finally broke, Vincent looked into his eyes and said, "T'Lani said it was logical."

Tyce looked at T'Lani, then said, "Your wife is not only very protective of you, but also very wise."

Vincent smiled at the statement, then walked to stand before Audge.

"Come down here Audge, you're my friend too." Vincent said firmly.

Audge bent down a little so Vincent could pull him into a hug, then shared a brief kiss with him.

"This is a good sign for the future of all our people." Tyce said with a contented smile at Joe.

After releasing Audge from the hug, Vincent said, "Oops. I think I got too much ieb. I need to get some chi to keep everything balanced."

Tyce, Audge and Joe all smiled as Vincent hurried to T'Lani and hugged her tightly.

"Vincent, I'll be right back." Joe said, then led Tyce and Audge out of the room.

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Joe walked back into the supply room to find Vincent and T'Lani exactly as he had left them.

"Vincent, there's something that I think you need to know and now seems to be a good time to tell you." Joe said seriously.

"Would you prefer that I leave you alone for this discussion?" T'Lani asked calmly.

"No T'Lani. I think it would be best if you were here." Joe said as he considered what he was going to say.

"That probably means it's something really serious." Vincent said as he renewed his hug with T'Lani.

"Vincent. I learned some things about your father that... well, it just seems right that you should know now." Joe said hesitantly.

"My dad? What is it?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Did you ever wonder why your dad hated Lawrence so much?" Joe asked quietly.

"Not really. He hated Lawrence because he's gay." Vincent said honestly.

Joe shook his head slowly, not disagreeing with Vincent's answer, but trying to find another way to approach the subject.

"Lieutenant Bowers, would it not be best to simply say what you need to say, then answer whatever questions result?" T'Lani asked simply.

Joe's eyebrows went up in surprise at the suggestion, then he said, "Thank you T'Lani. That probably would work best. And please call me Joe while we're conducting family business."

"Of course." T'Lani said and inclined her head slightly in a show of respect.

"Well then. Vincent, your father was attracted to Lawrence. He couldn't express his feelings the way he wanted to so he expressed them as hate." Joe said frankly.

Vincent thought about the statement for a moment, then asked, "You're telling me this because of the chi ieb thing, aren't you?"

"That's what made me think about telling you now." Joe said honestly.

Vincent nodded as he thought.

"Please allow me to verify my understanding. Vincent's biological father was sexually attracted to Vincent's brother, your son Lawrence. Since his marriage vows forbade any expression of his sexual desire, he instead abused the child?" T'Lani asked slowly.

"Well, yes and no. I think Winters had other same-sex urges before he fixated on Lawrence. And not only his marriage vows, but probably his upbringing contributed to the way things worked out. He might have even been sexually abused himself at some point." Joe said carefully.

"Wait. Wait. You're saying that my dad was hot for Lawrence. But because he couldn't have sex with him, he hurt him instead?" Vincent asked seriously.

"No, I'm saying that because of the way he was raised and the things he believed, that he couldn't admit to himself that he had sexual feelings for any other male. He was taught to hate gay people, and when he started having latent homosexual urges, he didn't have any healthy way of dealing with them. So eventually his frustration and hatred developed into his abuse of Lawrence." Joe said in thought.

"Huh?" Vincent asked in quiet confusion.

"Vincent, it's a very difficult concept to explain and I don't even know if I understand it all. I just felt that I should tell you this now so you could deal with it in the context of the chi and the ieb. I can't think of a better way to explain what was probably going through your father's mind." Joe said frankly.

"I will help Vincent to process this new information." T'Lani said seriously.

"Thank you T'Lani, but considering what Vincent just did, I think he understands. Even if it isn't entirely on a conscious level." Joe said with a smile at Vincent.

"What did I do?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Joe squatted down to look Vincent in the eyes and said, "You overcame a lifetime of conditioning that was meant to make you hate anyone who was different from you. Without any encouragement from me, you made the choice to forgive the Holy One for the misunderstanding and put your friendship with him first. I'm so proud of you Vincent."

Vincent took a step forward and pulled Joe into a firm hug.

"My husband has chosen well to place his trust in you." T'Lani said frankly.

Joe gave Vincent one final squeeze of the hug, then stood and said, "I'd have to say the same thing about his choosing to marry you."

T'Lani inclined her head in acceptance of the compliment.

"I think I'll leave you two alone for a few minutes. I left Thaelan running Deflector Control by himself." Joe said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks for telling me all that stuff, I love you." Vincent said as he walked to T'Lani's side.

"I love you to Champ." Joe said, then walked out the door.

* * * * *

As Darin, Tyce and Audge walked down the catwalk, Darin quietly asked, "When I take you to your cabin would you like me to wait for you to finish or would you rather that I left you alone? Oh... or you could call me and I could come back if that's what you want."

"If you have other duties to perform we could call when we are finished if you will instruct us in the use of your comm devices." Tyce said calmly.

"Oh no. I don't have any other duties right now. I just wanted you to be comfortable." Darin said in a rush then stepped forward as the turbo lift doors opened.

Tyce smiled at Darin's flustered nature and said, "I think it would be good to get to know the brother of my friend Vincent."

"Deck D." Darin said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Tyce and said, "Thank you Holy One. So far all of Vincent's friends have turned out to be really good people."

"Please call me Tyce, and this is Audge." Tyce said gently.

"Oh, thank you Tyce. It's nice to meet you both. I'm Darin." he said, somewhat shyly.

"Darin, I am curious to know something about your culture." Tyce said slowly.

"Sure. Ask me anything you want." Darin said with a warm smile.

"Vincent is a child, yet he has the responsibilities and respect of an adult. I am curious to know if it is true of others of your people or if Vincent is somehow unique." Tyce said carefully.

Darin chuckled as they stepped off the lift, then gestured to a door a few feet away.

Tyce and Audge followed Darin for the few steps to the doorway, then into the cabin.

"Commander M'Butu wanted to know if you would prefer for Audge to have separate quarters or if you would rather have him in here with you." Darin said seriously as they entered into a comfortable living area.

"I would prefer to have him share quarters with me. I feel safe with him nearby." Tyce said as he looked around.

Darin led the way into the bedroom and said, "Then I'll have another bed brought in before tonight."

"I would not be opposed to sharing this bed with Audge. There is more than enough room." Tyce said seriously.

"Well, I'll have another bed brought in anyway. You two can decide if you want to use it or not." Darin said with a grin.

Tyce smiled at the statement as he nodded his agreement.

"The shower and laundry fresher are in here." Darin said as he walked into the bathroom.

"Audge, would you go first so I may have some time to speak with Darin?" Tyce asked simply.

"Yes Holy... Tyce. But I may have difficulty with..." Audge trailed off as he looked at his cast.

"Oh, I can help you with that." Darin said quickly.

Audge hesitantly nodded. Before he knew what was happening, Darin was helping him to remove his shirt.

"If you'll just hold still, I'll pull the sleeve over your cast." Darin said in concentration.

"Thank you Darin. You are most kind." Audge said quietly.

Darin smiled as he worked the tight material over the cast.

"There. Do you think you'll need help with anything else?" Darin asked curiously.

Audge looked down at himself, then said, "I don't think so."

"Well, if you have any problem at all, we'll be in the living room. Just call for me and I'll come in and help you." Darin said with assurance.

"Thank you. I will." Audge said with a genuine smile.

Tyce gave Audge a quick, fond smile, then walked with Darin out of the room.

* * * * *

"Let's see. You wanted to know if Vincent is unique." Darin said as he led the way through the bedroom and into the living area.

"I get the sense that he is unique in many ways, but I am curious to know if others of his age have made similar achievements." Tyce said carefully.

Darin gestured for Tyce to sit with him on the couches in the living area, then said, "If you would have asked me a few weeks ago I would have said no. But since I've met Vincent, I've learned about some things that I wouldn't have believed before."

"What things?" Tyce asked curiously as he shifted to be comfortable on the couch.

"Well, let's see. I guess it starts with Vincent's official title. He is Crewman Vincent Winters, Son of Clan Short of the House of Surak of Vulcan." Darin said carefully.

"He has mentioned that he has adopted the Vulcan culture as his own, though I do not understand why it is so." Tyce said seriously.

"I don't understand everything about that either. I'll do my best to tell you his story from the start, at least as much as I know of it." Darin said, then looked to Tyce for approval.

After receiving it, Darin continued, "Vincent's parents died recently. That's when he met Joe, his half-brother's father."

"Half-brother?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yes. Vincent and Lawrence had the same mother, but different fathers. Vincent and Joe aren't related by blood, but... well, that doesn't matter. Joe is Vincent's dad no matter how you look at it." Darin finished with a smile.

Tyce nodded that he agreed.

"Well anyway, I guess Joe and Vincent talked to some people, some pretty high ranking people, and they came up with the plan for Vincent to be adopted by Clan Short..."

"Excuse me, but what is Clan Short?" Tyce asked curiously.

Darin smiled, then said, "That's what I wondered. I did a little research and found out that it's a Vulcan sub-clan of the house of Surak. Clan Short was formed for the purpose of helping abused and neglected children. The strange thing is that Clan Short is made up of children."

"Children like Vincent?" Tyce asked curiously.

"That's right. According to the stories that I've read, the members of Clan Short have done things that could only be classified as miracles if anyone

else had done them. They've rescued children from some of the most horrible and disgusting things that you could ever imagine. They have the support of Vulcan, Starfleet and the Federation. In fact, it's thanks to them that the Federation's Safe Haven Act has been implemented on nearly every world in the United Federation of Planets." Darin finished happily.

"Excuse me, what is the Safe Haven Act?" Tyce asked curiously.

"It's a piece of legislation that basically says that if a child is in danger, certain people have the authority to step in and protect the child even if other laws might normally prevent it. By using the Safe Haven Act, Clan Short can rescue a child in trouble and take him to a safe place where he'll never be hurt again. His family, the courts or even the government officials can't override the protection of Safe Haven." Darin said firmly.

"Would it be possible for me to see a copy of the Safe Haven Act. I would like to review it and see if it would be of benefit to my people." Tyce said carefully.

"Sure, I'll make sure you get a copy. Anyway, back to Vincent. When we left Earth on this mission, we received a distress call from the Kimber IV colony. They had a reactor that was leaking radiation and about to go critical. Vincent was the only one small enough to fit through the tunnels to get to the reactor. Well, he did that and saved a few hundred lives. I don't really understand a lot about Vulcan traditions, but since Vincent did something so brave, by Vulcan law he earned his adulthood. So even though he's still a child, legally he's an adult." Darin said carefully.

"I would like to hear more of this incident." Tyce said slowly.

"Well, I doubt that Vincent will talk to you about it too much, but if you ask Joe, I'm sure he'll tell you whatever you want to know." Darin said with a smile.

"He is a proud father, and rightfully so." Tyce said with a grin.

"Okay, so Vincent's an adult. Um, I guess the next thing was his promotion. Because of all the lives he saved and some other stuff that he did, he was promoted by two ranks, so now he's a Petty Officer second class. I'd guess that he outranks around two hundred people on this ship."

"I didn't realize that he had that much authority." Tyce said with surprise.

"Well, it's different for the enlisted ranks. Officers actually have the authority, Vincent's rank is more of a sign to those around him that he is competent in his job and that he is trusted by the officers to give instruction in his area of expertise. Although he would technically outrank

a new crewman who just boarded the ship, chances are that he would be working along side that crewman and offering advice. But it's still quite an achievement."

"Vincent explained that his family elders chose his wife for him. How do you feel about that custom?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Well, it worked out fine for Vincent. But I'm not sure that the elders of every family could do as good a job as Grandfather Sarek did. I could see myself having difficulty giving up that control over something so important in my life, but at the same time, I think that I would probably trust Grandfather Sarek's judgment better than my own." Darin said carefully.

"Excuse me, but I am having difficulty." Audge said as just his eyes peeked around the edge of the bedroom door.

"Please excuse me Tyce. I'll be right back. "Darin said courteously and walked to the bedroom door.

* * * * *

"Is everything alright?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yes. Audge was able to get undressed, but then he didn't know how to use the laundry fresher or the sonic shower. When you go in, I'll show you how to use everything before you get started." Darin said calmly.

"These quarters are quite comfortable. Do you have accommodations like this?" Tyce asked curiously.

Darin chuckled, then said, "Not quite. These are senior officer's quarters. I'm sleeping in the supply room of Deflector Control right now. But once we've delivered the colonists to their new home, Vincent and I will be sharing a cabin that is smaller than this living room."

"I see. Are the accommodations you share uncomfortably small?" Tyce asked with concern.

"Actually no. I was surprised at how small they were when I first arrived on board. But after staying there one night I was comfortable. I think sharing the room with Vincent made that possible. Rather than just being a place to sleep, it's the room I share with my brother." Darin said peacefully.

"Joe also refers to you as Vincent's brother, yet from the story you have told me about him, I suspect that it is an honorary title and not a circumstance of his birth." Tyce said carefully.

"That's right. Vincent and I met for the first time when we came on board. We were assigned to share quarters. I was an only child and always wanted a brother. Vincent was raised with his older brother Lawrence. When we found ourselves together in this new situation, we quickly became friends and before long, became as close as brothers. Joe has accepted me as another son, just like he did for Vincent." Darin said with a happy smile.

"In the days before I became the Holy One, I too wanted a brother. I was like you, an only child. But now that I am the Holy One, it is not possible for me to have such a relationship." Tyce said with regret.

"Why not?" Darin asked curiously.

"Because my duties preclude me from forming such relationships." Tyce said quietly.

"I bet that Audge would be your brother. He obviously admires you. I think that you could have the same type of relationship with him that I have with Vincent if that's what you both wanted." Darin said with a gentle smile.

Tyce shook his head and said, "Audge sees me as the Holy One, just as all my people do. I don't think there is any way that he could see beyond my title... such is my destiny."

"Only if you let it be." Darin said with certainty.

Tyce looked at him curiously.

"When I was assigned to the *Yorktown*, it was a mistake... well, actually it was a cruel joke. When I realized what happened I felt a lot like you do now. I felt like it was already a foregone conclusion that I would be decommissioned and sent back to Earth. But Vincent helped me and encouraged me so I didn't accept what I thought was fate. He kept me moving toward the outcome I wanted. Now I'm here. I'm a full ensign, not by accident or as part of a joke, but because I proved my abilities. Vincent has helped me understand a lot of things, but one of the most important things I've learned is that you're only doomed to your fate when you don't fight against it." Darin said passionately.

Tyce thought about the words for a moment, then smiled as he said, "The tone of your voice was very much like Vincent's when you said that. I can see that you really are brothers."

Darin giggled and said, "You aren't the first person to tell me that."

"Excuse me, do you think you could help me get this shirt on?" Audge asked from the bedroom doorway.

"Sure. I'll be right there." Darin said happily and hurried to Audge's side.

Tyce remained seated and watched through the bedroom door as Darin and Audge worked together to get the sleeve of the shirt over his cast.

* * * * *

"T'Lani has to get back to work." Vincent said with regret as he walked away from the supply room.

"How are you doing Champ?" Joe asked quietly from station one.

"I'm fine. Thanks for letting us have a few minutes alone. T'Lani helped explain some of what you were talking about." Vincent said as he walked slowly to Joe's side.

"Come here." Joe said warmly and pulled Vincent into a hug.

"Oh jeeze. I just got my chi and my ieb balanced." Vincent whined playfully.

Joe snuggled Vincent against his side, then said, "As I understand the concepts of chi and ieb, they are the forces of sexual attraction that people feel. What I feel for you is nothing like that. I'm sure if you ask the Holy One, he will explain the feeling a father has for his son isn't an example of ieb."

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "I know that. I was just playing. Why do you have to be so serious about this stuff?"

"I guess it's because I want to be sure that you understand as many things as possible to prevent a repeat of what happened this afternoon with the Holy One." Joe said frankly.

Vincent reluctantly nodded, then said, "He really freaked me out when he did that. It was like..."

"Like what?" Joe asked curiously.

"Um... This morning when Thaelan and I were working out, something happened." Vincent said slowly.

"Something?" Joe asked cautiously, concerned by Vincent's tone.

"Yeah. I um... got mad. I mean... I don't know how to explain it really..." Vincent trailed off helplessly.

"Vincent was consumed by rage." Thaelan said from the main console.

Joe and Vincent both turned to Thaelan with surprise.

"Andorians have excellent hearing. As I was saying, when Vincent began today's exercise, he became enraged and temporarily lost the ability to reason." Thaelan said seriously.

"Is that right?" Joe asked as he looked at Vincent with concern.

"Yeah. And I kinda got the same feeling when Tyce kissed me." Vincent said in a small voice.

"If I had known that, I wouldn't have told you about your father today. I'm sorry Vincent." Joe said as he renewed his hug.

"It's okay. I'm glad you told me that stuff. But what I wanted to tell you is that I'm um, going to ask to talk to a counselor about it so maybe we can figure out how to keep it from happening some more." Vincent said uncertainly.

"I think that's an excellent idea. If you want, I can make those arrangements for you." Joe said quietly.

"No. I'll take care of it myself when we get Tyce back to his home. I don't know when I'll have time to see a counselor while he's on the ship." Vincent said as he turned to look Joe in the eyes.

"You've got it Champ. Just let me know if there's anything that I can do to help you." Joe said with a gentle smile.

"I think I'll be able to handle it. Thaelan says that it's not a really big problem yet, so if I go to the counselor and ask for help I should be able to take care of it." Vincent said with a smile.

"I think he's right. Just remember that you don't have to do it all by yourself. If you ever need to talk or just need a hug, you've got your whole family that you can depend on." Joe said warmly.

"I'll remember." Vincent said happily and hugged tightly to Joe's side.

"While the Holy One is getting his shower, would you like to run some status checks on two and three for me?" Joe asked casually from the hug.

"Sure." Vincent said gently, then moved to station two.

* * * * *

Darin walked into the living room to find Audge looking around curiously.

"I showed Tyce how to operate the sonic shower controls and how to start the fresher." Darin said casually as he took his seat.

"Thank you for attending to us. Your people have been very kind." Audge said quietly.

Darin smiled and said, "I'm just glad to be able to do something to help."

Audge nodded his understanding of the feeling.

"You look worried. Do you want to talk about it?" Darin asked with concern.

"You would have no more influence over the situation than I do." Audge said distantly.

"I may not be able to do anything to change whatever it is, but talking about it might make you feel better." Darin said casually.

Audge looked into Darin's eyes and said, "I am not worthy of the position I have been given."

Darin chuckled at the statement.

Audge looked at him curiously.

Darin smiled and tried to explain, "While you were showering, I was just telling Tyce that I wasn't worthy of the position that I was given when I came onto the *Yorktown*."

Audge seemed surprised by the statement.

"Audge. Sometimes in life you work hard and are rewarded in exactly the way that you expect. But other times opportunities are presented to you. When that happens, you have the choice to either reject those opportunities because you feel you don't deserve them, or you can accept them and do your best to live up to the challenges you have been given." Darin said carefully.

"But I have been the least of the followers of 'The Holy One'. I have not been educated by the priesthood. I have never been in a position to give a proper tribute or serve in any meaningful way. So many have devoted their lives to his service and deserve the opportunity that I have been given." Audge said quietly.

"Audge. Sometimes things just happen. Sometimes it a horrible accident and sometimes it's your dream job being handed to you. It's not your fault, you have no control over it, you don't deserve it and it still just happens. But what you do have control of is how you deal with it." Darin said firmly.

Audge nodded slowly in thought.

"And if you're interested in my opinion, I think I can explain why you are actually more qualified than most to be Tyce's protector." Darin said cautiously.

Audge looked at Darin with surprise, then quickly nodded.

"I'm guessing that Tyce has been surrounded by priests since he became 'The Holy One' right?" Darin asked cautiously.

"I assume so. I only saw him for the first time today." Audge said quietly.

"Then why didn't he choose them to come here with him?" Darin asked curiously.

"I do not know. The high priest, Oluf, told me that I was to protect 'The Holy One'. He did not offer a reason." Audge said slowly.

"I think it's because Tyce doesn't need the high priest of 'The Holy One' or the most devoted follower of 'The Holy One' to be with him constantly. Being 'The Holy One' is his job. But when 'The Holy One' has come to the end of his duties for the day, Tyce needs someone who will be there for him. You're the best person to do that." Darin said seriously.

"I am?" Audge asked cautiously.

"Yes. You're coming to him as a regular person, not someone who was groomed to serve 'The Holy One'. If you choose to, you can relate to Tyce and give him someone that he can depend on when he's not doing his job. You are in a position to keep that sweet gentle person named Tyce from becoming lost in his responsibilities and duties." Darin said with passion.

"How is it that you know this?" Audge asked in wonder.

Darin smiled and said, "Because what I'm saying that you can be to Tyce is something like what I try to be for Vincent."

Audge stared past Darin in thought at the statement.

"He needs you Audge. He needs a real person in his life to keep him anchored. You can perform a very important function... provided that you don't talk yourself out of it because you feel unworthy." Darin added quietly.

The sound of movement from the bedroom caused both men to look up.

"If you say that the shower device cleaned me, I will believe you. But I much prefer a shower that uses water." Tyce said as he walked into the living area wearing a light green button up shirt and black slacks.

"There's a Jacuzzi tub in there too. After your dinner you could go in and soak in the water if you like. In fact, it's big enough for two." Darin said with a glance at Audge.

"I think that I would like to try that. Thank you Darin." Tyce said with a smile.

"Yes. If I can keep my cast from getting wet, I too would like to try it." Audge said cautiously, feeling that he might be overstepping his bounds.

Tyce looked at Audge with surprise for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Let's plan on doing that after dinner then. I'm sure Vincent wouldn't mind some time to do things by himself this evening."

"Most likely he will spend that time with his wife. They take an hour or so after their duty shifts each night to spend together." Darin said warmly.

"A very good arrangement. It is the foundation of a lasting union." Tyce said sagely.

"I guess since you're both finished, we should get back down to Deflector Control so you guys can go to dinner." Darin said frankly.

"Before we do that, would it be possible to contact the *Dorsa* so that I may speak to my high priest, Oluf?" Tyce asked seriously.

"Of course. If you'll have a seat at the desk, there is a comm unit that you can use. Just press the main comm button and tell whoever is on duty who you want to speak with and they'll take care of it for you." Darin said instructively.

"Thank you Darin. It will be helpful to be able to establish communications on my own." Tyce said as he moved to the desk.

After pressing the main comm button, the screen came to life to show an attractive woman.

"*Communications*." The woman said professionally.

"This is 'The Holy One' of the Okudai. Could you contact the *Dorsa* and connect me with the high priest Oluf?" Tyce asked carefully.

"Of course Holy One. I will have him for you in just a moment." The communications worker said respectfully, then the screen went dark.

Tyce smiled with accomplishment at being able to make the call without any complications, then turned his attention back to the console screen as it came back on.

"'Holy One'. It is so good to see that you are well. I was becoming concerned." Oluf said in relief.

"I am quite well Oluf. There is a dinner planned this evening and I have asked that you be invited to attend. Please arrange to transport to this ship and meet with me at your earliest convenience so I may speak with you about some new developments before the dinner." Tyce said calmly.

"Of course Holy One... may I also bring your formal robes?" Oluf asked as he looked at the unusual shirt that Tyce was wearing.

"No. but you may bring one or two of my regular robes. I will be wearing this clothing to the dinner. I will explain when you arrive." Tyce said carefully.

"As you say, Holy One." Oluf said as he bowed reverently.

"One other thing." Tyce said quickly before Oluf disconnected the transmission.

"Yes?" Oluf asked quickly.

"Please arrange for additional clothing to be provided for Audge, the man who came with me to protect me. I'm sure if you ask Captain Marr, he can find where Audge's clothing is stored." Tyce said, then glanced away from the screen to give Audge a quick smile.

"I will see to it 'Holy One'. I will join you as soon as I am able." Oluf said in an almost panicked voice.

"I will be in Deflector Control when you arrive." Tyce said seriously.

"Deflector Control. I will remember." Oluf said quickly.

"I will see you soon. Good bye Oluf." Tyce said with a gentle smile.

"Good bye 'Holy One'." Oluf said and bowed respectfully.

Tyce cautiously pressed the comm button again and the screen went dark.

"You handled that like you've been doing it all your life." Darin said with a smile.

"Although your Federation technology is different from ours, it operates fundamentally the same way. We had better go or Oluf will be in Deflector Control before we are." Tyce said with a grin.

"Tyce." Audge said cautiously.

Tyce turned to look at Audge with question.

"Your hair is somewhat disheveled. Would you like me to help you with it before we go?" Audge asked cautiously as he looked at Tyce's long flowing black hair.

"Yes, thank you. I've become accustomed to someone doing it for me and forgot." Tyce said timidly.

"The things you need should be in the top drawer of the dresser in the bedroom." Darin said quickly.

"You can come with us if you like." Tyce said as he walked toward the bedroom.

"No. Thank you. I think I'll let Audge handle this himself." Darin said with a smile at the pair.

* * * * *

"'Holy One'!" Oluf said in relief as he rushed into Deflector Control carrying a bundle of clothing.

"It is good to see you Oluf. Lieutenant Bowers, would you mind if I made use of your storage room to speak with Oluf privately for a moment?" Tyce asked casually.

"You're welcomed to use the storage room if you like. But I'm sure you could use one of the conference rooms where you would be more comfortable." Joe said quickly.

"There is no need. What I have to say won't take that long." Tyce said with a smile, then turned to Oluf and said, "Oluf, please come this way."

Audge watched cautiously, not knowing if he should stay or go. A glance from Tyce told him all he needed to know and he quickly followed the pair into the storage room.

* * * * *

"'Holy One', it is improper for you to be in this... workplace. I was led to believe that you would be treated as a dignitary among these Federation people." Oluf said in despair.

"Oluf. I am here because I choose to be here." Tyce said simply.

"But 'The Holy One' should not be subject to the trivialities of starship operations. You should be surrounded only by the most important and influential of their people." Oluf said desperately.

"Oluf. I have been sequestered from our own people since I became the Holy One. Austir kept counsel with only the heads of church and government for most of his life. The result has been that 'The Holy One' has lost touch with the common man. I'm ashamed to say that I know more about the day to day life of a Federation citizen than I do of my own people. It is going to change, starting now." Tyce said firmly.

"But it isn't proper for 'The Holy..." Oluf began to say.

"Oluf. That was a statement. Not a question. I will start with you. Up to now, you have fulfilled your duties as you have understood them. You have served me well as you have sought to protect me from unpleasantness and helped me to maintain my dignified bearing despite my young age. As of now, your first duty to me is to tell me the complete and honest truth about what is happening with our government and our people." Tyce said seriously

'"Holy One', I don't understand what you mean." Oluf said in astonishment.

"Have you served in this way for so long that you've forgotten what the truth is?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"No. But I don't understand what you are asking of me." Oluf said, and a note of helplessness could be heard in his voice.

"I am asking you to stop protecting me from the information that you feel is too unpleasant for me to know. I cannot make good decisions for my followers if I do not have accurate information. If you are unable to be honest and truthful with me, I will find someone who is able." Tyce said as he looked Oluf in the eyes.

"Yes... yes 'Holy One'. I will see that you are provided complete information." Oluf said quietly.

"Good. When we return home, I want you to make arrangements for children near my age from each colony and province to be randomly selected and brought to the capitol city to meet with me." Tyce said seriously.

"That could take some months to arrange." Oluf said hesitantly.

"Not all at once. One or two a week will be fine. I would just like to spend some time talking with them so I can get to know them and learn about their lives. How can I help to provide for their needs if I don't know what they are." Tyce finished simply.

"But... but you are 'The Holy One'." Oluf said in a disillusioned voice.

Tyce saw what was happening and said, "Yes Oluf. I am the Holy One. You, better than anyone, should know the abilities that I possess. But I am not omniscient or omnipotent. I suppose that over the last few decades that fact has been forgotten. It's time for us, all of the church, to turn our focus on the needs of our followers."

After a moment, Oluf reluctantly nodded.

Tyce considered for a moment, then reluctantly said, "I can see that your having difficulty with this. I think I may be able to ease your mind about it."

Oluf looked at Tyce with question.

After a quiet moment of concentration, Tyce slowly spread his arms and tilted his head back slightly.

A shadowy form slowly emerged from Tyce's chest and approached Oluf, who was frozen in a mix of wonder and fear.

"Oluf, my dear friend. It is good to see that you are well." The shadow said in a whispery voice.

"'H... Holy One'?" Oluf asked in fear.

There was a faint chuckle from around the room.

Audge, who had been standing silently watching, looked around and saw at least a dozen indistinct shapes throughout the room.

"All of us have used that name." the shadow said in a barely audible voice.

"But it is me that you remember. I am he who was Austir."

"Austir." Oluf said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"You need not fear me, my dear friend. I am simply here to assure you that young Tyce is doing what must be done at this time. Just as in nature, there is a time for the young to be protected and confined to the nest, but when they have grown enough, it is time for them to go out into the world to begin their own lives." Austir said softly.

Oluf nodded reluctantly.

"I was the protective parent who kept all my children sheltered and safe. Tyce will be the one to prepare them to leave the nest. Please help him my friend. All the Holy Ones who have ever been are in agreement that it is time." Austir said hopefully.

"I will Holy One. I will." Oluf promised as his tears fell.

"Remember the orchard in the springtime Oluf. That day still lives in my heart." Austir said in a whisper, then began to walked toward Tyce who was watching the scene before him sadly.

"I will Holy One. I'll never forget." Oluf said in a quiet, distant voice.

Austir gave a brief smile, then was absorbed into Tyce. One by one, the others made their way to Tyce and were also absorbed.

Audge hurried to Tyce's side and looked at him with question and concern.

Tyce smiled at his concern, then turned his attention to Oluf.

"Do you see now Oluf? I carry them with me. They advise me and offer their different points of view. I'm not a child who wants to make changes just to see things change. I am 'The Holy One' and I am clearing the path for the new age."

Chapter 24

"Lieutenant Bowers, do you know how long it will be before the dinner will begin?" Tyce asked seriously as he walked with Oluf and Audge out of the supply room.

"Let me check." Joe said, then keyed in his query on the auxiliary console he had been working on.

After looking over the information, Joe said, "You have ten minutes before the people from the other ships are scheduled to transport over. The dinner will begin in just over half an hour."

Tyce nodded at the information then noticed Vincent sitting at station two looking at him cautiously.

"If you can spare Crewman Winters, we could proceed to the transporter room to await our guests." Tyce said formally.

"Vincent was just doing a few system checks for me. He's free to go whenever you're ready." Joe said with a gentle smile at Tyce.

Vincent quickly signed off his station, then walked to Tyce's side.

"Darin, I would like to thank you again for your assistance this afternoon. You were very helpful." Tyce said with formal regality.

"It was my pleasure Holy One. If I can do anything else to help, all you have to do is ask." Darin said gently.

Tyce gave a single nod, then walked toward the door.

Audge walked on his right and Vincent on his left.

Oluf watched the trio walking away for a moment, then hurried to follow.

* * * * *

"Um, Tyce. Is everything okay? You know, between us?" Vincent asked with concern.

Tyce looked at the hesitant expression in Vincent's eyes and smiled.

"I understand the cause of the misunderstanding earlier and have accepted your apology. If anything, my admiration for you has only increased." Tyce said and gave Vincent a quick, one armed hug as they continued to walk.

"Then would it be okay if we stop somewhere before we go to the transporter room? I need to let my friends know that I won't be hanging out

with them." Vincent said carefully as the group slowly walked down the catwalk toward the turbo lift.

"Did you have a prior commitment?" Tyce asked with concern.

"No. Not really. I usually hang around with Benny, JonJon and Channing when I go off duty until T'Lani finishes her shift. I just want to let them know what's going on." Vincent said with a smile.

"Oluf, would you go to the transporter room to wait for us? If representatives from the other ships arrive before we join you, would you greet them in my stead?" Tyce asked formally.

"Yes Holy One, it would be my honor to do so." Oluf said reverently.

As the trio boarded the lift, Vincent said, "Deck J, Dorsal and Transporter room one."

"Are you sure that your friends won't be upset that you won't be joining them? You have already spent the majority of your day with me, I would not be offended if you choose to spend some time with your friends." Tyce said quietly.

"They won't mind at all. Besides, I'd like to have dinner in the officer's mess hall. I haven't done that yet." Vincent said with a grin.

Tyce smiled at the expression, then the turbo lift doors opened.

"Oluf, when you get off the turbo lift turn left, turn right at the first hallway then just walk straight ahead and the transporter room will be the first door on your left." Vincent said as Tyce and Audge stepped off the lift.

"Thank you Crewman Winters." Oluf said quietly.

Vincent gave him a brief smile, then hurried off the lift.

* * * * *

Tyce, Vincent and Audge could hear singing coming from behind the closed doors on the other side of the room.

"Your friends sound very happy." Tyce said cautiously.

"They are. But usually not this happy, let's see what's going on." Vincent said as he walked in front of the group to open the door.

* * * * *

The singing abruptly stopped as the door to the dorsal observation lounge opened. Vincent was the first to walk in and was barely able to contain his laughter at what he saw.

Channing, Benny and JonJon were all sitting on Channing's cot wearing triangular white paper hats and each one had a little black mustache painted on.

"What are you..." Vincent began to ask, then shook his head and said, "Never mind. I really don't want to know."

Fizgig poked his head from behind JonJon to reveal that he was wearing a little paper hat and had the fur above his mouth painted black in a sort of mustache.

Tyce broke into laughter at the sight.

He was quickly joined by Vincent and Audge.

"We were just..." Channing began to say.

"It's okay Channing. I just wanted to let you guys know that I'm going to be having dinner with these guys in the officer's mess hall today. I didn't want you to be down here waiting on me to show up." Vincent said as he tried to get his chuckles under control.

"Oh. Thanks Vincent. Is this the Holy One that JonJon was telling us about?" Channing asked quietly as he tried to discretely take off the paper hat.

"Yep. And this is Audge, the guy who protects him." Vincent said as he gestured toward the man with a cast.

"Please do not worry. I think it is good that you are able to have such fanciful fun. We will be leaving now so you may continue." Tyce said with a peaceful smile.

"You don't have to go, you're welcomed to join us." Benny said quickly.

"They're having a formal dinner with some people from the other ships in a few minutes so we need to go. But maybe we'll be able to play with you guys some other time." Vincent said with a grin.

"Yeah. Okay." Channing said shyly.

Vincent chuckled at Channing's reaction, then said, "Come on guys. Let's get to the transporter room before anyone shows up."

Tyce nodded, then said, "It was a pleasure to meet all of you. I truly hope that we will have the chance to play before it is my time to leave."

"Yeah, that'd be great." Benny said with an honest smile.

Tyce nodded, then walked to follow Vincent and Audge out of the room.

* * * * *

"I like your friends Vincent. They remind me of how I was before I was given the honor of being the Holy One." Tyce said distantly.

"Yeah. They're great. After working all day, Benny and JonJon remind me how to be a kid. And I guess having Channing with us makes me feel like it's okay to be a Crewman and still act like a kid now and then." Vincent said introspectively.

Tyce thought about the statement, then quietly said, "I believe that if I were able to achieve such a friendship, it would improve my life greatly."

"You already have." Vincent said with a smile as he stepped onto the turbo lift.

Tyce looked at Vincent curiously.

"Transporter room one." Vincent said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Tyce and said, "I'm your friend Tyce. Even after we get you home, you can always call to talk to me or even to just make a funny face at me if you want."

Tyce laughed at the thought, then said, "Yes. I believe I would like to do that."

"And I know that if you get the chance, Benny and JonJon will be your friends too. Once their colony is set up, you can talk to them every day if you want to." Vincent said seriously.

The turbo lift doors opened and Vincent led the way.

"I hope it is to be so." Tyce said distantly.

"Make it so." Vincent said as he turned at the first junction.

Tyce chuckled and said, "You make everything sound so simple and easily achieved."

"No. It's not always easy, but things are usually pretty simple if you can just forget about the things that don't matter and the things you can't change." Vincent said frankly, then stopped just short of a door.

Tyce looked at the door, then down at himself to see if the foreign clothes he was wearing were still neat.

"Please allow me." Audge said quietly.

Tyce turned to face him and allowed Audge to straighten his collar and fuss with his hair for a moment.

"Please allow me as well." Tyce said with a grin.

Audge looked at him with surprise, then held still as Tyce straightened his collar.

Vincent smiled at the scene, then when everyone was ready, he stepped toward the door and stood aside as it opened, allowing Tyce and Audge to precede him into the room.

* * * * *

"Welcome Holy One, our first guests have just signaled that they're ready for transport." Captain Byrne said formally.

"Thank you Captain. Please proceed." Tyce said calmly.

Captain Byrne gave a nod to the transporter technician, then the sound of the transporter filled the room.

When the shimmering sparkles had cleared, there was a man and a young boy, about Tyce and Vincent's age, standing beside him.

"Welcome to the Yorktown Captain Traiel. Would you introduce us to your companion?" Captain Byrne said with a friendly smile directed at the young boy.

"Thank you Captain, this is my son, Tyber." Traiel said seriously.

Tyce looked distantly at the pair for a moment, then took a step closer to Audge's side.

"It's nice to meet you Tyber, if you want, you can come over here and hang around with us." Vincent said with a quick smile.

Tyce held his formal expression as he considered what he should do.

Traiel smiled at Vincent's invitation, then put a hand on his son's shoulder and urged him to step out of the transporter chamber.

Tyber hesitantly walked toward Vincent and Tyce, then suddenly stopped when Vincent put out his hand in greeting.

"I'm Crewman Winters but you can call me Vincent if you want." Vincent said with a smile.

Tyber slowly took the hand, and had a look of intense concentration as he shook it.

His eyes went wide with surprise and relief as he looked into Vincent's eyes.

"It's nice to meet you." Tyber said formally as he telepathically said, //The Holy One is in danger. Get him away from Traiel.//

Without displaying any outward sign of receiving the message, Vincent released Tyber's hand and asked the Captain, "Do we have time to show Tyber around for a few minutes before the dinner begins?"

"The other guests will be arriving shortly. I'm sure that 'The Holy One' will want to be here to greet them." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"We won't be gone long and if they come before we get back Oluf can take care of greeting them... He would be honored." Vincent said with a grin at the elderly priest.

Captain Byrne looked curiously at Vincent, then finally said, "Given the serious discussion that will most likely accompany our dinner, a few minutes of relaxation might be of benefit. Please be brief."

"Yes sir. Thank you sir." Vincent said, then gestured to the door, urging Tyber and Tyce to accompany him.

Audge looked at Tyce with question but before he could respond, Vincent said, "Come on Audge, I think you'll like this too."

* * * * *

As soon as the door to transporter room one closed, Vincent's expression changed to complete seriousness as he said, "Come on. Let's go somewhere that we can talk privately."

Tyce kept close to Audge's side and made a point of keeping Audge between him and Tyber.

"Tyber, you aren't related to that man who claims to be your father. Traiel has a son named Tyber but you're not him... you aren't even of the Okudai people." Tyce said seriously.

Tyber's eyes went wide at the declaration and he asked, "How did you know?"

"I am the Holy One. I can see the lineage of all of my people." Tyce said firmly.

A look of resignation came over the boy's face, then he quietly said, "You're right. My real name is Lehman."

Silence fell over the group as they entered the turbo lift.

"Conference room one." Vincent said firmly.

"Please explain why you are here." Tyce said seriously as he stood with his shoulder touching Audge's side.

"I'm an assassin sent to kill 'The Holy One'." Lehman said in a low, quiet voice.

The doors to the turbo lift opened, and Vincent looked to be sure no one was in the room before saying, "Come on, we can talk in here."

The group stepped off the lift and Tyce never left Audge's side.

Once everyone was seated, Tyce quietly asked, "If you're here to kill me, why are you telling me this?"

"Because the man who claims to be my father is a ruthless man who must be stopped. He believes that he has given me no choice but to obey his commands." Lehman said seriously.

"What will he do to you if you don't do what he says?" Vincent asked quietly.

Lehman gave Vincent a dark look that said without words that the consequence would be death.

Turning his attention back to Tyce, Lehman said, "I was taken from my world and forced to undergo surgical changes at his command so I could hold your shape and become the Holy One." Lehman said with concern filling his voice.

"Hold my shape?" Tyce asked curiously.

Lehman looked Tyce in the eyes as his body began to reshape itself. Within a minute he was an exact duplicate of Tyce, he was even wearing the same mint green shirt.

"My people are known as Chameloids. We are shape shifters. I'm just a child, so normally I could not hold your shape for more than a few minutes, but Traiel did something to me. His doctors cut into me and did something to make it so that I could hold your shape for as long as I wanted to."

"What do you really look like?" Vincent asked in a gentle whisper.

Lehman glanced at Vincent, then changed into a blue skinned boy with blue/black hair and yellow eyes.

When Vincent noticed Lehman's frightened expression, he gave him a quick gentle smile that help put him at ease.

"I hadn't considered that they would go to such lengths to get rid of me." Tyce said distantly.

"What do you want to do?" Vincent asked as he turned his attention back to Tyce.

"I could have Traiel detained. But if he has the support of powerful people as I suspect he does, even I as the Holy One might have difficulty proving an accusation of conspiracy. We have only Lehman's testimony that Traiel has any ill will toward me. I doubt that the word of an alien child would be considered sufficient evidence to convict him of anything." Tyce said in distant thought.

"So we need to catch him doing something." Vincent said carefully.

"It will be difficult. Lehman, what does he believe you are doing right now?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Traiel constructed many scenarios so I could be alone with the Holy One for a moment. Gartain would cause a distraction and I would assume your shape while Traiel killed you and disposed of your body. Since Crewman Winters invited us to explore the ship, I'm sure Traiel is hoping that I've found a way to complete our mission." Lehman said uncomfortably.

"What if we make him think that you did?" Vincent asked carefully.

"I could return to the transporter room and allow Traiel to believe that I am Lehman in disguise." Tyce said speculatively.

Vincent nodded and said, "And Lehman would return to the transporter room, disguised as me. How will we explain that Tyber didn't come back?"

"The excuse we were planning to use is that due to the differences in ship's time, Tyber was tired and wanted to return to his ship." Lehman said as he looked at Tyce curiously.

"I see. Do you think you could take Vincent's shape?" Tyce asked in a voice of deep concentration.

"Yes, I can do that easily. But I know nothing of him or his people. To mimic his actions I would need to touch him." Lehman said shyly.

"Why?" Vincent asked curiously.

"My people are slightly telepathic. That is how I warned you of the danger to the Holy One. If I can touch you, I can take on your mannerisms and some of your basic knowledge." Lehman said seriously.

"So Lehman could pretend to be you while you get security and let them know what's going on." Tyce said carefully.

"Would you be willing to do that?" Vincent asked Lehman with concern.

"Yes. I'll do whatever I can to stop Traiel. He believes that he can command my actions and force me to obey him. But I would rather die than be his assassin." Lehman said darkly.

Vincent nodded that he understood.

"Holy One, when Traiel looks at you, make this sign with your fingers." Lehman said and demonstrated a simple hand gesture.

Tyce carefully made the gesture and looked at Lehman with question.

"That's right. That will be the signal to Traiel that I have taken your place. Here is a communication device that he will use to contact you later to give his instructions." Lehman said and handed a small communicator to Tyce.

"You'll need to stay close to me in case he contacts me. I won't know how to answer his questions if he asks anything." Tyce said with concern.

"I doubt that you'll have to worry about that. Traiel isn't one for asking questions, he tends to believe that he knows all and likes giving orders." Lehman said darkly.

"Audge, what we are about to do is dangerous, but I believe it is necessary. It may come to a point where you are my only protection." Tyce said as he looked up at Audge who was still at his side.

"I will protect you with my life." Audge said seriously.

"So will I." Lehman said quietly.

Tyce, Audge and Vincent looked at Lehman with question.

"I have been studying what the Holy One does for nearly a year so I could impersonate you when the time comes. Your people need you. You must survive." Lehman said firmly.

The sound of a communicator beep drew everyone's attention.

"Crewman Winters." Vincent said in a slightly surprised voice. He had completely forgotten that he was carrying his communicator.

"Vincent, you have a priority one transmission." Debbie said seriously.

"Okay, I'm in conference room one. Can you put it through?" Vincent asked cautiously, it seemed wrong for him to ask a lieutenant to do something like that for him, even if it was her job.

"Yes. And good luck." Debbie said in a voice filled with concern.

Vincent walked to the view screen expecting to see Cory or Commander Dodds, he was shocked when the image on the screen was Admiral Morrow.

Vincent stood at attention and waited for the admiral to speak.

"Crewman Winters... I have a sensitive matter of some urgency to speak with you about." Admiral Morrow said frankly as he looked at the people standing behind Vincent in the room.

"Yes sir. Admiral Morrow, this is 'The Holy One' of the Okudai, his protector Audge and an assassin who was sent to kill him, his name is Lehman." Vincent said seriously.

"Assassin? Well Crewman Winters, it seems that your time on the Yorktown continues to be interesting." Admiral Morrow said in a slightly puzzled voice.

"Yes sir." Vincent said with resignation.

"Is there anything I can do to help with your... situation before we begin to deal with my reason for contacting you?" Admiral Morrow asked carefully.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Um, well. Lehman is a shape shifter. He's supposed to kill the Holy One and take his place so some bad guys can control him and get him to do the stuff they want. We were thinking that if the Holy One pretended to be Lehman pretending to be the Holy One, then we could figure out everything that they're trying to do and maybe get enough evidence so that we can find out who all the bad guys are and arrest them."

"Without knowing more of the situation, it sounds like a reasonable plan, but it could also have it's dangers. Be sure that 'The Holy One' is outfitted with a transport inhibitor and has someone nearby to protect him at all times." Admiral Morrow said carefully.

"Yes sir. I'll take care of the inhibitor and Audge will be protecting Tyce... I mean, the Holy One." Vincent said seriously.

Admiral Morrow looked away for a moment, then said, "I'm afraid that you'll be attending to other matters Crewman Winters. In fact, you will be leaving the ship within minutes."

Vincent looked at the admiral with surprise.

"Excuse me Admiral, but I may be able to help." Lehman said shyly.

Admiral Morrow looked at the blue skinned boy curiously.

"Crewman Winters, if I may touch you I can absorb enough of your memories to function as you while you are absent." Lehman said quietly.

Vincent glanced at Lehman, then looked to the Admiral and said, "Admiral Morrow, I know it's a crime to impersonate Starfleet personnel, but can Lehman take my place while I'm on this mission? I don't want him to get into trouble, but he needs to be close to the Holy One and I think this is the best way he can do it."

"Yes. And given the nature of this other matter, it will be to our advantage if no one knows that you've left the ship. I give my word that your friend won't get in any trouble for impersonating you." Admiral Morrow said seriously, then glanced away again.

Lehman carefully placed his hand to the side of Vincent's face and closed his eyes. Within the space of a few seconds, Lehman transformed himself into an exact duplicate of Vincent, uniform and all.

When Lehman opened his eyes, he had an expression that was between pain and confusion.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"That was more difficult than it should have been." Lehman said as he slowly pulled his trembling hand away from Vincent's face.

"Are you alright?" Vincent asked as he looked at Lehman and it was like looking into a mirror.

"I'll be fine, it just took more effort and concentration than it should have. Don't worry, I've absorbed what I'll need to know to impersonate you..." Lehman trailed off with distraction.

Vincent turned back to the Admiral and asked, "What do I need to do?"

"I need to speak with you privately Crewman Winters." The Admiral said, then looked at the others.

"I need to take Tyce to security, then we need to get back to the transporter room. The Captain is waiting on us." Lehman said as he glanced at Tyce.

"Take care of yourself Vincent." Tyce said with concern for his friend.

"I will if you will." Vincent said with a smile.

Tyce nodded, then reluctantly led the way to the turbo lift.

Vincent watched as the trio left the room.

* * * * *

The door to transporter room one opened and Tyce walked in alone.

All attention turned to him and he felt that he should say something.

"I seem to have misplaced my escorts." Tyce said shyly.

When Traiel looked at him, Tyce quickly made the subtle hand gesture.

Traiel tried to hide his pleased smile.

"Well as you can see, Treifa and Captain Marr have already joined us. We are awaiting Captains Gartain and Treas." Captain Byrne said seriously.

The transporter room's doors opened again to admit Lehman and Audge.

"There you are! Where did you go?" Lehman asked in a demanding tone, doing his best to behave as Vincent would.

"You will address the Holy One with proper respect." Oluf said firmly.

"Alright, but you need to put a leash on him or something. And he lost Tyber." Lehman grumbled.

"Tyber was tired and returned to his ship. He said that they operate on a different ship's time cycle." Tyce said carefully, trying to exactly remember what Lehman had told him to say.

Traiel smiled at the statement and said, "Yes, our ship's time is set with the Dingovan colony so this is the middle of the night for us."

A beeping from the transporter console drew the Captain's attention, then he said, "I understand. It appears that Captains Gartain and Treas are ready to join us. So as soon as they have transported we can all go to the dining room."

Tyce gave a conspiratorial glance at Traiel, then smiled and nodded.

* * * * *

"A Vulcan scientist named Dr. Xon, will be joining you shortly. Go with him and he will explain everything that you need to do." Admiral Morrow said frankly.

"But how? And where am I going?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"Crewman Winters, please trust in my judgment and that of Starfleet in this matter. It would take far more time than we have to explain what needs to be done. Go with Dr. Xon, do what he says and return to the Yorktown when your mission is complete. Contact me personally the moment you return." Admiral Morrow said firmly.

"Yes sir. I will sir." Vincent said as he snapped to attention.

"Crewman Winters, would you accompany me?" An unfamiliar voice said.

Vincent jumped at the sound and turned to see a Vulcan man waiting for him without expression.

"Where... where did you come from?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

The Vulcan man raised an eyebrow, but didn't give a response to the question.

"Um yeah. Okay... I'll call you as soon as I get back Admiral. Winters out." Vincent said as he walked to the Vulcan man's side.

"Good luck Vincent. Morrow out." Admiral Morrow said in a voice of concern, then disconnected the transmission.

* * * * *

"Holy One, I need to go to Deflector Control to change." Lehman said in a whisper.

"Is something wrong?" Tyce asked with concern.

"I'm not sure. But I seem to be having difficulty altering my shape. I need to change into one of Crewman Winters' uniforms or I may be trapped in this clothed form." Lehman said carefully.

"I understand. Go and if anyone asks, I will say that I sent you to do something for me." Tyce said carefully.

