

# CSV-DSM Part One Introduction To Chaos

by  
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## Introduction

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It is just after the events of Memories part 2, and Cory, Sean, and the other core Clan members have been told to take a vacation by none other than Sarek himself. What they find gives rise to something none of them expected... and it shows just how deep friendship can be.

Hang on, the ride is just starting... the countdown to the maiden voyage of Clan Short of Vulcan - Des Moines has begun

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## Chapter One

Please read the notes at the end.... this was supposed to be the Part 2 Epilogue of Memories, but it morphed into a whole new story!

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"Why are we arriving out here?" Teri asked as she raised an eyebrow at Kyle.

"I dunno, Mom; Levi made me promise to do it this way, then he shut up about why. He even made Ty and me promise not to cheat by looking ahead." Kyle replied.

Adam and JJ both giggled. "And you wonder why he's our favorite nephew?" Adam quipped.

Ty grinned. "That's just 'cuz he bribes you with cuddles."

"What can I say? Levi takes after his parents; he gives awesome cuddles!" Adam replied with a grin.

Cory and Sean both shook their heads as they moved towards a nearby sign, Mont and Bast staying right at their sides. Cory's eyebrows raised as he read the sign out loud.

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### NOTICE:

You are entering a  
Clan Short of Vulcan  
Protected Area

Entry onto these grounds gives implicit  
consent to telepathic scanning without  
prior notification which is utilized for the  
protection of our residents

All actions within this compound are judged  
under Vulcan Law; penalties up to and  
including death will be enforced for violations  
of the Safe Haven Act or Youth Safety Codes

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Cory's eyes were wide as he tapped his commbadge. "Justy!!!!!!!" he growled.

"Yes, Cory?" Justy's voice replied, innocence pouring from every word.

"You know exactly why I'm calling you!" Cory replied. "Just because you're an Angel don't mean you're innocent!"

"Oh, the Des Moines Compound?" Justy replied, his halo and wings visible in every word. "You were busy, so I took care of the setup a few weeks ago. The Vulcan Embassy and Admiral Morrow were a lot of help with getting things moving!"

"And you happened to forget to tell me, huh, bro?" Cory asked while trying to hold back a grin.

"You were busy... I was gonna tell you... sometime!" Justy giggled back. "Now ain't you supposed to be on vacation?"

"Vacation don't mean surprises like this... remind me to tell Liam to give you extra pounces!" Cory chuckled. "I'll talk to you later, Jus, especially if there are more surprises!"

"Okay, duly noted... Joel? Start running!" Justy replied, the humor very evident in his voice.

Sean glanced at Cory, "Oh crap! Now I'm worried."

"Me too." Cory replied as he shook his head with a grin. He pulled Sean into his side, then turned and took the lead towards the entry port that now occupied the entrance into what he remembered as their old housing development.

As they got closer, they noticed a couple in typical Hawaiian tourist garb standing by as one of the sentries checked out a pre-teen Hawaiian boy.

"He shall be well taken care of; I believe he'll feel at home with the other three lads you rescued since you started your vacation, Mr. Caston," the guard was saying as they walked up. He looked up to see the new arrivals, mouthing 'Holy Crap!' as he sprung to his feet. The guard slapped his commbadge; a few seconds later an announcement was heard throughout the compound. "Code Green-One, South Entry; Code Green-One, South Entry. This is not a drill!"

Almost instantly, kids started appearing from nowhere inside the gate. Just as quickly, a familiar doctor appeared at the gate. "Welcome home!" the doctor announced as he held out his hand to Cory.

"Uhh ... thanks Doc... this ain't what I expected though... one of my brothers kinda forgot to warn us." Cory replied as he shook the doctor's hand with one hand while signaling Mont and Bast to stand down with the other.

"That doesn't surprise me!" the doctor replied before turning to Teri. "Hello, Teri; the offer of sedatives to assist you with coping with your growing family is still open if you need them!"

"I'm almost tempted to take you up on that offer, Doctor Jones. What brings you out here?" Teri asked with a grin. "Mont, Bast, this is Doctor Mike Jones. He's the reason Adam doesn't have as many scars as he could have from the beating he took."

"I was selected to be the Medical Director for this Compound based on my dealings with a certain patient, namely Adam over here." Mike replied as he reached out and squeezed Adam's shoulder. "If

you'll excuse me a second, I need to welcome a new guest to his new home and see what kind of help he's going to need."

"You're too late, Doc; we already fixed Kai up!" Kyle and Tyler chorused from under the arms of the grinning eleven year old. The Castons were standing there slack-jawed, still processing what they had witnessed.

Cory and Sean exchanged glances at the comment, their eyes communicating all that was needed to be said.

"Welcome to 'Life with Mikyvis', Des Moines Edition!" Teri chuckled as she surveyed the shocked adults. "You have just witnessed what happens when you give a big-hearted child the power to heal with just a thought. If I know these two, he's probably healthier now than he's been in years."

Tyler and Kyle both nodded. Kyle then looked at Teri with an innocent expression on his face. "Mom? Can we go get his stuff real fast?"

"Go ahead, I'm sure you'll be back before we notice you left!" Teri chuckled as she ruffled their hair.

They both giggled, then Ty looked over at Mont and Bast, his grin giving away the fact his words were to be taken semi-seriously. "You guys wanna come along? You can play cat-and-mouse with Kai's Foster Dad while we're gettin his stuff! You can even use claws if he puts up a fight!"

The rasping sound as both lions unsheathed their claws answered that question. Mont grunted, "Brant's getting hungry; this sounds like just his type. Call for Bear too... he can clean up."

There was a shower of golden sparkles, and I-Cheya appeared in full armor with Joel and Brant riding on his back. "Mikey says you have lunch for Fangie and Bo-bo," Joel giggled, his voice echoing out from the helm he wore. His own Armor was glimmering brightly in the late morning sunlight.

*Bad man make good meal for Dark One and I*

"You got room on your back for three more, teddy?" Tyler giggled as he heard everyone around inhale in awe.

I-Cheya looked at the three boys, snorted, and they appeared on his back. Brant at the rear with Kai in his arms, then Joel, then Kyle pressed into Joel's chest with Tyler seated on Joel's shoulders. Mont and Bast came over and took up station on either side of the Sehlat cub. *Come on. Vengeance* the Sehlat sent as he pawed the earth impatiently.

"Hi-Ho Sehlat.... Awaaaaayyyyyy!!!!" Kyle giggled from his perch. A second later, the 'pop' of air filling the spot they had just vacated was the only indication that anyone had been there.

Teri looked at her watch. "They'll be back in about ten minutes is my guess... it takes a while to ensure Justice is served."

"Just what are they going to do?" Mr. Caston asked.

"Just what I said. Extract justice." Teri replied seriously. "Considering the group that just went, I'm not sure you want to know everything that boy has lived through."

"The boy that was with them is my brother Joel; he's in charge while I'm on forced vacation," Cory added. "For Kyle to call him in, it's serious."

Mr. Caston glanced at the empty spot where the boys had been. "What was that the boys were riding?"

Sean giggled as he replied. "That was I-Cheya. He's a wild Sehlut cub; wait until you see a full grown one!"

"Yeah," JJ added, "we're still trying to decide if he belongs to Joel or Joel belongs to him."

"I'm not sure *they* have agreed on that answer yet!" Adam chuckled. He then walked over to the security guard and tapped on the guard's commbadge. "Attention in the Compound. This is Commander Adam Short, Clan Headquarters Security. Those of you waiting to see the Patriarch feel free to join us at the South Gate."

The guard looked at Adam in shock as he heard the message go out over the emergency announcement system. "How did you do that? It must be brok...."

Adam shook his head. "Executive override. All Clan commbadges are keyed for a limited list of people to access them, no matter who the badge is issued to."

"Showoff!" Cory giggled as he watched the steady flow of kids heading towards them. Mixed in the group were quite a few adults, usually with a group of children and teens hovering near them.

"Julio!" Sean exclaimed as a familiar face separated from the crowd. "What you been up to?"

Julio ran up and pulled Sean into a hug. "I'm Treasurer for the Short Boys Fan Club!" he giggled as he broke the hug. "Seriously, when you guys moved out, a bunch of us kids got together and talked our parents into letting us set up a way to carry on what you started here. We talked to the Governor, and he helped with the legal stuff for declaring the entire neighborhood a Compound. Once we had it all set up, Justy took care of getting us legally able to start saving kids. What is really kewl is the adults who live here are using their vacations to go out to areas that don't have Clan yet; they're getting the point across around the world."

Sean shook his head. "I wonder what else Justy's been setting up without telling us because we were busy? That's awesome, Julio! I was wondering why you guys had to leave so fast after the wedding."

Julio nodded. "Yeah, we got a call from one of our House-Dads. He sniffed out a youth home in South Mexico that was 'renting' their charges to the highest bidder. We had just finished helping an old-fashioned Mexican extended family get settled in their new house in the Compound; we had to rush back to help out with getting the kids settled into their new home. Some kid named Levi came over and helped out. Who is his Uncle Voice, and why should the government that was backing the Youth Shelter's actions be worried about him?"

"Voice is... Let's say that if you wouldn't mess with the Navy Seals, THEY wouldn't mess with Voice and his guys," Sean giggled.

Cory moved in closer to Julio with a grin, "Once we're inside we can tell you about 'The Dragon'."

Julio giggled, "They those from...?"

Sean shushed him quickly. "We'll explain once we're inside. You'll understand then, bro!" he giggled.

"Okay." Julio nodded. "Oh Sean; if we can talk them into letting the Clan field a team for the World Cup next year, you gonna play?"

"We'll see!" Sean giggled.

As they had been talking, Cory had noticed a trend in the path the kids were taking. Each one would come up to Cory, introduce themselves and tell where they were from, and then accept a 'welcome hug' from the Patriarch. Since Sean was busy taking a report in their eyes, the next stop was JJ and Adam. Once done there, they collected their mandatory cuddle from 'Momma Teri' before standing patiently to wait for Julio to finish his report.

*'Sean, tell Julio to catch us up at the house; you're keeping your fans waiting!'* Cory sent to his beloved with a giggle.

Sean looked around at the gathering crowd. "Julio, you wanna catch up at the house? I think your brothers are getting impatient!"

"Sure thing, Sean; I think I'm gonna get shot if I don't get out of the way!" Julio said as he stepped back and motioned 'HIS' family to begin.

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Just as the final kid finished with Sean and sat down to wait for the 'big-toothed teddy-bear' to come back, Joel and his 'attack force' returned from their trip to Hawaii. Cory almost collapsed in giggles when he saw that *everyone*, including I-Cheya, had a multitude of Hawaiian Leis circling their necks.

"Hey, Cory; you missed a great beach party!" Brant exclaimed as they started dismounting from I-Cheya. "We went and let Kai pick up a few things he's wanted. Once the store guys found out who we were, they passed word around the island and threw a huge party for us! I think they were having fun seeing how much my Bear friend here could eat!"

"You are gonna love the vine-ball they made us!" Mont added. "It's a lot better than yarn!"

"And you did this all in fifteen minutes?" Teri asked with a knowing grin as she glanced at her watch.

"Welllll..... more like 15 hours, but I won't tell if you don't, Mom!" Tyler giggled.

"Kevin had fun too," Joel giggled as he slipped down from his seat on I-Cheya's back and started helping Kai down. Even though the boy was larger than the battle armored Vulcan, he still walked hand in

hand with Joel, and even while grinning looked nervous. "It was like a honeymoon, Mama!" Joel continued with a giggle as Brant helped him remove his helm. As a group, everyone present placed the face with the name which had been passed through the grapevine in whispers after a few had overheard Cory saying it.

"It's him... it's really HIM!" rose from the crowd in whispers in various languages. The one common factor was the sense of awe; it could be felt even by a non-empath.

Teri smiled as she realized that Joel had his own fan club. "I'm glad you got a chance to have some fun Joel; now you and Kev have something special that is just yours. If you didn't get pictures, talk to John; he'll take some for you if he knows what is good for him!" She turned her head to Tyler for a second. "So, if you went shopping, where are all of the things you bought?" Teri asked.

"In his room!" Tyler responded a little too quickly.

Joel started giggling at Tyler as he led Kai over to the gathered kids all looking at him open mouthed. "Hey guys. I'm your brother, not anyone that special... but, if you want hugs, I can supply them," he giggled as he got to the group.

A tiny little boy, no older than five, tugged on the cape secured at his shoulders and belt, "Are you really *his* lil' boy?" he squeaked.

Joel grinned and picked the child up and placed him on his hip, "Yup. Come on, you wanna help me hug this lot with Kai?"

Cory watched Joel and Kai with a smile, then turned to Kyle. "And just *where* is his bedroom?" Cory asked Kyle after lifting him up to his hip.

"You'll see, bro." Kyle giggled. "I'm lettin' Joel do this; it's his chance to really prove to himself that he's just like us."

Cory nodded and poked Kyle's ribs. "Remember we're not supposed to be working! Levi already said that he's gonna be watching to make sure we don't cheat."

"I know; he checked on us in Hawaii. Joel did everything, so Ty and I didn't get any 'reminders' from our sons." Kyle giggled. "You got it lucky; at least you can hide from your kids!"

<You are mistaken Kyle.> Ark announced over the commbadge.

Cory pulled Kyle into a tight hug. "Looks like we get to 'suffer' together, bro!"

Joel looked up from his new friends and brothers, "Busted, Blondie! 'John' has you under the watch of 'T' as well! If you even think about doing work, Timmy has promised that Lew and Lance will be taking showers with you...Allie too."

Tyler moved over and tugged on Joel's hand, "You ready, big bro?"



Joel nodded seriously. "Keep Kai talking," he whispered. He then turned to Kai and smiled, "I gotta get things sorted for you, bro. Tyler will keep you safe, okay?"

"Okay Kalaniki'eki'e." Kai replied as he took Ty's hand.

"What's that mean?" the little five year old in Joel's arm asked curiously.

Joel giggled as he placed the boy back to his feet, "Means 'Royal Highness', Rafe. Okay, I gotta do some work, sweetie, but I'll be back for hugs in a moment, okay?"

"kay!" Rafe bubbled cheerfully.

Joel moved to stand by Cory, and quickly looked around at the others. He then turned to address them all, yet seemed to shift slightly closer to Cory for support.

Joel's face became impassive as he moved into his emotionless state. "Ka'imi Ka'aukai Makaokalani, also known as Kai, has been rescued by Mr. and Mrs. Caston from the Hawaiian Islands due to their witnessing of his physical appearance. It was indicative of severe physical abuse at the barest minimum, and so they prevailed upon Starfleet Command to extricate the child under the Authority of their position as Clan Short Registered House Father and Mother of the Des Moines Division. Upon a full review by Kyle Richardson and Tyler Short, Captains in the Clan Short Fleet, the following information was gained without causing further distress to Kai.

"The Safe Haven Act has been violated under the following: Article 10: Improper Living Conditions - Section 10.2: Unsanitary Conditions. 10.2(a): Consistent infestations of living areas by lifeforms accepted by the local general populace as a health or sanitation nuisance. 10.2(b): No accepted facilities present for disposal of bodily waste. Section 10.3: No hot or cold running water. 10.3(a): No dedicated washing or bathing facilities. 10.3(b): No dedicated facilities for cleaning of utensils used for eating or cooking.

"Article 11: Physical Abuse - Section 11.1: Signs of beating, strangulation, physical restraints. Section 11.2: Threats of beating, strangulation or physical restraint," Joel's control started to slip at this point, but the gentle hand placed on his shoulder by Cory enabled him to regain his composure and continue, "Section 11.3: Behavior which is indicative of such abuse.

"Article 12: Mental Abuse - Section 12.2: Isolation of children from their peers and normal socialization. 12.2(a): Deliberate isolation for purposes of depriving children of necessary social skills. 12.2(c): Any history of actions which prevent children from being afforded the same freedoms and opportunities afforded the general populace of the same age.

"Article 13: Sexual Abuse - Section 13.1: Use of minor children to provide sexual gratification. Section 13.2: Prostituting own children to provide sexual gratification for self or others. Section 13.3: Forcing children to perform sexual acts on themselves or siblings or other minor children. Section 13.4: Acquiring and or distributing nude and indecent photos or holographs of nude minor children for financial or other gain. Section 13.5: Forced sex with non sentient species.

"Article 14: Medical - Section 14.2: Failure to provide necessary medical or prenatal care. Section 14.3: Neglecting to provide necessary medications for survival of youth. Article 17: Other Abuse - Sec-

tion 17.3: Failure to provide accepted educational opportunities and Section 17.8: Abandonment for extended periods of time.

"As per Article 67 - Section 67.6 the relayed information has been gained lawfully by two registered Telepaths, Captains Kyle Richardson and Tyler Short, and confirmed by a registered Mind Melder, myself. I have acted upon said information and sentence has been passed upon Mr. Carl Lincoln, originally from Virginia, United States of America, Earth, and an ex-Navy Seal, who was the registered 'Foster Parent' to Kai."

Joel stopped and looked at Teri as Kyle was busy whispering to her. He then looked at Tyler who was still talking to Kai and keeping him from hearing Joel. Both Mikyvis turned and nodded at him seriously, yet happy smiles were on their faces.

Joel then dropped his Vulcan pose and grinned happily. He looked Kai in the eyes as Tyler released his block on the boy's hearing, "As per Articles 134 and 135, and based upon the wishes of the child, and of the adult wishing to become his full-time caregiver and parent, I, under the authority of Article 200, place Kai into the permanent care of Lady Teri Short of Vulcan and Director of Federation Youth Services. She is now your mother, your Ko'mekh, Kai; now and forever. And you are our brother." He then ran over and embraced his new little brother and led him to Teri.

Teri held out her arms and pulled both boys into a hug. "Welcome to the family Ka'imi. Just wait until you meet ALL of your new brothers!" She ran her hand through his long dark brown hair as she looked into his deep brown eyes. "Don't worry about it if sometimes you sound different than the rest of your brothers either, little one. Nobody will care; in fact some of your nephews and one certain little Elf might decide that it sounds 'kewl' and try to pick it up too."

Joel rolled his eyes, then giggled. He grinned at Kai and said to Teri in a copy of the boy's accent, "You are right. We will!"

Kai giggled softly at hearing a Welsh-Vulcan-Hawaiian accent. "Okay ... Makuahine?"

Teri smiled, thankful that Kyle had given her an emergency language update. "Yes, you can call me 'mother', son ..... keikikane."

Kai smiled as he melted into Teri's side. Joel kissed the forehead of his new brother, then leaned up to kiss Teri's cheek before slipping out of her arms and rejoining his other brothers.

As he glanced around, Joel started laughing, for I-Cheya had sat himself down while Joel had been making Kai a member of the family. With the help of Mont and Bast, his armor had been removed. His back legs were splayed out and his large front paws were resting on the ground before him. He looked for all the world like a large, stuffed teddy bear... a teddy bear casually accepting hugs and 'randomly' picking out kids to strip and bathe. Or at least it *seemed* random, but Joel's expression told Cory it was not.

'What's he doing, Lil'elf?' Cory sent to Joel.

Joel smiled up at Cory, a hint of sadness in his face, *Those with the deepest pain, the most severely hurt... he is bathing them. He is breathing into them. He is washing their souls free of the pain, if only*

*for a moment. And in doing so, he takes the sting and the poison away. It's like the Sharing, my beloved big brother. And I must help him... be back later....'*

Joel ran over to his large cuddly friend and those whom I-Cheya nosed into his arms he spoke with briefly and then proceeded to start a Sharing; sometimes with one, sometimes with a larger group. His armor was soon removed so that more than a handful could touch his skin and be drawn in for those most painful memories.

Rafe was one of the last to get to I-Cheya, and for many reasons the most afraid of the large bear. The Sehlat knew why. He raised his muzzle and howl-huffed heavenward, and with another shower of sparkles, Blackie arrived with Mikey.

"Little one," the golden winged angel knelt and kissed the frightened five year old, "little one, you are safe with these two. Think of them as animal-angels; like me, only without wings. They will help you."

Rafe nodded timidly, but looked over at Joel who was currently surrounded by a group of ten Asian pre-teen girls; all of whom were crying hard at whatever was currently being Shared. "I... I wanna wait for 'im, Mr Angel," Rafe whispered. "I like 'im... if he comes wif me, I'll see the bear and wolf."

Joel, although crying with the girls who had been so disgustingly used back in their homeland, heard him and opened an eye to wink at Mikey.

"Then he'll be here soon. He's just helping the little girls first," Mikey smiled as he sat down with Rafe on his lap.

I-Cheya huffed contentedly and scooped up another child, a tiny girl this time, and started happy petting and fussing her... all the while his and Blackie's healing breath was washing over her.

Once the group around Joel had finished and gave him a last round of hugs and kisses, he came over and knelt down with Mikey. "You want me to take you to see them?" Joel asked.

Rafe nodded, "Uh huh. I'm scared of dem, but not with you. I like you, 'cos I know about your daddy and if he's nice, you are too."

Joel smiled and scooped the boy out of Mikey's arms, "Okay, come on, Rafey; let's go meet my two Guardians."

Joel moved to stand in the queue around I-Cheya, but found that his celebrity status opened a path to the front.

"Take him first, please, Joel," Julio whispered; "he needs it most."

Joel threw a look at Kyle and then nodded at Julio. He sent out down the link Kyle had given him that morning, *'Find out about Rafey, would you, Little Bear?'*

*'Already on it, bro. Julio and me's been comparin' notes. Rafey won't attach to any adult; Dad and Jace are gettin ready to head out to take care of his former caregivers. At least they will just as soon as Jace*

*finishes chewin me out for workin! Go with your plan; Julio says that it's better than what they've tried so far, and you might be able to do it where they couldn't.* Kyle responded.

As Joel sat down with the boy on his lap, I-Cheya pawed him and Rafe closer. Rafe stiffened. "He won't put his... he won't hurt me, will he? He's too big... You won't make me, will you?" he pleaded up at Joel.

Joel touched his nose to the child's. "Never, ever, will I or anyone make you do anything like that again. Never. This is I-Cheya, and he protects me. Same for Blackie," Joel murmured as the wolf pup edged closer. He then whispered to the boy in his arms, "If you breathe in deep, and let your mind wander a little, you might get a surprise."

Rafe looked into Joel's eyes for a minute, then took a deep breath. Joel prompted him to keep taking slow breaths until Rafe gasped. "I heard somethin'! I did, Da... Joel. I did!"

"So did I," Joel murmured with a smile. "That was Blackie. Look at the big Teddy and wait for a second, and..."

"I heard 'im too!" Rafe yelled with joy. "He said I'm his boy!"

Joel grinned and started hugging Rafe tighter.

Mikey grinned and blinked. Another shower of sparkles later and Kevin arrived. "You and Joel have to have a chat, Kev," Mikey grinned.

Kevin giggled and nodded as he ran and slid in beside Joel. "Hi Raphael, I'm Kevin, and I'm Joel's husband," he giggled to the boy.

Rafe looked up and blinked, "You knows me name?"

Joel laughed, "I told him. We talk in our heads."

Mikey watched, a soft smile on his lips, as little Rafe was cuddled between the two small boys and the two animals. After about five minutes, the expression on Joel and Kevin's faces seemed to shout out something. Mikey grinned and winked at the Sehlat.

I-Cheya sent a telling look at Cory. *Cory-Boy. You name Raphael-Boy my Boy's Boy. You must*

Kyle smiled, "So much for not working, but he's right, Cor. Timmy said you can this ONCE... and he shouted that out loud. Pauly wants a new cousin like right *now*. Rafe's name is Raphael Leroy Davis." Kyle paused as the smile fell from his face. "And he's been through what I went through," he finished with a whisper.

Cory nodded as he stood up, listening as Kyle prompted him with information he needed while talking. "Due to violations of Local, State, Federal, Planetary and Federation Laws in addition to specific violations of the Safe Haven Act which shall be entered by the Family Archivist; as given to me by the State of Iowa Articles of Safe Haven and Article 200 of the Federation Safe Haven Act, I hereby exorcise my power as Patriarch of Clan Short and as of this moment nullify any claims of the former caregivers of

Raphael Leroy Davis and release them for trial under Vulcan Justice. By Mandate of a Power Higher than myself; I hereby name Joel Short and Kevin Thompson as the caregivers and parents of Raphael Leroy Short-Thompson. This placement is permanent and non-revocable by any Power on Earth."

"Does... are you my..." Rafe started to ask, looking between Joel and Kevin rapidly.

Joel giggled, "I heard that 'Da...' you nearly called me, Rafey."

Kevin nodded, "Yes, Rafe. We're your daddies."

Rafe beamed a smile from ear to ear. "Does that ALSO mean that HE is my Grandpop? Captain..." he couldn't finish, he was that excited.

"Yep," Sean laughed from next to Cory. "Dad's your grandpop!"

Joel got up quickly and looked at Mikey. "Get going, you three," Mikey giggled at the unspoken question. "Brant, I gather you're staying with Blackie and I-Cheya until they are finished?"

Brandar nodded happily, then stated, "Joel, I'll see you later. I'm going to help out here for a while."

After a quick hug from Brant, Joel, Kev, and Rafe made a quick round to say goodbye to their family. They saved Teri for last, all three getting a long hug from her.

After Teri had finished hugging her newest grandson; Joel took the boy back into his arms. He and Kevin vanished with their son in a shower of golden sparkles, leaving behind a ghostly echo of Joel saying to his brothers, "No MORE work, guys... have fun..."

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### **Short Residence, Des Moines:**

Teri smiled as she watched her family climb out of the VIP Tram that brought them to their house. The ride had actually been quite nice, despite the fact that the Tram was being pulled by an oversize go-kart being driven by a nine-year-old. On the trip, Julio had explained that one of the first things that had been done by the adult residents was to ban road-legal vehicles inside the Compound. Transportation was limited to go-carts, mini-bikes, and ATVs. For large groups, a Tram service was available 24/7; when VIPs were on-site, a special set of Trams was brought into service and placed on constant standby, with volunteer drivers playing video games and watching cartoons while waiting for a call.

The driver of the cart got her attention as he tapped her arm. "Mrs. Short? There's a button just inside your door. If anyone needs a ride, hit it and one of us'll be right over."

"Thank you, Benny; tell your Mom to feel free to come over and catch up on things. And yes, you can come along too." Teri replied.

"Okay, Mrs. Short!" Benny replied. "I gotta go; my shift is about over, then I can go tell Mom and Dad about being the first kid to give Patriarch Cory a ride!"

Teri laughed as Benny spun around and leaped back into the go-kart. Surprisingly, his enthusiasm did not affect his driving ability; the Tram pulled away smoothly and seemed to be staying within the posted limits.

She turned back to see her family gathered in front of a sign, Kai perched happily on Mont's shoulders. As she joined the boys, she realized that it was no normal sign; it was a brass historic marker embedded in a very large single slab of green marble.

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"Iowa Department of History  
Registered Historic Site"

"The building in front of you was the first residence and first Headquarters of Clan Short of Vulcan. On August Thirty-First, Two Thousand and Four, Cory and Sean Short were given the power by Patriarch Sarek of the Family of Sarek of the House of Surak of Vulcan to reach out across the Universe and continue the acts of goodwill towards abused youth that they began here in Iowa. Five days earlier, the Federation had granted Teri Short unprecedented powers to provide for the safety of youth as Director of Federation Youth Services."

"On September Twenty-Third, Two Thousand and Four, the Iowa House and Senate drafted and passed unanimously a Iowa Constitutional Amendment declaring this property as protected; this was signed into law immediately by the Governor after a seventy percent unanimous approval was reached via on-line voting. Upon formation of the Des Moines Compound on the Eighth of October, Two Thousand and Four, custodianship and preservation responsibilities were granted to the Des Moines Division of Clan Short until such time as they no longer occupy this location."

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"Des Moines Division?" Cory asked, his head tilted towards Kyle.

"Not officially, bro; but Justy has had them help on a few rescues." Kyle replied. "I asked him the same thing the first time I heard it. None of them are really trained like our guys, so Justy ordered them to stay put during the attack."

Cory nodded. "We're gonna fix that while we're here. There are NO lesser members of Clan Short, and none of my sworn brothers are to have lesser rights or training than the ones at Headquarters."

"I'll make the calls to get Starfleet Trainers down here as soon as you give the word, bro." JJ added. "We know a lot of these guys here; it's not gonna be any work making sure the right guys are in the right spots."

Sean nodded. "From what Julio was sayin', most of our class in school took the lead out here since they had the best idea how Cor and me do stuff. We just need to find out what they're missin' and fill in the blanks."

Adam glanced over to see Tyler 'lost in thought'. "I think one of our walking libraries is doing the legwork now!" he giggled as he pointed at Ty.

Ty grinned as he opened his eyes. "You try doing a full language dump to eight hundred and sixty-seven people at once and see if it doesn't distract you for a few seconds!"

"And how did you slip *that* one by Levi and his trained spies, little bro?" Adam giggled as he picked up Ty and sat him on his shoulders.

"You don't think Kyle and I taught our kids *everything*, do you?" Tyler giggled back.

*'But then, I didn't tell YOU everything either, Mr. Tyler Short Who Is Now Busted,'* the Doctor's voice giggled in all their heads.

*'But you know we are finishing a fixed point, so you ain't gonna tattle.'* Tyler sent back, ensuring that all who heard the Doctor heard his reply.

"And if you DO tattle, I've got a whole bunch of corners in this house that are feeling lonely!" Teri added out loud with a grin, knowing she'd be heard.

*'Fixed point? Has Joel been busy again?' the Doctor giggled. 'And Aunt Teri? When I do something wrong, then I bow. When I act as agreed upon when you guys, including you, young lady, say you're gonna rest, the corners can go jump... so nerrr!'*

"Fixed Point. Clan Short must be fully represented in the location of their founding for their influence on the Universe to remain stable. Run the Lines, Doc; I did when I was testing out my new powers and it ain't pretty." Kyle replied seriously. "Even with these people here doing nothing about the attack, we lost in every instance where there was no evidence of them re-forming here. It's like they are the Anchor for the Nexus."

"Don't forget, Grandpa," Teri added with a chuckle in her voice, "sometimes working at your leisure with friends is more relaxing than sitting by a pool reading a book. The only requirement is that it's done in moderation, something I am going to ensure these little rats learn!"

*'I know, Kyle. I do know how to tease, you know. 'When a billion years old you reach, will you play just as much?','* he misquoted with a chuckle. Then, *'Rats? Better leash the Lions quick, Teri... they might get hungry... and now, I better get going. I don't think I want an angry Mont and Bast trying to find me now, do I?'*

"Ma, are my brothers all this nuts?" Kai giggled from his perch on Mont.

"Sometimes they're worse!" Teri chuckled as she looked over at the cats and Kai. Her chuckle turned into full laughter when she saw the cats looking at their charges while licking their lips, their eyes giving away the fact that they were having fun. Once she caught her breath, she commented. "You'll need lots of salt and pepper for this group, guys!"

"MOM!" Cory, Sean, Tyler, Kyle, JJ, and Adam exclaimed in unison.

Teri laughed, and began herding her tribe towards the front door. Cory was the first one to the door, and reached into his pocket for the keys that had been given to him before they left Orlando.

"Do you remember which key it is?" Sean asked.

"I think so." Cory replied automatically with a grin.

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**//The Circle is Complete. The Nexus is now whole. The Next Chapter Now Begins...//**

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Watch for more "CSV-DSM" coming soon to the Cafe .... the first look at how 'Our Boys' spend their "time off" bringing their friends into the New World!

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### **Author's Notes:**

It's that time again; the second part of Memories draws to a close and work begins on the next stage of the odyssey that started with one simple key. After six and one-half years, I still do not tire of the twists and new ideas which come to me regularly regarding this series.

First of all, thank you to each and every one of the readers out there. Those of you who have told me how Memories has affected you have brightened my day on more than one occasion.

Secondly, thank-you to the family of authors that has grown around Memories and turned a simple story into its own Universe. Along the way, I have gained brothers (and more) that have turned my life into something I never dreamed of.

I can't forget to thank the group of munchkins who took up residence in my head back in October of 2002. No matter what, they always manage to let me know what is next; right when I decide there is no way that what I just wrote can work. I've known the ending of this series since shortly after it started; yet even now not all of the pieces are in place for it to be used.

If you read the note above my notes, you'll see that this new story has sprung from what was supposed to be a short epilogue. The story begins by covering the weekend getaway of Teri and her sons; where it will go from there I have no idea. All I can say for sure is that it is not Part Three of Memories; that saga still waits in the wings for the events to happen that make it possible.

Most of all, I want to thank Danny for sharing a portion of his all-too-short life with me. You were an angel as a boy, and you've earned your wings. I miss you little buddy, you were a light to every person who ever met you.

Until the next time;

AC

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**Clan Patriarch Notes:**

Hey Y'all!

Cory here, as if you didn't know! (Sorry Kyle, I was here first, you came in later!) I just wanted to say thanks for all of you hangin' around to read our story. Uncle AC has been really kewl about lettin' us tell the story as it happened without him puttin' in a bunch of extra stuff.

We miss Danny too; Uncle AC visited him after we invaded his head, and we all got to see what a great guy he was. All of us feel for Uncle AC when he remembers the fun stuff they used to do like water-parks, radio controlled toys, and games of tag with Danny and his friends.

Wait until you see what we got goin' for you in the new story and in Part Three. We got a whole bunch of things planned that you're gonna love! I can't say much yet, but I'll tell you that once Uncle Ilu finishes up the story of Sa'ren you'll see what we got planned.

I gotta go, Tommy's made cookies and I need to get some before Joel finds them!

Later!

Cory

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**Darryl's Notes:**

I just finished going through this first chapter of what was supposed to be an epilogue, and I must say I am very impressed. I am going to really enjoy the next little piece in the ongoing saga as well, I am sure. As has been said by almost everyone that I have talked to about this story and its associated stories, it is beyond amazing that the diverse combination of authors, editors and in some cases, readers, could combine their talents in the way they have done to make this such a magnificent outpouring of inspiration to us all.

When I first started chatting with AC. I didn't realize what kind of spectacle he had started. We became friends, and I really enjoyed getting to know him. As I said, when we first met on an IRC chat, I didn't know anything about Memories. I had been reading online stories for some time, but I hadn't read his story yet. It was actually my interest in Jeff P's story, Sentenced To Life, that actually led me to read Memories. And the rest, as they say, is history. So, I have to thank Jeff P and Akeentia for giving me the nudge to begin reading AC's work, which, of course, lead me to all the other wonderful connected stories. I sure am glad I went with the flow. Thanks to all of you, and don't stop now!

Darryl AKA The Radio Rancher AKA Sleeping Beauty

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**Jeff P.'s Notes**

The end of part 2... Now I really wanna say that I am both shocked and amazed that it has come so far, I really do. Fact is, I'm really not. No joke. Back when I first started reading part 1, I knew the universe that ACFan created had endless possibilities and unless he simply decided to retire the series, his "kids" would continue to lead him and the rest of us through situations we could never have imagined. (You know, without needing to seek out a good psychologist afterward. Hahaha!) It's been a lot of fun, we've all lost a ton of sleep and each and every CSU author to follow in his footsteps somehow willingly lost a piece of themselves to a universe that spawned from one single dream. Not that I can see a downside in that or anything.

It's funny how so much can happen, and how much time has passed since I had been introduced to ACFan's work originally. Heh, I still have the first email he ever sent me after meeting him through our mutual friend and author Gary Q. "...Let me know what you think of my pet project - "Memories". I'm always looking for input; and like Gary, what started out as a short story has turned into a novel!" Long story short; I liked it so much, I let the kids in my second story pack up and move over to the universe "Clan Short" calls home. Had I known then how many authors and characters would follow that same path in the years to follow, I would have accused ACFan of spiking the complimentary punch he used to hand out with each chapter ;)

So, here's to almost 7 years of Memories! I can't wait to see what the future has to bring!

\*HUGZ\*

Jeff P. & the entire cast of characters from "Sentenced to Life"

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**Clan Short Archivist's Notes:**

First of all I would like to thank AC for turning a simple dream into the wonderful saga that we know as "Memories" Parts One and Two and for all of the tie-in stories that have resulted. I started editing for AC because he couldn't remember how to spell Teri and he kept reusing the same "Safe Haven Act" articles for different things. One thing led to another and I became first the Ghost Editor and then the Official Editor as well as eventually Clan Short Archivist and writer of the "Safe Haven Act". The Safe Haven Act, as is "Memories", is a living and breathing entity with its ideal now taking shape in the 'Real World'! We need to ensure that all states and nations enact some sort of "Safe Haven Act" to protect all of the worlds children.

ACFan, thanks again for letting me come along on this wonderful roller coaster ride. I would also like to thank all of the authors, editors and support staff that have helped in the creation of The Clan Short Universe. Your help and creativity have helped turn a simple dream into a wonderful epic saga far more than AC or any of us could have ever dreamed!

TSL

## Chapter Two

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"Brownies!" Cory exclaimed as they walked through the door. Both him and Sean ran towards the kitchen counter, to find a large tray of brownies sitting in the center, cooled to just the right temperature for eating. On the edge of the tray was a note:

"To the best big brothers a kid can have:"

"I had Levi get Mom's recipe for brownies, and I made this batch up just for you guys. Thanks for bein' my kin, and enjoy your vacation."

"Love, Tommy"

Kyle ran over but skidded to a stop as he got to his brothers. "COOKIES!" he crowed, pointing to the other counter top.

Tyler reached them first and grabbed the note. He started giggling as he read it. "Well, no surprises, guys. Guess who?" he giggled.

"Elf!" Cory and Sean giggled in unison.

Tyler nodded as he read aloud, "Shal ashau tu, k'diwa sa-kai'am. Lil'elf."

Kai looked up at Teri, "What's that mean?"

She smiled, "It's from Joel. 'I love you, beloved brothers' is what it means."

Teri walked over to Kyle. "Tell me, little angel, why does all of this seem familiar?"

"I dunno, but I have a sudden urge for a shoulder ride from Sean!" Kyle giggled.

"If I start finding notes in cereal I quit!" Tyler giggled as he cuddled against Kyle.

"All right," Teri said laughing, "but if we go out for a meal, promise me no more than two rescued kids at a time!"

"Okay, rescue kids in pairs, got it Mom!" Sean replied as he ran to the other side of the counter.

"We usually rescue them first, then let them pair off!" Adam said with a laugh.

"It's not like *you* waited, son; I seem to remember you and JJ hooking up before you even had clothes on!" Teri replied with a grin.

"Moom!" Adam whined, blushing to the roots of his hair.

JJ giggled and winked at his boyfriend as Kai giggled. "I got a chrome bro, mon!" Kai commented to no-one in particular.

"You're not freaked?" Adam asked, suddenly worried about his newest brother's reaction.

"No bruv; Ky filled me in, an' T's givin me the languages now." Kai replied with a smile. "You're here, ain't no matter what color your blood is, bruv."

As Adam contemplated the response, Kai walked over and wrapped his arms around Adam. "Bruv, you need to let the Man Upstairs worry about the big stuff; you just worry 'bout livin'."

Adam returned the hug, noticing quite plainly that Kai stiffened for a split second before accepting the hug. *'Don't worry bro; as long as you're not an adult he'll be okay with hugs.'* Tyler's voice sounded in Adam's head, *'Right now the only adult who he trusts to hug him is Mom; since he's never been hurt by a kid he's okay with kid hugs. He jumped because you are bigger than him, he kinda had to remind himself that you're not a grown-up.'*

*'What has he been through?'* Adam thought, sure that his little brother was listening in.

*'He'll tell you when he's ready.'* Ty replied. *'It's not my place to share his demons since he's now safe.'*

*'I heard the laundry list that our Lil' Elf read off; how can we help him recover from it if we don't know what happened?'* Adam replied.

*'Be his big brother, just like you're my big brother.'* was Tyler's answer, the tone making it clear that his decision was final.

Adam looked down to see Kai looking up at him. "You head-talkin bruv?"

Adam smiled as he nodded. "Yes, little brother. I was worried about you. The Brain Leech Patrol has decided that it's up to you to tell us everything once you're ready; they won't even give us hints."

Kai smiled. "Promise made is promise kept. I'm goin' to like it here."

Cory giggled from over by the counter, where him, Sean, Bast, and Mont had just divided the brownies and poured glasses of milk. "C'mon guys, before they get cold!"

The thought of food distracted everyone and they rushed to grab seats. Even Kyle and Tyler, who no longer 'needed' to eat, quickly dived into their plate of brownies.

"Save room for the pizza, guys!" Teri chuckled as she watched the boys try to set a new brownie vanishing record.

"Yes Mom!" the boys and cats replied through mouths full of brownies.

Once the brownies were gone, Sean looked around. "Hey Kyle, how'd all our stuff get back here?"

Kyle smiled. "Remember Starfleet transported everything out? Justy had them go into their buffers, and put copies back as soon as you left. Levi, Bryce, and Dylan came over and made sure everything matched your memories just before we came back today."

Sean nodded. "Tell them thanks, they did a great job. Wanna go chill in the Rec Room?"

"Okay." the rest of the guys chorused, as the ones who knew their way headed out of the kitchen. Cory grabbed the tray of cookies along the way, bringing it with him for them to snack on.

A few minutes later, Teri had finished taking stock of the kitchen cupboards, and was about to go out to restock them for the weekend. She walked into the Rec room and stopped with a smile when she saw her boys. As always, Sean and Cory were in the center of the group piled onto the love seat. To their left, Adam and JJ were squeezed in, each with his little brother on his lap. To their right, Mont and Bast were comfortable in their natural state, teaching Kai the joys of Cat-Boy cuddles. They had "The Never-Ending Story" playing on the screen in front of them as they all finally let go and began to relax.

"Guys, I'm heading to the store to get a few things. Any requests?" Teri asked.

"Catnip and some fresh roasts!" Mont and Bast responded.

"Mint chocolate chip ice cream!" Cory added, Sean nodding his approval.

"Could you get some graham crackers and fudge icing Mom?" Tyler and Kyle chorused.

"That sounds good!" JJ and Adam agreed, both giving the little brother on their lap a squeeze.

Kai brightened up for a second, then muttered "Never mind."

Teri walked over and gave her newest son a loving squeeze on the shoulder. "Kai, when it comes to food anything you want just ask for it. If I can't get it here, I'll find a way to get it for you. If I don't know how to make it, I'll ask your little brother to find out for me. Ty likes to cook, so learning something new will be fun for both of us."

Kai nodded. "The store ain't gonna have stuff to make Kulolo, so I'm just gonna miss it. Do you think they'll have any pineapples?"

Teri glanced at Ty, his grin telling her that he was working on finding his new brother's favorite dish. "They usually have pineapples here; if not I can get Starfleet to get some for me."

"Don't worry about it Mom; I gotta go to the islands to get a few things!" Tyler giggled. "I *know* that the stores here ain't got what I need! I'll just hit a couple of pineapple trees while I'm there!"

"Don't hit them too hard bro; I'm pretty sure you can still bruise things!" Adam chuckled as he gave Ty a squeeze.

Tyler rolled his eyes as he giggled. "You know what I meant, goofball! Keep my spot, I'll be back in a second!"

He popped out, and a few seconds later was back with a basket on his lap. "I even got REAL brown sugar!" Ty exclaimed. "This ain't the fake stuff, you know, white sugar soaked in molasses. This is real brown sugar straight from the sugar cane; I got to watch them make it for us!"

"Y'all gonna just stare at the fixin's or ya' gonna let me an' Ty cook 'em?" Tommy asked as he walked in from the kitchen.

"Tommy! How and when .. and why .. did you get here?" Teri exclaimed as she turned around in surprise.

"Ty got me to help make our new kin's favor't food!" Tommy giggled. "Sorry Maw, but I hadda get the oven heatin."

Teri pulled Tommy over into a hug. "I should have figured as much; I couldn't see you passing up a chance to learn something new while welcoming a new brother. Come on, I'll introduce you."

Tommy grinned as he broke the hug and quickly made his way to the side of the loveseat. He then vaulted over the arm of it and landed squarely on Bast's lap. Tommy grinned at Kai, "Hey little bro; I'm Tommy. Our big bros been doin ya right?"

Kai looked over at Tommy in shock, unsure as to how he should respond. Teri chuckled as she moved off to the side of the loveseat. "Kai, this is your brother Tommy; as you can tell, he's the shy one of the family!"

"If he's shy, I'm a dog!" Bast muttered with a grin as he poked at Tommy's ribs.

"Woof woof!" Sean giggled.

"We know Sean; but you and Cory need to keep that to yourselves." Mont replied with a toothy grin which grew into a full smile when both Cory and Sean blushed deep red. "Open mouth, insert foot!" Mont giggled.

"Well, insert something," Kyle muttered just loud enough for everyone to hear. His pure, innocent grin was classic as he turned to look at his older brothers.

Kai laughed as he watched the interplay between his new family. "Hi Tm'y. You really making Kulo-lo?"

Tommy nodded as he carefully pulled Kai into a one-armed hug. "You better b'lieve it bro; I like makin' my bros happy by cookin' up their fav'rite vittles. We's about to be gettin' an'thur treat too; onea the 'gators down home broke some rules an' Allie sentenc'd him to Gumbo."

"How's Timmy taking that?" Cory asked seriously as he cuddled the now-quiet Kyle who he had pulled onto his lap.

"Timmy was gonna fry 'im on the spot; but Allie said notta waste food." Tommy replied.

Cory gave a low whistle. "That's not good; what did this gator do?"

Kyle looked up at Cory. "Dylan says he'll answer the questions in a few minutes, bro."

Cory nodded, then happened to look into Kyle's eyes. "There's something bugging you lil' bro; what's up?"

Kyle shrugged. "I dunno. I feel like I'm supposed to be doin' something, but Time is all messed up so I can't see what."

Kai glanced over at them, then commented "Ky' don't look good; does he need a doctor?"

"Yes, Child of Wind and Water and the Sea," came a voice as the Doctor folded out of the wall.

"Uhane hele!" Kai exclaimed in awe.

The Doctor bowed to Kai. "I am 'The Wanderer Without a Home', so that name fits as well as any I've heard. Welcome to the Family, Ka'imi Ka'aukai Makaokalani."

Kai carefully tried to phrase his response so that his new family would understand. "Traveling Spirit, what event ... blesses us with the honor of your visit?"

The Doctor giggled as he opened his arms to Kai. "I'm one of the Family, youngling. You can call me Galli like your bozo brothers, if you'd like."

Kai shuffled over hesitantly and was pulled into the smaller boy's arms.

The Doctor said, "I'm a Time Lord. I'm something similar to our Mikyvis brothers; it's just I do things a slightly different way." He looked at Kyle, "And I'm here to help out the Prince of the Mikyvis."

Kai nodded, not speaking as he absorbed this latest intrusion on his perception of reality.

"King Kyle, the Court Jester has arrived." Mont giggled.

The Doctor whispered to Kai, "Watch this, youngling." Kai turned and saw the Doctor raise his hand and point a finger at the now startled looking lion. "You need a shave, I think..."

"Wha...?" Mont's hand flew to his neck. His mane had vanished, and he had shrunk down by 60% of his body mass. "No fair! I don't wanna be five!!!"

"But you are such a cute little kitten-boy!" Sean giggled.

Mont glared around at the laughing group, then he bore his eyes into the Doctor. "Change me back!" he piped at him, his voice squeaking. "I still have claws and I'll take your kneecaps out!"

"I dunno. Hey, Kyle; he called you King. I'm just a 'jester'. What do you think? Keep the new cuddle toy?" the Doctor asked with a grin.

Kyle shook his head as he reached over and scratched Mont's ears. "It's not fair to him to prank him in a way he can't prank back. He's one of my brothers, and if I said yes I'd be hurting my brother. I can't do that."

Tyler nodded his agreement. "We've told our kids not to do stuff like that, so we can't be involved in it either. If you make the rules you gotta follow them too."

<I have just relayed your statements to Tyne. He is pleased that you are taking the responsibility for your species seriously.> Ark announced in both Kyle and Tyler's subvocals.

"Thanks Ark." Both boys replied, inwardly proud that Tyne approved of their decisions.

The Doctor giggled as he gestured again at Mont, and another beam of light made him grow back to normal age. "Well, at least you got to be a kid again, Mont," the Doctor grinned at him. "A lot of adults would kill for that chance."

Sean was looking at Kyle and Tyler and sighed in relief. "That's great news, guys. No more stops at the mid-Atlantic!"

"That's not a prank; it's a request from Timmy to have Poppa bring home more pets!" Tyler giggled.

"Besides, you can send us swimming too - all you have to do is ask one of us to help, and we'll even take you so you can drop someone else in the Atlantic." Kyle replied. "That's fair, because you can pay it back. Time stuff you can't pay back, so it's not a fair prank."

"Technically, you could ask another Time Controller to get them back for you, so..." the Doctor shrugged as he released Kai from the hug. "Anyhoo... Kyle. There's something that needs doing. And only you can. And you must go soon."

Kyle nodded. "I was practicing my time indexing, and saw that there's a time loop, but I can't see what it is to finish it."

The Doctor nodded seriously. "We need to 'Return to Oz', Kyle. Kano needs you, and I need to help. You'll know what to do when we get there, but once done, I'll step in and make it so that no-one knows until you release it. Once we've finished, we'll hop to the present in Australia. I'll be phased all the while, so until we return here, only you will see me."

"Okay, let's go." Kyle replied, obviously not happy at being limited in his abilities.

"Hey, I'm in the same boat by mid morning Monday, kiddo. Everything between now and then only becomes certain once it happens. It can still change, which for me is hell - it's my past!" the Doctor giggled as he walked over towards the glowering Mont. "Stop that, puss! You know why I did it! Fancy getting the Tardis to do that to me and Jay WHILE we're making love!"

Even through the fur, the others knew that Mont had started to blush. "Oh... yeah, that..."

As the rest of the family giggled, Kyle and the Doctor disappeared from the room. "Just *what* did you do?" Bast asked his blushing partner.



"Had the Tardis make them both into girls... while they were in the middle of..." he trailed off quietly.

"Now *THAT* is *EVIL!*" Teri chuckled as she heard her family unanimously exclaim 'Ewww...!'. "You're definitely earning the name 'Short!'"

Bast glanced at his brother and decided to have some fun, "You're just lucky he only shrank you. Mind you, your mane don't seem so long... you better check."

Mont's eyes went wide, and he pulled his robe up quickly. His breath whooshed out with a relieved sigh, "Nope. It's all still there!"

"You are all crazy!" Kai giggled as he reclaimed his seat on Mont's lap.

"You noticed already?" Teri chuckled. Just then, the doorbell rang, so she went to see who was there.

Teri opened the door, and found a familiar man in his late thirties standing there.

"Mrs. Short?" The man said, obviously unsure of what he was doing.

"Yes, I'm Teri Short." Teri replied, still trying to place a name with the face.

"I know this sounds unbelievable, but I swear it's the truth. Some kid with purple hair and purple eyes appeared on my desk about fifteen minutes ago and told me I had to come to this address because of my kids. Before I could ask anything, he added to say Dylan sent me, then he disappeared. I thought I was seeing things, until I looked down and found a cookie sitting on top of my coffee cup that was not there before."

Teri nodded with a knowing smile. "That sounds like my grandson. I didn't get your name."

"Bruce Collins. You don't look old enough to have a grandson his age."

"Thanks," Teri replied as she realized where she knew him from. "Come on in, I'll send for Dylan and we can sort this out."

Bruce followed Teri into the house, the expression on his face giving away the fact that he too had recognized Teri. He came to a halt, however, when he reached the Rec Room doorway and spotted the two cat-boys sitting on the loveseat.

"Guys, we have company." Teri announced. "Ty, could you please tell Dylan his visitor has arrived and is totally confused?"

"He'll be here in a minute Mom; I-Cheya is inspecting the 'gator meat before he can leave." Tyler replied with a grin.

Before anyone could respond, Dylan appeared with a cooler topped with two kids. One was a boy about nine years old, and the other was a girl about five. "DADDY!" both kids exclaimed as they launched themselves from the cooler towards Bruce.

Teri walked over and picked up Dylan. "Okay little man, would you like to fill us in?" she asked as she shifted him to her hip.

Dylan nodded. "Bruce don' need to hear this yet, I blocked him an' the kids hearin us. Casey and Tina's mom brought them into onea the wild areas in the back of the Compound. Ark caught her doin it and told us, so me and Uncle Gabe went out there. When we got there she had just pushed the kids in with a 'gator. Uncle Gabe took care of her, and I got the kids out from the gator who was attacking them and trying to eat them. The gator knew he wasn't 'posed to hurt kids, but he thought that since he was back in the corner nobody'd catch him. Uncle Gabe had me lock the gator so that he couldn't run away, then he called Timmy and Allie while I was healin the kids. I looked into their Mom's head an' found out she was doin sex stuff with them but had lost a court battle over custody, so she was killin them so Bruce wouldn't find out. Uncle Gabe took care of her, an' I told Bruce to come here. When I got back, the Bear was pickin out gator meat to bring to Tommy to cook for you."

Teri glanced at Tyler. "What?" she asked as she noticed his giggles.

"Bruce's okay for the kids, Mom, and he remembers you too! I can't believe you did that under the bleachers during homecoming though!" Tyler replied through his giggles.

"TYLER!" Teri exclaimed as she began to blush.

"I can't help it! He keeps thinkin' about it over and over!" Tyler giggled.

"We just *kissed* guys; get your minds out of the gutter!" Teri exclaimed as the boys made various faces.

"Ewwwwwww...." Cory giggled as he rolled his eyes. "Parents ain't supposed to do sex stuff!"

"I'm sure you have a few sons who wish that was true." Teri shot back; pulling Cory into a snuggle at the same time just to show that it was all in fun.

"Besides," Sean said, his face scrunching in distaste, "if Mom and Dad didn't, I'd not be here for us to make OUR kids go 'ewwww!', love."

Teri shook her head. "You better watch it; or I'll convince Levi that you guys need to see how you were made!"

As most of the boys made faces which suggested they were about to lose their snacks, Teri turned back to Dylan. "I'm sure you've got orders on how to proceed with Bruce and his kids; you want to fill me in?"

Dylan nodded. "It's easy; Uncle Justy already overrode the courts to make sure no one messed with Bruce. You just gotta let him know his kids are his again and he's covered by the Clan now."

"Okay, I can handle that. You going to turn their ears back on?" Teri replied as she took the chance to snuggle one of her newest grandsons.

"I slowed time, so they ain't gonna know they missed nothin'." Dylan giggled. "We're goin back to real time ... now."

Just as everyone turned to see how the reunion was going, Casey leaned back and started telling his Dad about their latest adventure. "Mom was mad and tried to feed us to a big ole' allygator. Dylan popped outta the air, and made the allygator glow funny and then made Mom into a statue! This big kid named Gabe was mad about what Mom did I think; he said a buncha stuff about some Safe Haven Act thing, then a red glow came outta his hand and Mom turned into a pile of ashes. Dylan is really kewl - he made his hands glow and then touched all of the places where the allygator hurt us; every time he touched one it just vanished! Then this little Indian kid named Timmy popped up next to us riding another allygator; he was even wearin' warpaint! Him an his allygator, he calls her Allie, argued about somethin for a few minutes, then Dylan grunted a couple a times and they agreed with him. Dylan stopped makin' the bad allygator glow, then a funny green glow came outta Timmy's hands, and the bad allygator stopped movin." Casey paused to take a breath, then continued. "I hadda pee, so I went and peed on Mom's ashes since she was so nasty to me an' Sis, then we all popped onto this BIG soccer field by a buncha BIG houses! There was a big bear there with teeth bigger than my hand wearing armor. We got to ride on him, then him and a wolf wrestled with us. Then we got to watch the bear pick out the allygator meat that Dylan says we're havin for dinner tonight, and we came over here cuz' Dylan says we get to live with you now!"

Bruce tilted his head at his son. "Are you sure you're not exaggerating that a little bit?"

Before Casey could reply, Teri answered for him. "I'm sure that's just the believable parts. Be glad he didn't try to explain the weird events. From experience, I'd say it was quite accurate."

Bruce gave his old friend a double take. "Oh, come on, Teri. A bear with teeth as big as his hand? Red glows? He's got a brilliant imagination, but..."

"It happened, Daddy!" Casey said, a small pout forming on his face.

A 'Huff, huff, huff' sounded from behind Bruce.

He turned to find a large teddybear sitting behind him.

He turned back. "Umm..."

"Hi Eyhheya!" Tina giggled as she waved at the Sehlat.

Casey scampered over and held his hand against one of I-Cheya's teeth. "See - I TOLD ya they were bigger!"

I-Cheya licked Casey's face soundly, then ambled over and did the same to Tina. He then turned and raised up on his hind legs so that he was standing a few inches taller than Bruce.

*Believe.*

He then vanished.

Two minutes later, Bruce awoke to see his kids wrestling with the G-Cats while Dylan sat giggling on his chest. "I just had the weirdest dream..." Bruce started to say before Dylan held up his hand.

"Bruce, among other things, I'm a telepath. Would you be okay with me helping you understand this stuff in your head?"

Bruce nodded. "You brought me my kids; if I can't trust you after than I can't trust anyone."

"Thanks!" Dylan grinned as he began updating Bruce; taking the time to answer questions mentally as he made sure Bruce understood the wonders of Clan life.

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Cory glanced out the window, where he could see Tommy, Kai, Mont, Bast, Casey, and Tina in a spirited game of Tag. He turned back to the table, and looked around at the group gathered there. Sean, Kyle, Tyler, JJ and Adam were seated at one end, all but Sean unaware of exactly what was to be discussed. Also at the table were Skylan, Cody, Kane, and Kane's 'boyfriend' Damon; the four of which had come back with Kyle from his trip with the Doctor. Cory glanced to where the Doctor was standing and motioned for him to take the last seat.

Once the Doctor was seated, Cory began. "Sky, I really didn't want this to be the way you guys came over to visit us. Finding out that those bastards almost killed Kano and Damon during the attack is bad enough; now Kyle is telling us that he had to go back and make them Mikyvis? That's not something you can hide, and they sure weren't Mikyvis at our wedding."

The Doctor held up his hand to get Cory's attention. "There are some things that you are not aware of, Cory. They *were* Mikyvis at your wedding, but they were under a Lock that even King Kyle could not see through. If I had not done that, there would have been a paradox: Kyle was becoming a Mikyvis about the same time that they needed to be saved. In Kane's case, this was needed anyway; his natural genetic patterns, combined with his not-yet-controlled mimicking of the psy skills of others around him, created a unique situation. Kyle had already begun his transformation when he visited Sky and his brothers; his mind was the first part of him to start changing. Since the Mikyvis are one of many possibilities of what Humanity can evolve into, the combination of Kane's natural abilities and Kane's genetics allowed Kyle to unknowingly trigger the beginnings of Kane's transformation. The problem lies in the fact that Kane had already started as well; and Kane was headed down the same path that Kyle had been on before Tyne stepped in to help. Kane would have slowly gone insane due to not having the exact genetic makeup and instruction to take control of his natural transformation, and it was advanced far enough that there would be irreparable damage if anyone tried to reverse it. With what happened with Kane imprinting from the already changing Kyle, the only viable alternative was for Kyle and I to go back in time, complete Kane as a Mikyvis, and then for me to Lock him down and out until this moment. After going back to last Saturday, we came forward to the present and brought them here to be released."

Cory tilted his head. "I'm glad that all made sense to you, because the only thing I got out of it was that Kano needed saved."

Sean smiled and patted Cory's head with a giggle. "Don't worry about it Babe; no need to burn out those cute blond roots trying to understand the insane brother in the family."

"You tickle his ribs, I'll do his feet," the Doctor said seriously to Cory before moving towards Sean.

"Dude! Sean's feet could kill Jack!" Cory giggled, returning Sean's earlier grin.

"Really?" the Doctor queried, looking impressed. He reached into a pocket and brought out his sonic screwdriver, grabbed one of Sean's sneakers and pulled it off before scanning, causing Sean to collapse in gales of laughter in the process. "Wow, you're right! Hey Dad! We have the solution to your problem when you're ready!"

A quiet reply from the Doctor's wristwatch came suddenly, "Try it, Galli, and I'll never let you..."

"Jay! There are kids present in that room!"

"Daddy! They've done more than I and Galli have!"

"Maybe, but not as bloody often! Doc? I'm wondering if your next life will be an infant..."

The Doctor sniggered as he decided that tickles weren't as much fun as cuddles. He plonked himself on Sean's lap, "Hugs, big bro! Then kisses later to say sorry for calling the Mad Doctor insane..."

Sky shook his head with a grin. "I'm glad I was born in the *sane* side of the family! You want to get back to the topic, Cuz?"

"I could change that..." the Doctor murmured with a wink.

Cory grinned as he stuck out his tongue at Sky. "I hear ya... remember, I've seen you in action! You're just as crazy as I am, I think it's a family trait!"

"You can say that again..." Cody muttered, grinning as Sky lightly elbowed him in the ribs. "What? It's the truth!"

"Tell me again, Jay, why we joined this crazy family?" the Doctor giggled as Sean snuggled him tightly.

"They give good hugs!" came the laughing response.

Cory shook his head. "Okay; I know that you guys already took the time to train our latest Mikyvis additions; Kyle told me that much once y'all got back. There's something we really need to talk about though. Nobody's in trouble; but if I don't say something, I'm afraid that there could be problems in the future."

Cory checked to make sure he had everyone's attention, then continued. "I'm gonna use something recent as an example; don't think I'm making a big deal out of just one thing. Kyle? Ty? Why did you guys have to heal Kai as soon as you met him at the gate when we arrived?"

"He was hurt!" both boys responded defensively.

"Calm down bros; remember, it's an example." Cory said softly. "I know he was hurt. Was any of his injuries life-threatening?"

"They woulda been in a couple of years." Kyle replied assuredly.

Cory nodded. "Is there any reason Doc Mike would not have found that and healed it when he did the check-in physical?"

Kyle and Ty glanced at each other, obviously debating the answer telepathically. Ty looked at Cory. "He woulda found all of it."

Cory nodded. "So why couldn't you let someone who trained all their lives to do something they love to do heal Kai, then all of us could have been involved in his recovery?"

Kyle's eyes grew wide, then him and Ty seemed to 'flash' for a second. They looked at each other, then both moved over and climbed into Cory's lap. "He woulda felt like part of the family a lot more by now." Kyle whispered just loud enough for all present to hear.

"We screwed up." Tyler added.

"No, you followed your hearts." Cory replied as he gave them both a hug. "Tell me why you play with Time to make people better."

"Because we don't wanna see any more of our family or friends hurting ever again." Kyle replied.

"Because I don't want no more bad stuff to happen to the guys I love." Tyler added.

"And because of that, Kane is here today." Cory said as he turned both faces to look at him.

"Kyle," the Doctor said, his voice almost a whisper.

"Yeah Galli?" Kyle replied softly.

The little Time Lord smiled at him and Tyler, "You two did NOT do anything wrong when you helped Kai. Levi did not do anything wrong yesterday when he healed Joel after your elf got a papercut. Dylan did not do anything wrong when he told Timmy about the Stone Age rather than Mr T this morning... all those things were good."

The Doctor paused, and Cory murmured, "But...?"

"What each of these events have in common is that they are the lesser of two goods. You've all heard of the 'lesser of two evils'. Well, these events are the opposite. However, who is to judge? Mr T for not being able to do what he loves and teach a curious child? Antonio who ran from the room to get the dermal regenerator and then find that Levi had done his job for him?. Neither of them were angry... but..."

"But they didn't get to help someone like they wanted to." Tyler finished softly.

Cory nodded. "Exactly lil' bro; Antonio is so proud of being a Doctor that he enjoys every chance he gets to help. I see the looks in both of you guys' eyes; don't even think of making a quick decision right now. You need to sit down with Galli and ask him questions; he may be a brat, but he's an ancient brat who can give you a lot of advice. Talk to us too; we can tell you how we see things. You guys kinda

think on a little different level now, but you're still our little Kyle and Tyler. All of us are here to help you adjust to the new rules that you guys live by."

The Doctor stood up and looked at them all seriously. "Cory is right, little brothers. Although if he thinks I'm his bratty ten year old brother, then I'll have to live up to that name... however..." he stopped and sighed. "Kyle, Lord of the Mikyvis. If you or any of your race need me to talk about these things, you have direct access through the Shields of the Tardis. You can always find me. I'll be there whenever and wherever."

He turned and looked at Cory, and tears came to his eyes. "Big brother. You need to steel your heart. I cannot be here for a while, for I still have my Task to do; and Time says I am to go. Now. I will be back, and I will be your little brat for as long as you'll have me. But the road from here to Red Sands is going to be without me. When the Time comes, when your Heart tells you to call, shout my name. Gal-lifrey. I shall be there."

He turned back to the Mikyvis, "Children of Forever. No other High Race has ever planned on what you are planning on: to be Gods among men. All, each and every one, separated themselves from the Younger Races. We could not bear to watch as they died on us. You two are intending to stay. To live as them and with them. Do not go to extremes. Wait and see what the next few days hold, and make your choices wisely. The Future for now is yours to Guard. And you have a Task that I must lay on you. Follow the Shaper, preserve him, protect him, advise him, help him. But, when the time comes, obey him and let him go. If not, all shall fail. This is the hardest Task any of our Kind has ever had. But you must NOT fail in it."

The Doctor looked around at them all. "I have loved you as if you have always been there in my life. I will be back, and I shall bring my Home with me. I shall laugh with you and cry with you. Until then, Follow the Heart of the Nexus, preserve the Shaper, and love your Family."

He shifted in Time and started to Fold away, leaving behind a ghostly whisper, "I love you, brothers..."

"Love you too..." the boys from HQ all replied.

Cory turned to his Oceanic brothers. "You guys see why I wanted you here?"

Sky and Cody both nodded, glancing at Kano and Damon. "How does this affect them?" Sky asked, nodding at the two Mikyvis sitting awestruck next to them.

Cory saw that both Kyle and Ty did not have the answer, so he answered for them. "I'm sure Kyle will let them know what him and Ty decide. For now, I think the best bet is, since you two know what you have people to handle and what you don't have covered, you two work with the munchkins to help them decide when they need to help out. If you need advice, you can call any of us here to get our thoughts. If we are not sure, Kyle and Ty are only a thought away to ask them."

"That makes sense." Cody replied.

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**A little later:**

The boys all sat back after finishing off the huge meal that Tommy and Tyler had laid out for them. "Cory wasn't kidding when he said you guys could cook!" Sky commented after letting out a satisfied belch.

"You don't have any relation in our area, do you?" Cody added.

"No kinfolk I'm 'ware of 'sides y'all!" Tommy replied with a giggle.

"Don't get any ideas Cuz; I'm keeping them!" Cory giggled as he saw the glint appearing in Sky's eyes. "You gotta find your OWN Chef!"

"I guess that just means we need to bribe Kano to bring us over at mealtime!" Cody laughed. "Speaking of which, we better be getting back or Mom's going to be worried."

"Do we gotta?" Kane and Damon chorused from their perches on Bast and Mont's laps. "We want to cuddle the kitties some more!"

Cory laughed as he watched the two boys try to snuggle deeper into his bodyguard's fur. "Cody's right, guys. Don't worry; these guys are family, they'll be here next time you visit."

"That reminds me..." Kyle interrupted. "Now that Kane and Damon are Mikyvis and are no longer covered by the Doc's shield, they can't be transported by Starfleet transporters any more. Using Ark is okay if there is a reason they can't just jump themselves, but Poppa Spock says that if you were to try to use a Starfleet transporter there would be a big boom which would kill the boys and destroy the vessel that was doing the transporting."

"How big of a boom?" Sky asked curiously.

"Like the ship 'losing Anti-matter containment type boom'... big enough that, if in orbit, you'll damage the atmosphere of the Earth," Kyle answered seriously. "Then, just for kicks, what we're made of would destroy everything else. The whole Universe. So don't let them use transporters."

Cody whistled as he looked over at the two grinning urchins just climbing from the laps of their furry new friends. "Thanks for the warning!"

Everyone got up from the table, and after a round of hugs and goodbyes the Oceanic group started off to one side. Sky started to reach for his communication badge, but then stopped and looked down at Kane. "Take us home, Kano."

Kane's face split into a huge grin as he waved one last time. A split second later, they were gone; the only lingering indication of their presence were the smiles on everyone's faces as they saw the pride in Kane's face as he performed his first unassisted action as a Mikyvis.

As Teri, Bruce, and Bruce's kids headed into the Rec Room to relax while their food digested, the rest of the boys assisted Tommy with cleaning up. As they were finishing, Tommy pulled Kyle and Tyler off to the side.



"I know what y'all are doin'." Tommy said as he pulled them into a hug. "Y'all can still be doing the special stuff y'all do without doin' it alla the time."

"What you mean?" Kyle asked softly.

Tommy gave each of their foreheads a kiss before answering. "This is the first time since Ty became Mikyvis that he ain't made cleanin fun by makin soap bubbles do weird crap or done jokin by puttin food back onna plate after I done washed it. Y'all better not be cuttin' out what makes you special; you ain't seen me mad yet, but y'all will if you stop bein what you are. Y'all are my lil' bros, an' I ain't lettin my kin ruin their lives."

"How can we know what is okay and what is not okay though?" Tyler asked.

Tommy thought for a minute before replying. "I know how I'd do it. Y'all know what special kinda stuff all our kin can do. If our kin can do it; then y'all should be able to sometimes. One thing y'all do none of our kin do is that 'lusion stuff; all the kids like that; it's fun an' don't hurt nothin. Y'all need to think an' talk 'bout it; don't stop bein' yourselves though."

Kyle nodded. "But I don't want Cory mad at me."

"Then don't be makin' urself miserable." Tommy replied. "If you're always worryin' 'bout doin' stuff, it'll show an' you ain't gonna be the fun lil' bro we all love. Let big stuff work itself out, an' have fun with little stuff. That's the Kyle we love; that's the Kyle we wanna see."

Both Mikyvis boys gave Tommy small smiles as they wrapped their arms around him in a double hug. "Thanks Tommy; I think I'm startin' to figure out what Cory was saying." Kyle whispered as he broke the hug.

Tommy gave both boys a quick kiss. "Y'all are welcome. Now stop figg'rin an' start playin'; y'all's on vacation, you can figger when y'all are down home."

"Yes Sir!" Kyle and Ty giggled as they gave Tommy a mock salute then ran to the Rec Room.

As they disappeared through the doorway, Cory came up behind Tommy and pulled him into a hug. "Way to go Bro; I think you explained it a lot better than I did. Thanks for helping."

Tommy grinned up at Cory. "I was just doing what ya taught me bro; takin care of my kinfolk."

"You did great; I'm proud of you." Cory said as he kissed the top of Tommy's head. "You cleared a lot of things up for them, now maybe they'll start healing from the attack like the rest of us have started healing."

"They will." Tommy stated, determination in his voice. "I'm gittin my lil' bros back, ain't no way I'm lettin what those backwards jerks that attacked us did steal Ty an' Kyle's innocence."

"I know you, you'll get your way!" Cory grinned.

"Yeah; that's why Uncle Tommy is my hero!" Dylan giggled as he joined them. He snuggled up next to his blushing uncle, then added seriously "I think it's about time we went home, Uncle Tommy. Leev says his Friend told him that you did what you was here for."

Tommy nodded. "Slow down, Dilly. You don't leave kinfolk without sayin' thanks to eacha them for lettin ya visit."

Dylan looked up at Tommy, his adoration of his Uncle apparent in his eyes. "Okay Uncle Tommy. Can you show me how?"

As Cory watched with a growing smile, Tommy put his arm over Dylan's shoulder and began teaching him by example how to properly say goodbye. Once they returned to Cory, they both gave him a hug.

"Thanks for lettin' us visit Uncle Cory! We'll see ya when y'all get home!" Dylan said proudly.

Cory smiled and picked the little Mikyvis up to give him a kiss. "Take care of your Uncle Tommy for me, okay Dylan?"

"Okay Uncle Cory!" Dylan responded brightly.

Tommy giggled and said his own goodbyes to Cory, then stood back. "Okay Dilly, NOW you can take us home!"

Dylan smiled, then with a final wave both him and Tommy returned to Orlando.

As Cory followed the rest of the boys to the rec room, he was distracted by a knock at the door. He walked over and opened the door to find Julio standing there with a young boy tucked under his arm.

"Wassup Julio? Who's the armrest?" Cory giggled.

Julio smiled as he rustled the boy under his arm's hair. "This is my lil' bro Johnny. I 'convinced' Mom and Dad to adopt him and his brother just after Justy gave us the 'go' for doing things here."

"Sweet! C'mon in; we're just chillin' after dinner. You can introduce him and we'll catch up on stuff." Cory replied as he opened the door fully and motioned for the two boys to come in.

They walked into the Rec Room, and stopped as both Kyle and Tyler broke into giggles. "What's so funny?" Cory asked, as everyone else sat back waiting for the two Mikyvis to explain.

Kyle smiled. "We were doing our usual check-out of Julio's little brother like we do all the new guys. Him and Timmy'd get along great!"

"Yeah," Tyler continued, "his cat Cinnamon sounds so kewl! Julio, you can stop wondering, they really do talk to each other!"

Cory looked over at the little ten-year-old redhead, now glowing with a blush. "Just animals, or can you talk to people too?" he asked seriously.

"I just talk to animals." Johnny replied softly. "Their heads ain't as messed up as humans. I leave the humans to Eddie, his head don't hurt when he talks to humans."

Cory smiled and introduced everyone. Once he was done, he knelt in front of Johnny. "Why don't you go over and visit with Ty and Kyle? They know some tricks they can teach you that help make it so that you have better control over your special skill; they can also teach you how to keep from having your head hurt when you run across someone else who can talk in heads."

Johnny looked up at Julio; silently asking with his eyes what he should do. "Trust Cory, lil' bro." Julio said softly. "In all the time I've known him, he's the one person who *never* asks someone to do something that they shouldn't do. If he says they can help you, they will."

"Okay Julio!" Johnny said as he gave his big brother a quick hug. A second later, he was in mid-air, quickly landing on Kyle and Tyler's laps.

Julio winced in expectation of the yell from the targets. When there was no scream of agony at Johnny's landing, he looked at Cory in shock. "How.....???"

Cory giggled. "You got a LOT of catching up to do! C'mon, grab a seat. If you're really good, you might even get a tongue bath from my bodyguards!"

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### **An hour later:**

Julio sat back in awe, finally up-to-date with all of the internal happenings of the Clan since the move to Orlando. He glanced over at Johnny, and smiled when he saw that Johnny, Kyle, and Tyler were deeply involved in a game of Monopoly. The ever-present stress that had haunted Johnny's face was conspicuous in its absence; for the first time since Julio had taken the brothers under his wing Johnny was able to feel free.

Cory grinned as he passed on a message from Kyle. "Kyle says to tell you they're helping Eddie too. Johnny sent him a message telling him it was okay to let them in his head; so they're helping him out from here."

Julio grinned. "Thanks. I think that they developed talking to each other because their old caregiver was so abusive that it was the only way they could communicate safely. Even I don't know everything they went through; only they do. All I know is that when I found them in the car in the parking lot, one of my guys who is a telepath picked up on enough to convict the trash that donated his sperm for their creation."

Sean looked up from teaching Kai, Casey, and Tina how to groom Mont and Bast. "You don't want to know; I got the full story in my head after the boys gave Kyle the okay to add their history to the Archive I keep in my memories."

Julio nodded. "I'll trust you on that one. All I care about is that they are safe and happy now."

"You just passed Big Brother 101!" Adam giggled from the corner where he and JJ were quietly talking about their future.

"Just a warning though," JJ added with an evil grin, "Don't let Johnny sleep over with the Mind Leeches... chances are he won't *ever* be the same again!"

"Bite me!" Kyle and Ty chorused as they launched the pillows they were laying on towards JJ's head. "You're gonna be the first one to test the pool as soon as this game is over!" Kyle added.

"Pack a lunch, Squirt!" JJ giggled before resuming his talk with Adam.

Cory grinned at the somewhat 'normal' bantering. "I don't know how long I've waited to hear that! Anyway, Julio, you've made some changes around here; you wanna fill me in?"

Julio blushed. "I'm just the voice for the rest of the guys until someone is chosen as the head of this mess. I think Justy picked me because I was the only one he knew somewhat from when he visited. Anyway; we pretty much took over the entire neighborhood after you guys moved to Orlando. It wasn't on purpose; things moved faster than we planned and the next thing we knew we had our own little Compound. We try to set up things that we took for granted but we found out a lot of the abused kids have never done." Julio paused, then grinned. "THAT is what I forgot! We're having a Seventies Disco Night dance tonight! We have dances every Friday; just about all the kids show up, even the rugrats. It should be fun; the last Seventies one we had all the adults helped us dress up like they did way back then."

Cory glanced around; the grins on everyone's faces answered for him. "It looks like we're going. We ain't got too many clothes here though, so we're probably gonna be dressed normal."

Tyler giggled. "We could always go get some, Bro."

"And just *where* would you go to get them?" Cory giggled in reply. "We don't keep ancient clothing in the Clan Clothing Locker; the stuff they wore back then was a fire hazard!"

"Bro, our kids go back to visit their pets in the Stone Age; the Seventies ain't much different!" Tyler giggled.

Before Cory could reply, Teri interrupted. "One more comment from anyone about the Seventies being 'ancient history' and *I* will be throwing **TWO** boys in the pool myself! Don't forget, your loving mother was alive through that period!"

"Like I said, way back when," Julio giggled, then ducked a clip from Teri's hand as she walked around the couch. She then grabbed Cory's arm with one hand and motioned for Tyler to join her with the other.

Tyler shook his head with a grin, which turned to surprise when he found himself standing right next to Teri with her latching onto his arm too. "Hey! No fair!"

"Better you than all of us, babe!" Kyle giggled. "You're overdue!"

'Paybacks later!' Cory sent to Tyler as both of them followed alongside Teri to the edge of the pool. Tyler grinned and nodded his head.

Teri stopped them at the edge of the pool. "I knew someone would take me up on that. I wanted an excuse to get you guys off to the side. I know how hard it is for you guys to forget about working after everything you've done in the last few months; today has been a good example of that so far. Cory, you're going to have to take the lead on saying 'no' to Clan related things; none of the other guys are going to do it unless you are. Ty, you are the only one here that understands what Kyle is going through. We all know how private Kyle keeps his problems; it's up to you to let your brothers know how to help him."

Cory and Ty both nodded in understanding. "What if Julio needs some help though, Mom?" Cory asked.

Teri smiled. "You know the answer to that, Cory. Ty? Does Julio want to be Division Head?"

Ty shook his head. "He's doing the job, in fact he's doing it great. He doesn't think he's ready for that kind of responsibility though."

"In other words, he's perfect for it." Teri mused. "I learned long ago that the best candidate for a position is the person who does not think that they are ready despite their actions showing otherwise. Cory, every position you've ever filled has been done the same way; in the process you've got a staffing that will give you the freedom to take some time for yourself, if you'll let them."