Lehman nodded, then hurried out of the room.

The captains of the other two ships materialized in the transport chamber and looked around the room slowly.

"Welcome aboard Captain Treas, Captain Gartain. I am Captain Leland Byrne. If you'll come with me, we will proceed to the dining room where we can all be more comfortable." Captain Byrne said with practiced diplomacy.

"Is this the Holy One?" Captain Treas asked as she looked curiously at Tyce.

"I am the Holy One." Tyce said seriously as he looked her in the eyes.

"Before we begin, I just want to know one thing. Are you really going to listen to us or are you just doing this so we'll stop attacking you?" The woman asked intensely.

Tyce considered his answer carefully, weighing the need to be truthful with the need to keep the appearance of being an imposter.

"Captain Treas, the fact that your concerns were of such importance that you were willing to face the consequences of attacking 'The Holy One' has opened my eyes... and my ears. I will listen." Tyce said, then carefully glanced at Traiel with question.

Traiel gave an almost imperceptible nod of approval.

Captain Byrne smiled at Tyce's thoughtful response, then said, "If you will all follow me, I'll conduct you to the dining room."

* * * * *

Lehman was relieved to find the memories that he had borrowed from Vincent included a very detailed layout of the constitution class of starship.

He hurried to Deflector Control and was about to walk into the supply room when he was stopped.

"What are you doing down here? I thought you'd be in the dining room by now." Joe said seriously.

Lehman looked into Joe's eyes and saw the love and concern housed within.

An echo of Vincent's love for Joe welled inside Lehman and he had to fight the desire to run to Joe and hug him tightly.

Lehman concentrated and a wet spot appeared on the right side of his pants leg.

"I had a little accident." Lehman said shyly and turned so that Joe could see the spot.

"Then you'd better hurry and change. You won't want to miss out on the first course." Joe said with a gentle smile.

Lehman nodded at Joe, then ran into the supply room to change.

* * * * *

"I am Dr. Xon, please take my hand so I can conduct you through the portal." The Vulcan man said seriously.

Vincent hesitantly took the man's hand and was guided to walk into the wall of the conference room.

After some initial resistance, Vincent felt himself being pulled through the seemingly solid matter.

The sensation on his skin was like being pulled through strands of cotton or spider webs.

Everything was hazy, like walking through a dense fog.

Just as suddenly as the strange sensations began, they stopped.

Vincent and Dr. Xon were stepping onto sandy ground in a desolate clearing surrounded by rocks.

"Where are we?" Vincent asked as he looked behind him and saw the portal they had just stepped through.

"Where we are is a planet that has been named Gateway. But the more interesting question is 'when' are we. The answer to that question is, nearly fifty years in your future." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Oh crap."

Dr. Xon arched an eyebrow and asked, "What concerns you?"

"Time travel. You don't just go back and snatch someone out of the past because it sounds like fun. Something must be really seriously wrong if you brought me here." Vincent said with concern.

Dr. Xon nodded, then quietly said, "Ten days ago there was a time shift that altered the entire universe. People who I have known my whole life are now dead or never existed. The few who survive have no memory of me. In fact, my colleagues here on Gateway are the only people I have found who have any memory of me at all. I was here doing research on the Guardian

of Forever when the time shift occurred. This planet is shielded from alterations in the timeline. I believe that if I were to leave this planet in this time, I too would cease to exist."

"Okay. Since I'm here, does that mean I did something that messed up time?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"A series of factors contributed to a situation that resulted in the time displacement." Dr. Xon said seriously.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Translation: Yes, I caused it."

"Not directly. As a consequence of a transporter accident in your recent past, I believe your quantum resonance frequency has been altered." Dr. Xon said carefully.

Vincent watched curiously as Dr. Xon began to scan him with an unfamiliar device.

"My what?"

Dr. Xon concentrated for a moment to try and put his explanation in the simplest terms, then said, "All matter in the universe resonates at the same quantum resonance frequency. Parallel and alternate dimensions each have a frequency that is distinctly their own. Normally an altered resonance frequency would not be a concern, the only effect might be an uncanny tendency to be in the wrong place at the wrong time since you are technically out of synchronization with the rest of the universe."

"Well, that explains a few things." Vincent said off-handedly.

"Unfortunately, something happened, or from your point on the timeline, will happen, that impacts the entire multi-verse." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Multi-verse?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"This universe and every parallel and alternate universe that is associated with it." Dr. Xon said in clarification.

"So what happened... will happen... whatever..." Vincent asked with frustration.

"To make conversation easier between us, I will use the future tense to explain events relative to your native point on the timeline." Dr. Xon said simply.

"Um, yeah. Okay."

"The prime materia timeline, the one from which all other timelines are spawned, is going to split into two." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"So? If I'm getting what you're saying, there are alternate timelines and universes all over the place. What's the big deal about this one?"

"The alternates and parallels are all shadows of the prime materia. Alternates do not spawn alternates, otherwise the exponential progression would be beyond imagining. At the timeline convergence point, all the alternate and parallel dimensional universes will merge back into the prime materia and become one. When all are joined, a critical mass will be achieved and the prime materia will split into two distinct timelines. They will be completely separate from that point on and have no effect on each other." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Okay. I think I get that. But where does my quantum thingy figure into all this?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

"Your quantum resonant frequency no longer associates you with the prime materia. If you enter the convergence point where the timelines split as you are, you will not emerge from the other side." Dr. Xon said frankly.

Vincent gulped as a chill ran up his spine.

"Your absence in the new timeline will cause an incongruity that cannot be reconciled, so to correct the loss of your... thread, let's call it, the forces that maintain balance in the multi-verse would trace back to your origin and erase your existence." Dr. Xon said firmly.

"So I won't just die, but I will have never been born?" Vincent asked carefully.

"That is correct. And nothing you have ever done in your life will have happened." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Wait. I saw this on a movie at Christmas last year, this guy wishes that he had never been born, then he gets to see how the world is different without him. Is this like that?" Vincent asked as he looked Dr. Xon in the eyes.

"I have seen the movie I believe you are referring to, it is called 'It's a Wonderful Life'. And this situation does have certain elements in common with the movie, however the resolution may be a bit more complicated."

"Okay, I think I understand. What do I have to do?" Vincent asked seriously.

* * * * *

Lehman tried to change himself to an unclothed form so he could put on one of Vincent's uniforms.

Sweat started to bead on his forehead as he concentrated harder on his objective, but his body wasn't changing.

Finally he gave up on making the change all at once and decided to do as he had done as a small child and change each part of his body individually.

He focused on his left foot first and watched as the boot slowly morphed into a human looking foot.

He stopped for a moment to catch his breath, then took in a deep inhale and held it as he focused his will on changing the other foot.

Lehman had to refer to Vincent's memory and self image to make the transition of the rest of his body.

The images were vague and Lehman ended up using what he had learned of Okudai physiology to fill in the gaps in his memory.

Each transformation seemed to take more effort than the one before.

When he had finally made the last of his 'clothing' vanish, he looked down at himself to be sure that he hadn't missed anything.

Lehman's gaze stopped on his hairless crotch and he thought about what the future might hold for him.

With the last bit of effort at his command, Lehman forced his genitals to alter to a state that was a few years more developed.

If whatever was wrong with him didn't get better, there was a chance that he could be stuck in this form. He felt that he might appreciate the more 'adult' equipment later.

After one last look, Lehman opened the storage locker where Vincent's clothes were stored and quickly started to dress.

As he pulled the boots on, he realized that he hadn't estimated the size of his feet correctly.

The boots were too tight and he could barely make them fit over his feet.

"Are you okay champ?" Joe asked as he looked around the corner.

Lehman was trying to alter the size of his feet to make them fit in the boots while he was pulling the second boot on, but he found that he had completely lost the ability to alter his shape.

"Oh, it looks like that growth spurt is kicking in. After your dinner you need to go to the quartermaster and see about getting larger boots." Joe said with a gentle smile.

Lehman looked at Joe with surprise at the suggestion, then smiled.

"Yeah. I will. Thanks." Lehman said as he stood.

"Come here." Joe said with a smile and opened his arms.

Lehman hesitantly walked into Joe's outstretched arms and was pulled into a warm hug.

"I'd really like it if you'd come and talk to me when you have some free time. I know that 'kid time' is supposed to be for you, but I think I'm needing some." Joe said as he hugged Lehman tightly.

"I will just as soon as I can. I promise." Lehman said as he tried to restrain his tears of joy at the wonderful feeling.

Lehman thought about his life in the foundling home on his home world and the past year as the property of Traiel. No one had ever shown him love like this.

He knew that this was intended for Vincent, but somehow it didn't matter. At this exact moment in time, someone loved him.

* * * * *

When the door to Deflector Control opened, Lehman nearly walked face first into Rad's chest.

He quickly stepped out of the way as Rad continued to walk without noticing him.

As soon as Rad was in the room, his gaze immediately turned to Darin.

"You're done awfully early." Darin said with surprise as he looked away from console one.

"I... Um... Yeah. The Chief said it was okay." Rad said in a semi-coherent voice.

Darin hopped up from his chair and ran to Rad's side.

"What's wrong? Come over here and sit down." Darin said as he guided Rad to sit at one of the auxiliary stations.

Joe walked out of the supply room in time to hear the question and hurried to Rad's other side.

"My little brother Tan... I just got a message from Earth... he's missing. He's been missing for two days." Rad said as tears filled his eyes.

Darin and Joe simultaneously pulled him into hugs from opposite sides.

"He didn't come home from school and... no one knows anything." Rad said as his tears freely fell.

Darin held Rad firmly, then said, "I know there's not much we can do to help all the way out here. But there *is* something."

Rad looked up at Darin with helplessness and confusion filling his expression.

Darin pulled one arm free of the hug and reached over to the auxiliary console.

"Communications." A voice responded immediately.

"This is Ensign Cooper, will you please open a diplomatic channel to Clan Short Headquarters?"

* * * * *

The group approached the turbo lift and it became evident that everyone wouldn't be able to fit.

"Captain Byrne, please take your other guests and make them comfortable. I will join you shortly." Tyce said seriously.

"Holy One, it is not proper..." Oluf began to say but was stopped with a glance.

"I have evaded Crewman Winters once today, I will show him the courtesy of waiting for him to return before joining you for dinner." Tyce said as he looked at the Captain again.

"I'll wait for the next one too." Treifa said, then looked at Tyce with question.

Tyce looked at him for a moment, then nodded his acceptance.

Once the turbo lift doors closed, Tyce looked Treifa in the eyes and asked, "Did you know that they were planning to kill me and replace me with a shape shifter?"

Treifa's eyes went wide at the question, then he quickly said, "No. I saw a few proposals about using shape shifters but none of them had a possibility of working."

Tyce looked deeply into Treifa's eyes, then turned to Audge and said, "He speaks the truth."

"Does this mean that an attempt was made on your life?" Oluf asked in shock.

"Yes Oluf. But Audge has performed his duties perfectly and would not have allowed it to happen. And it turns out that their assassin was not a willing participant in the scheme and is now helping me to uncover all who are responsible for this plot." Tyce said firmly.

"Traiel." Treifa said darkly.

"Yes. He was instrumental in this plan, but I suspect that he is merely a pawn. The resources needed to covertly smuggle a Chameloid from their home world and surgically alter him is far beyond what Traiel could finance." Tyce said seriously.

"Surgically alter?" Treifa said as the color washed out of him.

"Yes, that is what he said. What is it?" Tyce asked carefully.

"The surgery, I read about it in the proposal. Are you telling me that Traiel actually found a Chameloid child and did that to him?" Treifa asked with tears forming in his eyes.

"Yes. What is it? What's the surgery?" Tyce asked cautiously.

Treifa turned away and wiped his eyes, then quietly said, "For this to work they needed a Chameloid that was basically your size so they had to have a child. But a child can only hold a foreign shape for fifteen or twenty minutes at most. The surgery was to remove certain organs from the child's endocrine system and replace them with an adult's organs."

"So an adult Chameloid was sacrificed to make this plan work." Tyce said with pain.

"Yes, and there is a more than fifty percent chance that the child's body will reject the transplanted organs." Treifa said quietly.

The pained expression in Treifa's eyes told Tyce all he needed to know. Without asking, he knew what would happen if the organs were rejected.

The group turned as one when the turbo lift doors opened and Lehman was standing there in a fresh clean uniform.

Chapter 25

"Are you familiar with the properties of matter and anti-matter?" Dr. Xon asked slowly.

"Yeah, I read about that stuff when I was studying about starships." Vincent said carefully.

"Then you understand what would happen if a Crewman Vincent Winters from an anti-universe were to come in contact with you?" Dr. Xon asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah. When the exact same matter and anti-matter from the opposite universes touch each other they try to, um... mix or something and when they do it causes an explosion that destroys both universes." Vincent said in thought.

"Correct. I am using that theory as a basis for my plan to adjust your quantum signature." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"You're going to explode me?" Vincent asked hesitantly, sure that's not what he meant.

"No. When you make physical contact with your counterpart, your quantum signature should automatically attempt to adjust, much as it would with anti-matter. But since the variation is slight, the reaction should also be slight." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Should be..." Vincent parroted apprehensively.

"To my knowledge, nothing like this has ever been attempted before. There is no way to know what reaction will occur." Dr. Xon said reluctantly.

"Test it. Take a... ping pong ball or something from my universe and test it in the alternate universe." Vincent said reasonably.

Dr. Xon considered for a moment, then said, "That might be a reasonable way to proceed... if we had more time. Unfortunately, we do not have that luxury."

"Why not? If we're able to travel through time, we can go back as many times as we want until we get it right, can't we?" Vincent asked seriously.

"No. The ripple that erased your existence from my time is traveling backward toward the timeline split. Once it reaches that split you will no longer exist in any timeline and there will be no way of correcting your quantum signature. You will either be forced to live out your life here on

Gateway with me, or if you are in your own time when the anti-time ripple arrives, you will simply cease to be." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Oh. Wow. That sucks. Um, okay. What now?" Vincent asked apprehensively.

"When the timeline was altered, I began to search for the cause. Once I established that it was due to your transporter accident, I began to work on ways to alter your quantum signature. I have targeted two alternate dimensions that have the best chance of restoring your signature to it's original frequency. We will travel to those alternate dimensions in your timeline and you must make physical contact with your alternate self. I will tell you when your signature has been sufficiently altered. Then, if all has gone to plan, you will return to your own time and dimension and the original timeline should be restored." Dr. Xon said thoughtfully.

"Um, this sounds really dangerous. Is there any other way to do this?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Not to my knowledge. Either we attempt to alter your quantum signature in the manner I have suggested, or we do not. Those are the choices before us." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Okay. Let's do it." Vincent said with determination as he turned to look at the large stone portal that they had emerged from.

Dr. Xon turned on his tricorder and began to make the necessary adjustments as he said, "Guardian of Forever, I seek your aid to restore the past."

"Such is my function. Such is my purpose. Ask your question so you may repair the fractured course of time." The Guardian said in a booming voice.

"Guardian of Forever, will you show me these temporal/spatial coordinates?" Dr. Xon asked seriously as he transmitted the coordinates to the Guardian.

"Look into the past that you may restore the future." The Guardian said as the portal began to show scenes in the swirling mist.

"Um, that's not the *Yorktown*." Vincent said as he pointed at the images speeding by before them.

"No. Your alternate self in this universe is not on the *Yorktown*, he is on Earth." Dr. Xon said as he put a hand on Vincent's shoulder and guided him to stand directly before the changing scenes in the mist.

"What am I... is he doing there?" Vincent asked curiously.

"We will know shortly. Prepare to step through." Dr. Xon said with intense concentration.

Vincent prepared himself and was ready to jump.

"Now."

* * * * *

"This is Clan Short." A young voice said professionally.

"Hi. I'm Ensign Darin Cooper from the USS *Yorktown*. I'm Vincent Winters' brother." Darin said hesitantly.

"Yeah. Keith told us all about you. I'm Jamie, what's up?"

"Well, I've got a friend named Rad and his little brother is missing. I was hoping that maybe since you're on Earth you might be able to do something to help him." Darin said hopefully.

"Yeah. Tell me what's going on and we'll do whatever we can." Jamie said seriously.

"I don't know too much. I got an email from my mom and I guess she was pretty torn up. I couldn't make sense of most of it." Rad said as he seemed to snap out of his stupor.

"Is there someone we can call to get more information?" Jamie asked reasonably.

Darin, Joe and Rad noticed someone walk up behind Jamie, then nudge him over in the chair. The boy was identical to him and wore the same serious expression.

"Yeah. We could call my house and ask my mom." Rad said quickly.

"Do they have a terminal?" Jamie asked hopefully.

"Yeah, they got one when I joined Starfleet. I'll send you the address." Rad said and keyed in the connection.

"Got it." Jamie said, then the screen split to show the other terminal.

"Hello?" A young man asked, and he had a very tired look in his eyes.

Rad got a slightly irritated expression, then hesitantly asked, "Is my mom around?"

"No. She's out talking to the neighbors in case anyone might have seen what happened to your brother." The man said quietly.

"Is anyone else there?" Rad asked seriously.

"Yeah. The twins are in their room. Hold on, I'll get them." The man said sadly, then walked away.

"Who was that?" Darin asked quietly.

"My mom's new husband." Rad said darkly.

"He looks like he's about our age." Darin said cautiously.

"He is, he was my best friend my whole life. But when I went to the academy, he started sleeping with my mother." Rad finished with disgust.

"Rayne? Is that you?" A young voice asked hopefully.

"Shayd? How are you doing?" Rad asked gently.

"I'm Shadoe. But Shayd is right here." The boy responded with a grin.

"Liar. I've always been able to tell you two apart. Can we talk?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Asshole's in the kitchen starting dinner." Shayd said seriously.

"What's really going on?" Rad asked firmly.

"Tan's missing." Shayd said carefully.

"Bullshit. If he was really missing you'd be out with Mom looking for him." Rad said as he looked his younger brother in the eyes.

Shayd and Shadoe exchanged a look, then Shadoe hesitantly nodded.

"He's with your dad." Shayd said in a whisper.

Rad shook his head and asked, "Why are you pretending that he's missing? You're worrying everyone to death."

"You don't know how it is around here. Numb-nuts is on this big power trip trying to prove that he's our dad and Tan couldn't handle it anymore. I wish we'd gone with him." Shayd finished in a low voice.

Shadoe nodded his agreement.

"Guys, this isn't right. I understand that things are bad..."

"You don't get it Rayne, things aren't just bad, they're totally fucked up!" Shayd exploded.

Rad was shocked by his brother's outburst and realized that he didn't really know what was going on.

After a moment to collect his emotions, Rad quietly said, "Tell me about it."

"Mom goes to work all day, then when she comes home she just eats and goes to bed. Shit-for-brains is always here watching us and trying to control everything we do. When I go to the bathroom I have to look over my shoulder because I feel like he's going to be right there. He's ALWAYS watching." Shayd said with an expression of frustration.

"Yeah. He doesn't let up. He always wants to know what we're doing and what we did at school and who we talked to and... hell, we can't even go over to anyone else's house because he wants to know what we'll be doing over there. He talks to their parents and gets a report about everything we did." Shadoe said desperately.

Rad nodded slowly, then reluctantly said, "Go get him. It's time to deal with this."

* * * * *

"Is everything okay?" Tyce asked with concern.

Lehman looked at Treifa, then hesitantly said, "It's fine."

"It's okay Lehman, Treifa knows what's going on. I trust him." Tyce said carefully.

Lehman nodded, then said, "I think something might be wrong with me. I was barely able to change myself and now I can't change at all."

Tyce looked at Treifa with question.

"Are you in any pain?" Treifa asked cautiously.

"No. I'm feeling a little tired, but besides that I'm fine." Lehman said honestly.

"Are you well enough to go to the dinner with us?" Tyce asked with concern.

"Yeah, I think so. Besides, I'm really hungry. Maybe I'm having trouble changing because I haven't eaten in about twenty hours." Lehman said in thought.

Treifa considered, then quietly said, "Let's hope that's the problem."

Tyce nodded his agreement, then said, "Then let's go have dinner."

Everyone boarded the turbo lift, then Lehman said, "Officer's mess hall."

* * * * *

Everyone in the room jumped as two strangers suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

A young Native American man stood forward and asked, "What's going on here?"

"I am Dr. Xon and I believe you know my companion." Dr. Xon said seriously.

The young man looked at Vincent with surprise, then turned in time to see someone race down the hallway.

"I'm Jerico Foote, I'm in charge of this cabin. What are you doing here and why is Vince wearing a Starfleet uniform?"

"It is quite a long story and we have limited time. Would it be possible for us to see my companion's counterpart?" Dr. Xon asked in a typical Vulcan emotionless voice.

"He's still in our room." A Chinese boy with a black mask covering half his face said as he emerged from the hallway.

"I need to know what's going on before I can consider allowing you to see him." Jerico said cautiously.

Before Dr. Xon could answer, Vincent said, "He's going to die unless I can touch him."

"Not good enough. I need to understand what's happening." Jerico said firmly, then glanced at a large teenager by the front door.

The boy gave a quick nod, then hurried out.

"I'm from an alternate universe. There was a transporter accident that kind of unhooked me from my timeline. If I touch the Vincent from this universe, I might be able to get hooked back to it. If I don't get it fixed, then me and all the other me's in all the other dimensions will die." Vincent said seriously.

"This isn't right. They don't belong here." A young boy with dark hair said as he stared at Vincent intently.

"I know Luke. I can sense the wrongness of it." Jerico said as he held his gaze on the pair.

"Perhaps that is because we are not native to this universe." Dr. Xon said reasonably.

"Come on, all I need to do is touch the other Vincent and then we'll leave." Vincent said imploringly.

"No. *Tell me why* you're here. *Tell me* the whole *truth*." Jerico said in a voice that seemed to echo.

Vincent felt a strange sensation wash over him and began to speak without wanting to.

"I think I'm here because my dad was a bad person. He hurt a lot of people and died trying to hurt even more. Ever since that happened, things have been going wrong around me and I've been the only one who can make them right. I think I'm paying for all the bad stuff he did. I'll probably keep on paying until something finally kills me. But if I don't touch the Vincent Winters from this dimension, then a lot of people will die or not be born and it will be all my fault." Vincent said seriously.

"The sins of the father..." Luke said in a whisper.

Jerico nodded, then quietly asked, "Dylan, will you get Vince and bring him in here?"

Just then the front door of the cabin opened and two security officers walked in followed by the teenager who had run out earlier.

"Please wait. I don't think they're a threat." Jerico said to the guards.

"I'm sorry, but we need to take unauthorized personnel to the security office and make a report. It's procedure." One of the officers said seriously.

"Everything is fine. It was just a mistake. *These people belong* here." Luke said in concentration and his voice seemed to echo the same as Jericho's had.

Vincent and Dr. Xon watched curiously as the security officers were both overcome with matching expressions of confusion.

"I'm sorry if we interrupted, we thought there was an intruder." One of the officers said apologetically.

"No need to apologize. It was just a misunderstanding. We're glad that you're here to keep us safe." Jerico said with a kind smile.

The guards nodded, then quietly left.

The large teenage boy looked at Jerico with confusion.

"Thanks for getting them Uri, but I think we need to deal with this ourselves." Jerico said, then noticed Dylan leading Vince out of their bedroom.

"What's wrong. Is it time for my meds already?" Vince asked in a sleepy voice as he rubbed his eyes.

"No Vince, you have some visitors." Jerico said gently and motioned to Vincent and Dr. Xon.

"You look like me." Vince said in sleepy confusion.

"Yeah. I guess so. Will you shake my hand?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Who are you?" Vince asked suspiciously.

"I'm Crewman Vincent Winters, Petty Officer second class from the USS *Yorktown*." Crewman Winters said proudly and held out his hand to shake.

"Wow. You're really a crewman? I always wanted to be in Starfleet. How'd you do that?" Vince asked with fascination but didn't make any move to shake the offered hand.

"It's a really long story. Will you please shake my hand now?"

"Why?" Vince asked suspiciously.

"Please, just shake my hand. Then I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

Vince cautiously took hold of his counterpart's hand and immediately felt a tingle run up his arm.

Dr. Xon opened his tricorder and scanned the pair.

"Please continue contact for 3.9 seconds." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Can you give me a countdown or something?" Vincent asked as he grasped Vince's hand firmly with both hands to keep him from pulling away.

Vince looked at his counterpart with fear and confusion as he felt an electrical sensation spreading through his entire body.

"It hurts." Luke said as he turned away.

"I know." Jerico said as he squinted his eyes at the sight.

"What's wrong?" Uri asked in confusion, all he could see was the two identical boys shaking hands.

"Their auras are changing... It's making me sick." Luke said as he clutched his stomach.

"It's against nature." Jerico said in a pained voice.

Dr. Xon watched his tricorder carefully as he said, "Perhaps so, but it needs to be done. Three... two... one."

Vincent let go of his counterpart and fought to catch his breath. His whole body was tingling and his legs felt weak.

"I'm... what did you do to me?" Vince asked in a fearful voice as he began to sway.

Two boys ran to his sides and helped him to the couch.

"Your quantum signature has been slightly altered." Dr. Xon said frankly.

"What? He's altered too? Does that mean he's unhooked now?" Vincent asked with concern.

"No. Not unhooked, just slightly out of synchronization. No harm will come to him from this experience." Dr. Xon said slowly.

"How sure are you?" Vincent asked seriously as he finally started feeling somewhat normal again.

"Reasonably. This is why I have had you maintain limited contact. You have slightly altered each other. Your contact in the next dimension will alter you further without causing damage to your counterpart." Dr. Xon said carefully.

"Will you tell me about how you got to be a crewman now?" Vince asked hopefully from the couch.

"Sure." Vincent said with a smile as he walked to where Vince was sitting.

"We must proceed to our next destination." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"I have to answer his questions. That was the deal I made. I promise I won't take too long." Vincent said, then turned to Vince and continued, "The day my dad and mom died, I was in the hospital for... well, I was just in the hospital. My brother Lawrence came to the hospital with some guys from Clan Short and got me and took me to Commander Dodds' house. While I was there I met Captain Spock, Aunt Teri, David Gallagher and a lot of other people. They all worked together to fix it so I could go into the mentoring program and become a crewman. What happened to you?"

"Um, well I went to the hospital... probably for the same reason as you. My brother never came and got me because my dad threw him out. I don't know where he is... Anyway, then the cops came and talked to me and then CPS was going to stick me in a group home somewhere, but the judge took

me back to the little room behind the courtroom and talked to me about a lot of stuff. Then he sent me here." Vince said frankly.

"What about the medication? Are you sick?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Um, well. I was really sad and mad and... well, Dr. Dan said that I needed to take the medicine for a while so I can, like, get used to not feeling bad all the time. He's said I probably won't need any medicine at all by the end of the month." Vince said carefully.

"So how are you feeling now?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I dunno. I guess maybe I'm starting to feel better. I don't feel like crying all the time now, and everyone's been really nice. It's just so different here." Vince said reluctantly.

"If your life was anything like mine, different doesn't mean bad." Vincent said frankly.

Vince thought about the statement for a moment, then hesitantly nodded.

"Crewman Winters, we must be leaving." Dr. Xon said quietly.

"I've got to go. Just remember, different doesn't mean bad. That applies to all kinds of things." Vincent said as he walked to Dr. Xon's side.

"I'll remember. I'm glad I got to meet you." Vince said quietly.

"I'm glad too." Vincent said, then a thought came to him.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the couplers that he had grabbed before leaving deflector control.

"Here, this is for you." Vincent said and handed the coupler to his counterpart.

Vince looked at the coupler, then asked, "Is this really a coupler from your ship?"

"Yeah. I always keep a few extras with me. You can have this one for luck."

"Thanks. But I don't have anything to give you." Vince said with concern.

"It is time for us to go." Dr. Xon said quietly.

"Wait. I got something." Vince said and quickly reached for his back pocket.

"It's okay. You don't have to." Vincent said as he started walking back to Dr. Xon.

"No. Here, take it." Vince said as he jumped off the couch and ran to hand Vincent a picture.

"Thanks." Vincent said in a rush just as Dr. Xon pulled him through the wall.

* * * * *

"The twins said you wanted to talk to me. Do you have an idea of where D'Artagnan might be?" The young man said as he hurried to the terminal.

"He likes to be called Tan." Rad said firmly.

"Do you know where he is?"

"Brad, sit down and listen to me for a minute." Rad said seriously.

"You know something, don't you? Where is he?" Brad asked frantically.

"Brad, calm down. Where are the rest of the kids?" Rad asked carefully.

"The girls and MichaelAngelo are with your mom. The twins are here, probably in their room." Brad said with confusion at the question.

"It's more likely that they're listening at the door. Guys, get in here! I want you to hear this too." Rad said more loudly.

Shayd and Shadoe walked into the room wearing matching guilty expressions.

"Everyone, this is Jamie and... his brother I guess." Rad said uncertainly.

"Jacob. We're here to help if we can." Jacob said seriously.

"Cool. It's nice to meet you. We don't know any other twins. Well, guy twins." Shayd said with a smile at the boys.

Jamie and Jacob gave matching smiles in return.

"Brad, I think we caused all this." Rad said firmly, drawing everyone's attention.

"How?" Brad asked with confusion.

"Think about it. You always got along with all the kids until our fight started. Maybe if we can settle things between us, we can make things better for everyone." Rad said seriously.

"We can deal with that later. We've got to find Tan." Brad said desperately.

"He doesn't want to be found. And unless we can get a few things cleared up, he's not going to want to be found." Rad said quietly.

"He ran away?" Brad asked in disbelief.

"Yeah. And from what I've heard, I don't blame him." Rad said frankly.

Brad looked at his former friend with shock.

Rad shook his head, then said, "We'll get to that in a minute. Right now we need to get things settled between us."

"I married your mom. You hate me. I think that's about as settled as we're going to get it." Brad said with regret.

"I don't hate you... Okay, maybe I did for a little while, but not anymore."

Brad's eyes opened wide with surprise.

"Do you have any clue about why I was so upset?" Rad asked seriously.

"Because I married your mom." Brad said frankly.

Rad shook his head and said, "You really are dense, aren't you?"

"Yeah. That's what you've always told me." Brad said reluctantly.

"Guys, try to be grown up about what I'm about to say. You're old enough to hear this and I think you need to understand what's really been going on." Rad said to his brothers.

Shayd and Shadoe nodded in unison.

"Brad, we were best friends growing up and I really loved you." Rad said seriously.

"I loved you too Rayne." Brad said shyly.

"No Brad, I mean I really *loved* you. The problem is that I didn't understand my feelings and didn't tell you when I finally did figure it out." Rad said as he looked Brad in the eyes.

"Oh." Brad said in realization.

"Yeah. Oh... So when I heard from the guys that you and mom were, um... dating, I kind of freaked out. I mean, not only were there my feelings toward you but... think about the stuff we used to do." Rad said carefully.

Brad looked at the twins beside him and blushed.

Rad followed his gaze, then said, "Guys, we had sex. It's normal for friends to experiment to figure out how the equipment works."

Shayd and Shadoe both looked at Brad with matching expressions of horror.

"Friends and brothers." Jamie added from the split screen.

Shayd and Shadoe turned as one to look at Jamie and looked like they might combust from the redness of their faces.

"Busted." Jamie snickered.

Brad looked with shock from the screen to the twins and then to Rad.

"Come on Brad, we're all guys and we need to be able to talk about stuff like this." Rad said imploringly.

Brad reluctantly nodded.

"Anyway, that's why I was so mad. Just when I figured out that what I was feeling for you was really love, you hooked up with my mom." Rad said frankly.

Brad nodded again.

"I was mad. I said some pretty bad things to you, but nothing compared to what I said to the guys here. I didn't realize it at the time, but everything I was saying was being listened to and taken to heart. My feelings of hurt and betrayal were passed on to them." Rad said with regret.

"I see." Brad said quietly as he looked down.

"Oh, and you're not off the hook either. You've been doing your oblivious, control freak thing with the guys and that's been driving them crazy." Rad said seriously.

"I'm what?" Brad asked as he looked up to meet Rad's gaze again.

"From what I've been hearing, you're turning into your father. Do you remember how you used to bitch and moan about how he would try to control you and keep tabs on you every minute of your life?" Rad asked in a leading tone.

Brad reluctantly nodded.

"That's exactly what you've been doing to the guys. But it's even worse because you aren't their father. You're the guy who married their mother, and now you're trying to control them." Rad said frankly.

Brad thought about the words, then looked at the twins and said, "Rayne's right. I'm sorry guys, sometimes I'm oblivious."

Shayd quietly said, "Our real dad never wanted to spend time with us..."

Shadoe continued, "...so it was really weird for us when all of a sudden you were there, like, all the time."

"That's why Tan had to leave. He's older than the twins and he's starting to want to become more independent. Then all of a sudden, you're there suffocating him and trying to control him."

"I just wanted to protect them and be a part of their lives..." Brad said quietly.

"Guys, here's the part that I needed you in here for. Help me let Brad know what he can do to make things better." Rad said seriously.

"Back off." Shayd said immediately.

"Shay, I was thinking of something a little more constructive." Rad said, trying not to sound harsh.

"Give up on the dad thing. You're not our dad and you'll never be our dad." Shadoe said frankly.

"Shad, it'll be more helpful if you'll tell him what he *can* do instead of what he can't." Rad said in a leading tone.

The twins looked at each other for a moment, then Shayd quietly said, "I guess if you wanted, we could do stuff like we used to when Rayne still lived with us."

"Like what?" Brad asked cautiously.

"I don't know, like stay up late watching movies and camp out in the living room." Shayd said uncertainly.

"Or maybe go to a drag race or something." Shadoe added hesitantly.

"I'd like that." Brad said carefully, not wanting to disrupt the tentative peace between them.

"Good. I'll let you work that out. And when I get back to Earth maybe all us guys can go do something together." Rad said with a smile.

"Do you think we could borrow your dad's cabin by the lake?" Shayd asked hopefully.

"I bet you could. As soon as I know when I'll be back on Earth, I'll call you so you can set it up." Rad said with a smile.

Shayd nodded happily.

"But remember, we need to be left alone sometimes. It's really creepy to have you watching us all the time." Shadoe said seriously.

"Yeah. Give it a rest. The little kids might like all that attention but it's driving us nuts." Shayd added.

"I know how that feels. I'll try, but you may need to tell me when I'm doing it. I don't always realize it." Brad said hesitantly.

"Count on it." Shayd said firmly.

Brad nodded, then carefully asked, "What about Tan?"

"He's safe. I need to talk to him and see how he's doing. But if he decides that he doesn't want to come back are you going to be okay with it?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Yeah, I guess so. As long as I know he's okay." Brad said reluctantly.

"I'll call you back as soon as I know what's going on." Rad said more gently.

"Thanks Rayne. I'm sorry about... everything. I never meant to hurt you." Brad said quietly.

Rad sadly nodded and said, "I know."

* * * * *

When the lift doors opened, Captain Byrne stepped away from the group and said, "If I may have everyone's attention, I'll make introductions and then we can go to our table. Dinner will be served in just a few minutes."

Tyce glanced at Traiel, then glanced away quickly.

Lehman felt relief as he noticed the pleased expression on Traiel's face.

"I believe everyone knows the Holy One, on his left is his protector Audge and his high priest Oluf. On his right are Crewman Winters, his cultural liaison while he is amongst us and Ensign Thaelan, a member of the last Federation delegation to visit Okuda prime." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Next we have captains Marr, Treas, Gartain, Traiel and Treifa. If you will all follow me, we can have a seat and be comfortable while we get to know each other." Captain Byrne said hopefully.

As the group was walking toward the table, a crewman intercepted the captain and whispered in his ear.

Captain Byrne whispered to the Crewman, then said, "If you will all excuse me I will return in just a moment. I've instructed the staff to start serving the meal as soon as it's ready."

The crewman nodded then rushed to the kitchen while the Captain walked for the turbo lift.

"So Holy One, Treifa says that you're considering endorsing a proposal that a colony at the edge of our system be allowed to have contact with the Federation." Captain Gartain said casually.

"Yes. I am considering that option. I would be interested to know your feelings on the matter." Tyce said diplomatically.

"It sounds like a fine idea. Our first step out into the universe." Captain Gartain said happily.

"First steps tend to be unsteady and should be taken slowly. Thanks to my Federation hosts I've seen that not everything beyond our borders is more advanced." Tyce said seriously.

"In what way?" Captain Treas asked with interest.

"For example, they do not balance their chi with their ieb." Tyce said seriously.

All the Okudai captains looked at Tyce in shock as Oluf asked, "All of them are imbalanced?"

"That is my understanding. Ensign Thaelan, the people of Okuda balance their opposite sex and same sex desires to maintain balance in their psyche. Perhaps you know, do all Federation worlds believe in a monogamous life-long bond which forbids the opposing sexual contact?" Tyce asked curiously.

Thaelan thought about the question for a moment, then said, "I believe that monogamy is the prevalent belief on most Federation worlds, but most, perhaps all, societies have sub-cultures that would support alternative lifestyles that are more in line with your beliefs."

"Shocking." Captain Treas said with a disbelieving shake of her head.

"Disgusting." Captain Marr said in a growl.

"Please excuse my absence. Admiral Morrow asked that I pass on his best wishes to all of you and his hopes that this would be a productive meeting." Captain Byrne said and gave a meaningful glance toward Lehman.

"I had just mentioned an example of our differing philosophies. But perhaps it would be best if we begin to discuss the reason for our gathering." Tyce said formally.

"Are you planning to continue to fight to keep our society in the stone age?" Captain Treas asked before anyone else could speak.

Tyce thought about the question for a moment, then said, "No. I believe the time has come to reevaluate certain attitudes toward progress. But I cannot condone a plan that will disrupt our society to a point that will throw us into chaos."

"How about trade with the Federation?" Traiel asked seriously.

Rather than answer the question directly, Tyce turned to Captain Byrne and asked, "What do you think the Federation would think about opening trade negotiations with the Okudai?"

"Of course we would be in favor of it. But your people should carefully consider what they are willing to offer up for trade. It has happened on more than one occasion that governments have made promises that heavily burdened their people and depleted their resources." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"That is a reasonable concern. So it would be necessary to have people of integrity in the positions to make such decisions." Tyce said in thought.

"Good luck." Treifa said with a chuckle.

Thaelan looked at Treifa with surprise, then said, "Sarcasm is relatively unknown to my people. You appear to have this form of humor in common with Humans."

A chuckle spread around the table at the statement as waiters arrived with a small plate of salad for each person.

"You are vegetarians?" Treifa asked hesitantly.

"No. We simply have a salad course before the main course of our meal." Captain Byrne said gently.

"Do not worry Captain Treifa, I had the opportunity to sample their cuisine earlier in the Engineer's mess hall. Their tastes seem to be much like our own. I especially liked the stuffed pork chops." Tyce finished with a smile.

"You ate among the common workers of the ship?" Oluf asked in horror.

Tyce flashed a disapproving look at Oluf and said, "Yes. Why do you believe it is a dishonor for me to do so? Do you believe that I will be tainted by their sweat or somehow infected by their work ethic?"

Traiel smiled broadly at the statement before taking a bite of his salad.

"No Holy One, but you should be shown the proper respect of a visiting dignitary and treated to their finest offerings, not subjected to the rations of their common workers." Oluf explained carefully.

"Crewman Winters spent the day showing me where he works, eats and sleeps. Thanks to his willingness to share the details of his life, I have come to understand that the workers on this ship perform their duties with pride because they know that their contributions are appreciated by their captain. And the rations of the common workers that you speak of were as fine a meal as any that I've had and fit for any dignitary." Tyce said firmly.

"As you say Holy One." Oluf responded quietly.

"I'm pleased that you enjoyed your meal Holy One." Captain Byrne said, trying to divert attention from Oluf's discomfort.

"Yes Captain. Not only did I enjoy a good meal, but also good company. Crewman Winters introduced me to his friend JonJon who is one of a group of colonists who are traveling to establish a new colony." Tyce said seriously.

"What is the purpose?" Captain Treas asked with interest.

"As I understand it, their purpose is to reduce the impact of technology on their lives. They produce their own food and live close to the land, much like our Andarkan colony." Tyce said seriously, then smiled when he saw that Lehman had eaten all his salad.

The waiters returned to clear the salad plates, then replaced them with plates with filet mignon and rice pilaf.

"This is more what I expected." Treifa said with a smile.

"Yes. It looks very good." Captain Treas said approvingly.

Lehman took a bite of the meat and considered the taste carefully. After a moment to draw on Vincent's memories, he motioned to one of the waiters who was standing nearby.

"Could you get me some catsup please?" Lehman asked quietly.

"Catsup?" The waiter asked hesitantly.

"Yes. Please?" Lehman asked hopefully.

The waiter nodded, then walked out of the room.

"Is something wrong Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked cautiously.

"No sir. I just asked for some catsup for my meat." Lehman said shyly.

"Catsup?" Treifa asked cautiously.

"Yes. As I understand, it is a condiment that is used to mask the flavor of food that is repugnant." Thaelan said seriously.

"Is there a problem?" The chef asked as he walked to the table.

"I just wanted some catsup for my meat." Lehman said quietly, wishing that he had never asked.

The chef looked at Lehman for a moment, then said, "I suppose a child wouldn't have the refined taste to appreciate my filet mignon."

"Is that what this is? I had filet mignon on the *Enterprise*... but it didn't taste like this." Lehman said, then shrank back a little when he noticed the anger in the man's eyes.

"Would you see that the crewman gets some catsup?" Captain Byrne asked as he tried to restrain a smile.

"I'll send someone down to the engineers mess hall to get your catsup. You'll have it in a moment." the chef said gruffly, then walked away.

When the chef was finally gone, Lehman quietly said, "I'm sorry about that, I didn't mean to make him mad. I just think this meat would taste better with catsup."

* * * * *

The pair emerged from the portal and landed on the sandy ground of Gateway.

Vincent lifted the picture his counterpart had given him to see what it was.

"What did he give you?" Dr. Xon asked curiously.

"A picture of him and all the guys in his cabin... They look kinda like a family." Vincent said as he looked at the group picture carefully.

"If we complete our task, he will have the opportunity to live long and prosper." Dr. Xon said formally.

"Yeah. I know. I just feel kinda bad because I've got such a good life and he has to be doped up to be able to put up with his." Vincent said quietly.

Dr. Xon stepped forward and put a hand on Vincent's shoulder before saying, "He is going through a difficult time. Such is the way of life. You have had difficulties and are stronger for having faced them. The tragedies he has endured are causing him to form new relationships that will serve him well in his later life."

Vincent thought about the statement, then nodded his agreement.

Dr. Xon released Vincent, then walked to a rack of equipment by the portal and selected a device.

"Please allow me to examine your quantum signature so I can adjust the time needed for the next contact." Dr. Xon said as he adjusted the instrument.

"Do you have any kids or anything Dr. Xon?" Vincent asked curiously as the Vulcan scientist scanned him.

"My apologies Crewman Winters, but I must refrain from answering any specific questions because I am part of the future. Any specific knowledge that you carry into the past with you could potentially pollute the timeline and cause a paradox." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Okay, I studied about paradoxes, I don't want to cause one of those. I just wanted to get to know you." Vincent said quietly.

"If all proceeds according to plan, we may have that opportunity one day." Dr. Xon said as he looked over his readings.

"What does it say?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"It confirms that your quantum resonant frequency has been altered by 0.04 cycles. Another such contact should be able to realign your quantum signature to that of your home universe and restore my timeline into being." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Okay. So where are we going this time?" Vincent asked cautiously.

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"Do you want us to sign off? It looks like you have things under control." Jamie said cautiously.

"Sure. Thanks for your help guys. I was afraid that Tan was really missing and we might have to go looking for him." Rad said honestly.

"I'm glad it worked out. If you need any other help, just call us." Jacob said sincerely.

"I'll do that." Rad said gratefully and watched as they disconnected.

"Do you want us to give you some privacy for this?" Darin asked quietly from Rad's side.

"I'd really rather have you guys here if you don't mind." Rad said as he glanced from Darin to Joe.

"We're here for as long as you need us." Joe said with a smile.

Rad nodded, then turned back to the terminal to initiate the call to his father.

"Radovanovich residence." A timid voice answered and the screen showed only an empty room.

"Tan, is that you?" Rad asked carefully.

"Rayne? How are you doing? Are you okay?" Tan asked with excitement as he moved in front of the screen.

"Yeah, at least I am now that I know you're alright." Rad said peacefully.

"Oh. Yeah." Tan said quietly.

"Where's dad?" Rad asked cautiously.

"He's out in the kitchen making dinner. Do you want me to get him?" Tan asked quietly.

"Not yet. I want to talk to you first and find out how you're doing." Rad said with concern.

"I'm fine. I'm sorry if I worried you. I just couldn't stay there anymore." Tan said shyly.

"I know. I talked to Shay and Shad. They filled me in." Rad said quietly.

"Are you mad at me?" Tan asked hesitantly.

"No. But I wish you would have called me and talked to me about it first. We might have found a way to do this that wouldn't make everyone think you'd been abducted." Rad said honestly.

Tan nodded with an expression of shame.

"What do you want to do next?" Rad asked gently.

"I really want to stay here. Your dad said that I could stay as long as I want and it's really nice here." Tan said as he looked at Rad with hope.

"If that's what you really want, we can probably make that happen." Rad said gently.

"Really? You think you could do that?" Tan asked hopefully.

"I think I could, but it may not be exactly the way you're wanting." Rad said slowly.

"How do you mean?" Tan asked cautiously.

"You can't leave things like this with Mom. It isn't right. You're going to need to go talk to her face to face and explain why you left and what you've decided to do next." Rad said firmly.

"Can't I just send her an email?" Tan asked hopefully.

"You could. But it would be the coward's way of doing it. You've already messed up by running away the way you did. Now it's time to do the right thing and face your decisions like a man." Rad said with certainty.

"I guess so. I just hate Brad so much. I don't even want to be in the same room with him." Tan said darkly.

"I had a long talk with him before I called you. I think I got through to him and worked some stuff out so it won't be as bad as it has been." Rad said quietly.

"So you think I should go back?" Tan asked cautiously.

Rad thought for a moment, then said, "No. Actually I think you should stay with my dad."

"Why?" Tan asked hesitantly.

"Because my dad's a really good decent man. I think the best thing you could possibly do right now is stay with him and learn what that means so you can grow into a good decent man that I can be proud to call my brother." Rad said seriously.

Tan nodded slowly at the statement.

"I've known Brad since I was a little kid and I know he isn't a bad person, he's just making a lot of mistakes while he's trying to figure out how to be a father." Rad said quietly.

"He sucks at it." Tan said darkly.

"Yeah. He does. He could probably use some help." Rad said frankly.

Tan looked at Rad with confusion.

"When he married Mom he got an instant family. I've made it a lot harder for him by talking bad about him to you and the twins. How long do you think it can keep up like this before he decides to bail out?" Rad asked seriously.

"And that would be a bad thing?" Tan asked sarcastically.

"Do you remember how you felt when your dad bailed out? Or Mike and Allie's dad? It hurt like hell. You don't want them to have to go through that again do you?" Rad asked imploringly.

"No. I guess not. Livvy and Jess really do love him." Tan said quietly.

"He's the only dad they've ever known. You don't have to like him Tan, but if you can try to support him and help him out when you're around the others, it might make everyone's lives a lot easier." Rad said seriously.

"I can try. Maybe if I don't have to live with him 24/7 I'll be able to put up with him when I visit." Tan said in thought.

"That's good. I'm going to try that too." Rad said with a smile.

"Thanks Rayne... Joe? Is that you back there?" Tan asked as he moved a little closer to the screen.

"Hi Tan. Yeah, it's me. How are you doing?" Joe asked quietly.

"Um, well, I guess you already know since you heard all that." Tan said shyly.

"Yeah. Your brother wanted us here for moral support." Joe said with a gentle smile at Tan.

"I'm glad you guys aren't mad at each other anymore. Rad was really miserable after you had your fight." Tan said honestly.

"So was I, but that's all in the past now." Joe said happily.

"That's right." Rad said, then motioned for Darin to come closer to the terminal screen.

"Tan, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend Darin." Rad said happily.

"It's nice to meet you Darin. How long have you known my brother?" Tan asked with a smile.

"Since I came on board the *Yorktown*... almost two weeks now." Darin said shyly.

"You'll have to tell me all about it when you guys come back to Earth. You are going to bring him to meet me in person when you get back, aren't you?" Tan asked hopefully.

Rad smiled, then turned to Darin and asked, "Would you like to spend our shore leave with me and my family in California?"

"Yeah. I think I'd like that." Darin said happily.

"Oh yeah, Tan. When I talked to Brad we kind of made plans for all us guys to go camping out at the cabin by the lake one weekend." Rad said cautiously.

"Brad wants to go camping with us?" Tan asked darkly.

"No. Actually the twins came up with the idea and we invited Brad along." Rad said seriously.

"Okay. I guess that's alright. Just as long as he didn't invite himself." Tan said reluctantly.

"Would you go ask dad if he can come talk to me for a minute? I just need to clear a few things through him before we can call everything settled." Rad said seriously.

"Yeah, I'll go get him now." Tan said quickly and rushed away from the terminal.

"I like your brother, he seems like a good kid." Darin said quietly.

"He really is. I hope my dad is willing to go along with this because I think it's the best thing for him." Rad said with concern.

* * * * *

"Your catsup." The waiter said as he placed a bowl of catsup beside Lehman.

"Thanks." Lehman whispered, then spooned a little bit of the catsup onto his meat.

Conversation around the table stopped as they watched Lehman take a small bite of his meat.

Lehman considered the flavor, then smiled.

He looked around the table and noticed everyone watching him.

"It really is better. Would you like to try some Holy One?" Lehman asked quietly as he scooted the bowl of catsup closer to Tyce's plate.

Tyce smiled at the offer and said, "Yes. I believe I would."

After a moment to spoon a small dab of catsup onto a piece of meat, Tyce carefully took a bite.

His eyes widened in surprise, then he said, "You should all try this. It is very good."

Over the course of the next few minutes, the bowl of catsup made it's way around the table and everyone had tried some.

Everyone, even the captain, was in agreement that the catsup added something to the flavor that made the filet mignon taste better.

"Holy One, when the time comes to begin trade negotiations with the Federation, will you endorse the action?" Treifa asked seriously.

Tyce considered the question carefully while he ate, then said, "I would consider endorsing trade between our people if certain conditions are met."

"What conditions?" Captain Treas asked cautiously.

"First, it would be necessary to have honest people to oversee the trade. I am concerned that the people given this responsibility will become corrupt and seek to line their own pockets at the expense of our people." Tyce said seriously.

"Perhaps representatives from each province could be appointed by the provincial governors to oversee the operation." Oluf said in thought.

Tyce shook his head and said, "I don't trust the governors and I am against the whole idea of appointees. I believe the people should be allowed to select one from each province by popular vote. The process may be slower, but it will reflect the trust and will of the people."

"I like that idea very much." Captain Treas said happily.

"What else?" Treifa asked cautiously.

"Once the representatives are chosen and trade is established, we need to make sure we put catsup on the list of things we want to import."

Smiles and chuckles went around the room at the statement.

Chapter 26

Vincent and Dr. Xon appeared out of thin air and found themselves standing in a park.

"Are we in the right place?" Vincent asked curiously.

Dr. Xon raised his tricorder to perform a brief scan, then said, "Yes. Your alternate self should be approximately twenty meters in that direction."

Vincent looked in the direction Dr. Xon indicated and froze in shock.

Dr. Xon looked curiously at Vincent, then said, "We must proceed."

"But... that's my mom." Vincent whispered.

Dr. Xon looked where Vincent was staring, then quietly said, "Events in this alternate universe appear to have unfolded much differently from yours. I did not have sufficient time to catalog the differences. I apologize for not anticipating this possibility."

Vincent looked at Dr. Xon curiously for a moment and was surprised to see true remorse in his eyes.

"It's okay. I know you didn't do it on purpose." Vincent said quietly as he slowly turned his gaze back to his mother.

Vincent continued to stare until he felt Dr. Xon's hand on his shoulder urging him to walk.

The woman noticed two people approaching and stopped fussing over the food she was putting out on the picnic table.

"Greetings." Dr. Xon said formally at the woman's inquisitive stare.

"Hello. That's a really great costume. My hus..." She said, then noticed Vincent.

Vincent stared at the alternate version of his mother, not knowing what he should say.

"Vinny? What did you do to your hair and who's your new friend?" Peggy asked cautiously.

"I... um, it's kind of a long story." Vincent stammered.

"Mom! Dad wants to know if you're ready for him to start the burgers or if we have time to try the kite?" Lawrence called as he ran up to the table.

When he saw Vincent and Dr. Xon he froze in his tracks.

He stared at Vincent for a moment, then looked behind him and saw his brother and father playing catch with a Frisbee.

Vincent followed his gaze and was astounded to see himself playing Frisbee and having fun in the park.

"Who are you?" Lawrence asked in wonder as he stared at Vincent again.

Vincent blinked, then said, "Crewman Vincent Winters."

"Larry, get your father over here." Peggy said in a flustered voice.

"Yeah." Lawrence said absently, then ran off at full speed.

"Mrs. Winters, we need to..." Dr. Xon began to say, but was interrupted.

"Silva." Peggy said firmly.

Dr. Xon raised an eyebrow in question.

"I divorced Victor about six years ago, I'm Peggy Silva now." She said seriously.

"Silva? Like principal Silva?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yes, Mitch and I have been married for almost four years." Peggy said with a peaceful smile.

"What is it Peggy?" Mr. Silva asked as he ran to Peggy's side with the boys following a step behind.

"You need to see this." Peggy said and motioned to Vincent and Dr. Xon.

Mitch looked at Vincent, then down at his youngest son who was now at his side.

"This might take a little explaining." Vincent said hesitantly, feeling the stares of everyone on him.

* * * * *

"Ray? How are you doing? Is everything alright?" Rad's father asked as he took a seat in front of the terminal.

"Can Tan hear us?" Rad asked cautiously.

"No, I left him chunking up the vegetables for our stew tonight. What's going on?" Rad's father asked with concern.

"Tan didn't come home from school a couple days ago. Everyone's been running around looking for him. They thought he'd been abducted." Rad said frankly.

"I'm sorry to hear that. He arrived here last night and it didn't occur to me to call and make sure they knew where he was."

Rad looked at his father cautiously for a moment, then said, "Dad, you're not very good at lying. You should really stick to the truth."

"Fine. He told me that he ran away and I promised that I wouldn't tell anyone he was here."

Rad nodded and said, "That's better. So how is he?"

Rad's father looked down in thought, then finally said, "Feeling alone in the world."

"Do you mind him being there?" Rad asked cautiously.

"Not at all. I've always liked Tan, he's a good kid."

Rad smiled and said, "I was thinking that, if you wanted to, we might work it out with Mom so Tan could stay there for a while."

"A while?" Rad's father asked cautiously.

"Like maybe until he's eighteen?" Rad asked hesitantly, closely watching his father's reaction.

"Why don't we just say that he can stay until he's ready to leave for college? I don't want him to get the feeling that I've marked the calendar and I'm waiting for the day to come when I can throw him out."

Rad let out a gust of breath in relief and said, "Yeah. That'd be great. If he tried to go back to Mom's, sooner or later something would happen to cause a blow up and he'd end up running away again... and this time we might not be able to find him."

"I think you're right."

"Besides, I think he needs a role model as much as a friend." Rad said quietly.

"I see what you mean. Your mom is a wonderful person, but she's not a shining example of how an adult should behave. And from what I hear, her boy-toy is just about worthless."

"Come on Dad, you know that Brad is trying. That's a lot more than I can say for Tan's father. I doubt that he's talked to Tan more than five times in the past ten years." Rad said with disgust.

Rad's father nodded sadly and said, "I guess you're right. I know that Brad is doing his best. He doesn't have a mean bone in his body... or a smart one."

Rad smiled and nodded, then said, "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you guys out."

"Stay here with me when you get back to Earth. It'll be good to spend some time with you and I think Tan needs more than one role model."

"Okay, I'll do that as long as you don't mind if I bring my new boyfriend. Dad, this is Darin. Darin, this is my dad, Drake Radovanovich." Rad said gently.

"It's nice to meet you Darin. Don't tell me Ray finally found someone crazy enough to put up with all his hijinks." Rad's father

"It's nice to meet you too. And it's possible that I am crazy enough for him... we'll just have to find out." Darin said with a fond smile at Rad.

"So Dad, is there anything else I can do to help you and Tan?"

Drake considered for a moment, then said, "Smooth things over with your mom. If you can manage that, I think everything else will be fine."

"I'm on it. Oh, and when I get back to Earth, do you think all us guys could have a get-away weekend at the cabin?" Rad asked hopefully.

"Sure, that sounds like a lot of fun. Count me in."

"I already invited Brad."

"Oh, then strike that part about fun. It sounds painful and awkward. You're welcomed to use the cabin, but I'll pass."

"Please think about coming with us Dad. You might be able to help Mom and all the kids out by giving Brad a few pointers. You know, now that you're older and wiser." Rad finished with a smile.

Rad's father thought for a moment, then quietly said, "I suppose I should. Otherwise I'll probably have Shayd and Shadoe living here in a few months."

"And Mike not too long after that." Rad said with a smile.

After a nod, Drake said, "Go work on your mom and let me know when everything's settled."

"You got it. I love you Dad." Rad said with a warm smile.

"I love you too Ray. Be safe."

* * * * *

"Perhaps once we've come to some sort of terms, you might stop blocking our communications long enough for me to let my priests know what's going on. I'm sure they're quite concerned by now." Tyce said casually as he looked at Treifa and Gartain.

"I was able to get a brief message through to the home world before the hostile ships returned." Oluf said cautiously.

Tyce looked at Oluf with surprise, then hesitantly asked, "What did you tell them?"

"I told them that a number of Okudai military ships had been pursuing us for days and that we suffered severe damage." Oluf said with caution at Tyce's expression.

"And..." Tyce prompted.

"...and that a Federation vessel came to our aid moments before we would have been destroyed." Oluf said cautiously.

Tyce thought for a moment, then quietly asked, "Who did you talk to?"

"The senior priest, Adelaide." Oluf said, and looked as if he were about ready to run and hide.

Tyce closed his eyes and hung his head as he concentrated on the situation.

"What's wrong?" Lehman asked in a whisper.

Tyce slowly raised his head, then turned to Lehman and quietly said, "Of all my priests, Adelaide has to be the most flighty and high strung."

After taking a deep breath to calm himself, Tyce turned to Oluf and slowly said, "At least they know that I am safe aboard the *Yorktown*."

"Our transmission was cut off before I could complete my report." Oluf said hesitantly.

Tyce nodded silently.

Looks flashed around the table as everyone tried to understand the implications of what had been said.

"So the news of attack has reached Okuda Prime. Knowing Adelaide, the video transmission of your report has probably been sent to every media center throughout the system." Tyce said in a considering voice.

"He wouldn't really do that would he? I mean, it would cause complete anarchy." Treifa asked cautiously.

"Given Adelaide's nature, I feel comfortable saying that by now every person in the Okudai system has probably seen Oluf's report at least once." Tyce said seriously.

"What are we going to do?" Traiel asked as he realized the gravity of the situation.

"Stop blocking communications. I need to talk to the home world if there is to be any chance of stopping this before it grows out of control." Tyce said firmly.

Gartain looked at Traiel with question and received a nod.

"I will need to contact my ship." Gartain said hesitantly.

"Of course." Captain Byrne said as he stood.

The captain walked to the wall and pressed a button which caused a panel to open and reveal a large view screen.

"We sometimes have conferences in here." the captain explained as he pressed the main comm button.

"Communications." Debbie said professionally.

Captain Byrne stepped aside so Gartain could speak.

"Would you please connect me with the first officer of the *Timmeraeon*?"

"Right away." Debbie said then the screen went blank.

A moment later a dark haired woman appeared on the screen, looking curious.

"It appears that the situation may have changed. Stop jamming communications and open a channel to Okuda Prime." Gartain said forcefully.

"Perhaps we should survey the situation before we have our talk." Tyce said in thought.

After a moment of thought, Gartain said, "Agreed. See if you can lock onto a news broadcast."

"Yes.... right away." The woman said quickly.

"Treela, will you relay the news transmission to us?" Gartain asked cautiously.

"Yes sir." The woman said quickly, then the screen changed to show Oluf talking in a panicked voice.

"You called that one." Lehman said as he walked to Tyce's side and looked at the screen carefully.

A commentator came onto the screen and said, "If you'll look in the background, you can see the damage and two bodies."

"Not good." Treas said absently as she watched the screen.

"We say again, the High Priest Oluf was unable to tell us of the condition of our Holy One before the transmission was jammed at it's source. All we know is that it was our own ships that caused this death and destruction you see in the background. From Oluf's brief statement it appears that an alien ship named '*Yorktown*' came to defend our Holy One from his own people!" The commentator said as his face began to turn red with fury.

"It's worse than I thought." Tyce said reluctantly.

"The colonies of Andarka, Kerova, Greater and Lesser Nistruum and Vennis have called back all officials from Okuda Prime and announced that they will no longer follow any orders given by the central government... or in the words of Governor Janke, 'The murderous bastards who attacked our beloved Holy One'." the commentator said seriously.

"The government won't allow..." Treifa began to say when the commentator continued, "President Malif has issued orders that military ships be dispatched to assume control of each of the named colonies, but as yet, no military ships have launched. Apparently, a significant number of our brave soldiers are having difficulty interpreting their oath of service to mean that they should turn their weapons on their own people whose only crime is showing support for the Holy One who is beloved to us all."

"I've seen enough." Tyce said as he turned away.

"Holy One, you need to let the people know that you're not injured before this degenerates into a revolution." Captain Treas said quickly.

"Why should I? You and your fellow captains chased me all the way out here with the intention of killing me. Perhaps I should ask for sanctuary in the Federation and let you and your friends sort this whole mess out." Tyce said darkly.

"That wouldn't be right. We need you in your proper place." Traiel said forcefully.

"And why should I concern myself with your needs?" Tyce asked in a considering voice, then walked to Audge's side as he continued, "Could it be because you believe that I'm not really the Holy One. Maybe you think I'm the shape shifter that you sent to kill me and take my place?"

Traiel looked at Tyce with disbelief.

"I'm not him Traiel. I was going to pretend with you a while longer in hopes that you would reveal who is pulling your strings. But I've since realized that it doesn't matter. You wanted a world without a Holy One. Now you've got one. I've discovered that I want to have a life that's my own. Let's just part company and make us both happy." Tyce said in a snarl.

"You can't!" Captain Gartain barked.

Tyce turned to Captain Byrne and asked, "Captain, do you think it would be possible for me to join JonJon's colony?"

"I'm sure they would be honored to have you." Captain Byrne said formally.

"Yes. And even if they aren't honored, at least they won't conspire to kill me." Tyce said seriously before turning to face the captains again.

Treifa took two steps forward, then knelt down on one knee before Tyce.

"I regret my part in the plot against you Holy One. Here, before everyone, I swear my loyalty to you. Please forgive me." Treifa said with his head bowed.

"Arise Treifa. You are forgiven." Tyce said gently.

Captain Treas stepped forward and also got down on one knee.

"I'm sorry Holy One. I thought I was helping to provide a better future for my grandchildren." she said in remorse.

"Arise Captain Treas, I can see the pain these decisions have caused you and know that your actions were taken out of love and concern, not malice or greed." Tyce said gently.

Captain Treas nodded as she slowly stood.

Captain Gartain began to step forward when Tyce held up his hand.

"I see no remorse in your soul. Only a desire to ally yourself with the other captains so you will not be held accountable in the coming days. Captains Gartain and Traiel, I would advise that you not return to the Okuda system.

If you do, you will not only stand accused of crimes against me, but also of crimes against Lehman, the Chameloid that you had surgically altered so he would be able to take my place. You have violated the highest laws of Okuda with this barbaric act and I will personally testify to assure that you are convicted for the pain you have caused." Tyce said in a voice that was nearly a growl.

"I... I didn't..." Captain Gartain began to protest.

"Save your lies. I have the ability to read your SOUL!" Tyce finished in a scream.

"Holy One." Oluf said and pointed at the view screen.

The image was of an explosion at the main gate of the presidential palace.

"Yes. Captain, could you possibly contact the main church on Okuda Prime. As nice as it would be to go to the new colony, these are my people and they need me." Tyce said with resignation.

"I would be honored to help however I can Holy One." Captain Byrne said reverently, then hit the main comm button.

* * * * *

"I don't understand what's going on here. Who are you?" Mr. Silva said cautiously.

"Um, I'm Crewman Vincent Winters, Petty Officer second class from the USS *Yorktown*." Vincent said shyly.

"No. I mean, who are you really?" Mr. Silva asked as he looked at Dr. Xon carefully.

"I don't know what you're asking. That's who I really am." Vincent said as he looked around at everyone staring at him.

"I am Dr. Xon, a Federation scientist." Dr. Xon said as he watched their examination of him.

"It's not a costume." Mr. Silva said as he cautiously reached out to touch one of Dr. Xon's ears.

"No sir. It is not." Dr. Xon said as he remained perfectly still.

"That's not possible. Star Trek is just a TV show." Peggy said carefully.

"Star Trek?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Yeah. It's this really cool show about people who travel through space and meet all kinds of really cool aliens and get into space battles and stuff like that." Vinny said quickly.

"Yeah. It's about the *Enterprise* and Captain Kirk." Lawrence said slowly as he stared at Vincent.

"So there's no Federation or Starfleet here?" Vincent asked in surprise.

"Just in the TV show." Vinny said frankly.

"What are you doing here?" Mr. Silva asked curiously as he took a step back out of Dr. Xon's personal space.

"Well, I think it might be really hard to explain. If you don't have Starfleet, then you probably don't know much about time travel." Vincent said carefully.

"Try me. I've been watching science fiction since I was Vinny's age." Mr. Silva said frankly.

Vincent looked up at Dr. Xon to explain.

"I have been studying a time portal called The Guardian of Forever on a distant planet..." Dr. Xon said slowly.

"The City on the Edge of Forever." Mr. Silva said with a nod.

"Pardon?" Dr. Xon asked curiously.

"Let's see, that's the one where Dr. McCoy accidentally injects himself with an overdose of cordriazine and beams down to the Guardian of Forever. A landing party follows him and after he steps through the guardian, the *Enterprise* disappears because he changed history. So Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock go back to try and stop him from doing whatever he did that changed the future." Mr. Silva said in concentration.

"Edith Keeler had to die." Vinny said slowly, straining his memory.

"I am astounded that you know of these facts. The existence of Gateway has been a well guarded secret in the Federation since Captain Kirk's discovery. The details of that encounter in the past are only available to the researchers." Dr. Xon said in surprise.

"Well, if you understand all that, then this shouldn't be too hard to explain." Vincent said, sounding relieved.

"Correct. Due to a transporter accident, Crewman Winters' quantum resonance signature was altered. This, in turn, caused Crewman Winters to

become disassociated with his own universe. The consequence of this disassociation would result in all the incarnations of Crewman Winters in all alternate universes to be removed from existence. With the assistance of the Guardian of Forever, we are traveling to select alternate universes so Crewman Winters can make physical contact with his alternate selves. The contact causes the quantum signatures to slightly realign and will, in theory, cause Crewman Winters to reassociate with his own dimension before a temporal/spatial convergence occurs." Dr. Xon said seriously.

After a long silent moment, Vinny said, "That made my head hurt."

"Mine too." Mr. Silva said as he put an arm around his son.

"If I can shake hands with your son for a couple seconds, we'll be done and you can get back to your picnic." Vincent said frankly.

"Is it going to hurt?" Vinny asked cautiously.

"No. It just tingles a little. You might feel funny for a few seconds afterward, but then it goes away." Vincent said with an assuring smile.

Vinny looked up at his dad with question.

"Do you have time to answer a few questions before you do that?" Mr. Silva asked cautiously.

Vincent turned to Dr. Xon and asked, "Do I?"

"We have eight point four nine minutes before the vortex will reopen." Dr. Xon said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then said, "Go ahead and ask me whatever you want to know."

* * * * *

"Tan?"

"No Mom. It's me." Rad said quietly.

"Brad said that you know where he is. How is he? Is he getting enough to eat?" She asked desperately.

"He's fine Mom. Is Brad around? I need to talk to you both." Rad said seriously.

"Something's wrong, I knew it. Is he in trouble? Is he in jail somewhere?" She asked with tears in her eyes.

"Mom. Get Brad and I'll tell you." Rad said firmly.

Rad's mother hopped up and ran into the next room.

"I really feel like I'm intruding on something private." Darin said quietly.

"I feel like I'm watching a soap opera." Joe said with a teasing smile at Rad.

Rad chuckled and said, "Thanks Joe. That put everything right back into perspective."

Darin looked curiously at Joe and smiled at the way he had just diffused the emotions of the situation.

"He's coming. Now where's Tan?"

"Mom. Tan's with my dad." Rad said firmly.

"How did he get there? Did your father come down and get him?" She asked in confusion.

"No. I don't know how he did it, but Dad said that Tan showed up there last night." Rad said seriously.

"Why didn't he call me? I've been worried sick!" She said in an increasing voice.

"He didn't call because Tan asked him not to. I'm pretty sure Dad felt that it was more important right then to let Tan know that he was somewhere safe and that he was with someone he could trust." Rad explained calmly.

"Rayne explained a few things to me and I think I understand why he left." Brad said quietly.

"Why?" She asked in a helpless voice.

"He left because he's growing up. I've been treating all the kids the same, like they're all four years old. He couldn't handle me watching over him every second and had to get away." Brad said quietly.

"You're not quite as dense as I thought." Rad said with a smile at his old friend.

"Yes I am, you're just really good at explaining things." Brad said shyly.

"You've given me a lifetime of practice." Rad said with a chuckle.

"So when is Tan coming home?"

Rad glanced away for a moment, then looked his mother in the eyes as he said, "I don't know if he will come home. I think maybe he'll be better off at my dad's for a while."

"He needs to be here with me. Drake isn't even his father." She said as tears started streaking down her cheeks again.

"No, he's not. But I think Brad explained the problem perfectly. Tan needs someone to relate to him as a teenager. He needs a father to help guide him into adulthood. No offense Brad, but with the feelings between you and Tan already, I don't think there's any way you could be that for him. Dad may not have been the best husband that ever was, but he's a great father." Rad finished firmly.

Janet reluctantly nodded her agreement.

"Do you think he'll come visit?" Brad asked as he held his wife gently at his side.

"I think he might if you invite him. It might not hurt if you let him know up front that you're not going to try to talk him into staying while he's there." Rad said seriously.

"I'll do that." Brad said in nearly a whisper.

"Dad also said that it would be okay if we borrow the cabin for a weekend. He might even join us if he's free." Rad said with a smile.

"Did he really say that? I got the feeling that he hated me almost as much as you did." Brad said hesitantly.

"He doesn't hate you. Hopefully he'll be able to tell you that for himself when we have our weekend." Rad said with a smile.

"Thanks for all your help Rayne." Janet said as she hugged Brad tightly to her side.

"No problem Mom. But next time, call me as soon as it happens. You don't need to be worrying like this." Rad said frankly.

"You have your own life now. You'll never find someone to settle down with if your crazy old mother is always calling about every little thing that goes wrong." She said frankly.

"You're not old." Rad said seriously, then after a second broke into a smile.

Everyone started to chuckle at the statement.

"And since you brought it up. Mom, Brad, this is my boyfriend Darin. Darin, this is my mom Janet Curry and her latest husband, Brad." Rad finished with a smile.

"It's nice to meet you Darin. And just wait until you get home Rayne, you're not so old that I can't put you over my knee." Janet said playfully.

"Mom! Not in front of my friends!" Rad said in a scandalized voice.

"Hi Joe! I didn't see you there." Janet said with a wave.

"Hi Janet. It's nice to see you again. How are things going?" Joe asked with a smile.

"You know me. Same ole, same ole." Janet said with a secretive smile.

"That's good... Wait! The last time you said that..." Joe began to say when Rad interrupted.

"Mom! You're not!" Rad said desperately.

"The doctor confirmed it Monday. Apparently I had one egg left and my little stud here found it." Janet said with a playful smile.

Rad looked up at Joe and said, "Eww. I was planning to eat later."

"Congratulations you two. I'm happy for you." Joe said with a smile.

"Thanks Joe." Janet said happily.

"Yeah. It really is great news. I'm happy for you both." Rad said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks Rayne. You don't even know how good it is to hear you say that." Janet said as she hugged her husband tightly.

"Well, we're on subspace so I'd better end it soon. Brad, would you do one thing for me before we get back to earth?" Rad asked hopefully.

"Sure, what is it?" Brad asked cautiously.

"The next time you and Mom are getting all romantic and stuff, just remember... I came outta that thing." Rad said with a smile.

Brad got a confused look, which slowly turned sour.

"Love you Mom. Bye." Rad said quickly and ended the transmission.

* * * * *

"Holy One! It's so good to see you! A middle aged priest said with relief.

"Hello Adelaide. Would you get Chaundra for me?" Tyce asked carefully.

"Are you well Holy One? Do you need assistance?" the priest asked frantically.

"Adelaide! Get Chaundra!" Tyce barked.

The priest froze for a moment, then ran out of the room.

"Is he going to get in trouble for sending that report to the media?" Lehman asked from Tyce's side.

Tyce smiled at Lehman's concern and said, "No. Adelaide was acting true to his nature. I can't help but believe that the forces that guide the events of the universe arranged for him to be the one to accept the transmission. There is more going on here than I originally thought."

An elderly woman walked before the screen and bowed reverently.

"Summoned, I come." She said in a quiet voice.

"Chaundra, favored of Austir, it is time to prepare the way for the new age." Tyce said formally.

"I recognized the signs. All is in readiness." Chaundra said, still looking down.

"Then connect me with Malif. It's time." Tyce said firmly.

* * * * *

"Have you ever seen the *Enterprise*?" Vinny asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I even got to eat dinner there once." Vincent said proudly.

"Did you get to meet Captain Kirk?" Mr. Silva asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I didn't really get to talk to him or anything, but I got to meet him." Vincent said with a smile.

"What about you Dr. Xon? Have you been on the *Enterprise* or met Captain Kirk?" Lawrence asked curiously.

"Unfortunately, I am unable to answer those questions. Crewman Winters and I are from the same dimension, but from different times. I cannot allow him to return to his own time and dimension with any specific knowledge of the future." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Otherwise you risk creating a temporal paradox." Mr. Silva said speculatively.

"Correct." Dr. Xon said and seemed to be impressed.

"So Crewman Winters..." Mr. Silva began to say.

"You can call me Vincent if you want." Vincent said quickly.

"Thank you Vincent. So what's it like being a crewman?" Mr. Silva asked curiously.

"Oh, it's great. I'm in a mentoring program so I can learn to be an officer and I work in deflector control." Vincent said happily.

"Oh wow. Do you get to work the deflector dish?" Vinny asked with excitement.

"Well, not really. The person who runs the main console really does that. But what I do is make sure that all the power systems and command systems and consoles are working right so whoever is running the main has everything they need." Vincent said with a smile.

"That must be so great! I wish I could live in space and go to different planets and meet all kinds of different aliens like you do." Vinny said in wonder.

Vincent took a step forward and looked his alternate self in the eyes as he said, "Even though it sounds like fun, traveling through space and all that stuff isn't half as good as being able to have a picnic with your family."

"What happened to your family Vincent?" Peggy asked with concern.

"My mom and dad died. But before they died we didn't do things like this. Not since I was a little kid." Vincent said as he glanced at the picnic table.

"Why not?" Mr. Silva asked quietly.

"Because we were all scared of my dad's moods. We tried to be quiet and keep away from him so we wouldn't make him mad. I didn't even know I was doing it back then, but we all just knew that we had to be quiet and not disagree with him or do anything that might set him off." Vincent said distantly.

"What a horrible way to live. Is that what would have happened if I stayed with Victor?" Peggy said as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Yeah, probably. I never lived any other way so I didn't know there was anything wrong with it until they died. Now that I'm living on the *Yorktown*, I'm happy just about all the time. Everyone is really nice and they all treat me like any other member of the crew." Vincent said happily.

"I'm very glad to hear that." Mr. Silva said as he put a comforting arm around his wife.

Vincent looked into Vinny's eyes again and said, "So do you see? I get to live on a starship and do all that stuff, but I don't have a mom to tuck me in at night or a dad to take me to the park and play with me. My brother has his own life and I probably get to see him more on a view screen than I do in real life. As good as my life is, you've got all the stuff that really matters."

"Okay. I won't wish it again." Vinny said quietly.

Vincent reached into his pocket and took out one of the couplers that he had been carrying.

"This is a coupler from my ship." Vincent said as he handed it to Vinny.

"Thanks. What does it do?" Vinny asked as he looked at the small metal device.

"It holds things together the way a nut and bolt does." Vincent said with a smile as he watched his other self happily.

"Thanks. It's really awesome." Vinny said with a big smile.

"Dr. Xon? Are you ready?" Vincent asked over his shoulder.

"Proceed." Dr. Xon said as he turned on his tricorder.

"Will you shake my hand?" Vincent asked gently.

"I'd rather have a hug." Vinny said shyly.

Vincent smiled and said, "Me too. Come on."

Vincent pulled Vinny into a firm hug and felt the electrical tingle spread through his body.

"It feels funny... kinda nice." Vinny said as he snuggled tighter into the hug.

Vincent giggled and said, "Yeah. I like it too."

"Three... two... one." Dr. Xon said formally.

Vincent reluctantly let go of his alternate self and smiled when he saw the peaceful look in his eyes.

"I guess we're going to have to go soon. I've got to go back to my own dimension." Vincent said quietly.

"It was a pleasure to meet you Vincent. Now that we know that Star Trek is being lived for real somewhere, we're going to watch it every time it's on. Maybe someday we'll even see you on there." Mr. Silva said with a smile.

Vincent looked up into the man's gentle eyes, then reached into his pocket and pulled out the last coupler he was carrying.

"Here. I'd like you to have this." Vincent said shyly.

"Thank you Vincent." Mr. Silva said with astonishment.

"Crewman Winters, it is nearing time to depart." Dr. Xon said firmly.

"Okay, I'm almost ready." Vincent said, then hurried to Lawrence.

"Do you know anyone named Deacon?" Vincent asked seriously.

"No. Why?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"I just know what happened in my dimension. If you find a guy named Deacon, be nice to him. He's a really good guy." Vincent said, then gave Lawrence a quick hug.

"Crewman Winters, we have fifty-five seconds." Dr. Xon said seriously.

"Be right there." Vincent said as he hurried to stand before the alternate version of his mother.

"It was good to meet you Vincent." Peggy said with a peaceful smile.

"It was good to meet you too. I've only got a few seconds, but there's something I didn't get to do before my mom died and I wondered..." Vincent trailed off, not knowing how to ask.

"I understand. Go ahead." Peggy said gently.

"I love you mommy." Vincent said as he ran to her and gave her a tight hug.

"I love you too baby." Peggy said in a whisper as tears filled her eyes.

"Five... Four..." Dr. Xon said without emotion.

Vincent gave Peggy a quick kiss on the cheek, then ran to Dr. Xon's side.

"Bye!" Vincent said as he took Dr. Xon's hand.

As everyone said 'Goodbye' in unison, the world faded away from Vincent's sight.

* * * * *

"Do you think your brother is going to be alright there with your father?" Darin asked with concern.

"Yeah. My dad is great. He'll make sure that Tan gets put on the right track." Rad said as he stood.

"From the few times that I've talked to your father, I get the feeling that he's a very secure and self assured person." Joe said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I guess so. He always seems to be... on target. Like he knows where he's going and exactly what he has to do to get there. I stayed with him for almost a year before I entered the academy. He taught me a lot." Rad finished with a peaceful smile.

"I think I'd enjoy getting to know him." Darin said with a smile at Rad.

"That's good, because we're going to be staying with him while we're on shore leave." Rad said with a grin.

Darin noticed that Joe was looking around and quickly asked, "Joe, would you like to have dinner with us?"

"That's alright. I know you two don't get to spend a lot of time together." Joe said gently.

"C'mon Joe. It's not like we're inviting you to join us for sex. Just a conversation over meatloaf." Rad said with a roll of his eyes.

Joe smiled at the comment, then noticed a blush rising up Darin's face.

"And besides, this is one of the things we enjoy doing as a couple. We like to spend time with our friends." Rad said in an urging tone.

"Yeah, you're important in both our lives, so we want to spend time with you." Darin said seriously.

"Thanks guys. As long as you're sure I won't be intruding, I'd love to have dinner with you." Joe said warmly.

"Good. Come on, we'd better get him out of here before he can find another excuse." Rad said with a teasing smile.

Joe chuckled, then looked across the room at Connie and said, "Darin and I have our communicators if you need anything."

"Got it boss. Enjoy your dinner." Connie said with a quick smile, then turned his full attention back to the console.

After one last look around the room to see that everything was normal, Joe walked to follow Rad and Darin.

* * * * *

"Holy One, it's good to see that you are well." Malif said in a formal voice.

"Thank you. And rest assured that you *are* speaking to the Holy One, not the Chameloid that was sent to take my place." Tyce said firmly.

"Pity. I liked that plan. It would have made everything work out much more smoothly." Malif said without concern.

"Let's get down to business. I know that you sent the ships to hunt me down and kill me. But considering the media event that apparently just happened, perhaps there is a way we can set our dispute aside long enough to concentrate on what to do for the benefit of our people." Tyce said frankly.

Malif chuckled and said, "Media event? Don't worry about that. My soldiers have taken control of the media. The people will only know what I choose to tell them."

"The people already know that you sent ships to attack me. And when I return, I'm going to call for free elections. How can you possibly believe that events are working in your favor?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Because the people are mindless drones. Since I have control of the media, I can tell them what to believe. And as far as you returning, even with a Federation escort, you will never survive the trip back to Okuda Prime." Malif said with a cold smile.

Tyce looked at him cautiously, then quietly asked, "What have you done?"

"I've done what the Holy One's have been afraid to do. I've begun to form alliances outside the Okudai system. And as a symbol of our alliance, my new friends are going to send an armada of warships to destroy you." Malif said with a malicious grin.

Tyce thought for a moment, then looked at Malif with sudden realization.

"You can't mean that you've formed an alliance with the Gorn?" Tyce asked with dread.

"As a matter of fact, I have." Malif said proudly.

"You ignorant fool..." Tyce said as he shook his head.

"The Gorn will expand their empire to include us. We will become part of a force that can rival the Federation!" Malif said in triumph.

"Malif, you've allied yourself with devils. The Gorn won't include us in their empire, they will enslave us. All mammals are food to them, our people will become their cattle." Tyce said in panic.

"I have been assured that only a small portion of the population will be reserved as consumables and breeding stock... The outer colonies most likely. But the government is going to be given a fleet of Gorn warships to command so we can move out of this system and finally begin to expand our influence." Malif said happily.

"President! Stop!" A man said as he ran into the room.

"I'm on a private call. What is it?" Malif asked with irritation.

"It's not private. It's being transmitted all over the system." the man said breathlessly.

Malif looked at his screen and saw Tyce smiling back at him.

"How could you, I have control of the media centers..." Malif asked in shock.

"Every temple has it's own transmitter, we've just been waiting for this day." Tyce said seriously.

"Jam him, Gartain! Jam the signal!" Malif called in a scream.

"Since Dingovan is one of the outer colonies, I think that I will not." Gartain said in a growl, then turned away from the view screen.

"Traiel, stop him!" Malif said in a snarl.

"No. I have sealed my own fate, but to do this would condemn my son. That I will not do." Traiel said, then also turned away.

Tyce stood before the monitor and firmly said, "My people, you have seen and heard the truth for yourself. Just as with the cycles of nature, a season of cold and suffering precedes the dawn of a new age of growth and rebirth. I declare before you all, the new age has begun. It is time to rid ourselves of the greed and corruption that have plagued our society and brought despair to our people."

"Holy one!" Oluf said in shock.

"Silence!" Tyce barked, then continued to the view screen, "Soldiers of the old government, you will not be held to account for standing against your own people in this uncertain time, but now is the time for you to make your final choice. Will you be agents for the corruption and greed that have caused the suffering of your friends and families? Will you work to enslave

your own people so they can become the cattle of another race? Choose now."

"Holy one, do you know what you're saying?" Thaelan asked in shock.

Tyce nodded and continued, "People of Okuda! Hear me! RISE UP AND TAKE BACK OUR WORLD!"

Chapter 27

Vincent was only vaguely aware of landing on the sandy ground before the Guardian of Forever.

"Crewman Winters?" Dr. Xon asked cautiously.

Vincent gave no response as he stood staring into the Guardian's vortex while tears glided down his cheeks.

"Vincent?" Dr. Xon asked in a softer voice.

Vincent glanced at Dr. Xon with question as the tears continued to fall.

"I wish to offer my apologies for not anticipating the presence of your mother. Please understand that I did not do so intentionally." Dr. Xon said with concern.

"I know, it's okay. I just... when I went to my parents funeral the caskets were closed. I guess ever since then I felt like I didn't really get to say goodbye."

"So your tears are to express joy?" Dr. Xon asked uncertainly.

"Maybe some of my tears are happy. And I know some of them are sad, but I think some are just relieved to finally be able to say goodbye." Vincent said as he wiped his eyes.

"I understand. I am pleased that the experience of realigning your quantum signature had the side effect of providing closure to this painful emotional trauma."

Vincent considered the words for a moment, then said, "Yeah. That's exactly what happened. Seeing my mom in a place where she's happy kinda made some of the stuff that was hurting inside me feel better."

Dr. Xon walked to the rack of equipment and picked up his scanning device, then quirked one eyebrow at Vincent with question.

Vincent nodded that he was ready and waited to be scanned.

* * * * *

"Captain, there is a message for the Holy One from the *Nezratia*." Debbie's voice said seriously.

"*Nezratia*?" Tyce asked curiously as he looked around.

"That is my ship." Traiel said apprehensively.

"Please put it through." Tyce said as he turned his attention to the view screen.

"Holy One, I am Lomarr, son of Makiel. The crew of the *Nezratia* have heard your call to arms and taken the command staff and others loyal to Traiel into custody. Please forgive us Holy One, we were following our orders and did not know that you were aboard the *Dorsa* when we attacked. We thought we were defending our people from dissidents." Lomarr finished in a worried voice.

"Where is Tyber?" Traiel asked suddenly.

Lomarr looked at Traiel with disgust and said, "With the other traitors!"

"He wasn't any part of the plan. Please don't hurt him." Traiel said desperately.

Tyce looked at Traiel carefully for a moment, then said to the screen, "Lomarr, will you see that Traiel's son is transported to this ship?"

"Holy One?" Lomarr asked cautiously.

"Even though Traiel has committed heinous acts and broken the most sacred laws of our people, his son may be an innocent in all of this. Please have him transported so I may judge the proper course of action in regard to him." Tyce said firmly.

"Yes Holy One, right away." Lomarr said quickly and ended the transmission.

"Captain Byrne, we've just received a text message from the *Mangeon* saying that their crew is in mutiny." Debbie said quickly over the comm.

"I must return to my ship." Captain Treas said in panic.

"Please Captain, allow me to calm them first. Captain Byrne, may I speak to them?" Tyce asked with concern.

Captain Treas stopped and waited to see what was going to happen.

"Yes. Of course." Captain Byrne said, then pressed the comm button and said, "Please open a channel to the *Mangeon*."

"Yes sir, and there is an urgent call from the Okuda Central Ministry for the Holy One." Debbie said quickly.

Captain Byrne looked at Tyce with question.

"Please tell the ministry that I'll be with them in just a moment." Tyce said in a louder voice for Debbie to hear him over the comm.

"Yes Holy One." Debbie said quickly, then the screen changed to show a darkened room.

"Captain Treas, the crew are trying to take the ship. Holcoth is holding engineering and I still have control of the bridge. They've taken Mashal and Teik." The woman on the screen said in a desperate voice.

"If you can make a ship-wide announcement, perhaps we can resolve this matter." Tyce said calmly.

"Holy One?" The woman said as her eyes went wide.

"Please Tomie, patch us through to the entire ship so we can end this." Captain Treas said tenderly.

The woman, Tomie, gave Captain Treas a brief smile, then pressed some controls on the console before her.

"Attention all hands. The Holy One wants to make an announcement." Tomie said firmly, then glanced up hopefully.

"Crew of the *Mangeon*, this is 'The Holy One'." Tyce said in a booming voice.

"Captain Treas and I have discussed our concerns and found understanding between us. There is no need for you to take control of the ship. Captain Treas and I will be working toward a common goal, so if you will resume your duties, we will begin to forge the future together." Tyce said firmly, then looked at Captain Treas with question.

"Please release your prisoners and take your stations. None of you will be held to account for answering the call of the Holy One. Stand with me so we can provide him safe passage back to our home." Captain Treas said formally.

There was a moment of silence, then Tomie looked up with surprise at the screen.

"The fighting has stopped." She said in wonder.

"I will be transporting over right away. Get repair teams working on the most significant damage so we can be underway when we are needed." Captain Treas said seriously.

"Yes Captain." Tomie said with a serene smile.

Tyce looked at Captain Byrne and said, "Can you put me through to the ministry now?"

The Captain nodded and pressed a button on the comm panel to switch to another screen.

"Holy One, this is minister Falek of the Interior. Malif and his staff have been taken into custody and will be ready to stand trial when you arrive." The middle age man said with a look of worry in his eyes.

"Falek, stand down all military actions against our own people and prepare our defenses for a possible invasion. We need every ship that is space worthy launched and prepared to defend the Okudai system." Tyce said firmly.

The minister paled at the words and seemed uncertain of what to do.

"Malif has opened the door to some powerful enemies. His being deposed will not stop their acceptance of his invitation. Defend our people!" Tyce finished as he glared at the minister.

"Yes Holy One. Right away!" The minister said quickly.

"Holy One, if there is a need, perhaps I could petition the Federation to aid in your defense." Captain Byrne said cautiously.

Tyce thought for a moment, then shook his head and said, "There is one thing I can do to try to prevent this before we must call on outside help."

Everyone looked at Tyce with uncertainty, until Lehman said, "You're going to talk to them, aren't you? The Gorn?"

Tyce looked at Lehman with surprise at his observation, then hesitantly nodded.

* * * * *

"So what does it say? Is my quantum thingy all better?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"We have achieved a more precise correlation than I had anticipated. When the time shift occurs, you should have no difficulty." Dr. Xon said with accomplishment.

Vincent watched Dr. Xon's expression carefully.

"It is time for you to return to your own time and place in the universe Crewman Winters." Dr. Xon said as the emotion that had been showing fell away.

"Yeah. Um, can I see that tricorder for a second before I go?" Vincent asked and held out his hand.

Dr. Xon was surprised by the request, and hesitantly handed his tricorder to Vincent.

After a moment of looking over the main display screen, Vincent handed it back to him.

"What information were you seeking?" Dr. Xon asked curiously.

"It doesn't matter. What are you going to do after I leave? I mean, everything's fixed now, right?" Vincent asked curiously.

Dr. Xon thought about the question for a moment, then said, "When you return with your altered quantum signature, the universe should adjust back to it's original timeline. Once all is restored, I will continue my study of the Guardian of Forever. This event has shown the necessity of knowing how to restore time when damage has occurred to the past."

Vincent nodded, then looked at the gateway apprehensively.

Dr. Xon turned on his tricorder and began to make the necessary adjustments as he said, "Guardian of Forever, I seek your aid to restore the past."

"Such is my function. Such is my purpose. Ask the question that I may repair the fractured course of time." The Guardian said in a booming voice.

"Guardian of Forever, will you show me these temporal/spatial coordinates?" Dr. Xon asked seriously as he transmitted the coordinates to the Guardian.

"Look into the past that you may restore the future." The Guardian said as the portal began to show scenes in the mist.

"Prepare to step through Crewman Winters." Dr. Xon said as he watched the time flow carefully.

"Thank you Dr. Xon. I hope everything and everyone you remember comes back to you." Vincent said as he took his place before the portal.

"Go!" Dr. Xon said as the exact moment that he was looking for appeared in the mist.

Vincent stepped into the mist and seemed to be moving in slow motion as he traveled fifty years back through time.

* * * * *

Tyce turned when the doors opened and saw a familiar face.

The ten year old boy's black mop of hair was disheveled. He had a bruise on his cheek and a terrified look in his light brown eyes.

"Welcome Tyber, there is no need to be afraid." Tyce said gently.

Tyber saw his father and ran to pull him into a hug.

"There is something I must do to try to prevent a war, but once that is done I will speak with you." Tyce said gently, then walked to stand beside Captain Byrne.

"I must enter a specific subspace frequency to contact someone. Can you show me how?" Tyce asked Captain Byrne quietly.

"Of course Holy One. I will set the controls, then you can enter the frequency." Captain Byrne said in an equally quiet voice.

After a moment to set the comm unit to accept direct input of a frequency, Captain Byrne stood aside.

Tyce quickly keyed in a numerical sequence, then pressed the key to initiate the transmission.

There was a moment of silence, then a large reptile with mottled green/gray skin and solid black eyes filled the screen.

Tyce smiled and said, "J'Laad."

"J'Layiah?" The reptile asked uncertainly.

Everyone in the room looked at the screen in a mix of fear and awe.

"Yes Holy One, it's me." Tyce said firmly.

"You appear to have shed your skin again." J'Laad said with a note of amusement.

Tyce smiled at the statement and said, "Yes, if you want to look at it that way."

"It is good to see that you are well." J'Laad said more formally.

"Are you aware of the Gorn fleet approaching our space?" Tyce asked bluntly.

"I should say so! I travel with them." J'Laad said with amusement.

"What of our agreement?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"I was told that you had been dispatched. I attempted to contact you to verify this information, but received no reply. If you were dead, our agreement would have died with you." J'Laad said frankly.

"There was a plan to remove me from service. They attempted to dispatch me just after I had... shed my skin, so I was occupied with other matters and didn't see it coming. But thanks to the actions of some good and caring people, I'm happy to say that I survive." Tyce said and gave a fond glance at Captain Byrne.

"To attack when one is shedding is most dishonorable. It is good to see that you are well." J'Laad said with a serious nod.

"Then will you ask your fleet to return to your own space?" Tyce asked firmly.

"If you like, but it seems like such a waste since we have already made half the journey. Perhaps we could escort you back to your home world? It would also serve to protect you from any further plans to remove you from service." J'Laad said with a mischievous twinkle in his black, reptilian eyes.

Tyce thought for a moment, then said, "Perhaps. It has been generations since my people have seen the glory and majesty of the Gorn. Malif's willingness to form an alliance has proven that my people need to be reminded of just what lay beyond our borders."

J'Laad nodded with a mischievous smile.

"How far are you from my location?" Tyce asked in thought.

"At our current speed, we will join you in twelve hours. But we can be there in five if there is a need." J'Laad said seriously.

"No. Some of our ships have sustained damage and we could use the time for repairs. I will be expecting you to arrive in twelve hours." Tyce said in deep thought.

"Our sensors indicate that you are not on an Okudai ship. Is this correct?" J'Laad asked seriously.

"Yes. A Federation vessel came to my aid when my ship was attacked." Tyce said carefully.

"I trust that you will instruct the Federation creatures in the proper protocols before we arrive." J'Laad said in a leading tone.

"Yes Holy One. They have earned my trust, I will see that they behave properly." Tyce said formally.

"I look forward to our reunion Holy One. It has been far too long." J'Laad said with a peaceful smile.

"I agree. It will be good to see you again." Tyce said gently.

"Power and Might." J'Laad said firmly.

"Duty and Honor." Tyce said in response.

J'Laad nodded, then disconnected the transmission.

* * * * *

As Dr. Xon watched Vincent appear back in his own time, his attention was drawn away by the beeping communicator on his belt.

"Dr. Xon, you have a subspace transmission." A female voice said professionally.

"Thank you Dr. Lewis. Can you put it through to my communicator? I am nowhere near a terminal at the moment."

"He said you wouldn't be. I'm patching it through." Dr. Lewis said with a delighted chuckle in her voice.

"This is Dr. Xon."

"I'll never get used to you calling yourself that. You're just like your mother." A man's voice said with amusement.

"Dad? Is that you?" Dr. Xon asked with excitement.

"Who else would it be? I've been waiting for this exact day and time for fifty years so I could thank you for everything you did to help me, not just the quantum signature, but everything." The man said seriously.

"It was logical to do so." Dr. Xon said in his most reasonable voice.

"Joseph Xon Winters! You don't need to use your Vulcan routine with me. I know you better than that."

"Sorry Dad. I guess I fell into the habit over the past few hours. I'm so glad to hear your voice. I thought I'd lost you." Xon said with relief.

"That's better. Now you need to get your ass off that research planet and find yourself a woman and give me some grandkids!" Vincent said firmly.

"What?" Xon asked with confusion.

"I haven't said a word about you getting lost in your work because I knew that you had to so you could save the universe someday. Well you've done it! It's saved! Now go find yourself a nice woman... or man. Just find someone and make a happy life for yourself." Vincent said firmly.

"But my work..." Xon began to say.

"Your work is on a planet that exists outside the flow of time. I'm pretty sure it will still be there after you've taken some time for yourself. I bet you've got about thirty years of data that you could be compiling back here with your family and writing a bajillion papers that will make the scientific community go cross eyed. Joey, whether I'm nine or fifty-nine, I'm still your father and I love you. Come home." Vincent said seriously.

Xon wiped the tears out of his eyes and said, "You're right dad. Of course you always are. It's going to take me a few days to collect everything, but you can expect me to be home sometime next week."

"That's my boy." Vincent said happily.

"I love you dad, tell mom I love her too. Winters out." Xon said as tears streaked down his cheeks.

"She already knows, but I'll tell her. We love you too Joey, Winters out."

* * * * *

"I don't understand. You and the Gorn Holy One are friends?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Tyce smiled at Lehman and said, "Yes. Many races have Holy Ones who help to guide them. As I recall, the Chameloid Holy One is named Myscendria."

Lehman's eyes went wide at the name and he said, "The Reverend Mother Myscendria is a Holy One like you?"

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes. We have much to do. Come over here and help me to sort out what's going to happen to Tyber."

Lehman walked with Tyce to find Tyber still hugging his father desperately.

"Holy One, I never imagined that things could turn out this way. Please help me to provide a future for my son." Traiel said in a pained voice.

"Treifa, could you help me?" Tyce asked in thought.

Treifa hurried to Tyce's side and waited expectantly.

"Would you check on the status of the ships and see who is in control of them and when they will be prepared for the journey back to Okuda?" Tyce asked seriously.

"Yes Holy One." Treifa said quickly and hurried away.

"Gartain, come over here. We need to sort some things out." Tyce said seriously.

Captain Gartain looked at Tyce with indecision for a moment, but finally approached.

"Traiel and Gartain, you've sealed your fates. If you had just attacked me, it might be possible to forgive what you have done. But your mutilation of Lehman is beyond forgiveness. When you return to Okuda you will almost certainly be exiled for your crimes." Tyce said firmly.

"Holy One?" Lehman said quietly.

Tyce looked at him with question.

"You're safe and I'm still alive. What was done is finished. If it will make any difference, I will forgive them." Lehman said quietly.

Tyce smiled at the statement and pulled Lehman into a brief, one-armed hug.

"You are a good and honorable person Lehman. Your forgiveness does make a difference." Tyce said gently.

"So can you fix it so they won't be exiled?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"No. I don't think I can. You need to understand that it wasn't an error in judgment or a momentary lapse in reason that caused all this. It was a calculated plan born of greed. People like Traiel, Gartain and their allies have no place in our society. If they were allowed to remain among us, their true natures would eventually surface again to cause even more problems." Tyce said to Lehman, then turned to Traiel and Gartain and considered for a moment.

"If you return to Okuda and face trial, I believe that the outcome will almost certainly be exile on the third moon of Ikera." Tyce said seriously.

Traiel and Gartain both nodded their agreement.

"Lehman, since you were the one most hurt by them, what would you think if we gave them and their allies a ship and let them go on their way?" Tyce asked in a considering voice.

Lehman looked at Traiel and Gartain for a moment, then back at Tyce and nodded.

"Good. I believe that this will be the best thing for everyone involved. The only thing left to decide is what is to be done with Tyber." Tyce said seriously.

"I want him to go with me." Traiel said quickly.

"If that is his choice, then it will be so. But please consider carefully. If Tyber goes with you, he will be an exile from his own people. He will grow up knowing that he doesn't belong to any race or society. What he accomplishes in his life won't contribute to his community and when he dies, he probably won't be remembered." Tyce said frankly.

Traiel considered the words carefully, then said, "His mother died in childbirth. We don't have any close relatives. Who could take him? What else can I do?"