Cory thought over her words for a minute. "Thanks Mom." he said as he pulled her into a hug. "I guess I've been ignoring you and everyone else telling me I'm overdoing it, haven't I?"

"Yes you have, Cory; you've had that problem since the day you tried to slap the doctor back... right after you were born!" Teri replied with a chuckle. "You two jump in and get wet; I'll see you inside!"

"Okay Mom!" Cory giggled as he picked up Ty and jumped into the pool with Ty in his arms.

A few minutes later, the two totally soaked boys jogged back into the Rec Room. Both stopped in front of Julio, and shook off the excess water on him. Once Julio was soaked, Ty giggled as both he and Cory were suddenly dry.

"That's for getting us wet!" Cory giggled.

Julio stuck out his tongue. "You enjoyed it!"

Ty took his seat back at the game, and took his turn before asking "What do you think? Do you want us to go get some clothes?"

Cory glanced up at Teri, and was surprised to see that she seemed distracted. A few seconds later, she 'came back' and chuckled. "Are you feeling okay, Ty? I could swear I just heard you asking to GET clothes instead of LOSING them!"

"MOOOOMMM!" Ty exclaimed as Johnny and Kyle broke into giggles.

Teri smiled, then asked. "Seriously; where did you plan on getting clothes?"

"We can get them from that time; that way they're the real thing." Ty replied. "Besides, I think Mont and Bast would look awesome in leisure suits."

Teri thought for a second, then motioned for Cory and Sean to join her. "Before I tell you what I think, there is something I need to ask your big brothers."

Cory and Sean moved over to where Teri had taken a seat, and took places on her lap after she held out her arms. "I've got a sneaky suspicion that something is about to happen. Thing is, I think that you guys need some background before I set your brothers loose to do something which I know will affect both of you. Back when I was about your age, your fathers, Cory's mother, and myself hung out together. There was an event that both of your fathers swore happened but we thought they were both pulling a prank. Both of them had certain clothes that they had wore for dances when they were your age. Back when they were fifteen, they both swore that a kid appeared in their bedrooms and asked if they could spare some clothes for their sons in the future. We didn't believe them then, but I'm thinking that we have what your brother Galli calls a 'time loop'."

Both boys looked at her in shock. Cory responded first. "Daddy is giving me clothes for the dance?" he asked, reverting unconsciously to a young boy once again.

Teri kissed Cory's forehead as Sean snuggled silently into her side. "I think so." she replied softly. "If I understand Time law correctly, your brothers can't tell them about you other than you'll exist. I need to know if you guys can handle it though; if you can't, then I'm going to tell your brothers to wait until some other dance."

Cory recovered enough to consider her question as he pulled Sean into his side and held him close. "I don't have anything from my father, this would be something I could keep to remember him with."

"Me too." Sean whispered more to Cory's chest than anywhere else.

"Are you in agreement Ty?" Teri asked softly. "Can they handle it emotionally?"

"Yeah Mom; it might actually do both of them some good." Tyler responded.

Teri nodded. "Go get the clothes; by the look on Kyle's face he has an idea of what you guys need to do."

"Can I go too?" Johnny asked.

At Julio's nod, Kyle agreed. "Sure, you'll have to stay with one of us while the other is talking to Cory and Sean's dads. Don't say anything out loud unless we okay it first though."

"Okay!" Johnny exclaimed, obviously excited to be included in the adventures of his new friends. A few seconds later, the three of them 'popped' out.

"Kyle says you have ten minutes before they come back." JJ announced. "He gave me the message as they left."

Julio nodded. "I know why. He's giving me time to tell you a few things. Ever since I saved Johnny, he's been glued to my side. This is the first time he's went off with someone else; in fact I think Kyle and Ty are becoming his first friends since he moved in with me."

JJ smiled. "I've been there, Julio. Kyle was the same way; just ask Cory and Sean. If anyone can teach him to open up, it's my little brother. I'll bet you see a lot of changes in how he acts now that Kyle's talked with him."

"How can you be so sure? Johnny won't open up to anyone." Julio asked.

"That's easy." JJ replied. "I can count the people that Kyle has absolute trust in on my hands and still have fingers left. He won't tell anyone, even us, anything about his past UNLESS something happens which makes it so we need to know about it, or him talking about it will help someone else recover from their own past. There is one thing surer than a normal human's death... Kyle's big heart will not allow someone he's made friends with to suffer."

"Ain't THAT the truth!" Cory giggled. "I think he's set himself up his own room inside my head!"

"He has." JJ replied seriously. "You, me, Sean, and Danny all carry a piece of him with us at all times. He told me about it when you were having problems after the attack. In a way we carry Ty too; Kyle says that something about when Ty became Mikyvis caused the two of them to be linked like they're one person. Miah thinks it might be because they were woke up just as the conversion was finishing; the link required to do it wasn't severed like it should have been."

Julio whistled. "Wow... I think I see what you mean about him being protective. Can all Mikyvis do that?"

Cory shrugged. "No idea; Kyle was doing it before he became Mikyvis, so I don't know if it's a species trait or just him. He's always had a range that blows your mind with his telepathy."

"That's why I always know when you're talking about me!" Kyle giggled as him, Ty, and Johnny reappeared in the middle of the group. Kyle and Tyler had arms full of clothes, and Johnny was cuddling a little orange fuzball.

"Another one! You're as bad as your son!" Cory exclaimed as he spotted what was in Johnny's arms.

Kyle grinned. "That's the last one... he's Marie's little brother. Levi flagged the pickup for when the time was right; his Friend told him when this would need to happen, and had him tell us since we'd be doing it."

"Just be glad we talked him out of bringing a T-Rex back!" Tyler added with a giggle.

"What's so bad about a little kitten?" Julio asked. "Wait... did you just say T\_REX??!! Where did you go??!!"

"When." Kyle corrected with a giggle. "Johnny wanted to know more about Mikyvis, so while we were getting his kitten for him we gave him a quick tour showin him some of the stuff we can do. He was safe; we kept out of phase with Time so nothing in the places we was looking at could hurt him."

Tyler put his pile of clothes down, then walked over and wrapped his arms around Cory. "It's all good bro." he whispered just loud enough for Cory to hear. "Johnny is our 'eyes and ears' here now. He's not Mikyvis, but he's a special type of next-gen and wants to help us."

Cory nodded as he gave Ty a squeeze. "Okay Bro; I was just worried that you guys went too far."

"I know." Tyler said softly. "We were careful and just showed him the stuff he needs... the only reason he saw the T-Rex was we wanted him to meet our kids and they were taking a break for a millisecond to play with their pets."

"I don't wanna even try to figure that one out!" Cory replied with a soft giggle. "Only you two could have kids with pet dinosaurs!"

While Cory and Tyler were talking, Kyle put his clothes pile down. He took Julio's hand, and with a huge grin led him over to meet Johnny's new pet. As they came alongside Johnny, both could hear a steady purr; the only question was if it was coming from Johnny or the kitten. Johnny looked up at them, the happy grin on his face melting Julio's heart.

"Hey little bro, who's your new friend?" Julio asked softly.

"He says his name's Charlie." Johnny answered. "Him and Cinnamon are using my head and talking to each other; I'm passin' messages back and forth for them. They're makin friends already!"

Jason finally noticed the size of the teeth on the little kitten. "Ummm... what kind of kitten is he, Johnny?"

"He's a Sabre Tooth!" Johnny said with a grin. "Levi says that him and two others are 'posed to be here in our time now!"

Kyle giggled at the lost expression on Julio's face. "Levi is Ty and me's son. He's got some... powerful... friends; if he says something is supposed to happen, it's usually because he was told to say it. Just roll with it; you hang around long enough and you'll see some really strange stuff!"

"A Vulcan wearing armor while riding a talking bear... a saber-toothed kitten... spontaneous healing at the front gate... angels popping in to say hi... field trips to see real dinosaurs... and you're telling me I ain't seen strange yet??!!!"

"Yeah, you're still in the introductory course!" Kyle giggled.

"Okay, stop trying to strip out the gears in Julio's head!" Cory giggled as him and Ty joined the little group. "That's MY job!"

"Like you could blow someone's mind?" Julio giggled. "Nice try, Cory!"

Cory's grin grew wider as he turned his head. "Mr. Richardson; your presence is required here."

JJ quickly joined them; Adam, Sean, Mont, Bast, and Kai on his heels. Once they were all there, Cory tapped his commbadge. "Thomas, open a broadcast channel. Clan-wide." he ordered.



Tommy answered immediately, the fact that Cory used his given name flagging the fact this was official business. *"Channel open, Patriarch."*

Cory looked Julio in the eyes. "Attention all members of Family Clan Short. As of three-forty-seven PM Central United States time, the city of Des Moines, Iowa officially has a Clan Compound in the suburb of Urbandale. I hereby designate Julio Carlos Hernandez as Director of Clan Short - Des Moines with Johnny Hernandez as Head of Communications. All Divisions are hereby ordered to provide support as necessary to bring this Division to full operational status in the most expedient manner. Division heads, acknowledge."

*"Commander Casey responding for Clan Short Special Forces Division."* Adam responded almost immediately. *"I have just alerted a full strike team to help them with anything they need. Is there anything else you can think of they would need, or should I just get in contact with them?"*

"Divisional Staff Security is the priority." Cory replied.

*"Understood Patriarch, have them prepare for Lieutenant Sean Patrick and a full equipped assault team to act as division security until such time as they do not need them anymore. Strike team Tango will arrive with in thirty minutes."* Adam responded after a short delay.

"Acknowledged and approved Adam." Cory replied.

*"Charleston AI Division acknowledged."* Danny stated.

"Acknowledged Danny. Nothing outstanding that concerns AI at the moment." Cory responded.

*"Acknowledged Cory."* Sammy replied, signifying that the North American Region was aware of the status.

"North America acknowledged."

*"Northeast; we got ya Patriarch."*

"Okay Peter, tell your brothers to take a break already!" Cory replied with a giggle.

*'Voice of the Dragon to Patriarch Cory: it took you this long? We've been watching Julio and company for weeks already...'* Jason's voice giggled from Cory's comm-badge. *'Get with the plot, blond-top!'*

"You are so dead, Jace!" Cory giggled back quickly.

*'Yeah, well: I'm down here in sunny Orlando. You're stuck up there for the next few days... I will be well hidden before you get back!'* came the giggled retort.

Before Cory could form a response, there came a yell from Jason's end of the channel, followed by giggles and then, a second later, a loud splash.

*'Blondie?'* Joel's voice came suddenly. *'Don't worry, Blondie! I got your back! Tell Julio I'll be over in the week sometime with some cookies as a present! I've gotta run, got more Starfleet tests to do! Love you'*

Cory was again about to respond when the sound of a comm being dropped on a table without being closed made him stop and listen.

The group standing with him collapsed into gales of laughter with him when they faintly heard Joel's voice yell out *'Only I gets to pick on Blondie, Jace!'* before even more splashes and giggles started.

Cory shook his head. "Welcome to the nuthouse Julio!" He then activated his subvocal. *'Ark, I assume you were listening. Could you please make sure that Tyne and Nyo are aware of the new division?'*

<I will do so, Cory. I have been instructed to supply subvocals, they are on the table behind you. Correction, they are in Sean's hands.>

*'Thank you Ark. Tell Nyo that JJ will be getting with him Monday to decide on the need for Phasenmorph issuing to the officers of the new division.'*

<Your message has been delivered. Anything else Cory?>

*'That should cover it. Thanks Ark.'*

Cory smiled as he watched Sean teaching Julio and Johnny about the subvocals. Johnny was being especially cute, telling Ark all about his recent adventures with the Mikyvis. Cory watched for a minute, then silently asked *'Is Johnny bugging you, Ark?'*

<He actually is helping with my understanding of the capabilities of the Mikyvis.> Ark replied. <Unlike some members of your family, he understands my lack of gender. I find him to be quite interesting to talk to.>

*'Okay, just making sure. Have fun!'* Cory replied with a smile as he tapped on JJ's shoulder. "Looks like Johnny has a new friend!"

"Ark's gonna need to add another processor!" JJ giggled.

Cory grinned, then put an arm over JJ's shoulder as they went over to inspect the piles of clothing that Kyle and Tyler had brought back. "I wonder which ones are ours?" Cory asked softly.

Tyler came up and snuggled into Cory's free side. "These are for the rest of the guys; we put yours and Sean's in your bedroom. Kyle and me are gonna go up there with you, we have a message from your daddies that we're 'posed to deliver."

As Tyler was speaking, Sean finished the training, and was led by the hand by Kyle to join them. "We're ready; Johnny's gonna take care of passin' out the clothes. He knows who gets what."

Cory nodded, and allowed himself to be led by Tyler upstairs to his room. Kyle led Sean behind them; both Cory and Sean were quiet as they anticipated what they would find. As they entered the room, Co-

ry paused to wipe the silent tears from his eyes. "I wish my Daddy was here instead of in Heaven." he whispered.

"He is; he's never left your side." Mikey's voice answered from inside the room. "Neither of our Dads ever really left us."

Both Sean and Cory looked up to where Mikey was sitting on the edge of the bed, their renewed pain at the loss of their fathers at a young age written clearly on their faces.

"Get over here Tigger and Pooh; you're overdue for Mikey cuddles." Mikey said softly, bracing himself for the expected pounce from his brothers. Cory and Sean did not disappoint him; as one they ran over and landed sobbing on his lap. "The Time has come to release your pain, brothers." Mikey stated as his wings became visible and wrapped around the duo in his lap. The last thing Ty and Kyle heard was a sobbing 'why?' chorus from Sean and Cory as the wings closed around them, sealing them into a personal space that was blocked to even the Mikyvis.

*'I'm glad Mikey was able to help' Kyle sent over his link to Ty. 'I've never had a memory of a Dad that I loved that died. I was too young when I was kidnapped from my real family; the only stuff I know is what Grandpa and Colin have told me.'*

*'Yeah; that jerk that I got stuck with ain't no great loss either.'* Ty replied. *'I guess in our case it's better though. It kinda hurts knowin' I'll outlive every one of our brothers except Galli and Jay. It'd really bite if we had to worry about the ones that made us too.'*

Before Kyle could reply, Mikey's voice entered both of their heads. *'It is not your place to attempt to guess the contents of the Book Of Life, little brothers. There is only One with that knowledge; and He is gracious to those doing His work. Trust that what Should be, Will be.'*

Kyle looked over at Ty with a grin. "I think Mikey's been hangin' out with the Yarn Guy again!"

Ty giggled. "Yeah, that was just messed up!! You know, Yarnie's not bad once you get to know him though; I think he was just freaked that you'd screw up the first time you met him. He calmed down some once we knocked out all those extra strings!"

"Yeah, and he made sense when he explained that I didn't really kill anyone when I knocked out those timelines." Kyle replied seriously. "It's weird; something that we can do without really thinking about it drives regular humans insane."

"It drives me insane too, I just confine the insanity to three rooms I've got reserved for just that purpose!" Ty giggled as he pulled Kyle into a hug. "If our sons keep it up, I might need to add more rooms to that list though!"

"Tell me 'bout it!" Kyle giggled. "Speaking of rooms, Mikey just let me back into the one in Cory's head; I think our brothers are about ready to rejoin us."

*'They are, but first I need you to pass a message to the rest of the Leech Patrol.'* Mikey said in both of their heads. He ignored the glares he was getting from both boys and continued. *'Tell your fellow thought suckers to stop worrying about Cory's age swings. He's recovering from the stress of the last month, and his mind is trying to balance itself back to where it should be. There were a lot of things*

*nobody knew about locked behind doors in Cory's head; as he deals with them his age will seem to change accordingly.'*

*'Why does it need to be us that tells them?'* Kyle sent back.

*'Because things have not changed as much as you think they have, little brothers.'* Mikey replied softly. *'The fact that you evolved into a High Race does not change the fact that the Telepaths of the Clan still look to you as their leader Kyle, just as the Empaths look to Ty as theirs. The two of you were the ones that set the procedures for how things are done by the way you did them; it's time to get back into that role and show those that came after you how to use their powers to help others without losing the fun of being a kid. Both of you have been trying to be what you thought others expected you to be since you evolved; you will never be happy doing that, so before it is too late get back to being yourself no matter what anyone else thinks.'*

*'Does everyone but US have a copy of the **How To Be A Mikyvis** manual?'* Ty sent with a giggle.

*'No,'* Mikey laughed, *'but none of us are going to force you to write that first chapter without any help. You're not alone, and whatever the future holds your family is here for you.'*

*'Thanks Bro.'* Kyle and Ty both replied with small smiles. Kyle quickly updated the Telepaths with the information that Mikey requested, while Tyler did the same for the Empaths. As they finished, Mikey's wings slowly opened, revealing Cory and Sean both securely held in Mikey's arms. As he kissed the tops of their heads, each of them looked up at him, their appreciation of their big brother apparent in both of their faces.

"Go have fun, little brothers." Mikey said with a smile. "The Past is done, go make some memories of the Present. I want pictures though; your first dance as a couple is one event I never want to forget!"

"Okay Bro!" Cory replied as he gave Mikey one last hug then climbed from his lap. "Thanks for hel-pin'."

"Yeah; thanks Mikey!" Sean replied mid-hug before joining Cory.

"That's what Big Brothers are for." Mikey giggled. "You're welcome; I'll see you later tonight."

Both boys nodded, and smiled as they watched Mikey fade into nothing. They turned back to Kyle and Ty, and both tilted their heads at the grins on the younger boy's faces.

"What?" Sean giggled.

"You two ain't been this relaxed since just after we all moved to Orlando." Kyle replied. "I dunno what Mikey did, but I can see the difference just in the way y'all are standing."

Cory grinned. "Mikey cuddles do that; when you're feelin bad, he knows what to say to make you feel better again."

Ty giggled. "So THAT is where you two learned it!"

Cory and Sean glanced at each other, and a few seconds later each of them had a giggling boy on their hip. "So what is this message that you needed to pass on to us?" Sean asked as he poked at Kyle's ribs.

"Stop tickling me and I can tell you!" Kyle giggled. Once Sean paused his assault, Kyle replied. "It's kinda weird, even for me! We went and asked about the clothes like Mom said we was gonna do, and your Dads told us something I wasn't expecting. These clothes were what they wore to the first dance they ever took your Moms to. They used them for all of the dances that year, but when they went to see if they still fit the next school year neither one could find them. Just as we got to each of their houses, they were each dumping their laundry onto their bed to put it away, and the clothes were somehow in that laundry, right on top where they would be seen. We were just as surprised as they were; and I think it kinda helped them with believing why we were there. Both of them sent the same message to both of you; 'I hope that your first dance goes as well as mine did, and one way or the other I'm going to be there to see you'. We had to explain why even telling them if they would be here could mess up their future, so I think they were trying to cover it either way." Kyle paused, then added with a smile "I'm supposed to give you some pictures after the dance; they didn't think that the pictures would look as nice if they tried to save them the normal way in a picture album for you. It's some kewl stuff like school pictures and pictures of their rooms. We had to go with them to a one-hour photo shop to get them developed since it was a film-camera, but that wasn't too bad to play with Time to make it work."

"It sounds like you two did a great job!" Cory said as he gave Ty a squeeze to emphasize his statement.

"Yeah; thanks!" Sean added while giving Kyle a squeeze of his own. "Did you remember to get something to wear too?"

"Kinda." Kyle giggled. "We saw some kewl stuff in the store we was wandering in while we waited for the pictures, but none of it was in our sizes. They had it in a catalog, so I bounced into this time long enough to see if Ark could make them from the pictures in our sizes. Ark's awesome, it promised to have them whenever we were ready for them!"

As if on command, two more piles of clothes appeared on the bed. <Johnny just told me that it is time for you to get ready for the dance.> Ark announced in their subvocals. <He asked me to remind you to make sure Cory and Sean know the proper way to dance to the music of that era. To quote the Vulcan's favorite phrase while visiting Clan Headquarters, this should be 'fascinating'. Nyo has already installed cameras so that this event can be fully archived.>

"Thanks Ark!" Kyle giggled as both Cory and Sean began to blush.

"We checked out how they danced back then since we didn't know either." Tyler explained with a smile. "Your Dad suggested it Cory; he said that maybe we could teach you the basics before the dance. We didn't tell him that we were able to do brain dumps!"

Cory smiled as he replied. "Okay, that makes sense. But you guys keep getting one thing wrong. They are OUR Dads... you're OUR brothers, which makes them OUR family. Got it, munchkins?"

Both Ty and Kyle looked at Sean; they didn't need telepathy to see his agreement with Cory. Both Mikyvis pulled themselves tightly against their respective brother's chest, expressing with their embrace the feelings that neither had words for. Once recovered, they climbed down and led their respective brother to the clothes that had been sent for him.

The commotion of everyone trying to figure out how the 70's clothes were to be worn came to a grinding halt as Cory, Sean, Kyle, and Tyler came downstairs and entered the Rec Room. Cory was the main reason that everyone stopped; his outfit drew your attention no matter how much you tried to resist. With Tyler's assistance, his hair had been grown out to hang just below his shoulder-blades in a classic 'surfers cut'. The necklace that had been given him by Aaron was accompanied by a heavier gold chain with a large gold cross on it. His shirt was a deep V-neck spandex long sleeve in ivory, accompanied by a polyester vest which matched his hair. His bell-bottomed pants matched the color of his shirt, with a white 2 inch belt filling their belt loops. The belt really wasn't needed, as they fit him like a glove from the knees up. To finish off the outfit, white leather two-inch platform shoes resided under the wide bells at the bottom of his pants.

Standing next to Cory, Sean presented a sharp contrast that showed the diversity of the decade's fashion. Somehow, Kyle had convinced Sean's hair to cooperate... so now Sean was sporting an Afro the size of a schoolhouse globe. His shirt consisted of random geometric patterns in pink, blue, and purple, offset by an orange tie. The lapels on his teal suit jacket literally reached to the edge of his shoulders, while black leather platform shoes helped offset the teal bell-bottoms that finished the ensemble.

Kyle and Ty had taken a slightly more conservative route, dressing in matching light purple leisure suits with white shoes, pink dress shirts, and purple ties. Each of them matched the hair style of the brother that they had helped, so Kyle had a mini-Afro while Tyler mimicked Cory's surfer look.

"Mom, I hate to tell you this," Sean said, breaking the silence, "there is *no way* that Dad was straight if he dressed like this!"

"Stop complaining and eat your Jelly Babies, Hun." Cory giggled. "I'm willing to bet our absent little brother was involved in picking out our outfits, since Jelly Babies were left in the pockets. Take it up with him later!"

By then, Teri had regained her voice. "Actually, that is how both of your fathers looked when we went to our first dance. You both look a lot like them, especially now. Sean, actually both your father and Cory's father were bi... that is why I was not surprised when the two of you became attached to each other."

As Cory and Sean's faces scrunched up at what that could imply, Kyle giggled. "I guess that means you know where they got their practice before Sean's dad gave you your first kiss, huh Mom?"

"Among other things, yes Kyle!" Teri replied over the repeated moans of 'TMI!' from both Cory and Sean.

Before the conversation could get any worse, JJ interrupted. "Hey Lil' Bro; Johnny says you're gonna teach us to dance before we go. You better hurry, it's almost time!"

Kyle smiled. "Yeah; Ty's gonna do that while I help y'all get your hair ready. I wonder how a lion in a tux looks with an Afro...."

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As Cory and Sean led their group into the Gym the dance was being held in, all conversation in the room came to a halt. "It's *them*... they're really here!" various voices whispered as the kids began to form a greeting line.

Cory rolled his eyes with a grin. "Jeeze, it's not like I'm Bon Jovi or anything!" he giggled.

Julio laughed as he guided the group into position to walk down the line. "Naw; they didn't get mobbed like these guys wanted to do when they heard you were here. Richie had fun teaching some of the guys some trick guitar riffs yesterday though!"

Cory just shook his head, and led the group towards the far side of the gymnasium. They only managed to make it a few feet before a familiar voice got everyone's attention.

"Ladies and Gentlemen; I just received a call from the Vulcan Embassy." Coach Simmons announced over the P.A. system. "It seems our visitors have the same problem they did when they were on my team; they don't give up. By request of Ambassador Sarek and by Order of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, the Family Short is representing the Crown tonight as Ambassadors to welcome the newest Division of Family Clan Short. I'm proud to welcome home Iowa's pride and joy, Prince Cory Short and Prince Sean Short."

Cory and Sean looked at each other in shock. *'I think we're being told to take the night off or else!'* Cory sent to Sean with a giggle.

As the first notes of "Rule Britannia" rolled from the towers of speakers throughout the room, the group held themselves tall and continued on their way towards the table that was obviously reserved for them. *'Not too bad of a guess for a cute blond!'* Sean sent back, confident that Cory would not retaliate at this point in time.

*'I'll get you later!'* Cory retaliated.

Sean couldn't hold back his snickers, causing the rest of the group to give them knowing smiles. As they reached the table, the music faded away and Coach Simmons came back on the P.A. system. "To make it easy, I'll introduce the rest of our honored guests. First we have Kyle Richardson, Duke of Eternity and his husband Tyler Short. They are joined by four members of the Royal Guard; JJ Richardson, Adam Short, Mont Lion, and Bast Lion. Last, but certainly not least, the newest member of the Short Family, Kai Short. Their special guests are the newest members of Family Clan Short, Tina and Casey Collins."

Once they were seated, Sean looked around the table, smiling as he reached the two cats. Each one had gained a smiling lap-warmer; Johnny taking up residence on Mont's lap, while his little brother Eddie was happily snuggled against Bast and giggling as he poked at the Afro-ized mane of his new hero.

"I think that the two of them are going to be occupied for a while, Julio!" Cory snickered as both youngsters were tickled by their furry companions.

Julio laughed. "As long as they're having fun, I'm all for it. I think we'd better get this party started, which means you two are gonna have to get up and dance. I'd be willing to bet everyone is waiting on ya'."

Cory rolled his eyes. "What happened to me just being one of the guys?"

"Same here." Sean added, as JJ and Adam nodded their heads in agreement.

Julio nodded towards Kyle. "Word got out about how you and JJ helped Kyle back before you moved back home, Cory. Even before there was a Clan, you were doing things to help others that most of us never thought of. All of the titles that everyone has gave you don't mean crap to anyone here. What means something is the way that you do stuff. You're all kinda like the big football heroes in college; when you guys do something good all of us want to know how to do it too. When you goof up, we learn from that too; but the kewl part is that you don't care about all the glory you've got and you still hang with us. A lot of these kids have never met y'all; the only way they're gonna accept that you're just like the rest of us is if you go out and be yourselves and show them that you're just like them."

"Life as a hero is such a pain!" Kyle giggled as he grabbed Tyler's hand and ran towards the center of the dance floor.

"Last one out has to do Cory and Sean's laundry!" Tyler shouted behind them.

"EWWWW!!!!" JJ and Adam both exclaimed as they dove out of their chairs and ran after Mont and Bast, who had slung their giggling charges over their shoulders and sprinted after the Mikyvis.

Kai managed to speak despite his laughter as he took Casey and Tina's hands. "Let's go, Kyle warned me about their laundry!"

By this time, Julio was rolling on the ground laughing, so Cory and Sean quickly stood up and followed their brothers onto the dance floor. "No fair!" Julio managed to exclaim through his laughter, "I can't move!"

"Sucks to be you!" Sean yelled back as the lights in the gym began to dim.

The gym went dark except for one spotlight in the dead center of the dance floor. Cory and Sean were 'guided' by the assembled crowd into the spotlit area; as they entered it, the circle of kids closed around them.

"Hey Coach; *IT'S PARTY TIME!*" JJ yelled towards the DJ booth.

"I see you're as impatient as ever; James!" Coach Simmons responded, followed by him chuckling at the glare in response from JJ.

The rest of the boys giggled, knowing that the Coach was known to use JJ's first name whenever he wanted to tease him. Just then, the dance lights started spinning, and within seconds Cory and Sean had their first chance at showing off the dance moves that their dads had taught them through the Mikyvis. As '*Get Down Tonight*' by KC & The Sunshine Band blasted from the speakers, Cory and Sean found their rhythm and for the first time in over a year let themselves go. By mid-song, the surrounding kids were bit by the grin on their Patriarch's face and had joined into the fun. By the end of the first song, the surrounding tables were empty as the excitement of hanging out with the founders of the Clan overrode any shyness over their dancing ability.



A few songs later, the lights dimmed again. "Prince Cory, would you do us the honor of leading our first slow dance with Prince Sean?" Coach Simmons asked over the PA.

Cory gave the Coach a 'thumbs-up', knowing that he would not be heard over the cheers of agreement. As the spotlight turned back on, Cory pulled Sean in close. A second later, *'Islands in the Stream'* came on, and the rest of the kids watched in awe as Cory and Sean displayed their love for all to see.

"I love you Cor." Sean whispered as he melted into Cory's shoulder. Cory kissed Sean's cheek and held him tighter while they circled in the spotlight.

"I love you too, Teddy Bear, I'll love you forever." Cory responded. To make his point, he 'pushed' his love towards Sean using all the power he could spare.

Sean melted even further into Cory's arms as he was overcome by the love of his husband. By then, the song was completing and Tyler's giggles got their attention.

"What's so funny little bro?" Cory asked as he pulled Tyler into their hug, the three of them moving off to the side as the next song started.

"Did you forget that you can broadcast?" Tyler giggled.

Cory tilted his head as he tried to figure out what Tyler meant. Sean got it immediately though, and began giggling as he muttered "Oh crap!"

Kyle joined them just then, a big grin on his face. "I'm glad our species is immune to you, Cor! You trying to see how many pairs of pants you can mess up at once?"

"What?" Cory asked, still trying to decipher what they were talking about.

Kyle took pity on his first hero. "Bro, when you decided to show Sean your love, you kinda forgot just how much power your head has. Everyone here has felt it, and I think you just healed a lotta hearts in this room. A lot of these kids never knew absolute love; they do now thanks to you."

Comprehension finally dawned on Cory, and within a microsecond he was blushing so much that it could have lit up the room. "I didn't!!!" Cory squeaked.

"You DID!" Kyle and Tyler chorused.

"Oh My God!" Cory exclaimed softly as he grabbed a nearby chair and sat down, pulling Sean down on his lap.

"It's a good thing, Bro." Kyle commented as he wrapped his arms around Cory's shoulders from behind. "They're really lucky; you got some real special love. You saved me with it when you didn't even know you could. They're really Clan now; your love is so strong that once someone's felt it, they have to share it with others."

"That's part of why we love you bro." Tyler chimed in. "You loved us when nobody else cared; now we try to do for others like you did for us."

"You're not helping me with my blushing!" Cory giggled, still glowing like a stop light.

"I don't care; you're even cuter when you are blushing!" Sean giggled.

"Sean!" Cory giggled. "That did NOT help!"

Kyle quickly stepped back as he saw Sean start leaning towards Cory's face.

"Maybe this will help!" Sean stated before locking lips with Cory and proceeding to do a full tonsil inspection with his tongue.

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### **Back on the dance floor:**

Julio stood there in shock at the wave of love that he had just felt wash over him. As he glanced around, he could tell that he wasn't the only one to feel it; everyone around him had latched onto the nearest person and was engaged in tearful hugs.

His thoughts were interrupted by a hesitant tap on his shoulder. "Are you okay, Sir?" a voice asked from behind him.

Julio turned and saw that it was one of the newer arrivals, Jesse, that had come over to check on him. Without conscious thought, his mind quickly reviewed what he had learned of the new boy in the day and a half Jesse had been a resident of the Compound. Jesse was a rescue performed by the State Police during a routine traffic stop that quickly became a lot more. They had pulled over a camper from Idaho that was speeding, and when they ran the license of the driver they found that he was under investigation for child endangerment and was under a court order not to leave his home state. The police quickly got approval to search the vehicle, and found Jesse, naked, tied to the toilet in the small bathroom of the camper, his mouth held closed with duct tape. The fact that his father had raised Jesse as his 'servant' backfired on him; as Jesse politely answered the questions of the police in exact detail. Julio himself had taken the call from the State Police once they had found out just what 'servant' meant to Jesse's father; after a quick tribunal assisted by a staff member of the Vulcan Embassy, Jesse was released to the Des Moines Compound as his father became the newest resident of a prison planet known for its inmates willingness to assist in the punishment of those who like abusing children.

Since his arrival, Jesse had went out of his way to be useful; so much so that he had to be 'ordered' to go to bed by the staff of the interim shelter because he insisted on trying to clean the entire building after everyone else had gone to bed. In the morning, everyone woke to find that Jesse had prepared a five-star breakfast for the entire group in the house. When asked why, he just shrugged and said "Daddy taught me that it's a kids job to make sure that everyone is happy. Besides, I like cooking."

All of this happened in a split second as Julio turned to face Jesse. "Yeah, I'm just trying to figure out what just happened." Julio replied as he took his first real look at Jesse. While he was involved in the finalizing of the transfer, he had not paid attention to the appearance of Jesse once he was assured there was no immediate physical damage, concerning himself more with making sure that he followed all the procedures that he was still memorizing. Jesse was a slightly small thirteen year old, with long fine blond hair reaching to the small of his back. His green eyes sparkled with life; despite his father's actions there had been no shortage of love in his life and it showed in the way that he carried himself. His

face could only be described as the perfect incarnation of a Tolkien-esque elf. "How are you doing, Jesse?"

"I'm doing fine, Sir." Jesse responded. "I don't know what happened either. I was just standing there trying to decide what to do about the stiffy that I got watching you dance when I felt a bunch of love hit me. As soon as I was able to see again after making a mess in my boxers, I looked over here and saw you just standing here. You looked like you need a hug, and I was kinda hoping you'd hug me back even though I got another stiffy as soon as I looked at you again."

Julio was speechless for the first time in his life since he had learned to talk. He pulled Jesse towards him for a hug, and almost immediately was held in the tightest hug that he had ever been in. Jesse was pressing every part of his body that he could into Julio, and Julio instinctively returned the gesture as he shifted his hands to hold Jesse as close as humanly possible. Before either boy could comprehend it was going to happen, they shared a mutual orgasm that was heightened by them pressing against each other so hard that the mess was shared through the thin material of their 70's outfits.

Julio was awestruck by the feelings coursing through his body, and he absently ran his fingers through Jesse's hair as he tried to absorb it all. He was shocked from his contemplation by a hand slipping between their bodies followed by a giggle as the hand explored their still-stiff nether regions.

"We really made a mess, didn't we Sir?" Jesse giggled as he continued his exploration.

Julio leaned his head back enough to turn it and kiss Jesse's cheek. "Enough with the 'Sir' already, cute stuff. I swore that nobody would touch me down there unless I was planning on marrying them. Between all the stuff I learned when Cory moved back home and me helping Johnny and Eddie, I even stopped dating. It's a good thing I did too; I'd hate to have to explain to my girlfriend that she's being replaced by a hot blond boy from Idaho. You're the first guy I've ever felt like this about; and I really hope it works out."

"I guess I better make it official then!" Jesse giggled as he quickly thrust his hand inside Julio's waistband. Julio was once again unable to speak as his body responded to the first ever touch from another person. The next thing he knew, Jesse was kissing him and a damp hand was down the back of his pants pulling him close to his new boyfriend.

Suddenly Julio realized that they were making out in the middle of the dance floor. His panic quickly subsided when he pulled his head back enough to look around; over three-quarters of the kids on the dance floor were doing the same thing, with the rest watching quietly while cuddled into little groups.

As Julio relaxed into the hug once again, he realized what had just happened. For as long as he had known Cory, the blond had caused a weird effect whenever he was around. Kids who at any other time would be at each other's throats if in the same room would get along like best friends if Cory happened to be in the area. As he thought more about it, he realized that those who Cory established friendship with seemed to start going the extra little bit to look out for others. *'Busted, Cory!'* Julio thought with a giggle. He reached down and took the hand of Jesse that wasn't busy feeling up his butt. "C'mon Jes'; if you want to be the boyfriend of a Division Head you better ask permission from the boss!"

Jesse looked at Julio in wonder. "If you want it si.. Julio.. that is all that matters to me."

Julio gave Jesse's hand a squeeze. "What you want is what matters to me, and you're about to have your chance to say it." With that, Julio gently guided Jesse through the crowd towards the table that Cory had landed at.

Once they were almost to the table, Julio gave Jesse a quick kiss. "I need to thank Cory for giving you a reason to hug me. Don't run off; I don't want to lose you."

"Okay." Jesse replied, his mind just starting to understand that Julio actually cared about what *he* thought. He followed along, and stood back a few feet as Julio walked up and gave a two-in-one hug to the still-seated Cory and Sean.

"Thanks Cory." Julio whispered. "Thanks forever." He stood back up, then giggled as he added "Next time give some warning though! Thanks to you, now I've gotta change my shorts, and I'll bet a lot of others do too!"

Before Cory could respond, Julio turned and reached out for Jesse to join him. In the few seconds it took for Jesse to take residence under Julio's arm, Kyle's voice came through in Cory's head.

*'Take it easy with Jesse, the new kid, bro; the way he was standing reminded me of Elf, so I scanned him. He's been through the same kinda stuff as Lil'elf, except there was no pain involved for Jesse.'*

*'Thanks Kyle!'* Cory sent back as him and Sean stood to meet Jesse.

Julio stood tall with pride as he made the introductions, pointing out who he was referring to as he went. "The little guys are Tyler and Kyle; if I tried to tell you anything about them you'd think I was crazy. Over here is Sean Short; he's the Clan Historian. Last but not least, Cory Short, Patriarch of Family Clan Short."

Kyle and Tyler both played up the 'kid' role, giving Jesse a welcome hug from the side. Sean went next, adding a 'welcome to the family' as he broke the hug. Cory went last, and as he broke the hug he placed a hand on each of Jesse's shoulders. "Welcome home, Jesse. I was told by someone I trust with my life that I could help you. Are you willing to let me help?"

Jesse looked Cory in the eye just like he had been taught to when speaking to an elder. What he saw made his chest all warm and fuzzy; he saw absolute caring and love. "If you say that there is something that you can help me with, I will accept your help Sir." Jesse replied carefully.

Cory nodded, Jesse's response confirming Kyle's scan. "By the power invested in me by the Vulcan High Council and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, I hereby release you from all claims of bondage and servitude which have been made either directly or indirectly over your person. Effective immediately you are a free being with all rights and responsibilities granted a member of Family Clan Short."

"Can you do that, Sir?" Jesse asked.

Julio giggled. "Wrong question cutie. It's not can he do it? It's who has the balls to try to stop him! It takes the entire Vulcan Council to override what he just said; the chances of that happening are less than zero."

"I'd believe him, Jesse," a small newcomer said from behind Cory, "You got some big bros backing you now. And my Daddy and Grandpa made it so that Blondie can say it. And Grandma Lizzy too!"

Cory's face grew wide with a smile, for he had immediately recognized the voice. He then felt a poke in the small of his back, "Working? Naughty Cory! You are sentenced to give the Royal Elf a five minute snuggle!"

Cory giggled as he reached behind him and pulled Joel around to his front so that he could place his arms across Joel's chest. "Jesse, it's for real. May I introduce you to His Royal Highness, Sa'ren Joel Short, King of the Elves and Official Family Cookie Monster."

Joel raised a small bag he had slung at his waist and offered it to Jesse. "Choco-chip cookie?"