"If he chooses to, he could come with me." Tyce said seriously.

Tyber looked at Tyce with fear and uncertainty.

"Tyber would become a member of my household." Tyce said frankly.

"Like your servant?" Traiel asked cautiously.

"Like my brother." Tyce said seriously.

"I want to go with you." Tyber said to his father as he clutched onto him more tightly.

"I know. But the Holy One is right. If you came with me, chances are that you would have a short and unhappy future." Traiel said as he held his son tightly.

"I don't care. I don't want to leave you." Tyber said desperately.

"I know. But the fact of the matter is, if you came with me, it would hurt me every single day to know that you're suffering for the choices that I made. If you go with the Holy One, I can leave and know that you are in a safe place with people who will take good care of you." Traiel said as he pulled back to look in his son's eyes.

"Do you really want to leave me?" Tyber asked as his tears began to fall.

"No son. I want to hold you and keep you with me forever. But I've given up my right to have the things I want. The Holy One is being kind enough to give us a choice about what kind of opportunity you're going to have for

your future." Traiel said, trying to make his son see the importance of the choice before him.

"I... I'll go with the Holy One if that's what you really want." Tyber said in a shaky voice.

"Yes. That's what I really want. And there's one more thing." Traiel said as he looked deeply into his son's eyes.

Tyber looked at his father with question.

"I have brought shame to our family by being greedy and selfish. All I'm going to ask of you is to have lots of friends and become strong and smart. Live a good life and become a better man than I am. If you listen to the Holy One, I'm sure he'll tell you how to do that." Traiel said frankly.

"Okay. I will. I'll make you proud of me. I promise." Tyber said as tears filled his eyes again.

"Holy One. All our ships are at your command. All but the *Mangeon* have prisoners who have been identified as allies of Traiel or Gartain. We should be ready to be underway within eight hours." Treifa said seriously.

"Good. Get with the crew of the *Timmeraeon* and prepare their ship for an extended voyage. When it's ready, we will transport Captains Gartain and Traiel and all their allies onto that ship and allow them to go on their way." Tyce said seriously.

"Holy One?" Treifa asked in surprise.

"If they returned to Okuda, the best that they could hope for would be exile on a desolate moon at the edge of our system. It would be a closed off future without hope. At least this way, there is the possibility that they might find a new world and build a decent future for themselves. When they leave, my sincere hopes and best wishes will go with them." Tyce said honestly.

"I'll see to it." Treifa said with a peaceful smile.

"Thank you Holy One. It's better than we deserve." Traiel said quietly.

Captain Gartain looked at Traiel uncertainly.

"Tyber, please go with the Holy One now." Traiel said softly.

"I don't want to let you go. Please let me stay with you." Tyber said in a tearful voice.

"I'll see you again before I leave. Right now I have quite a few things to arrange if we're to have any hope of survival." Traiel said gently.

"You promise that I'll get to see you again before you go?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"I promise. I'll be back just as soon as I can." Traiel said seriously.

"Okay." Tyber said reluctantly as he let go of his father.

"I'll take good care of him." Tyce said quietly.

"Thank you Holy One. I never doubted it." Traiel said with a pained smile, then turned to Gartain and said, "Come on, we have a lot to do and very little time."

* * * * *

Vincent looked around the conference room for a moment, then slowly walked to the comm panel by the view screen.

He pressed the main comm button, then waited.

"Communications." The voice answered professionally.

"Can you connect me with Admiral Morrow at Starfleet Command on a secure channel?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Yes. I'll have him for you in just a moment." The communications worker said efficiently.

Vincent took a deep breath to brace himself, then watched as the Starfleet Logo filled the screen.

"Crewman Winters, can I assume that all went as planned?" Admiral Morrow asked cautiously.

"Yes sir. Dr. Xon believes that he has corrected my quantum signature and that his original timeline should be restored." Vincent said seriously.

"Good. Can I assume that you understand the seriousness of this matter and why it needs to remain classified?" Admiral Morrow asked as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Yes sir. I understand. I won't say where I went on subspace, but it's still classified fifty years from now." Vincent said seriously.

"Yes. You do understand. There is to be no report made of this event in official or personal logs. As far as history will ever know, this event did not occur." Admiral Morrow said, still holding Vincent's gaze.

"Yes sir." Vincent said professionally.

"Very well. As I understand the situation with your doppelgänger, they are having quite an interesting time in the officer's mess hall. Perhaps you should find some unobtrusive place to spend some time until their situation settles down and you can reveal your presence." Admiral Morrow said carefully.

"Yes sir. There's something that I think I need to do and this would be a good time to do it." Vincent said professionally.

"I'm glad that everything turned out well. Have a good evening Crewman Winters. Starfleet out." Admiral Morrow said, then closed the channel.

Vincent stared at the blank view screen for a moment, then looked at the ship's time.

Finally he came to a decision and started keying in instructions on the comm panel before him.

He knew it would have been faster to call communications and let them route the call for him. But Vincent felt that this was something that he needed to do by himself.

Finally he was connected with TerraMain's central communications complex and began to search the terminal directories, not knowing if the one he wanted even existed.

Vincent narrowed his search further and more precisely until he finally found what he was looking for.

After a deep breath to brace himself, Vincent pressed the final button to make the connection.

There was a long moment of silence, and Vincent began to wonder if maybe it was too late to be calling.

Finally the screen came to life and a hesitant voice said, "Hello? This is Mr. Silva."

* * * * *

"Um... Tyce? I'm starting to feel really shaky. I think something is wrong with me." Lehman said quietly.

"Audge can take you to sickbay." Tyce said immediately.

"No. He needs to stay here with you to protect you." Lehman said forcefully.

Tyce smiled at Lehman's protectiveness, then said, "Captain Byrne, is there someone who can accompany Lehman to the Sickbay? He isn't feeling well and I'm afraid he might not make it on his own."

The captain nodded, then summoned one of the waiters who had been standing by the door in case anyone needed anything.

"Please accompany this young man to the Sickbay." Captain Byrne said professionally.

"Yes sir." the waiter said immediately.

"Thank you sir." Lehman said in a quiet voice and followed the waiter out of the room.

"Dr. Perry will take good care of him." Captain Byrne said to Tyce with assurance.

"Thank you Captain. Even though I've only known him for a short time, I consider Lehman to be a trusted friend." Tyce said seriously.

The view screen came alive to show Falek looking extremely serious.

"What can I do for you Minister Falek?" Tyce asked calmly.

"Holy One, the counsel of governors has voted to allow me to assume the duties of president until an election can be scheduled. I have released control of the media centers, but thought that if you could make the announcement, it would have more meaning to the people than anything that I could say." Falek said seriously.

"Have you launched our military ships?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"Yes Holy One. Every space worthy ship that has any kind of weapons compliment has been launched. Each colony's force has been called to defend it's own world and the primary fleet is en route to take position at our border." Falek said firmly.

"Good. Make sure that all the ships are tied into one central communications frequency. I want to be able to address them all when I arrive." Tyce said carefully.

"I'll see that it's done." Falek said immediately.

"Good. If you'll activate the link to the media centers, I'll make the announcement." Tyce said calmly.

"Thank you Holy One." Falek said with relief, then keyed in the instruction on his console.

"People of Okuda. Malif and his co-conspirators have been taken into custody to await trial. The counsel of governors has elected Minister Falek to govern in his stead until free elections can be arranged to elect a new president. If Minister Falek would agree to it, I would like for Jessub, from the Mycien colony to be put in charge of the election preparations so we will be assured of an accurate vote. He has my complete trust." Tyce said carefully.

Falek looked surprised for a moment, then said, "Yes Holy One, I will see to it immediately."

Tyce smiled at his flustered state, then became serious again as he said, "People of Okuda, some evil and self-serving individuals orchestrated a plan to kill me so they could expand their influence outside our system and reap the benefits of associating with other species in the universe. Although their plan was born of greed and the allies they chose would have sought to enslave us, their underlying desire to grow beyond our borders is shared by many and is not necessarily bad."

Falek looked on with wide eyes of wonder, not having any idea of what the Holy One was going to say next.

"Not all of my attackers were evil. Some were people of good will who sought to improve all of your lives and believed the lies that they were told by Malif. One of these people is named Treifa. I judge him to be sincere in his desire to provide a better future for all of you and for our children. He has sworn his loyalty to me, but has proven through his actions that he will do whatever is necessary to improve the lives of you, his people. Therefore, I am giving my endorsement of Treifa for the office of president in the upcoming election." Tyce said, then motioned for Treifa to join him before the terminal.

"Thank you Holy One." Treifa said reverently.

"Further, I am endorsing Captain Treas of the *Mangeon* for candidacy for the office of Vice President. She has demonstrated not only her desire to improve the lives of our people, but her willingness to take action to make that desire a reality." Tyce said forcefully, then paused to allow everyone to consider his words.

"Change is frightening. And there will be many changes in the coming days. But if you all will listen to your hearts and do what is right, we can sweep the corruption out of our government and return our civilization to working order. When we have achieved that goal, we will begin to make plans to form alliances outside our system. To my left is Captain Byrne of the Federation starship *Yorktown*. When Malif's assassins were attacking me, Captain Byrne came to my aid and protected me. When the time comes that we are ready to form our first alliance, I will call upon the Federation to send the *Yorktown* to Okuda so we can begin negotiations." Tyce finished with a smile at Captain Byrne.

"Arm yourselves with knowledge. Seek truth before you make judgments. Take action when it is right to do so. And vote with your heart for the benefit of all our people. Thank you for your attention." Tyce said, then looked at Falek with question.

Falek blinked a few times, then stammered as he said, "Thank... thank you Holy One. I will do my best to serve our people well until the elections are held."

Tyce smiled at Minister Falek and nodded.

"People of Okuda, you have heard the words of the Holy One. Let us prepare ourselves, the time of change has come." Minister Falek said more assuredly.

Tyce reached over to the comm panel and turned off the screen.

"That was quite impressive Holy One." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Thank you Captain. I didn't think you would mind if I introduced you to my people." Tyce said with a mischievous smile.

"Not at all. I'm honored." Captain Byrne said honestly.

"Good. Now we have several things that need to be done in the next twelve hours. Treifa?" Tyce said as he looked around.

"Right here." Treifa said as he hurried away from the other captains.

"Will the *Dorsa* be ready to make the trip to Okuda in twelve hours?" Tyce asked seriously.

"Captain Marr assures me that it will be ready." Treifa said seriously.

"How about the *Timmeraeon*, will they have everything they need?" Tyce asked in thought.

"Supplies are going to be an issue. If Captain Byrne will help us identify some nearby worlds where they can collect resources, then we should be able to get them on their way before the Gorn ships arrive." Treifa said firmly.

"I'll have Commander M'Butu help you with that." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Thank you." Treifa said professionally.

"Good. And Captain Byrne, when the Gorn ships arrive it is very important that you do not scan them or attempt to make any contact with them. As long as you remain silent and just observe, they will not make any move against you." Tyce said firmly.

"Another Federation ship, the *Enterprise*, encountered the Gorn at Cestus III, that encounter did not go well." Captain Byrne said with concern.

"I heard something about that. You attempted to colonize inside their area of space." Tyce said frankly.

"We didn't know it was their space. We had never encountered their species before that meeting." Captain Byrne said cautiously.

"Oh, then I think it would be a good idea for us to provide you a chart to show you their boundaries so you can avoid another such misunderstanding." Tyce said consideringly.

"Yes. That sounds like a very good idea." Captain Byrne said frankly.

Tyce looked around, then noticed Tyber at his side looking lost and unsure of what to do.

"Tyber, would you go ask Captain Marr to come here?" Tyce asked gently.

"Yes Holy One." Tyber said in a whisper.

"I think it's going to take some time for him to be comfortable around you." Captain Byrne said with concern as he watched Tyber walk away.

"I agree. But it will be time well spent. I see great potential within him." Tyce said as he also watched Tyber.

* * * * *

"Hi Principal Silva, this is Vincent Winters." Vincent said shyly.

"Vincent? It's wonderful to hear from you. I heard about what happened to your family. Then you were withdrawn from school without explanation. I

didn't know where you went. How are you doing?" Principal Silva asked with concern.

"I'm fine. I just wanted to call to let you know that I'm okay. I mean, even though I was kind of a lot of trouble for you while I was there... I guess I always knew that you cared and stuff. So I wanted to let you know that everything turned out okay." Vincent said shyly.

Principal Silva smiled at the rambling statement, then quietly said, "I'm very glad to hear that. Your teacher and a few of your classmates have asked what happened to you."

"Really?" Vincent asked with surprise.

Principal Silva smiled and said, "Yes, really. Would you like me to pass a message on to them?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I don't know if anyone noticed, but I always liked Starfleet stuff."

Principal Silva chuckled as he said, "I think the UFP and Starfleet crests you drew on every notebook you ever owned might have tipped them off."

Vincent smiled at the fact that Principal Silva had noticed, then continued, "Just tell them that after my worst nightmare happened, my favorite dream came true."

"Would you care to go into more detail about that?" Principal Silva asked cautiously.

"If anyone wants to hear more, they can write to me and ask me. Just tell them to send the message to Petty Officer Vincent Winters on the USS *Yorktown*." Vincent finished with a proud smile, then backed away from the terminal a little to show off his crewman's uniform.

"Petty Officer?" Principal Silva asked in wonder.

Vincent smiled and nodded.

"Congratulations. Now I understand what you mean about your dream coming true." Principal Silva finally said.

"Yeah. And I'm taking classes over subspace at the Vulcan Academy of Science." Vincent added with pride.

"It appears that you've done very well for yourself Vincent... or should I call you Petty Officer Winters?" Principal Silva asked seriously.

"You can still call me Vincent. Only Starfleet people call me by my title." Vincent said gently.

"Okay Vincent. I'm very proud of everything you've accomplished. I had always hoped that you would get into Starfleet one day so you would have a productive direction for all your potential." Principal Silva said gently.

"Really?" Vincent asked with surprise.

Principal Silva chuckled and said, "Didn't you ever notice that you were put in advanced math and science classes even though your grades weren't quite high enough to qualify you?"

"Um. I kinda thought you were just being mean. Like, saying that I wasn't working hard enough or something." Vincent said reluctantly.

"I was trying to give you the tools that you would need later. Whether you wanted them or not." Principal Silva said while trying to restrain a smile.

"Well, you could'a told me. I would have worked a lot harder if you let me know that I was getting harder work so I could get into Starfleet." Vincent said indignantly.

"The moment I tried to push you in any direction, you would automatically turn the other way... Just to be difficult. So I decided to just put you in the classes and hope for the best." Principal Silva said frankly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Thanks."

"I just need to know one thing." Principal Silva said seriously.

"What's that?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Are you happy?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I am. I always thought I'd like being in Starfleet, but now that I'm here, it's better than I ever imagined."

"Good. Then I'm happy for you. Think about stopping by and saying 'hi' to your old class next time you're on Earth." Principal Silva said warmly.

"Yeah. I'll do that. And if you wanted to write to me, it'd um... be okay." Vincent finished shyly.

"Yes. I think I would like to have a pen pal who travels among the stars." Principal Silva said peacefully.

"I've got to go. It's not good to tie up the subspace channels too long." Vincent said quietly.

"I understand. Be expecting a message from me sometime soon."

"I will. Goodbye Principal Silva." Vincent said with a smile.

"Goodbye Vincent." Principal Silva replied, then ended the transmission.

Vincent thought about the things that he needed to do, then slowly walked to the turbo lift.

When he entered, he glanced at the ceiling and said, "Counselor's office."

* * * * *

"Do you need me to stay?" The waiter asked Lehman gently.

"No, thank you. I'll be fine." Lehman said outside the Sickbay door.

"I'm Crewman Fields, just call me if you need anything." the young man said with concern.

"I will. Thank you." Lehman said with a smile, then walked to the door.

"Hello Vincent... you look worried. Is something wrong?" Dr. Perry asked with concern as she worked on one of the *Dorsa*'s crew members.

"Um, I'm not Vincent. It's kind of a long story. But when you have a minute, could you scan me. I'm not feeling right." Lehman asked as a wave of dizziness washed over him.

"Go over there and sit down. T'Lani should be right back. I'll get her to scan you." Dr. Perry said as she continued her delicate work.

Lehman slowly walked over and took a seat by the door to the back hallway.

The door to the hallway opened and T'Lani walked in carrying a medical tricorder.

"Hus... Who are you and where is my husband?" T'Lani asked firmly as she looked Lehman in the eyes.

"Um... I'm Lehman and Vincent is doing something for Admiral Morrow right now. I don't know exactly where he is." Lehman said cautiously.

"Why do you look like my husband." T'Lani asked seriously.

"I'm a shape shifter... can you please scan me? I'm not feeling well and it's getting worse." Lehman said as he suddenly felt very tired.

T'Lani raised her tricorder and began to scan him carefully.

"Your blood pressure seems to be extremely low, but I do not know what is normal for you." T'Lani said carefully.

"I think I'm going to pass out." Lehman said as he started breathing heavily.

"Dr. Perry. This patient appears to be going into respiratory arrest." T'Lani said quickly.

"The patient on the first biobed is stable. Get him moved out and put that kid on respiratory support." Dr. Perry said firmly as she continued to work on her patient.

"I need the patient on bed one relocated to the convalescent ward immediately." T'Lani said quickly into the comm panel by the door, then resumed her scans of Lehman.

"Can you determine a cause for his condition?" Dr. Perry asked quickly.

"It appears that his endocrine system is shutting down. Many of his organs have failed." T'Lani said as she tried to make sense of the readings.

"As soon as you get him on the biobed, run a complete blood workup." Dr. Perry said quickly.

T'Lani saw a pair of crewmen move the patient off the first biobed onto a gurney.

Without hesitation, T'Lani scooped Lehman up into her arms and carried him to the biobed.

"What does the biobed's diagnostic say?" Dr. Perry asked in concentration.

"It has identified the organs that have failed to be foreign bodies." T'Lani said with confusion.

"T'Lani, close up for me so I can have a look." Dr. Perry said as she laid her surgical instruments aside.

"Yes Doctor." T'Lani said seriously, then hurried to the other biobed.

Dr. Perry rushed to Lehman in time to see the heart monitor flat line.

"Not good." She said as she initiated the automatic cardiac stimulator in the biobed.

While it was attempting to revive Lehman, she loaded a syringe with adrenaline and injected it directly into his heart.

Dr. Perry watched carefully and waited for the adrenaline to take effect.

Lehman took in a desperate gasp of breath and tried to sit up on the bed.

"Relax, you're back." Dr. Perry said as she gently petted his short fuzzy hair.

Lehman looked at Dr. Perry with wide, terrified eyes.

"We're going to get you fixed right up. Just lay back and relax." Dr. Perry said as she looked carefully at his blood test results.

"I feel like... something is... laying on... my chest... Can't breathe." Lehman said in increasing panic.

"Here, let me help." Dr. Perry said, then adjusted the respiratory support settings.

Lehman rested back and started to breathe normally again.

"It looks like you've had some recent surgery, would you like to tell me about that?" Dr. Perry asked as she looked at his readings carefully.

"I don't know what they did. They knocked me out and cut me open and did stuff inside me... but I don't know what." Lehman said quietly.

"Who did this to you?" Dr. Perry asked as a fire of anger welled up inside her.

"Captain Traiel. But it's okay, he's already in trouble and going to be exiled for doing it." Lehman said weakly.

"Do you know why they did this to you?" Dr. Perry asked more quietly.

"I'm a Chameloid, a shape shifter. They did this so I could hold an alien shape for a long time." Lehman said in a whisper.

"Well, whatever they did is killing you. I have to remove those failed organs." Dr. Perry said quietly.

"Do whatever you have to. Just please help me. My life is finally starting to get good. I want to live." Lehman said in a trembling voice before falling asleep.

Chapter 28

"Um... Hello?" Vincent said cautiously as he walked into the unfamiliar room.

"Hi. Can I help you?" A pleasant young man asked in a casual tone.

"I, um, don't know. I need to talk to a counselor about some stuff. Am I in the right place?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"Yeah. Have a seat. I'm Tony." the young man said as he turned off his terminal and gave Vincent his full attention.

"Are you a counselor?" Vincent asked cautiously as he continued to stand. He expected a counselor to be older and more professional looking.

"That's how I'm listed on the crew roster. What's up?" Tony asked casually.

"Um, well. A few things I guess." Vincent said nervously.

"Why don't you have a seat and tell me what's bothering you." Tony said as he sat back in his chair and turned to face Vincent fully.

Vincent cautiously sat down, then said, "Well, I'm not sure about everything. I've kind of had a lot of stuff happen all of a sudden and I really don't know how I feel about all of it yet."

"Oh. I can probably help you with that. You're Crewman Winters aren't you?" Tony asked curiously.

"Yeah. How did you know?" Vincent asked suspiciously.

"Because I saw you get your promotion in the rec hall. It's an honor to meet you." Tony said with a friendly smile.

"Thanks." Vincent said shyly.

"Let's see... Feeling overwhelmed by a large number of changes in your life sounds like a reasonable reaction to me. It takes time to adjust to changes, even good ones." Tony said consideringly.

Vincent thought about the statement, then nodded his agreement.

"Do you feel like talking about any of those things now?" Tony asked casually.

"Not really. Everything just seemed to hit at once, but I think it's like what you just said, it's going to take time." Vincent said slowly.

"Well, if you feel like talking to someone to help you sort it all out, that's one of the things I'm here for." Tony said simply.

Vincent smiled and said, "I think that right now I just need some time to sit and think about stuff. But if I get hung up on anything I might ask for your help."

Tony nodded his agreement to the arrangement.

"Um, and there was kinda something else." Vincent said uncomfortably.

Tony looked at Vincent with question and waited.

"I've been having problems with getting mad. Sometimes things will happen that will make me go kinda crazy mad and I can't think right. I just wanted to see if maybe I could get some help before it happens and I hurt someone or get into trouble because of it." Vincent said in thought.

"I can think of a few things to try." Tony said casually.

"I wasn't wanting to get started on that right now. I'm assigned to escort the Holy One while he's on our ship. But I was thinking that after that, I could do... whatever it is that we can do to fix it." Vincent said uncertainly.

"Fair enough. The first thing I'd like for us to do is a medical work-up with an extensive neurological scan." Tony said seriously.

"I was just in Sickbay this morning. They said I was fine except that I'm having a growth spurt." Vincent finished shyly.

"That could mean that you're having hormonal surges that could effect your emotional stability. We'll have to take a look at that too." Tony said in thought.

"So it might be just because I'm going through puberty?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"That's one possibility. Or your hormonal balance might be exacerbating an existing condition. We won't know until we've done the scans." Tony said frankly.

Vincent smiled and said, "I thought maybe I was going nuts or something. I didn't even think it could be because I'm growing up."

Tony smiled at Vincent's relief and said, "Well, we're going to do a lot of tests, both physical and psychological to find out exactly what's going on with you. When we're finished, we should have a pretty good idea of what needs to be done to keep your moods even."

"Thanks Tony, I feel a whole lot better already. I was afraid that the same thing was wrong with me that made my dad get mean and hit my brother." Vincent said seriously.

"If your father had an abusive nature, then there's a possibility that what you're experiencing is how you learned to deal with anger or stress. Let's hold off on worrying about that one until the physical tests are completed." Tony finished with a smile.

"Okay. So what do I do now?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Well, let's see." Tony said and turned his terminal back on.

After a moment of keying in instructions and reading the results, he finally said, "There you are."

Vincent looked at him curiously and waited.

"I'm putting a request for the medical tests that I want into your file. The next time you have free time, stop by the Sickbay and get the doctor on duty to run the tests." Tony said frankly.

"Oh, okay. Then what?" Vincent asked with a small smile.

"Then, when your schedule has stabilized and you know when you'll be available for regular visits, come back to me and we'll go over the medical scans and if there's anything physically wrong, I'll tell you about it and we'll discuss your options." Tony said, then looked up from his terminal.

"Thank you Tony. When I came in here I thought you were going to have me laying down on a couch and talking to you about my mom and stuff." Vincent said honestly.

Tony chuckled and said, "Freudian analysis can help in some cases and I can't say that we won't do that at some point, but for now we'll just work on ruling out any physical cause for your mood swings."

"Um, okay. Sounds good to me." Vincent said happily.

"Well, that's all for now... unless you want to lay down and tell me about your mother?" Tony said with a smile.

Vincent giggled and said, "Maybe next time. I'm going down to Sickbay now."

"It was a pleasure to meet you Crewman Winters. Hopefully we'll get this taken care of without too much difficulty so you can get back to working your way up the chain of command." Tony said warmly as he leaned across his desk to offer his hand.

Vincent shook Tony's hand and said, "Thanks for being so nice. I was a little bit worried about doing this before, but now I feel like everything is going to be okay."

Tony smiled and nodded.

Vincent smiled in return, then walked out the office door.

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"T'Lani, are any of the medical teams back on the ship yet?" Dr. Perry asked quickly as she gathered surgical supplies.

"No Doctor." T'Lani said professionally.

"Then I'm going to need you to assist. I know you aren't a doctor yet, but we don't really have much choice. This boy's body has rejected these transplanted organs and if we don't hurry and get them out of there, he's not going to survive." Dr. Perry said frankly.

"I am ready to assist." T'Lani said calmly as she walked to Dr. Perry's side.

"Get Nurse Young in here. We'll need his help too." Dr. Perry said absently as she looked over Lehman's scans again.

"Right away." T'Lani said and walked briskly out of the room.

"Hang on little guy. You're going to get your chance to live." Dr. Perry said in a whisper as she continued to study the biobed's readouts.

* * * * *

"How are you at comparative xenobiology T'Lani?" Dr. Perry asked as she stopped and looked inside the incision.

"I am well versed in the subject." T'Lani said frankly.

"Good. Then take a look at this and tell me if you have any clue as to it's function." Dr. Perry said as she pointed to a small glandular organ.

T'Lani inspected the small organ visually, then pressed some controls on the biobed to do a detailed scan.

"The fibrous structure seems indicative of a filtration organ, but I cannot speculate as to it's function." T'Lani said carefully.

"Focus on the sack underneath." Dr. Perry said as she glanced at Lehman's vital signs.

"A neurochemical reservoir? I do not see the logic of this arrangement." T'Lani said in confusion.

"You think that's something, look at this one." Dr. Perry said as she pointed to another organ.

T'Lani adjusted the scanner to the indicated organ, then said, "The function of this organ would seem to be to attach neural triggering chemicals to hormonal secretions."

"It could take us years to figure out the functions of all these organs and this boy won't last another half an hour in this condition." Dr. Perry said gravely.

"What do you recommend that we do?" T'Lani asked with concern.

"From everything that I can see here, the majority of his other organs function much the same as a Human's. It's just his endocrine system and skin that are drastically different. If we were to use artificial organs designed for Humans, they should be able to sustain him in reasonable health." Dr. Perry said carefully.

T'Lani looked at the medical readings for a moment, then said, "If we do nothing. He will die. If we use the artificial organs as you suggest, he may die. Logically, the choice is clear."

"Thank you T'Lani. I was having a moral dilemma since, from a certain point of view, this could be considered a further mutilation." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"First, do no harm." T'Lani said without inflection.

"Right. Do you know what we're going to need from medical supply?" Dr. Perry asked with renewed conviction.

"Yes doctor. I will return shortly." T'Lani said quickly.

"Nurse Young, brace yourself. This is going to be a race." Dr. Perry said as she picked up a laser scalpel and started to work.

* * * * *

"T'Lani? What's going on?" Vincent asked as he walked into main sickbay.

"Husband, I am gratified to see that you are well." T'Lani said while keeping her concentration on the surgery before her.

"T'Lani, get that one there." Dr. Perry said intensely.

"Yes Doctor." T'Lani said as she carefully worked her way in beside Dr. Perry.

"Oh, I'm sorry, you're busy. I'll come back in a while." Vincent said quietly as he realized that he was interrupting surgery.

"No, actually you might be able to help us." Dr. Perry said suddenly as she looked up.

Vincent stopped and looked at her with question.

"Since this young man appears to be the same size and age as your husband, we could use Vincent's blood chemistry readings as norms for Lehman. It should allow us to get his levels balanced much faster than the trial and error method I was originally going to use. And considering the weakened state that this boy is in, he doesn't need the additional stress of a hormonal imbalance." Dr. Perry said quickly to T'Lani.

After a moment, T'Lani said, "Husband, you could assist us by getting on the second biobed."

"Um, sure." Vincent said cautiously, just understanding that it was Lehman who was being operated on.

After a moment to settle into place, Vincent said, "I'm ready."

"Nurse Young, order complete pituitary, thyroid and pineal output reports and have the results sent over here." Dr. Perry said firmly.

Vincent watched as Nurse Young worked the controls at the head of his biobed quickly.

"What's wrong with Lehman?" Vincent asked quietly.

"He's had a lot of organs transplanted and his body rejected them." Nurse Young whispered in return.

Vincent turned to watch the next bed with concern.

* * * * *

"I think everything is settled here for the moment. I would like to go check on Lehman now." Tyce said apprehensively.

"I only received word that Lehman was a Chameloid impersonating Crewman Winters with Starfleet Command's approval. I'm interested to know more." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"There's not much more to know. Lehman was brought onboard disguised as Tyber, then when we left the transporter room, he revealed who he really

was. Lehman disguised himself as Vincent so he could be near me and help me try to expose Traiel and whoever was working with him." Tyce said carefully.

"And the surgical changes that you mentioned earlier were performed on him? And that's why he's in Sickbay now?" Captain Byrne speculated.

"It is possible. I would like to go to sickbay to be sure that he is well." Tyce said with worry.

Captain Byrne nodded and said, "Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Tyce smiled and said, "I will Captain. Call me if you have need of me."

Captain Byrne nodded that he would.

"Oluf?" Tyce asked as he glanced to his right, knowing that Oluf would be within earshot.

"Yes Holy One, how may I serve you?" Oluf asked in a rush as he hurried to Tyce's side.

"I would like for you to remain here and keep abreast of events. If a situation arises that requires my attention, you may summon me. If you have need of anything, simply ask the Yorktown staff and they will see that your needs are met." Tyce said firmly.

"As you say, Holy One." Oluf said reverently as he bowed.

Tyce turned to his other side and gently said, "Tyber, would you like to go to Sickbay with me? There is someone that I'd like for you to meet."

Tyber looked at his father talking with a group of people, then hesitantly turned to follow Tyce to the door.

Tyce glanced to see that Audge was following them, then continued out of the room.

* * * * *

"How are you feeling Lehman?" Tyce asked as he walked into the sickbay.

"I'm Vincent." Vincent said quietly.

"Oh. Well it's good to see you again. Lehman wasn't feeling well and came to sickbay. Have you seen him?" Tyce asked as he looked around.

"He's over there. They've been doing surgery on him since I got here." Vincent said in a concerned whisper, then glanced at the next biobed where Dr. Perry and T'Lani were still working.

"I didn't realize that his condition was so serious. How is he?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"I think he's going to be fine." Dr. Perry said as she took a step away from the biobed.

"Really?" Vincent asked with relief.

"Well, we have reason to hope. The replacement organs that we used were designed for Humans, so there might be some side effects from using them on a person of another species but... everything seems to be functioning normally and his vital signs are stabilizing."

"Replacement organs?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yes. Several of his internal organs, mostly those associated with the endocrine system, were replaced with foreign organs. Those foreign organs were rejected by his body and died. Since we could only speculate on the purpose of some of those organs, there was no way we could mimic their functions. What we ended up doing was taking artificial organs designed for Humans and adapting them to function in his system." Dr. Perry said in a clinical tone.

"How long will it be before he wakes up?" Tyce asked with concern.

Dr. Perry looked at the readings on the head of the biobed, then said, "Hold on. T'Lani, come look at this."

Everyone was silent as Dr. Perry carefully lifted a gauze pad from the right side of Lehman's abdomen.

"This doesn't make any sense." Dr. Perry said in confusion.

T'Lani looked at the readings on the head of the biobed, then pressed in a series of commands to verify that the readings were correct.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked in a small voice, afraid of the answer.

"He's healed." Dr. Perry said as she adjusted the scanner of the biobed to focus on different areas.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Tyce asked in confusion.

"This boy has just had major surgery. He had over a dozen incisions and now there's not a mark on him." Dr. Perry said seriously.

"Doctor, please look at this." T'Lani said as she indicated a detailed reading on the biobed's display.

"I don't understand. Why are they so worried if he's healed?" Tyce asked Vincent curiously.

"I think it's because they don't understand 'why' he's healing so fast. It's a Human thing to worry about what you don't understand, even when it's a good thing." Vincent finished with a relieved grin.

Tyce smiled at the statement, then turned his attention back to Lehman's bed.

"So the same process that allowed him to alter his physical form before is healing his physical damage now." Dr. Perry said speculatively.

"It appears that his body needed an adequate hormonal balance for the regeneration process to become active." T'Lani said in thought.

"So he's going to be alright?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Yes. I think so. But I still don't know how alright he's going to be." Dr. Perry said slowly as she looked over the scans again.

"How do you mean?" Tyce asked curiously.

"His body has already healed the incisions that were made to implant the artificial organs. I suppose it's possible that he could spontaneously regenerate replacement organs for the ones that were removed." Dr. Perry said in thought.

"It is also possible that only his epidermal layer has the accelerated healing factor and that the replacement organs will continue to be needed." T'Lani said professionally.

Dr. Perry nodded her agreement, then said, "We'll need to keep a close watch on him for the next few hours to see what develops."

"When do you think he will awaken? I would like to assure him that all is well." Tyce said quietly.

"The anesthetic should wear off soon. He could wake at any time." Dr. Perry said as she looked Tyce in the eyes.

"Thanks for helping him Dr. Perry. When he's well enough to travel, I'm going to make sure that he gets a wonderful home." Tyce said sincerely.

"I'm afraid he's going to need to be somewhere that a Federation doctor can care for him. The artificial organs that I've implanted will need to be

maintained. He should be able to lead a normal life, but if any of his organs are somehow damaged, only a Federation doctor would have any hope of repairing or replacing them." Dr. Perry said as she glanced down at Lehman tenderly.

"I understand. What you have done is far beyond the capabilities of my people. Thank you for saving him." Tyce said as he followed her gaze to look at Lehman's face.

"If you really want to thank me, there's something you could do that would absolutely make my day." Dr. Perry said with a warm smile at Tyce.

"What is that Doctor?" Tyce asked with surprise.

"Go into the convalescent ward and talk to your injured people. They seem to feel as if they're doing something wrong by being here. I know it would lift their spirits tremendously if their Holy One would go in and talk with them." Dr. Perry said with a gentle smile.

"It would be an honor to talk with those brave people who fought to defend me." Tyce said warmly.

"I'm going to stay here in case Lehman wakes up." Vincent said quietly.

"When he does, tell him that I will return shortly and that I am concerned for his well being." Tyce said seriously.

"I'll tell him." Vincent said with a smile.

* * * * *

Lehman was beginning to thrash around and struggle in his sleep, then he started whispering, "No, don't..."

Vincent hurried to Lehman's side and said, "It's okay Lehman. You're safe."

Lehman opened his eyes and saw that Vincent was standing over him, holding his hand.

"I don't want to be him. I want to be you." Lehman said in a weak, tired voice.

T'Lani walked to the head of the biobed to check Lehman's readings.

"What?" Vincent asked quietly with concern.

"Him. Who I was before. No one loved him. I don't want to be him anymore. I want to be you." Lehman said semi-coherently.

Vincent smiled and said, "It's okay Lehman, you can be me if you want to."

Lehman looked into Vincent's eyes with hope and asked, "Really?"

"Sure. I love my life and I don't mind sharing it."

"But... What am I going to do now? You have Daddy Joe and Darin and I've got... no one." Lehman said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"What would you think about going to the new colony?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Lehman thought for a moment, then whispered, "By myself?"

Vincent smiled, then said, "T'Lani, would you call Benny and JonJon and ask them to come to sickbay?"

"Yes Husband." T'Lani responded immediately.

"What are you going to do?" Lehman asked weakly with concern.

Vincent squeezed Lehman's hand firmly and said, "I'm going to get you a family."

Lehman stared in wonder at the statement.

* * * * *

Tyce and Tyber walked down the hallway that led to the convalescent ward in silence with Audge following a step behind.

Just as they were about to enter the ward, Tyber quietly asked, "Do you really want me to stay with you?"

Tyce turned to look at Tyber and saw the concerned expression that he was wearing.

"Yes Tyber. I really do want you to stay with me." Tyce said with assurance.

"Why?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"Tyce?" Audge asked quietly from behind the pair.

Tyce turned to face him with a look of question.

"If you would like, I think I can answer Tyber's question." Audge said hesitantly.

Tyce was surprised by the offer, but nodded hopefully.

Audge turned to face Tyber and said, "When 'The Holy One' is in front of priests and politicians he has to be strong and be the leader. But when he's done with his duties, he's still a person just like you and me. Tyce needs people around him who treat him like a real person... like a friend. He's not just offering you a place to live. He's offering you a place in his family. I think he needs you as much as you need him."

Tyce was stunned by the statement, and was surprised to find that he was nodding in agreement.

Tyber looked from Audge to Tyce uncertainly.

"We're not trying to take the place of your father and we're not asking you to forget him or stop loving him. We're just trying to give you a home." Audge said gently.

"I've never really had a home. I've always lived on ships with my dad." Tyber said in a small voice.

"We'll do our best to make it comfortable for you." Tyce said quietly.

"Thank you Holy One." Tyber said shyly.

"No Tyber. You and Audge are my family. You can call me Tyce."

* * * * *

Benny walked into the room first, followed by JonJon who was carrying Fizgig in his arms.

Both stopped and stared in shock when they saw two Vincents, one on the bed and the other standing beside him, holding his hand..

"Guys, this is Lehman. He's kinda like my twin." Vincent said with an impish grin.

"Who is he?" Benny asked with concern.

"Do you want to tell them?" Vincent asked Lehman curiously.

Lehman thought for a moment, then said, "I'm a Chameloid; a shape shifter. Well, except that I can't change anymore... Anyway, some guys from Okuda took me from my home world. They wanted to kill 'The Holy One' so I could change myself to look like him and take his place. When I did that they were going to run the church of Okuda through me and pretty much take control of the entire government. After I came on this ship, I took Vincent's shape so I could help him and the Holy One catch the bad guys doing something wrong, but... I got stuck like this."

"And he's just had surgery and had to have a bunch of his organs replaced." Vincent added gently.

"Do you have a family back on your world that's worried about you?" Benny asked quietly.

Lehman shook his head and said, "There was a plague on my world a few years ago and both my parents died. I was in a foundling home after that... I can barely remember what my parents looked like now. Besides, since the bad guys did this to me, I can't change my shape anymore. I couldn't go back there if I wanted to. I'd be a freak."

Benny nodded in thought.

"And Lehman needs to be somewhere that he can see a Federation doctor. He wouldn't be able to stay on his home world if he did go back. I was thinking that if you guys wouldn't mind it too much, maybe Lehman could go to the new colony with you." Vincent said slowly.

Benny and JonJon looked at Vincent with shock. Even Fizgig looked a little surprised.

Vincent felt that he needed to explain, so he took Lehman's hand and held it firmly as he said, "When Rory came on the ship a few weeks ago to see if it was safe here for me, I got to thinking about what it would be like to go to the new colony and live with you guys. Even though I'm happy that I'm allowed to stay on the Yorktown, a part of me is disappointed that I wasn't able to go with you."

Benny and JonJon both nodded that they understood.

"Lehman has some of my memories and already said that he wants to have a life like mine." Vincent continued carefully.

"Well, you could just think of this like what would have happened if Rory had said 'no'. This way it's like I get to go live with you guys AND I get to stay on the Yorktown. It's like that thing about having your cake and eating it too." Vincent finished with a smile.

"So you want us to pretend that Lehman is you?" Benny asked Vincent slowly.

"No. Not really pretend. I'm just saying that you could try to accept him because he's the same as me. Let him have that place that you were going to let me have." Vincent said with difficulty.

"How do you feel about it Lehman?" Benny asked quietly.

"I don't know... I remember a little bit about you and JonJon from Vincent's memories, but if I do this I still won't have a family... I mean, like parents..." Lehman trailed off in a worried voice.

Vincent smiled and said, "You don't need to worry about that. I have a ton of fathers and uncles and brothers. I know that if I ask them, they'll all love you and worry about you the same as they do with me."

Lehman looked at Vincent with confusion.

"Daddy Joe, Thaelan and the whole Clan are like my fathers. Even though you'll be living at the new colony, you'll just be a subspace call away from all the help and advice that you'll ever need." Vincent said assuringly.

"And you'll have me and JonJon right there with you to watch out for you so you'll never have to be alone." Benny said quietly.

"And Fizgig." JonJon added shyly.

Lehman looked at the dog in JonJon's arms and smiled.

"I think living with you sounds like it might be nice." Lehman said as he reached a hand out to gently scratch Fizgig behind the ear.

Fizgig sniffed the hand, then turned and started to lick Lehman's palm.

JonJon watched with a smile and said, "Fizgig agrees."

* * * * *

As Tyce, Tyber and Audge walked into the convalescent ward they noticed that it was quiet and an atmosphere of despair permeated the room.

After a moment to look around, Tyce cautiously walked to the first bed.

There was a young woman sleeping soundly, but she seemed to have an expression of worry.

"Holy One?" A weak voice called uncertainly from the next bed.

Tyce looked over to see a middle aged man with a bandage covering the majority of his chest.

"Yes. I am the Holy One." Tyce said gently as he approached.

"Are you well Holy One? They didn't hurt you?" The man asked with concern.

Tyce smiled gently and said, "I am well thanks to you and your crew mates."

"Good." The man said with relief as he rested back.

"Tarmon, son of Markham, I wish to thank you for the sacrifices you made to ensure my safety. You and your fellow crew mates will be remembered as heroes among our people." Tyce said as he took Tarmon's hand and held it gently.

"Joining the crew of the *Dorsa* was my only chance to serve 'The Holy One'. All my training and everything else I've ever done in my life brought me to today. That's all I ever wanted." Tarmon said peacefully.

"Rest and become strong Tarmon. This is only the beginning." Tyce said with a smile.

Tarmon nodded slightly, then closed his eyes to sleep.

"Did my father cause this?" Tyber asked with tears in his eyes.

"Your father played his part in the events that led to today. But if he had not made the choices he did, another would have taken his place. I believe it was inevitable." Tyce said as he led the group to the next bed.

They stopped at the bed to find a young man with his eyes bandaged.

"Mykale, son of Jarisson, how are you feeling?" Tyce asked gently.

"Who is it? How do you know me?" the young man asked in fear as he turned his head toward Tyce's voice.

"I am the Holy One, and I know all my people." Tyce said with a pained expression at Mykale's fear.

"Are you really 'The Holy One'?" Mykale asked hesitantly.

"I am." Tyce responded quietly.

"Did they hurt you?" Mykale asked desperately.

"No. I was not injured." Tyce said with assurance.

"Then it was worth it." Mykale said with relief.

"Do you need anything to ease your recovery?" Tyce asked gently, sensing an underlying despair in the man.

"The doctors, they were able to save my life, but... but they couldn't save my eyes." Mykale said in a trembling voice.

"I'm so sorry." Tyce said as he held Mykale's hand firmly.

"No. It was a small price to pay for your safety. I would do exactly the same thing if I knew it would keep you safe. I just... I don't know what I'm going to do now..." Mykale trailed off in despair.

Tyce thought for a moment, then said, "If you would be willing, there is a service you could perform for which you are uniquely qualified."

"Anything Holy One. How can I serve you?" Mykale asked with hope.

"You and your crew mates have sacrificed much to protect me. Our world is entering a new age and many changes will occur in a short time. If you would be willing, I would like for you to have the responsibility for seeing that all the members of the *Dorsa's* crew are honored and remembered for their service and that those who survive are having their needs met." Tyce said gently.

"But I'm blind." Mykale said in a small voice.

"Then you will have someone to help you. But I am entrusting you alone with this duty. When we arrive at Okuda Prime, you will be given a room in my main temple and you will have priests to provide whatever assistance you may need to fulfill your duties." Tyce said, then turned to Tyber and continued, "Tyber, if you would like, you could be in charge of seeing to Mykale's needs."

Tyber looked at Tyce with surprise, then said, "But I'm just a kid."

Tyce smiled and said, "So am I. So are Vincent and Lehman. Being young doesn't prevent us from doing what must be done. If you're willing to see that Mykale has all the help that he needs, you can always come to me or Oluf and ask any question you might have."

Tyber thought for a moment as he looked at the bandaged young man on the bed, then said, "Thank you Holy... Tyce. I think I'd like to try."

Tyce smiled, then squeezed Mykale's hand gently and said, "Tyber has agreed to help you. Would you like to help me and your crew mates by doing this?"

"Yes Holy One. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity." Mykale said with a content smile.

"You earned this opportunity. Rest now and heal. Tyber will keep in contact with you and when you have recovered enough to assume your duties, he will see that you have all that you need."

"I'll begin as soon as possible." Mykale said seriously.

"Heal first. There is time." Tyce said gently, then laid Mykale's hand on the bed.

"As you say Holy One." Mykale said with a peaceful smile as he relaxed.

* * * * *

"It would be beneficial if you would sleep. Your readings indicate fatigue." T'Lani said seriously.

"Can I stay awake a little while longer? I want to be sure about what's going to happen next." Lehman asked with a puppy dog expression in his eyes.

T'Lani raised an eyebrow at the expression, then looked at Vincent in question.

Vincent leaned in to whisper, "It doesn't work on Vulcans."

"Oh." Lehman said shyly, then broke into a smile.

"Please conclude your business so you may rest." T'Lani said quietly, then took one last look at Lehman's readings before leaving the room.

Lehman noticed that Benny was standing silently with a distant look on his face.

"Is something wrong?" Lehman asked with concern.

Benny looked at Lehman as if just remembering that he was there.

"Oh. Um, no. I'm sorry Lehman. If Vincent says you're alright then it's fine with me if you come to the new colony with us." Benny said quickly.

Lehman looked at Benny consideringly, then up at Vincent with question.

"What's wrong Benny?" Vincent asked seriously.

Benny shook his head and said, "It's nothing."

Vincent and Lehman shared a look, then both turned their inquiring gazes on Benny.

After another moment of distant thought, Benny felt the identical stares boring into him.

"It's nothing." Benny said defensively.

Vincent and Lehman continued to stare at him in silence.

"Fine. Fine. I'll tell you." Benny finally said with resignation.

"It works a lot better with two of us." Vincent whispered with a smile at Lehman.

"I'm worried about my family. Okay? I haven't heard anything from them since the *Enterprise* left and I know that other people have already heard from their families. Being here in the sickbay again just kind of brought it back to me." Benny said with aggravation.

"Then let's call them." Vincent said simply.

"We can't do that." Benny said irritably.

"Sure we can... if I can call Starfleet Command you can call Starfleet Medical." Vincent said seriously.

"But we're not supposed to use subspace unless it's official business or an emergency." Benny said hesitantly, obviously wanting to do it.

"If your family are all this stubborn their doctors are probably going through hell." Vincent said as he walked to the nearest comm panel.

Lehman chuckled, then winced in pain.

"Don't make me laugh. It hurts." Lehman said with effort.

"See what you did?" Vincent said to Benny, then pressed the computer access to the comm system.

"It's going to be faster to do it this way." Vincent said seriously as he keyed in his search criteria.

Benny slowly walked to Vincent's side to see what he was doing.

"You Summers are like rabbits. Look at this." Vincent said as he pointed at the display screen full of people named Summers.

"That one, that's my dad." Benny said as he pointed at one of the names on the screen.

Vincent keyed in the proper ID, then waited for the call to be answered.

"Orlando Regional Medical Center." A woman answered professionally.

"We're calling to talk to Harold Summers. This is his son." Vincent said seriously and indicated Benny at his side.

"Let me see... He's listed to have no visitors, that would include calls... But give me a second, his primary care physician is right over there, I'll ask him." The nurse said and hurried away from the view screen.

A professional looking man who appeared to be in his mid thirties took a seat before the terminal and said, *"I'm Doctor Reynolds. What can I do for you gentlemen today?"*

"We called to see if we could talk to Harold Summers. But the nurse said he couldn't have any calls." Vincent said in a professional tone.

"That depends, is one of you two Benny?" Dr. Reynolds asked the two boys casually.

"I am." Benny said quickly.

"Then I'll let you speak to him. I've been trying to limit the interruptions to his sleep. He needs a lot of rest. But I'm sure that getting to talk with you will help him to sleep more soundly. Hold on. I'll be right back" Dr. Reynolds said seriously, then the hospital's logo filled the screen.

"I wonder why he's in Orlando. I thought he'd be in San Francisco." Benny said as he looked at the screen anxiously.

"Starfleet would send him wherever the best doctor was that could take care of him." Vincent said in thought.

A moment later the screen flashed on again and Benny was relieved to see his father looking back at him.

"How you doing Benny Boy?" Mr. Summers asked his son with a relieved smile.

Vincent smiled at the greeting, then walked back to his place at Lehman's side to give Benny some privacy.

"I'm doing fine Dad. We're about half-way to the new colony now." Benny said with tears of joy welling up in his eyes.

"So you're not having any problems? Everyone's treating you okay?" Mr. Summers asked with concern.

"Everything's great Dad, I promise. The Deflector Control team kind of adopted me and JonJon. We've been rooming with them and they've been taking really good care of us." Benny said, then noticed a tear falling down his cheek.

"I'm glad to hear it. On the way back to Earth I began to realize just how much I was asking of you by giving you all the responsibility." Mr. Summers said in a worried voice.

"It's okay Dad. If I have any kind of problem I've got lots of people who will help me. How are you and Mom and Callie?" Benny asked desperately.

"I think we're all going to be fine. Your sister was sent to Vulcan to see a specialist in bone reconstruction. Your mother is in the Starfleet medical facility in San Francisco and I'm here in Orlando so I can see a specialist about my spine." Mr. Summers said seriously.

"Will you let me know if you need anything?" Benny asked in a small voice.

"They're taking great care of us Benny Boy. You'd think we were royalty from the way they've been fussing over us. Just be sure to take care of yourself. We're all missing you like crazy." Mr. Summers finished with a sad smile.

"I miss all of you too. Tell Mom and Callie that I love them the next time you talk to them." Benny said quietly.

Lehman tugged on Vincent's arm to get his attention and got him to lean down.

"I'll tell them. The Doctor is saying that I need to try and get back to sleep now. Make sure you send me a letter and some pictures as soon as you get there." Mr. Summers said seriously.

"I will Dad. I promise." Benny said, just realizing that the tears were flowing down his cheeks.

"Don't hang up. I need to make a call too while you've got the connection." Vincent said as he rushed to Benny's side again.

"I love you Benny Boy." Mr. Summers said in a sleepy voice.

"I love you too Dad." Benny said quietly.

Vincent rekeyed the comm to terminate the connection to the hospital room, then keyed in another location.

"Clan Short." A voice said immediately.

"Hi Tommy, are Gabe or Adam around where I can talk to them?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Adam's right here. Hang on a second." Tommy said politely, then turned and screamed, *"**ADAM! YOU HAVE A CALL!**"*

Vincent chuckled to himself, and glanced back to see Lehman fighting to hold in his laughter.

"Oh, hey Vincent. What can I do for you?" Adam asked as he quickly took the seat that Tommy had vacated.

"I was just wondering if you could do me a favor." Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure, what do you need?" Adam asked casually.

"I've got a friend named Benny from the Kimber colony and his family is all hurt and in different hospitals. I was just wondering if you guys could kind of send them like, flowers or something like that. You know, let them know that they've got people who care about them." Vincent said uncertainly.

"Care packages. Got it." Adam said with a smile.

"Yeah. That sounds good. Benny's last name is..." Vincent said before he was interrupted.

"Summers. His family are in Orlando, San Francisco and at the Vulcan Academy of Science Medical Center." Adam said with a smile.

"Wow. You're getting really good at doing searches. Cory must be keeping you guys in practice." Vincent said in an impressed voice.

"It wasn't that hard. When you said Kimber, that cut the possible matches to less than two thousand, and there was only one Benjamin who didn't return to Earth, his last name is Summers. From there it was a snap." Adam said, sounding proud of himself.

"Thanks Adam. I just wanted to be sure they knew that there was someone around who cared about them." Vincent said quietly.

"We'll check with their doctors and find out what they can have and what they might need. You know, like crossword puzzles and CDs. Stuff like that." Adam said happily.

"That sounds great. I appreciate this." Vincent said with a smile.

"Hey, it's just something we do." Adam said dismissively.

"I've gotta go now. Thanks again." Vincent said quickly.

"Anytime, Vincent." Adam said with a smile and closed the transmission.

Vincent turned and was surprised to find that JonJon was now at Lehman's side.

"Thanks for doing that Vincent. That was great." Benny said and gave Vincent a quick one armed hug.

"Then you should thank Lehman, it was his idea." Vincent said as he led Benny back to Lehman's bedside.

* * * * *

Tyce, Tyber and Audge walked to the next bed to find a serious man staring at them.

The man was around thirty with straight jet black hair and pale brown eyes that were almost amber.

From the way the blanket draped over him, it was obvious that he only had one leg and the bandaged stump on his right side was all that was left of his right arm.

Tyce stared at the man for a moment, then hesitantly said, "Jarkin, son of... Jarkin?"

A smile broke out on Jarkin's face at Tyce's confused look, then he said, "Yes Holy One. My father was killed in a farming accident a month before I was born, so I was given his name."

Tyce nodded that he understood, then asked, "How are you feeling Jarkin?"

"I am in no pain, but... I'm half a man now. I can't work my farm anymore or... anything. What good can I be like this?" Jarkin asked in a pained voice.

"I suspect that you have the ability to provide a much needed service to our people." Tyce said honestly.

Jarkin looked at Tyce curiously, prompting for more information.

"Please be assured Jarkin, you have a purpose and your injuries will not prevent you from carrying it out." Tyce said gently.

Jarkin slowly nodded, then quietly asked, "Would you answer a question for me?"

"Of course. What would you like to know?" Tyce asked casually, feeling an unusual kinship with this man.

"These people, the Humans, why do they look like us and speak our language?" Jarkin asked as he looked into Tyce's eyes.

Tyce glanced around the room, then moved closer to speak quietly.

"If I share this information with you, will you give me your vow not to repeat it?" Tyce asked quietly.

Jarkin's eyes went wide at the question and he quickly nodded.

"Many centuries ago, there was a sharp decline in the birth rate of our people, have you heard of that?" Tyce asked in a whisper.

"Yes. It was said to be the result of industrial pollutants." Jarkin said cautiously.

"Correct. And it is true that the pollution was the cause. But the situation was far more severe than you were led to believe. The industrial byproducts that were released into the environment caused genetic damage to our people for generations. More and more were born sterile until it became a significant threat to our very survival. Stopping the pollution did not remove the sterilizing agents from our environment. In fact, there are still traces of it to be found on Okuda Prime today." Tyce said carefully.

"So what happened?" Jarkin asked cautiously.

"The Holy One at that time secretly contacted a few trusted friends from other worlds for their assistance in preventing our extinction. One of them knew of the Humans, and so it was decided that some of these Humans would be relocated to Okuda to provide fresh genetic codes for our population and hopefully allow those who were still fertile to produce fertile young." Tyce said uneasily.

"Relocated, as in abducted?" Jarkin asked in a whisper.

Tyce nodded with regret and said, "At first just a few, but more over time. Two, maybe three thousand in all."

"But why doesn't our history show this?" Jarkin asked contemplatively.

"With the help of another race, who I would prefer not to name, we were able to alter the memories of the Humans that were brought to us... The abducted Humans were given false memories and led to believe that they were the survivors of the failed Mitigahl colony. They were given the knowledge of our language, but they also retained the memory of their original language. Within four generations, our people were speaking the Human language of English and the Okudai language of Gillikanese was nearly forgotten." Tyce said carefully.

"How could it spread so quickly?" Jarkin asked cautiously.

"Because nearly every Okudai today is descended from those Humans. Only one in ten thousand Okudai today has the original genetic code of our ancestors." Tyce said seriously.

"Is that why it takes you years to find a replacement?" Audge asked from Tyce's side.

Tyce looked at Audge with surprise.

"You need a person with that original genetic code to be the next Holy One." Audge said speculatively.

Tyce hesitantly nodded.

"So is that why the Holy Ones have fought so hard to keep us separated from the rest of the universe?" Jarkin asked cautiously.

Tyce nodded and said, "If there were an influx of new genetic sequences into our population, all the descendants of the Okudai founders would become blended with other species. Within a few generations the essence of Okuda would be lost."

"That's why you can see our lineage, isn't it?" Audge asked cautiously.

"Yes. You might call it a survival skill. I can only pass the knowledge and experience of the Holy Ones on to a person with that specific genetic sequence from the founders. It took ten years for Austir to find me." Tyce said quietly.

"Why are you telling me this?" Jarkin asked curiously.

"Because you asked." Tyce said slowly.

"Oh... I thought it might be... Am I descended from the founders?" Jarkin asked hesitantly.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes and no."

Jarkin looked at Tyce with confusion at the statement.

"Since it has been so many generations since the Human genetic material was introduced into our society and we haven't had any new influx of alien genetic material in the successive years, the original Okudai sequence is finally beginning to establish itself in those who have human ancestors. You Jarkin, son of Jarkin are one of those rare people. You carry the Human ancestry, as most of our people do, but you also have the dominant Okudai genetic sequence that defines us as a people. People like you are very rare Jarkin, and very important to our future." Tyce finished with a smile.

"But if we join the Federation, we stand to lose that genetic sequence because we'll end up mixing with Humans again." Audge said in thought.

"No. People like Jarkin and Tyber are our hope of surviving the new age. In our ancestors, the genetic sequence was recessive. In Jarkin and Tyber it is dominant. Three out of four of their children will carry the dominant trait and the remaining one will carry it recessively." Tyce said happily.

"I'm special?" Tyber asked with disbelief.

"Not just special Tyber. Essential. You and Jarkin and probably less than one thousand others out of all our people are our hope for the future. If you were to mate with a Human, a Vulcan, or even an Andorian, the chances are that your offspring would have the dominant genetic sequence that defines our people. Your children would probably even have the same dark hair and light eyes that you and Jarkin share. This is another sign that it's time for the new age of our people to begin." Tyce said gently.

"The New Age?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"Let's leave Jarkin to get his rest and I'll talk to you about that later." Tyce said gently.

Tyber looked at Jarkin and saw that he was fighting to stay awake.

"Jarkin, I'm going to be living with The Holy One when we get back to Okuda. If you need my help with anything, let me know. If we're the hope of Okuda, we need to take care of each other." Tyber said seriously.

"I'll let you know if I need anything. Please come back and visit if you find the time." Jarkin said quietly.

"I will." Tyber said gently, then reached down to pull up Jarkin's blanket a little and tuck him in.

"Do you see your purpose now Jarkin?" Tyce whispered as he smiled at Tyber's tender care.

"Yes Holy One, I understand. Thank you." Jarkin said, then closed his eyes.

The group stood silently for a moment and watched as Jarkin fell into a contented sleep, then moved to the next patient.

Chapter 29

"Vincent? Would you do something for me, please?" Lehman asked quietly.

"Sure, Lehman, what can I do?" Vincent asked as he hurried back to Lehman's side.

"Would you let me see some more of your memories of Benny and JonJon? I didn't get much more than their names the last time I touched your mind." Lehman asked shyly.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay. But it might be a little weird because I met JonJon when I was blind."

"I just want to know more about them if that's okay." Lehman said uncertainly.

Vincent picked up Lehman's hand and held it to the side of his face, then placed his other hand on the side of Lehman's face in the position for a mind meld.

"What are you doing?" Benny asked curiously.

"I just want to make it as easy for Lehman as I can." Vincent said quietly as he continued to hold Lehman's hand in position.

"Thank you, that did help. I'm done." Lehman said in a worried whisper.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked with concern as he placed Lehman's hand back on the bed.

"JonJon lost his whole family, then he had a nail in his head... in his brain. It just makes me feel bad to know that he was hurt so much." Lehman said quietly.

"Thank you for worrying for me Lehman, but I'm really fine now. I miss my family a lot, but being here with all of you is making it hurt less. As far as the nail, I'm an android and the nail only caused some minor damage to my hardware. I wasn't in any pain, I didn't even feel it." JonJon said with assurance.

"I'm glad you're not hurting." Lehman said in a whisper.

"Why don't you go to sleep now. You look like you really need it." Vincent said with concern.

"Yeah. I will. Thank you for finding me a family." Lehman said with an honest smile.

Vincent smiled in return and said, "I want to thank you too, Lehman. You're going to have the other future that I wanted for myself."

Lehman smiled with contentment as he fell asleep.

* * * * *

When Tyce, Tyber and Audge arrived at the next bed, they found a middle aged woman fast asleep. A significant portion of her body was covered with burns and she was wearing a mask to help her breathe.

"I'm sorry Tyce." Tyber said, as tears filled his eyes.

"For what?" Tyce asked curiously.

"For what my father did. If he caused all this suffering... Why are you letting him go?" Tyber asked as he looked at Tyce with tears running down his cheeks.

"Because Lehman asked me to." Tyce said frankly.

"I don't understand." Tyber said hesitantly.

"Tyber, your father made some unfortunate decisions. One of those decisions was to take a Chameloid child from his home world so he could assume my form and replace me." Tyce said seriously.

"The blue boy." Tyber said in a whisper.

Tyce looked at Tyber with question.

"While I was sleeping one night, I felt someone touch me. I woke up in time to see a blue boy leaving my room. I tried to tell myself it was a dream but..." Tyber trailed off in thought.

"I'm sure that was him. When he came on this ship with your father, he looked like you." Tyce said gently.

"So if he was trying to take your place, why are you doing what he asked?" Tyber asked slowly.

"Because he helped me. Some horrible things were done to him. They cut him open and did things inside him so that once he took my shape he would be able to stay that way." Tyce said seriously.

"My father did that?" Tyber asked as his tears started to fall again.

"I'm sorry Tyber. I wouldn't have talked to you about this until later, but you asked the questions and I believe that learning a truth, even a painful truth, is better than living in ignorance."

Tyber stood silently for a moment as his tears fell, then he quietly said, "I wish I could be mad at you and say that I know it's not true."

"I know." Tyce said, then gently put his arms around Tyber.

A moment later, Tyce was surprised to feel a hand grip his shoulder.

"You did the right thing Tyce." Audge said with assurance.

"Thank you." Tyce said as he felt his own tears threatening to fall.

"Tyber." Audge said seriously.

After a moment, Tyber looked up at Audge cautiously.

"Lehman forgave your father. Not only did he forgive him, he asked Tyce to keep him from being sent into Ikerian exile. I know learning these things hurts you, but please understand that Tyce and Lehman don't hold any animosity toward your father. They're just trying to do the right thing for everyone, even him." Audge said seriously.

Tyber thought about the words for a moment and put them together with what he remembered from when he arrived on the ship.

"Is the blue boy still here?" Tyber asked slowly.

"Yes. He's the one in the bed in the next room." Tyce said gently.

"Can we go back in and talk to him? I need to ask him something." Tyber said in thought.

"What do you need to know?" Tyce asked curiously.

Tyber thought for a moment to find the right words, then he said, "I want to ask him how he can forgive someone who hurt him the way my father did. I want to understand."

"I hope the answer that he gives you can bring you peace." Tyce said as he led the way to the door.

* * * * *

Tyce, Tyber and Audge walked into the main sickbay to see Benny, JonJon and Vincent surrounding Lehman's bed.

"It looks like Lehman is asleep. Come over here Tyber. I want to introduce you to everyone." Tyce said gently.

Tyber cautiously walked with Tyce to join the gathering around Lehman's bed.

"Vincent, I would like you to meet Tyber." Tyce said gently.

Tyber looked curiously at Vincent, then down at Lehman with confusion.

Tyce understood Tyber's confusion and decided to try a different approach.

"Tyber, son of Okuda, I would like you to meet Crewman Vincent Winters, son of Earth... and Vulcan." Tyce added in consideration.

"And Andor." Vincent added.

"Andor?" Benny asked curiously.

"Vincent, I understand your relation to Earth and Vulcan, but how are you a child of Andor?" Tyce asked carefully as an uneasy feeling washed over him.

"It's an Andorian tradition that a father teaches his children to defend themselves. When Thaelan started teaching me to fight, he kind of adopted me into his family. I did a little research on Andorian traditions and... well, me knowing his family style of fighting would qualify me to be his heir. Even though he doesn't call me his son, the things he's doing are what an Andorian father would do for his son." Vincent said shyly.

"A child of three worlds..." Tyce said distantly.

"What's wrong?" Audge asked from Tyce's side.

Tyce stood silently for a moment, then absently said, "Audge, would you summon Oluf? I need him."

"Right away." Audge said quickly and ran to the nearest comm to make the call.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"No. Not wrong, just... too soon." Tyce said carefully.

"Did something happen?" Lehman asked as he peeked open one eye.

"No Lehman, I'm sorry if I woke you." Tyce said gently.

"That's okay. I was only a little bit asleep anyway. I just woke the rest of the way up when I heard you guys sounding worried." Lehman said seriously.

"So what's wrong?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Before I answer, I need to ask all of you some questions." Tyce said in thought.

"Ask us anything you want. We're all friends here." Vincent said as he looked around the group.

Tyber looked at Vincent with caution at the statement.

"Lehman. Please forgive me for asking, but you were orphaned by poverty, weren't you?" Tyce asked carefully.

"Yeah, I guess so. If my parents weren't so poor, they'd be alive right now. The medicine they needed to cure them from the plague was too expensive. How did you know?" Lehman asked slowly.

"Because he's the Holy One." Vincent said to Lehman with a teasing smile and a wink.

Lehman rolled his eyes at the statement, then looked back at Tyce who was still deep in thought.

"Benny, are your parents exceptionally wealthy?" Tyce asked slowly.

"Not even close. My dad is a botanist and my mom is a xenoarchiologist." Benny said hesitantly.

"Oluf will be here in a moment." Audge said as he hurried to Tyce's side.

Tyce absently nodded as he continued to think.

"What's bothering you Tyce?" Vincent asked with concern.

"It's like I have a puzzle, but the pieces won't fit together." Tyce said with frustration.

"What pieces of the puzzle are you missing?" JonJon asked timidly.

"The first one is the child of laughter and light, born of wealth and privilege." Tyce said absently.

"JonJon has blond hair, that's kind of golden and he's kind of funny... well, not at the moment but usually..." Benny offered weakly.

"I wasn't born, I was manufactured." JonJon said frankly.

"What was that?" Tyce asked with surprise.

"I'm an Android." JonJon said hesitantly.

Tyber and Audge looked at JonJon with surprise.

"The child ageless and unborn..." Tyce said distantly with a nod, as if he had expected the statement.

"Yeah. That sounds like JonJon." Vincent said hesitantly as he looked around the gathering.

The door opened and drew everyone's attention.

Oluf ran into the room and directly to Tyce with an expression of worry.

"When you packed Austir's belongings, did you bring the black ironwood box?" Tyce asked firmly.

"Yes Holy One. I was instructed to bring it whenever he would travel." Oluf said quietly.

"Please retrieve it from the *Dorsa* and bring it to me. I have need of it's contents." Tyce said firmly.

"Right away Holy One." Oluf said quickly, then rushed out of the room.

"Can you tell us what's going on?" Vincent asked seriously.

Tyce looked at Vincent and said, "No. I've probably said too much already."

Vincent looked carefully at Tyce and saw the concern in his eyes.

"Can you tell me... is it something bad?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Tyce considered for a moment, then said, "That's a judgment that you will have to make when the time comes. I think you will approve of the end result."

Vincent glanced down at Lehman and said, "That sounds like something that's gonna suck."

* * * * *

A moment of silence fell over the room until it was finally broken by Tyber asking, "Lehman, could I ask you a question?"

"Sure Tyber, come over here where I can see you better." Lehman said quietly.

"I just... I don't know how you could forgive my father when he did so much to hurt you and caused so much death and pain." Tyber said as he looked into Lehman's eyes.

Lehman saw the pain and confusion that Tyber was struggling with and said, "I could forgive him because you love him."

Tyber looked at Lehman with confusion.

"Back on your ship, I touched your mind so I could impersonate you. I could see your father through your memories of him and the love that you feel for him. Even though he hurt me and a lot of other people, I know that he has some good in his heart and should be given the chance to overcome his darker desires. I would have done anything to stop him from killing the Holy One, but once he was stopped, I didn't have any desire for revenge." Lehman said carefully.

"Tyber, my dad was a little bit like yours." Vincent said from Tyber's side.

Tyber looked at Vincent with surprise.

"He hurt a lot of people. He even killed a few. But he wasn't all bad... Well, maybe at the end he was... but when I was a little kid he was a good dad. I guess even though I could hate him and blame him for a lot of stuff, all that would do is make me feel bad inside. It makes it easier if I tell myself that I don't like who he was when he did those bad things, but I still love the dad who cared about me and loved me when I was little." Vincent said distantly.

"So I can still love my Dad without agreeing with what he did?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes Tyber. I think Vincent and Lehman have explained things very well. Your father obviously loves you very much and regrets that his choices have caused this outcome. You can choose to continue to love your father and forgive him for making bad decisions."

Tyber slowly nodded and said, "Thank you... all of you. After seeing everything that my dad caused to happen I felt like I was some kind of monster for still loving a person who could cause so much pain."

Lehman took hold of Tyber's hand as Vincent moved in to put an arm around him.

"It's okay Tyber. I know exactly how you feel and it's really okay to love him." Vincent said gently.

Lehman looked up into Tyber's eyes and nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"I am sorry for the delay 'Holy One', the contents of the storage area shifted during the battle..." Oluf rambled as he rushed into the room carrying a heavy black box.

"Please be calm Oluf, the Holy Ones past have carried that box with them for over a thousand years and never needed it's contents. I only wished to have it now as a precaution." Tyce said thoughtfully.

Oluf looked at Tyce curiously, but didn't ask.

"Lehman, I believe we should leave you so that you may rest. We will speak again before I leave." Tyce said gently.

"Thank you Tyce. I'd be really scared being helpless on an alien ship like this, but having you all here... I feel like everything is going to be okay." Lehman said with a weak smile.

"Lehman, if you wouldn't mind, Fizgig and I would like to stay here with you." JonJon said quietly.

After a moment, Lehman turned slightly and looked at JonJon with question.

"You're going to the new colony with us, that makes you part of our family. I've lost a lot of family and I'd feel better if I could be here to make sure that you're going to be okay." JonJon said shyly.

"Thanks." Lehman said with a small smile as he reached out to pet Fizgig.

JonJon responded by placing Fizgig on the side of the bed.

After a moment of sniffing around, Fizgig laid his head on Lehman's chest and settled into sleep.

Lehman smiled at the move and began to gently pet Fizgig as he closed his eyes.

* * * * *

"We should probably check back with the captains to see if anything else needs to be done." Tyce said quietly as he led the group away from Lehman's bed.

"When I left, they were coordinating preparations and repairs. Other than a few messages, there was nothing to concern you." Oluf said seriously.

"What messages?" Tyce asked as he led the way out of sickbay.

"Minister Falek wanted your approval to activate the planetary reserve troops to serve as ground defense if some of our enemies were to get past our armada." Oluf said professionally.

"What did you tell him?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"I told him that such preparation would be diligent. The planetary reserves of all our worlds will be waiting for the call to duty." Oluf said cautiously, not entirely sure what Tyce's reaction would be.

Tyce slowly nodded and said, "Yes. That will serve our purposes well. Were there any other messages?"

"Jessub from the Mycien colony called to ask for clarification of his duties. I told him that a list of his duties would be forthcoming." Oluf said carefully.

Tyce looked around the group who were all gathered around them and asked, "Vincent, where could I go to make a call to Okuda?"

"Well, I bet the conference room is probably being used right now. Maybe the engineering conference room?" Vincent finished uncertainly.

Tyce nodded and gestured toward the turbo lift before them.

Vincent led the way and the rest of the group followed.

Once everyone was aboard, Vincent said, "Deck P."

* * * * *

"You inquired of your duties in the upcoming election?" Tyce asked the view screen carefully.

"Yes Holy One. I wanted to be sure that there were no misunderstandings about your expectations." Jessub said reverently.

"My expectation is for you to facilitate a fair and transparent election. Take every reasonable step to ensure that no one can claim that the results are anything but accurate and representative of the wishes of our people." Tyce said firmly.

"Yes Holy One. But there are others with more experience who might be able to perform the job more efficiently." Jessub said hesitantly.

"Perhaps, but it is not your experience that qualifies you for this job. It's your honesty and your belief that every citizen should have a voice. You may recruit those with more experience to aid you in your duties, but use your own judgment to determine what is the best method to give our people a truly fair election."

"Yes Holy One. Thank you, I understand."

"And when your duties bring you to Okuda Prime, I would like you to stay with me at my home." Tyce continued without any show of emotion.

"Yes Holy One. Thank you." Jessub said hesitantly.

"I know what Austir said to you when I was chosen to be Holy One. And what he said was true to some degree. I am now the Holy One and all the people of Okuda are my family. But he was mistaken when he said that the person I was, your son, would be lost. I am still Tyce and I would like to visit with you and mother if she is available to accompany you." Tyce finished in a more gentle voice.

Jessub smiled and said, "As if there is anything in the universe that would be more important to her. She's been alternating between worry for you and grief over losing you."

"I've missed you both as well. I'll look forward to seeing you when I get back to Okuda." Tyce said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"I'll tell her right away. I bet she'll start cooking food to bring with us the moment I tell her." Jessub said with a tender smile.

Tyce laughed and said, "Just tell her not to make any of those crusty meat pies. I can't stand those things."

"Me either. I don't know why she keeps making them. I'll tell her but it may take a declaration from the Holy One himself to stop her."

"I'll do it if I have to. Stay in touch and let me know." Tyce said in a more gentle voice.

"I will. I'm glad to have my son back. I'm very proud of you Tyce. You're doing a great job." Jessub said quietly.

"Thank you Dad. I'm glad that I was able to retain myself after becoming the Holy One. I need to attend to other duties now. I love you." Tyce said as tears welled up in his eyes again.

"I love you too Tyce." Jessub said, and tears were also forming in his eyes.

The screen went blank and Tyce felt an arm come around him and pull him into a hug.

He didn't need to look up to know who it was.

"Thank you Audge." Tyce whispered as he returned the hug and fought to get his emotions under control.

* * * * *

"So what do we need to do next?" Vincent asked, directing his question to Oluf.

"They moved to a conference room before I was summoned to attend the Holy One. It would probably be best to see if there have been any developments." Oluf said thoughtfully.

Tyce released Audge from the hug and said, "I agree. We can attend to those matters, then retire for the evening."

"Do you think my father will be there?" Tyber asked quietly from behind Vincent.

"If he isn't, we'll find him for you." Tyce said with a smile of assurance.

Vincent led the group out into the hallway.

"If you guys don't mind, I have some stuff to do for school tomorrow." Benny said reluctantly.

"Homework?" Vincent asked with a smile at Benny.

Hesitantly, Benny nodded and said, "History."

Vincent chuckled and said, "It's funny, we're here *making* history by saving the Holy One and you have to leave us to study history."

"Yeah. Real funny." Benny said with a sour look that finally broke when confronted with Vincent's beaming smile.

When everyone was aboard the lift, Vincent said, "Conference room one."

"Deflector control." Benny said quietly from Vincent's side.

The silence in the lift was becoming uncomfortable, so Vincent casually asked, "How are you feeling Audge? Is your arm bothering you at all?"

Audge considered for a moment, then said, "No. If it weren't for the cast on my arm I wouldn't even know that I had been injured. Your healer's are quite skilled."

Vincent smiled at the formal answer, and said, "I'm glad you're not hurting, but if the pain medicine starts to wear off, just let me know and we'll get you some more."

The doors opened to reveal all the captains sitting around the conference table, talking at once.

Tyber hurried out of the turbo lift and ran to his father's side.

Vincent glanced at Benny and quietly asked, "Would you tell Daddy Joe that I'll probably be down in a few minutes?"

"Yeah. I'll tell him. See ya in a few." Benny said with a smile at his friend as the lift doors closed.

* * * * *

"How are you doing Tyber?" Traiel asked with concern, as he stood to pull his son into a hug.

"I'm okay. The Holy One and his friends have been really nice to me and helped me a lot." Tyber said as he held his father desperately.

"We've just about sorted everything out here. Commander M'Butu has provided us with the locations of some planets with natural resources we can use. With a little hard work and some good luck, we may be able to find a world that we can call our own." Traiel said gently.

"We would be better off staying here and joining forces with the Gorn." Gartain said firmly.

"Haven't you learned anything?" Traiel asked in a tired voice.

"The Gorn would not be interested in allowing you to join them. The only value our people have to the Gorn is as food." Tyce said frankly.

"So you say. I believe that if we were able to speak with the Gorn we might be able to convince them that we could be their allies." Gartain said as he turned his angry gaze on Tyce.

Audge and Vincent moved protectively closer to Tyce on either side with matching expressions of warning.

"You idiot! Tell me honestly Gartain, what would you think of a ship full of aliens who came to us in a position of inferiority and weakness, then asked to be our allies?" Traiel asked frankly, then waited for an answer.

Gartain stared at Traiel for a moment in thought, then turned away with an expression of shame.

Traiel turned his attention back to his son who was still hugging him and gently asked, "Now that you've had some time to think about things, do you think you're going to be okay staying with the Holy One?"

Tyber tried to get his emotions under control before saying, "Yes. The Holy One and his friends have helped me understand some things. They told me about some of the things you did..."

"I'm sorry Tyber." Traiel said in a pained voice.

"I know. They also helped me to understand that I can still love you even though you made some mistakes." Tyber said quietly.

Traiel gave a weak smile at the statement, then turned his attention to Tyce and said, "Thank you Holy One. I was worried that when Tyber learned about everything that I did he'd end up hating me."

"Hate is not something to carry, it is something to overcome." Tyce said quietly.

"I need to write that one down." Vincent whispered to Audge playfully.

Audge glanced at Vincent as he tried to contain his smile.

Tyce grinned at the whispered conversation between his friends.

"Tyber, I'll be leaving soon. All your clothes and things are still aboard the *Nezratia*, right where you left them. Captain Treas' first officer Tomie will be commanding the *Nezratia* now and she has promised that you'll be safe if you choose to return." Traiel said quietly.

"I'm going to miss you." Tyber said in a small child's voice.

"I'll miss you too. But if I can find a new home, maybe someday we might be able to be together again." Traiel said hopefully.

"I'd like that." Tyber said in a whisper.

"Good. Then I'll have something to work toward." Traiel said gently.

"Treifa, how are the preparations for departure coming along?" Tyce asked as he turned, trying to divert attention from Tyber and his father to give them the illusion of privacy.

"Very good. Crew members from the *Timmeraeon* have transported to the *Dorsa* so she will be fully manned for the return voyage. The most serious repairs are nearly completed. We should be able to be underway on schedule."

"Good. Could you also see that our injured aboard the *Yorktown* are made as comfortable as possible when they are returned to our ships? I would like to be sure that they are treated as heroes for the sacrifices that they have made." Tyce said carefully.

"Captain Treas thought of that and has already begun to convert one of her cargo bays into a care facility. Medical personnel from all ships will transport to the *Mangeon* before we depart so that our honored comrades will have the best possible care." Treifa said seriously.

"Thank you Treifa and be sure to convey my thanks to Captain Treas." Tyce said gently.

Treifa nodded his agreement.

"Holy One?" Tyber asked from his father's side.

Tyce turned to look at Tyber with question.

"Can we get a priest or someone to take care of Mykale? I'm worried that he'll start feeling helpless and sorry for himself if he's put in a big room with a lot of other people and can't do anything for himself." Tyber asked hopefully.

Tyce nodded, then turned to Oluf and said, "Will you see that someone is assigned to attend one of our injured men named Mykale? And be sure that Mykale knows that Tyber will be available to provide any further assistance that he may need."

"Yes Holy One, what did you want me to do with this?" Oluf asked as he indicated the black lockbox on the conference table beside him.

"I will be retiring for the evening shortly. You may bring it to my cabin." Tyce said gently.

"As you say Holy One. If you will excuse me, I will make arrangements for Mykale's attendant now and return shortly." Oluf said quickly.

"Yes, of course." Tyce said with a gentle smile and watched as Oluf left.

* * * * *

"Crewman Winters, could I speak with you for a moment?" Lieutenant Simms asked from Vincent's side.

Vincent was startled, but hid it quickly and stepped away to talk to Lieutenant Simms privately.

"I had an idea and thought I'd talk to you about it before doing anything." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"What is it?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"It's about Korrigon, I don't know how well he's going to fit in at the new colony." Lieutenant Simms said carefully.

"I haven't really talked to him much. What's wrong?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Well, I did as you suggested and over the past two weeks I've been going through our security procedures with him to find the holes. We've talked about things and I just get the feeling that he's not going to do well living among the colonists." Lieutenant Simms said in slow consideration.

"What's his problem?" Vincent asked with interest.

"Well, it just seems like he's not committed to improving his situation. It's sort of like he's going through the motions until something better comes along."

"So what was your idea?" Vincent asked slowly, thinking he might already know.

"Well, I was thinking that we might talk to everyone involved and if they all agree, he could be invited to join up with the Okudai exiles. I have a feeling that he might fit in better with them." Lieutenant Simms said in thought.

"What do you need me to do?" Vincent asked as he considered what Lieutenant Simms was saying.

"After reading your reports and talking with you, I've come to respect your opinion about things. You seem to have a unique point of view. I thought that you might see some reason that this is a bad idea, or if not, maybe you could help me talk to the people involved to get them to agree to it." Lieutenant Simms said carefully.

"I think it would be best if you talked to Commander M'Butu and the Captain about it, they'll probably trust your opinion more than mine about something like this. But I'll talk to the Holy One and Traiel to see if they would be willing to go along with it." Vincent said slowly.

"So you do think it's a good idea?" Lieutenant Simms asked carefully.

"I don't know about that, but either way, I think he should be given the chance to decide what's going to make him happy." Vincent said carefully.

Lieutenant Simms smiled and said, "Thank you Crewman Winters."

Vincent nodded, then glanced around the room to locate Tyce.

* * * * *

"You asked to see me?" Korrigon asked as he stepped off the turbo lift.

"Yes Korrigon, please come in." Commander M'Butu said casually.

Korrigon hesitantly walked in and realized that most of the people in the room were Okudai.

"Are you aware of what's going on with the Okudai ships?" Commander M'Butu asked seriously.

"Not really sir. I heard that they were here trying to kill a holy leader or something. But that's about it." Korrigon said hesitantly.

"For reasons that we don't need to go into right now, the people who were responsible for the plot to kill the Holy One are being given the Okudai ship *Timmeraeon* so that they can leave. They will be exiles from their own people, but they will be free to go on their way and hopefully make a decent future for themselves." Commander M'Butu said in a careful voice.

After a moment to think about the statement, Korrigon nodded his understanding.

"I've talked to Captain Byrne, Cyril Byrne, The Holy One, and Captain Traiel of the *Timmeraeon* about this and they've all agreed that you should be given the opportunity to join the crew of the *Timmeraeon* if you're interested." Commander M'Butu said cautiously, watching carefully for Korrigon's reaction.

"You want to send me into exile?" Korrigon asked in shock.

Lieutenant Simms stepped forward and said, "We're not sending you anywhere Korrigon. But when you came to us, you were left with little choice but to go with us to the new colony. Since this opportunity came along, we wanted to give you a choice and some control over your future."

Korrigon looked at Lieutenant Simms carefully, and realized that he was the one who orchestrated the entire event.

After a moment of thought, Korrigon quietly said, "Thank you for doing all of this Lieutenant Simms. You're right. Up to now I've been going along with what was happening because I felt like I didn't have any other choice. A part of me wants to leave on the *Timmeraeon* and go back to the kind of life that's familiar to me. But I think that since I do have a choice, I'd really like to continue on to the new colony and try for something different this time... something better."

"I think that's a good decision." Lieutenant Simms said with an honest smile.

"Yeah. I guess it'll make a difference because I'll know that I'm going because I want to, not because I have to." Korrigon said consideringly.

Lieutenant Simms glanced at Vincent with a smile of gratitude.

"Now that that's done, we should be on our way." Traiel said with resignation.

"Already?" Tyber asked from his side.

"Yes son. The *Timmeraeon* is ready to depart and we have a long way to go before we reach our first planet of resources. Every minute we wait here is another minute we will be without food and water as we try to get to our first stop." Traiel said gently.

"I understand." Tyber said as he tried to act bravely.

Traiel squatted down to hug Tyber and whispered into his ear, "As soon as we've found a place and built it up enough to call it a home, I'll find a way to get in touch with you and let you know."

Tyber smiled and hugged his father with all his might.

* * * * *

"Audge, are you about ready to retire for the evening?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yes, after a visit to the sickbay for more pain medication I will be ready." Audge said gently.

"Is it hurting you?" Vincent asked with concern.

"I'm just beginning to feel a slight ache, it's nothing to worry about." Audge said peacefully.

"Actually, I need to go to the sickbay too. I'm supposed to get checked out to see if I need another vitamin shot." Vincent said in a considering voice.

Tyber reluctantly walked away from his father and to Tyce's side.

"Do you want to go to the transporter room with your father?" Tyce asked gently as he pulled Tyber into a casual hug.

"No. We said what we needed to. Besides, he said he didn't want to beam over to his ship looking like he'd just been crying. It sends the wrong message to the crew." Tyber said as he returned the hug firmly.

Audge gripped Tyber's shoulder briefly in a show of support.

"Come on guys. Let's go." Vincent said from Tyber's other side.

"Oluf, come along and bring the box. We'll be retiring for the evening soon... Oh, and remind me before we leave sickbay to ask about a way to keep Audge's cast dry." Tyce said as the group walked toward the door.

"As you say, Holy One." Oluf said quickly as he grabbed the box from the conference table.

* * * * *

"How's he doing JonJon?" Vincent asked as he led the way into sickbay.

"T'Lani said that he's completely healed and that doing all that healing is probably what's making him so tired." JonJon said quietly.

"Do you need to take Fizgig down to use his box or anything while we're here?" Vincent asked as he watched Fizgig sleeping on Lehman's chest.

"No. He's fine for a while." JonJon said peacefully.

"Did Dr. Perry say when Lehman could leave sickbay?" Tyce asked curiously.

"Yeah. She said that since he's healed, there's no real medical reason that he needs to be here now. But she said it was okay if I stayed here with him in case he has nightmares or something like that." JonJon said carefully.

"I guess that as soon as we get Audge taken care of, Lehman could come down to deflector control with us... well, unless you want to stay up here with him in sickbay tonight?" Vincent finished uncertainly.

"No. I think we would both be more comfortable in deflector control. As soon as you're ready to go, I'll wake Lehman and we can go with you." JonJon said consideringly.

* * * * *

"Vincent? How are you doing?" Joe asked with concern as Vincent walked into Deflector Control.

"I'm fine... why?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"You've been gone a long time. Thaelan was just starting to tell us about your dinner... something about catsup?" Joe said hesitantly.

"Oh, yeah. Um..." Vincent stammered uncomfortably when the door opened and JonJon walked in with Lehman who was wearing one of Vincent's uniforms.

"Actually, he was the one that went to dinner." Vincent said shyly and made a vague gesture in Lehman's direction.

Silence fell over the room as everyone looked from Vincent to Lehman and back.

"There's two of you." Jimmy said in amazement.

Vincent rolled his eyes and said, "We can't sneak anything past Jimmy."

"How..." Susan asked, as she looked at the surreal sight before her.

"Vincent?" Joe asked as he looked from one to the other.

"Um, that's me." Vincent said as he raised his hand.

"Lehman should lie down." JonJon said quietly.

"I need to do something first." Lehman said and walked to stand before Joe.

"My name is Lehman, and I was pretending to be Vincent when I came in to change clothes before dinner." Lehman said shyly.

"That was you?" Joe asked hesitantly, still unable to believe what he was seeing.

"Yeah. And I'm sorry I lied to you. If you'll forgive me, I promise that I'll never do it again." Lehman said seriously.

Joe looked carefully into Lehman's eyes and saw that he was really worried.

"Okay. You're forgiven." Joe said with a small smile and opened his arms.

Lehman smiled with relief and hugged Joe tightly.

"Okay Vincent. What happened?" Connie asked from the main.

"It's kind of a long story and Lehman needs to go to bed. I can tell you all about it later. The important thing is that Lehman is going to the new colony with Benny and JonJon." Vincent said firmly.

"And Fizgig." JonJon added with an expression of concern directed at Lehman.

"And Fizgig." Vincent said with a smile.

"Come on Lehman. I think it's our bedtime." JonJon said gently.

Lehman nodded with a gentle smile and walked to JonJon's side.

As they approached the partition to the storage room, they saw that Benny had been watching the whole time.

"Why didn't you warn them about Lehman?" JonJon asked, as he draped one arm around Lehman's shoulders.

"And miss seeing their reactions? No way." Benny said with a chuckle.

"Are you about to go to bed too Benny?" Lehman asked, and Benny heard the hopeful tone in his voice.

"Sure Lehman, I'll be ready in a minute. Save me a spot." Benny said gently.

Lehman happily nodded and walked with JonJon into the supply room.

* * * * *

Darin pressed the comm button by the cabin door and waited.

"Do you think it's too late for me to be visiting?" Darin asked with concern.

"It's not really that late. He should still be up." Rad said consideringly.

"Well, he is the Holy One. Don't holy types usually go to bed early?" Darin asked uncertainly.

"Like I would know." Rad said with a mischievous chuckle.

The door finally opened to reveal a nine or ten year old boy with black hair and very light brown eyes.

"I brought something for the Holy One. Is he here?" Darin asked cautiously.

"Yes. He and Audge are bathing right now, I kind of got the feeling that they might be in there for a while. Is it something I can give him or do you need to deliver it yourself?" The boy asked cautiously.

Darin smiled and said, "I can give it to you. It's just a copy of the Safe Haven Act that he asked about earlier today. Tell him Darin brought it by."

"Oh, okay. By the way, I'm Tyber." The boy said shyly as he accepted the data padd from Darin.

"It's nice to meet you Tyber, this is Rad." Darin said with a casual smile.

"It's nice to meet you both. I'll make sure he gets this as soon as he gets out of the bathing room." Tyber said seriously.

"There's no rush. Thanks." Darin said then glanced at Rad to see if he was ready to leave.

"I'm glad to help. Have a good evening." Tyber said, then retreated back into the cabin.

After the cabin door closed, Darin smiled brightly and said, "Way to go Holy One!"

* * * * *

"Please wake up Crewman Winters." a voice said gently.

Vincent felt a hand on his shoulder and slowly opened his eyes to see Oluf kneeling beside him.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked blearily.

"The Holy One has requested that you, the Chameloid and the Android attend him." Oluf said quietly, trying not to wake the others in the supply room.

"Their names are Lehman and JonJon. If you call them that again I'll start calling you the 'old Okudai priest'." Vincent said firmly.

Oluf reluctantly nodded and said, "My apologies Crewman Winters. I am not entirely familiar with the customs and formalities of your people."

Vincent looked into Oluf's eyes for a moment, then said, "That's okay Oluf. If you'll go out to deflector control and wait for us, I'll get Lehman and JonJon up."

Oluf stood and gave a courteous bow before leaving the room.

Vincent forced himself to get out of his sleeping bag, even though a part of him very much wanted to sleep for a few more hours.

* * * * *

"Lou, the Holy One wants to meet with us. Will you let everyone know if we're not back before they wake up?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure thing. Go have fun." Lou said with a smile.

"At 04:00? Yeah, I bet there's just tons of fun things to do right now." Vincent said sarcastically as he walked to the door where the others were waiting.

* * * * *

"What's going on?" Vincent asked cautiously as he followed Oluf into Tyce's cabin.

"The Gorn ships will be arriving soon. If you would all agree to it, I would like for you to accompany me over to the lead Gorn vessel to meet the Gorn Holy One." Tyce said frankly.

"Why?" Vincent asked suspiciously, feeling that Tyce wasn't telling them everything.

"I can't really say more. I just know that this is what needs to be done right now." Tyce said honestly.

Vincent reluctantly nodded his acceptance.

"Are you feeling up to this?" JonJon asked Lehman quietly, but everyone in the room clearly heard.

"Yeah. I'm fine now. I think I just needed a good sleep." Lehman said with an encouraging smile.

"Oluf, do you understand the protocols for meeting with the Gorn?" Tyce asked firmly.

"Yes Holy One." Oluf said reverently.

"Good. I need you to go to the bridge and arrange for a shuttle to transport us to the lead Gorn ship when it arrives..." Tyce said seriously.

"But Holy One, I should attend you at this meeting." Oluf said with concern.

"Normally that would be true, but not this time. Only these four may accompany me. When the Gorn ship arrives, instruct the *Yorktown*'s bridge crew on the protocols. The Gorn will be wary of a Federation vessel and any oversight could become a source of conflict. Oluf, there is no one else who can perform this duty better than you. I am depending on you." Tyce said as he stared deeply into Oluf's eyes.

"I understand." Oluf said with resignation.

"Go to their bridge now, time is short." Tyce said seriously.

"Yes Holy One." Oluf said with a bow, then retreated from the room.

"Audge, I would like for you to check on the patients that we met in the *Yorktown*'s sickbay. Make sure that they have everything they need and are comfortable." Tyce said carefully.

"It's my job to stay with you and protect you." Audge said quietly as he looked into Tyce's eyes.

Tyce nodded with regret and said, "That is true. But you can't come with us. Will you trust me?"

Audge smiled at the question and said, "Yes Tyce. I will always trust you. Do you need me to do anything else before I leave?"

"No. I'll contact you on the *Mangeon* with further instructions before we depart for Okuda." Tyce said seriously.

"I'll be waiting. Take care of yourself." Audge said as he looked into Tyce's eyes with concern.

Tyce smiled and said, "If I weren't completely sure that I would be safe, I would have you by my side."

Audge hesitantly nodded, then turned to leave.

"Would someone please bring the box? We need to be going." Tyce said as he looked at the group of four boys who had been watching silently.

"I'll get it." Tyber said quickly and walked to the table where Oluf had left the box the night before.

* * * * *

"Holy One, your priest said that you needed a shuttle." Commander M'Butu said as the group walked into the shuttle bay.

"Yes Commander. It is necessary for us to greet the Gorn Holy One personally when he arrives." Tyce said seriously.

Commander M'Butu looked at the collection of boys for a moment, then said, "I would be honored to pilot the shuttle if that is acceptable."

Tyce considered for a moment, then said, "I hope you will not take offense to this, but if you pilot for us, you will need to remain on the shuttle while we are aboard the Gorn ship."

"Just tell me what I need to do." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Tyce smiled and said, "When we leave the ship, you will receive an automated navigation signal. Allow the Gorn ship to assume control of the shuttle. That will be all until we are ready to depart."

"I understand. The preflight has already been done and the *Windsor* is ready to depart." Commander M'Butu said as he indicated the large shuttle.

"Let's go aboard and wait for the Gorn ships to arrive." Tyce said calmly and started walking toward the *Windsor.*

The rest of the group exchanged curious looks, but followed silently.

* * * * *

"Captain, sensors are picking up three... fifteen... thirty Gorn ships." Lieutenant Clark said as he felt numb shock wash over him at the sight.

"Discontinue the use of all sensors. They will perceive it as a violation of their ships." Oluf said firmly.

Lieutenant Clark looked at the Captain with question.

"Do it. Ensign Munroe, do a ship wide shutdown of all sensors and notify all departments that they are not to attempt any type of scan of the approaching vessels." Captain Byrne said firmly.

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Clark and Ensign Munroe said in unison.

"Please contact the shuttle to let them know that the Gorn ships are arriving." Oluf said as he watched the main view screen.

"Lieutenant Patterson?" Captain Byrne asked as he glanced at her.

"Yes sir." Debbie said quickly, then made the call.

"Oh my God!" Ensign Munroe gasped in astonishment as she saw the view screen fill with forty Gorn warships. Any one of them would be a match for the *Yorktown*.

"Do not hail or attempt any kind of contact with them. It would be seen as disrespectful." Oluf warned.

"Absolutely not." Debbie said, as she looked at the screen in wonder.

"The shuttlecraft *Windsor* has exited the shuttle bay." Ensign Munroe said with distraction.

"We are merely observers in these events. Remain here silently and the Gorn will contact us if there is any need for our participation." Oluf said seriously.

"Lieutenant Patterson, monitor all channels for any attempt at contact." Captain Byrne said over his shoulder at her.

"Yes sir." Debbie said and dragged her attention back to her communications panel.

* * * * *

"The Gorn ship has control of the shuttle." Commander M'Butu said through the shuttle's comm.

"Can you tell us what we're doing now?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Actually, I don't know much more than you do at this point. I'm going to introduce you to the Gorn Holy One, then we're going to see what happens next." Tyce said cautiously.

"Why us? I mean, why not Benny or Darin or Audge?" Vincent asked curiously.

Tyce smiled and said, "It's true that there is a reason that you four were chosen to accompany me, but I can't really explain further, in case I am mistaken."

"Does it have something to do with what's in the box?" JonJon asked carefully.

Tyce glanced at the black box that Tyber had put in the seat next to him.

"I brought the box for the same reason I brought the four of you." Tyce said carefully.

"It's like we're talking in circles around each other." Lehman said with a curious glance at Tyce.

"Dancing." Vincent said with a smile.

JonJon giggled at the statement and the feeling of tension in the room seemed to ease somewhat.

"We're entering the lead Gorn vessel." Commander M'Butu said over the comm.

"Tyber, you can leave the box here for now. We'll come back and get it if it's needed." Tyce said seriously.

Tyber nodded that he heard.

"I guess it's time to meet the Gorn." Vincent said reluctantly as he stood.

JonJon and Lehman stood more slowly and moved from their seats to join Vincent in the aisle.

"Do we need to do anything special like bow or anything like that?" Lehman asked cautiously.

"No. The Holy One will appreciate it if you show him respect in the manner of your own culture rather than try to conform to his." Tyce said as he led the way to the door.

"Let me get that for you Holy One." Commander M'Butu said as he walked around the group of boys and activated the main door of the shuttle.

"Thank you Commander. If all goes well, we will see you soon." Tyce said carefully.

"And if it doesn't go well?" Commander M'Butu asked cautiously.

Tyce looked into Commander M'Butu's eyes and revealed a little of the concern he was feeling.

"I see someone." Vincent said from the door of the shuttle.

"It's time." Tyce said as he walked past Vincent to lead the group.

* * * * *

"What is the meaning of bringing these creatures?" J'Laad asked sternly as he watched the group leaving the shuttle.

All the boys froze in place as they looked at the large reptilian creature with greenish gray mottled skin.

Tyce seemed to ignore the question as he said, "My people have just reached the precipice of the third age. Then a series of unlikely events brought me to meet this group who represent many different people."

"They all appear to be of your people." J'Laad said cautiously.

"Appearances can be deceiving." Tyce said, then motioned for Vincent to step forward.

"This is Crewman Vincent Winters of the Federation starship *Yorktown*. He has been adopted by fathers from three worlds." Tyce said in a leading tone.

J'Laad nodded slowly, apparently understanding the significance.

Tyce turned to indicate Lehman and said, "Lehman is a Chameloid, orphaned by poverty."

"It's too soon. My people have only just entered the third age." J'Laad said reluctantly.

"As have mine, and theirs." Tyce said frankly.

"Tyber is one of my people, his father was instrumental in the plot to remove me from service." Tyce said in an informative tone.

"Orphaned by treachery." J'Laad muttered as he looked at Tyber.

"And JonJon is an Android." Tyce said with a glance at JonJon.

"Immortal child." J'Laad said, barely even looking at JonJon.

"So what I need to know is if you happen to have the child of laughter and light with you?" Tyce asked frankly.

J'Laad stared at the silent group of boys for a moment, then reached beside him to brush his claw-like finger across a crystal embedded in the control panel. Soon he began to make sounds that were like gurgles and hisses to the boys untrained ears.

"I'm going to guess that means yes." Vincent said to Lehman who was now at his side.

J'Laad turned his attention to the boys and said, "You are welcomed here. Please come with me so you can be made comfortable."

"Tyber, would you get the box?" Tyce asked quietly.

Rather than answer, Tyber hurried to the shuttle.

J'Laad looked at Tyce curiously.

"We will be ready in a moment." Tyce said seriously.

J'Laad nodded cautiously, then opened a panel and took out a necklace with a large jewel on it.

Tyce nodded in approval as Tyber returned from the shuttle.

"You brought it?" J'Laad asked with surprise.