Out of habit, Jesse looked to Cory for permission. At Cory's nod, Jesse put his hand in the bag and pulled out a cookie that barely fit through the opening. With wide eyes, Jesse looked at Joel. "Thank you, Your Highness; may I ask how you got so many cookies into such a little bag? It's almost like one of those 'Bag of Holding' things that my Dad used to talk about when he played D&D with his friends!"

Joel turned the bag so that the symbol on the side could be seen. "The Doctor gave it to me. It's bigger inside than outside," he explained. "You can call me Joel. I'm only Highness or Sir to our enemies."

Jesse smiled and nodded. "Thank you, Joel."

Joel then looked inside the bag. "This shouldn't be this heavy... it makes things a lot lighter, but you can still tell... huh! Jules? Come out of there, kiddo!" he giggled. He placed the bag on the floor and stretched the top open wider.

Laughing, a furry face poked its way out, "I like cookies, but there's no shynys in here, Daddy Joel! Ricky lied! Bad Ricky!"

"Wrong pocket," Joel giggled as he opened the side flap and pulled out an old gold English sovereign from the 19th century. "Here, sweetie. Come on, out you come," he continued as he gave the coin to the furry boy-like creature and pulled him from the bag.

Jules seemed about two foot tall, and his body was very thin and long. His arms and legs seemed oddly shorter in proportion than they should have been, and his tail was long and thick. His cute face was topped by a blue baseball cap... and that was all this kid was wearing.

He sat himself easily on one of Joel's shoulders while licking the 'Shiny', and blinking at those around him.

Cory looked over at Kyle, who just shrugged and grinned. Tyler wasn't any help either, his grin was even wider than Kyle's. "Umm, Lil'elf, could you maybe fill me in a little about what you've been up to?" Cory asked while giving Joel's hair a loving rustle.

"Yeah, and does he have any brothers that would like to live in Des Moines?" Julio added. "I think that me and Jesse could handle someone like him around!"

"You's not taking Verne! He's MY brudder!" Jules giggled.

Joel reached up and scratched the boy's belly lightly. "This is one of my new kids, bros. Kev and I got a few more to add to Rafe earlier today. As for who and how, you don't need to worry or know right now. Just enjoy your holiday and we'll tell you on Monday."

He then looked at Julio, "You don't want any of Jules' and Verne's *other* brothers. They are kleptomaniacs. My two ain't, and that's a bad thing in their case."

"Can I cuddles with the big bushy top one, Daddy Joel?" Jules asked, pointing at Sean.

Joel giggled and lifted him off his shoulder. "Sure. This is your Uncle Sean," he said as he handed him over. Then, "What have you done to your hair? And why?" he asked them all. "And why do I smell large amounts of sperm around here?"

As Julio and Cory did a very good reenactment of Cory's earlier blush, Kyle, Ty, and Sean broke into giggles. Jesse simply looked at Joel and explained. "If I understand Julio's comment right, Patriarch Cory is the one who sent out a wave of love, which caused a lot of the guys here to have orgasms. I had two, and Julio had three, that's why the front of our pants have wet spots. The hair thing is because this is a seventies dance and this is how they did their hair back then. That reminds me, I need to get Patriarch Cory's permission to be Julio's boyfriend."

Joel, giggling, looked at the red face his brother was sporting. "Cory's on holiday. I'm in charge of the Clan right now," he smiled at Jesse. "May I touch your forehead?"

Jesse nodded slowly, and Joel laid two fingers on the boy's temple. He then looked at Julio and did the same. Then, "As the Grandson of Sarek and Heir to House Surak, I do hereby endorse your Beginnings. When you wish to go for a Joining Review-Meld, it shall be open to you."

Jesse cocked an eyebrow at Joel, then looked at Cory.

Cory managed, "Ummm, you're now engaged... sorta... in other words, Julio is your boyfriend... and more..."

"Does that mean there won't be any more crusty socks in the laundry?" Johnny asked as he walked up and wrapped his arms around his big brother. "I hope so; Mom's about out of rubber gloves... again!"

Julio felt it was best to remain quiet.

"I'm gonna mingle a bit... you finished checking Sean's hair for shinys, Jules?" Joel giggled as he stood on tippy toes and kissed Cory's cheek.

Cory glanced over at his husband and burst out laughing, for the lower half of Jules' thin body was only just sticking out of the vast hair on Sean's head. Sean was laughing and holding the boy steady as well.

"Uh huh. No shinys! Ah well!" Jules called out as he squirreled out and plopped to the floor.

"Come on then, little furball. Let's see if others have shinys to give you..." Joel said as he held out his hand.

Kyle giggled, "Check my hair, Jules."

Jules grinned widely and ran over to the small Mikyvis and stuck his snout into Kyle's hair. A loud squeal of triumph came a second later and Jules' face emerged with a small silver cup held by his teeth. He spat it into his tiny hands and started jumping about crying happily, "Shiny! I gotta Shiny!"

"It's yours, little one!" Kyle giggled as he picked up the little guy and gave him a hug. "Welcome to the family!"

"Unca Leevee is wite! You a nice Daddy. Can I calls ya Poppa Kyle? Daddy Kev and Daddy Joel says dat us Clan Kids can have lotsa daddies and stuffs... Daddies are almost as nice as Shinys!" Jules squeaked out quickly, his brown eyes soulfully looking into Kyle's.

"Sure thing little guy! You know, that means that Levi, Dylan, and Bryce are your brothers now, right?" Kyle replied with a smile.

"Really? Me *and* Verne? Day our brudders for real?" the furry boy asked breathlessly.

Kyle and Tyler nodded with soft smiles on their faces. "And my Ty can be your Poppa Ty too, if you want. Both of you." Kyle added.

"And Aslan and Shere Khan and Brian and Sue and Lee toos? AND Rafey?" Jules rushed out.

The two Mikyvis kids nodded and talked softly with the small boy, while Cory turned Joel to face him. "Eight kids in one day? You going for the record, Elf?" he giggled.

"Uh huh!" Joel grinned.

"Don't tell Kyle there is a competition; he's got an advantage and he'll win every time." Sean giggled before turning to Jesse and pulling him off to the side. "I have an idea what your life was like, you were taught some very good things but were taught to apply them in 'unusual' ways. You should really get with Joel sometime; there is a lot that you have in common despite the differences in what you lived through before you became part of our Family."

Jesse nodded. "I will do as you ask, Sean."

At the same time, Cory had whispered to Joel, "Meld. I need to tell you some stuff."

Joel nodded and quickly joined his mind to his brother's. A minute later, he broke the contact, "If Julio wants to, I'll talk to them both after. Otherwise, just Jesse. One thing I know, Cor, is that your hugs and Sean's hugs are the bestest things to help heal those like me and Jesse. You do your thing, then Jesse and I can help each other after. I think I can pick up a thing or two from him."

Johnny interrupted Cory's response. "Uncle Cory? You made Julio's hugs more specialer when you did that love wave thing! He hugs like you now, thanks a ton!"

"It's finished now, Daddy Joel! Can we go dance and stuffs and find more Shinys?" Jules called as he ran over on all fours, which seemed a far more graceful way for him to move than on his short back legs.

Joel picked up his son and nodded. "Yuppers. Let's go see some of the guys." He then winked at Cory and mouthed, "Later."

Cory nodded and did as Joel had suggested: he pulled Jesse over and gave him a big hug.

Jesse returned the hug, and as he pulled away he commented "Now I know where Julio learned to hug! The only difference is he gives me a stiffie when he does it!"

Cory grinned. "Boyfriends do that - a lot! Enjoy it!"

"Okay, I'm about due to get another stiffie again!" Jesse grinned as he turned and got Julio's attention. "Julio? Is it okay if I have another hug from you? Cory says I should enjoy your hugs."

Julio came over and wrapped his arms around Jesse. "You don't ever have to ask again, cutie. I'm yours now; you get hugs any time you wish."

Jesse melted into Julio's arms, silent tears of joy springing forth as Julio's words sank in. Two simple words, 'I'm yours'; simple but unheard of in Jesse's short life. Possession was a concept which Jesse only knew by being one; there was never a time when he could say anything or anyone was 'his' unless he was stating a family relationship. His father had successfully managed to purge fright from his emotional inventory, so all Jesse felt was a little unease at the fact he was now free. Love was allowed within tight bounds, but those bounds were destroyed by Cory's wave, allowing Jesse to feel a love that benefited himself for the very first time. No matter how he looked at it in his mind, Jesse could only come to one conclusion; for the first time in his life he was a *partner* with someone. With that one conclusion, Jesse opened his heart completely to Julio, and with that one action, Julio's love began to weaken the shackles of Jesse's past.

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### **An hour later:**

Cory smiled as he glanced at the newly-christened 'Armchair Section' as him and Sean decided to take a break from dancing. Before Joel had left, he had performed a Meld with Julio and Jesse; once he found out there were no comfortable seats for them to cuddle in and recover, Joel made a quick call to Levi. After some quick replicator work, a few seconds later comfortable armchairs began appearing on one end of the gym. As he reached the table they had sat at when they first came in, Cory was able to see that Julio and Jesse had fallen asleep in each other's arms.

Sean turned two chairs so that they could watch the dance floor while they rested their legs, then the two boys took a seat. A few seconds later, Johnny and Eddie came walking up, each carefully carrying two glasses of soda.

"You looked thirsty, Uncle Cory." Johnny said as he handed Cory one of the drinks.

"We are getting drinks anyway, so we got you some!" Eddie added as he gave one of his to Sean.



Cory giggled and motioned both boys to join them. "Thanks guys!" he replied, figuring it would ruin it to note that just after he had told Sean they should take a break when the next song started, he had seen the two little ones running off the floor towards the concession stand.

"Do you want me to hold your drink while you climb up here for some snuggles?" Sean asked Eddie, as he saw that Johnny was already half-way onto Cory's lap.

Eddie glanced at his brother, then shyly nodded his head. "Johnny says you are good people." he commented as he handed Sean his drink then carefully took a seat on Sean's lap. Once seated, Sean handed Eddie his drink back, then put his arm around Eddie out of habit.

Eddie stiffened for a second, then relaxed and giggled softly. "You give nice snuggles." he whispered just loud enough for Sean to hear.

Sean smiled and gave him a light squeeze. "You're a good snuggler."

This brought on a fresh round of soft giggles from Eddie as he finished relaxing into Sean's chest. The four of them just sat and watched as the assembled kids enjoyed themselves on the dance floor. As the most recent song ended, Coach Simmons came over the PA.

"It took some looking, but I finally found the perfect song for our next Spotlight Special." Coach Simmons announced. "There are only two people here tonight who could really do this song justice; Mont and Bast, could you please take center stage?"

Everyone watched, curious as to what the Coach had up his sleeve. As the first notes of "Stray Cat Strut" hit the airwaves, both Mont and Bast got huge toothy grins on their faces. For the next three minutes, the tuxedo-clad lions hammed it up in the spotlight, tails high as they entertained the watching crowd. Cory and Sean barely managed to hold onto the two boys on their laps, as all four were laughing at the antics of the 'stars' of the moment.

As the song ended, Mont and Bast grabbed JJ and Adam out of the edge of the crowd, spinning them into the spotlight as Mont and Bast took their places. As the first notes of "Disco Inferno" hit them, the two boys grinned as they put everything they had into showing off the dance moves they had learned. During the six plus minutes of the song, Jesse, Julio, Cory, Sean, Johnny, and Eddie joined the sidelines -- Jesse and Julio having been woke up by the cheers during the cat's performance.

JJ and Adam were covered in sweat as the song began to wind down.

JJ leaned into Adam. "Looks like Julio found someone!"

Adam giggled as he prepared to give JJ a final spin. "Targets acquired, prepare for launch!"

JJ nodded, and as the final note played, they placed themselves so that they could spin Julio and Jesse into the spotlight.

Having not seen Mont and Bast pull JJ and Adam out, the two boys were surprised to suddenly find themselves in the spotlight. At first they started slow, but as the lyrics of "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" filtered into their consciousness, they got into the groove and began giving an awesome performance.

Julio 'led' Jesse in the dance moves, since Jesse did not have the benefit of a Mikyvis dance course. By the half-way point of the seven minute song, everyone there was singing along with the chorus, all clapping their hands to the beat as they watched their leader and his new partner.

Before the song was over, Julio knew who his target would be for the next song. He made sure that they were in position as the song wound down, and he quickly grabbed his two favorite Mikyvis and slung them onto the dance floor. Kyle and Ty giggled as Abba's "Take a Chance on Me" hit their senses. The two boys obviously had fun, and made sure that Cory and Sean knew what their plans were for the next song well before it was time. As the first notes of "Y.M.C.A." played, Johnny and Eddie followed the instructions Cory had passed to them and joined Kyle and Ty on the dance floor. The four kids had a blast acting out the song, their antics bringing smiles to everyone's faces.

Cory and Sean were well aware that the boys wanted them to be next, so they made their way into the spotlight as soon as Kyle motioned for them. Various groans followed by giggles reminded them quite plainly of what happened the last time they were featured, and after a few 'cleanup in aisle three!' comments from some of the older kids, their song started. A strange static seemed to fill the air as "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now" began playing, causing even those sitting in the Armchair Section to pay attention. To everyone's relief, there were no more emotional waves sent out during the dance, but as it wound down they all felt a sense of foreshadowing in the words of the song.

As "Night Fever" started to play, Cory waved for the rest of the kids to join them. In no time, the dance floor was filled with kids doing their interpretation of the dance moves from the movie; the earlier feelings pushed to the back of their minds.

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### **Later that night:**

"Cory, do you realize how many nervous teens there were when you and Sean started dancing to "Last Dance" at the end of the party?" Julio giggled as they walked out of the building.

"Bite me, Julio." Cory replied softly, trying not to wake Johnny, who was happily sleeping on his shoulder.

"Like you would have complained!" Sean added, shifting Eddie to a more comfortable position for both of them.

"I wouldn't have!" Jesse announced with a grin.

"You don't have fur!" Mont and Bast replied in unison, causing both cats to break into giggles.

"Where's an open pool when you need one?" JJ giggled to Adam, as they made sure Casey and Tina were comfortable in their arms.

"Not right now, bro... later." Kyle replied after interrupting his kiss with Tyler. "Cor, your arms are gonna be dead if you carry Johnny all the way home. Do you want us to save the walking?"

Cory thought over his answer for a second. For the first time since the attack, Kyle and Tyler had let loose and allowed themselves to just be normal kids during the dance. From the tone in Kyle's voice, he

really didn't want to let that go; but his concern for Cory made him ask anyway. "I like that idea, but hows about you just take us to Julio's driveway so that I can convince his parents to let us kidnap their sons for a sleepover? I think I can handle walking home carrying this angel from there."

Kyle smiled back at Cory, quite happy with the compromise. "Okay Bro; one driveway coming up."

In the blink of an eye, the group found themselves standing in front of Julio's house. Cory took the lead with a giggle as they went up to the door. "Hey Ma, I'm Home!" Cory announced with a laugh as soon as he walked in the door.

Julio's mom, Janice, chuckled as she came over and managed to give Cory a hug without crushing Johnny in the process. "It's about time! What have I told you about running around the Universe without giving a call?"

Cory tried to fake a pout, but his giggles prevented it from being convincing. "Sorry, my cell phone doesn't work outside the atmosphere!"

"I see he's back to being the prankster of the group!" Janice laughed as she moved over to welcome Sean. "It's nice seeing that smile back on your face, Sean; I thought you lost it there for a while."

"If you knew what Cory did to give him that smile, you wouldn't think it was nice." JJ giggled under his breath.

"Oh, I've got a really good idea." Janice replied, causing JJ to turn beet red. "Would you mind introducing your comedian trainee and his obvious partner in crime, Cory?"

Cory snuck a glance at Julio, and could tell by the expression on his face that the distraction was giving him time to figure out how to break the news to his Mom that Jesse was moving in. He stepped forward a few steps, then started the introductions. "That is JJ Richardson, one of my 'blood brothers' is probably the easiest way to explain it. The little guy in his arms is Casey, he's the son of a friend of my Mom. Next to him is Adam, he's one of my adopted brothers, and he's holding Casey's sister Tina. Next to them is our brother Tyler, and the cute kid trying to hide behind him is my 'blood brother' Kyle, who happens to be JJ's little brother. The furry guy who just poked Kyle is Mont, and the other furry guy is Bast, they are Sean and I's Security as well as being family."

The flash of a camera made them all pause for a second. The deep bass chuckle from the doorway told Cory what had just happened without even looking. "Mick! You KNOW that I hate having my picture taken!" Cory whined.

"Someone has to keep records to show your grandkids!" Mick replied as he walked into the room.

"Welcome home guys, and it's nice to meet the rest of you. Julio, are you going to introduce us to your boyfriend, or do I need to break out your baby pictures?"

As Julio stood there like a fish out of water, Janice added her opinion. "At least you got good taste son! If I was twenty-five years younger and single you would have had a fight!"

Now that BOTH boys were doing imitations of stop lights, Cory decided to add some fuel to the fire. "Janice, Mick, meet your soon-to-be son-in-law Jesse Crowley."

"CORY!!!" Julio and Jesse chorused as their blushes expanded. "How did you figure it out, Dad?" Julio added.

"The stains on your pants, along with the puppy-dog eyes that Jesse there was giving you, son." Mick chuckled. "I'm not too old to forget what it's like being a teen."

"Give them a chance to recover before they set off the fire system, hon!" Janice said as she cuddled into her husband's side. "I'm impressed though."

It took a few minutes for the couple to recover enough to be able to interact with the others. While they were waiting, Cory, Sean, JJ, and Adam put their armfuls of kids on the couch. Kyle stayed cuddled up to Tyler, his renewed shyness in full effect.

Cory worked his way over to the little Mikyvis and lifted him into a cuddle. "What's the matter, bro?"

Kyle shrugged. "Dunno. This cuddle feels nice though."

Cory smiled knowingly. "You can relax, they are good people and I trust them totally bro. You think that you can trust the word of your big bro?"

"I trust you bro; I guess they're just a little too bouncy." Kyle replied softly.

Cory kissed Kyle's forehead. "I love you Munchkin; and I think you'll like them once you know them."

Kyle nodded slowly, clinging to Cory. Mick carefully walked up to join them, making sure that he was in Kyle's line of sight as he approached. "So you're the famous Kyle Richardson?" he asked softly. "I'm happy to see that you still let yourself be a kid. Did you have fun tonight?"

Kyle nodded his head, his grip on Cory making it plain that he was not planning on going anywhere any time soon.

Mick smiled. "Good, when Julio came up with the idea for those dances, we figured that it would give everyone a chance to unwind. Everyone, no matter what their age, needs some 'kid time' every once in a while. People who don't get it tend to become really crabby."

Kyle nodded his head once again, then carefully reached out a hand and touched Mick's face. Mick stayed perfectly still, somehow knowing that Kyle was checking him out in his own way. After a few seconds, Kyle released his hold on Cory and held his arms out to Mick. Mick gently took Kyle from Cory and allowed him to get comfortable in his arms.

Cory smiled as he saw that Kyle had decided to trust Mick, and he leaned over to kiss Kyle's cheek before turning to see what he was missing. He couldn't help but giggle when he saw that Janice was busily taking turns fawning over her son and his boyfriend. Julio had finally got over his embarrassment, and was beaming with pride at his mother's comments about Jesse. The rest of the group had taken a seat wherever they could find one, watching the show with grins on their faces.

"I guess this means me asking if your sons can stay the night at my place is kinda out, huh Mick?" Cory commented as he watched Janice fawn over Jesse's hair.

Mick chuckled. "I think that it'd be a good idea if they did. If there is anyone that can give Julio advice on making it as a teen couple, it's you and Sean. As far as Johnny and Eddie go; today was the first time either one of them has been excited to go anywhere, so I have no problem with them enjoying themselves as long as possible."

Cory smiled. "You can thank the little angel in your arms for helping the munchkins, Mick. His natural charm worked a miracle."

"Cory!" Kyle giggled softly. "All I did was be a friend!"

"Sometimes that is all it takes, little one." Mick said softly. "Just a little friendship from the right person can work miracles."

Cory giggled as Kyle hid his face in Mick's shoulder. "Lil' bro, I think he got ya. You want me to wake your cuteness trainees?"

Kyle giggled as he nodded his head. "Yeah, maybe all of us can save Jesse from his new mommy-in-law!"

"I heard that!" Janice laughed. "Can I help it that Julio got his taste in men from me? Too bad I'm not about twenty-five years younger, or I'd be fighting my son over his boyfriend!"

"MOM!!" Julio exclaimed as he turned red from head to toe. "That's just WRONG!!!"

"Hey! What am I, chopped liver?" Mick laughed.

Kyle tilted his head up and licked Mick's cheek. "Nope... you taste more like a pretzel... kinda salty." he giggled.

Cory shook his head with a grin. "JJ, Adam? You guys wanna wake up the angels and help them get things to spend the night? Casey and Tina can help them pick out some toys if they want to take something with them."

"That sounds like a good idea." Mick agreed. "I'll take care of giving this little angel his daily requirement of snuggles." he added as he gave Kyle a squeeze.

"And I'll get his little partner caught up on his." Janice added as she turned and picked up Tyler.

"I *LIKE* that plan!" Tyler giggled as he snuggled in her arms.

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### **Fifteen minutes later:**

As the group of kids started down the road towards home, Mick and Janice watched them from the front porch. "You know, I get the funny feeling that things are about to get very interesting." Janice muttered as she watched the group turn the corner.

"You can say that again." Mick stated as he turned just in time to see three Vulcan technicians beaming into the front yard....

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"Five... four... three..." Cory giggled as he looked at his watch while walking.

"CORY MADE HIM *WHAT??!!*!" they heard being yelled by Janice from behind them.

"Guys, I think the best action at the moment would be... RUN!" Sean giggled as he started jogging.

"Wait for us!" Johnny, Eddie, Casey, and Tina exclaimed as they ran to keep up with Sean. The rest of the group followed Sean's lead, all giggling as they made their way home a little faster than planned.

As they reached the yard, they found Teri standing as the door shaking her head with a grin. "Did you guys forget to tell some parents about a few things?"

Cory giggled. "Nope; we knew they would find out soon enough! Payback for Julio's mom trying to steal his boyfriend!"

"You are just *EVIL!*" Teri laughed. "Get in here, before the lynch mob finds you!"

"We got the adults outnumbered, we ain't worried!" Tyler giggled.

"That seems to be the story of my life!" Teri chuckled. "Get in here before you all decide to take over the universe!"

"How did you know what our plans for next week are?" Adam asked with a grin as he went through the doorway, unsuccessfully trying to avoid a playful swat from Teri.

As the kids headed into the Rec Room to unwind from their evening, Teri gently pulled Sean and Cory off to the side. "Your brother is waiting for you guys in Cory's bedroom. He says that you two need to come on up there for a few minutes."

Cory tilted his head then grinned. "I wonder if Saints are affected by empaths?"

"If so, I'm sure we'll hear about it!" Sean giggled as he put his arm around Cory's waist. "C'mon babe, let's see what Angel-Boy has up his wings this time."

"Angel-feathers!" Cory responded as he leaned over and kissed Sean fully on his lips. Once they were done exchanging tonsils, they started up the stairs.

They stopped outside the door, Cory turning Sean to face him. "You know what?" Cory started softly, "I love you more than anything, even more after tonight. After all of the crap I've put you through, you still love me. Tonight you showed me just what I meant to you as you made sure everyone knew that I belong to you. You showed everyone how much you love me with every chance you could get. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I thank God that He gave me the present of your love."

Sean pulled Cory even closer. "You didn't put me through anything, hot stuff. If I had to go through everything all over again I would as long as it means that I have you. I didn't really understand just how much you meant to me until I almost lost you. If it is possible, I love you more because of what has happened. I'll never stop loving you. In fact, without you I don't think I could really survive."

"You're just as stubborn as you are cute." Cory giggled as he kissed Sean's nose. He started to lean in to explore Sean's tonsils, but was interrupted by Mikey's voice from inside the bedroom.

"Could you two horndogs stop feeling each other up and get your skinny butts in here?" Mikey laughed. "I have two grown men in here who are getting a really interesting opinion of you two."

"Mikey!" both boys exclaimed as they began blushing. "Do you *HAVE* to interrupt *EVERY* intimate moment we have!"

"Yes, it's my job. Now get your horny butts in here!" Mikey responded with a chuckle.

"You are sooooo dead Angel-Boy!" Cory giggled as him and Sean wrestled with the doorknob, each of them trying to turn it in a different direction.

"You mean you noticed?" Mikey said as the door popped open. "You'd think at your ages you two would have figured out how to turn a doorknob by now."

"Bite me, Mikey." Cory and Sean chorused as they walked over to the bed and sat down, Cory holding Sean on his lap.

"Okay Mikey, what is so important that you had to interrupt me helping Cory with his Family Planning homework?" Sean asked with a grin.

"You both really need help with "Family Planning" homework if you're trying it together... you see, you need a BIRD and a Bee... not just two bees, bros!" Mikey responded with a grin.

"He don't complain!" Cory and Sean both chorused, each pointing at the other.

"So I've heard...." Mikey replied. "Despite the fact we have all of Eternity to discuss your favorite form of exercise, do you two think that you can control yourselves long enough to have some visitors?"

Cory and Sean looked at each other, then stuck out their tongues at their big brother.

"I'll take that as a 'yes', so try to behave!" Mikey giggled. A few seconds later, two men appeared standing next to him.

"Glory be, Lad, you be a spittin' image of your mother!" the blond gentleman next to Mikey stated as he fixed his eyes on Cory.

"You got that right, Uncle Pat." Mikey said as he nodded. "Aunt Cheri thinks so too!"

Cory's head snapped to look at Mikey, his eyes going wide. After a few seconds, he turned and stared at Pat. "Daddy?" Cory asked incredulously.

Pat nodded his head, and before another breath was taken Sean found himself on the floor as Cory launched himself at his father. Fortunately, Mikey had anticipated that, and had gotten permission for the spirits to appear in a solid form. The other spirit walked over with a grin and offered his hand to Sean to help him up. "Like father like son, I would say. You landed yourself a lively one, Sean... your Mom has good reason to be proud of both of you. I sure am; it's not every father who can say one of his sons is a Saint in Heaven and his other one is a Saint on Earth."

"Michael, I think ye be messin with your little lad's head a wee bit much. Get to hugging him, less I have Little Mike give you a wee bit of persuasion." Pat said with a grin as he caressed the back of the blond leech securely attached to him.

Sean's eyes got wide as he pieced together what Pat's comment meant. Within seconds, he was wrapping his arms around Michael, silent tears of joy at seeing his father streaming down his face.

Pat chuckled. "He be just like you was, Michael. Look good Cor; they be twins separated by a generation. If I dinna know better I'd be sayin they's the same person."

Cory simply smiled. Words just refused to come to his lips at that moment. He simply smiled, and hugged his father all the tighter.

Mikey just smiled, and held his wings out as two slightly confused Mickyvis found themselves occupying each of his arms. "You guys have earned this." Mikey said to Ty and Kyle. "Besides, your stepfathers insisted that you get to meet them properly too."

About a minute later, as both Sean and Cory were still silently latched on to their fathers, Teri quietly came through the door with Johnny in her arms. As she headed over to sit on the edge of the bed, she gave the occupants of the room a tearful smile. "Thank you for doing this Mikey; if it wasn't for you already being a Saint I would say that this qualifies you as one. You have just gave your brothers something they have needed for a very long time."

"You can say that again, Sis." Cheri said as she appeared along with Davey. "Mikey's little helper here was sitting with me as we watched the reunion. We can catch up in a few; right now I think my son needs to become the filling in a spirit sandwich!"

As Teri nodded, Cheri went over and joined her husband in comforting Cory.

Mikey looked over at Davey with raised eyebrows. Davey giggled as he answered the unasked question. "Just because you're the boss don't mean I can't look out for them too! They're my brothers now as well as yours. Cory needs them both, so instead of you having to go get her, I took care of it."

"I always knew Sean was the smart one," Ty giggled with an impish grin up at Mikey's face.

"Bite me, Turtle!" Mikey responded with a grin.

Ty looked up at Mikey, tears suddenly springing to his eyes. "Nobody's called me that since you died." he whispered.



"I know; and I'm proud of you for finally sticking your head out of your shell." Mikey replied lovingly as he pulled Tyler in tighter to his side.

Kyle grinned shyly. "Looks like I'm the only one not crying," he said with a hesitant whisper. "Can someone say something nice to me so I can cry too? I've not had happy tears in a while..."

Johnny motioned for Kyle to join him on Teri's lap. Once Kyle was comfortable, Teri wrapped her arms around the two boys. "Kyle, you're still the lovable shy little guy who was 'just here for the shoulder rides' two and a half months ago. I'm proud to call you one of my sons, because you still have that spark that makes every day with you special. I think you shared that spark with Johnny today; I see the same look in his eyes that you get when things are not crazy. I love you little man; and no matter what, that will never change."

"Thanks.... Mommy," Kyle whispered as he hid his face in Teri's neck.

Cory smiled through his own wet eyes; it looked like Kyle just got his wish. He then looked up at Pat. "Daddy, why did you have to leave me?"

Pat tilted his head down to kiss the top of Cory's head. "It was me time, son. I kinna think Our Father was thinkin it be best to be watchin my favorite laddie from Up High."

Cory buried his face in Pat's shoulder, once again falling quiet. Sean looked up into his father's eyes as he asked softly "Have you been watching us too, Daddy?"

Michael nodded. "Every moment. Pat and I both are always watching you two; we knew that you two had something special way back when Cory used to insist on giving you his pacifier. Neither one of you were talking yet, but he'd always manage to find a way to get over to you, and next thing we knew his pacifier was out of his mouth and into yours."

"So *that* is where he got that habit from!" Sean giggled softly.

"You might say that; you two have came up with ideas that Pat and I never though of!" Michael chuckled. "I can tell you where you got the gene that makes you like boys... that one came from me. Your Mom is the first and only woman that ever interested me, so seeing you and Cory getting together was no surprise."

"You're not mad that I'll never make any babies?" Sean asked softly.

"Not at all; you've collected a group of grandkids and great-grandkids for your Mom and I that make me very proud." Michael replied seriously. "They may not be related by blood, but they are related by something much stronger... *Love*."

"Thank you Daddy." Sean said with a smile as he leaned back into Michael.

Pat grinned. "Aye, Laddie." he said as he gave Cory a squeeze. "You an' Sean 'ave always been kinna tight. I canna help wonderin if ye might be makin a lil' laddie or lass as much as ye be tryin'!"

Cory giggled as he began to blush. "Daddy!"

"Don't be worryin your head, Cory. I'm thinkin you got ye stamina from myself." Pat chuckled.

"Ain't that the truth!" Cheri piped up. "I think the only reason you started dating me is Michael was complaining about not getting any sleep! That brings up something else though. Davey, would you mind helping me when we are done here?"

Davey nodded. "Our Father has already assigned the Task to me. He has decided that it is Time; the Lessons have been learned."

"Thanks, sweetie. It's no wonder Jerry idolizes you; you're an Angel in more ways than the obvious."

"Aww mannn!" Davey groaned as he blushed to the tips of his wings.

"I warned you!" Mikey giggled. "Just wait; I've had to live through it from all four of them!"

"Yes, and you enjoyed every minute of it!" Teri and Michael said in unison.

"Daddy, what did you being hornier than a jack rabbit make Mommy just think of?" Cory asked innocently, the tone of his voice letting everyone present know that he had allowed himself to regress to the past to deal with freshly revived memories from his childhood.

Pat chuckled as Teri, Michael, and Cheri tried not to break out in laughter. "Laddie, me thinks Teri's been'a givin ye lessons!"

Mikey spoke up. "I think I can answer it better, Tigger. A promise was made a long time ago; a promise that has been kept to this day. Something will happen once you get your head straightened out the rest of the way; Something really good. When it happens, you will know what it is, but if you are told before it is Time then it will not go well. When the Event happens, just remember that it was arranged by Someone under Mandate; the revelation is your reward for following your Heart."

"Has he *ALWAYS* been this confusing?" Cory groaned.

"YES!" all of the adults said in unison.

"I know less now than I did before he started talking!" Cory giggled. "I hear you though, bro. You're sayin don't get pissed because of something I'd usually get pissed at because it's supposed to happen this way?"

"Pretty much!" Mikey chuckled. "I knew you'd figure it out!"

"Mommy? I think Mikey is worse than when Levi talks to his 'Friend!'" Kyle giggled.

Teri laughed. "I'll second that, Angel."

Kyle giggled harder as halos appeared above his, Ty's, and Johnny's heads. "There, now everyone knows who are Mommy's Angels!"

And as horns appeared over Cory and Sean's heads, Tyler giggled, "And her little devils!"

"What about me?" Mikey fake-pouted.

"Sean's told me somea the stuff you've done bro." Ty giggled. "You may be a Saint, but you sure ain't no Angel!"

"Teasin' poor Joel and Kev is tha last in a LONG list of things you've done!" Kyle added.

"Oh?" Sean asked as he grinned from his dad's arms.

"First time interruptions," Kyle stage whispered.

Cory went beet red as Pat chuckled. "Aye, that was a wee bit mean there, Laddie."

"Not nearly as bad as when your Mom caught you masturbating with a pair of panties you had bought from the store though, was it Mikey?" Michael said with a knowing smile.

Cory stopped blushing, and started choking - on his laughter, for he had fallen from his father's arms and was now rolling around on his back, howling madly.

As Pat leaned down to rescue his son, he added. "Aye, an' that be the last time Little Mike hid 'imself in the laundry to be reliev'in himself too."

Mikey had decided to remain silent and dignified, even if he was blushing every shade under the sun. Davey, on the other hand, was sitting back grinning widely. "I love reunions; you learn so much about people...."

"If Saint Peter hears about this, Davey, you and I are going to have words. Got it?" Mikey said, his voice even but his eyes dancing.

"You couldn't afford my silence, bro!" Davey retorted.

"If they're angels, I'd hate to meet a demon!" Johnny giggled from the cuddle he was enjoying with Teri. "You guys are lucky; Momma Teri gives awesome cuddles, even if her older sons are weird!"

Cory looked over at Johnny and smiled; based on what Julio had said, this was probably the first time in a long time the boy had grinned and laughed like he was doing now. "Just wait until you meet the rest of us; some of them make Mikey look normal!"

"I'll second that!" Mikey chuckled, inwardly glad that Johnny's shell was cracked without outside intervention. "I think watching a family get-together has become the favorite pastime of some of my friends!"

"Aye, that it has." Pat chuckled. "Mostly to see the Love all of you have, but the antics be well known throughout the Upper Realm."

"So *THAT* is where Elvis got the idea to toss Abe Lincoln in the pool?" Davey asked as he tried to restrain his laughter.

"One and the same!" Michael laughed. He looked around to ensure everyone had recovered their emotions from the initial meeting, then continued. "We need to thank three special little boys for taking the time to make their brothers happy. Kyle, Tyler, and Johnny visited with us a few years ago when we were teens. Pat and I were a couple as much as could be done back then, and both of us were really down about what our lives looked to be like. The visit from these three gave us hope, and is probably the only reason that we have sons on the Earth today. Thanks to those three, a whole group of kids are happy tonight. As we watched you guys at the dance, we realized two things. One was that we no longer needed to feel bad about not being here for you guys, and two was that seventies disco clothing looks absolutely weird no matter what species is wearing it!"

"You kinna argue that our lads were the handsomest ones there though, Mik." Pat said with a smile. "You boys made everyone smile, I ain't just speakin of your group orgasm either, son! You made this Ole Scotsman proud Cory; and soon you' be gettin the reward for keepin the family heritage."

"What heritage?" Cory asked curiously.

"Ye needs to ask me Uncle. He'd know, but he's not in line for it," Pat smiled.

"Who?" Sean quired.

"Why, Monty, o' course!" Pat replied with a grin.

"Monty?" Sean asked in confusion.

"You don't mean..." Teri started as her eyes grew wide. At the nod from Pat, she exclaimed "Oh shit! Just wait to find out guys; I think there will need to be some groundwork laid before this bombshell gets dropped. If we are not careful, this could be worse than letting Jory loose in a TNT factory."

"Aye Lass, that it may be." Pat chuckled. "I'm thinkin that Cor needs to be a lettin a few of those trees be replaced before he be needin more surprises. Will you trust Teri to know when it's time to be tellin ye the news, Cor?"

Cory looked up into his father's face with a grin. "Aye, she dinna do no wrong so far. I kinna argue about her timing, Dad."

Pat chuckled as he gave Cory a squeeze. "I kin see ye's been a practisin proper speakin. Why don't you an' the lads come with myself to be meetin the rest of the family while Michael does some handlin' of personal matters wit' Teri? When they are done they'll be joining us to take our leave."

Cory grinned and jumped up onto his feet. "Awesome! Come on guys!"

They rest of the group formed up behind Cory, Pat, and Cheri. Even Sean hung back slightly, sensing that this one time Cory needed to be able to stand by himself with his long-lost parents. Mikey was the last in the line, and he looked over his shoulder as he followed the group through the doorway. "Please listen to him, Mom." Mikey said before closing the door behind him.

As the boys trooped out with Pat and Mikey, Mike turned to Teri, "You. Come here. I've missed your hugs, and I have something to talk to you about, young lady!"

Teri smiled, yet a tear did trickle down her cheek. "I've missed you, Mike - more than you know."

"No," he murmured as he took her into his arms, "I do know. I've been watching."

Teri closed her eyes as Mike enveloped her in a tight hug, and she smiled happily.

"Before I get to my own concerns, love, there is something you need to know about one of your... *our* boys."

"Who?" she asked curiously.

"Sa'ren. Or Joel to you. Have you felt anything peculiar in his presence?" Mike asked seriously.

Teri thought, then nodded her head against Mike's shoulder, "Yes. I feel I've known him for a lot longer than just a few days."

"You have," Mike explained. "Remember telling me about how you were feeling before the news came in about the Transwarp Disaster?"

"Uhhh... oh, you mean when I thought I was having morning sickness?" she half giggled. "Yes, I re... wait, what are you meaning?" she said, as her face paled for she had a funny feeling about where this was heading. She knew the deeper import the Transwarp Disaster had for her family, after all.

"The instant Sa'ren was snatched from this Universe, you became ill," Mike explained. "Saint Peter explained it all to me. That boy was never meant to be lost, nor was he meant to remain in the care of T'Sara. She was destined to die young, but he... he was ALWAYS meant to be YOUR child... OUR child. As much as all your boys are yours, they are mine too. Spock's as well. You have always been recorded as 'Mother' to the Shaper, Teri. You have always been recorded as 'Mother' to those who will set this Universe aright. Our two boys, Cory, the Mikyvis... the Shaper... all of them. Even the least seeming are destined for something. But young Sa'ren... he was meant to have been yours since he was 3 years old."

"How could THAT have been? I'd never have met Spock or Joel or any of them at that time!"

"I wasn't meant to die, Teri. I died before my time. So did Pat. Something is working against us, but 'all things are worked for the good of those who love' as the Good Book says. If I'd have lived, we'd have met Spock and Sarek when I would have joined as a Civilian Worker in Starfleet. Remember why I was out of the house the day I died? Pat and I were going for the interviews... we'd have met and loved little Sa'ren then. When T'Sara WOULD, or SHOULD, have died, Spock would have come to us to ask us to be his parents while he was off planet with the Enterprise."

Teri was stunned into silence.

"We would have raised him, and Cory would never have lost his parents. So much was MEANT to be, but something changed. It was as if, when Sa'ren was snatched away, a 'force' went into fury and started lashing out."

"Wh...what do you mean?" Teri asked, her mouth dry.

"I cannot explain. I don't know, love. But even though so much is on a new path, this new path shines all the brighter. More has been done than the Book of Life had originally intended - and it all revolves around Cory, Sean, Joel, JJ, Adam, and the rest of them. But they cannot do their task without their 'mother' - You! Even though so much was destroyed by this 'enemy', that one thing has remained. You. You are the constant. But you are incomplete. So..."

"So 'what', love?" Teri asked, her mind spinning.

"I need you to listen now, love," Mike whispered, after making sure the boys were gone. "I need you to really listen this time."

Teri nearly chuckled, "Okay. This once, I'll listen to you."

"Good... because I don't want to have to get moody. Nor do I want to see you lonely forever..."

"Mike?" she murmured, pulling back to look at him questioningly.

"Shhh..." he smiled, placing a finger to her lips. "Listen..."

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### **Rec Room:**

Bruce looked up from watching Casey and Tina playing with the sabre-toothed kitten, and almost fell from his chair in shock as he saw who Cory was escorting into the room. "Pat? Cheri? I thought you were dead!"

"That we be, Bruce!" Pat chuckled. "Now don't ye be a passin out again, or I'll be needin to be requestin ice... again."

Cory had a huge grin on his face as he looked around the room, locking eyes with JJ, Adam and Kai as he scanned. "Guys, this is *OUR* Mom and Dad, Pat and Cheri Scott!"

Pat grinned as Cory proceeded to introduce everyone in the room. Once Cory was done, he nodded his head. "Laddie, you hava assembled one fine set of brothers for our family. Kai, as the newest brother ye need to be knowin that Our Father isa Blessin you with the best brothers ina universe!"

Kai tilted his head. "Why do the Spirits seem to always appear in my new family?"

"It's a side-effect of having a Saint as a combination big brother and guardian angel, little one." Cheri replied with a smile. "It doesn't help when you have a group of brothers who literally carry the hope of the Universe in their hearts."

Kai nodded. "I see the wisdom in that, Spirit Mother. The Legends of the Islands tell of a group that will one day restore peace to the tribes; my heart says that the group is now here."

"You can open your heart, Kai." Cheri said softly. "As I have watched this family grow, it has reminded me of a puzzle. Every piece has it's place, and there are no pieces left over when the puzzle is com-

plete. Our Father has given you the honor of being a part of the puzzle, it is up to you how important of a piece of the puzzle you become."

"I will do as you suggest, Spirit Mother." Kai replied with a smile.

As Cheri and Kai were talking, Pat made his way over to JJ and Adam, Cory tagging along glued to his side. Pat looked JJ over before smiling at him. "I see that ye got your Mother's fire in ye veins, Lad. Royal blood it be too, from times far past. You have made myself and me wife proud many times over since ye joined our family, and I'm sure that you and Adam will continue to be the honorable lads that we all love."

JJ gave Pat a small smile. "Thanks. I never expected to actually get to meet Cory's parents, and now I can see where he gets his big heart from."

Cory reached out his free hand and put it on JJ's shoulder. "Bro, they are OUR parents. When we swore that pact, everything of mine became yours too, that includes OUR parents. That goes for you too, Adam."

Adam chuckled. "I knew that already, I got a Ty-Gram right after you told Ty and Kyle the same thing, bro! it's kewl knowing that I'm getting a bunch of awesome parents to make up for the old ones I got stuck with."

Pat laughed. "Ye be correct, Adam! JJ, ye need to know that any parent of a Clan member who has joined Our Father's Realms is part of a special group. We share our family on Earth between all of us, each watching the offspring of all the others."

Cheri smiled as she joined them. "The translation of that is that all of us Up There have decided that all of you are one family and as such so are all of us. I lost count of how many generations of Angels have come together as one family as you guys built your family here."

JJ leaned into Adam's side as he replied softly. "Thanks... Mom and Dad. I don't know how you can be proud of me though. I'm getting ready to do something really selfish just so I can be with Adam all of his life."

Pat reached out and lifted JJ's face to look him in the eyes. "Only Our Father knows if you are planning the right thing, James." Pat said, the tone of his voice showing that JJ was to listen carefully. "HE never sets a challenge without placing the right action in your heart, and He never leads one of His flock astray. While He does not tell me what His plans are, if you are listening to your heart you will not be led astray by your actions."

"I understand, Dad." JJ replied, his posture changing to reflect the confidence that Pat's speech had restored in him. "I guess it's best for me and Adam to sit down and really discuss what our hearts are telling us instead of what others think we should be doing."

Pat and Cheri both nodded. "That is the best thing to do, for both of you." Cheri stated.

Cheri then looked at the two boys with a smile. "On a lighter note, I need to remind Teri to work on spoiling your kids more; you guys are getting it way too easy!"

"She don't need any encouragement!!" Adam and JJ giggled in unison.

"I heard that, you little rats!" Teri's voice announced from the stairs. "Just wait, you haven't seen anything yet!"

"BUSTED!" Cory, Sean, Kyle and Ty giggled in unison. Kai laughed as he added "I hope that you washed your feet before eating them, bruv!"

Casey looked up from the game he was playing with Tina, noticing the blushing pair of boys. "Daddy? I didn't know people could glow like that!"

Bruce smiled as he replied "Unless Teri's changed, it's going to get worse!"

Julio, Jesse, Johnny, and Eddie all collapsed on the floor in giggles as they saw the expressions flash across JJ and Adam's faces.

Teri entered the room, Michael's arm over her shoulder. "Now why would I mention that I'm going to teach their sons the many uses for chocolate icing... except for JJ and Adam's favorite one that is." Teri commented with an innocent smile.

"You mean they finally settled on chocolate?" Michael asked.

As both JJ and Adam did very impressive imitations of space heaters, the two newest arrivals went over and gave them both hugs. Michael then turned and looked around at everyone in the room. "My Sons, the Nexus. All fathers dream of their sons making a small difference in life, yet in this room tonight I have the honor of returning to tell the core of my family that they have exceeded my wildest dreams. Never doubt your hearts... none of you, because what you have started is what this world has needed for a long time. Bruce, earlier you expressed to Teri a willingness to help; that makes you my brother by the rules our sons have put in place. Welcome to our family, and expect life to never be the same."

Michael then turned to Julio, Johnny, Eddie and Jesse. "Three J's working together has a history of doing wonders in this family. Tonight Cory gave you the greatest compliment he is capable of giving; the trust that you can continue what was started in this very house. Julio, Cory is rarely wrong, and in this case I know he made the right choice. Listen to your hearts; because by this time tomorrow, I think that you'll find that the four of you here tonight have formed your own core that will be just as unbreakable as the core that my sons have formed. Once the Past has been revealed, then the bond can form."

Julio looked at his three companions, and felt a spark of something entirely new to him ignite in his chest as he concentrated on what Michael had said. "What do you mean about the past?"

Michael shook his head. "That's not mine to tell, or even to fully know. What I do know is what Mikey has told me. You will know soon."

Julio looked over at Sean. "Now I see where you learned Confusion; it's genetic!"

Sean looked over at his father, and broke into a huge grin. "Thanks!"



**AC's notes:**

I know, this one is even longer than usual! Seriously, it is this long because I had a lot of things which had to be covered here before I could end the chapter. I'm really enjoying writing this, and am looking forward to finding out just where this is going!

This chapter cements the fact that this is a continuing story that runs alongside the rest of the CSU; while not Memories, it will continue the tradition in Des Moines.

Thank you for reading and hope that you enjoy this latest addition to the CSU.

AC

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**Archivists Notes:**

Okay first all the wait for this chapter was worth it. Now to the bad news, it is going to be a while before I can edit anything else; this huge chapter wore me out. :)

I also have to disagree with ACFAN - THIS IS MEMORIES!!! By that I mean this chapter takes us back to what the original story was like. This chapter brings back memories of when I first started reading "Memories".

Thanks ACFan and Ilúvantír for such a wonderful chapter,

TSL

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Just in case you were wondering, here is how to make Kulolo:

- \* 1 large taro root, grated
- \* 3 coconuts, grated
- \* 1 cup water
- \* 2 cups coconut water
- \* 2 tsp brown sugar

Preparation:

Mix taro with coconut meat.  
Add water, coconut water, and brown sugar.  
Put in baking pan.  
Top with butter.  
Bake 1 hour in moderate oven (350 degrees for most).

You may wish to partially cook the taro before grating. Cut in chunks and boil slightly. Do not over-cook.

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## Chapter Three

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Jesse slowly climbed out of the group bed in Cory's room, being careful not to wake anyone on his way out. As he reached the edge of the bed, he turned and smiled as he took in the still-sleeping bodies on the bed. Johnny and Eddie were each sharing one of the cats with Casey and Tina, Johnny's new kitten purring softly in his free arm. Cory, Sean, and their brothers were all in a tangled pile in the center of the bed; neither Cory nor Sean were visible under the protective shield of their brothers. Jesse's eyes finally settled on Julio, who he found watching him with a smile on his face.

Julio quickly joined Jesse. "I didn't wake you, did I?" Jesse asked softly, the underlying fear of having messed up evident in his tone.

Julio pulled Jesse into a hug as he replied in a whisper. "No; I was watching you sleep. Don't worry about waking me; I'll be a lot happier knowing that you got up instead of waking up alone."

Jesse smiled, and gave Julio a quick kiss before starting towards the bathroom. When he noticed Julio hanging back, he turned to his new boyfriend. "You can share the bathroom with me. I can't remember the last time I used it by myself."

Julio nodded and followed Jesse, inwardly wondering just how much his boyfriend had been through that he didn't know about.

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A few minutes later, the rest of the crew started slowly working their way out of their sleep. After Cory finally made his way out of the pile, he noticed Kyle and Tyler sitting on the floor with the four youngest kids. They had retrieved the Uno deck from Cory's dresser, and Kyle was in the process of dealing the cards.

"Uno before breakfast??" Cory asked in surprise.

Kyle giggled. "Yeah; we need somethin' to do while waiting for you slowpokes. Jesse and Julio have this bathroom tied up, and all the little guys needed to 'go', so Ty and me took them to Marc and Danny's house to take care of morning stuff. They even got to meet Joey."

"I think that was a good idea, Kyle." Cory replied. "Jesse and Julio are gonna need their time. Why don't you guys go on down to the Rec Room and play cards there while you're waiting on us?"

"Okay Cor." Kyle replied, standing up to give Cory a quick hug before retrieving the dealt cards.

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Teri was the first one downstairs, as per normal, and breakfast was well on the way. She hummed to herself as she was laying the table, between sips of her first cup of morning coffee. As she turned back from the table, she had to catch herself from yelling, for Mikey was standing there, holding out the stack of bowls for her to take.

"Good Morning!" he said brightly, although there was something forced about his smile.

"Good Morning, Mikey. Something's wrong, I can hear it in your voice. Spill it, son."

Mikey's face tightened, and he bowed his head. "No need. You'll be getting an update on that link of yours any second," he whispered as he moved forwards to embrace her. He reached out with his power and caused silence to surround them, as well as tie together Tyler and Kyle's laces on their tennis shoes in a knot that even their powers couldn't undo quickly.

Teri automatically wrapped her arms around her son. "What's wrong, Mi... wha... Spock! NO! Oh, GOD!" she screamed out as both fury, rage and grief fought for control over her heart.

Mikey squeezed his eyes tight shut. She was feeling the same as he had done nearly an hour before when he was made aware of the problem, and he had known instantly - and had been forbidden from helping. Now, all he could do was help here. To preserve all that existed. To keep his brothers 'in the dark'.

Teri's eyes were wide and they ran with tears as her mind-link with Spock became a highway of grief and screams of rage.

"Mom," Mikey said as he tried to break through to her, "Mom, you need to focus. You need to hold yourself back, Mom. We can't let my brothers know. We can't! Not yet, not now. Can you imagine the chaos if Kyle were to know? It's why I'm here. You HAVE to pull back, Mom!"

"Why!" Teri exclaimed in a rage that Mikey had never seen from her. "Why HIM?"

"I don't know... I don't know..." Mikey sobbed suddenly in frustration. Then he felt Kyle giving up on his shoes. "Father! I need more Time! We need more Time!"

Everything around them became still. Everything. Everywhere.

Teri didn't notice. She just gripped all the tighter onto Mikey. "He's been through... through... NO! I can't accept this, Mike! You HAVE to be able to DO something. No, wait. GUARDIAN! YOU DO IT, CHANGE IT. NOW, God damn you! NOW!"

"He's busy, Mom," Mikey sobbed as he rubbed her back. "He's chasing down the Fallen and - best I not tell you. He can't change this, Mom. I can't either. I don't know how it happened, how the Defenses failed, but... he's going to need you, and..."

"I swear by everything that is holy that if I ever get my hands on the being that caused this to happen that being is going to think Hell is a vacation destination." Teri exclaimed.

"That's what the Guardian is doing right now, Mom," Mikey whispered. "He's playing Vengeance, and he's skating near to breaking his Mandate to do it too..."

"That's just a taste of what *I* will do." Teri stated matter-of-factly. "My son needs me. Take me there. Now, Michael."

"I can't. You're needed here, and..."

"NOW, Michael!"

"Mom, think! If you up and leave, Cory and Kyle will find out. Then we have..."

Teri's mouth went dry. "Oh... FUCK! WHY HIM, Mike? Why?" A second after she said it she added, "Wait! Cory's going to know anyway! Kyle will see I'm not myself, he'll find out, and..."

"No, he won't. It's why I'm here. You will use me to help cover yourself from revealing this. You **HAVE** to, Mom. This is the hardest thing I've ever had to ask you, but you **HAVE** to pretend everything is normal - that there's no problem. At least right now. Once the Unit have finished their invasion of Orlando and we have the ones that did it, we'll see how to tell the guys then, but not right now. If they... no, we have to wait," Mikey whispered the end. Then, "He's going to need you, but that will be tonight. For certain, he's going to need you then - but I don't know how, as you won't be leaving here either... oh, God... this is too much. I'm being supplied with help, Mom, and I'm here to pass that onto you. I'm also here as a 'holiday'. Don't ask me, St Peter just told me to go and that was the second reason."

"Holiday? When Joel is going through...? What in God's Name...?" Teri spluttered.

"I know," Mikey whispered. "I know... that is what I'll tell the guys, anyway. I won't lie. I just have to help you hide the truth..."

"Who is watching our family if you're on 'vacation'? Teri asked, trying to use the basic skills that Spock had recently taught her for use in situations where she needed a clear head.

"Well, they called in a very old, OLD spirit to take point in Orlando. Then my dad and Uncle Pat and Aunt Cheri are helping him," Mikey said as he felt her start to regain control.

"Who's the spirit?" she asked as she started to close doors in her mind.

"Black Feet's father, the Earth's oldest Animal Spirit and progenitor of all the others. He's called Cy-noeswr, but to the Dragon guys, he's Silver Wolf. They've known him for nearly a year, now - just not **WHAT** he was."

"Going by what William and Duke can do, I can live with that choice." Teri replied.

"Just be glad that I-Cheya's father was told 'no'."

"That big Sehlat we met at Joel's naming?"

"The same. He's older than Cynoswr, and very short tempered," Mikey said as he tried to smile.

"Look, Mom, I know this is a lot to ask of you, and it was a lot to ask of me, but I can see why the Higher Ups did so. He's going to be okay, Mom. You're going to make sure of that. We all are."

"He better be, or else someone is going to wish that Cory had found out first...." Teri replied, the unspoken threat left hanging.

"Do you think you can handle this, Mom?" Mikey asked softly. "I can ask for us to stay here longer if you need it."

"If Cory really has the power to end the Universe because Joel got hurt, I don't really have a choice, now do I?" Teri asked seriously.

"No, you don't," Mikey agreed. "In the end, I think it's going to be that Joel will be the one to tell Cory. From anyone else, we're going to have a big problem on our hands." He hugged her tight for a moment longer, then said, "Time is starting. Remember, I'm on holiday. That's all."

A few seconds later, they heard Kyle and crew coming down the stairs. "...and if I find out which one of our resident pranksters welded our shoelaces together, they're gonna be standing in the corner until there is no more corner to stand in!" Kyle exclaimed as he led the rest of the youngest kids towards the Rec Room.

"It was me; I haven't taught that trick to Bryce or Dilly yet!" Mikey announced as he held up his hand. "Big brother prerogative; pulling pranks on his little brothers."

Kyle and Ty both stopped and glared at Mikey. "That was too much!" Tyler exclaimed. "We had to get Quint to fix them!"

"And you ain't NEVER going to teach ANY of our sons that... ARE YOU MIKEY?" Kyle added, obviously not happy with the scale of the joke. "Then you stand down here with Mom to let us suffer before you disappear again."

"I'm not going to disappear for a while, guys. I've been given Orders like Dad gave Cory. I'm on holiday," Mikey said as he came over to the two not pleased boys and tickled their ribs to get them laughing.

"Angels get holidays?" Johnny asked as he watched Mikey slowly melt through Kyle and Ty's displeasure.

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As Cory and Sean finally made their way into the Rec Room, they overheard Eddie talking to Kyle.

"Hey Kyle? How did you meet up with Cory?" Eddie asked seriously.

Kyle tilted his head, then gave a small smile as he began his tale. "It kinda started when I walked in the door of the last Home we were in...."

**\*\* Begin Kyle's Flashback: Mid-November 2003 \*\***

*'I wonder how long it'll take this shrink to decide I'm too much of a freak to stay here'* Kyle thought as he followed the social worker up the walkway to the latest of many 'homes' he had been shuffled through. His previous psychiatrist had lasted a record three weeks before giving up and passing Kyle off to someone else. According to the Judge, the Psychiatrist that was being assigned by him personally did not believe in giving up. Kyle risked a small smile at that thought; it sounded like a challenge that he was well up for.

As they entered the door and walked up to the desk, Kyle noticed something that made him pause. In all of the previous homes, within seconds there was a mob of kids gathered around him to 'meet the new kid'. While all of the kids in the area were watching him in this home, they seemed to be holding back for some reason. Kyle turned his head and saw what he assumed was the reason heading towards him; a blond kid barely in his teens. *'The bullies work quick around here!'* Kyle thought to himself. He chanced a look at the kid's face, and was surprised to find a welcoming smile instead of the sneer he expected.

Just then, Kyle's head had one of the 'flashes' that he had lived with as long as he could remember; flashes that lately had grown stronger and larger. Within a second, he knew more about the kid approaching him than the kid himself knew. As Kyle worked to reclaim his own thoughts again, he felt the kid stop next to him and place a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, I'm Cory." The kid announced. "Hey Jeff, Jake's about his age and could use a roomie." he suggested, something in his tone saying that he wouldn't be too happy if the suggestion wasn't taken. "Besides, that way 'Drew and David have another target besides me for their Monopoly marathons!"

Jeff erased something he had written down and made an entry on the other side of the paper. "You know, Cory, you could at least give me room to argue when you pull stunts like this!" he commented with a chuckle. "Just for that, you can introduce him to your shrink, since he's Kyle's shrink too. I swear, that judge must have the hots for that guy or something. No matter how many times he gets told that Doctor Richardson is not allowed to practice here, he still issues court orders stating that we have to allow it."

Cory shrugged. "I ain't arguing none; he's helping me." He then moved so that he could pick up Kyle, having the young boy on his hip before anyone could say otherwise.

Kyle twisted his head, and found himself looking into Cory's eyes. Kyle's eyes grew wide at what he saw; absolute compassion and friendship, even though Cory didn't know a thing about him. *'If he's for real, I ain't never gonna tell him nothin that'll make him hate me.'* Kyle resolved as he melted against Cory's chest and enjoyed the first innocent cuddle in recent memory.

As Cory felt Kyle relax against him, he announced loud enough to be heard in the still lobby area. "You can chill, Kyle; if anyone here even thinks of messing with you they have to deal with ME."

"Why?" Kyle asked softly from the new-found security of Cory's arms.

"Because you kinda feel like a little brother. I felt it as soon as I picked you up. I dunno if I really have any little brothers, but even if I don't you feel like one." Cory continued as he started carrying Kyle down the hallway. "Since you feel like a little brother, I gotta protect you like a big brother is supposed to." Cory paused, then in a quiet voice added "That includes not letting you try to kill yourself, because that is sure what it looks like you planned from the way your eyes looked."

"You don't know what it's like..." Kyle mumbled softly.

"I don't know a lot of things, memory loss does that." Cory replied seriously. "Doctor Dan has taught me that there is nothing that teamwork can't beat; my roommate Mark and my friend from school, Sean, have been working together with me to try to get my memories back. It seems to be working a little bit too; there's stuff at school that I'm starting to remember how to do again, and sometimes I even get little flashes of me as a little kid."

"Will you still want me as a brother when you get all your memories back, though?" Kyle asked.

Cory nodded. "Sean says that is one thing I never forgot; when I make promises I always keep them. With God as my Witness, you'll always be my little brother ... forever."

Kyle tilted his head. "I guess you better get working on getting your memories back then, because I'll only promise to stick with getting better if you do too."

"You've got a deal, little bro." Cory said as he gave Kyle a squeeze.

"Why is everyone scared of you; you're so nice?" Kyle asked softly.

Cory sighed. "Last month a kid killed herself. Her note said that one of the staff was doing stuff with her. I had thought I had seen something and had said something to one of the other staff members, but they blew me off. Jeff had heard me report it, and when he saw that no report had been made the next day, he started getting suspicious. He went to check on her after going through the report book one more time, and he found her body. His partner on the shift was a really good friend of the guy who did it. I was at the counter by Jeff's request to help with the report; When Jeff came running up to call the paramedics and said what he found on the note, the other guy grabbed me and informed Jeff that I was the one responsible. That really pissed me off, and I screamed as I threw the guy off of me. He fell back against the counter, hitting the back of his neck on it. Jeff called 911, telling me to stay still and relax. He pulled out the tape that records everything that happens at the counter, and gave it to the cops as soon as they showed up while he told them everything that had happened. Even the administrator admitted it was self-defense, so I didn't get in any trouble. Ever since then, everybody is afraid of making me mad. Sean says that he knows I have taken Judo lessons before, and he thinks I used some of that even though I can't really remember taking the lessons."

Kyle's brain played it's tricks on him again, and he saw in his head the events as Cory was describing them. He reached up and pulled Cory's head down to where he could wipe the tears from Cory's cheeks. "You're still good. I bet that with you around there are a lot of people who don't get hurt no more. I think I'm gonna like having a big brother named Cory."

**\*\* End Flashback \*\***

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"...And after that, we kinda became inseperatable." Kyle finished.

Cory walked over and picked Kyle up for a cuddle. "Yeah, I think you started moving into my head the same day, Squirt!"

Kyle giggled as he poked Cory just under the ribs. "Nuh-Uhh!!! I waited at LEAST a WEEK!!!!"

"Why?" JJ asked, then he snapped his fingers, "Nevermind, I figured it out. You had to get the cleaners in to get rid of the cobwebs and dust off the braincell. Makes sense!"

"Be glad I'm holding Kyle, or you'd be halfway to the pool already JJ!" Cory giggled.

"We got ya covered big bro!" Ty replied as JJ was grabbed by him and Adam.

"One of these days, you're gonna learn not to make blond jokes...." Adam giggled as they escorted JJ to his punishment.

"Well, at least THIS time it wasn't an ocean!" Teri commented softy as she squeezed Mikey's hand.

Kyle giggled. "That's only cuz Harley ain't got his room for new friends... yet...."

"I'm not saying a word," Mikey commented with a half smile at Kyle.

"So, why'd you say you were here, Mikey?" Cory asked. "When I was heading out of the bathroom earlier I heard you tell Mom you'd been told to stay with us."

Mikey shrugged, "I'm under orders to have a holiday too, bro."

"You tryin' to say we're working you too hard, bro?" Sean half-giggled.

"I'm copying your new nephew - saying nothing," Mikey grinned.

"Who? Which new nephew?" Cory asked as Adam and Tyler walked back in, followed by a naked and dripping JJ who was carrying his clothes. "Jules? He's about as quiet as Timmy on a sugar rush."

Mikey smiled, "No. One of his brothers. A wise little boy called Lee."

Sean tilted his head. "So you're saying this wise boy named Lee says not..hi..ng.... MIKEY! That was bad! Your sense of humor is worse now than when you was alive!"

Mikey, his face serious, said, "It's no joke, but you won't believe me until you meet Lee."

Cory glanced at Sean, "Jules DID say he had a brother called Lee, hon."

"It's still bad," Sean giggled as he poked his tongue out at Mikey.



Julio giggled as him and Jesse cuddled Eddie and Johnny. "Admit it Sean, you're just pissed that you didn't think of it first! You're the only person I know that can make puns that make a Brit grimace in agony."

"Just think of him like a parent Julio; then you won't hear half of it!" JJ commented, forgetting that Teri was in the room.

Teri stood up and stopped JJ from going upstairs to find dry clothes. "You won't need them yet, young man. This way please," she said firmly as she took a hold of JJ's ear and guided him back out towards the pool.

"Now THAT is a world-shattering event... Mom using the pool as a punishment for JJ's mouth not being attached to his brain!" Cory giggled. "Usually she sticks to me and Sean."

"I know... when you two were rugrats that's how I'd calm you down during your wilder moments." Mikey replied with a laugh. "It worked so well she started doing it too."

Kyle assisted Cory by making a halo above his head as Cory replied. "But Mikey; we NEVER caused any trouble!"

"No. You instigated it instead," Mikey grinned as he remade the halo into a pair of horns. Attractive horns, Sean thought appreciatively.

"Cory's horns are making Sean horny!" Eddie exclaimed before collapsing against Jesse in giggles.

As the rest of the boys giggled, Sean tried unsuccessfully to not blush. "He's MY horn-y blond!" Sean quipped.

"You better believe it!" Cory giggled.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. Teri went to answer the door, pausing in surprise as she saw the young woman in a wheelchair holding a small baby. The older lady pushing the wheelchair addressed Teri. "Mrs. Short?"

Teri nodded her head as she placed the name with the emancipated face in the wheelchair. "Yes, that's me. Candy? Candy Burroughs?"

"Hi Mrs. Short." the girl said weakly. "I'm not bugging you, am I?"

"It's *still* Mom, young lady, and I've been worried sick about you, since you never returned my calls. Get in here, introduce your escort and that little bundle in your arms, then relax while your friend here explains to me why you are in such poor health." Teri replied, giving no room for argument.

"Yes Mom." Candy replied, relief evident in what was left of her voice.

Teri led the pair into the Rec Room, where all conversation came to a halt as soon as Cory and Sean saw the new arrivals.

Mikey had hidden himself from view, since for some reason he was blocked from 'looking' to see who was arriving. He caught himself just in time as he realized that appearing next to her would probably literally scare Candy to death. *'Mom, you need to tell her about me... please ... I'd kill her if I just popped in!'* Mikey said in Teri's head, his emotional overload present in every word.

*'Let her get comfortable with the rest of us first, Mike. I'll make sure she is ready; plus I think she'll say more if she does not know you are here.'* Teri thought back.

*'Okay, Mom.'* Mikey replied, inwardly realizing that his Mom had things under control.

As the wheelchair came to a stop, Bast stood and quietly signaled for the overstuffed recliner to be evacuated. As Adam and JJ found another seat to cuddle in, Mont walked over to the wheelchair. "Hi, my name is Mont. Can I help you to a more comfortable seat?" he asked softly, his limited telepathy having told him more than he really wanted to know about what was about to happen.

"I'm Bast. I'll hold the little angel for you while my brother helps you, if you want." Bast added as he came up on the other side. The baby obviously liked the idea, as he was already holding his arms out towards the big furry boy he saw standing there.

"I don't think Patty is going to give me a choice." she answered softly. "I would appreciate the help; this thing is almost as comfortable as a bed of nails."

Bast smiled as he reached down and picked up the little baby. Almost instantly, the baby wiggled around until he was able to reach the bottom of Bast's mane; within seconds giggling as he played with the hair.

"I think you've made a new friend, bro!" Sean giggled as he watched Patty cuddle into Bast's fur.

Bast smiled. "Now you see why I'm so proud of my fur; it makes me more cuddleable!"

Even Candy laughed softly. "You can hold him for a while if you want... Bast."

Bast nodded. "Thanks; he's a little cutie." he replied as he found a seat.

Mont helped Candy into the chair, then once he was sure she was comfortable he made himself a seat next to the chair.

Candy nodded her head towards the lady who had brought her. "Mom, this is Julie Wilkins. She is with Central Iowa Hospice, and was nice enough to bring me here on her day off when I found out that you were back in Des Moines."

The rest of the group had taken seats to see what was going to happen; the actions of the cat boys signaling that this was something important. Kyle and Tyler both positioned themselves out of the direct line of sight of the rest of the group, both trying their hardest not to display their emotions over what they had figured out was causing Candy's failing health.

"Hello Julie; thank you so much for helping Candy. I'm Teri Short, you can feel free to just call me Teri." Teri said.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Teri." Julie replied. "Candy, save your strength; I'll take care of filling them in."

Candy nodded. "Thanks Julie."

Julie looked around the room, inwardly amazed at how all of the kids were just sitting and waiting to hear what was said. "Teri, Candy is suffering from the advanced stages of acute leukemia. When she got pregnant, it weakened her body enough that the disease took hold and began to run rampant. Even with Federation help, the doctors were unable to stop it. I've spent the last month getting her to agree to contact you, since she believes that you might hold interest in what happens to her son."

Teri held up her hand, the pieces in the puzzle falling into place inside her head. "Before you continue, there is one more person that needs to be fully here. My son Mike was dating Candy before he was killed. He's known as Saint Mikey of Urbandale now, and I think he should be present. Candy, prepare yourself; he's going to probably be appearing right next to you."

Mont saw the disbelief in Candy's face. "Candy, Aunt Teri is telling the truth." Mont said softly.

Candy looked at Mont, the seriousness of his face convincing her. "Okay, I guess I'm ready." she announced.

Teri didn't even have a chance to inhale before Mikey appeared next to Candy, tears flowing freely down his face as his wings glowed brightly. "Candy!" Mikey whispered, the whisper somehow echoing throughout the room.

"Mikey?" Candy replied, the reality of Mikey actually being there a surprise even though she had been prepared for it by Teri. "You're dead though, or I thought you were...."

"Still a textbook blond I see..." Mikey said with a small smile. "I'm a Saint now, just like Mom was saying."

"So miracles DO occur." Candy shot back, making it obvious that this had been normal banter between them.

"Not the one I want to happen." Mikey replied, sadness in his voice.

As Mikey and Candy were talking, Teri quickly glanced around the room. When her eyes fell on Kyle and Ty, their tear-streaked faces told her more than any tricorder reading ever would. She motioned for the two young Mikyvis to join her, aware that right now they needed cuddles no matter how powerful they could be. As they took positions under each of her arms, she turned her attention back to Candy.

"Mikey, I would like you to meet somebody." Candy was saying as she motioned for Bast to join them.

Mikey looked over at the baby that Bast was bringing over, Patty happily swatting at Bast's mane. He saw himself in the face of the little baby boy, and he felt his mouth go dry.

"Mikey; this is Patrick Michael Short... your son." Candy said softly. "I wanted to name him after you, but juniors are so stupid for names, so I swapped your middle name in as a first name."

Mikey carefully took Patty from Bast. Patty didn't mind, as he quickly decided that he wanted to play with the pretty wings. Mikey smiled, managing to control his wiggling son long enough to look him in the face. "I have a son," Mikey said softly as he kissed Patty's forehead. Tears were pouring from his eyes as he blinked at his baby boy. "I... I have a son!"

Candy looked at Mikey curiously. "Why do you act like this is a surprise? I thought Saints can see everything?"

Mikey shook his head as he wrapped his wings around his son, much to Patty's delight. "I can only see what falls under my Mandate. The way my Mandate is worded, I was not able to watch over you. I... I never knew, Candy. I never knew... oh, Patty," he cried softly as he took his son's gaze with his own. "May Our Father Bless you, Patty."

Cory and Sean saw how distraught Mikey was getting, for they knew that he would have been there had he known, and it was tearing him up inside. They came up and cuddled in either side of their big brother and looked into their nephew's face. "He's beautiful, Mike," Sean whispered. "Don't kick yourself in the nuts for not being there. It wasn't your fault."

"You were only obeying the rules, Mikey," Cory added with a whisper.

"Miracle number two... Michael Short following the rules." Candy quipped, causing both Sean and Cory to giggle. "If your Mom only knew...."

"I did know; Mothers know everything - and I taught him well; always obey the rules, right Mike!" Teri replied as she joined them. "Michael, you and your brothers need to introduce the newest member of the family to your other brothers while Candy and I talk... unless you'd like for your brothers to know some of your more embarrassing pranks...."

Mikey gave Teri a small grin. "I get the hint, Mom. I'll get lost."

As Mikey, Sean and Cory headed around the room to show off Patty, Teri tried to get comfortable with the two young Mikyvis clinging to her. Tyler pulled himself in tighter to Teri as he whispered "Mommy, Candy's really hurting bad."

Teri gave Tyler a squeeze as she addressed Candy. "Candy, this little blond is one of my newer sons, Tyler, and the one under my other arm is my son in all but name, Kyle. Tyler says you are in a lot of pain, and for reasons that would take forever to explain I'm taking his statement as fact. Would you like some help with the pain?"

Candy shook her head. "I can handle it; I don't want any drugs messing up what I need to ask you."

Teri could tell by the slight trembling she was feeling from Tyler that it was probably bad enough that he was having to fight his instinct to step in. "Candy, I'm not talking about any drugs. What you see on the surface is not always what is reality; these two little angels are proof of it. Neither one of these boys would register as human on a medical scanner; in fact I would not be surprised if they could manage to not register at all if they really wanted it. It doesn't matter, I love both of them just as much as my other sons. Tyler is able to take away a good portion of your pain if you let him; he won't do it unless both of us agree to it though."

Candy looked closer at Tyler, and noticed the purple 'halo' on his steel grey eyes. "Is that why you're crying Tyler? Because you feel my pain?" Candy asked softly.

"Kinda." Tyler replied softly, afraid to put into words the fact that neither him nor Kyle could take away what was killing her.

"Will you be feeling my pain if you take it from me?" Candy asked.

Tyler shook his head. "No, Ma'am.... I convert it to energy."

Candy nodded. "I don't think I need to know how you do that, but if it keeps my head clear while I'm talking to Teri, I'll take the help. How long will I have before you have to stop?"

"Forever." Tyler replied simply, taking the squeeze he felt from Teri as permission to begin. The sound of thunder in the clear skies outside told Teri just how much pain Tyler was siphoning off; the relaxed look on Candy's face showed that his efforts were having the desired effect.

Candy glanced at Kyle, and had the sudden urge to reach out and pull him into a hug as she saw that he was glued tightly against Teri's side, his face buried in her chest.

"Is he okay?" Candy asked, nodding her head towards Kyle.

Teri shook her head. "Kyle has legitimate issues with anyone losing family. Right now he just needs to be held; when he's ready we'll talk it over until he can get his mind around why."

Candy slowly leaned so that she could rub Kyle's back. "Thank you for caring, Kyle." she said softly as she rubbed in small circles between his shoulder blades.

As she helped to comfort Kyle, Candy started quietly vocalizing the thoughts that had been tearing through her mind since the day Mikey died. "The day Mikey was hit, he was supposed to pick up his brothers from the mall after practice, then we were going to surprise them by taking them out to dinner...."

"A double date?" Teri injected with a small smile.

"Actually, yes." Candy replied. "I figured out they were a couple the first time I met them, and we figured they'd get a lot less hassle if Mikey and I were there. I was planning on giving Mikey the news that I was pregnant during the date; due to how close he was to his little brothers, I figured it would only be fair that they find out at the same time. I still can't remember much about what happened when I got the call about what happened; everything is pretty much a blur until the funeral. That's when I found out that Cory had completely lost it, and that Sean was on a twenty-four hour a day suicide watch. You were going through enough already, there was no way that I was going to add the extra stress because Mikey was thinking with the wrong head."

Teri knelt down, both boys still clinging to her sides, and held both of Candy's hands with her own. She smiled into Candy's face, and her expression took the nervousness out of Candy's eyes. "Sweetheart, I understand. I won't say you thought right, but I understand why you said nothing. But I do want you to know, just for yourself to really know that Patty will be okay, is that I would *never ever* have abando-

ned him - nor would I have thought any less of you or Mikey. And I don't now. I know that, if things were different, you and Mike would still be together, and the two of you would have been excellent parents together. How could I think any less of a wonderful girl that I feel is my daughter in law?"

Candy, her eyes running tears, leaned her head forwards to rest against Teri's shoulder. Tyler, who was now looking up into the teen's sobbing face, reached up more to kiss her on the cheek.

"Besides," Teri said softly as she comforted the crying girl. "It wasn't just Mikey not 'thinking'... it does take two to tango, sweetheart," she continued with a smile and a loving laugh in her voice.

Candy laughed even as she cried. Between the mix of gentle sobs and soft laughter, she managed to say, "Yeah... and oh boy, did we tango..."

The dual 'ewwww!!' from each side of Teri made both women chuckle. "You two don't have any room to talk." Teri said softly, moving her arms back down to give them a loving squeeze before returning to the task of comforting Candy. "Is this why you seemed to get tired easily?" Teri asked, changing the subject for the benefit of the boys. "I always thought it was because you barely ate enough to feed a sparrow."

Candy nodded. "Yes. I had chronic leukemia that was developing so slow that nobody realized it. When I became pregnant, the doctors say that the combination of the hormone changes from pregnancy and the actual stress of being pregnant, on top of the stress from Mikey's death, allowed the disease to become Acute. I had the choice of them trying to treat me immediately, which probably would have killed Patty, or waiting until he was born and then hope it could still be stopped. There was no way I was going to take a chance of losing the best thing Mikey left with me, so I gambled on the doctors being able to stop it after he was born."

Teri paused for a minute before responding, her expression insinuating that she was listening to something in her head. "You did the right thing, at least that's what Davie says."

"Davie?" Candy asked curiously.

"One of Mikey's sidekicks Up There." Teri responded. "He's a good kid, I've become good friends with his parents. He was abducted and killed a while back, now he helps Mikey keep track of things. Knowing him and Pablito, one or the other of them stretched their Mandate to find out if you made the choice that you were supposed to."

"So Mikey has Angel sidekicks that are just as bad as him? Are they that desperate for Saints nowadays?" Candy asked with a grin.

"I heard that!" Mikey laughed from across the room. "You would be surprised to know I'm the angel of our little trio!"

"Jerry's told me about Davie." Cory said. "There's no way he's even half as bad as you!"

"Like you have room to talk, Squirt!" Mikey chuckled as he let Adam hold Patty for a minute. "Do we need to discuss the reasons you were told that you couldn't do any more independent study in the computer lab?"

"All I did was beef up their firewall!" Cory replied innocently.

"Yes, and set the home page for every teacher in the district to the "Teaching for Dummies" webpage." Mikey chuckled.

"Well... I was just trying to help book sales." Cory tried, looking totally innocent.

"Suuurreeee.... and I supposed setting the 'beep' sound on Principal Maas' computer to the 'Mickey Mouse' song was an accident, right?"

"Maas... Mouse... hey, that's as close as I could get!" Cory giggled. "With that accent he had, it sounded like Mouse anyways!"

"Let me guess..." Teri said from where her and Candy were listening carefully, "that must have been the year that Mikey somehow got listed as the legal guardian for both of you in the school's records."

"Ummmm... hey Mikey, what's the weather supposed to be like tomorrow?" Cory quickly asked.

"I thought so..... busted!" Teri laughed.