"Of course. I assume that you have yours as well." Tyce said frankly.

"I do... I suppose that whether we consider ourselves ready or not, it is time." J'Laad said with resignation as he led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

Vincent noticed that the lighting in the hallway seemed to be harsh and the humidity unusually high.

"This place reminds me of my home." Lehman said casually as they walked.

"How is that?" JonJon asked curiously.

"It is very moist where I am from, though not usually this hot." Lehman said in a considering voice.

"I guess it gets like this in Florida too sometimes." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Is that your home planet?" Tyber asked curiously.

Vincent smiled and said, "It's the place on my planet where I'm from. My planet has lots of different climates."

The group all fell silent as they passed two large reptilian creatures who seemed to be staring at them.

"I hope they're not thinking that we're dinner." Lehman said in a whisper.

J'Laad began to laugh from ahead of them and said, "Not to worry young Chameloid. If you are invited to a meal here it will be as a guest, not as an entrée."

"Thanks." Lehman said hesitantly, not feeling especially comforted.

J'Laad chuckled and gestured to a doorway.

Tyce led the way into the room and the group of boys followed close behind.

* * * * *

As the group entered, they all noticed a thin, golden skinned reptile looking at them from the other side of the room.

J'Laad walked across the room and placed the necklace over the golden reptile's head.

"This will allow you to speak their language." J'Laad said in a comforting voice.

The reptilian boy looked around the room with question and his gaze finally stopped on the group of boys looking back at him curiously.

Before anyone could say a word, the boy broke into uncontrollable laughter and exclaimed, "They *do* look like hairless monkeys!"

Vincent couldn't help but smile at the statement and began to laugh.

After the laughter had quieted, J'Laad said, "I would like all of you to meet..." Then a series of gurgles and hisses followed that were apparently the boy's name.

"Oh wow. Um, I don't think I could say that if I tried." Vincent said reluctantly.

He looked around to see that the others agreed.

"Could you say it again? Maybe we could come up with something close?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

The golden skinned Gorn seemed to be amused by the suggestion, but slowly began to pronounce his name in a series of gurgles, growls and hisses.

"That middle part sounded something like 'hrrskr', can we call you Oscar?" Vincent asked hopefully.

The boy considered for a moment, then said, "I like the sound of it, but before I agree, does it have a meaning?"

"Well, I'm sure it does, but I don't know what it is. It's just a name that sounds a little bit like your name." Vincent said carefully.

"We can consult the *Yorktown*'s computer if you want to know the meaning of the name." Tyce said carefully.

"No. I simply wanted to know if I was being given a name that was descriptive in some way." the Gorn boy said carefully.

"Oh, I get it. You wanted to know if we were calling you 'snake-face' or something." Vincent said casually.

Oscar looked at Vincent with question, obviously not understanding the reference.

"It doesn't matter. Oscar doesn't mean anything bad. I promise." Vincent said with a smile.

"I would like to introduce all of you to the heir to the third estate of the Gorn empire, Oscar." J'Laad said formally.

Vincent wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but felt that he should bow out of respect.

The rest of the boys followed Vincent's example and bowed respectfully to Oscar.

"Thank you." Oscar said with surprise at the polite and respectful gesture.

"Oscar, this is the Holy One of the Okudai people. It is proper to also address him as Holy One." J'Laad said seriously.

"Another Holy One? A mammal?" Oscar said in wonder.

Tyce smiled at the statement and said, "Yes Oscar. Many races have Holy Ones like yours. Those who don't, have people who serve the same function with our assistance."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Holy One." Oscar said respectfully.

"It's nice to meet you too Oscar. Let me introduce you quickly to the others so we can start this." Tyce said, then looked to see if Oscar was ready.

After a nod from Oscar, Tyce said, "The one in the uniform is Vincent, the one who looks like him is Lehman, the blond is JonJon and the one with long dark hair is Tyber."

"I will try to remember." Oscar said carefully.

"If you don't remember, you can always ask. We won't mind." Vincent said with assurance.

Oscar smiled and said, "Thank you. I have never spoken to mammals before. I thought you would be more... primitive."

Vincent giggled at the statement and said, "I kinda thought the same thing about you."

Oscar's eyes went wide with surprise at the statement, then a look of curiosity seemed to fill his expression.

"Did you have a question?" Vincent asked cautiously, hoping he was interpreting the expression correctly.

"Well yes. I have studied about sentient mammals, but there are certain things I wasn't sure about. I am curious to know... Do you really have nipples?"

"Yeah, do you want to see?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Oscar nodded quickly.

Vincent opened his jumpsuit uniform enough to expose one of his nipples.

"THAT'S SO DISGUSTING!" Oscar said in amazement, then started laughing himself silly.

Everyone watched as Oscar slowly fell to the floor, clutching his sides with laughter.

J'Laad looked to Tyce with question and received a nod in return.

After a moment for Oscar to get himself under control again, J'Laad said, "We believe that you five share a destiny."

All the boys turned their attention to J'Laad at the vague statement.

"The only way to know for sure is in that box." Tyce said as he indicated the box in the floor beside Tyber.

"What's in the box?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Perhaps nothing, perhaps many things. You'll have to open it to find out." Tyce said with concern evident in his voice.

"What exactly is going to happen when we open the box?" Vincent asked more carefully.

"I don't know." Tyce said, then noticed that J'Laad had moved to the door.

"No, wait! What are we supposed to do?" Vincent asked in a rush.

"Just open the box. After that, it's up to you." Tyce said, then followed J'Laad out the door.

* * * * *

"Who else has the feeling that this is really gonna suck?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"I thought it was just me." Oscar said as he walked to Vincent's side.

"The Holy Ones wouldn't do anything to put us in danger... would they?" Lehman asked uncertainly.

"Normally I'd say no. But from the look in Tyce's eyes... he's scared." Vincent said reluctantly.

"We could just not open the box, then tell him there was nothing in it." JonJon said quietly.

"You want to lie to a Holy One?" Oscar asked with surprise.

"No, we don't want to. But JonJon is just coming up with another possibility so we can all think about it. " Vincent said seriously.

Oscar nodded his acceptance of the reasoning.

"We're going to open it. We have to." Tyber said as a statement of fact.

Silence fell over the group for a moment, then Vincent quietly said, "I'll do it."

"Me too." Lehman said and held out his hand.

Vincent smiled and laid his hand on top of Lehman's.

"I'm with you." JonJon said as he looked at the two identical boys.

"An heir to the third estate of the Gorn empire wouldn't be worthy of his name if he were afraid of the unknown." Oscar said as he placed his claw-like hand over JonJon's.

Everyone looked at Tyber with question.

"I'm the one that said we have to." Tyber said with a smile and made the stack of hands complete.

Vincent looked around the group, then said, "Let's do this."

Everyone looked at each other with question for a moment, then Oscar and Vincent moved at the same time toward the box.

Vincent gave Oscar a quick smile then, as one, they opened the lid.

Chapter 30

There was a long moment of silence as the group of boys stared in disbelief.

"What does it mean?" Tyber finally whispered.

"Nothing." Oscar answered in an uncertain voice.

Vincent shook himself out of his stupor and glanced around the group as he said, "After all that build up, this was a real let down."

"But why would they bring us in here just to open an empty box?" Tyber asked in confusion.

"I really don't think they knew it was empty." Lehman said quietly.

"Well JonJon, I guess you called that one." Vincent said with a teasing smile at his friend.

"Android intuition." JonJon said with false bravado.

Vincent giggled at the statement, then said, "Let's go tell the Holy Ones that it was empty so maybe I can get back to the *Yorktown* in time to have some breakfast before I have to go to work."

"I'm hoping I can get some more sleep." Lehman said, honestly.

JonJon hugged Lehman to his side and guided him to start walking.

As the five boys approached the door, they dissolved into nothingness.

* * * * *

"Okay... Did anyone else see what I just saw?" Vincent asked as he tried to recover from a tingling sensation that seemed to be coursing through his entire body.

"If you saw the five of us walk to the door and vanish, then yes." Oscar said hesitantly.

"What does it mean?" Tyber asked in confusion.

"Maybe we should try to follow them. They may be duplicates of us, intent on taking our places." Oscar said speculatively, then started walking toward the door.

"No. I think I know what that was. You don't have to worry about it. We won't be seeing them again." Vincent said, as he carefully considered what he was feeling.

Oscar turned on him and asked, "What do you think it was?"

"I think... Actually, I'm pretty sure that what we just saw was a time split." Vincent said slowly.

"Time split? What's that?" Tyber asked curiously.

"It's kind of hard to explain, and I'm really not supposed to talk about most of what I know about it. But I've felt this feeling before, and it means that something just happened to our timeline. Since there were just two groups of us, I think what we saw was what would have happened to us if the box were empty." Vincent said in slow concentration.

"Very good." A man's voice said from behind the group.

The group turned as one to see a tall transparent man standing about six feet away.

His skin appeared to be thin and made of something like crinkled white paper and his eyes were sunken in, looking like they were solid black.

"Who are you?" Vincent asked before anyone else found their voice.

"I was known as Eliam. Now I am the keeper of this archive." The man said quietly, as he gestured toward the box which had a glowing sphere about four feet wide hovering above it.

The group turned and moved around so they could all easily see the glittery light.

"It's kind of pretty." Lehman offered shyly.

"As holograms go, it's alright. I wouldn't really brag on it." Vincent said with a shrug.

"I don't know for sure, but it looks like a model of the universe." Tyber said as he leaned in to get a better look.

"No. It isn't. It's hard to tell, as small as it is, but I'm not seeing any familiar formations." Oscar said in a considering voice.

Vincent looked more closely and tried to find the Milky Way, the formation he had the most familiarity with.

After another moment of inspecting the hologram, Vincent said, "Oscar is right. There's nothing here that I recognize."

"It's doing something." Lehman said, as he pointed toward the center.

All the boys watched in silence as one after another of the little lights started moving toward the center. As each one reached the central point, it winked out.

The boys watched silently as more and more little lights winked out.

"This is giving me the creeps. I feel like I'm watching the deaths of billions of people." JonJon finally said in a whisper.

Vincent looked back at Eliam with question, to find him watching the model with an expression of profound sorrow.

"It's horrible." Tyber said in a whisper, as tears began to well in his eyes.

"It's the natural cycle of death and rebirth in the universe." Eliam said in a resigned tone that didn't quite hide his sorrow.

"Rebirth? Everything is being destroyed. How is there rebirth after that?" Vincent asked as the central point started glowing.

Silence was the only answer as everyone was transfixed on the sight.

The model seemed to pick up speed and within a second, all of the tiny lights were drawn to spiral into the growing molten central point.

A moment after the last light disappeared, Lehman asked, "So is that it? The end of everything?"

"No. The beginning." Eliam said with certainty.

As soon as the words left his mouth, the swirling molten glob exploded.

All the boys scampered back as molten debris flew out in all directions and expanded to fill one end of the large room.

"It's the big bang." Vincent whispered in realization.

"I think what we're seeing is billions of years of progress in a matter of seconds." Oscar speculated as he looked around the room.

"Vincent, is that ours?" JonJon asked as he pointed.

Vincent moved to JonJon's side and looked where he was pointing.

"Maybe. But it's not right yet. We probably need to give it a few million years to settle down." Vincent said in thought.

Oscar walked to his side and watched as the molten globs of debris formed into recognizable patterns.

"So does this mean that before the universe was born that there was a whole other universe that was destroyed?" Tyber asked, curiously.

"That's what it looks like." Vincent said as he continued to watch the different star systems develop.

All the boys were startled when everything seemed to freeze in place.

"You reasoned that out well." Eliam said from behind them.

"Why are we here?" Oscar asked in a firm voice.

"Why are any of us here?" Eliam said with a gentle smile.

Vincent shook his head and said, "We're not going to do this. I didn't get enough sleep, I'm hungry and my joints are aching. Will you just tell us why we were all brought here so we can get started doing whatever it is you need us to do?"

Eliam seemed to be surprised by the statement, but his only answer was a casual bow and a gesture toward the conference table at the other side of the room.

When the last of the boys was seated, Eliam said, "What you just witnessed was an ending and a beginning."

"We figured that part out." Vincent said shortly.

JonJon put a hand on Vincent's arm to get his attention, then put a finger to his lips to silently say, 'shush'.

Vincent rolled his eyes, then turned his attention back to Eliam.

"What you saw happened, and will happen again." Eliam continued.

Vincent nodded and fought the urge to say, 'Well, duh!'.

"We are approaching the point of critical mass, when all matter will be drawn together again or will continue on to allow another cycle." Eliam said carefully.

Vincent thought about the words for a moment, then quietly said, "Okay. I get that. But I still don't see why we're here. What do we have to do with it?"

"The cycle of destruction and rebirth will continue until a civilization develops that is worthy of continued existence."

The boys looked around at each other, barely comprehending the scale of what he was saying.

"What do we have to do with it?" Vincent asked again.

"There are certain creatures in existence that have the ability to alter fate. Their presence and force of will can cause things that were predestined, to become otherwise." Eliam said carefully.

"You five are just beginning to find that power in yourselves and you will use those abilities to determine the ultimate fate of the universe." Eliam said, and Vincent noticed that he was more transparent than just a minute before.

"Okay. Are you saying that we five are some kind of super people?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Remind me to feed him before we go anywhere with him again." JonJon whispered to Lehman.

Lehman nodded his agreement.

"Super people? No... Each of you are members of your own species and not unlike others of your kind. But as each of you grow, you will begin to notice that if you invest your thought and caring into a project, the random factors will seem to align in your favor." Eliam said carefully.

"That sounds good, except... I don't grow." JonJon finished hesitantly.

Vincent glanced at JonJon, then turned to Eliam and nodded in agreement.

Eliam seemed to consider for a moment before saying, "Whether you are aware of it or not, it is necessary for what is to come. If you are one of the five, you grow."

"The nail." Lehman whispered.

JonJon looked at him curiously, not understanding what one thing had to do with the other.

"The doctors on the *Enterprise* said that it might effect your development." Vincent said cautiously.

"So my hardware was physically altered to allow me to fulfill this destiny? And I was drawn to be in this time and place? Did you kill my family?" JonJon asked darkly, as he glared at Eliam.

"No young one, not me. The force that guides the universe brought the five of you to meet in this time and place, and made sure that you had the ability to do what was asked of you." Eliam said cautiously and was now difficult to see.

"Okay guys. It looks like Eliam's nightlight is about to burn out, so let's see what we have to do before we're stuck sitting here talking to nothing." Vincent said firmly.

"Each of you will go and live your lives as you would have before, only now you will do so with the knowledge that you can make changes in destiny. Your presence and will can alter the predestined fates of people... or even worlds." Eliam said seriously.

"There's got to be more to it than that, or we wouldn't be here. Spill it." Vincent said firmly.

"Others have worked to put in place a network of people who can aid you in your efforts to alter the destiny of this universe. They would be put in place as respected figures of authority." Eliam said cautiously.

"The Holy Ones. Two of them are waiting for us to finish." Oscar said as he watched Eliam cautiously.

"Yes. Your Holy Ones will provide you access to places that you might not otherwise be permitted. They will alert you to situations where your unique abilities might be of benefit. They are resources for you to draw upon." Eliam said, and was now little more than an undefined glow.

"You said that we have to change the destiny of the universe. How do we do that?" Tyber asked quickly.

"You may be able to completely change the destiny of an entire planet by altering the destiny of just one man. Likewise the fate of the universe may be changed by altering the fate of just one planet. So it follows, that if you can change the fate of one pivotal being, the universe might be allowed to continue on to fulfill more of it's ultimate potential." Eliam said slowly.

"But how do we find that man?" Lehman asked, cautiously.

"You will be drawn to him. It is part of your nature to be drawn to the people who are instrumental in the formation of the future." Eliam said, as he turned his insubstantial face toward Lehman.

"Okay. So we find the guy who can change the future of a world, what then? What do we do?" JonJon asked as he squinted his eyes to try and see Eliam's facial features.

"Care. Become involved. Help him realize his dream. Your presence and your will for it to be so is all that is necessary for a destiny to be rewritten." Eliam said in a whisper of a voice.

"I can barely see you. Are you okay?" Lehman asked with concern.

"The abrupt time displacement provided me the energy to manifest before you, but as time flows away from it, I am fading." Eliam said with concern.

"What else do we need to know?" Vincent asked quickly.

"Only one more thing. A warning. The failure of the five in my time was due to their being universally known. They were made the supreme rulers of the five great empires because it was known by all that they had the ability to save our universe. When our universe reached it's critical mass and all matter began to return to it's origin, our societies fell into ruin and our civilizations collapsed. The five were unable to perform their duties and improve their empires because they... we became the focal points. Our ability to change the universe was lost because there were few factors that we, as emperors, did not control. There were not enough random factors to allow us to change anything of significance. Heed my warning, do not announce the true nature of your gifts or you face the possibility of losing this chance. If you fail in your duties, one of you may have to choose to give up his physical body to become the keeper of the archive and warn the next universe."

The last few words were little more than whispers in the empty air.

"Wow. That sucks." Vincent finally said.

Oscar nodded his agreement.

"I guess we should go tell the Holy Ones what happened so we can find out what to do next." JonJon said cautiously.

"I need to do one thing first." Vincent said as he walked to the box.

He carefully closed it, then turned and said, "Oscar."

Oscar looked at Vincent curiously.

Vincent pulled open the top of his jumpsuit enough to expose his right nipple.

Oscar let out a yelp of laughter, then turned away to try and get himself under control.

"I just thought things were getting a little too serious. Now I'm ready." Vincent said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Wait." Tyber said, before he reached the door.

Everyone stopped to look at him curiously.

"Before we go talk to the Holy Ones, I think we need to talk about what just happened." Tyber said with concern.

"What is there to talk about? The five of us were brought here to save the universe. The only choices we have are do it or don't. Does anyone want the universe to die?" Vincent asked seriously.

"No, but there has to be someone better than me to do this..." Tyber said in a hollow tone.

"Nope. You're here. That means that you're good enough." Vincent said simply.

"I believe the mammal is correct. We have been selected for this task by forces beyond our comprehending. Our very presence is all the evidence required to prove that we are worthy." Oscar said, then gave Vincent a teasing smile.

"Listen guys, my dad was an insane murderer who secretly wanted to pork my brother. If anyone should feel unworthy it's me. But we're gonna do this because there's no other choice. Besides that, I think 'Savior of the Universe' will look pretty good on a resume if I ever decide to leave Starfleet." Vincent finished with a cheeky grin.

"Okay Vincent. I guess you're right. I mean, if you think about it, nothing has really changed. Eliam said that we're just going to go and live our lives like before." Tyber said speculatively.

"Except that now we'll know that if we help someone, it might be that one person who will tip the balance and let the universe keep living." JonJon said in thought.

"Good. Then if we're all agreed, let's go. The sooner we meet with the Holy Ones, the sooner I can get something to eat. I'm starving." Vincent said, as he started toward the door.

"Does he always think with his stomach?" Oscar asked Tyber curiously as they followed.

"I don't know. I met him for the first time yesterday." Tyber said in thought.

"I see... What does it mean, 'to pork'?" Oscar asked more quietly.

Tyber looked at the other boys who had moved ahead and quietly said, "I was hoping you could tell me."

* * * * *

As the boys walked into the hallway, they stopped as a group to stare at the nearly seven foot tall Gorn who appeared to be waiting for them.

"Where are the Holy Ones?" Oscar asked in his growling and hissing language.

The rest of the boys shared glances of surprise that they understood what he was saying.

"They await your presence in the Lounging Hall." The large reptile answered.

Oscar considered for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "Our guests require food. Please see that a traditional feast is prepared that is in accordance with mammal eating habits. I will conduct our guests to the lounging hall."

"I will see to it, but... what do they eat?" The large reptile asked as he glanced at the group of boys watching him.

"I do not know. Have the cooks prepare a variety, and we will hope that none of the selections will be offensive." Oscar said carefully.

"I will notify the cooks immediately." The large reptile said, then hurried away.

Oscar looked at the group behind him and said in English, "Follow me, the Holy Ones are this way."

Vincent thought carefully about the pronunciation before saying in the Gorn language, "In the Lounging Hall?"

Oscar stopped suddenly and looked at Vincent with surprise.

"We could understand everything both of you just said." JonJon said quietly.

Oscar took off the crystal he had been wearing and asked, "You can now understand our language?"

Lehman nodded and said, "It sounded like a language that I learned to speak by telepathy. Not really familiar, but I understood the meaning clearly."

Oscar nodded absently, then started walking again.

"I wonder what else Eliam did to us without telling us?" Tyber asked speculatively.

Vincent took a deep breath, then let out a long, sustained shriek.

"You don't have to use that kind of language Vincent. We're guests here." JonJon said in a chastising tone.

"And you say my language is difficult to pronounce." Oscar said with a chuckle.

Vincent smiled at the statement.

"I understood what you said, but what language was that?" Tyber asked as the group approached a large double door.

"Eagle. I just figured that if Eliam taught all of us to speak Gorn, that he might have given all of us all of each other's languages." Vincent said casually.

"But Eagle? You speak Eagle?" JonJon asked in wonder.

Vincent nodded and said, "So do you now."

* * * * *

As the group walked into the large room, Oscar said, "This is where our crew can come to relax while off duty."

Vincent looked around the brightly lit room and immediately noticed the higher humidity.

"The rest of the crew have vacated the area so we may speak." J'Laad said from on top of a large platform at the center of the room.

Oscar continued to lead the way to the platform, then around the side to reveal a ramp that led up to the Holy Ones.

It was warmer and the light was even brighter on top of the platform. Vincent felt like he was back in Florida in the summertime.

"What was in the box?" Tyce asked from J'Laad's side.

Before Vincent could answer, Tyber said, "Everything that is."

Tyce seemed disturbed by the answer.

"...And has been." Lehman added in a small voice a moment later.

"I had almost hoped that they would see nothing." J'Laad said quietly.

"You're in the wrong timeline for that." Vincent said, before he could think better of it.

J'Laad and Tyce both looked at Vincent with matching expressions of surprise that were verging on panic.

"What happened? What about timelines?" Tyce asked firmly, sounding nothing like his usual, gentle self.

"I just... When we opened the box, I think the timeline split." Vincent said carefully.

"Why would you believe such an unlikely thing?" J'Laad asked slowly, obviously trying to appear calm.

A combination of the early hour, his empty stomach and a stranger than usual morning, even for him, sparked a fire of anger within Vincent.

"I know what it feels like okay? I'm not allowed to talk about how, but when we opened the box, it caused something to happen that affected time. All of us saw our alternate selves walking away from the box like they didn't see us. When we opened the box, time split into two different realities." Vincent said, as he tried to get control of his building rage.

"Vincent." Oscar said seriously.

Without thought, Vincent turned to Oscar with a full glare of anger burning in his eyes.

Oscar tugged on the sleeve of the robe he was wearing and caused the robe to fall open at the neck. As it opened it revealed one side of his smooth, golden chest. The pectoral muscle was nicely defined, but there was no trace of a nipple.

Vincent's anger dissipated in a burst of laughter.

After a moment for Vincent to calm down, J'Laad said, "Come and sit with us. We have some matters to discuss and I have something to give you."

All the boys made their way fully onto the platform and gathered in a semi circle in front of J'Laad and Tyce.

"Did the keeper of the archive reveal himself to you?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"If you mean, did we see Eliam, yeah." Vincent said carefully.

JonJon bumped against Vincent's shoulder and whispered, "I'm sure that's what he meant. He *is* the Holy One."

Vincent looked at JonJon with a smirk but didn't reply.

As J'Laad was about to speak, Oscar broke into a howl of laughter.

Everyone turned their attention to Oscar as he fell back on the floor.

"Reveal himself!" Oscar squeaked with delight.

"He's good for my ego." Vincent said quietly to JonJon.

"Just remember, you would have gotten the same response if you had shown him your nipple again." JonJon said sagely.

"Okay. I'm as funny as a nipple. I guess I can live with that." Vincent said with a smile at Oscar's laughter.

As Oscar's gales of laughter finally began to subside, J'Laad said, "If we may continue."

"I'm sorry Holy One, but the double meaning of the words used was quite..."

"I'm aware of the double meaning. I have known their language since before your birth." J'Laad said seriously.

Oscar finally settled back into his position sitting upright before J'Laad, then waited expectantly.

"Yes. Well... what was I saying?" J'Laad asked as he looked at Tyce with question.

"Holy One, we have a feast prepared when you and your guests are ready to dine." A small stout Gorn said from just inside the doorway.

"Yes. We will be down shortly." J'Laad said with confusion.

"The mammals did not have an opportunity to eat before they came to our ship. Apparently it is early in the morning by their ship's time." Oscar hurried to explain.

"So you asked the cooks to prepare a feast?" J'Laad asked carefully.

"Yes. It seemed the proper way." Oscar said seriously, then finished with a smile.

"It is good. Come, we will dine." J'Laad said as he stood and walked toward the ramp.

"Tyber, would you mind bringing the box?" Tyce asked quietly.

Tyber looked where J'Laad had been sitting to see another black box, nearly identical to the one they had opened.

"Oh no. The last one told us that we have to save the universe. I don't want to know what's in this one." Vincent said firmly.

Tyce chuckled and said, "It's just something to help you. Once we've had our meal, we'll explain everything."

* * * * *

When they were finally all down the ramp, they spotted a variety of platters of food sat in a decorative pattern near the base of the platform.

"I like dining traditionally." Oscar said happily as he walked between two platters and took a seat on the ground with his back against the base of the platform.

"There is no etiquette in traditional dining. Just sit and eat." J'Laad said as he moved slowly between the platters and took a seat as Oscar had done.

"Do we need to sit over there?" Tyber asked curiously.

J'Laad smiled as he said, "Yes. This tradition of our people was born of necessity. During the hottest part of the day, we would have a meal break in the shadows of the great pillars. Hundred's of people would be gathered, resting with their backs against the pillars and the feast spread out before them."

While J'Laad had been talking, everyone found places to sit with their backs to the base of the platform.

"Our people have lost so many things to innovation and technology. We have nearly lost the essence of what it means to be Gorn. But this tradition continues on, it reminds us of our origin, when our only tools were stone and wood." J'Laad said with a distant look of peace.

"You can eat. There is no ceremony, you simply take whatever food appeals to you." Oscar said as he picked up a clawful of something that looked deep fried.

"I don't know what most of these things are." JonJon said as he looked over the selection.

"Glurrah! Would you hand me some of that?" Lehman asked with excitement.

JonJon saw the cluster of lavender fruit that Lehman was pointing at and cautiously handed him a bunch.

"These are my favorite, we have these on my home world." Lehman said, and began to split open a finger sized lavender pod then sucked the contents out.

JonJon hesitantly took one and opened it carefully.

"You eat like a female." Oscar said with a chuckle.

JonJon took that as a challenge, and quickly sucked the contents of the pod into his mouth.

After a moment to get past the slimy texture, the flavor was sweet and pleasant.

"Hey Oscar, would you hand me some of that meat?" Vincent asked around a mouthful of something that tasted like carrots.

"Are you aware that the creature is warm blooded? I would not wish for you to eat something that would offend your morals." Oscar said carefully.

"Me and my morals both think that the meat looks like it would taste good." Vincent said, then bit into something he imagined should taste like an apple, but ended up being more of a radish.

Oscar selected a relatively large piece of meat and quietly said, "If you will pull it apart with me, it is considered to be a sign of friendship."

Vincent smiled and quickly grabbed onto the opposite side of the piece of meat.

"Do you want to do that?" JonJon asked Lehman curiously.

"No. I don't like Juppa rats, they give me gas." Lehman said, then leaned forward to grab another bunch of lavender fruit.

JonJon looked over to see Vincent and Oscar both enjoying their, now separate, pieces of meat.

After a moment of watching them happily eating, JonJon turned and asked, "Would you like to share a rat with me Tyber?"

* * * * *

J'Laad settled back after eating his fill and smiled at all the boys enjoying the food before them.

"I never imagined that there would be a day when people of so many different species would be gathered and sharing this most ancient tradition of my people. I suppose it's superstition, but I can't help but believe that this is a very good sign." J'Laad said with a peaceful smile.

Tyce watched for a moment longer before saying, "They don't see species. Look at them. They're just enjoying good food and good company. Why can't we all live this way?"

"If we fulfill our purpose this day, and set them on their course, then one day perhaps we will."

* * * * *

"Hey Oscar, do you have room for another rat?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Oscar looked at the last piece of meat on what had once been a full platter and considered for a moment.

Suddenly he let out a loud belch that seemed to echo through the room.

"Now I do." Oscar said happily and picked up the rat for Vincent to take the other end.

All the boys giggled and were finally beginning to slow their eating.

"I had not considered that the young of other species could consume so much food. I had somehow thought that our own young were unique in their ability to decimate a feast." J'Laad said as he surveyed the remains of what had once been an abundance of food.

Tyce wanted to answer, but his mouth was too full.

J'Laad noticed and broke into delighted laughter.

* * * * *

"I have had centuries to prepare for this day, and yet now that it has arrived, nothing is going to plan." Tyce said quietly.

"Perhaps we should take them to the communications area so we may begin the process of notifying those involved." J'Laad said speculatively.

"I had wanted to tell them about their responsibilities, but..." Tyce trailed off as he looked down the line of boys leaning lazily against the base of the platform.

"The walk will do them good. And once they meet their Holy Ones, perhaps they will be reenergized." J'Laad said with a smile at the boys.

Tyce nodded and said in a louder voice, "If everyone is finished, we need to call a few people."

The puppy dog expressions in the boys' eyes nearly made Tyce relent, but he held fast to his determination and took a step away from the platform.

Slowly, the others stood to follow.

Tyce turned to say something but found that he didn't need to when Tyber automatically picked up the black box.

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"You know, when you invited us to eat with you, I was a little bit scared that we'd, well... um..." Vincent trailed off, uncertain of how to continue.

"Be eating people?" Oscar asked with a smile.

"Well, um, yeah." Vincent said shyly.

J'Laad allowed his steps to lag until he was walking with Vincent and Oscar.

"The Gorn are known for our tradition of eating our enemies when they are defeated, but I assure you that it is more symbolic than anything." J'Laad said seriously.

"So you don't really eat them?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Oh, we eat them, but not the entire army. The victorious general of the battle will have the honor of eating his defeated opponent, the heroes of the battle will be invited to the feast and the feast will be recorded and broadcast to all the troops so they may also join in the victory celebration."

Oscar nodded and said, "It is these broadcasts that have given our people the reputation that they have."

"And it is a reputation we do not seek to lose. It serves us well by making those who would attack us seriously consider the consequences of being defeated." J'Laad said carefully.

"There are some who are too stupid to realize that, Captain Gartain for example." Tyce said as he stopped at a door at the end of the hallway.

Vincent thought about what he had been told as the group walked into the room that J'Laad had opened for them.

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When the group were all in the room, Tyce gestured for Tyber to bring the box to him.

"Oscar, come forward." J'Laad said as he started working the jeweled control panel.

Hesitantly, Oscar stood forward and took his place at J'Laad's side.

The screen came on and a large, dark golden reptile filled the screen.

"Rhoskan." J'Laad said firmly.

"*Holy One*." Rhoskan responded as he gave a brief, respectful bow.

"Have you studied the ancient teachings of the Holy Ones past?" J'Laad asked carefully.

"*Yes Holy One, I have studied the ancient texts since I was a child.*" Rhoskan said respectfully.

"Good, then you remember what has been said of the greatest of our warriors, proud and noble being given the honor to stand above and beyond all estates." J'Laad said in a leading tone.

Rhoskan's eyes seemed to light up as he said, "*Yes Holy One. The Trach Manja, he will stand forward as the voice of all the estates of the Gorn empire*."

J'Laad gave a slight nod at Rhoskan's summary, then glanced at Tyce.

Vincent followed J'Laad's gaze and saw Tyce opening the black box.

He lifted something out and handed it to J'Laad.

"You will recognize this as the ancient symbol of the Trach Manja. I, the Holy One, do bestow the title of Trach Manja upon Oscar, heir of the third estate of the Gorn Empire." J'Laad said as he brought the necklace over Oscar's head.

Rhoskan stared in disbelief at the scene before him.

"Now Rhoskan, since your son has received this highest honor, I believe that you, as his father and as leader of the third estate, should also say something." J'Laad said firmly.

Rhoskan seemed to snap out of his trance, then said in a flustered voice, "*I Rhoskan, head of the third estate of the Gorn empire do hereby recognize Oscar, heir to the third estate to be an adult. May he choose his mate well and provide many offspring to faithfully serve the empire*."

Oscar bowed reverently to his father, but didn't say a word.

"I must instruct your son in his new duties. I will personally conduct Oscar to your home when the fleet returns." J'Laad said casually.

"*Thank you Holy One. We will have rooms prepared*." Rhoskan said as he bowed again.

J'Laad gave a slight bow, then disconnected the transmission.

"I'm glad that's over. I really do dislike all that formal nonsense." J'Laad said with relief.

"You're not done yet, we still have four to go." Tyce said with a smile.

"True, but the rest will behave properly without the formality." J'Laad said with a smile, obviously knowing he was right.

Tyce looked over the group of boys and said, "Tyber, I suppose we'd better do you next."

Tyber cautiously stepped forward.

"Tyber. For millennia Okuda has been silent in the universe. You are now their voice." Tyce said as he took a necklace and placed it over Tyber's head.

"What does that mean?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Before Tyce could answer, J'Laad said, "You are the voice of the worlds who wish to remain separate. You represent the wishes of the xenophobes and those with closed borders."

Tyce nodded and said, "Just the same way that Oscar speaks for those who believe that the strong should conquer the weak. Oscar is the voice of warriors."

Vincent turned in time to see Oscar's chest puff up a little at the statement.

"Who wants to be next? We have one for all of you." Tyce said as he looked at the other three.

Lehman reluctantly stepped away from JonJon's side and took his place before Tyce.

"Would you contact the Reverend Mother Myscendria? I still can't figure out how to work Gorn controls." Tyce said timidly.

J'Laad let out a sigh of long suffering as he programmed the communications console.

"*This is a secure channel. Please use another frequency.*" A computerized voice said firmly.

"This is J'Layiah." Tyce said firmly into the comm.

A moment later an elderly blue skinned woman appeared on the view screen.

"*J'Layiah? Is that really you?*" She asked hopefully.

"Yes. J'Leitha, you are looking well." Tyce said peacefully.

She giggled at the statement, then said, "Thank you for saying so, but I'm looking older than the hills. What can I do for you J'Layiah?"

Tyce motioned for J'Laad to come to his side.

"*J'Laad? No. It's too soon, my people have only just*..."

"...entered their third age. Ours too J'Leitha. Congratulations, one of your children was chosen." Tyce finished happily.

The Reverend Mother broke into a wide smile, her white teeth almost glowing out from her dark indigo skin.

"Lehman, come forward." Tyce said in a whisper.

"*Child, do not hide yourself. Show me your true face*." The Reverend Mother said gently.

Lehman's gaze fell to the floor as he said, "I'm sorry Reverend Mother, but the off-worlders who took me from our world did something to me... inside me, and now I can't change anymore."

"*I have heard of this procedure. But if you are locked in your current form, how is it that you are still alive?*" The Reverend Mother asked with concern.

"Have you heard of the Federation?" Tyce asked quietly.

"*Yes. I have heard the name, though their borders are too distant for us to have had contact*." The Reverend Mother said carefully.

"We are on the border of their space now. Their doctors were able to keep Lehman alive and replace his failed organs with artificial organs that mimic Human biology." Tyce said carefully.

"*I see*." She said quietly, then continued in a more relaxed voice, "*You say this child, Lehman, has been chosen?*"

"Yes. If you agree, Lehman will represent the Chameloid people as well as those who have no voice. He will represent the interests of slaves, the conquered, children and any others who cannot speak for themselves."

"*Child, tell me of your life, how did you come to be taken by off-worlders?*" The Reverend Mother asked gently.

"My parents died in the plague a few years ago, then I was put in the foundling home... some men came and bought me and took me to Okuda." Lehman finished with a shrug.

"*OFFWORLDERS BOUGHT one of my children!*" The Reverend Mother screeched.

"J'Leitha, will you accept Lehman as the voice of the Chameloid people and promise to be his guide and support in the coming years?" J'Laad asked firmly.

"*Yes. And Lehman, call me when you're ready and we'll have a long talk about what happened. I will swear to you that I will see to it that what happened to you will NEVER happen to another of my children.*" The Reverend Mother Myscendria said with icy venom.

Lehman nodded his agreement slowly.

"You may say the words and we will act as your hands." J'Laad said seriously.

The Reverend Mother seemed to calm, then said in a clear firm voice, "*I, the Reverend Mother Myscendria, do bestow the most ancient relic upon Lehman, my lost child.*"

Tyce placed a necklace around Lehman's neck then, on impulse, gave him a firm hug.

"*Child. Now that the time has come, the two of us can change our world.*" the Reverend Mother said in a distant voice.

"Not just the two of you. He'll have all of us." Vincent said as he walked to Lehman's side.

"Yes. We are one." Oscar said as he walked to Lehman's other side.

The Reverend Mother Myscendria's mouth fell open at the site of a Saurian and Human both vowing their allegiance to one of her children.

The tears started streaking down her cheeks as she stared at the unbelievable sight.

"It is a new age." Tyce said in a whisper.

She absently nodded at the statement.

"We still have two more to go. Do you want to watch?" Tyce asked gently.

"*Yes. Please.*" The Reverend Mother Myscendria said in an absent voice.

"JonJon. Do you want to be next?" Tyce asked curiously.

"I don't understand. I don't have a race or a species. I don't have a people." JonJon said quietly.

J'Laad chuckled at the statement and said, "You should have prepared him for this."

"I couldn't say anything in case I was wrong." Tyce said in an aggravated tone.

The screen came alive to show a rather common Human looking man wearing a strange necklace with '001' printed on it.

"Norman. Do you remember when I told you of the Holy Ones?" Tyce asked happily.

"*My memory functions have not been impaired. I'm sure I remember the conversation in more detail than you do.*" Norman said, almost sounding playful.

Tyce chuckled and said, "Then you remember what I said might happen one day, in the third age."

"*That five would rise from the dominant races to promote the advancement of all the peoples in the universe.*" Norman said casually.

"One of your people was chosen. This is JonJon, he is an Android." Tyce said happily.

"*An Android was selected to represent one fifth of the universe?*" Norman asked with actual surprise.

"He will represent all Androids, artificial intelligence and cybernetically enhanced species to protect their interests and rights." Tyce said firmly.

"*I would like to have the opportunity to interface with JonJon when time permits. Our people are facing something of a crisis.*" Norman said seriously.

Tyce and J'Laad shared a look of concern at the statement, but before either could think of what to say, JonJon quietly asked, "Who is he?"

"Norman is the leader of an Android civilization. You could consider it the Android home world." Tyce said quietly.

JonJon's eyes went wide as he looked at the screen with wonder.

"*JonJon, before I approve of your placement as our representative, would you please answer one question?*" Norman asked seriously.

"Sure, if I can." JonJon said cautiously.

Norman nodded, then asked, "*What is the greatest pain that one can feel?*"

"To know that you serve no purpose." JonJon said without hesitation.

"*I approve of your placement. Please contact me at your convenience.*" Norman said firmly, then disconnected the transmission.

"It works for me. Here you go JonJon." Tyce said as he placed a necklace over JonJon's head.

Oscar, Lehman and Tyber all pulled JonJon into a hug of congratulations as Vincent stepped forward.

"Do you want to do it?" Tyce asked carefully.

"I'm not doing it. You do it." J'Laad said as he backed away.

"How about we do 'odds and evens', wouldn't that be fair?" Tyce asked hopefully.

"I'm Gorn. I don't care about fair. I'm not doing it. I'll initiate the transmission, but I'm not talking to her." J'Laad said firmly.

Tyce hung his head in defeat, then muttered, "Do it."

* * * * *

"Most ancient. Most Holy. We seek your counsel." Tyce said in a small voice.

"*Why doest thou seek my counsel.*" the ancient Vulcan woman asked in an icy firm voice.

"The third age has come and the five have emerged. One of your children has been chosen." Tyce said, trying to keep a tremor out of his voice.

"*Bring the child forward that I might see.*" she said coldly.

Vincent walked before the view screen and stood silently.

Before Tyce could introduce him, the Vulcan woman slowly said, "*Crewman Winters of the house of Surak. Doest thou seek my approval?*"

"No ma'am." Vincent said as he tried to remain calm.

The arch of one of her eyebrows was her only response.

"I am the child of three worlds. I am here. I am the one who was chosen to do this. There is no other." Vincent said in his most logical voice.

A long moment of silence fell over the room as J'Laad and Tyce looked at each other with question.

Finally the ancient woman said, "*Your statement is logical. I accept that this child is the voice of federations, unions and alliances. He will receive the benefit of my position that he may have access to the doors that remain locked to others.*"

Vincent bowed reverently to the view screen.

Tyce brought the last necklace to Vincent and placed it over his head.

"*Live long and prosper, Vincent Winters.*" the elderly Vulcan woman said in an almost peaceful tone.

"Peace and long life, T'Lar." Vincent said in his most respectful voice.

J'Laad disconnected the transmission, then seemed to wilt with relief.

"You did great Vincent. I've never been able to say anything to her that met with her approval." Tyce said with a relieved smile.

Before Vincent could answer, the group of boys swallowed him up in a hug.

* * * * *

"Our work here is done. It's time for us to begin our separate journeys." Tyce said to the group.

"Um, before we go. What are these?" Lehman asked as he held up his necklace.

"Just keep them with you and when you meet a new race of people, the necklace might open a door for you that would otherwise be closed." Tyce said carefully.

"But what are they?" Vincent asked as he examined the flat clear crystal on his necklace.

"These are the last physical remnants of the last universe. The stones each of you carry and the archive were kept safe by a race that have ascended beyond a physical form. When the new universe came into being and the new races began to emerge, they established the Holy Ones and provided them the insights to guide their people through the first age." J'Laad said distantly.

"So what each of you is wearing is something that predates all matter in this universe. Having these necklaces is proof that you are in league with forces beyond our understanding." Tyce said quietly.

All the boys looked at their necklaces with awe and wonder.

"Come now. This chapter is closed. It's time for us to get on with our adventure." Tyce said as he gestured toward the door.

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"Will there be any way for us to keep in touch?" Vincent asked with worry as he looked at Oscar.

"I will provide you the secure subspace frequencies to be able to stay in contact. And with the necklaces, you will even be able to visit." Tyce said with a smile.

"I'd like to see your home world Oscar." Vincent said with a smile.

"When you come to visit, we will have a feast that my people will be speaking of for centuries." Oscar said with a smile.

"Sounds good. If you ever come to Earth, I'll see if I can get Commander Dodds to have a cookout. I think you'd like his brisket." Vincent said with a slightly sad expression creeping into his voice.

"Please do not be sad. You will be in contact regularly. The five of you are one. You will never be without each other." J'Laad said reassuringly.

Vincent reluctantly nodded, then walked to Tyce's side.

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"The shuttle bay is right down here." Tyce said, as he started to walk.

"No. It's over there." JonJon said as he pointed.

"JonJon is right, Holy One. You should listen to the young ones or your reputation as 'all knowing' could suffer." J'Laad said with a giggle.

"I am all knowing, I just have a lousy sense of direction." Tyce said with a playful smile as he followed JonJon who was leading them to the shuttle bay.

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"I was beginning to get worried. Is everything okay?" Commander M'Butu asked with concern.

"Everything is fine, Commander. Would you take Tyber and me to the *Mangeon* so we can continue our journey. The Gorn fleet and the Okudai ships will be departing as soon as we are aboard." Tyce said seriously.

"Is there anything I need to do as far as protocol before leaving the ship?" Commander M'Butu asked carefully.

"Just use their automated system. When you have cleared the ship, you will be in control of the shuttle. Do not contact them by voice or use sensors." Tyce said as he relaxed back into his chair.

Commander M'Butu nodded, then went to the front of the shuttle to get them underway.

* * * * *

"Do you think we'll see each other again?" Vincent asked with concern.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes. I know we will. Your new duties will no doubt intersect with those of Tyber. The five of you will be drawn to the places in the universe where you can do the most good."

"I'm going to miss you both." Lehman said quietly.

"I know. But the restrictions on contact with outside races does not apply to Tyber anymore. You can call him whenever you like. You can call both of us." Tyce said gently.

"I'll do that." Vincent whispered as he felt that he was about to lose something very precious.

Commander M'Butu's voice on the intercom called, "*We will be docking with the Mangeon in approximately one minute*."

"What about your stuff? Don't you need to get your things off the *Yorktown*?" JonJon asked in a worried tone.

"No. Oluf would have taken care of that while we were aboard the Gorn ship. There's no putting off what has to be done. It's time." Tyce said, as the shuttle jolted slightly.

Commander M'Butu walked through the shuttle and pressed some controls at the back before opening the door.

Vincent realized that they didn't go into a shuttle bay but were docked at the side of the ship.

Lehman, JonJon and Vincent each took a turn hugging Tyber and wishing him well before allowing him to walk toward the back of the shuttle.

"Tyce." Vincent said as tears welled in his eyes.

"Come here." Tyce said and pulled Vincent into a hug.

Vincent felt that the hug somehow wasn't enough and moved to give Tyce a firm kiss.

The kiss was brief, but filled with meaning.

Finally the kiss broke and Vincent pulled back and looked into Tyce's eyes.

"You'd better get back to T'Lani so you can stay in balance." Tyce said with a teasing smile.

"And you'd better get back to Audge." Vincent said with a grin.

Tyce seemed surprised by the statement for a moment, but rather than dispute it, he simply nodded slowly.

"Call me with those frequencies. I don't want to miss a single day of talking to you." Vincent said firmly.

"I'll attend to it as soon as I'm settled into my new quarters." Tyce said with a gentle smile as he walked toward the back of the shuttle.

"Ready?" Tyce asked Tyber who had been waiting for him.

Tyber glanced back into the shuttle where all his new friends were watching.

Reluctantly, Tyber nodded.

"Let's see what new adventures the universe has in store for us." Tyce said with a smile as he put an arm around Tyber and guided him off the shuttle.

* * * * *

Vincent was sitting silently, looking out the view port of the shuttle when all the Gorn and Okudai ships began to move in unison.

He watched as the entire fleet went into warp in one synchronized burst.

"It's like what Eliam said, this isn't an ending. It's a beginning." Lehman said quietly from Vincent's side.

"I know. But it still hurts." Vincent said as the tears he had been restraining began to fall.

Lehman considered what he should say to comfort Vincent, but finally concluded that any words would just get in the way.

Vincent felt Lehman's arm come around him and hold him gently as the tears blurred the vision of where his friends had departed.

Chapter 31

"Let's see what new adventures the universe has in store for us." Tyce said with a smile as he put an arm around Tyber and guided him off the shuttle.

Once the door was closed, Tyber stopped in his tracks and broke into uncontrollable sobbing.

Tyce adjusted his hold on Tyber to pull him into a full hug.

"Why does everyone I love go away?" Tyber whispered as he fought to control his sobs.

"It sometimes seems that things work out that way Tyber, but I promise that all love isn't destined to leave you. Love *can* last forever." Tyce said gently.

Tyber fought to gain control of his emotions and was finally able to pull back enough to look into Tyce's concerned eyes.

"This isn't an ending, it's a beginning. Let's go see what our new life holds for us." Tyce said with an encouraging smile.

Tyber still wasn't at a point where he could trust his voice, so he nodded his agreement to the Holy One's words.

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"Holy One, did all go well?" Oluf asked hopefully as he rushed up to the pair in the hallway.

"Yes Oluf. I believe that everything occurred as it was meant to." Tyce said peacefully.

"All your belongings have been brought to the Mangeon and are being arranged in your quarters." Oluf said quickly.

Tyce smiled and said, "Thank you Oluf. I knew that I could trust you to arrange things. Would you please see that Tyber has everything he will need for the journey back to Okuda... and that he has a room prepared in the sanctuary of the main church before we arrive?"

"Begging your pardon Holy One, but the sanctuary is for you alone. It would be proper for the young one to have accommodations among the priests." Oluf said hesitantly.

Tyce smiled at Oluf, obviously expecting his reaction.

"Oluf, I would like to present Tyber, son of Traiel, the Voice of Okuda." Tyce said seriously.

Oluf looked from Tyce to Tyber with question.

After a moment to let the words sink in, Tyce continued, "In matters which involve Okuda and it's relationship to the other worlds of the universe, Tyber's words carry more authority than my own."

Oluf paled at the words as he looked at Tyber with wonder.

"Really?" Tyber asked with surprise.

"That's right Tyber. I didn't want to say anything in front of the others because they each have to speak to their own holy ones to discover their unique purposes. But as your Holy One, I can tell you that your purpose is to make decisions for our worlds and represent us to the other species." Tyce said frankly.

"But... you said... I have more authority?" Tyber asked reluctantly.

Tyce smiled as he said, "I don't plan on opposing your plans for our world, but yes. If there comes a time when we have differing ideas as to the proper course of action, I will defer to you."

Tyber's eyes went even wider as he considered the Holy One's words.

"Of course, I will expect you to defer to my judgment in matters regarding Okudai internal policy." Tyce said frankly.

Tyber absently nodded as he continued to think about what he had just been told.

"Oluf, Tyber looks like he needs to rest. Perhaps you could conduct us to our rooms." Tyce said with an amused smile.

After a moment for the words to register, Oluf quickly said, "Oh yes. Of course Holy One. Right this way."

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"Oluf, I would like for you to make arrangements with the central government for Tyber to have unrestricted communication privileges." Tyce said as they walked slowly down the hallway of the Mangeon.

"Unrestricted access?" Oluf asked curiously.

"If Tyber is our voice in the universe, we need to be sure that he has the tools he needs." Tyce said frankly.

"As you say Holy One. Though it may take some time to convince the governmental agencies to allow it." Oluf said thoughtfully.

"I know you'll be able to work it out, but if you need for me to speak to anyone to back you up, just let me know." Tyce said casually.

Oluf stopped by a door in the hall and said, "I hope you will find these accommodations to be acceptable Holy One."

Tyce walked past Oluf into the room and looked around.

After a moment to consider, Tyce said, "Yes. Please be sure that Tyber's accommodations are equally acceptable."

Oluf froze for a moment and it appeared that a thousand different things were being planned in his mind before he finally responded, "Yes Holy One. It will be as you say."

Tyce smiled, getting a tiny bit of pleasure out of throwing unexpected challenges in Oluf's path.

"Come with me now Tyber. Oluf will contact us when your rooms are ready." Tyce said peacefully.

"Yes Holy One." Tyber said with a timid smile at Oluf as he passed.

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Tyber looked around the lavishly decorated room cautiously before saying, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

Tyce smiled, then walked to a small couch and sat down before answering, "Before we discuss the duties you'll have when we reach the home world, why don't we talk about the things we need to attend to during our journey. There are quite a few things that need to be dealt with in the next two days."

Tyber nodded, then looked around uncertainly.

"Please sit and be comfortable Tyber. Before our trip to the Gorn ship, you were already going to be a member of my family, but now that you have been chosen as the Voice of Okuda... you are my equal." Tyce said frankly.

"Is that my title?" Tyber asked as he cautiously sat down in a large cushioned chair.

Tyce considered for a moment, then slowly said, "It could be. That's really up to you. Several of the Holy One's past had considered making a prophesy regarding you but once such a thing is done, you are bound by it."

"I don't understand." Tyber said cautiously.

"Well, like the Gorn for example. They gave their emissary the title of 'Trach Manja'. For a thousand years the Gorn have known that one would be named to be the Voice of Warriors who would stand above all houses and castes to represent the interests of the entire Gorn empire." Tyce said distantly.

Tyber nodded slowly, then asked, "What's wrong with that?"

"The mold has been cast which describes just what a Trach Manja is and what he can do. Now Oscar will have to fit into that mold, even if it doesn't entirely fit him." Tyce said frankly.

Tyber thought for a moment, then said, "But since you haven't announced that I'm coming, I'm free to... do what?"

"You're free to do the job that needs to be done without limitations. The 'Voice of Okuda'... or whatever we decide to call you, will be able to represent Okuda when speaking to the Federation or the Gorn or any other race without being constrained by a written 'destiny' or 'prophesy'." Tyce said frankly.

"If that's so, then why did the Gorn Holy One invent the Trach Manja?" Tyber asked curiously.

"The way their society was developing, there was almost certainly going to be a fragmentation of classes at some point. We actually expected it to split three ways... but that doesn't matter. As soon as it was determined that their society was going to fragment into autonomous entities, the Holy One concocted the Trach Manja prophesy so that no matter where the emissary emerged, he would be given the proper respect by all." Tyce said carefully.

"I'm sorry. I really don't know much about Gorn history. So they *did* fragment?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Tyce smiled and said, "I'm sorry Tyber. When I get to thinking about the long ago, I sometimes lose touch with the here and now. And to answer your question, yes. They fragmented. Since Oscar was the child of laughter and light and came from one of the main houses of the Gorn empire, the prophesy of the Trach Manja turned out not to have been as necessary. But if Oscar had been the child orphaned by poverty, he could have easily come from the fragment... that is, assuming that they still exist."

Tyber shook his head as he tried to process the myriad of emotions associated with all the new information he had received in such a short time.

He looked up to notice Tyce watching him consideringly.

Tyber waited to see what was on Tyce's mind.

"You're overwhelmed." Tyce said slowly.

Before he could think better of it, Tyber said, "Yeah. A little."

Tyce slowly nodded then said, "I have a suggestion that might help, if you're interested."

Tyber nodded quickly that he was.

"Although I can advise you on what to expect in the coming days, that's probably going to be of little comfort to you. I think that, if you wanted, we could invite Oscar over to spend part of the journey to Okuda with us." Tyce said carefully.

"Oscar? Here?" Tyber asked uncertainly.

"Yes. There's no time like the present to get people used to the notion that he is welcomed on our ships and on our worlds. There will come a time when he will do the same for you to let his people know that you are the exception to the rules they have grown up with. To the Gorn you will be known as Trach Manja Tyber of the Okudai.

"Wow. That really sounds impressive." Tyber said with wide eyes.

"You think so? I was kind of leaning toward 'Voice of Okuda'. It sounds so much more... peaceful." Tyce said consideringly.

Tyber chuckled at Tyce's expression, then said, "How about while Oscar is here, we tell our people that he is 'Oscar, the Voice of the Gorn', then when I go to his world, I'll be called 'Trach Manja Tyber of the Okudai'."

"Yes. I think that will work very well. I'd rather not have to explain what a Trach Manja is to the Okudai people. They might get the wrong idea and start thinking that you're a type of royalty." Tyce said frankly.

Tyber nodded, then slowly said, "Eliam said that we weren't supposed to let ourselves be universally known. But it looks like all the Holy Ones are working to make sure that everyone knows who we are."

"Yes. I suppose I should have explained that to all of you when I had you together." Tyce said as he thought about what he should say.

"If everyone knew what you could 'really' do, then you would fail. There is no doubt of that. But it is necessary for people to know who you are and that you're important so that you will be allowed to go where you need to go and do what you need to do." Tyce said carefully.

"And if the Okudai people know that I'm the Voice of the Okudai, then Lehman shows up and is the Voice of the Chameloids, he will be let in and people will be able to accept him." Tyber said thoughtfully.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes. Exactly. In fact, all the Holy Ones will be working to make sure that all the 'Five Voices' will be recognized and given proper access wherever they need to go."

Tyber nodded, then stood as he said, "Then let's get started."

Tyce smiled and said, "I assume you know how to work the communications equipment."

"I've lived most of my life on starships. I could use a comm before I was potty trained." Tyber said as he walked to the desk where a terminal was located.

"I believe if Vincent were here he would have said, 'TMI - Too Much Information'." Tyce said with a chuckle.

Tyber smiled at Tyce's words as he began to work the controls.

* * * * *

"Would you please contact the lead Gorn vessel and establish contact with the Trach Manja, Oscar?" Tyber asked the communications worker on the bridge.

"I'm sorry but 'The Law' prohibits casual contact of outside species." The young man said in a warning tone.

Tyce walked into view of the terminal and said, "Korible, son of Mishin, I am the Holy One. I would like to speak to the captain."

The communications worker's eyes went wide as he stammered, "Yes. Yes Holy One."

A moment later Captain Treas appeared on the screen.

"How may I serve you Holy One?" Captain Treas asked respectfully.

"Would you please inform the bridge crew and the other captains that this boy, Tyber, son of Traiel, has been designated as the 'Voice of Okuda'. As such, he is exempt from all prohibitions against communications with people outside our system." Tyce said firmly.

"Yes Holy One, I will inform them immediately."

"Also, on the Gorn ship there is a boy who has the same position within the Gorn Empire. To us he would be known as Oscar, the 'Voice of the Gorn'. To his own people he would be known as the Trach Manja, Oscar. Any attempt at communication from him, either now or in future, is to be accepted. And if he should wish to come aboard any of our vessels, he is to be welcomed and treated with the utmost respect." Tyce said seriously.

"You're saying that we are to welcome a Gorn onto our ship?" Captain Treas asked with disbelief.

"Yes. Of all the massive Gorn Empire, this one, and only this one, is given free access to all the territories of Okuda." Tyce said firmly.

Captain Treas stared at Tyce as her mouth dropped open slightly.

"And of course Tyber will be granted the same access within the sovereign space of the Gorn Empire." Tyce said seriously.

Captain Treas finally seemed to come back to herself enough to say, "I will see that the bridge crew and other captains are informed."

Tyce smiled and said, "Thank you Captain Treas. The government will be informed and these changes will be in effect throughout the Okudai system before we reach Okuda."

"As you say Holy One. Is there any other way I can be of service?" Captain Treas asked hopefully.

"Tyber wants to contact Oscar, the Voice of the Gorn. If you could make that possible, that is all I will need for now." Tyce said gently.

Before Captain Treas could tell her communications officer to place the call, he had already made contact and was waiting for Oscar to answer his comm.

Tyber smiled when he saw Oscar's face on the screen.

"How are you doing Oscar?" Tyber asked with a smile.

"My Holy One is insane." Oscar whispered, then glanced around with worry, to see that he hadn't been overheard.

Tyber chuckled at the statement, then said, "My Holy One was just telling me that if you wanted to come over to our ship and spend part of the journey with us, it'd be okay."

Oscar looked at Tyber with surprise, then past him to Tyce who was standing just behind him.

"I've already cleared it with my people. If you want to visit, you'll be welcomed." Tyce said frankly.

"Thank you. I need some time away from the Holy One. He's... happy. Way too happy." Oscar said hesitantly, then looked around again.

"We're on the Mangeon. We'll be ready to receive you whenever you transport." Tyce said with a smile.

"I will be there immediately." Oscar said, then the screen went blank.

"J'Laad must really be driving him crazy." Tyce said with a smile.

Tyber nodded and thought about how lucky he was to have Tyce as a Holy One.

* * * * *

A tone at the door drew both boys' attention.

"Yes?" Tyce called in the direction of the door.

"Holy One, I have made the preparations you requested." Oluf's voice said quickly.

"Come in Oluf." Tyce said as he turned his full attention toward the door.

No sooner had the door opened than Oluf started talking.

"I have relayed your instructions regarding 'The Voice' to Minister Falek and he has assured me that the permissions will be in place before our arrival."

"Good." Tyce said with a nod, then asked, "Do you happen to know where Audge is?"

"Audge? Oh yes, your security. He is in the cargo bay comforting the injured. He awaits your summons." Oluf said professionally.

"When we have concluded our business, summon him. And be sure that all of his belongings are brought to this room. He will be staying with me." Tyce said as he watched carefully for Oluf's reaction.

"His belongings have already been installed into your quarters. Will you be needing another bed brought in?" Oluf asked as casually as if he were speaking of the weather.

Tyce walked across the room and looked into the sleeping chamber before saying, "No. Audge is my security, and I will feel most secure if he is in the bed next to me."

Oluf bowed his head slightly to acknowledge that he understood.

"What of preparations for Tyber?" Tyce asked as his mind went back to his list of things that needed to be done.

"Quarters are being prepared for 'The Voice' as we speak. His belongings are being transported aboard and should be in place soon." Oluf said nervously.

"You can call me Tyber."

"No. He can't." Tyce said firmly.

Tyber looked at Tyce with surprise.

"It will be necessary for you to be addressed by your title until people become familiar with your position. If you allow Oluf and others to call you by your given name openly, it will make their acceptance take that much longer." Tyce said seriously.

"I understand." Tyber said quietly, then turned to Oluf and said, "When we are in private with the Holy One, you may address me as Tyber."

"As you wish." Oluf said as he bowed reverently.

Tyce thought for a moment, then nodded his acceptance of Tyber's wishes.

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"Oluf, due to the recent... unpleasantness, I have fallen behind on many of my routine duties. Would you please go through the outstanding tasks that require my personal attention and organize them so we might dispense with the bulk of them before our arrival at Okuda?" Tyce asked seriously.

"Yes Holy One." Oluf said, and Tyber noticed that Oluf seemed to be pleased by the declaration.

"Oh yes. I promised Vincent, the 'Voice of the Federation', that I would relay contact information to him... I suppose that I should gather similar contact information for Lehman, the 'Voice of Chameloids' and JonJon, the 'Voice of Androids'." Tyce said in thought.

"Shouldn't we make sure that they have the same access that Oscar does?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes. But Oluf can arrange that at his leisure. It was necessary to make accommodations for Oscar right away so he could visit."

As if on cue, the tone sounded to indicate that someone was at the door.

"Yes?" Tyce responded casually.

"Holy One, the 'Voice of the Gorn' is here to meet with you." Captain Treas said diplomatically.

"Please show him in." Tyce said with a smile.

The door opened to reveal Oscar and Captain Treas standing side by side.

"It's good to see you again Oscar. Please sit and visit with us while Tyber's rooms are being prepared." Tyce said gently.

Oluf looked at Tyce quickly, then moved to the computer console to begin typing furiously.

Tyce noticed Oluf's movements then smiled as he turned his full attention to Tyber and Oscar.

"What do you think of our ship? It's quite a bit different than what you're used to, isn't it?" Tyce asked casually.

"Yes. The temperature is cooler than I am accustomed to, and the smell... forgive me Holy One." Oscar finished as he looked down.

"It's fine Oscar. J'Laad has mentioned that mammal species tend to have an odor that is unpleasant to Saurians." Tyce said gently.

"No. Not unpleasant, just.... different." Oscar hurried to explain.

"Really? J'Laad said that the scent of mammals was reminiscent of livestock." Tyce said frankly.

"Then perhaps it is because I have never been around livestock that I have not made that association." Oscar said frankly.

Tyce smiled as he said, "That sounds reasonable to me."

"Holy One, the Voice's belongings have been installed in his rooms. All preparations are complete." Oluf said quickly.

Tyce smiled and said, "Tyber, if you boys would like to go to your rooms and relax for a while, your rooms are ready."

"What about the messages for Vincent and the others?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"It's just contact information. I'll take care of it. Go on and relax. After the day you've had, you two have earned a rest." Tyce said gently.

Tyber looked at Oscar with question and received a nod as his response.

"Which way to my rooms?" Tyber asked Oluf seriously.

"Allow me to show you the way." Oluf said reverently.

Oscar looked at Tyber curiously.

"Tyce said that I'm equal to him now. So Oluf is treating me like I'm a Holy One." Tyber said as he slowly walked with Oscar to the door.

"It is good to be shown such respect. I must discuss this with my Holy One." Oscar said as the pair followed Oluf out of the room.

Tyce smiled at the door for a moment, then went to the computer and began to compose his message to Vincent.

* * * * *

"I hope that you will find these accommodations to be acceptable." Oluf said as he stood aside to allow Tyber and Oscar to precede him into the room.

Tyber looked around the room and froze when he saw a young man wearing priest's robes, standing just inside the door.

"This is Dengarvin. He will be your personal attendant. If you have any need, simply ask and he will see that it is provided." Oluf said seriously.

"Oh, um. Thanks Oluf." Tyber said, then looked at Oscar to see his reaction.

Oluf gave a quick, courteous bow, then withdrew from the room.

Tyber was about to speak when he noticed that Dengarvin was fighting, trying not to stare at Oscar.

"Dengarvin, this is Oscar, the 'Voice of the Gorn'. He is my guest." Tyber explained carefully.

"Is there anything I can provide to make you and your guest more comfortable?" Dengarvin asked in a nervous voice.

"I'm actually feeling a little bit hungry. How about you?" Tyber asked as he looked at Oscar with question.

"Yes. I think I am." Oscar said uncertainly.

"Is there anything special that you would like?" Dengarvin asked hopefully.

"No. I'm sure we'll like whatever you come up with." Tyber said, then looked at Oscar with question.

"Yes. Tyber is correct. Anything will be fine." Oscar said quickly.

"Would you prefer to dine with the crew, or here in your room?" Dengarvin asked cautiously.

"I think we'll eat here. That'll give everyone a little more time to get used to the idea of Oscar being here." Tyber said frankly.

"I will return with your food as quickly as possible." Dengarvin said as he started toward the door.

"Wait!" Tyber said, hoping to catch him before he ran out.

Dengarvin stopped and looked at Tyber with question.

"We're not starving. You can relax and take your time." Tyber said honestly.

"I'm sorry, I'm just a little nervous." Dengarvin said nervously.

"Please try to relax. You're doing fine." Tyber said assuringly.

Dengarvin nodded, then withdrew from the room.

* * * * *

"I wonder how Vincent and Lehman and JonJon are doing." Tyber said absently as he looked at the door.

"They're probably wondering how we're doing." Oscar said with a grin.

Tyber chuckled, then said, "I can't believe that I only met you this morning. I feel like I've known you for a thousand years."

"A hundred-thousand." Oscar said distantly.

Tyber quirked an eyebrow at the strange response.

Oscar giggled and pointed.

"What?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"That furry thing on your face... the way you just moved it..." Oscar said before breaking into giggles.

Tyber smiled and said, "It's an eyebrow and most of the time it kind of moves on it's own."

That response caused Oscar to laugh even harder.

Tyber felt himself drawn in by Oscar's infectious laughter.

When both boys had finally laughed themselves out, they laid back on the couch and stared off into the distance.

"It's a new beginning." Tyber said for no apparent reason.

Oscar nodded his agreement, then turned slightly as he said, "Yesterday I was a child and the future was impossibly far away. Today I am an adult and I have been officially named as an heir to the third estate and as the Trach Manja of the Gorn Empire."

"Yeah. Yesterday I was a child and I didn't even think about the future. I mean, I was going to be just like my dad. That was the best thing that I could dream of, there was never any doubt." Tyber said distantly.

"We do not have a path that has been laid out for us. We have to make our own path." Oscar said quietly.

"Maybe this is why my Holy One thought it would be good for us to be together right now. We can share what we're feeling because we're going through the same thing." Tyber said thoughtfully.

"Yes. I am glad to be here, my Holy One is so excited that the Trach Manja has arrived that he is making all kinds of preparations. He seems to have forgotten that I am here." Oscar said with amusement.

"I bet he'll be surprised when he notices that you're gone." Tyber said with a grin.

"Yes." Oscar said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"Holy Voice... I mean Voice Tyber. I have your food." Dengarvin's voice said quickly through the comm.

"Come in." Tyber said with a smile.

The door opened to admit Dengarvin pushing a cart loaded with food.

"That was quick. I told you that you didn't have to rush." Tyber said slowly as he sat up.

"The food was nearly prepared. It is time for the midday meal." Dengarvin said as he moved the cart to the side of the room and began to lay the food out on a table.

"Dengarvin, would you do something for me?" Tyber asked quietly.

"Yes. What can I do for you?" Dengarvin asked quickly as he turned to devote his full attention to Tyber.

"Would you set yourself a place at the table and eat with us?" Tyber asked hopefully.

"But the high priest Oluf said that I am to serve you." Dengarvin said quickly.

"If you really want to serve me, be a real person who I can talk to. I'm afraid that my title will make it difficult to find people who will treat me like a person." Tyber said as he reflected on the things Audge had said about how Tyce was isolated by his duties.

"Of course I will do as you ask, but... are you sure?" Dengarvin asked hesitantly.

"Yes. I am very sure." Tyber said as he took a seat at the table, then continued, "And I would like it if, when we're alone like this, you'd call me Tyber."

"But I was told that you are the 'Voice of Okuda'. He who speaks for our people to the rest of the universe." Dengarvin said quickly.

"That's right, I am the 'Voice of Okuda'. But that's not all I am. I'm a person just like you. I eat, I sleep, I have people that I love. It would really mean a lot to me if you would treat me like a person."

"Thank you. I will try." Dengarvin said timidly.

"Dengarvin, you've already met Oscar, the 'Voice of the Gorn'." Tyber said as he indicated Oscar who was now at his side.

"It is an honor to meet you." Dengarvin said reverently as he bowed.

Oscar glanced at Tyber, then said, "Dengarvin. You don't have to bow to me."

"I simply wish to show my respect." Dengarvin said timidly.

"You may show me respect by treating me as a thinking and feeling being who is no better or worse than you are. Meaningful discussion can only be achieved among equals." Oscar said seriously.

"It looks like you're finished laying it out. Let's eat." Tyber said as he gestured to the table.

"Yes. Please. I hope you like the food that I selected for you." Dengarvin said in a rush.

Oscar looked at Tyber helplessly.

"Did you have anything else planned for the next few hours?" Tyber asked with a smile.

"No." Oscar replied cautiously.

"I think it's going to take both of us the entire meal to get Dengarvin to really understand what we're saying." Tyber said frankly.

Oscar looked over at the young priest, who seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown, then said, "I enjoy a good challenge."

* * * * *

The meal went on longer than any of them would have guessed.

Dengarvin did seem to relax slightly and even ventured some opinions of his own before the meal was over.

Oscar and Tyber were both happy to have someone to spend time with who was completely outside their situation. It helped to take their minds off the enormity of the things that had happened earlier in the day.

But when the last of the food had been eaten, Dengarvin fell back into his subservient roll and began to load the empty dishes onto the serving cart.

Once the cart was loaded, Dengarvin quietly asked, "Is there anything I can get for either of you?"

Tyber glanced at Oscar with question, then said, "No. I can't think of anything."

Dengarvin gave a single nod, but didn't make any move to leave.

He seemed to be uncertain about what he was supposed to do next.

"I think we'd like to rest for a while. If you'll let me know where to contact you, you can have some time to relax and I'll call if we need anything." Tyber said slowly, hoping that the young priest would, indeed, relax.

Dengarvin walked to the communications console and keyed in a code.

"I will await your call in my cabin. You may call me at any time." Dengarvin said as he turned to face Tyber and Oscar.

"Okay. Thanks." Tyber said, then watched as Dengarvin pushed the serving cart out of the room.

* * * * *

"I wonder if I'll have someone like that to get things for me." Oscar said hesitantly as he looked at the door.

"I don't know. I think it depends on your Holy One." Tyber said speculatively.

"Perhaps it would be better if I didn't. I don't know that I would like the feeling of having someone being subservient to me." Oscar said cautiously.

"I know what you mean." Tyber said slowly as he walked across the room to sit on a large sofa.

Oscar watched Tyber sit down and seemed unsure of what he should do.

Tyber patted the cushion beside him, inviting Oscar to sit beside him, then said, "Maybe if I can get Dengarvin to relax a little bit, he could be more like a friend than a priest who is trying to serve me."

"Perhaps he would be able to relax more easily if I weren't here." Oscar said frankly.

Tyber looked at Oscar with surprise at the statement, then said, "I don't think so. I think this whole thing is as new to him as it is to us. Oluf probably told him that it was his job to take care of me, so now he's trying to sort out the best way to do that. I think that if we let him know it's okay to relax around us, he might be alright."

Oscar nodded his agreement, but Tyber noticed that his posture seemed to be slightly 'huddled'.

"Is the cold really uncomfortable for you?" Tyber asked with concern.

"Not terribly. I am simply not accustomed to it." Oscar said carefully.

Tyber looked around, then said, "I'll be right back. Give me a second."

Oscar watched as Tyber hurried out of the main room.

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"Let's try this." Tyber said as he carried a heavy blanket with him to the couch.

Oscar looked at him curiously, then seemed to understand what the blanket was for.

"My people do not generate body heat the same way that yours do." Oscar said cautiously.

"Really?" Tyber asked with surprise as he took his seat on the couch beside Oscar.

"So wrapping myself in that will do little to alleviate the cold." Oscar continued in an apologetic tone.

"Maybe not, but I still think I can help." Tyber said as he took the blanket and draped it over Oscar's shoulders.

As Oscar was about to protest, due to the pointlessness of the action, Tyber draped the rest of the blanket over his own shoulders, then pulled Oscar into a hug.

"I don't understand..." Oscar began to say, then a smile came over his face as he whispered, "You're warm."

"Yup." Tyber said as he snuggled even closer to Oscar and pulled the blanket tighter around them.

Oscar moved his arm so that he was returning Tyber's hug, then closed his eyes as he felt Tyber's body heat slowly warming his skin.

The combination of a full belly and a warm embrace started to work it's magic on both the boys.

With half lidded eyes, Oscar quietly said, "This is nice."

* * * * *

After an undetermined time of just sitting and hugging, Tyber finally said, "I wonder why all our people can't be like this for each other."

"Because the Holy One has declared that your people are lesser beings." Oscar said absently.

"Lesser beings?" Tyber asked curiously.

Oscar snuggled in a little bit closer and said, "I think it was the only way that we could be neighbors without fighting."

"How is that?" Tyber asked curiously.

"The Okudai aren't fighters. They aren't technologically advanced and really don't have any significant resources of interest to the Gorn Empire. If we

were to invade your space, we'd almost certainly conquer you, but... what then? We'd end up with an inhabited planetary system that we'd have to occupy and govern. It would be an endless drain of our resources with no discernible benefit." Oscar said distantly.

"So the Holy One said that we're 'lesser beings' than the Gorn, so that everyone would accept that it's not worth the bother." Tyber asked, trying to find a way not to be insulted on behalf of his people.

"I think so. The Holy One doesn't explain himself to me, but it seems reasonable." Oscar said quietly.

"Yeah. I guess it does." Tyber said in thought.

"If we were on my ship, I would offer to take you to the bathing pool. I think soaking in a pool of warm water would be very relaxing right now." Oscar said, effectively changing the subject.

"Let's see if we have a tub. We may be able to do that." Tyber said, then before Oscar could object, he got out from under the blanket and walked out of the main room again.

* * * * *

Oscar heard and unusual sound, like running water, from the room Tyber had entered. Then, a moment later, Tyber walked out and said, "I think you're really going to like this, but you should probably adjust the water temperature so it's comfortable for you."

"You have your own bathing pool?" Oscar asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. Just a little one. It's called a bath tub." Tyber said, then motioned for Oscar to join him.

Slowly, Oscar shifted the blanket off his shoulders, then walked to join Tyber in the doorway.

"Go ahead and check get the water to the temperature you like." Tyber said as Oscar approached.

Oscar walked into the bathroom and to the tub where water was flowing.

"Is this okay with you?" Tyber asked hopefully.

After a moment to adjust the water to be slightly warmer, Oscar said, "Yes. Although my people do not usually have private bathing pools."

"So what do you have? Community bathhouses?" Tyber asked as he began to undress.

Oscar noticed what he was doing and began to do the same as he said, "Yes. My family, the third estate, provides bathing facilities for each of the communities that are under our protection. The other estates do the same for their people."

"I've heard that the Okudai used to do something like that, but now it's more common for people to have their own tubs." Tyber said as he folded his clothes, then walked to the edge of the tub.

Oscar casually glanced at Tyber then his eyes went wide as he looked at Tyber's groin.

"What?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"I never... I didn't..." Oscar stammered.

Tyber looked down at himself, then back at Oscar with question.

"We are not... the same." Oscar said as he pulled down the loose fitting pants he was wearing.

Tyber blinked at what he saw... or more accurately, didn't see.

"Where's your penis?" Tyber finally asked.

"Pouched." Oscar said frankly.

Tyber dragged his gaze up to meet Oscar's amused eyes, then he hesitantly asked, "What does that mean?"

Oscar smiled at the question, then reached over to feel the temperature of the water.

"Let's get into the water, then I'll explain." Oscar said gently.

"Okay." Tyber said, then slowly began to put his foot into the water.

"Too hot?" Oscar asked with concern.

"No. It'll just take me a few seconds to adjust to it." Tyber said as he slowly lowered more of his leg into the water.

Oscar watched for a moment longer to be sure that Tyber wasn't going to be uncomfortable, then climbed into the tub to join him.

* * * * *

"So you were going to tell me about 'pouched'." Tyber said as he settled in beside Oscar in the tub.

"I have basically the same genitalia that you do, but mine recedes into a pouch when it is not in use." Oscar said frankly.

"Where?" Tyber asked curiously.

Oscar had to move a little to gain his balance, but finally stood in the tub and pointed to a barely noticeable dip in his lower abdomen that looked something like a navel.

"Oh, wow." Tyber began to say, then froze when the tiniest trace of pink could be seen, peeking out.

"Is that..." Tyber started to ask, then froze again as a teeny bit more emerged.

Oscar followed Tyber's gaze, then quickly dropped down into the water.

"What's wrong?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"That..." Oscar started to say, then seemed to want to approach the topic from another direction, "What I just did, I shouldn't have done it."

"Why not?" Tyber asked carefully.

"Because, to expose myself to you in that way, it is an invitation... no, a promise..." Oscar said with difficulty.

"So you just... what? Said that you want to marry me or something?" Tyber asked carefully.

"No. Well not precisely. But it could be taken to mean that I am offering myself for courting." Oscar said hesitantly.

"Oh, okay. I think I get it." Tyber said as he relaxed back into the warm water.

Oscar seemed to be uncertain that he had explained it well enough.

"Since we're built different, I asked you to show me. You did. And I guess me looking at you and making you think about it caused your 'little guy' to wake up some."

"Not that little." Oscar said in a growl.

Tyber smiled, and continued, "Fine. The 'big guy' woke up and peeked at me and that freaked you out a little because it was like your people's way of saying that you want to date."

Oscar slowly nodded that Tyber understood correctly.

"So, if you're not interested, just say it and we'll forget that it ever happened. Just think of it as one of those weird things that sometimes happens when Humans and Saurians bathe together." Tyber said with gentle smile.

"Thank you." Oscar said with relief.

"But you still need to say it." Tyber said with a grin.

"Say what?" Oscar asked hesitantly.

"Say that you're not interested in me... you know, like a boyfriend." Tyber said simply.

Oscar seemed to consider for a moment, then nodded that he agreed that it needed to be done.

"Tyber. I'm not..." Oscar trailed off as he looked deeply into Tyber's eyes.

"I'm not able to say that I don't like you... because I do." Oscar finished in a trembling voice.

"Good. Because I think I feel that way about you too." Tyber said shyly.

"Really?" Oscar asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Really." Tyber said timidly, then barely restrained a giggle.

"Do your people have a taboo against mating with Saurians?" Oscar asked cautiously.

"Not that I know of, but I don't know if anyone ever even thought of it." Tyber said honestly.

Oscar nodded as he thought about what they were about to do.

"What about your people?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"What about them?" Oscar asked as he tried to devote his full attention to Tyber again.

"Do your people have a taboo against mating with mammals?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Oscar considered for a moment, then said, "Not really. The only thing I can think of is when my father used to tell me not to play with my food."

Tyber stared at Oscar for a moment, then slowly broke into a grin.

"My people will never be able to accept us." Oscar said with regret as he moved so close that Tyber could feel the breath of Oscar's words on his skin.

"Mine probably won't either." Tyber said as he moved forward to close the distance even more.

Oscar nodded slightly, obviously disheartened by the words.

"But we're Trach Manjas." Tyber said with a hopeful smile.

Oscar met Tyber's gaze with an expression of surprise.

"We're not them." Tyber said in a whisper.

"We're Trach Manjai. Above all houses and castes." Oscar said as joy infused his expression.

Tyber moved to close the last few centimeters between them when the sound of an incoming transmission came from the main room.

* * * * *

As Tyber hurried out of the bathroom, he thought about who might be calling him.

He didn't have any reason to believe it was his father... and yet, he couldn't deny that it was possible.

As his bare bottom hit the chair, he remembered that he was completely naked.

Although he would prefer to put some clothing on, he didn't want to keep his caller waiting.

After a quick glance around, he pressed the key to accept the incoming transmission.

"Is everything okay Tyber?" JonJon asked with concern.

From the prickly sensations on his face, Tyber was certain that he must be blushing.

"Yeah. Fine. You just caught me while I was, um... taking a bath." Tyber said reluctantly as he glanced back toward the bathroom.

Oscar called in the Gorn language, {"If it is not an emergency, tell them you will call them back. It's getting cold without you."}

Tyber felt the prickling of his blush return as he nervously asked, "What's going on guys?"

Vincent smiled as he said, "We needed to talk to Tyce. Is he around?"

"I'm sure he is in his suite of rooms. I'll connect you." Tyber said quickly, hit the control to put the transmission on hold.

"Communications, would you please direct this call to The Holy One?" Tyber said into the comm.

"Yes. Right away." The communications worker said efficiently.

{"It's getting cold."} Oscar growled from the bathroom.

"I'll be right there to warm it up." Tyber said as he walked toward the bathroom.

The EndChapter 31

"Let's see what new adventures the universe has in store for us." Tyce said with a smile as he put an arm around Tyber and guided him off the shuttle.

Once the door was closed, Tyber stopped in his tracks and broke into uncontrollable sobbing.

Tyce adjusted his hold on Tyber to pull him into a full hug.

"Why does everyone I love go away?" Tyber whispered as he fought to control his sobs.

"It sometimes seems that things work out that way Tyber, but I promise that all love isn't destined to leave you. Love *can* last forever." Tyce said gently.

Tyber fought to gain control of his emotions and was finally able to pull back enough to look into Tyce's concerned eyes.

"This isn't an ending, it's a beginning. Let's go see what our new life holds for us." Tyce said with an encouraging smile.

Tyber still wasn't at a point where he could trust his voice, so he nodded his agreement to the Holy One's words.

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"Holy One, did all go well?" Oluf asked hopefully as he rushed up to the pair in the hallway.

"Yes Oluf. I believe that everything occurred as it was meant to." Tyce said peacefully.

"All your belongings have been brought to the Mangeon and are being arranged in your quarters." Oluf said quickly.

Tyce smiled and said, "Thank you Oluf. I knew that I could trust you to arrange things. Would you please see that Tyber has everything he will need for the journey back to Okuda... and that he has a room prepared in the sanctuary of the main church before we arrive?"

"Begging your pardon Holy One, but the sanctuary is for you alone. It would be proper for the young one to have accommodations among the priests." Oluf said hesitantly.

Tyce smiled at Oluf, obviously expecting his reaction.

"Oluf, I would like to present Tyber, son of Traiel, the Voice of Okuda." Tyce said seriously.

Oluf looked from Tyce to Tyber with question.

After a moment to let the words sink in, Tyce continued, "In matters which involve Okuda and it's relationship to the other worlds of the universe, Tyber's words carry more authority than my own."

Oluf paled at the words as he looked at Tyber with wonder.

"Really?" Tyber asked with surprise.

"That's right Tyber. I didn't want to say anything in front of the others because they each have to speak to their own holy ones to discover their unique purposes. But as your Holy One, I can tell you that your purpose is to make decisions for our worlds and represent us to the other species." Tyce said frankly.

"But... you said... I have more authority?" Tyber asked reluctantly.

Tyce smiled as he said, "I don't plan on opposing your plans for our world, but yes. If there comes a time when we have differing ideas as to the proper course of action, I will defer to you."

Tyber's eyes went even wider as he considered the Holy One's words.

"Of course, I will expect you to defer to my judgment in matters regarding Okudai internal policy." Tyce said frankly.

Tyber absently nodded as he continued to think about what he had just been told.

"Oluf, Tyber looks like he needs to rest. Perhaps you could conduct us to our rooms." Tyce said with an amused smile.

After a moment for the words to register, Oluf quickly said, "Oh yes. Of course Holy One. Right this way."

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"Oluf, I would like for you to make arrangements with the central government for Tyber to have unrestricted communication privileges." Tyce said as they walked slowly down the hallway of the Mangeon.

"Unrestricted access?" Oluf asked curiously.

"If Tyber is our voice in the universe, we need to be sure that he has the tools he needs." Tyce said frankly.

"As you say Holy One. Though it may take some time to convince the governmental agencies to allow it." Oluf said thoughtfully.

"I know you'll be able to work it out, but if you need for me to speak to anyone to back you up, just let me know." Tyce said casually.

Oluf stopped by a door in the hall and said, "I hope you will find these accommodations to be acceptable Holy One."

Tyce walked past Oluf into the room and looked around.

After a moment to consider, Tyce said, "Yes. Please be sure that Tyber's accommodations are equally acceptable."

Oluf froze for a moment and it appeared that a thousand different things were being planned in his mind before he finally responded, "Yes Holy One. It will be as you say."

Tyce smiled, getting a tiny bit of pleasure out of throwing unexpected challenges in Oluf's path.

"Come with me now Tyber. Oluf will contact us when your rooms are ready." Tyce said peacefully.

"Yes Holy One." Tyber said with a timid smile at Oluf as he passed.

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Tyber looked around the lavishly decorated room cautiously before saying, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

Tyce smiled, then walked to a small couch and sat down before answering, "Before we discuss the duties you'll have when we reach the home world,

why don't we talk about the things we need to attend to during our journey. There are quite a few things that need to be dealt with in the next two days."

Tyber nodded, then looked around uncertainly.

"Please sit and be comfortable Tyber. Before our trip to the Gorn ship, you were already going to be a member of my family, but now that you have been chosen as the Voice of Okuda... you are my equal." Tyce said frankly.

"Is that my title?" Tyber asked as he cautiously sat down in a large cushioned chair.

Tyce considered for a moment, then slowly said, "It could be. That's really up to you. Several of the Holy One's past had considered making a prophesy regarding you but once such a thing is done, you are bound by it."

"I don't understand." Tyber said cautiously.

"Well, like the Gorn for example. They gave their emissary the title of 'Trach Manja'. For a thousand years the Gorn have known that one would be named to be the Voice of Warriors who would stand above all houses and castes to represent the interests of the entire Gorn empire." Tyce said distantly.

Tyber nodded slowly, then asked, "What's wrong with that?"

"The mold has been cast which describes just what a Trach Manja is and what he can do. Now Oscar will have to fit into that mold, even if it doesn't entirely fit him." Tyce said frankly.

Tyber thought for a moment, then said, "But since you haven't announced that I'm coming, I'm free to... do what?"

"You're free to do the job that needs to be done without limitations. The 'Voice of Okuda'... or whatever we decide to call you, will be able to represent Okuda when speaking to the Federation or the Gorn or any other race without being constrained by a written 'destiny' or 'prophesy'." Tyce said frankly.

"If that's so, then why did the Gorn Holy One invent the Trach Manja?" Tyber asked curiously.

"The way their society was developing, there was almost certainly going to be a fragmentation of classes at some point. We actually expected it to split three ways... but that doesn't matter. As soon as it was determined that their society was going to fragment into autonomous entities, the Holy One concocted the Trach Manja prophesy so that no matter where the

emissary emerged, he would be given the proper respect by all." Tyce said carefully.

"I'm sorry. I really don't know much about Gorn history. So they *did* fragment?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Tyce smiled and said, "I'm sorry Tyber. When I get to thinking about the long ago, I sometimes lose touch with the here and now. And to answer your question, yes. They fragmented. Since Oscar was the child of laughter and light and came from one of the main houses of the Gorn empire, the prophesy of the Trach Manja turned out not to have been as necessary. But if Oscar had been the child orphaned by poverty, he could have easily come from the fragment... that is, assuming that they still exist."

Tyber shook his head as he tried to process the myriad of emotions associated with all the new information he had received in such a short time.

He looked up to notice Tyce watching him consideringly.

Tyber waited to see what was on Tyce's mind.

"You're overwhelmed." Tyce said slowly.

Before he could think better of it, Tyber said, "Yeah. A little."

Tyce slowly nodded then said, "I have a suggestion that might help, if you're interested."

Tyber nodded quickly that he was.

"Although I can advise you on what to expect in the coming days, that's probably going to be of little comfort to you. I think that, if you wanted, we could invite Oscar over to spend part of the journey to Okuda with us." Tyce said carefully.

"Oscar? Here?" Tyber asked uncertainly.

"Yes. There's no time like the present to get people used to the notion that he is welcomed on our ships and on our worlds. There will come a time when he will do the same for you to let his people know that you are the exception to the rules they have grown up with. To the Gorn you will be known as Trach Manja Tyber of the Okudai.

"Wow. That really sounds impressive." Tyber said with wide eyes.

"You think so? I was kind of leaning toward 'Voice of Okuda'. It sounds so much more... peaceful." Tyce said consideringly.

Tyber chuckled at Tyce's expression, then said, "How about while Oscar is here, we tell our people that he is 'Oscar, the Voice of the Gorn', then when I go to his world, I'll be called 'Trach Manja Tyber of the Okudai'."

"Yes. I think that will work very well. I'd rather not have to explain what a Trach Manja is to the Okudai people. They might get the wrong idea and start thinking that you're a type of royalty." Tyce said frankly.

Tyber nodded, then slowly said, "Eliam said that we weren't supposed to let ourselves be universally known. But it looks like all the Holy Ones are working to make sure that everyone knows who we are."

"Yes. I suppose I should have explained that to all of you when I had you together." Tyce said as he thought about what he should say.

"If everyone knew what you could 'really' do, then you would fail. There is no doubt of that. But it is necessary for people to know who you are and that you're important so that you will be allowed to go where you need to go and do what you need to do." Tyce said carefully.

"And if the Okudai people know that I'm the Voice of the Okudai, then Lehman shows up and is the Voice of the Chameloids, he will be let in and people will be able to accept him." Tyber said thoughtfully.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes. Exactly. In fact, all the Holy Ones will be working to make sure that all the 'Five Voices' will be recognized and given proper access wherever they need to go."

Tyber nodded, then stood as he said, "Then let's get started."

Tyce smiled and said, "I assume you know how to work the communications equipment."

"I've lived most of my life on starships. I could use a comm before I was potty trained." Tyber said as he walked to the desk where a terminal was located.

"I believe if Vincent were here he would have said, 'TMI - Too Much Information'." Tyce said with a chuckle.

Tyber smiled at Tyce's words as he began to work the controls.

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"Would you please contact the lead Gorn vessel and establish contact with the Trach Manja, Oscar?" Tyber asked the communications worker on the bridge.

"I'm sorry but 'The Law' prohibits casual contact of outside species." The young man said in a warning tone.

Tyce walked into view of the terminal and said, "Korible, son of Mishin, I am the Holy One. I would like to speak to the captain."

The communications worker's eyes went wide as he stammered, "Yes. Yes Holy One."

A moment later Captain Treas appeared on the screen.

"How may I serve you Holy One?" Captain Treas asked respectfully.

"Would you please inform the bridge crew and the other captains that this boy, Tyber, son of Traiel, has been designated as the 'Voice of Okuda'. As such, he is exempt from all prohibitions against communications with people outside our system." Tyce said firmly.

"Yes Holy One, I will inform them immediately."

"Also, on the Gorn ship there is a boy who has the same position within the Gorn Empire. To us he would be known as Oscar, the 'Voice of the Gorn'. To his own people he would be known as the Trach Manja, Oscar. Any attempt at communication from him, either now or in future, is to be accepted. And if he should wish to come aboard any of our vessels, he is to be welcomed and treated with the utmost respect." Tyce said seriously.

"You're saying that we are to welcome a Gorn onto our ship?" Captain Treas asked with disbelief.

"Yes. Of all the massive Gorn Empire, this one, and only this one, is given free access to all the territories of Okuda." Tyce said firmly.

Captain Treas stared at Tyce as her mouth dropped open slightly.

"And of course Tyber will be granted the same access within the sovereign space of the Gorn Empire." Tyce said seriously.

Captain Treas finally seemed to come back to herself enough to say, "I will see that the bridge crew and other captains are informed."

Tyce smiled and said, "Thank you Captain Treas. The government will be informed and these changes will be in effect throughout the Okudai system before we reach Okuda."

"As you say Holy One. Is there any other way I can be of service?" Captain Treas asked hopefully.

"Tyber wants to contact Oscar, the Voice of the Gorn. If you could make that possible, that is all I will need for now." Tyce said gently.

Before Captain Treas could tell her communications officer to place the call, he had already made contact and was waiting for Oscar to answer his comm.

Tyber smiled when he saw Oscar's face on the screen.

"How are you doing Oscar?" Tyber asked with a smile.

"My Holy One is insane." Oscar whispered, then glanced around with worry, to see that he hadn't been overheard.

Tyber chuckled at the statement, then said, "My Holy One was just telling me that if you wanted to come over to our ship and spend part of the journey with us, it'd be okay."

Oscar looked at Tyber with surprise, then past him to Tyce who was standing just behind him.

"I've already cleared it with my people. If you want to visit, you'll be welcomed." Tyce said frankly.

"Thank you. I need some time away from the Holy One. He's... happy. Way too happy." Oscar said hesitantly, then looked around again.

"We're on the Mangeon. We'll be ready to receive you whenever you transport." Tyce said with a smile.

"I will be there immediately." Oscar said, then the screen went blank.

"J'Laad must really be driving him crazy." Tyce said with a smile.

Tyber nodded and thought about how lucky he was to have Tyce as a Holy One.

* * * * *

A tone at the door drew both boys' attention.

"Yes?" Tyce called in the direction of the door.

"Holy One, I have made the preparations you requested." Oluf's voice said quickly.

"Come in Oluf." Tyce said as he turned his full attention toward the door.

No sooner had the door opened than Oluf started talking.

"I have relayed your instructions regarding 'The Voice' to Minister Falek and he has assured me that the permissions will be in place before our arrival."

"Good." Tyce said with a nod, then asked, "Do you happen to know where Audge is?"

"Audge? Oh yes, your security. He is in the cargo bay comforting the injured. He awaits your summons." Oluf said professionally.

"When we have concluded our business, summon him. And be sure that all of his belongings are brought to this room. He will be staying with me." Tyce said as he watched carefully for Oluf's reaction.

"His belongings have already been installed into your quarters. Will you be needing another bed brought in?" Oluf asked as casually as if he were speaking of the weather.

Tyce walked across the room and looked into the sleeping chamber before saying, "No. Audge is my security, and I will feel most secure if he is in the bed next to me."

Oluf bowed his head slightly to acknowledge that he understood.

"What of preparations for Tyber?" Tyce asked as his mind went back to his list of things that needed to be done.

"Quarters are being prepared for 'The Voice' as we speak. His belongings are being transported aboard and should be in place soon." Oluf said nervously.

"You can call me Tyber."

"No. He can't." Tyce said firmly.

Tyber looked at Tyce with surprise.

"It will be necessary for you to be addressed by your title until people become familiar with your position. If you allow Oluf and others to call you by your given name openly, it will make their acceptance take that much longer." Tyce said seriously.

"I understand." Tyber said quietly, then turned to Oluf and said, "When we are in private with the Holy One, you may address me as Tyber."

"As you wish." Oluf said as he bowed reverently.

Tyce thought for a moment, then nodded his acceptance of Tyber's wishes.

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"Oluf, due to the recent... unpleasantness, I have fallen behind on many of my routine duties. Would you please go through the outstanding tasks that require my personal attention and organize them so we might dispense with the bulk of them before our arrival at Okuda?" Tyce asked seriously.

"Yes Holy One." Oluf said, and Tyber noticed that Oluf seemed to be pleased by the declaration.

"Oh yes. I promised Vincent, the 'Voice of the Federation', that I would relay contact information to him... I suppose that I should gather similar contact information for Lehman, the 'Voice of Chameloids' and JonJon, the 'Voice of Androids'." Tyce said in thought.

"Shouldn't we make sure that they have the same access that Oscar does?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes. But Oluf can arrange that at his leisure. It was necessary to make accommodations for Oscar right away so he could visit."

As if on cue, the tone sounded to indicate that someone was at the door.

"Yes?" Tyce responded casually.

"Holy One, the 'Voice of the Gorn' is here to meet with you." Captain Treas said diplomatically.

"Please show him in." Tyce said with a smile.

The door opened to reveal Oscar and Captain Treas standing side by side.

"It's good to see you again Oscar. Please sit and visit with us while Tyber's rooms are being prepared." Tyce said gently.

Oluf looked at Tyce quickly, then moved to the computer console to begin typing furiously.

Tyce noticed Oluf's movements then smiled as he turned his full attention to Tyber and Oscar.

"What do you think of our ship? It's quite a bit different than what you're used to, isn't it?" Tyce asked casually.

"Yes. The temperature is cooler than I am accustomed to, and the smell... forgive me Holy One." Oscar finished as he looked down.

"It's fine Oscar. J'Laad has mentioned that mammal species tend to have an odor that is unpleasant to Saurians." Tyce said gently.

"No. Not unpleasant, just.... different." Oscar hurried to explain.

"Really? J'Laad said that the scent of mammals was reminiscent of livestock." Tyce said frankly.

"Then perhaps it is because I have never been around livestock that I have not made that association." Oscar said frankly.

Tyce smiled as he said, "That sounds reasonable to me."

"Holy One, the Voice's belongings have been installed in his rooms. All preparations are complete." Oluf said quickly.

Tyce smiled and said, "Tyber, if you boys would like to go to your rooms and relax for a while, your rooms are ready."

"What about the messages for Vincent and the others?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"It's just contact information. I'll take care of it. Go on and relax. After the day you've had, you two have earned a rest." Tyce said gently.

Tyber looked at Oscar with question and received a nod as his response.

"Which way to my rooms?" Tyber asked Oluf seriously.

"Allow me to show you the way." Oluf said reverently.

Oscar looked at Tyber curiously.

"Tyce said that I'm equal to him now. So Oluf is treating me like I'm a Holy One." Tyber said as he slowly walked with Oscar to the door.

"It is good to be shown such respect. I must discuss this with my Holy One." Oscar said as the pair followed Oluf out of the room.

Tyce smiled at the door for a moment, then went to the computer and began to compose his message to Vincent.

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"I hope that you will find these accommodations to be acceptable." Oluf said as he stood aside to allow Tyber and Oscar to precede him into the room.

Tyber looked around the room and froze when he saw a young man wearing priest's robes, standing just inside the door.

"This is Dengarvin. He will be your personal attendant. If you have any need, simply ask and he will see that it is provided." Oluf said seriously.

"Oh, um. Thanks Oluf." Tyber said, then looked at Oscar to see his reaction.

Oluf gave a quick, courteous bow, then withdrew from the room.

Tyber was about to speak when he noticed that Dengarvin was fighting, trying not to stare at Oscar.

"Dengarvin, this is Oscar, the 'Voice of the Gorn'. He is my guest." Tyber explained carefully.

"Is there anything I can provide to make you and your guest more comfortable?" Dengarvin asked in a nervous voice.

"I'm actually feeling a little bit hungry. How about you?" Tyber asked as he looked at Oscar with question.

"Yes. I think I am." Oscar said uncertainly.

"Is there anything special that you would like?" Dengarvin asked hopefully.

"No. I'm sure we'll like whatever you come up with." Tyber said, then looked at Oscar with question.

"Yes. Tyber is correct. Anything will be fine." Oscar said quickly.

"Would you prefer to dine with the crew, or here in your room?" Dengarvin asked cautiously.

"I think we'll eat here. That'll give everyone a little more time to get used to the idea of Oscar being here." Tyber said frankly.

"I will return with your food as quickly as possible." Dengarvin said as he started toward the door.

"Wait!" Tyber said, hoping to catch him before he ran out.

Dengarvin stopped and looked at Tyber with question.

"We're not starving. You can relax and take your time." Tyber said honestly.

"I'm sorry, I'm just a little nervous." Dengarvin said nervously.

"Please try to relax. You're doing fine." Tyber said assuringly.

Dengarvin nodded, then withdrew from the room.

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"I wonder how Vincent and Lehman and JonJon are doing." Tyber said absently as he looked at the door.

"They're probably wondering how we're doing." Oscar said with a grin.

Tyber chuckled, then said, "I can't believe that I only met you this morning. I feel like I've known you for a thousand years."

"A hundred-thousand." Oscar said distantly.

Tyber quirked an eyebrow at the strange response.

Oscar giggled and pointed.

"What?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"That furry thing on your face... the way you just moved it..." Oscar said before breaking into giggles.

Tyber smiled and said, "It's an eyebrow and most of the time it kind of moves on it's own."

That response caused Oscar to laugh even harder.

Tyber felt himself drawn in by Oscar's infectious laughter.

When both boys had finally laughed themselves out, they laid back on the couch and stared off into the distance.