Sean just shook his head with a grin as he took a turn holding Patty. "Hey little guy!" Sean said softly as he rubbed noses with his nephew. "Just remember I'm your innocent Uncle; don't listen to the rest of them!"

Mikey shook his head in wonder. "Innocent... I'm not EVEN going there; I've grown kinda attached to these wings...."

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### **Thirty minutes later:**

Since the rest of the Short boys were busily discussing the latest twist in their vacation, not to mention the fact that he was closest to the door, Jesse decided to answer the doorbell when it sounded.

"I'll get it!" Jesse stated as he started towards the foyer. A few seconds later, he returned and walked up to Cory. "Sir? Governor Jacobs is in the foyer and wishes to speak to you."

After a second to remember just why Jesse was so formal, Cory turned and gave Jesse a quick hug. "Thanks, Jesse. Why don't you take him to the kitchen? I'll grab the rest of your division that are here and we'll be right behind you."

"Okay Si... Cory." Jesse replied, this time catching himself. He understood why he didn't need to be formal anymore, but the habit was a hard one to break.

Jesse went back to the foyer. "Governor, if you would please follow me, Patriarch Short will be with you shortly."

Ted Jacobs smiled as his young escort. "That will be fine. Lead the way, young sir."

Jesse nodded, then led the way into the kitchen. Once Ted was seated, Jesse asked "Would you like some refreshments, Sir?"

Ted was impressed with the manners of his host. "Thank you Jesse, by some chance would you have any coffee?"

Jesse nodded. "Yes Sir, Mrs. Short just made a fresh pot. Would you like cream or sugar?"

"No thank you, Jesse. No reason to ruin good coffee." Ted replied, inwardly glad to see the small grin on Jesse's face at his humor.

A few minutes later, Jesse returned carrying a tray of drinks just as Cory led the other boys into the kitchen. Jesse served Ted first, then as everyone took their seats he placed drinks in front of each of them, whispering a quick 'thanks' to Eddie as he served him.

Once Jesse was done, Cory spoke up. "Thanks for helping out, Jesse. Go ahead and have a seat, I'll take over from here."

Jesse smiled and took his seat by Julio, then Cory got down to business.

"Good Morning, Ted. What brings you here on a Saturday?" Cory asked with a smile.

"I heard that your Mom makes the best coffee in Des Moines, and I had to verify it!" Ted replied with a grin. "I will say that this is the most professional reception that I have had in ages... I am quite impressed."

Cory grinned. "Considering Jesse is the First Officer of the Des Moines Division, I think you should be telling that to his Division Head, Julio! I'm pretty impressed with both of them!"

Ted smiled at the young teen that had spearheaded the initial organization of the Compound; even if he had not known Julio, he would have been able to distinguish Julio by his blush. "So it's official now? Congratulations, I think Cory has made a perfect choice."

"Thanks, Governor." Julio squeaked.

"Don't worry, the responsibility grows on you." Ted chuckled. "You've got my number if you ever need to bounce some ideas off of me or just are not sure of how to deal with this ancient elephant we call a government."

Just as Cory was about to get the meeting on track again, Eddie stood up, his eyes burning with anger. "Patriarch, I need one of the kitties." he stated.

"I'm going too... Bast, full dress uniform. Des Moines Division is in need of our assistance. Move out!" Ty stated as he stood up. "My apologies Ted, but your surface thoughts on a matter that you just became aware of were intercepted by Eddie as he was performing his normal safety procedures which we taught him. While you may suffer from having to follow a statute of limitations, we are under no such illogical restrictions. Des Moines Division of Family Clan Short has claimed jurisdiction and hereby releases all jurisdictional claims of Earth governments."



Before Cory had time to process what just happened, two black hooded robes appeared in front of the two standing boys. As Eddie put on the robe from in front of him, Cory noticed a new crest in addition to the Family Crest. It consisted of a smaller version of the Family Crest overlaid on a grey shadow outline of the Des Moines skyline; the same skyline that was present on every license plate issued for vehicles in the State. Crossing diagonally over the entire Crest was a silver lightning bolt.

Just as Cory took in the new crest, Bast came jogging in. His uniform drew everyone's attention immediately. Cory took in the sight in awe; the highly polished combat boots, up through the blue trousers with gold braid down the side of each leg, on through the dark blue jacket and white shirt with black bow tie, all topped off with a Green Beret. As Cory's eyes dropped back down, he first saw the First Lieutenant rank insignia on the shoulder boards, with the Unit insignia on the right collar lapel and a Special Forces insignia on the left. On the suit lapels, there appeared two Military Police insignia laid over the letters F.C.S.H.Q.. On the right side, a gold Aiguillette signified that Bast was assigned to duty involving a dignitary. On his left side, a green fourragere signified that Bast was active in the Montana Massacre. Cory had been mildly shocked when the President had personally come down to present the award; a U.S. Army award that was only to be worn by those units actively involved in repelling the attack in Montana. On the left sleeve, a black brassard indicated that his Commander still considered the Unit in a state of mourning. Below his name tag, centered on the right pocket, was a single combat service badge; an outline of the State of Montana with a Clan Crest centered within it. On the left side, a Montana Conflict Medal stood alone under his Sharpshooter insignia, the bottom of the ribbon just over the Military Police badge on the right pocket. Bast was perfectly groomed, right down to the fur on his tail which extended from the slit in the seat of his pants.

"Request permission to depart on temporary duty service to the Intelligence Corps, Sir." Bast barked as he came to a full-attention stop in front of Cory and snapped a salute.

Cory quickly stood and addressed Bast. "Permission granted, Lieutenant." He then returned the salute. "Dismissed."

Bast turned, and quickly decided that now was not the time to threaten Tyler if the 'monkey suit' was not necessary; as soon as he saw the robes he knew this was serious. Before he even had a chance to approach Tyler, he knew just how serious it was due to the telepathic briefing Tyler gave him. He saluted Tyler, then after dropping the salute announced "Reporting for duty Sir." He unconsciously adjusted the pistol and phaser on his belt as he added "Ready and able for deployment."

Tyler nodded wordlessly, then a second later all three were gone.

"What happened to not working?" Sean asked nobody in particular.

Kyle smiled. "Exceptional circumstances. Eddie has been trained in Vulcan Information Extraction, but has not been given his final. Ty and I are his trainers, so we have to witness the final. This will be it; and Grandpa Sarek okayed it as soon as he found out what the issue was." Kyle then mentally relayed to everyone but Julio exactly what was causing the fuss.

*'When will he find out?'* Cory sent to Kyle, his heart aching from what he just learned about his friend's past.

*'Don't worry bro; once they are done, Ty is making a stop on his way back to start the healing from the past.'* Kyle replied.

Ted had a small smile on his face as he interjected his observations. "I'm starting to see why you guys are so successful where standard methods fail. Just out of curiosity, how long until you bring this to trial?"

Kyle looked Ted straight in the eyes. "The trial is done; I estimate sentence in thirty seconds."

"Holy crap!" Ted exclaimed under his breath....

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### **Polk County Jail:**

As soon as the three boys appeared in front of the Reception desk, Bast stepped forward. "I am First Lieutenant Bast Lion, Family Clan Short Special Forces. It is our understanding that you are holding one Carlos Julio Sanchez. He is currently under suspicion of multiple charges under our jurisdiction. May we assume your cooperation as we verify his guilt or innocence?"

The Sergeant behind the desk took one quick look at Bast's uniform, then took in the two hooded figures behind Bast. He pressed a button, then quickly stood before replying. "We have standing orders to provide full cooperation, Lieutenant Lion. Will you require any assistance?"

Bast formed his reply based on the information that Tyler was feeding him on the fly. "We shall relocate the subject to holding cell three. Please have one of your senior officers present for a State witness."

"That can be arranged, Sir. We should have someone available to assist you shortly."

Within seconds, another officer came through the doorway behind the counter. "Security informed me of your request, Lieutenant Lion. I am authorized to assist you in any way you deem necessary."

"Thank you, Corporal. We shall join the subject in the cell now." Bast replied. He drew his weapon, then a second later the four of them found themselves in the holding cell.

Bast barely had time to realize that the man sitting in shock in front of him was an older version of Julio before Eddie announced "I have the information; can you please check me Ty?"

Tyler nodded, then a few seconds later announced "Confirmed. Give it to Bast and Corporal Johnston, Eddie."

As the Corporal's eyes went wide at the confessions that were suddenly in his head, Bast came to attention and addressed the prisoner. "Carlos Julio Sanchez. You have been tried by a Vulcan Tribunal. Stand to receive your charges and sentence."

Carlos had just about recovered from the shock of the sudden cell change and appearance of his four visitors. This latest order renewed his shock level, so he mutely stood to await whatever was coming next.

Bast allowed him to wait in silence for almost a minute before continuing. "Carlos Sanchez; at a New Years party on January 1st, 1990 at 12:43am you slipped a drug into the drink of Janice Hernandez.

Thirty minutes later, you performed sexual intercourse with Janice without her consent. After you completed the Act, you left the party and immediately left the State, assuming a false identity. The act resulted in the impregnation of Janice and the subsequent birth of a son. Due to the fact that you have repeated the offense three times since that date, We have determined that you shall be punished for those actions in addition to abandonment and failure to support a minor child. The maximum punishment for your actions under Vulcan Law is death. Due to the suffering that you have caused, I consider it logical that you shall suffer yourself as you have made others suffer before the death sentence is delivered by those of your own social ranking; history has shown the period that you will survive will be minimal. You are to be castrated immediately and will spend the rest of your life on a Federation Prison Planet." Bast turned to Ty and Eddie. "You should step outside; what is about to happen is not for young eyes."

Tyler nodded his agreement, and the two boys disappeared.

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### **Outside the cell:**

Tyler quickly turned to Eddie. "Turn on all of your mind blocks; you don't need to hear this part in your head, it'll give you nightmares. I'll cover your ears so that you don't hear the sound either."

"What about you, Ty?" Eddie asked with concern.

"I already have the nightmares...." Tyler replied softly before reaching out and covering Eddie's ears.

It was at that very moment the screaming started, only to taper off a few seconds later. Shortly thereafter, the Corporal came quickly out of the cell and ran towards the nearest bathroom. Bast followed him out of the cell with a scowl on his face. "Not only did he pass out before I was done with the first part of his sentence, but he got blood on my best uniform!"

Tyler gave Bast a weak grin as he uncovered Eddie's ears and activated his commbadge. "Federation Security, this is Clan Short Intelligence."

*"Federation Security. Please don't tell me you're calling in a pickup, Mr. Short; I thought you were supposed to be taking a break!"*

Tyler allowed himself a small giggle as he recognized the voice of one of his favorite operators. "I heard you were bored, Frank. I have a pickup for you, destination P-7-C. Tell Bubba I said Happy Birthday."

*"Got it." Frank replied, understanding the hidden meaning behind Tyler's apparent joke. "I'll let them know they have incoming, then I'll help you take out the trash. Go home and relax already, Kiddo."*

"Thanks Frank; I plan on doing just that. Short out."

Tyler turned towards the doorway, where soft moans signified Carlos was coming around. "Bubba will be sooo happy to meet you, bastard...." Tyler growled just before the beginning sounds of transport reached everyone's ears.

Once Carlos was gone, Ty turned to Bast. "You're right, he was messy. I'll hook you up, bro." Within seconds, Bast's uniform was back to its original condition.

"Thanks!" Bast purred, then gave the two boys a quick face wash in appreciation...

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### **Hernandez Residence:**

The three boys appeared on the sidewalk in front of the newly-designated Des Moines Division Headquarters. After quick telepathic instructions from Tyler, they headed towards the front door, Bast in the lead. Bast came to attention as he stopped at the door and rang the bell; his two hooded companions matching his formal posture.

Mick answered the door, his eyes going wide as he saw Bast in formal uniform, Tyler in formal robes, and his youngest son in robes matching Tyler's. "Hello guys. Why is it that I get a feeling this isn't a social visit?"

Bast nodded his head as he replied. "Your intuition is correct, Sir. A recent maneuver has necessitated our requiring a conference with yourself and Mrs. Hernandez regarding an incident which occurred approximately fourteen years ago. May we enter to discuss the results of the action with you and your wife?"

Mick's face went pale as Bast's request revived long-suppressed memories. "Oh shit...." Mick whispered as he braced himself against the doorway to keep from collapsing on the floor. After a few seconds, he collected his emotions enough to be able to form a response. "You gentlemen know where the living room is. Please make yourself comfortable while I get Janice."

"As you wish, Sir." Bast responded. They followed Mick through the entry, splitting off to wait in the living room as Mick headed out to the back yard to get Janice. They waited ten minutes for Mick and Janice to join them; when they did finally come into the room, it was obvious that Mick had spent the time preparing Janice for what was about to be discussed.

Bast stood and motioned the two adults towards an open loveseat. "Thank you for giving us your time. I would suggest you sit together so that you may comfort each other. Lieutenant Hernandez will update you on the current situation. Captain Short will assist, with your permission, in ensuring that your emotional state does not exceed a safe level."

Mick and Janice both twisted their heads towards Eddie so fast that it caused their necks to audibly 'pop'. What they saw made them temporarily forget about the pending discussion; their youngest son was sitting there, a stone cold serious expression visible on the parts of his face able to be seen through the hood. Eddie reached up and lowered his hood, in the process revealing brand-new Lieutenant's bars on his shirt collar under the cloak.

"Will you accept Captain Short's assistance?" Eddie asked seriously, putting the training that Kyle and Tyler had given him in the Dream Realms overnight to full use.

Mick and Janice looked at each other in shock. "How... when... Lieutenant?????" Mick stuttered.

Bast took pity on the two adults. "Eddie is fully qualified and has passed training for the Clan Short Intelligence Corps. His training was completed in a side timeline to our own last night. He is certified to dispense testimony to courts as a Vulcan Registered Telepath; his word is considered more evidence than a signed confession."

As Mick was mulling over this new information, Janice looked her son directly in the eyes. What she saw convinced her more than a million words ever could; for the first time since Eddie had joined her family, his green eyes showed a life and glow that had been sadly missing. Despite the seriousness of his face, she could see that he had been healed of the worst of his hurt by the chance that this group of boys has given him. She placed a finger over Mick's mouth as he was about to respond to Bast. "Hon; look at Eddie, really look. These boys have given our son life, and it's not our place to interfere."

Mick followed his wife's instructions. A few seconds later, he stood and faced Eddie, coming to attention for the first time since he had mustered out of the Quartermasters Corps.

Bast silently assisted Eddie with military protocol as soon as he noticed what Mick was doing. With Tyler ensuring that all three were able to participate in a telepathic conference while they were here, it made it easy for Bast to give Eddie a crash course in military procedures.

Eddie quickly stood, coming to attention facing his dad.

Mick saluted Eddie, dropping the salute after Eddie returned it. "Lieutenant Hernandez, I accept your offer of assistance. On a side note, congratulations; you've made me very proud."

Eddie was unable to hold his serious expression after Mick added the side note. His face broke into a huge smile as he replied "Thanks, Daddy!" and ran over to give Mick a huge hug. Janice joined the hug as well, expressing her pride in his accomplishment softly as the two adults sandwiched their youngest son.

Once the hug broke and everyone was seated again, Janice looked at Eddie. "I think I'm ready for the reason you came home, son. Tyler, if we need help feel free to do it. Your reputation proceeds you as far as your help when there is emotional distress."

Tyler nodded his head in acknowledgment, as Eddie brought his emotions back under control before beginning.

Eddie looked at both of his parents seriously. "I understand the emotional impact of going into detail regarding past events, so I will only state what is required to ensure all present are aware of what event is being discussed." He paused to give the statement time to register, then continued. "In January, 1990, Janice Hernandez was attacked by Carlos Julio Sanchez. The attack resulted in the birth of her son Julio, who at this time is unaware of the circumstances of his conception. Within the last two hours, Clan Short Intelligence was made aware that Mr. Sanchez was being held on unrelated charges in a local penal institution. While local authorities were hampered by a statute of limitations, Vulcan does not recognize such illogical statutes. Mr. Sanchez has been found guilty of this action and other repeat actions of the same nature by Vulcan trial as administered legally by Officers of Family Clan Short of Vulcan under jurisdiction granted by the State of Iowa. Mr. Sanchez has been castrated and is now beginning a life sentence on prison planet P-7-C, at least as long as his cellmates consider him useful."

Mick and Janice sat there, staring at Eddie in shock. Even with all they knew about how the boys operated, witnessing it firsthand with something that involved them personally was still a shock.

Tyler allowed time for Eddie's statements to settle in, then he added softly "Mr. Sanchez automatically lost any and all claims to parental rights towards Julio upon conviction... forever." He paused, then added "It's over, Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez... it is really over."

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### **Clan Short Archivist's Notes:**

I thought Sean and Cory were on vacation; I guess some things never change and justice and help must be given whenever necessary.

It was very nice getting to learn a little bit more about how Kyle and Cory met and I look forward to more of those flashbacks.

Now if only the boys can get the vacation they really need.

The Story Lover

## **Chapter Four: Furry Follies**

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### **Back in Des Moines, a few minutes later....**

Cory looked over at Julio. He could tell by the expression on his face that not knowing what was going on was starting to make Julio angry. Cory quickly went over to Julio's side and started massaging his shoulders. "You haven't had the crash course in temporal mechanics that I've had." Cory said softly. "You need to trust me; this time you need to wait to find out what is happening. If we tell you right now, things will be a lot different than if you find out when you're supposed to from the people that you're supposed to find out from."

"You sure?" Julio asked warily.

Cory nodded. "I've been taking lessons from my eight-million-year-old little brother; some things just have to wait for the right time to be revealed."

"Eight million... you're weird, Cory!" Julio commented as he shook his head. "Do you even remember what 'normal' is like?"

"Nope!" Cory replied with a grin. "That part of my history is still blocked!"

Julio looked over his shoulder and rolled his eyes. "You're still as weird as ever, Cor."

"Yep!" Cory giggled as he returned to his seat, satisfied that Julio had calmed down enough to continue.

Ted had been watching the two boys, and had a big smile as he asked Cory, "Do you think I could send my staff over for management training from you? You guys could teach them a few thousand things about how to resolve issues!"

"That's why we don't let adults resolve our issues; most of them don't think about the other person," Cory replied as he settled in.

Ted nodded. "Unfortunately, you're right. Getting back to the reason I stopped by, do you guys have any plans for later this evening?"

"Nothing too important; cuddle time don't start until about 10," Cory replied.

Ted grinned. "I wasn't born yesterday; the day you guys cuddle by the clock is the day the world ends. What would you say to all of you coming over to the Capital Complex for a special guided tour? That includes you and your Division, Julio. I've already cleared it with your parents; now that you're a Division Head, that means I can take you into a few areas you've never seen before."

Sean tilted his head. "You make it sound like Julio's been there a lot."

"He has," Ted replied. "His Dad and I are cousins. You should have heard the earful that I got after you guys ran off, just as the Vulcan technicians were arriving to install the new terminal."

"They called you too?" Cory asked, trying to suppress a giggle.

"Yes; right after they finished telling me how proud they were of Julio, they both spent the next twenty minutes plotting revenge on you for not warning them, Cory."

Johnny giggled from where he had been sitting back and watching the 'fun'. "You're in *trroouuubb-blllleeee!* Daddy can be *eeevvvviiiiiiiiiiii!*"

"He hasn't beat me yet!" Cory giggled. "That sounds like a plan, Ted. Why is it I get the feeling you have something up your sleeve?"

"Let's just say my arm was lonely," Ted responded with a laugh.

The rest of the occupants of the table groaned in agony at Ted's play on words. "Now I see why someone else writes your speeches!" Kyle quipped.

"You have NOOOOO idea...!" Julio added, sticking his tongue out at Ted in defiance.

"Just remember, Julio; I know where your Mom hid your baby pictures," Ted replied with a chuckle. "I'm sure Jesse would be quite interested in them."

"Hey! That's playing dirty!" Julio exclaimed as he started blushing.

"What do you expect? I'm a politician!" Ted laughed. "I'll coordinate timing with Teri, Cory. That way your visit does not affect any plans she may have."

"Thanks, Ted," Cory replied. "Since we missed out on our pizza night last night, Mom's ordering in some for lunch. You wanna join us?"

"Thanks for the offer, but I need to get back to the Statehouse," Ted said with a smile. "I have a few papers that need to be signed."

"Chicken!" Julio giggled. "Just because I bit your fingers *one time* when you tried to take a piece I wanted...."

"Guilty... I almost needed stitches!" Ted laughed as he stood up. "Watch him, Cory... I think he files his teeth before bed at night!"

"He does not! He does spend a half hour making sure his penis is really clean in the shower, though," Jesse said with a straight face.

"Oh my God!" Julio exclaimed as every drop of blood in his body moved to his face. He quickly sank into his seat, trying to hide behind the edge of the table.

"I'll remember that!" Ted chuckled as he moved towards the Rec room. "No wonder your Dad was looking for a hundred-gallon water heater...."

Cory shook his head. "Thanks, Ted!" he replied before looking over to find Jesse giving Julio pre-emptive mouth-to-mouth. "Do you two need to borrow my bedroom?" Cory asked with a giggle.

"Yes Sir; thank you," Jesse replied as he broke contact and quickly pulled Julio out of his chair. As he began dragging Julio towards the stairs, Jesse added "We'll be back in a little bit!"

Sean giggled, "Take your time... Julio's already on a slow simmer there!"

Cory was about to respond when Ark spoke over his subvocal. <Cory, despite the standing orders about you being on vacation, I have intercepted a communication from Timmy's grandfather that you need to be aware of.>

Cory tilted his head. "Is there a problem, Ark?"

<No, Cory. The Ambassador has just arrived in Earth orbit, and I was able to intercept a communication between him and Admiral Morrow inquiring as to your location. It appears that the Ambassador wants to personally make sure that you are healthy; I believe I have learned a few swear words not ever used on this planet when the Admiral told him that you were not available.>

Cory couldn't help but laugh. "Yes, he's extremely multilingual. Could you please extend my welcome to him, and inform everyone that he's family and I expect to see him as soon as possible?"

<I expected you to say that. Daileass has agreed to communicate with them in exchange for a vocabulary update containing the words I have learned.>

"I know nothing!" Cory laughed. "I'll warn Mom that he's coming; could you please arrange appropriate transportation for a family member of a Founder Council Member as soon as possible?"



<Yes, Cory. I believe he has just about reached the lineage of the Admiral's oldest known ancestor. Once he pauses to catch his breath, I will have Daileass make arrangements.>

"Thanks, Ark!" Cory replied with a grin. He then turned to the rest of the room. "C'mon, guys, Timmy's grandpa is gonna be here pretty soon. Let's warn Mom, then we need to get cleaned up and get the two horndogs to settle." He then walked over to Kyle. "C'mon, lil bro; let Ty do what you guys do best. Timmy says Grandpa gives great shoulder rides; you feel up to giving a second opinion?"

Kyle looked up at Cory with a grin. "I guess since the 'Shoulder Elf' isn't here, I better handle his job for him. Ty's got things all handled; we all need to make a stop before we go to see Ted."

"Sounds good... let's go warn Mom that we'll have company soon," Cory replied as he knelt in front of Kyle. "Horse-back ride??"

"Yeah!" Kyle exclaimed as he scrambled to climb onto Cory's back. "Giddy-up, Cory!"

"I thought that was Sean's line, lil bro!" JJ laughed as he ran past the pair, Sean quickly taking chase after him.

The remaining boys worked their way into the Rec Room, Johnny having decided to get a kitty-back ride to 'keep from getting worn out'.

Teri had just finished making the arrangements for the night with Ted when they all showed up, a soaked JJ following the rest in. "Where's Mikey and Candy?" Adam asked as he noticed they were missing.

"They went up to his room to have a talk," Teri replied.

"Yeah, I bet Mikey just wants to see if Saints can still play around!" Sean chuckled as he joined them.

"I heard that!" Mikey yelled from upstairs. "Unlike you, Sean, I DO have SOME control!"

"Since when?" Cory, Sean and Teri all replied in unison.

"Buuusstteeddd, Mikey!" Kyle giggled from his perch.

"You can all bite me!" Mikey yelled back with a laugh.

"Ewww... Angel Feathers!" Kyle giggled, barely managing to hold on to Cory's back.

Ted laughed as he headed towards the door. "I'll see you guys tonight. Try not to overthrow any more Governments between now and then, okay?"

"Who, *us*?" the boys all chimed innocently, halos appearing above their heads.

"I'm not saying a word!" Ted laughed as he turned the corner.

"That's okay; you're still *my* angels," Teri chuckled. "Are you guys about ready for pizza? You haven't had a snack in at least an hour."

"Yeah, you tryin' to starve us, Mom?" Sean asked with a grin as he took his new-found nephew from Teri and began cuddling him. "Don't worry, Patty, I won't let your Grandma starve you," he added as he quickly moved out of swatting range.

"Hold out your hand, Sean," Kyle giggled. Sean did as asked, and a second later a bottle appeared in it. "Patty's hungry," Kyle stated with a smile.

Sean sat on the loveseat and, after some quick mental training from Kyle, began feeding Patty.

Cory looked over at Sean with a smile. "Too bad we can't have kids; that looks so sweet."

"Don't let Elf hear ya say that, Cor!" Kyle giggled. "We ain't got any Maternity Patriarch Cloaks!"

"Why would it just be Cory having to say it?" JJ mused. "If I say that Cory and Sean'd make a good pair of natural daddies around Elf, would that trigger an Event?... mmmm, interesting..."

"You do and Adam loses his favorite toy!" Sean and Cory chorused, causing everyone else in the room to break into laughter.

"What are you punishing ME for?" Adam protested once he'd finished laughing.

"Not keeping your pet on his leash!" Cory shot back with a grin.

"Well, if you DO do what you threatened to do, I'll just get Joel to make it triplets. Each!" Adam grinned evilly.

"You guys are gonna really be lost if you're *both* castrated!" Sean responded.

"At least our dicks won't be the width of an elephant's trunk after having triplets," JJ murmured with a giggle.

"That's not much different than it is now..." Cory giggled.

"DAMN! Sean, I feel for you. REALLY!" Adam winced.

"Must be why I heard Sean practicing his caber tossing yesterday," Kyle said sweetly, another halo appearing over his head.

"Okay you guys, you're killing me!" Teri interrupted, holding her sides from laughing so hard.

Julio looked over at Jesse as they entered the room. "You ever get the feeling you're the only sane one in the group?"

"Yeah, and I'm really worried about you!" Jesse responded with a grin.

"Ahhh, Cory and Sean's horn-dog trainees have returned!" JJ quipped.

"You're just jealous that you can't keep up," Jesse shot back.

"He has no problems in that area..." Adam mumbled, causing JJ to break into a bright red blush.

Teri shook her head in wonder. "Guys, if you don't find another topic soon, I'm going to start discussing some of MY escapades in bed!" she announced with a gleam in her eyes.

Sean's face went white. "So, extra pepperoni on the pizza, guys?"

"I wonder if it's raining in Orlando?" Kyle mused out loud.

"No, but it's not very sunny there," Mikey said softly, then coughed and went over to tickle his baby boy's ribs gently.

Adam shrugged. "Sunny here though. When was the last time we had a pickup game of soccer?"

"I wonder if Mom and Dad have decided not to kill me yet for the surprises?" Julio said at the same time.

"I can make pizzas instead of us ordering them if you want!" Jesse added helpfully.

"I wonder what Grandpa O'Neal is going to want on his pizza when he gets here?" Cory asked, causing Teri and Mikey to both spin to look at him in shock.

"Just *when* did Timmy's grandfather decide he was going to be visiting, and *why* didn't I know about it?" Teri asked just as soon as she was able to bring her emotions back under control.

Mikey, however, let his eyes go blank for a moment before sighing slightly.

Cory just grinned at his mother. "Ark just sent the message. Admiral Morrow is talking to him right now, then he's coming in for a visit," he answered as he stood to go to his jacket where his communicator badge was. As he searched for it he found a folded piece of paper in one of the pockets. "What's this?"

He opened it up and read it slowly before tears started from his eyes. "Oh, Elf," he whispered, his voice getting thick.

Sean looked up from where he was feeding Patty and asked, "What is it, Hon?"

"Joel... he wrote... he... you read it," Cory answered tearfully as he walked over and handed the piece of paper to Sean.

Sean took it and read it out loud, and by the time he had finished, he was also in tears:

What is Love?

What is this that I now feel,  
Held close in gentle arms?  
No pain, no fear;  
'Cos they are near;  
No strike from hateful palms?  
To hear true words of comfort  
That let me know my place;  
To sense concern,  
And compassion;  
Joy when they see my face?  
My heart once hard from beatings,  
My heart once dead through grief,  
I now must walk;  
That longest road;  
That helps me find true peace.  
My Brothers now forever,  
And when push comes to shove,  
They'll guard my back,  
And light my way;  
While I learn... "What is love?" ...

By Joel Short

Date - 27th October

For my Big Brothers, Cor and Sean.

Kai gently took the paper from Sean. "I will put this up, Bruv; with the little bit I have known Joel I already would give my life to protect him, especially after hearing this."

Kyle wiped at his own tear-filled eyes and then held out his hand. A frame appeared and he handed it to Kai. Also, the paper Kai held suddenly smoothed out so that the folds vanished. "There. That'll keep it safe forever," Kyle whispered thickly.

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**Fifteen minutes later:**

The kids spread out across the front yard, their plan of attack finalized for when the pizza delivery arrived. As each of them reached their assigned position, they took a seat, trying to look relaxed. Teri had wisely prepaid for the delivery, so all that was left was 'helping' the delivery boy bring in the food.

Just as Casey got into position, Tyler appeared with his group, including Julio's parents. Within microseconds, Kyle ensured the returning boys knew the plan and were assigned positions. Tyler grinned as he looked up at Mick. "Watch this!" he giggled as the new arrivals quickly deployed.

They got into position just in time, as the sound of an approaching go-cart heralded the arrival of lunch. As the cart and trailer skidded to a stop in front of the house, the assembled mob in the front yard sprung into action. Casey and Tina scrambled into the back of the trailer, immediately locating the pile marked 'Short'. As Casey yelled out the toppings on each pizza, the intended recipient claimed it, instantly being transported to the Dining Room by Kyle as soon as their treasure was in their hands. Tyler handled the pizzas intended for the adults, who had decided it was safer in the house.

Once the last pizza was accounted for, Tyler popped in next to the baffled teenaged driver. "Here!" Tyler giggled as he attached a pin to the driver's uniform that read 'I survived a delivery to the Patriarch of Clan Short'. "I'll have Mom handle your tip; she can put it right into your bank account. If you wanna swing by tomorrow and hang out, we'll explain what just happened!"

"Uhh.... okay, I guess.... thanks!" the driver said as he finally started to regain a sense of reality. "This is my first day. Is it always this nuts when deliveries are made to you guys?"

"The rest of the guys here ain't this good... yet. We're training them though," Ty responded between giggles. "The manager there musta remembered Mom; he used to send *all* the new guys for us to break in!"

"So THAT'S why Chuck ran out of the building as soon as he heard the order being taken!" the driver responded. "I'm Jeremy; I think I'll take you up on that visit tomorrow! Catch ya later!"

"See ya tomorrow!" Ty responded as Jeremy started the cart and began to pull away. Ty turned to find Mick standing there waiting on him.

"You guys give evil a whole new meaning!" Mick chuckled as he came over and put his hand on Ty's shoulder. "I'm impressed; not a single drop of blood spilled during the operation."

Tyler giggled and stuck out his tongue at Mick. Just as he was about to add a response, two sparkling columns appeared between them and the house. Tyler tilted his head, then grinned as the forms of an adult and a child began to form. "Kewl!!! I getta meet Granpa O'Neal finally!" he exclaimed.

"Ahhhh... the Universally famous Tyler Short has deemed himself worthy to greet me!" O'Neal said with a grin as soon as the transport was complete. "I am pleased to finally meet you, Your Highness."

Mick chuckled as Tyler literally glowed with a bright blush. "I believe you might have embarrassed our Royal Cuddle Monster, Sir. I'm glad to meet you, I'm Mick Hernandez, father of the latest addition to the Clan Director's Club."

"It is an honor to meet you, Mick; I believe your sense of humor might be needed, based on the information my sources have provided me. I am Ambassador Marcus O'Neal, UFP Ambassador to eleven planets as of yesterday. My companion is Hrffaffif Njrrthin Tassfret." (Hirrf-rav-eye-v Near-thine Tashh-fright)

Tyler shyly snuck over and took up residence under Marcus' arm as Mick turned his attention to the youngster who had arrived with Marcus. Mick quickly took in the child in front of him. The child appeared to be about seven years old, with an orange-tinted semi-transparent coat of fine hair about one-quarter inch long covering his entire body. On the top of his head, a single strip of orange-blond hair about four inches long stuck up in a 'v' shape, running in a stripe towards his back. Once it reached the area just below his shoulder blades, it became a pony tail that ended at the small of his back. Mick made eye contact with the boy, and despite the fact he was not human, his orange eyes clearly showed a recent loss that was affecting him still. "Hello, Hrffaffif, welcome to Earth." Mick said softly.

Hrffaffif gave Mick a small smile. "Thank you, Mick. You can call me Fife; we don't use our formal names unless it's something important happening."

"Okay, Fife it is!" Mick replied. "If I know my favorite pack of rats as well as I think I do, all four of us have food waiting for us inside. Tyler, do you think that you can interrupt your cuddles long enough to escort us in?"

"Nope!" Ty giggled as all four found themselves standing in the dining room.

Mick shook his head. "You know, one of these days you're gonna scare someone doing that."

"I warned everyone else, even Fife! I just owed you for the Royal Cuddle Monster comment!" Ty shot back with a grin.

"You do realize this means war, don't you, Prince Rat?" Mick said with a laugh.

"Bring it on, Ancient One!" Tyler giggled as he came over and took Fife's hand. "C'mon, Fife; we ordered a special pizza for ya! Admiral Morrow called Mom and told her what you could eat."

"Hey, Dad, your Geritol pizza is over there!" Julio added between bites of the slices of pizza he had in both hands.

"Hey, Cory; how do you deal with smart-aleck Division Heads around here?" Mick asked as he spotted Cory across the table from where he was standing.

"Easy; I promote them to Sub-Patriarch!" Cory giggled. "I usually wait at least two days after making them division heads... so you just gotta suffer, Mick."

"You might as well give up while you can, Mick!" Teri said as she motioned for Mick to join her, Janice and Bruce at the kitchen counter. "The safe zone is over here."

As Mick quickly made his way to safety, Marcus made his way to where Cory and Sean were seated. He smiled as he saw that Fife had been placed next to Cory, and the little alien was now completely absorbed in his vegetarian pizza.

As he stopped behind them, Marcus tapped on both Cory and Sean's shoulders. "Stand up, Grandsons." Marcus said in a tone that gave no room for argument.

Cory and Sean both quickly swallowed their most recent bites of pizza and complied. They had learned quickly that Marcus was not one to be trifled with when they had met with him on Rigel; yet once he considered you family it was forever. Marcus took the tricorder that he had hanging on his belt and quickly scanned both boys, then put it away and physically looked at and felt the injuries that Cory had received. "This is totally unacceptable. Timothy has lost one father to the crackpots of the universe; I will not stand for him to suffer another loss. Once we have finished eating, I have a matter to discuss with you, Cory. Once I depart Earth, I shall call in a few favors which have been outstanding for a long time. It is time for the Universe to start taking the offensive. Now, I believe I am overdue for hugs from the two of you; I intend to collect that debt immediately."

The two boys grinned, knowing that behind the harsh comments, Marcus was telling them to stop worrying and let him handle some of the details. They quickly gave him a double-hug, both whispering 'Thanks, Grandpa' before breaking it and returning to their seats.

Marcus smiled and ruffled both boys' hair before taking the seat reserved for him on the other side of Fife. "I see you have already adopted the eating habits of your new family, Fife; it has been a whole hour since you last ate!"

"But I'm hungry, Grandfather!" Fife giggled.

Cory looked over at Marcus, and immediately grew worried when he saw the gleam in his 'grandfather's' eyes. "You from Tesnia, Fife?" Cory asked, figuring a change in subject might be a good idea.

"Yes; how did you know?" Fife replied between bites.

"I gotta know most of the 'local' species from the Federation, and since Tesnians visit Earth a lot, it makes you guys one of the races I make sure I know about." Cory replied. "When did you have your last Boron breather?"

Cory's question made Fife pause in the destruction of his pizza to smile at Cory. As a courtesy to the people that they were visiting, Tesnians generally tried to get their six-hour dosages of the Boron/Nitrogen gas mixture that allowed them to remain healthy while breathing Earth's atmosphere in private. As such, their requirement was not general knowledge to most people on Earth. Cory's concern

showed that he actually made sure he knew important details when he did his research. "Grandpa made me have it before we came down, I don't need another one until just before bedtime."

Marcus smiled at Cory's concern. He tickled the back of Fife's neck, causing the small boy to make a noise similar to that of a purr as he said, "Normally, he'd need to have the full dose at once; as the delivery system designed by the then Commander Trip Tucker, Sub-Commander T'Pol, and Doctor Phlox could not be stopped and started with ease. We've come up with a more advanced one now that allows him to take a few hours worth in the morning, then more midday, then the last before bed. It is also as unobtrusive as we can get it, so he can even run and play, or eat and drink while using it."

Fife, still 'almost purring', reached into the bag he had been carrying and pulled out a small gas canister with a tube attachment. "Watch, Cory," he smiled as he slipped the canister into what Cory recognized as a fanny pack, then placed the tube to run up his back. The top end of the tube was then split to loop over each of his little ears and ended with two fixture he plugged into each nostril. "It lets your air in as well, and then my boron air is mixed as I breathe! It's so..." The next word he said had no literal translation, so it came out as a purr-growl.

Bast's giggles from next to Sean got everyone's attention. "What's so funny, Bast?" Sean asked.

Bast held his sides as he choked out a response. "I don't know what that means in his language, but in Lion it means there is about to be a mess in his pants!"

"Is he picking on me?" Fife asked Cory softly.

"No," Cory giggled as Bast purred at his own joke. "He's kidding."

"Oh," Fife giggled, then he pulled a face and looked with 'shock' at Bast. "Grandpa! He's swearing! He's saying LOTS of bad words!"

Mont fell over laughing at the look that came to Bast's face. "Your joke backfired on you, bro!"

Fife giggled, then looked over at Marcus. "I like it here. Can I, Grandpa?"

Marcus nodded, and smiled as the entire group stopped eating to see what their little visitor would do next. Fife grinned as he stood up and slowly walked around the table, his little boy sized nose twitching as he walked by each person. After his first pass, he smiled and made a second pass, as if making sure of something.

"Have you decided?" Marcus asked as Fife came to a stop beside him.

Fife nodded with a smile. "I think you were right, Grandpa."

After a minute of looking around the table, as if he was making real sure, Fife softly spoke. "The furry guys, Mont and Bast, smell like big brothers; I like them. Tyler helped me place names to all of these faces. Julio and Jesse smell like they're going to be daddies soon. JJ and Adam smell like they're trying to be daddies again really hard but it hasn't worked yet."



Fife had to pause as the entire room broke into laughter, all except Adam and JJ who tried to make themselves as small as possible in their chairs. Once things calmed back down, Fife continued.

"Kyle and Tyler smell like Champions; I think Earth calls them Kings. Only a Champion bloodline can be a Champion. Kai, Johnny, and Eddie all have an 'Overseer' scent, I think the British call them 'Lords' in their government."

Fife paused again, his nervousness apparent in the quivering fur covering his body. As Fife's nose twitched again and again, Marcus took his hand to give him emotional support. After a minute to gain his courage, Fife let go of Marcus' hand and moved between Sean and Cory. "You smell different." he said slowly, trying to pick words that all would understand. "I think I smell Champion, but it's not like any Champion scent I've ever heard of. There is a whole mixture of scents I can't figure out. There is one really strong one that I know, but I don't know how you can have it. You both have the scent of my Father. By Tesnian law that makes you family. My family that lived on Tesnia was killed by some pirates while we were on our way back from a vacation in California here on Earth. Will you accept me as your son?"

Cory and Sean exchanged a quick glance as they mentally discussed the information they had just heard. After a few seconds, Cory looked Fife in the eyes. "We accept you as our son; not because the law of your land requires it, but because we desire it."

Fife smiled and whispered "Thank you". Before anyone else could figure out how it happened, Sean and Cory executed a complex maneuver which resulted in both of them in one chair with Fife sitting across their laps. As the four teen arms surrounded the young Tesnian, Fife leaned into Cory's chest and quietly began to release the mourning that he had been holding inside.

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Once Fife had stopped crying, he started to do something unusual. Cory, being the oldest, was the first one who experienced it, and it was only Grandpa O'Neal's slight nod of his head that made Cory remain quiet while Fife did it.

First, he settled himself fully onto Cory's lap chest to chest. Then he buried his nose directly under Cory's chin, right against his Adam's Apple. After a few sniffs, Fife moved his nose about until it was near to Cory's left ear, yet still on the neck. Then he started to inhale slowly and deeply.

At O'Neal's visual instructions, Cory start rubbing the fur on Fife's bare back against the grain. He used moderate force so that the smaller boy's back was being firmly massaged.

After a few minutes had passed, Fife raised his left wrist and held it an inch from Cory's nose, still sniffing at Cory's neck.

While this was happening, the whole room was silent as a grave. Even Kyle and Tyler were watching with interest and yet without true comprehension. Only Mikey and O'Neal showed any form of true understanding.

Cory darted his eyes to O'Neal, for Fife was simply holding his wrist at his nose - nothing more. O'Neal made another motion, and so Cory leaned his face forwards enough so that his own nose was touching

the small alien's wrist and he too started to inhale - just as slowly and deeply as Fife was doing to his neck.

Less than ten seconds later, Cory's less able nose detected a musky, relaxing and fairly pleasant smell coming from Fife's wrist. Now Cory understood, and although he wouldn't be able to 'scent' his newest son in the same way Fife would him, he realized that *this* was how children on Tesnia bonded with their parents.

After another minute, Fife stopped what he was doing and lifted his head to press his face nose to nose with Cory. "Dad," he whispered before kissing him gently. "Your scent is in me, and mine in you. I am your little one, and you my father."

"Son," Cory whispered back. "Your scent is in me, and mine in you. I am your father, and you are my little one."

Sean's eyes were running tears. In fact, everyone there had tears flowing.

Fife sniffed happily and purred a few times before shuffling over to sit fully on Sean's lap, chest to chest.

And the process began again.

All in all, each person there went through this with Fife.

An hour later, Fife had his family.

Forever.

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"Dad?" Fife looked up at Cory while Sean was helping Teri with the washing up.

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something that might be personal?"

"Sure, Fife. Questions are not bad. If I don't think I should tell you, then I'll be honest - I'll never lie, though," Cory assured him.

Fife nodded and then paused to collect his thoughts. "You know I said you smelled like Champions, and the other have their own smells?"

Cory nodded, "Uh huh, yeah."

"Well. There was one other scent I was picking up from a few of you. Not Johnny and Eddie, and really small from Julio and Jesse, but it was there with the others. You, Pop and Grandmother have it strong, though."

"Go on," Cory prompted gently as Fife seemed to run out of steam.

Fife took a deep breath, "I smelt a Vulcan smell, but while it was a Champion as well, it was also the smell of a Rescuer."

"If it's Vulcan, then it could either be my little brother, Joel, or our dad, Spock," Cory smiled. "It's more likely them than the other Vulcans as we've spent a lot more time with them. Joel's your uncle."

Fife nodded, then a tear trickled from his eye.

"What's wrong?" Cory asked gently.

"You don't know what a Rescuer is, do you," Fife stated.

Cory half shrugged, "I'd guess it's someone who saves people."

"Yeah, but... a Rescuer is someone who saves a village from a Jhrir.... a Jhrir Traafeen. There's only one way to save them and it's to fight the Jhrir... a fight that will last long enough for the children and some of the adults to run away... but... the Rescuer is going to die. Your brother... Joel... or your dad, Grandfather Spock, smells like a Rescuer, Daddy... I'm sorry..." Fife finished with a small sob.

"Shhh," Cory soothed gently. "Dad - Grandpa Spock - has been rescuing people for a long time, so that must be it. He died too, once."

Fife's eyes opened wide. "Then how...?"

"He came back. Vulcans can store their spirits in another person, and Dad's body regenerated, so the Vulcans put his spirit, his Katra, back into his body."

Fife visibly relaxed, "That must be it, then. That must be what I'm smelling."

"Yeah," Cory smiled - hoping against hope that it was *only* Spock that smelled like a Rescuer....

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Marcus couldn't help but smile as he watched the group settling in to hear the announcement from him. Fife had decided that his Uncle Kai was due for cuddles, so he was sitting on Kai's lap while holding his Uncle Patty. Patty was happy with the arrangement, softly cooing as he rubbed his face in Fife's soft down. Mick and Janice had found themselves buried as their boys jostled for places on their laps, while Bruce was happily holding his two munchkins as they settled in with him. The loveseat ended up being the same mess that Marcus had seen when he last saw Cory and Sean; the two of them were almost buried in family as JJ, Adam, Mont, Bast, Kyle, and Tyler took up 'protective' seating around and on top of them. Julie, Teri, Mikey and Candy had all chosen seats well separated from the mob, placing their own safety first.

"Now that everyone is comfortable," Marcus announced, "I require the presence of Patriarch Cory Short up here with me. No arguments about being on vacation either, Cory; this is one matter which re-

quires your personal seal and it can not be delegated. Director Short, please join us as well as a Federation witness."

Cory wiggled out of the pile, managing to reach Marcus' side just as Teri weaved her way through the room and joined them. Marcus motioned for them to both take a seat, then began.

"With the acceptance of Fife into the Family Short, I have been authorized by the Rfffafrapr Rffafniaf-fijss (Elder Champion, pronounced Irrf-ey-af-ireh-rih Irrf-ey-af-nee-eh-ey-ea-shh) of Tesnia to commence negotiations on his behalf to enter into a binding treaty with Clan Short to provide a resolution to a societal issue which Clan Short is uniquely qualified to assist the Tesnian Governmental offices with. The Tesnian government has reviewed the Federation Safe Haven Act, and has determined that, despite the Tesnian status of being an independent system within Federation space, it is in their best interest to provide for their citizens as specified in the Act as written. As such, in accordance with Section 7.4 inclusive, if Family Clan Short accepts this treaty they have authorized me to deliver in-kind contributions in excess of the required .075% of their system GNP. The Tesnian cultural system has a historical practice which is in conflict with Federation cultural standards. There is a class in the culture known as Hralffijss; (H-reah-elf-ey-ea-shh) it means 'Less than Family' but it more directly translates to 'Underclass'. The Underclass is made up of orphans without any family. By custom stretching back beyond memory, once Underclass it is possible after the second or third generation to become a citizen again by proving their worth to society. Until that time, the Underclass have no voice or voting rights on city or planetary matters, and they are not eligible for any type of space-related work. They are still taken care of, and are productive in the areas they are allowed to work in."

Marcus paused, looking at Cory and Teri. He wasn't sure which one was more displeased, or more accurately which one was closer to exploding. "The government and citizens of Tesnia recognize that this is unacceptable, but due to the structure of their society as a whole, it would cause a societal collapse if they were to just outright outlaw the practice. By utilizing Family Clan Short, they believe the natural attrition of the Underclass with no new orphans coming in to replace those who have reached Elder stage will give their society a chance to adjust to life without an Underclass."

Cory glanced over at Fife, happily cuddling Patty. His eyes turned dark as he stood up and turned towards Marcus. "I have heard *more* than enough, Ambassador. Do you have a copy of the proposed treaty?" Cory growled.

"Let Ambassador Marcus finish, Cory." Teri said gently, hoping that it wasn't too late to rein in Cory's temper.

"He was finished when he said 'Orphan', Mom." Cory stated as he took the Padd from Marcus. "My newest son almost became one of them; this shit *ain't* gonna continue." He quickly scanned over the proposed treaty. "Okay... a Skywalker-class science vessel; I'll accept that as in-kind since they just rolled out the second one. All Tesnian adolescent and younger are to immediately be transferred to us after loss of their last family member... good, I don't have to argue that with them." Cory quickly scrolled to the bottom of the document, and nodded before returning to where he was in the middle. "Good; an addendum giving citizen status to any adult that grows up in Clan Short." He quickly finished, then spun and locked eyes with Kyle. "Kyle, I need my robes... now." He turned back to Marcus, his clothes changing to his Clan robe as he spun. "Ambassador, there is one section which I find unacceptable that we must resolve with the Eldest directly." Cory stated, now in full Vulcan mode. "Kyle will arrange a conference on our terminal, may I presume your assistance in convincing the Eldest that he must follow my timetable?"

Marcus nodded. While he had seen glimpses of this side of Cory in their earlier meetings, seeing Cory in full Patriarch mode for the first time was unnerving for even him. He suddenly realized why Admiral Morrow had warned him about crossing the Clan; the sweet, fun Cory that he loved could easily turn into a terror that would make a Klingon tremble in fear if Cory were crossed.

Marcus followed Cory and Teri over to the terminal. As soon as he saw the security and priority settings that Kyle had initialized the session with, his jaw hit the floor. He had only seen higher levels once before, and that was a direct communication from the Vulcan High Council. For the first time in many years, he was in unfamiliar territory; this treaty seemed to be taking on a life which could change things universe-wide.

"Ready to initiate connection on your request, Ambassador." Kyle stated flatly, obviously also deciding to use his Vulcan training in this situation.

Marcus nodded. "Proceed." he replied as he moved into position. Immediately, the screen came to life; a few seconds later an impressive Tesnian adult came on the screen. "Greetings, Ambassador Marcus. Do you have word on the treaty deliberations?" the Tesnian said in his native language.

"Greetings, Eldest. I hope to have word at the end of this communication." Marcus replied in Tesnian. "I must introduce my companions. This lovely 'Family Female' behind me is Director Teri Short, Federation Youth Services. The young man who is assisting with this call is 'Champion' Kyle Richardson. My last companion is 'Eldest Champion' Patriarch Cory Short, Patriarch of Family Clan Short. With your permission, I would like to allow Patriarch Cory to express his concern to you directly."

"By your titles, it is proper that we discuss this directly as we are equals. May I ask how you determined the status of Champion that you mentioned, Ambassador?"

Marcus smiled as he replied. "The adolescent Fife has verified bloodline on every person present in this room, Eldest."

"I know his chosen specialty, as I had to approve it personally. As he has declared them Champions, so shall it be entered in our genetic database. Shall we switch to Federation Standard to begin?"

"There will be no need of that, Eldest. I have full knowledge of your language." Cory replied, his mind having just completed the language dump of Tesnian that Kyle took after getting Fife's approval. "My Intelligence division has assured me that all who need to hear this deliberation will understand it."

"Many thanks, Patriarch," the Eldest replied. "My command of Federation Standard is somewhat incomplete. May I ask what your concern is?"

Cory nodded. "You have proposed that the egress of orphans be spread across a three Federation year period. May I ask why you have suggested such an extended period?"

"I suggested it myself as I know of no organization able to handle over ten thousand orphans at once. Not without putting them in worse conditions than they are in now." the Eldest replied.

"Starfleet does, and I have resources that they don't," Cory stated with conviction. "The treaty needs to be revised to allow for evacuation as fast as I can arrange proper transport."

"There goes all of those favors the Admiral owes me!" Marcus chuckled. "He is correct, Eldest. I shall begin assisting with arrangements once I visit my Grandson in Orlando, if this is approved."

"Eldest, I assure you that Cory is understating the resources he has available," Teri added, the mental picture of ten thousand Tesnian children in the Dream Realm bringing a small smile to her face.

The Eldest nodded. "In that case, I approve the change. The Council will be pleased; they were hoping for a way to speed up the process. Are there any other concerns, Patriarch?"

"No, with that change I accept the treaty. Kyle is in the process of placing the modified document in the system to receive the final authorization," Cory replied.

"Done," Kyle announced a few seconds later. The Eldest quickly scanned the document, and shortly after he finished the terminal signaled receipt of his stamp. Cory stepped forward, reviewed the document that bore the Eldest's seal, then affixed his own seal to it. Teri and Marcus followed suit, their stamps witnessing the treaty and making it official.

"Thank you, Eldest; I look forward to a long relationship with you and your people," Cory said as the final seal was registered in the system and Marcus forwarded a copy of the document to Federation Headquarters.

"And I am as well, Patriarch. Marcus has informed me of your engineering accomplishments; Fife has been approved to investigate genio-mechanical interfaces, so I think you will be a perfect mentor," the Eldest said proudly.

"As my bonded son, he'll be right by my side, just as my other sons are allowed to be," Cory replied, a small smile at the new information crossing his face.

"Bonded?!" the Eldest said, the 'V' shaped crest of hair on his head quivering with his amazement.

Marcus nodded seriously, fully aware of the reason for the response of the Eldest. "Yes; bonded by the standards of Tesnian society. I verified it myself with Fife when Cory was in another room; I would say that Fife was accurate despite Cory being surrounded by other people."

"What about yourself, Cory?" the Eldest asked, now being less formal as he investigated this new twist.

"Just a second, let me move Fife," Kyle stated. "Okay, Cory, try now."

Cory closed his eyes, and his nostrils expanded as he slowly inhaled. "It's really weak, but I think that Fife is behind me off to my left side." Still facing the terminal with his eyes closed, Cory pointed his arm in the general direction he thought Fife was in.

"Amazing," the Eldest said as Cory was pounced by Fife.

"You found me, Daddy!" Fife exclaimed as he gave Cory a big hug. "I need to get back to Uncle Patty though; he likes my fur!"

With that, Fife bounced off to reclaim his Uncle. The Eldest smiled at the interaction he just witnessed. "While I've heard that you have done miracles, Cory, this is something that I have never seen or heard of. I have no worries regarding our orphans after witnessing that; any person given a gift such as yours by the Maker to be able to accomplish things previously unheard of must have a Mandate which protects those under his care."

"I'm just me; and Fife's pretty special himself," Cory said as he blushed slightly.

"I am glad that you are you; our society is going to finally move forward thanks to you," the Eldest replied. "One thing I forgot to mention is that Ambassador Marcus is in possession of our required in-kind payment to Clan Short. I know for a fact that there are a good number of 'Underclass' who would love to be in the space service; enough to give you a good crew once they receive training. I will ensure that not only they, but also qualified trainers, are present on the first group out."

"How long will the trainers be available to us?" Cory asked.

"Unless you want otherwise, I will be asking for lifetime volunteers. Our culture thrives on learning and training others; if you are willing to train them on your technology that is specific to Clan Short, you will find that you have trainers who can turn out the best new crew members in independent space."

"How long is 'lifetime'?" Teri asked.

"I expect most of the volunteers to have just entered adulthood; our structure of education ensures that they get their full training as young adults so they are fully prepared to teach their chosen profession. Those people have an expected lifespan of up to one-hundred and seventy Federation years. I also expect quite a few Elders; they will be more interested in general life training of your youth, and are probably going to still have forty Federation years left in their lives."

"Good... more help for me at bedtime, then," Teri chuckled.

"Hey; we've got almost as many kids as you, Mom!" Cory said with a giggle.

"Only by name, kiddo!" Teri chuckled. "Most of the Clan considers me Mom; there are countries with smaller populations than my unofficial family tree."

"The Vatican, Australia, Russia... China..." Sean listed off, then ducked a cuff to the back of his head from Teri.

The Eldest chuckled, then said to Teri, "Go for the back of the legs... young furr-tuggers hate that!"

Cory laughed as he watched Teri take off after Sean. "You asked for it!" he yelled to his husband. He then turned back to the screen. "Once things calm down and we have the adoptions running smoothly, I would like to come visit you. It's not fair to Fife to not let him visit his home-world occasionally."

A large paw came down on the elder's shoulder. In the background Cory saw a large... well, it looked to be a large skunk, with the head of a panda. The fur was red with orange and gray mottling the body. A

large double purple stripe ran from its snout to its tail. It was emitting a series of excited grunts and chirps.

Fife ran over and immediately answered the large creature with grunts and chirps of his own. He showed his Uncle Patty to the creature, who seemed quite interested in what the young Tesnian was saying.

The creature looked at Cory and began to rattle off a further series of grunts and chirps. Cory grinned and looked at Fife expectantly. It took a moment before Fife caught on, and began to translate for his new father.

"His name is Traania (Trav-nee-eh), his name means 'Walks Land'. He's a Praffedral (Pih-a-ey-eh-d-reahl) and we've known each other since long before I was furred. He likes to travel a lot; he's traveled more than anyone else in his clan." Fife explained with a grin. "I was telling him all about my new family. He says to tell you that he will tell his clan that you are now family; and when you visit, the clan will provide you some guards to make sure no 'Death Walkers' try to attack."

Cory nodded. "Death Walkers? I think you need to teach me more about Tesnia. Please tell Traania I said thank you very much and I am honored to accept his offer."

Fife grinned, happy to be able to help his new father. He quickly chirped and grunted back, getting a response almost instantly. "He says that his people would be the ones honored, being able to guard the legendary Furless Bonder."

"Legendary?" Cory asked as the rest of the room broke into giggles.

"Praffedral legend states that one day a furless one will come and bring the world into a new state of awareness. This furless one will bond as a Tesnian yet not be of Tesnian descent," Fife explained.

"Kewl! I guess that means Sean ain't the only one who thinks you're a legend!" Kyle giggled.

Cory reached over and ruffled Kyle's hair. "Smart Alec!" Cory giggled.

A series of chirps and grunts came from the terminal, followed by a chuckle from the Eldest. "I agree, Old Friend; it *is* good to see Humans being a true family. I believe we should give them their privacy; they have started an event which will be listed as the most significant societal change in Tesnian history since our two species joined. It is time for them to celebrate. And time for us to let our people know that the treaty has become prophecy."

Cory smiled. "Thank you for your time, Eldest."

"Thank you, Cory, for helping us and our orphans. I look forward to further communications and one day meeting you in person. Thank you and your family, and have a good day."

"You too," Cory replied just before the connection dropped.

Marcus put an arm over Cory's shoulder. "Why did you say you had a diplomatic corps? I think that you do great by yourself."



Cory giggled. "If he would have said 'no', you would have seen why I need diplomats."

"Ain't that the truth!" Kyle giggled as he joined the cuddle. "You make JJ look like a Saint!"

"Leave the Saints outta this!" Mikey exclaimed from the other side of the room.

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**Fifteen minutes later, in Teri's office:**

Julio nervously sat at the table with Jesse pressed tightly against his side. Tyler was off to his left, and Eddie to his right. Mick and Janice were across from them, Mick silently trying to decide how he was going to break the ice. As they waited, Teri and Bruce joined the conference, Teri closing the door behind them as they entered.

After she was seated, Teri looked at the assembled group. "All of you need to relax, okay? Nothing that will be said here will end the world; the only reason that we are in here is that I believe what we are about to discuss should be kept private until everyone is on the same page. Julio, your Dad is going to have a little trouble with what he needs to say, I need your sworn promise that you will let him finish before you say anything."

"Okay, Teri," Julio replied, glad that things were finally moving. "I'll wait until Dad is done."

"You're on, Mick," Teri said softly.

Mick nodded, then took Janice's hand as he began the toughest speech of his life. "Son, before I start I want you to know that your Mom and I love you now and always have. This is a subject which brings both me and your Mom to tears whenever we think of it; that is the reason that you are just now finding out about it. You can thank your little brother for taking care of this; Eddie closed out a part of the past that haunts us to this day." Mick paused, hoping to give Julio time to absorb his statements. At Julio's nod, he continued. "At a New Years party just before you were born, an ex-friend of ours decided to pull a stunt which just landed him in a Federation Prison for what remains of his life. He slipped what is known as a 'date-rape-drug' into your Mom's drink, and then raped her. After he did it, he disappeared until recently; he was picked up on other charges and your brother brought him to trial for his past crimes with a few other women in addition to your Mom. You don't need to worry about him; I doubt he will survive long in prison. That February, we found out that your Mom was pregnant; right then I made the decision that no matter what, you would be raised as *my* son. You are a gift from God to us, since I am unable to father children myself. When you were born I put my name on your birth certificate to seal the promise I made when we found out about you."

Julio sat there in shock as his mind tried to process the new information. As Mick stood to come around the table to comfort him, Julio sprang to his feet and began to sprint towards the door. Mick barely caught him, pulling him into a tight hug.

"I love you, son. Forever, I love you," Mick whispered just loud enough for Julio to hear. "Go think things over; we'll be waiting for you here once you have had time to sort it all out."

Julio pulled back and locked his tear-filled eyes with Mick. While the concern and love they reflected gave Julio some comfort, it was not enough to calm the thousands of thoughts running through his

head. He nodded at Mick, not trusting himself to speak, then turned and sprinted out the door and headed towards the pool area.

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At the sound of doors being opened and closed quickly, Fife sat up from his cuddle with Kyle. His nose twitched slightly, then he looked over at Cory and Sean. "Dads? Julio smells like he's scared. Can I go see what is wrong? I don't smell any danger."

"Go ahead," Cory and Sean chorused, both aware of just what the problem was. Sean thought quickly, having just finished reviewing everything he could find about Fife's home planet and added a warning. "Fife, there is a pool out there, a big pond of water. It is safe, there is nothing living in it or around it."

"Thank you, Dad." Fife replied as he stood up and headed out to find Julio.

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### **Julio's Perspective**

"Rape? My mom was raped and I'm...Oh God, por que? Por que?" was all I could think as I ran out of the room and finally collapsed into a lounge chair by the pool. "Por Que?"

So many thoughts were running around in my head and I could feel the tears falling but I didn't care. Dad, no, Mick wasn't really my dad. All these years... I'd thought he was the best dad in the world but he wasn't. He isn't.

He's just someone who took pity on us...but...he said he loved me... "Ah, Dios mio, Por Que. Quiero mi padre y no puedo mas."

I don't know how long I was there, crying, curled up in a ball before I smelt something, something sweet and something I somehow knew. It was like the scent of warm Churros fresh from the cooking.

I knew who it was, but I didn't want to see anyone right now and hoped he'd just go away.

He didn't.

"What's wrong, Julio?" I heard him ask softly, and when I didn't answer him, I could feel him moving closer and asking softly, "Why can't you have your dad anymore?"

I looked up at him and he gently crawled into my lap, wrapping his arms around me tightly in a hug.

I could smell the cinnamon much more strongly now, along with other scents, all soothing for some reason as I inhaled deeply.

"You're sniffing me like a Tesnian," Fife said softly.

"Sorry, but there is just something about you that smells so good to me right now," I had to say.

"We are bonded, and family scent soothes one another," he replied.

"Family..." I whispered, looking out over the yard at nothing. "Family, it's all a big fucking joke," I finally said.

"No, it is not," the young boy said strongly as he sat up looking straight into my eyes, which had come back to him now.

"You asked what was wrong? Well, my whole life is nothing but a lie. That's what's wrong. I don't have a father and my mother... my mother lied to me my whole life."

I could see Fife shaking his head as I spoke and he responded with, "You are incorrect, Julio. I do not understand what has happened, but you do have a father, and I do not believe your mother would do that to you."

I felt myself laughing bitterly as I said, "Well, it's true. My mom was raped and my dad isn't my real dad. They lied to me all these years ,Fife, **THEY LIED TO ME!**" I cried as I felt the pain coming up again.

"Rape? That is the word you use for forced copulation, is it not?" Fife asked.

"Yeah, and I'm here 'cause my mom got raped," I told him.

"But your father is not the one who did this thing?" he asked.

"He's not my father, they lied to me. He just someone who took pity on the poor pregnant girl and then me," I said.

"The one who did this, he has been dealt with?" Fife asked.

"Yeah, they said he's on some prison planet where he'll die soon," I replied.

"Good, for those who would do such a thing on my world, we would banish them to the wilds to be eaten, with no one to give them aid. They die quickly and painfully as they should," Fife explained to me.

Fife gently wiggled and pushed until he was cuddled into my chest. "On my old world, things such as that are punished by banishing from society. That means death, as the offender will be eaten by a Jhrir Traafeen (Zhrir Trav-af-een) not too long after banishment, and none of the other races will step in to help him or her."

"What is a zeer ... zihher ... whatever that thing is you said?" I asked, my curiosity partially overcoming my emotional turmoil.

Fife tilted his head a little as he tried to figure out a comparison. "It's about the size of one of those big city buses I saw here; it somewhat resembles one of Earth's armadillos, except for it being big, pink, and it has a bunch of tentacles that pull you into a big black hole with teeth, and ...."

"Holy Crap!" I commented as a shudder went down his spine. "That sounds like a nightmare."

Fife nodded seriously. "Which is why we don't have Red Alert... we have Pink Alert!"

"I think I can see why.... Yeah, well, it doesn't change anything now, does it? I still don't have a dad like I thought I did, and they both lied to me all my life," I told him.

"No it does not change anything, Julio, from what it was an hour of your time measurement ago," Fife said.

"What?" I asked.

"You were just given this information, is that not correct?" Fife asked me gently.

All I could do was nod my head.

"And before you were given this information, was Mick your father, your dad?" he asked next.

I didn't, no couldn't, answer for a moment or two, but finally admitted "Yes."

"Then why is he not still your father now?" Fife asked.

"Because," I muttered.

"Because why? I do not understand. Has he not loved you all your life?" he said.

"Y..y..yes," I stuttered out.

"And have you not loved him as well?" to which I admitted yes again.

"And has this love not been the love of a father and a son?" he asked me quietly.

I didn't answer him and finally he said "It is, is it not?"

"Yes, but it's different now," I finally got out.

"How?" he asked.

Didn't he understand anything? I thought to myself as I said "It just is."

"How?" he asked softly yet again.

"Fife, he's not my dad," I replied.

"Because an act of copulation between him and your mother did not take place, correct?" he asked as I blushed but nodded my head.

"So if this reasoning is true, then your Clan which you are a part of cannot exist, am I correct?" he asked.

"What? Of course not," I replied.

"I do not understand then," he said with a confused look on his face before going on. "Your Clan has people who adopt children in need of a parent, even though they themselves did not take part in the mating process which produced the younglings."

"It's not the same thing," I said.

"Grandfather told me that Cory is his grandson's father and Timmy sees Cory as his 'dad', yet Cory did not copulate with Timmy's mother to produce him. Are not Cory and Timmy father and son?" Fife asked.

"Well, yeah, but that's different," I told him.

"How?" he asked.

"Look, Fife, he's just not, okay?" I said, a bit mad.

"No, it is not 'Okay'. Mick is your father as if he had copulated with your mother, and you are his son, the same as if you were from his organ which secreted the mating fluids. The knowledge which you have gained does not change what IS there," Fife said, causing me to blush.

"Are you well? Your skin is turning a most distinct shade of color which is not normal," he asked.

"I'm... I'm fine, Fife. Your people don't have a problem talking about sex, do they?" I asked, smiling down at him.

"No, why would they? It is a natural process which all go through at some point," Fife replied confused.

"Never mind, little one," I replied.

"Do you understand now?" he asked.

"I'm trying, Fife, it's just so much to think about and take in right now. He said he loved me, even after he told me, he said he loved me and always has," I told him, sniffing back tears which were threatening to break free again.

"That is because he does. I can smell the bond, Julio, it's like a bright rope linking the two of you together saying "FATHER AND SON". There is no mistaking it. You are his heart and he yours in the way of a parent and child," Fife explained gently to me.

"I don't know, Fife, I just don't know anymore."

"Then let me tell you something which happened on Tesnia a couple years ago, and maybe it will be of help to your comprehension," he said.

"Okay," I replied, having no idea what he was going to tell me or could tell me to make this all better.

"In our society, sometimes a special bond is formed. It is hard to describe in your language because it has no counterpart really that I know of so far. It is a combination second parent, brother, friend, advocate, and someone who teaches the cub. It is a relationship that the parents, cub, and Toffprfff (Toy-pih-Irrf-ey) must all agree to. That person is all and more to a cub. He is there to play with them, teach them, support them and love them, he is also there to advocate for them, and if something should happen to the parents, be a parent for the cub." He paused for a moment before going on.

"A Toffprfff is family and sometimes in some ways closer than even the cub's actual parents are. He does not take the place of parents, but his role is for the cub, not the parents. Even a King is subject to this, should he pick a Toffprfff for his cub or cubs. Several hundred years ago a King was at odds with his son and the Toffprfff advocated for him, as was his duty. The king was going to banish his son to the underclass. This would violate the bond between the Toffprfff and the King's son, as the Toffprfff is a parent to his cub when the parent can't or won't be one. The only way to be part of the underclass is to have no family. The Toffprfff stood up to the King, and in a fight the Toffprfff killed the King. The Ruling Council stood by the Toffprfff, ruling that not even a King could go against this custom, and he became father to the boy; raising him to be King when the time was right. A Toffprfff has a unique place in our world and is very important to our family structure," he told me, stopping again to think before going on.

"My parents picked Afhralid (Af-h-reah-ello) to be my Tesffirapr (Tes-ey-ireh-pih), a holy father, and he was a part of my life since before I was birthed. He was there throughout my life, and in some ways I was closer to him than to my own father. When I was declared a child, and old enough to make the choice, we went to the Elders and declared him my Toffprfff. It is difficult to explain, as I loved my father more than anything, yet Afhralid was just as important to me in other ways and I loved him so very much."

I didn't know why, but somehow I could sense this was hard for him, as he stopped once again and seemed to be trying to draw strength to continue from somewhere. I tried to give him some by hugging him to me.

"Thank you," he whispered before going on. "A few years ago Afhralid began to show interest in a female. That female had a small cub a couple of years younger than I. The cub and I became fast friends and then like brothers. He was the little brother I had never had and we were always together. I came to love him as a brother and he was like part of my family. After a while, my Afhralid announced his intention to bond with the female. He loved her and loved Hiafnia (eye-af-nee-ah) as if he was his own son. Hiafnia loved him too and you could smell the familial bond that existed between them. It was separate from the tie between he and I. Hiafnia was his son as if he had mated and produced him, and Hiafnia felt the same towards Afhralid."

He stopped for a moment, breathing deeply, then went on.

"I was more happy than I can say, to know that my Toffprfff was going to be a father to one who I felt the bond of brotherhood with, and even happier that my little brother was going to have a dad to love and be loved by once again. It would also mean he would officially become part of my family through the Toffprfff bond. The...then Hiafnia's mother was killed before they could enter the bonding ceremony, in a Jhrir Traafeen raid on a nature reserve they were visiting, and he was left an orphan. In our world orphans are not, well, they lose everything. They have no... Uhm... They have no say in government. I mean no rights. I am not sure what you would call it. I guess they are basically, uhm... I think slaves is the right word. They have no status as they have no family."

"Afhralid tried to adopt Hiafnia but it was not allowed, because of the serious injuries my little brother had received. I was losing my little brother and Afhralid was losing his son. By Tesnian law he could prove the bond existed, but his pleas were denied because of the demands of Hiafnia's care. It was going to take seven long years of intense rehabilitation and care for him to regain his mobility. They believed that they could return eighty-five to ninety-five percent of his mobility to him. The state would of course cover his healing, but that was not an option if Hiafnia was adopted.

"Afhralid even humbled himself and begged to the authorities but his pleas were denied. Hiafnia was to be taken and put into the orphan's sector with no contact allowed by any of us. My parents tried to intercede as well, and with their status an exception was made, but it came at a horrible cost to Afhralid....to him and to me." He stopped and I could see the tears running down his furred little face as I gently wiped them away and planted a kiss onto his downy cheek.

He buried his head into my chest for a moment before pulling back and going on.

"The authorities granted the pleas from my parents and Afhralid, but not in the way anyone had expected. They told Afhralid that if he gave up being my Toffprrrff, he could care for Hiafnia. I..I had to make a decision and it was the hardest one I have ever had to make. Let the man who I loved so much go and be a father to my little brother, or keep him for myself as was my right."

He stopped at that point, crying now openly, as I rubbed his back the way I'd seen Cory do it earlier.

When he could continue, it was brokenly but he bravely went on.

"I could have said no, Julio. I needed him but...there was no doubt that they were father and son the way my father and I were. Just as deeply as our bond, did exist their bond. Hiafnia was so scared of losing Afhralid and being alone. It broke my heart to see them and know that Afhralid would stand by me first and foremost, even at the cost of his son. I couldn't let that happen, so I released Afhralid from our bond. Hiafnia tried to stop me and cried, begging me not to let Afhralid give up everything he had for him. Afhralid would become nearly destitute caring for Hiafnia, and while Afhralid was well off, his family was not. At least Hiafnia would never be alone. He would have a family." Tears came to Fife's eyes.

"They were meant to be together and I could not keep them from their destiny. So I released him and Afhralid gave up everything he had worked so hard to gain for Hiafnia. They both came to say goodbye and we once again imprinted onto each other our love which would have to last a lifetime. That was the last I saw of them and it still hurts even now. It was the hardest day of my life until the day my parents were killed. Even though I realize that if Afhralid had remained my Toffprrrff, I would have a family and not... not... be a slave... I would not change a thing," he said stopping.

"I'm sorry, little brother" I whispered softly as I stroked his fur and let him cry his pain out.

I didn't answer him for a long time, thinking about my life until a little while ago. Did it really make any difference? Mick had been my dad and I could never have asked for a better one, until those words were said in that room. Did it really change anything, other than I now knew that like Afhralid and Hiafnia, he had chosen to be my dad, and what had happened hadn't made any difference to him at all. He'd loved me, he'd always loved me. Did those words change it all of a sudden?

Fife gave me a small smile. "I can barely smell the other man; he is like a spirit long in your family's past. Your mother is strong in you as she should be. Mick is as your father; he has bonded with you so much that he overshadows any other connection as your father. By Tesnian law, he is your father. Nobody can bond that strong to someone, yet he has. I think he was right; the Creator gave you as a gift to them and gave you some of his genes, even though he did not provide them."

"How sure are you?" I asked, as the hope I was beginning to feel seeped into my voice.

"I am studying genio-mechanical interface advance application and design," Fife stated simply. "I have to know my genetic theory and application every way possible to be in the field."

"I'd say that makes you more of an expert than me. So that means that Mick is my dad, even though he's not my dad, but genetically he's my dad anyway?"

"That pretty much explains it," Fife replied with a grin.

"Does this mean that anyone who adopts and loves a kid will do this?" I asked, my curiosity now fully in gear.

"No." Fife replied. "The bond you have with him is built from his love of you; it is a family bond that only love can build. That bond can be built by any family member; in fact it has started with your brothers already, even though they share none of the family's genes. In Tesnian history, the only time this has been seen is when one is born that is fated to lead the society to a new level of peace and prosperity. Those people, and only two are recorded, have been said to have been sent by the Creator to guide us, and they carried the scent of their mother and of one never seen. None of them gave their genes to future generations. You are the first known to ever have the genes of one not your father, yet be living with the one who matches those genes. I'll need to do a full workup of you, Mick, and your mom to record this!"

"You're definitely Cory's kid," I said with a giggle. "Get you going on something tech and you can talk for hours!"

"Thank you!" Fife beamed, overjoyed at the first time someone acknowledged him as one of Cory's sons by comparing him to Cory.

It was then that Mick's last words came back to me as I ran from the room, 'he always would'.

And I knew, I just knew. Dad was dad just like he'd always been, only now that meant even more to me than it had before, because with this new knowledge I realized he didn't have to be.

Fife asked me again. "Do you understand now, Julio? Do you understand that seed does not make a father nor a son?"

As tears began to fall down my face, I said, "Yes Fife, yes I do."

"Okay," Fife replied. As he started to get up, he actually paid attention to the pool nearby. "Julio. This may not be the right time to bring this up, but why does Earth have all of these ponds at people's houses? And why does the water smell dead?"



"You've never seen a pool or a water-park?" I asked in reply.

"No; when my family was here, my Elder was really vocal about making sure there was nothing called a 'pool' at our hotel," Fife replied softly. "The Tesnian travel guide has a stern warning about Tesnians not even viewing that thing you call a water-park."

I nodded my head, my gut feeling telling me this could prove interesting. "A pool is like a small water-park. It is a place for families to play games and swim in the water." I paused at the confused look on Fife's face. "What confused you?"

"I don't have any idea what 'swim' means; I don't think we have a word for it on Tesnia."

I nodded. "Okay. Swimming is pretty much you get into the pool and exercise by propelling yourself through the water using motions of your arms and legs."

"That's stupid! What if something was to come up and jump in the water? You can't get away, and you'd be dead!" Fife stated, an edge of panic in his tone.

"Calm down; remember this is Earth," I said softly. "It sounds like you have some creatures on Tesnia that we never had here. When you get back home to Orlando, your little brother Timmy will help you learn all about Earth animals. There are no animals here in the Des Moines area that we would ever have to worry about attacking us while swimming. it's another way that Humanity spends time with friends and family to have fun."

"Does that mean that I *have* to get in there? That water smells weird."

"No. In fact, I'm pretty sure Cory would try to strangle anyone that tried to make you get in," I replied with conviction. "Everyone takes time out of the water to just watch the others play and to talk, so you would have a lot of company if you just sat in one of the chairs. The water smells weird because it is treated to make sure no bacteria or anything bad like that can live in it."

"That explains it smelling dead," Fife acknowledged. "I guess I can try watching though."

I nodded. "A water-park is a really big pool with slides and other fun stuff to play around with in the water. They are safe too; but unless the Clan visits one and occupies the entire park, you'll have a bunch of people you don't know in the water with you. I would say that you should stay away from those unless Cory and Sean are with you."

"I think I'll do it that way; I don't know if I even want to do it then," Fife replied seriously. "I would like to look at the pool; would you hold me while I look?"

I nodded seriously, fully aware of the trust that Fife was putting in me. "Sure, then we'll head inside."

Fife held on to my arm like a boa constrictor as I led him around the pool area. "What is that for?" Fife asked, pointing at the diving board.

"It's called a 'diving board'; you walk out on it to the end, bounce a few times, then jump off of it into the water," I explained.

"Humans are nuts," Fife stated as he pulled on my arm to move on. "At least you can stop yourself on that slide over there."

"I never said anything about humanity being sane!" I giggled. "You ready to go inside?"

"Yeah, I really need to talk to Dads about this pool thing." Fife responded as he started dragging me towards the safety of the house.

"Well, I have to let someone know how much I love them, and even more, how much their loving me means to me; and you, little brother, need to have a conversation with Cory," I said smiling.

"About the pool things?" he asked.

"No. About why you became an orphan and what is going on in your society. I have a feeling your new dad will have a few asses to set on fire," I told him.

"Why would he ignite the posterior of someone?" Fife asked bewildered.

"Oh it's just something he likes to do, and it's fun to watch too," I said, giggling a bit as we both headed inside.

Fife still looked at me like I was an alien, which of course I am to him, but finally shrugged his shoulders, muttering something about 'humans' I think as I walked in and handed him off to Cory.