"It's a new beginning." Tyber said for no apparent reason.

Oscar nodded his agreement, then turned slightly as he said, "Yesterday I was a child and the future was impossibly far away. Today I am an adult and I have been officially named as an heir to the third estate and as the Trach Manja of the Gorn Empire."

"Yeah. Yesterday I was a child and I didn't even think about the future. I mean, I was going to be just like my dad. That was the best thing that I could dream of, there was never any doubt." Tyber said distantly.

"We do not have a path that has been laid out for us. We have to make our own path." Oscar said quietly.

"Maybe this is why my Holy One thought it would be good for us to be together right now. We can share what we're feeling because we're going through the same thing." Tyber said thoughtfully.

"Yes. I am glad to be here, my Holy One is so excited that the Trach Manja has arrived that he is making all kinds of preparations. He seems to have forgotten that I am here." Oscar said with amusement.

"I bet he'll be surprised when he notices that you're gone." Tyber said with a grin.

"Yes." Oscar said with a chuckle.

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"Holy Voice... I mean Voice Tyber. I have your food." Dengarvin's voice said quickly through the comm.

"Come in." Tyber said with a smile.

The door opened to admit Dengarvin pushing a cart loaded with food.

"That was quick. I told you that you didn't have to rush." Tyber said slowly as he sat up.

"The food was nearly prepared. It is time for the midday meal." Dengarvin said as he moved the cart to the side of the room and began to lay the food out on a table.

"Dengarvin, would you do something for me?" Tyber asked quietly.

"Yes. What can I do for you?" Dengarvin asked quickly as he turned to devote his full attention to Tyber.

"Would you set yourself a place at the table and eat with us?" Tyber asked hopefully.

"But the high priest Oluf said that I am to serve you." Dengarvin said quickly.

"If you really want to serve me, be a real person who I can talk to. I'm afraid that my title will make it difficult to find people who will treat me like a person." Tyber said as he reflected on the things Audge had said about how Tyce was isolated by his duties.

"Of course I will do as you ask, but... are you sure?" Dengarvin asked hesitantly.

"Yes. I am very sure." Tyber said as he took a seat at the table, then continued, "And I would like it if, when we're alone like this, you'd call me Tyber."

"But I was told that you are the 'Voice of Okuda'. He who speaks for our people to the rest of the universe." Dengarvin said quickly.

"That's right, I am the 'Voice of Okuda'. But that's not all I am. I'm a person just like you. I eat, I sleep, I have people that I love. It would really mean a lot to me if you would treat me like a person."

"Thank you. I will try." Dengarvin said timidly.

"Dengarvin, you've already met Oscar, the 'Voice of the Gorn'." Tyber said as he indicated Oscar who was now at his side.

"It is an honor to meet you." Dengarvin said reverently as he bowed.

Oscar glanced at Tyber, then said, "Dengarvin. You don't have to bow to me."

"I simply wish to show my respect." Dengarvin said timidly.

"You may show me respect by treating me as a thinking and feeling being who is no better or worse than you are. Meaningful discussion can only be achieved among equals." Oscar said seriously.

"It looks like you're finished laying it out. Let's eat." Tyber said as he gestured to the table.

"Yes. Please. I hope you like the food that I selected for you." Dengarvin said in a rush.

Oscar looked at Tyber helplessly.

"Did you have anything else planned for the next few hours?" Tyber asked with a smile.

"No." Oscar replied cautiously.

"I think it's going to take both of us the entire meal to get Dengarvin to really understand what we're saying." Tyber said frankly.

Oscar looked over at the young priest, who seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown, then said, "I enjoy a good challenge."

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The meal went on longer than any of them would have guessed.

Dengarvin did seem to relax slightly and even ventured some opinions of his own before the meal was over.

Oscar and Tyber were both happy to have someone to spend time with who was completely outside their situation. It helped to take their minds off the enormity of the things that had happened earlier in the day.

But when the last of the food had been eaten, Dengarvin fell back into his subservient roll and began to load the empty dishes onto the serving cart.

Once the cart was loaded, Dengarvin quietly asked, "Is there anything I can get for either of you?"

Tyber glanced at Oscar with question, then said, "No. I can't think of anything."

Dengarvin gave a single nod, but didn't make any move to leave.

He seemed to be uncertain about what he was supposed to do next.

"I think we'd like to rest for a while. If you'll let me know where to contact you, you can have some time to relax and I'll call if we need anything." Tyber said slowly, hoping that the young priest would, indeed, relax.

Dengarvin walked to the communications console and keyed in a code.

"I will await your call in my cabin. You may call me at any time." Dengarvin said as he turned to face Tyber and Oscar.

"Okay. Thanks." Tyber said, then watched as Dengarvin pushed the serving cart out of the room.

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"I wonder if I'll have someone like that to get things for me." Oscar said hesitantly as he looked at the door.

"I don't know. I think it depends on your Holy One." Tyber said speculatively.

"Perhaps it would be better if I didn't. I don't know that I would like the feeling of having someone being subservient to me." Oscar said cautiously.

"I know what you mean." Tyber said slowly as he walked across the room to sit on a large sofa.

Oscar watched Tyber sit down and seemed unsure of what he should do.

Tyber patted the cushion beside him, inviting Oscar to sit beside him, then said, "Maybe if I can get Dengarvin to relax a little bit, he could be more like a friend than a priest who is trying to serve me."

"Perhaps he would be able to relax more easily if I weren't here." Oscar said frankly.

Tyber looked at Oscar with surprise at the statement, then said, "I don't think so. I think this whole thing is as new to him as it is to us. Oluf probably told him that it was his job to take care of me, so now he's trying to sort out the best way to do that. I think that if we let him know it's okay to relax around us, he might be alright."

Oscar nodded his agreement, but Tyber noticed that his posture seemed to be slightly 'huddled'.

"Is the cold really uncomfortable for you?" Tyber asked with concern.

"Not terribly. I am simply not accustomed to it." Oscar said carefully.

Tyber looked around, then said, "I'll be right back. Give me a second."

Oscar watched as Tyber hurried out of the main room.

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"Let's try this." Tyber said as he carried a heavy blanket with him to the couch.

Oscar looked at him curiously, then seemed to understand what the blanket was for.

"My people do not generate body heat the same way that yours do." Oscar said cautiously.

"Really?" Tyber asked with surprise as he took his seat on the couch beside Oscar.

"So wrapping myself in that will do little to alleviate the cold." Oscar continued in an apologetic tone.

"Maybe not, but I still think I can help." Tyber said as he took the blanket and draped it over Oscar's shoulders.

As Oscar was about to protest, due to the pointlessness of the action, Tyber draped the rest of the blanket over his own shoulders, then pulled Oscar into a hug.

"I don't understand..." Oscar began to say, then a smile came over his face as he whispered, "You're warm."

"Yup." Tyber said as he snuggled even closer to Oscar and pulled the blanket tighter around them.

Oscar moved his arm so that he was returning Tyber's hug, then closed his eyes as he felt Tyber's body heat slowly warming his skin.

The combination of a full belly and a warm embrace started to work it's magic on both the boys.

With half lidded eyes, Oscar quietly said, "This is nice."

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After an undetermined time of just sitting and hugging, Tyber finally said, "I wonder why all our people can't be like this for each other."

"Because the Holy One has declared that your people are lesser beings." Oscar said absently.

"Lesser beings?" Tyber asked curiously.

Oscar snuggled in a little bit closer and said, "I think it was the only way that we could be neighbors without fighting."

"How is that?" Tyber asked curiously.

"The Okudai aren't fighters. They aren't technologically advanced and really don't have any significant resources of interest to the Gorn Empire. If we were to invade your space, we'd almost certainly conquer you, but... what then? We'd end up with an inhabited planetary system that we'd have to occupy and govern. It would be an endless drain of our resources with no discernible benefit." Oscar said distantly.

"So the Holy One said that we're 'lesser beings' than the Gorn, so that everyone would accept that it's not worth the bother." Tyber asked, trying to find a way not to be insulted on behalf of his people.

"I think so. The Holy One doesn't explain himself to me, but it seems reasonable." Oscar said quietly.

"Yeah. I guess it does." Tyber said in thought.

"If we were on my ship, I would offer to take you to the bathing pool. I think soaking in a pool of warm water would be very relaxing right now." Oscar said, effectively changing the subject.

"Let's see if we have a tub. We may be able to do that." Tyber said, then before Oscar could object, he got out from under the blanket and walked out of the main room again.

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Oscar heard and unusual sound, like running water, from the room Tyber had entered. Then, a moment later, Tyber walked out and said, "I think you're really going to like this, but you should probably adjust the water temperature so it's comfortable for you."

"You have your own bathing pool?" Oscar asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. Just a little one. It's called a bath tub." Tyber said, then motioned for Oscar to join him.

Slowly, Oscar shifted the blanket off his shoulders, then walked to join Tyber in the doorway.

"Go ahead and check get the water to the temperature you like." Tyber said as Oscar approached.

Oscar walked into the bathroom and to the tub where water was flowing.

"Is this okay with you?" Tyber asked hopefully.

After a moment to adjust the water to be slightly warmer, Oscar said, "Yes. Although my people do not usually have private bathing pools."

"So what do you have? Community bathhouses?" Tyber asked as he began to undress.

Oscar noticed what he was doing and began to do the same as he said, "Yes. My family, the third estate, provides bathing facilities for each of the communities that are under our protection. The other estates do the same for their people."

"I've heard that the Okudai used to do something like that, but now it's more common for people to have their own tubs." Tyber said as he folded his clothes, then walked to the edge of the tub.

Oscar casually glanced at Tyber then his eyes went wide as he looked at Tyber's groin.

"What?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"I never... I didn't..." Oscar stammered.

Tyber looked down at himself, then back at Oscar with question.

"We are not... the same." Oscar said as he pulled down the loose fitting pants he was wearing.

Tyber blinked at what he saw... or more accurately, didn't see.

"Where's your penis?" Tyber finally asked.

"Pouched." Oscar said frankly.

Tyber dragged his gaze up to meet Oscar's amused eyes, then he hesitantly asked, "What does that mean?"

Oscar smiled at the question, then reached over to feel the temperature of the water.

"Let's get into the water, then I'll explain." Oscar said gently.

"Okay." Tyber said, then slowly began to put his foot into the water.

"Too hot?" Oscar asked with concern.

"No. It'll just take me a few seconds to adjust to it." Tyber said as he slowly lowered more of his leg into the water.

Oscar watched for a moment longer to be sure that Tyber wasn't going to be uncomfortable, then climbed into the tub to join him.

* * * * *

"So you were going to tell me about 'pouched'." Tyber said as he settled in beside Oscar in the tub.

"I have basically the same genitalia that you do, but mine recedes into a pouch when it is not in use." Oscar said frankly.

"Where?" Tyber asked curiously.

Oscar had to move a little to gain his balance, but finally stood in the tub and pointed to a barely noticeable dip in his lower abdomen that looked something like a navel.

"Oh, wow." Tyber began to say, then froze when the tiniest trace of pink could be seen, peeking out.

"Is that..." Tyber started to ask, then froze again as a teeny bit more emerged.

Oscar followed Tyber's gaze, then quickly dropped down into the water.

"What's wrong?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"That..." Oscar started to say, then seemed to want to approach the topic from another direction, "What I just did, I shouldn't have done it."

"Why not?" Tyber asked carefully.

"Because, to expose myself to you in that way, it is an invitation... no, a promise..." Oscar said with difficulty.

"So you just... what? Said that you want to marry me or something?" Tyber asked carefully.

"No. Well not precisely. But it could be taken to mean that I am offering myself for courting." Oscar said hesitantly.

"Oh, okay. I think I get it." Tyber said as he relaxed back into the warm water.

Oscar seemed to be uncertain that he had explained it well enough.

"Since we're built different, I asked you to show me. You did. And I guess me looking at you and making you think about it caused your 'little guy' to wake up some."

"Not that little." Oscar said in a growl.

Tyber smiled, and continued, "Fine. The 'big guy' woke up and peeked at me and that freaked you out a little because it was like your people's way of saying that you want to date."

Oscar slowly nodded that Tyber understood correctly.

"So, if you're not interested, just say it and we'll forget that it ever happened. Just think of it as one of those weird things that sometimes happens when Humans and Saurians bathe together." Tyber said with gentle smile.

"Thank you." Oscar said with relief.

"But you still need to say it." Tyber said with a grin.

"Say what?" Oscar asked hesitantly.

"Say that you're not interested in me... you know, like a boyfriend." Tyber said simply.

Oscar seemed to consider for a moment, then nodded that he agreed that it needed to be done.

"Tyber. I'm not..." Oscar trailed off as he looked deeply into Tyber's eyes.

"I'm not able to say that I don't like you... because I do." Oscar finished in a trembling voice.

"Good. Because I think I feel that way about you too." Tyber said shyly.

"Really?" Oscar asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Really." Tyber said timidly, then barely restrained a giggle.

"Do your people have a taboo against mating with Saurians?" Oscar asked cautiously.

"Not that I know of, but I don't know if anyone ever even thought of it." Tyber said honestly.

Oscar nodded as he thought about what they were about to do.

"What about your people?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"What about them?" Oscar asked as he tried to devote his full attention to Tyber again.

"Do your people have a taboo against mating with mammals?" Tyber asked cautiously.

Oscar considered for a moment, then said, "Not really. The only thing I can think of is when my father used to tell me not to play with my food."

Tyber stared at Oscar for a moment, then slowly broke into a grin.

"My people will never be able to accept us." Oscar said with regret as he moved so close that Tyber could feel the breath of Oscar's words on his skin.

"Mine probably won't either." Tyber said as he moved forward to close the distance even more.

Oscar nodded slightly, obviously disheartened by the words.

"But we're Trach Manjas." Tyber said with a hopeful smile.

Oscar met Tyber's gaze with an expression of surprise.

"We're not them." Tyber said in a whisper.

"We're Trach Manjai. Above all houses and castes." Oscar said as joy infused his expression.

Tyber moved to close the last few centimeters between them when the sound of an incoming transmission came from the main room.

* * * * *

As Tyber hurried out of the bathroom, he thought about who might be calling him.

He didn't have any reason to believe it was his father... and yet, he couldn't deny that it was possible.

As his bare bottom hit the chair, he remembered that he was completely naked.

Although he would prefer to put some clothing on, he didn't want to keep his caller waiting.

After a quick glance around, he pressed the key to accept the incoming transmission.

"Is everything okay Tyber?" JonJon asked with concern.

From the prickly sensations on his face, Tyber was certain that he must be blushing.

"Yeah. Fine. You just caught me while I was, um... taking a bath." Tyber said reluctantly as he glanced back toward the bathroom.

Oscar called in the Gorn language, {"If it is not an emergency, tell them you will call them back. It's getting cold without you."}

Tyber felt the prickling of his blush return as he nervously asked, "What's going on guys?"

Vincent smiled as he said, "We needed to talk to Tyce. Is he around?"

"I'm sure he is in his suite of rooms. I'll connect you." Tyber said quickly, hit the control to put the transmission on hold.

"Communications, would you please direct this call to The Holy One?" Tyber said into the comm.

"Yes. Right away." The communications worker said efficiently.

{"It's getting cold."} Oscar growled from the bathroom.

"I'll be right there to warm it up." Tyber said as he walked toward the bathroom.

Chapter 32

The distant sound of the door chime jarred Tyber out of a wonderfully comfortable sleep.

He slowly disentangled himself from Oscar, but before he could even get out of the bed, the chime sounded again.

Tyber quickly pulled on the clothes he had worn the day before, then padded to the door in his bare feet.

"Yes?" Tyber asked blearily as he opened the door. His mind was still somewhat sleep fogged.

"The Holy One asked that you attend him. Events have unfolded in such a way that he believes you should be introduced to our people in advance of our arrival." Audge said quietly.

"Oh, um, do we have time to take a bath and have breakfast first, or does he need us to go right this minute?" Tyber asked slowly as he eased the rest of the way into full wakefulness.

"You should have time to eat and bathe. Tyce asked that I wake you now so that you would have time to compose yourself." Audge assured him, then quietly asked, "Would you like for me to inform Dengarvin that you and 'The Voice of the Gorn' will be ready for your breakfast soon?"

"I'd hate to wake him up if he's sleeping." Tyber said thoughtfully. "We can just go down to the galley and get something for ourselves."

"Please try to understand that Dengarvin feels incredibly honored and blessed to have been given the responsibility of seeing to your needs. Allowing him to do these small things for you brings him joy because for these few days, he's being given the opportunity to perform a service that has significance and meaning. All his service and training to date has been solely in hope that one day he might be asked to do something such as this."

Tyber considered the words, then quietly asked, "Is that how you feel about being with Tyce?"

Audge was surprised by the question, but considered carefully before answering, "In the beginning, perhaps. But my situation was somewhat different. I signed up for ship's service to be a crewman. I suppose that my ultimate motivation was somewhat like Dengarvin's, that being, to be of service to The Holy One and the church. But I never thought it would even be possible for me to ever meet or speak directly to 'The Holy One'. In my

wildest dreams, I could only imagine that I might get the opportunity to *see* 'The Holy One' someday."

"How do you feel about Tyce now?"

Audge gently smiled, then thoughtfully said, "What I feel now goes beyond duty and honor. I have come to know who Tyce is beneath his title and formed a personal bond with him."

Tyber grinned, then nodded that he understood.

"So, would you like for me to let Dengarvin know that you'll be ready for breakfast soon?"

"Yeah. That'd be nice." Tyber said, matching his quiet tone.

"Oluf will call you later to let you know where and when you'll be expected."

"Thank you, Audge. We'll be ready when he calls." Tyber said peacefully, then watched as Audge withdrew.

* * * * *

"It's time to wake up, Oscar." Tyber said as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"It seems too early." Oscar said as he slowly opened his eyes.

Tyber smiled at the sleepy look in the eyes of his young Saurian lover, then moved in to give him a slow, gentle kiss.

After a long minute of sensual kissing, Oscar pulled away enough to say, "You can wake me at whatever time you like if I get to wake up like this."

"I'll remember that." Tyber grinned, then said, "Audge stopped by and said that the Holy One is going to need us for something. We should have time for breakfast and a bath before he calls on us."

"By 'bath', I'm hoping that you mean that I will once again be able to sheath myself in your warmth." Oscar said with half-slitted eyes.

Tyber let his hand drift down and lovingly caressed Oscar's pouch, which was a bit more mounded than usual.

"I think that since it's likely that we're going to be doing official things, at some point we should do some washing up. It seems only proper." Tyber said with a grin, then gently began to massage Oscar's hardness as he continued, "Besides that, I think that feeling you inside me again will help me keep a smile on my face, no matter how long and boring the next few hours are."

"You really like it?" Oscar asked curiously, looking uncharacteristically serious.

Tyber carefully considered how to answer the question, then slowly said, "At first the sensation was strange and I didn't like it all that much. But once I got past that, I started to enjoy the way it felt. But I think what makes it good is because it's you that I'm with. When you're inside me, I feel complete. It's the only time since my dad went away that I feel like I'm not alone."

Oscar leaned forward and kissed Tyber gently for a moment, then whispered, "I haven't ever been as close to my family as you are to your father. I envy you that. Being here with you, sheathed in your warmth and holding you in my arms... I feel peace. It's the first peace I have known in my life."

"Less talk." Tyber whispered as his gentle stroking became more insistent.

Oscar responded by grabbing hold of Tyber's shirt to peel it off over his head.

* * * * *

The door of the bathing room opened but no one stepped inside. Finally, a timid voice from outside the doorway quietly said, "I have brought your breakfast, I will serve it when you're ready."

Tyber lazily smiled at Oscar, then called toward the door, "Dengarvin, would you come in here for a moment?"

The young priest looked cautiously into the room, then timidly walked in and waited for Tyber's orders.

"We're done bathing. We've just been enjoying soaking in the warm water for a few minutes. Go ahead and serve the food, and we'll be out soon." Tyber said calmly.

Dengarvin gave a slight bow and began to withdraw when Tyber called after him, "Be sure to set a plate for yourself, too."

A slight smile of appreciation came across Dengarvin's face, then he gave Tyber a quick nod before hurrying away to work on his task.

"You know, when the Gorn fleet leaves, I'm going to have to go with them." Oscar said honestly.

Tyber looked at Oscar and regretfully nodded.

"If you were to seek comfort from Dengarvin in my absence, it would be of help to me." Oscar said as the concern shown clearly in his eyes.

"Comfort?" Tyber asked cautiously, not entirely sure what Oscar was asking him to do.

"Naked sexual comfort." Oscar said frankly.

"Oh." Tyber whispered.

"We are from different worlds, cultures and species. I expect that circumstances will force us to be apart, regardless of what we might wish." Oscar said in a pained voice, then said more firmly, "I just wanted you to know that I approve of Dengarvin. If he were to share your bed or your... 'bath', in my absence. I would not feel betrayed. In fact, I would feel comforted knowing that you aren't left here, feeling completely alone."

"I'll feel alone unless I'm with you." Tyber said gently, then added, "I may ask him to hug me or hold me through the night, but that will be because you aren't here with me. As far as the sex stuff, I think I'll just save that up for the next time that we can be together."

"Thank you, Tyber." Oscar said with a smile. "In the lonely days ahead, it will help me to know that you won't have to face it completely alone."

"What about you? Do you have someone like Dengarvin on your ship?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"No. But should I feel the need and find someone to fill that role, I'll discuss it with you before doing anything." Oscar said sincerely.

"You don't have to..." Tyber began to say.

"I know." Oscar assured him, then continued, "And I wish we didn't have to consider such things, but having 'surrogates' seems to be the most realistic way for us to deal with the extended absences we are likely to face ahead."

Tyber regretfully nodded, then stood.

Oscar's gaze slowly traveled down his slim, wet body.

Tyber extended his hand and helped Oscar to stand.

"You're beautiful." Oscar said as he began to dry himself.

Tyber looked at Oscar's firm golden body and said, "You're glorious."

Oscar gave a hissing laugh, then said, "That sounds like something a Gorn would say."

"You are." Tyber said frankly.

Oscar couldn't think of any response to Tyber's sincere praise, so he moved in to give him a kiss.

After a long minute of kissing, Tyber whispered, "Breakfast is probably cold by now."

"I'm sure Dengarvin knows us well enough by now to know that we need a little extra time to get out of the bath."

"You're probably right." Tyber chuckled, then held open a robe, offering to help Oscar put it on.

* * * * *

Just as they were finishing an enjoyable meal of delicious food and comfortable conversation, Oluf called to inform them that they were needed on the bridge.

Dengarvin stayed behind to see to the cleaning of the suite of rooms. There were a few strange and guarded looks at Oscar as they walked down the hallways, but none of the crew did anything overtly rude.

"Over here." Tyce said when he noticed them walking onto the bridge.

"What's wrong? Did something change?" Tyber asked as they approached.

"Nothing important. Things are proceeding as expected, for the most part, although a bit more rapidly than anticipated."

"What do you need for us to do?" Tyber asked simply.

"Right this minute all I need for you to do is listen while I fill you in on what's going on. After I'm done, Oscar will need to go back to his ship so his Holy One can cover a few things with him. While he's doing that, we're going to be introducing you to our people." Tyce said seriously.

"Don't we get any say in this?" Tyber asked anxiously.

"I'm asking you to trust me to lay the groundwork so that by the time we arrive you'll already have most of the difficult things done. If we introduce you now, like this, we'll have much more control over the situation than if we made the announcement in person." Tyce said reasonably.

"I don't want to go back to my ship. The Holy One is crazy!" Oscar proclaimed.

"There are things that need to be done right now or they'll be that much harder to deal with later. J'Laad may be crazy, but he knows what he's doing. He's already promised that you'll be able to come back later, once your obligations have been met." Tyce said firmly.

"Obligations?" Tyber asked darkly, then turned to Oscar and quietly said, "As Vincent would say, this sounds like something that's gonna suck." Tyber said darkly.

"It already does." Oscar grumbled.

* * * * *

"The duly elected representative of the Okudai people invited the Gorn to come to Okuda and 'establish a relationship' between our governments." Tyce said carefully as he looked from Tyber to Oscar.

"The only 'relationship' the Gorn have with other species is as their conquerors." Oscar said simply.

"I think we all understand that. But it appears that Malif had received assurances that he would be given preferential treatment in the new order. He was essentially promised that he would be the supreme leader of the enslaved Okudai people for the remainder of his miserable pathetic life." Tyce said with disgust.

"So he was willing to trade the freedom of his own people for the promise of a life of luxury for himself?" Oscar asked to confirm.

"Yes. That appears to be the case. And what makes it that much more insidious is that, so far as I know, he didn't have any compelling reason to do so. It's not like the Gorn had invaded and he was left with no other choice." Tyce said frankly.

"Even if that were the case, it wouldn't make his decision forgivable." Tyber said coldly.

"True. But at least I could see how someone with a weak will could fall into the trap of making that decision. But it doesn't matter because that's not the case here. By all appearances, Malif actively sought out the Gorn and worked to forge a deal with them. Now the Gorn are on their way to Okuda Prime to collect on the promises that were made." Tyce said seriously.

"But they're not really going to do that, are they?" Tyber asked anxiously.

"Certain things have to play out, for form's sake, to satisfy both of our governments. J'Laad and I are reasonably sure that we can guide things so

that the end result leaves us in the best political position. But for this to work, we're going to need both your help." Tyce said frankly.

"What can we do?" Tyber asked in astonishment.

"You two are the voices of the Gorn and Okudai people, or the Trach Manjai, if you'd rather. With the situation that we're in, it seems that the best thing that we can do is to introduce you, separately, to the people that you represent. Then, when the conflict between our people seems to be inevitable, the two of you will propose a resolution that both J'Laad and I will endorse, thereby solidifying your positions and showing our people your importance." Tyce said carefully.

"So, do we have to come up with this 'resolution' or are you and J'Laad going to write it for us?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"Don't worry. By the time we get to that point, we'll have something worked out for you to say." Tyce assured him.

"This seems... dishonest." Oscar said reluctantly.

"Manipulative, maybe. But it's necessary to put things in order for what is to come." Tyce said frankly.

"I should go to my ship now, so that I may return here that much sooner." Oscar said to Tyce, then looked at Tyber urgently.

"Can I walk Oscar down to the transporter room?" Tyber quickly asked.

After a moment to consider, Tyce reluctantly said, "I suppose that Oscar doesn't need to know the details about the political upheaval that the Okudai government is going through. I'll cover that with you when you get back. But please hurry, I need to get you briefed so that we can make our announcement."

"Yeah. I'll just walk him down and be right back." Tyber assured him, then walked with Oscar toward the nearest door.

* * * * *

"Did that seem as wrong to you as it did to me?" Oscar asked as they walked.

"Yes. We're being used for Tyce's political games." Tyber said darkly.

"This is not what Eliam described to us. This is not the true purpose of the Trach Manjai." Oscar said firmly.

"But don't we need Tyce and J'Laad's influence to be able to do our jobs right? I mean, how much good can we really do without their help?" Tyber asked anxiously.

"How much of what we do will be of help to the universe if we become embroiled in politics and games?" Oscar countered.

As they walked into the transporter room, Tyber quietly said, "Even though Tyce has said the words, I don't think he really believes them. He doesn't look at me as having the same authority that he does. Before this is all over, I think that both of us are going to have to stand up to our Holy Ones and let them know how things are. The universe is depending on us."

After a moment to consider, Oscar reluctantly said, "Agreed."

"Could you transport 'The Voice of the Gorn' back to the Gorn lead vessel?" Tyber asked the transporter operator on duty.

"Yes. But it will take me a moment to link with their alien technology." The transporter operator informed him.

"Come back as quick as you can. I have a feeling that it's about to get very tense around here." Tyber said frankly.

"Do you plan to confront Tyce now?" Oscar asked with surprise.

"No. I'm not planning on it. But if Tyce suggests something that's contrary to our true mission, I'll find a way to stand up to him and let him know that *he* is going to have to work within *my* boundaries." Tyber said firmly.

Oscar slowly nodded, then said, "I know that I am going to have to do the same, however I cannot see my Holy One being accepting of such an arrangement."

"If it gets too bad, just come back over here. I've got a warm place where you'll be safe and comfortable." Tyber said with a grin.

"It's going to be difficult for me to concentrate on what the Holy One has to say while I'm thinking about your 'warm place'." Oscar said honestly.

"We're ready for transport." The transporter operator announced.

"I'll see you soon." Tyber said as he walked to the edge of the transporter chamber.

"Not soon enough." Oscar said as he took his position on the transporter pad.

Tyber watched with an ache in his heart as Oscar dematerialized.

He stood for a long moment, not really thinking, just experiencing the ache in his heart. But finally Tyber collected his emotions and began the trip back to the bridge so that he could be filled in on the political upheaval throughout the Okudai government.

* * * * *

After a seemingly endless barrage of political trivia, Tyber finally interrupted long enough to ask, "You *do* realize that I lived my whole life on ships and that I don't know who any of these people are, don't you?"

"These are the people who represent you in the government. It's your responsibility to know who they are." Tyce countered.

"They don't represent *me*. They never have. My dad and all the people that I grew up around are essentially nomads. They have no permanent homes and no one represents them in the government. You're from a very different world than I am. Just because I'm here with you doesn't mean that I see things the same way that you do." Tyber said as he fought to keep his anger in check.

"But every citizen should be represented in the government by people who hold their same values. That's the only way that a representative democracy can properly function." Tyce said frankly.

"It *doesn't* properly function. At least, not for the people I know." Tyber said seriously.

"Well, now that Treifa is running for office, you and your people *will* be represented." Tyce said with a smile.

"Maybe... For now... But what other 'invisible' groups of people are going to be overlooked? You're playing to the masses, trying to gain consensus. That's great for politics but it's not how life works. Right and wrong aren't up for a vote. And I'll tell you now that I'm not going to tell people what they want to hear because it's what they expect." Tyber said firmly.

"It's necessary to gain majority approval to get things done." Tyce said reasonably.

"That's funny, coming from 'The Holy One' whose word is law." Tyber said seriously, then continued, "Do what you need to do and say what you need to say, but I'm not going to be a puppet, saying the words that you put in my mouth. I'm 'The Voice of Okuda'. You may have spotted who I was and got me to where I needed to be to get the title, but you didn't 'create' me. I'm here because I'm the right person to do a job that needs to be done."

"When I introduce you, what are you going to say?" Tyce asked cautiously.

"I guess we'll know when I say it." Tyber said simply.

"You need to be very careful. There are a lot of powerful and important people who will take anything that you say and twist it to their own uses. You need to calculate the permutations of your words." Tyce warned.

"No. *You* need to do that. *I* need to speak the truth." Tyber said frankly.

"This may turn out to be much more difficult than I had first anticipated." Tyce said anxiously.

"Probably. But it still needs to be done." Tyber said, firm in his resolve.

"Holy One, Chaundra has just indicated that the central church has announced to the citizenry that you will be speaking soon. All is in readiness." Oluf said as he hurried to Tyce's side.

"Will you at least *try* not to say anything inflammatory?" Tyce asked hopefully.

"No." Tyber said simply.

Tyce agonized over the decision for a moment, but finally looked to Oluf and nodded that they were ready.

"People of Okuda, as you know, I am returning from a rather harrowing adventure." Tyce said as he faced a viewscreen with a teleprompter.

"As a result of the actions of President Malif, the Gorn fleet travels with me. Promises were made and cannot be ignored. Some might say that this is a result of the isolation we have maintained from the rest of the universe. Others would argue that more strictly enforced isolation might have prevented this outcome. I'll leave that for others to debate.

"Be that as it may, it is time for us to have a voice in the universe. Beside me is Tyber, Son of Traiel, who will also be known as 'The Voice of Okuda'. In time we will have elected representatives who will negotiate treaties and settlements on our behalf. 'The Voice of Okuda' will make contact, form relationships outside our system, facilitate the process and pave the way for their eventual success.

"Tyber, would you like to say a few words?" Tyce asked hopefully.

"Thank you, Holy One." Tyber said calmly to him, then turned to the screen and ignored the prepared speech that started to scroll.

"For any of you who are worried about it, I don't want to drag Okuda out of its isolation and start making deals with people. All I'm going to do right now is talk to people and get to know them and let them know that we're here. If I notice that they have something that we might be able to use, then I might try to work out a trade with them... there's this great stuff called catsup that I'd really like for us to get. But don't expect to see alien tourists on our streets or exotic alien merchandise in our shops. All I'm going to do is go out and talk to our neighbors in the universe for you and hopefully make a few friends." Tyber finished with a smile, then looked at Tyce, prompting him to take over.

"Thank you, Tyber. If your objective is to make friends, I have no doubt that you will achieve it." Tyce said with a smile at him, then turned back to the screen and once again began reading his prepared speech.

"One further thing. In regard to the upcoming election, I urge you to do whatever you can to find people of good character to elect that will work for the benefit of all our people. We need to purge the greedy and self-serving elements of our political structure so that we can have people of good will to provide a path for achievement. What you decide in the coming election might well determine if our civilization will ascend or decline in the coming generation." Tyce finished gravely, then waited a moment before Oluf ended the transmission.

After a long silence, Tyber cautiously asked, "How'd I do?"

"I'm not sure how the news agencies will dissect what you said, but I didn't find anything wrong with it." Tyce said honestly.

"Okay. What do we have to do next?" Tyber asked as he looked around.

"It will take some time for Chaundra to gather the commentaries from the different news agencies. I suppose that in the interim, you could have a meal or relax." Tyce said consideringly.

"If you don't need me for anything, I think I'll go down and check on the injured crew from the Dorsa. I promised to watch out for them." Tyber said seriously.

"If you're going to do that, ask Captain Treas for one of her security people to accompany you." Tyce said firmly.

"No. I don't want to be walking around with armed security when I'm trying to tell people that we're proud of them and want them to feel better." Tyber said seriously.

"Given what's happened the past few days, it wouldn't be safe to let you go on your own." Tyce said frankly.

"Then either let me borrow Audge or I can call Dengarvin to go with me." Tyber said reasonably.

Tyce thought for a moment, then cautiously asked, "Is Dengarvin the attendant that Oluf assigned to you?"

"Yes. He may not be big and muscled, but he's so enthusiastic about helping me that I don't think that anyone who tried to hurt me would have a chance." Tyber finished with a smile.

"Oluf, would you summon Dengarvin to attend Tyber?" Tyce asked over his shoulder.

"Thank you." Tyber said with a smile.

"It was mentioned that you and Oscar spent the night in your room last night." Tyce said in a leading tone.

"Yeah." Tyber confirmed.

"Are you two..." Tyce trailed off, reluctant to put his question into words.

"Yeah." Tyber said, reasonably sure that they were both talking about the same thing.

"Due to our isolation from other worlds, this isn't something that's discussed that much, but from ancient times interspecies relationships have been frowned upon..." Tyce began to explain, but was interrupted.

"Yeah. And from what I've been told, so was bathing, eating crustaceans and several other random harmless things." Tyber said bluntly.

Tyber waited as Tyce seemed to be trying to formulate another argument to make his point.

A movement drew both their attention and they watched as Dengarvin scrambled onto the bridge.

"I see what you mean about his enthusiasm." Tyce said absently.

"Are we alright?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"We're fine." Tyce assured him, then watched as Tyber walked to Dengarvin's side.

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"The high priest Oluf did not know what duty I would be asked to perform, so I did not know how to prepare." Dengarvin said as they left the bridge.

"All I need for you to do is walk with me while I check on some people. The Holy One didn't want me going by myself." Tyber said honestly.

"Do you believe that you are in danger?" Dengarvin asked with concern.

"That's kind of hard for me to answer. In my head, I know that most of these people are my friends that I've known for most of my life. But I can't help but remember being taken prisoner by them when the Holy One called on our people to rise up." Tyber said distantly as they entered the turbolift.

"Did they hurt you?" Dengarvin asked quietly as Tyber pressed the button to take them to the lower deck.

"They were a little bit rough with me, but they didn't beat me or rape me or anything like that." Tyber said honestly.

"But still, I would imagine that if I were in your situation that I would continue to feel frightened, worried that they might do it again." Dengarvin said frankly.

"Yeah. I still have that buzzing around in the back of my head, but I can't let that stop me. I'm 'The Voice of the Okudai'. Our people need me to focus on what's ahead of us. I'm of no use to them hiding in my cabin." Tyber said passionately.

"I heard what you said... I mean, I was watching the Holy One's announcement and then he introduced you and you told everyone that you're going to speak for us to the outer worlds."

"What do you think I should say to them?" Tyber asked curiously as they stopped outside a cargo bay door.

"From all that I've heard about the pirates and space battles, I think I'd want you to tell them to leave us alone." Dengarvin said frankly.

"I guess that most of that stuff you've heard about is probably true, but you're only hearing about the bad. That makes sense because horrible and shocking things is what most people talk about. I've had the chance to get to know some people from other species and some of them are really good people. I think that I'd like to get to know more of them."

"I'm afraid." Dengarvin said honestly, then explained, "I worried that outsiders will come in and change our world."

"All I can do is promise that I'll do my best to prevent that. I'm going to do my best to establish relations with honorable people of good will. But once I've done my part, there will be others who will follow behind me to negotiate treaties and trade deals. I have a feeling that they'll be the ones who have the most potential to betray our people." Tyber said honestly.

"Is there any way to prevent that?" Dengarvin asked anxiously.

"In the upcoming election we need to be sure that good honest people are chosen to negotiate for us. We also need for the legislators to make laws that will make it difficult for the negotiators to sell us out. Civilian oversight might also help to keep things honest. That's all I've come up with so far, I've got to think about this a lot more before I'm sure about what to do."

Dengarvin slowly nodded as Tyber led the way into the cargo bay that had been converted into a makeshift hospital.

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Tyber looked around for a moment at all the people in neatly arranged beds. The sight was disturbing, although Tyber found that he couldn't find a way to put what he was feeling into words.

One patient caught his attention over all the others and Tyber started toward him.

As Tyber approached, he noticed that the man with bandaged eyes was talking to a priest who was sitting in a chair at his side.

Tyber waited for a moment, until the priest looked up and noticed him.

"Excuse me if I'm interrupting, but I just wanted to stop by and see how Mykale is doing." Tyber said cautiously.

"Who is it?" Mykale asked, directing the question to the priest beside him.

"A young teenager and a priest."

"I'm Tyber. I talked to you before, when you were on the *Yorktown*." Tyber said gently.

"Are you 'The Voice of the Okudai' who was just speaking to our people?" The priest asked cautiously.

"Oh, you heard that?" Tyber asked shyly.

"The Holy One's announcement was played over the speaker system for all to hear." The priest answered.

"Well, yeah. That was me." Tyber confirmed, then added, "I just wanted to stop in and see how Mykale was doing and if he needed anything."

"Oren has been helping me get a list of all the injured and another list of the crew of the Dorsa, so that we can be sure that all the heroes who defended the Holy One will be remembered." Mykale said seriously.

"It's good that you're doing that. But be sure that you don't do too much too soon. You need to give yourself time to heal and recover." Tyber said gently.

"Oren is taking very good care of me. Honestly, he's doing most of the work." Mykale said frankly.

"I wouldn't be doing anything if it weren't for Mykale. Despite his blindness, it's his vision of how to pay proper tribute that's guiding us." Oren said reverently.

"Do you need anything to make it easier?" Tyber asked with concern.

"Too much has changed too quickly for me to answer that. I think that for right now I'd like to keep my focus on the other Dorsa crewmembers. I'll have time to worry about other things once I know that they're being taken care of." Mykale said thoughtfully.

"Contact me if you think of anything that I can do." Tyber said gently.

"Are you really going to contact other worlds and speak on our behalf?" Mykale asked cautiously.

"Yes. But all I'm really going to do is talk to them and see if I can set things up so that we can get a productive dialog going. I'm not going to invite them to come here or try to change our worlds." Tyber gently assured him.

"Going out into the universe, meeting other species... just the thought of it scares me." Mykale said anxiously, then turned his face, as though he could see Tyber and quietly added, "Be careful."

"I will. I promise." Tyber assured him, then turned his attention to the priest at his side, Oren, and said, "You can contact me through 'The Holy One' if you need anything. If it's within my power to provide, you will have it."

"I will. Thank you." Oren said with surprise.

"Mykale, I'm going to go and check on some of the others now. Thank you for what you're doing." Tyber said solemnly.

"We're all doing our part. I'm just glad that there's something that I can do." Mykale responded sincerely.

Tyber glanced at Dengarvin at his side, then started walking.

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As they walked among the patient beds, a voice quietly called, "Tyber?"

When Tyber turned at the sound of his name, he recognized the man who was calling to him.

"Jarkin? How are you?" Tyber asked as he walked with Dengarvin to Jarkin's bedside.

There was a long moment of silence as Jarkin carefully considered before responding, "I am comforted in knowing that I continue to have a purpose. But I am frustrated at my inability to work on fulfilling that purpose while being confined to this bed."

"Yes. I can see how that would be frustrating. Is there anything I can do to help you?" Tyber asked with concern.

"To be honest, I don't understand what duties and responsibilities 'The Voice of Okuda' has. But unless it includes being able to speed the passage of time, I doubt that there is much that you can do to aid me." Jarkin finished with a weak smile.

"My job is to talk. Although I suppose that it might seem that I alter the passage of time when I'm telling a long story, I don't think that I actually can." Tyber responded with a grin.

"My husband has been notified about my injury. But I didn't want to discuss..." Jarkin glanced at Dengarvin, then seemed to amend what he was going to say, "...what the 'Holy One' revealed to us. The first order of business upon my return will be to make my unique contribution to the wellbeing of Okuda."

Tyber slowly nodded, understanding what Jarkin was not saying.

"But what of you? If I understood correctly, you are one of the blessed few like me. Do you have plans to make your contribution as well?" Jarkin asked curiously.

"I'm too young." Tyber said automatically, then amended, "While I might 'technically' be able to... contribute. It's still a few years before I should start thinking about doing something like that. Besides, as 'The Voice of Okuda', I'm probably going to be away from the Okudai system quite a bit. That just doesn't seem fair."

"In a perfect world, I would agree with you. But from what 'The Holy One' told us, this is our duty. This is something that we can do for the benefit of all our people. Whether it's 'convenient' or not, whether it's 'proper' or not, we still need to do it. We're the hope of the future of our people." Jarkin said urgently.

"Thank you, Jarkin. I heard what the Holy One was saying when he said it, but I guess that I haven't given it the amount of thought that you have." Tyber said quietly.

"I have plenty of time to think. There's not much else that I can do like this." Jarkin said as he looked to where his right arm and leg used to be.

"Well, it's good for me that you've had the time because I didn't see the urgency in what 'The Holy One' told us. Now that you've told me about it, I'll seriously consider..." Tyber glanced at Dengarvin out of the corner of his eye, then continued, "...making my contribution, sooner rather than later."

Jarkin smiled at the declaration.

"You can contact me through the church if you ever need my help with anything." Tyber said seriously.

"Audge has stopped by to visit several times since we parted company with the Federation vessels. He is very interesting and we've had some good conversations. It wouldn't surprise me if we continued to stay in contact once we reach Okuda." Jarkin informed him.

"From what Tyce said, I'll be staying in the sanctuary at the main church with him, so Audge will be able to give me a message whenever you want." Tyber said frankly.

"Yes. I'll do that." Jarkin said with a smile.

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"Would it be easier for you to talk if I weren't accompanying you? If it would be better, I could stand aside, available if you have need of me, but not so close that I can hear your conversation." Dengarvin offered cautiously.

"I'll ask you to step away if I need to have a private conversation for some reason. But I'd rather that you stay with me. I like having you around." Tyber finished with a smile up at him.

"I just wish that there were more that I could do for you. It seems like all I'm doing is following behind you and not really helping you at all." Dengarvin said regretfully.

"Knowing that you're here to help me if I need it is a big help, all by itself. Being named 'The Voice of Okuda' is a big scary thing and I'm glad that I'm not going to have to face it all by myself." Tyber said frankly.

"You seem to be more than capable of dealing with whatever you're going to face." Dengarvin said honestly.

Tyber looked around, then motioned for Dengarvin to walk with him, back toward the door.

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Once they were alone in the hallway, Tyber continued to walk toward the turbolift as he said, "I can't tell you all of what happened to me... to us, the 'Voices'... mostly because I don't know all of it. Maybe I'll never know. But I'm not the same person that I was before."

"I don't understand." Dengarvin said honestly as they entered the lift.

"Neither do I." Tyber said as he selected their destination, then continued, "My dad was the center of my universe. I depended on him for everything and never did anything for myself. Now, I'm here, without him. Not only am I doing things for myself, but I feel confident in knowing what I have to do."

"So you somehow changed?" Dengarvin ventured uncertainly.

"If what we were told was true, then there was something about us, 'The Five Voices', that made us capable of assuming a great responsibility. But I think something more happened because I've been doing things and saying things that I know I couldn't have done before." Tyber said thoughtfully.

"Are you afraid that you aren't yourself anymore?" Dengarvin asked as the lift stopped and the doors opened.

"I'm still me. But I'm not *exactly* like I was before. It's like I have skills and... maturity, maybe. I don't know. But before, I was a kid who let someone else make decisions and didn't worry about much of anything. I didn't have any responsibility. Now I'm... this." Tyber said with difficulty as they walked.

"Is it possible that being given the responsibility has made you rise to the occasion?" Dengarvin asked cautiously.

"I don't know. Maybe. Like I said, I'm not sure if I'll ever know. It just bugs me that I don't know. Now that I have a job to do, I think it's important that I know what tools I have to work with." Tyber said as he led the way toward his cabin.

"If there is anything I can do to assist you, please let me know." Dengarvin said quietly.

"I know that it's your job to help me, and I appreciate that. But I think that the thing you could do to help me most right now is to be a friend." Tyber said frankly.

"Of course I'll be willing to try, but that is a skill that I haven't had much luck with." Dengarvin said regretfully.

"Really? I thought that you'd have all kinds of friends." Tyber said honestly as he took a seat on the couch, then gestured for Dengarvin to sit with him.

"I have been told in the past that I'm difficult and tedious company. I tend to be too quiet. Then, when I finally *do* say something, I'm either too abrupt in my speech or I babble endlessly. I think my training in the priesthood has helped me, to some degree, but I still have those tendencies." Dengarvin admitted shyly.

Tyber smiled, then said, "You're fine just the way you are. Maybe you aren't skilled at the art of conversation, but people who are, tend to only say what you want to hear or they say nothing at all. I'd rather that you just be yourself. I don't know how things are going to work out, but I have a feeling that with the way things are going that I might be in store for some really lonely days ahead."

"But as 'The Voice of Okuda', aren't you going to be interacting with different species from all over the universe?" Dengarvin asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But right now we're heading toward Okuda Prime and 'The Holy One' has already said that I'm going to have a room in the sanctuary of the main church. I don't know how that's going to work out." Tyber said frankly.

"From what little I have seen, I believe that 'The Holy One' and the priests are dedicated to providing for your needs. If that is truly the case, then I will be attending you for as long as you wish it." Dengarvin said carefully.

Tyber thought about that for a moment, then cautiously said, "That kind of brings up something that Oscar and I were talking about."

Dengarvin looked at Tyber curiously, but didn't ask.

"He's going to have to go back to his homeworld soon and... well, we were talking and he said that if I started feeling lonely and wanted someone to... um, sleep with... I mean, sleep beside, to keep me warm and keep me company, that it'd be okay with him if I slept with you... I mean, that's only if you want to." Tyber rushed to explain.

"Although I have no objection to the idea as you present it, practically speaking, I am an adult and you are a child. Despite how I present myself or what you think of me, I am a sexual being. In such a situation, a number of things could conceivably happen. Therefore, it would not be appropriate." Dengarvin said formally.

"I wasn't asking... I mean, you don't have to do stuff or anything like that..." Tyber stammered.

"If you need to be hugged or held, I wouldn't mind doing that for you. If we were to fall asleep while I was holding you, there wouldn't be any problem. But I think that sharing your bed on a nightly basis could lead to things that shouldn't happen between us. That should be saved for the ones who you bond with in your heart." Dengarvin said sincerely.

After a moment to consider, Tyber quietly said, "Yeah. I guess you're right. Maybe since I saw how Tyce and Audge were, I just kinda thought..."

"Their case is different and should probably be looked upon as an exception rather than a rule. 'The Holy One' has great responsibility and is mature beyond his years. He and Audge appear to be forming a lifelong bond. While I may have an opinion on the matter, it would be improper for me to give it voice. I will only say that I truly hope that they can find happiness."

"Yeah. Me too." Tyber agreed.

"May I ask you a question?" Dengarvin asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Sure. I guess." Tyber automatically answered.

"You say that you and the others only recently went through this... transformative experience. I'm curious to know if you and 'The Voice of the Gorn' would have engaged in the same type of relationship had you not gone through that." Dengarvin asked curiously.

Tyber thought for a moment, then slowly answered, "Before, I was just a kid. Because of the way that I grew up, I knew some stuff about sex and love and all of that, but I never really saw it as having anything to do with

me. That was something that grownups did. But now... I don't know... I feel drawn to him. It feels right."

"So, in addition to your increased responsibility and maturity, you might also have had your sexuality awakened." Dengarvin suggested cautiously.

"Yeah. I guess so." Tyber said thoughtfully, then continued, "All I know is that when we were together, all I wanted was to *join* with him. I felt like I'd be incomplete without him."

"Do you feel that way about anyone else or just him?" Dengarvin asked curiously.

"Just him." Tyber said immediately, then amended, "Well, now that I know what it feels like, I kinda want to feel that again. It was *really* nice. But Oscar's the only one that I want to go to sleep beside and wake up next to."

"It seems that you, and probably the other 'Voices', are yet more exceptions to what would generally be considered a rule." Dengarvin said seriously.

"Do you think we're being driven to act this way for some purpose?" Tyber asked cautiously.

"Who's to say? But I think that the evidence at hand suggests that you are doing what you're destined to do." Dengarvin said thoughtfully.

"It'd be nice if someone would tell me what I'm expected to do. I mean, we were given the 'big picture' of what's going to happen, but I'd kinda like to know what I'm supposed to be doing in the next hour or so." Tyber grumbled.

"Lunch?" Dengarvin suggested with a smile.

Tyber looked at him with surprise, then said, "Yeah. Lunch sounds nice."

"I will return shortly." Dengarvin said as he stood from the couch.

"Make sure that you bring enough for both of us." Tyber called after him.

Dengarvin paused at the door and gave him a nod before continuing on, out of the room.