"Fife, you tell Cory about Afhralid and Hiafnia, everything, okay?" I said.

He nodded as Cory asked "How're ya doing, Julio?"

I smiled softly as I said, "Fine, thanks to my new little bro there," then I turned and headed back into the office where I knew my DAD was waiting.

As soon as I walked into the room, he stood up with a worried look on his face, but I just walked over to him and looked up at him without speaking for a minute or so before saying, "I love you, dad," then launching myself into his arms as we both began crying, and through it all came the words I'd so long taken for granted, but never would again: "I love you so much Julio, so very very much."

### **End Julio's Perspective**

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As Fife finished relaying his story to Cory, Cory looked around the room while he comforted his furry son. "You know, I'm really starting to have an issue with this..." Cory announced with menace in his voice.

Mikey rolled his eyes, and motioned for Kyle and Tyler to stay where they were. "Vacation, Tigger ... Vacation. All of you can stay put; it can all be dealt with after you get home."

"Spoilsport!" Cory, Sean, Kyle and Ty exclaimed in unison.

"You always ruin my fun!" Cory added.

Mikey shook his head in wonder. "I swear, if it wasn't that you and Sean would enjoy it, I'd tie you down to keep you from working."

"MIKEY!!!!" Sean and Cory exclaimed as they grabbed pillows off the couch and threw them at Mikey.

"Humans like being restrained when copulating?" Fife asked in wonder from his perch on Cory's lap.

"Only weird ones like your Uncle Mikey." Cory replied.

The boys broke into laughter as they once again got the chance to see a Saint blush. "BUSTTEED-  
DDD!!" Kyle and Ty giggled.

"Mom, you really need to teach them respect for their elders!" Mikey groaned as he rolled his eyes.

"Don't blame me, young man!" Teri responded with a laugh. "You're the one who taught them to be what they are now!"

"Yeah, bro!" Cory and Sean exclaimed in unison.

Kai came over from where he had just finished changing Patty's diaper and smiled as he handed the baby boy over to Cory. "It is your turn to spoil Patty," Kai said with a grin. "Family before world domination, Bruv."

Cory laughed as he took his turn with his new nephew. "You're sounding just like the rest of our brothers already, Kai! One of these days, I'm gonna find a brother who takes MY side!"

"Not if I can help it!" Adam, Mikey, Sean, and Tyler exclaimed in unison.

Kai laughed. "I think I will join with the thoughts of the rest of my bruv!"

"Jeeze ... outnumbered in my own family..." Cory fake pouted. His pout did not last long, as Patty noticed his furry cousin was on Cory's lap. Patty wiggled and squirmed his way around until he got his way and ended up where he was against both boys at once. Cory's hair was still long from the dance; a situation which Patty took advantage of as he reached out and started playing with a handful of blond locks while happily rubbing the side of his face on Fife's furry shoulder.

"I think he likes us!" Cory giggled.

Fife nodded. "He acts happier when you are holding him. I know he likes fur; he has fun cuddling with me, Bast, and Mont."

Bast walked over and put a paw on Fife's shoulder. "He likes us, but he's happiest when he's cuddling you or Cory. When we get back home, I think you're going to be busy with kid cuddles, Fife. Not because of your fur; because of your heart. You and Cory both have something special about you that other people can feel, and it'll give a lot of kids comfort they haven't felt before."

"You've got that right, Bruv!" Kai added, which just served to deepen the blush visible under Fife's fur.

"You can add Des Moines Division's vote to that too!" Julio giggled as him, Mick, and Janice rejoined the rest of the group. Julio was attached to Mick's back so tightly that a leech could take lessons from him, the smile on his face showing that the earlier events had been resolved. "If I hadn't already known he was your son before Fife came out, I woulda figured it out when he cuddled me!" Julio added.

Fife's grin became huge as Cory replied "That's my son!"

Sean smiled as well. "I think you and Timmy are going to get along great, Fife. Just don't be surprised when he offers you alligator rides!"

"You're both crazy, Dads, but I like it!" Fife giggled. "Can we talk about the pool thing out there?" he added in a more serious tone.

"I was wondering when you would bring that up," Cory replied. "I know that Tesnians don't have anything like a pool."

Fife snuggled in closer and stroked Patty's back as he tried to put his feelings into words. "I know you said that nothing could get me out there ... I know why animals don't come to that water, since the water smells dead. I don't understand why humans want to get in a lake like that, especially a lake that is dead. Julio explained it a little, but it don't make sense that you would risk your lives getting into water like that."

Cory nodded seriously, looking around to see if everyone was paying attention. "I think you should take it slow. While all of us enjoy pools who are from Earth, not all species from other planets enjoy the same things we do. Nobody will force you to get in there; if anyone tries I will deal with them personally. Just try not to freak out when you see one of us being tossed in the water by another one. We know how to do it so that it is safe, and we never do it to someone who can't swim or who is afraid of water."

Fife relaxed, trusting Cory at his word. "Julio said it would be okay if I watched everyone while they were in the water."

Sean spoke up. "He's right; not everyone is in the pool at once. You'll probably have plenty of company watching whoever is swimming. It's kinda a safety thing too - if there is a problem then the guys not swimming can get help faster than the guys who are swimming."

"It'll be a good thing if you're sitting there watching us." Cory added. "You might end up with a wet cuddle partner or two, but that is the closest you'll get to pool water unless you tell us otherwise."

Fife nodded, the assurances he received calming his fears. "Thanks Dads!"

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**Editor's Note:**

Wow, thanks AC!! What a change of events. Who would have know that while on Vacation, the Clan would sign a treaty with another world!! Someone needs to explain to AC what a vacation is! LOL I think this new information will be interesting as it unfolds. We know what happens when Cory starts questioning things and has the authority to change them. One world getting turned upside down coming up! I am glad that Julio was able to come to terms with his Dad. So many people let silly stuff come between them. It may seem like a big deal at the time but if you take a second to see the big picture, it really is not that bad. Oh darn, someone loves me! (That's the point).

Now we just have to figure out why Mikey is on vacation! I don't think this story is over yet. Something is brewing and it seems like it is going to be big! Let's hope that AC has chapter 5 started and going already!

Your Friendly Neighborhood Hound!

Boxerdude

## Chapter Five : My Hero!

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Julio giggled as he finally convinced his brothers to put on some dress clothes. "C'mon guys, Cory's waitin' on us!"

Johnny stuck out his tongue at Julio. "Kyle says we still have ten minutes before we leave. They're still tryin to pry that pizza kid off of Bast; it'd be easier if Bast wasn't helping hold him."

"They make a cute pair, though; I thought the poor guy was gonna need new pants when Bast offered to give him a tongue bath!" Julio laughed. "Eddie, I don't think you'll need the roller blades!"

"How can I keep up with you long-legged old guys?" Eddie asked meekly.

"Piggy-back rides... it's a benefit of being a kid!" Johnny replied.

"Oh yeah... I better leave them then!" Eddie giggled as the aforementioned roller blades went flying across the floor. He quickly slipped into the dress shoes that Julio had set out for him, then stood up with a grin. "My feet hurt already, big bro; you gotta carry me!"

Julio laughed as he knelt down to allow Eddie to climb on his back. "Hop on, Cowboy!"

As Johnny watched his little brother climb on Julio's back, a soft smile appeared on his face. For the first time in their short lives, the two youngest members of the Hernandez household were able to feel secure in their surroundings. His smile grew wider as Jesse came over and knelt in front of him.

"You too, Johnny! I can't let you walk if Eddie isn't walking." Jesse announced.

Johnny climbed onto Jesse, snuggling in as he got comfortable on his new friend's back.

Once the two young boys were settled in, their 'horseys' proceeded to go meet up with the rest of the group.

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Cory grinned as he saw the Des Moines boys making their way into the Rec Room. "You guys just missed it!" Cory laughed. "Bast just called Jeremy's boss and informed him that Jeremy was quitting, whether he wanted to or not!"

Julio looked over at the fourteen year old (former) pizza delivery driver, who was happily cuddled with Bast in the recliner. "Hey Jer! Isn't that taking 'getting a piece of tail' a little literally?"

Jeremy stuck out his tongue at Julio. "Once you have Lion, you don't keep tryin'!" he shot back.

The room fell into laughter at the quick reply, Bast blushing and pulling his new boyfriend close with a toothy grin. Julio went over to the phone and called the pizza shop, dialing the number from memory.

"Pizza Italiano, this is Kristopher. How may I help you?" a young voice answered.

Julio decided to try out his new title. "This is Director Hernandez; could I please speak to George?" Julio asked politely.

"Yes sir, one minute while I get him," Kristopher replied.

A few seconds later, an adult voice came onto the line. "This is George, how may I assist you, Director?"

Julio smiled. "It's still Julio to you, George. I just wanted to make sure that Jeremy being hijacked by one of Patriarch Short's security detail wasn't going to cause you any issues with your schedule. Also, I want to apologize for the lack of warning. They're only here for the weekend, so Jeremy giving notice was difficult."

"You don't need to worry." George replied, the smile evident in his voice. "I could hear the love in Mr. Lion's voice. I already called a few of the other drivers; as soon as they heard that Jeremy had found someone special, they all agreed to cover for him until one of the new rescues is able to take his place."

"Thanks George!" Julio replied with relief. "How's business been?"

"Insanely good!" George laughed. "I might need to expand the building over more of that parking lot that I don't use anymore! I'm glad that you guys decided to let me, Walgreens, and the skate shop remain in business here when you annexed the area. With the arrangements that Mr. Takamura made, we can help the kids without worrying about profit and loss. I will say there were some really happy employees here when Mrs. Short made her order, though. Since she paid for the order, all of the kids involved in the order or making the pizzas split the payment between themselves as pocket cash."

"So *that's* how you do it!" Julio giggled. "No wonder everyone likes working there!"

"I think it's because I don't care if they have fun as long as they do it safely." George chuckled. "My wife is starting to wonder if I've had a bad day if I come home without some part of a pizza embedded in my hair! Speaking of which, I better go; there's a twelve-year-old baker who I owe a dose of pizza sauce down the back of his shirt to."

"Have fun!" Julio giggled. "Thanks for understanding; have a great day!"

"You too!" George replied.

As George was hanging up, Julio barely heard him exclaim "Conlin, you better start running now..."

---

As Julio was making his phone call, Kyle and Ty were updating Johnny and Eddie on the capabilities of the newest member of the newly-christened Des Moines Psy Corps. As instructed, Robin had come over to have his abilities assessed after he had been observed helping Jules "save" the disco ball at the dance. The eight-year-old strawberry blond had immediately hit it off with Eddie, and the two of them seemed to be constantly giggling as each showed off a little more of what they could do.

Kyle smiled as he watched the two reunite. When Robin had arrived earlier, Kyle had sat down with him to help him discover just what kind of telekinesis Robin was capable of. As soon as Kyle had started to really investigate Robin's powers, he realized that fate had given Robin a lucky break by allowing him to be spotted playing with his skill....

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### **;Flashback:**

Kyle barely took enough time to explain to Robin what he was about to do, then he pulled Robin's consciousness into his head. Once they were both safely inside one of Kyle's many rooms, Kyle explained in more detail what the problem was.

"Welcome to my head!" Kyle giggled as he pointed toward an overstuffed chair. "Have a seat, then I'll fill you in."

Robin nodded, his eyes wide at the new experience of being in someone else's head. "Am I dead now?" he asked uncertainly.

"No, there's a piece of you that stays back to keep your body alive." Kyle replied seriously. "You've got a special type of head; your mind is about ready to become something really special, but it's missing a couple of puzzle pieces. You're a little too close, though; it's like you're walking a crack on a sidewalk. All you gotta do is miss that crack once and things go 'boom!'."

"What happens if things go 'boom'?" Robin asked in a worried tone.

Kyle shook his head. "You don't wanna know, and I'm not gonna let you find out." He paused for a second, then continued. "While you rest in here and munch cookies, I'm gonna go into your head and put

the missing puzzle pieces back into place, then I'll take you back and teach you how to use everything. The fixin' part hurts a lot, but while you're in here you won't feel it; at least I don't think you will."

Robin nodded, then giggled as a Transformers episode started playing on the opposite wall at the same time as cookies appeared on the table in front of him. "Kewl! I missed this episode!" Robin exclaimed as he quickly grabbed two handfuls of cookies, then made himself comfortable.

Kyle giggled, then vanished from the room as he began the necessary conversion....

### **;End Flashback**

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Kyle was brought back from his reflection by Mick walking up to them. "Are the five of you ready to go downtown?" Mick asked, knowing the boys were looking forward to the tour promised by Ted.

"Mrowrrrw???" Charlie seemed to ask from his perch on Johnny's lap.

"Okay, okay... are the SIX of you ready?" Mick laughed.

"Rowrrr!" Charlie purred smugly.

"I getta go too?" Robin asked hopefully.

"Of course." Mick replied. "I'm not mean enough to separate you and Eddie. Speaking of which, on Teri's suggestion I just got off of the phone with your mom. Marcie and us are combining properties, and Teri has arranged for a CIC like Orlando has to be put in place of our houses. The only difference between theirs and ours is the roof is being raised to put our living quarters on the second floor. Marcie is going to become a house-mom for all of you guys and whoever you add to the family. Robin, if both of you guys want it, you and Eddie can share a room."

The two boys grinned as their eyes lit up. "AWESOME!!" they exclaimed in unison.

Mick nodded and smiled. Despite the fact they were neighbors, Eddie and Robin had never had the chance to know each other; Eddie was so deep into his shell that the only people that he would interact with before Cory's return were Johnny, Mick, Janice, and Julio. Now, thanks to Kyle and Ty, his youngest son was rejoining the human race. Mick wasn't about to argue with the way things were going; in fact, with the progress he had seen with Johnny and Eddie in the last twenty-four hours, Mick was willing to just let things progress along their new route.

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### **;Fifteen minutes later:**

"A stretched *CAMARO!*!" Cory exclaimed as Benny, who somehow happened to be the driver of their tram once again, pulled into the lot just outside the gate.



"Of course, only the best for da Boss!" Benny giggled. "C'mon, I've been wanting to ride in this thing since we got it! I'm 'posed to stick with you until you come back home, my boss said so."

"Who is your boss?" Cory asked as he noticed the confused look on Julio's face at Benny's comment.

Benny grinned, winked at Julio and then gestured for both the confused Division Director and the Clan Patriarch to follow him down the sidewalk for a few meters until they were out of earshot of the rest. Kyle and Ty glanced over knowingly, and Benny winked at them too.

"Now I'm *really* curious," Cory giggled. Somehow, he thought, this should be good. Jace had already said he'd been watching this place, so this was unlikely to be a nasty surprise.

Benny stopped and opened his jacket top and pulled open his shirt. Cory's jaw dropped open, while Julio looked even more confused.

Then, in a soft, south Wales accent, Benny said, "I am Sub-Commander James Benjamin Roberts, Wings Corp, Dragon Division VSO - May we live as the line, and die to defend it."

Cory's face hardened for a split second before he asked, "When were you given your rank, Sub-Commander Roberts? I thought all the kids in the Dragon were lieutenants."

"Apart from Koth and Matthew, yeah. They are higher than me. I was a lieutenant up till this morning," Benny smiled as he allowed Julio to check out his uniform under his outer clothes. "Since you've made this group of head cases a Division, I was appointed main point of contact for the VSO here. If you want, Julio," he added as the boy blew a raspberry at him for the 'head case' comment, "I can be your direct liaison with the Dragon as well."

Julio tilted his head. "So, the Dragon Division Cory told me about... How long have you been VSO? I thought you guys moved here from Illinois; that's what your mom told my mom."

"Ah," Benny giggled as he did up his shirt and jacket, "Swansea... well, the name of the place is right, just the location is a little off. Swansea, South Wales. I was recruited in April when Jace and the gang came back from Vulcan; went to Vulcan myself in June and was back home in July. Got shipped out here to watch some colonials in August... some blond bonce named..." Benny couldn't finish, for Cory had him on the ground being tickled before he could complete his comments.

"Mmm... is this what the Clan is reduced to? Tickle torture? Looks fun! Can I help?" A man's voice said from behind the three boys... for Julio was also attacking Benny for the 'colonial' remark.

"DAD! You TRAITOR!" Benny squealed as he writhed about under the dual assault he was on the receiving end of.

Cory laughed, and as he began to stand up he caught a glimpse of some familiar black fabric through the new arrival's collar. "Feel free to continue as you have been trained, Mr. Roberts." Cory said with a knowing grin.

"That's 'Captain' to you, colonial," Benny giggled as he tried to escape now that Cory's attention was divided.

Julio laughed and caught the boy easily. "Your dad outranks you and you're in charge?" he asked as he hugged the boy close.

Benny nodded, "He's Eyes Corp. I'm Wings. Eyes watch and collate data. Wings set the watch, along with Talons. If it's something in Dad's field, then he tells me what to do. But if it's in mine, he does what *I* tell him to do! I HAVE THE POWER!"

"Unless I ground you," 'Captain' Roberts grinned as he shook Cory's hand. "Pleased to finally meet you, Patriarch."

Cory grinned, then said shrewdly, "I'm guessing you were once in another service before VSO, and Benny here was recruited along with you?"

"Yes," the man smiled. "I was sent by Her Majesty to join the Division. Formally MI6, and yes, I had the 'license'. I got sent, and he stowed away in the boot of the car... the imp. Jason took a liking to him, and recruited ME only because he wanted Benny as well!"

"Figures. Jace is weird that way." Cory giggled.

"Has he told you who your official liaison is for the main Compound yet, Mr. Patriarch, sir?" Benny grinned evilly.

Cory poked his tongue out at him before shaking his head. "No. I'd assumed it would have been either him or one of the other nuts he has there with us. But I gather it isn't?"

"Nope. I can tell you, if you want," Benny smiled as he and Julio stood up.

"Sure. Then I can torture Jace for forgetting to tell me." Cory laughed. "He's gonna need gills by the time I get home anyways!"

Benny smirked, "Well, one you've known from the Home you were in. The other three newcomers you haven't even considered..." He trailed off as Cory's eyes went wide.

"No.... Mark?!"

"Yuppers," Benny nodded. "He was rescued by Sarek on the second of Jan, brought to meet Jason, and then went through the training at the same time as my Boss. The other three, however... they are old... but don't look it..." Benny smirked again.

He then added, "And have a large pet!"

"My three android brothers?" Cory asked incredulously. "I didn't think androids were qualified to do that kind of stuff!"

"Llywelyn and Rhys are Black level," Benny pointed out. "They are about the same age as the three amigos who got roped in... by Jason... when he was training... he's good at that," Benny finished with a giggle. "They've been our Vulcan side contacts for a while, but they wanted in on Earth. So they've been transferred undercover."

"Don't you mean 'under THE covers'?" Cory giggled. "That is where they spend most of their time lately!"

"Really?" Benny asked, "who did they pair off with?"

"They haven't got that far yet!" Cory laughed.

Benny giggled, "They've learnt too much from Ollie..."

"Who?" Julio asked.

"Jason's sex-crazed son," Cory laughed.

"Oh, he takes after his Uncle Cory," Julio laughed as he sprinted back towards the limo.

"I could stun him for you," Benny offered evilly as he, his dad and Cory walked back to the limo at a more normal pace.

"No, I'll get him later," Cory smiled.

Benny smiled up at Cory for a second, then hugged him tightly. "Sorry," he blushed as he pulled back. "I've been watching you guys for months, even before coming over here, and I've wanted to hug you for ages... you always looked so sad," he said, his eyes seeming misty with unshed tears.

Cory pulled him back for a proper hug. "That's okay, bro... I understand." Cory said with a smile.

Benny purred into Cory's chest for a moment before asking in a mumble that was nearly obscured by having his face mashed into Cory's jacket, "I saw your face when you saw my uniform. Is there something about the Division that makes you angry?"

"Red One," Cory replied simply, not totally sure that they were in private.

Mr. John Roberts looked down with mild surprise, "So you've been let in on the horror, then." It wasn't a question.

Cory nodded.

"I understand your reason for looking angry," John said softly as he pulled his son from Cory's arms and into his own. "Imagine how I felt after going through the Fire only to realize that 1) my son wasn't tortured to death before my eyes but 2) he had been tortured like I was and must have 'seen' me die..."

"I know more than you would ever believe...." Cory replied seriously, his tone suggesting it was best to not ask for details.

John nodded before kissing his son's cheek and telling him, "Behave with Cory, or I'll hear about it."

"Sir, yes sir," Benny giggled as he threw an American-style salute at his dad.

"You did that wrong," John laughed as he continued the months-long joke that had been in the running since moving to the U.S.

"I'm a Yank, now," Benny giggled, dropping back into his Middle America style accent. "Got to fit in, Limey."

John glared at his son, shook hands again with Cory and said, "If he acts up, you have my permission to spank him... he's terrified of that."

Benny did go a little pale, Cory noted.

"Oh?" Cory asked carefully.

"It's embarrassing... don't hurt, but it's embarrassing..." Benny whined. "I'll be good, Dad."

John winked at him, "Thank you."

As the man walked off, Cory looked at Benny seriously. "Does he spank you often?" he asked, still careful but also dead serious.

Benny shook his head quickly. "It's not like that. I get spanked if I'm really bad... and I have to admit, I can be. My pranks go too far. He never hurts me, but he and Mam found out years ago that I find it most embarrassing and therefore it's something that makes me behave... a little better, anyway!" he finished cheekily.

"Maybe I should have your Dad straighten out Jace...." Cory murmured with a grin as they resumed the trip back to the limo once again.

Benny grinned and giggled, "Jace don't mind being embarrassed. Just don't ignore him. If you spank him and stand him in a corner for an hour, he'd be in tears over being ignored more than the sore butt. There... now I'm on his hit list for telling you that one!"

"I better warn Mom then." Cory replied seriously. "She doesn't believe in punishments that hurt mentally."

Benny glanced up seriously, "He won't be hurt mentally. He just don't like it. He won't be a gibbering wreck or something. He just can't stand it. Only saw his mam do it once. Sent him to his room and told him to stay there until he was called. Nathan was sent up an hour later and when Jace came back down he apologized and never did it again."

"What did he do?" Cory asked curiously.

"Told his mam to fuck off in the middle of an argument..." Benny giggled. "I thought he was so brave... I'd NEVER tell my mam something like that!" he added with admiration in his voice.

"There's a difference between bravery and stupidity," Cory commented. He then froze as he saw Benny opening the driver's door of the limo. "What are you doing?!"

"I'm your driver too," Benny replied with a grin. "Your driving skills are legend throughout the Clan, Patriarch. I'd like for the limo to return home with all of its paint!"

John, standing by the gates to the compound, called over, "I wasn't impressed the first time he took me on a drive... but he's good... when he reaches the pedals..."

Cory yanked Benny back out of the driver's door and tossed him, giggling, into the back of the limo with the others. "John?" he called to Benny's father. "Would you? Please?"

Nodding, John walked over, patted Cory on his head, then leaned down and whispered into his ear. "He really can drive rather well, as a matter of fact, he's even better at offensive driving than I am. Hell, I have seen him do things in a Yugo that would put James Bond to shame. But I'll let him have fun with you... this time."

"James Bond?" Cory giggled.

"Yes, it's a code name. Ian Fleming found out about it... his stories are over the top, but there is a 'James Bond' active at all times. A few others as well."

"007 and all that?"

"I was 004," John smiled. "Now I'm out, I can tell you. Not even I know who all the Double-0's are."

"Did you ever work with a 'Bond'?" Cory asked with excitement.

"Once. In China," John smiled.

"Your code name?" Cory asked as he was being pulled forcibly into the limo by Sean.

"Tell you later," John chuckled as he closed the door and started the engine.

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### **;Capitol Complex; Des Moines:**

John guided the limo carefully along with the police escort that had formed around them within a few blocks of the compound. The officers guided the limo into the parking lot of the office complex across from the Capitol Building, motioning for it to be stopped once it was between two stripes painted in the drop-off lane. A few seconds later, the limo and its occupants slowly began sinking into the ground due to the freight elevator that was holographically hidden from normal view.

Once they came to a stop in the underground cavern, John pulled the limo forward to allow for the elevator to return to its normal position. Once the green light illuminated to indicate that movement was safe, John slowly followed the moving light trail through multiple security checkpoints until the limo was directly beneath the Capitol Building. He stopped the car with the passenger door lined up with the red carpet, and then exited the car and went to open the door for his charges to join him.

As he opened the door, he barely restrained his laughter. With Benny acting as a conductor, the boys were all humming the James Bond theme. The two cats made it perfect, keeping time with very loud purrs. "Okay you pint-size comedians, we're here now!" John chuckled.

The limo was quickly emptied of its giggling occupants. First out was Fife, holding Charlie in his arms. Benny, Johnny, Eddie, Casey, Tina, and Robin were next, with Kai hopping out right behind them. Kyle and Ty decided not to wait, and suddenly appeared outside next to Fife. Mont exited next, immediately joined by Bast. Both cat-boys were in full security mode, scanning the surroundings completely before motioning that it was okay for the rest of the occupants to exit. Jeremy led the last group out; first came Julio and Jesse, then Adam and JJ. JJ stuck his head back in and yelled "Sean, get your hands outta Cor's pants and get out here!"

"You're gonna get it later!" Sean commented a few seconds later as he and a blushing Cory joined the group.

"You do know that the seat that you were using folds out into a bed?" John asked, then laughed as JJ and Adam had to restrain Cory and Sean to prevent them getting back into the limo to find out. "Cow-boy games AFTER we get home!" JJ laughed as Cory and Sean fake-pouted.

Just then, Ted exited the elevator off to the right with a chestnut-brown-haired eleven-year-old under his arm. "Good evening, Gentlemen!" he announced.

"Hi Ted! What is this place?" Cory asked, glad to have an excuse to change the subject.

Ted smiled. "Welcome to the V.I.P. entrance to the Iowa Statehouse."

"Wow! This is pretty awesome!" JJ commented. "Thanks for lettin' us see it!"

"You're welcome," Ted replied, "but you can plan on seeing it a lot more. All of you guys get to use it now when you visit."

"Why?" Cory asked. "What's so special about us? We're just a bunch of kids that decided to take a stand against abuse."

"Actually, you're considered a State Treasure now," Ted replied with a smile. "Besides, I would be willing to bet that over half of you would never make it through the security checkpoints that normal visitors need to pass through. This is the ONLY entrance into the building that allows the weapons I know some of you are carrying. Above a certain level, it is assumed that the personal security of a V.I.P. will be more effective than the standard security which is normally provided within the building."

"That's no fun, though!" Kyle complained with a giggle. "Ty an' me were gonna walk through the scanners an' make it look like we wasn't there!"

"It'd be funnier if their screen showed you looking like some big animal!" Johnny giggled.

"Or a Dyno-soar!" Casey giggled.

As both Kyle and Ty fell into giggles considering the possibilities, Ted turned to his young companion. "See, I *told you* that they were normal kids, Richie."

Richie looked up at Ted. "But why would they want someone like me around?" he asked softly.

"Because Julio can really use someone who hacks into the Secret Service servers for something to do between Space Sims missions," Tyler replied as he appeared next to Richie. As Ted's eyebrows vanished into his hairline, Ty added "You'd give Cory a run for which one of you can hack a Starship computer faster!"

"How'd you know that?" Richie asked, then quickly put his hand over his mouth when he remembered that Ted was listening.

"Don't worry about him," Tyler giggled. "Ted, do you know the meaning of a Vulcan Red One event?"

"Yes, one of the Vulcan Diplomats explained it to me as we were reviewing the differences between various Terran legal systems and the Vulcan legal systems," Ted replied. "The House and Senate are really appreciative of having outside eyes helping to review our legal system. It is amazing just how many antiquated laws are still on the books, and how many laws contradict each other when placed side-by-side."

"Good," Ty replied seriously. "You and Richie are now under Red One in regard to any activities that your great-nephew may or may not have done."

"So... Richie doesn't exist anymore? What about ME!" Ted exclaimed.

"You exist. Richie does too," Ty giggled. "Just everything he's done that's... edged past the law?... no longer does!"

Richie looked down at the little blond next to him. "You still didn't say how you knew."

"Purple People Power!" Tyler giggled as he made himself glow with a purple aura.

Richie's eyes got wide at the antics of Tyler. Julio chose that moment to save what appeared to be the newest addition to his growing staff. "Hi there, Richie, I'm Julio. You wanna join us, and we'll fill you in as we get the chance while Ted gives us the Grand Tour?"

Richie nodded warily. "Sure. What about...."

Julio tapped his head. "Don't worry about that. Our Intel guys have already filled me in on what has happened. We'll discuss it after the tour is over."

"In other words, chill out and have fun, we've got you covered, Bro." Cory said with a grin. "Welcome to the Clan!"

Richie smiled as he accepted Ty's hand and walked over to the rest of the group. After a quick round of introductions, and a cuddle test by Charlie, the boys turned back to Ted.

Ted grinned, happy that his plan had worked. "Are you guys ready?"

"Lead on, Uncle Gov!!" Julio giggled.

"Why do I feel like I'm going to regret this?" Ted asked no-one in particular before chuckling and moving off.

"Because you will!!" Kyle giggled in reply.

When they reached the elevator, Ted found himself being stopped by Mont's furry paw. "Where does this go?" Mont asked politely.

"Directly to my office lobby," Ted replied. "Why?"

"Security," Mont stated. He then turned to Kyle, "Charge up, Glow Boy; we're going in as advance team. Bast, you and Ty have the back door. Kyle will tell Ty when the rest of you can follow."

"I'll give you 'Glow-Boy'!" Kyle giggled. "Static and cat fur can be sooo much fun, at least to those who are watching it....."

Mont grinned and stuck his tongue out at Kyle. "You ready, bro?"

Kyle nodded as he moved into position next to Mont. "C'mon, I ain't fried no-one in at least a few hours! I'm gettin' out of practice!"

"Smart-ass!" Mont giggled, grinning almost as much as Kyle.

As they disappeared into the elevator, Ted mused "I feel sorry for anyone in my office right now. Even if they're doing nothing wrong, those two showing up will shock them out of a few lives."

Cory nodded. "Yeah, especially if Kyle decides to have fun."

At that moment, Tyler started giggling madly.

"What did they do?" Sean asked, hoping it wasn't too bad.

"Ted, I think your Publicity Assistant needs a change of clothes!" Ty exclaimed. "Something about a War Cat and a Dragon walking outta the elevator kinda freaked him out! Kyle says if we hurry up, we can all get up there before he regains consciousness!"

"Poor guy, he just started last week!" Ted laughed. "Let's see just how bad they scared Harry!"

The giggling mob agreed, and quickly filled the elevator to capacity. As they got to the office level and the doors opened, Ted almost fell down in laughter. Sitting behind his desk was Mont, dressed as a classic British General, complete with monocle and a large unlit cigar. On one side of the desk sat Kyle, still maintaining his illusion of being a large purple and gold dragon, calmly 'washing' his front paws, then quick-drying them with "flame" repeatedly. Tyler laughed out loud, and quickly hopped onto the other side of the desk, turning into an illusion of a living Sphinx as he settled into place.



The assistant, Harry, was out cold, his pair of glasses askew on his face, and his mop of black, messy looking hair splayed out on the carpet.

Robin grinned and looked over at Fife. "Somethin's missin'. Fife, would you like to look like you're ridin' the dragon?"

Fife looked at Cory; when Cory returned his look with a nod and a grin, Fife agreed. "Okay, how are you going to do that?"

"I'll float you, you're light enough it'll be easy!" Robin replied.

Fife 'purred' in joy as he found himself floating across the room and he became 'seated' on Kyle's 'back'. As he was settling into place, Charlie jumped from Johnny's arms and went over to try to revive Harry, using the time-honored method of repeatedly licking his face.

"You guys are ALL evil!" Ted announced as he moved to be in Harry's line of sight when he revived. He was just in time, as Harry's eyes opened and quickly focused on his boss. "You won't believe what...." Harry started to say.

"Yes I would, and it's got worse." Ted replied with a laugh. "Welcome to the world of security, Clan Short Style. Quite effective too, I'd say; it's hard to attack someone when they just scrambled your perception of reality!"

"You're telling me!" Harry said as he reached up and absently started scratching the ears of the purring bundle of fur comfortably curled up on his chest. He straightened his glasses, glanced over at the desk, and saw the grinning faces of a Dragon, a General Cat, a Sphinx, and a Tesnian who was riding the Dragon. He quickly shook his head and turned the other way, to see the giggling group of boys watching him, only a few of whom he recognized. He then focused on the kitten on his chest. "What big teeth you have ...," he groaned.

"I think he's a keeper, Uncle Ted; he only passed out once!" Julio giggled as the occupants of the desk returned to normal and Fife was lowered to stand by the side of the desk.

Harry rolled his eyes, and carefully managed to stand up while holding the furry ball demanding his attention. He turned to Ted. "Sir, I realize that you told me to expect unusual things during this visit, but I was not prepared for this!"

"Neither was I, but I'm the last one who would try to predict what youth will do, especially ones as gifted as this group!"

As the entire group of boys giggled, Harry turned back towards the main group. "Is this cuddly ball of fur alone, or does he have a caretaker?"

Johnny giggled as he stepped forward and petted his kitten. "His name's Charlie; he's my friend."

"He's a nice kitten. What kind is he?" Harry asked, hoping the answer was not what he thought it would be.

"He's a Sabre Tooth! He's got a brother and sister in onea the other Divisions." Johnny replied proudly.

Harry nodded, not sure how it could be, but never less believing the evidence in his arms. "What does he like to eat? We've got a snack set up for you guys a little later, and I want to make sure he is accommodated."

"He eats the same stuff the big kitty kids liketa eat: raw meat and milk," Johnny replied, surprised that Harry was considering his companion as part of the group.

"I'll make sure that arrangements are made, then. Enjoy your tour, guys," Harry said as he carefully handed Charlie back to Johnny.

Harry turned and started heading out of the room. As he reached the door, he turned back for a second. "Oh, I almost forgot. Governor, everything is ready for you. Excuse me, I must arrange for the unique diets of a few of our guests, then I believe plotting revenge is in order."

As Harry left the room, Ted chuckled. "Look out, guys; he went to college to learn advanced deviou-ness. He has a Masters in it, actually."

"Bring it on!" Kyle giggled. "I wanna see what he comes up with!"

Cory laughed. "Famous last words! What you got planned, Ted?"

"You'll find out..." Ted replied, ending the sentence with a grin.

"Ohhhh, this should be fun!" Julio giggled. "He makes Dad look like an amateur!"

As the boys moved towards the door, Ted announced, "For the new guys I'll give the regular tour first. Enjoy it; not very many people get me as a tour guide."

With that, they exited Ted's office and made their way through the outer lobby. They then entered the upper level of the rotunda, and gathered at the rail surrounding the opening to the floor below. As they looked down through the railing, Ted smiled. "Look up, guys. You'll see all of the flags that have flown over Iowa in its history."

Despite having seen it a dozen times before, Cory still looked up into the center dome at the static display. "Duuuuuuddeee!" he exclaimed as he noticed a major change in the display. The flags had all been placed closer together to make room for two new arrivals. He grabbed Julio, who had not bothered to look, and pointed up and to the left. "Check it out!"

Julio looked at where Cory was pointing, and whistled in appreciation. "AWESOME! They added your flag... and they added my DIVISION flag too! How'd they do that; we just started usin' the new logo earlier today when Johnny, Kyle and Ty came up with it!"

Ted laughed. "Your prank victim of a few minutes ago climbed up there and put it up as soon as the Vulcan Embassy delivered it." He then expanded on his reply when he saw the confused faces on all but the three designers. "It seems that when Ty ordered the cloaks, they automatically transferred the image to a new flag. That is what I was told when it was delivered."

"That makes sense," Cory giggled.

"I thought you'd like that," Ted replied. "Follow me."

The next stop was in one of the wings, where the cats and Fife came to a screeching halt. All three stood there in awe as they inspected the murals that completely covered the ceiling, all depicting points in the early history of the state. The rest of the boys looked as well, those who had seen it before trying to find something that they had missed the last time they looked. Ted just watched, amazed at how the entire group had gone so quickly from the professionals that he had seen earlier in the day, to just another group of kids checking out the old building.

After a few minutes, the boys started migrating towards the opposite wing to check out the murals on that side. John went with the first group to head that way, while Ted waited to move along until the last of the group was ready to go join their brothers. Once everyone was satisfied with their first chance to really look without being rushed, they gathered around Ted.

"You guys ready to do some climbing?" Ted asked with a grin.

"We get to go in the Dome?" Sean guessed, his eyes lighting up at the possibility. "We were told that nobody can go up there anymore every time we've ever had the school tours."

"That is because the school tour guides don't have the security clearance that you guys do," Ted replied seriously.

"Finally, something FUN about all of the titles everyone gives me," Cory quipped, his tone suggesting that it wasn't as much of a joke as he'd like it to be.

Ted caught the tone, and just as seriously told Cory, "I think it's time that you do something about that, Cory. Harry just guaranteed himself a job working for me by his desire to play games at the level they were played on him earlier. If you're not having fun, then things need to change or else they'll get even worse. I think it's time for me to schedule a visit at your Headquarters and give you some professional human input into how things are being run; that way you and all of your brothers can have fun time again."

Cory tilted his head. "How can you help differently than everyone else who is trying?"

Ted smiled. "Easy. They all know you and will try not to hurt your feelings. I consider you a friend, but I'll have no problem telling you to get your head out of your ass if that is what's needed."

"Usually it's his head in Sean's ass that's the issue!" JJ giggled as he ran for cover.

"JJ!!!" Cory and Sean both exclaimed as they took off after him. "You're soooo DEAD!" Sean added with a laugh as their shoes squealed on the hard floors, all three straining to keep traction during the chase.

"That's better!" Ted commented to John. "That is the kind of hijinks I expect at their age."

"Agreed," John replied. "Now, if we can just keep them in that mode for a while...."

"You'll regret it!" Bast commented with a purr. "I like it though!"

After a few minutes, once JJ had been caught and properly tickled, the three boys rejoined the group. As they caught their breath, Ted started heading towards a narrow door off in a corner of the rotunda. "Time to do some climbing, guys!" he announced as he took an electronic key out of his pocket and released the magnetic latch on the door.

The boys all followed Ted, John taking the tail to prevent stragglers. As they started up the tight, steep spiral stairs, Julio giggled. "Uncle Ted, if your butt gets any bigger, you ain't gonna fit on these stairs!"

"Hey now, I've only got a thirty-five inch waist; these stairs are just narrow, brat!" Ted replied.

"Like I said; BIG BUTT!" Julio laughed.

"You know, it's been a while since someone has been tossed out of the cupola," Ted commented as he led the group higher.

"You love me too much to do that," Julio giggled.

"I hate it when you're right!" Ted replied with a chuckle.

A little further back in the line, the younger kids were amazingly having no issues with the steep staircase. Kyle giggled as he realized why; Robin had decided that there was no reason for the kids to wear out their legs, so he was 'floating' them up the staircase, keeping pace with the people who had to use their legs to climb.

"You know, that's cheating!" Kyle giggled softly to Robin.

"I don't care; they don't need their legs hurtin' at the top!" Robin replied with a grin.

"Kewl!" Kyle giggled. "I like the way you think!"

John smiled as he watched the kids in a line in front of him, all of them excited to be doing something special. He knew from the reports that he'd received just how stressed Cory had been recently, and it was obvious that the rest of the Orlando boys were in just as bad of shape. With a few exceptions, it appeared that this tour was good medicine for the boys; they seemed to be letting go and just being kids for a while. Even Robin, with his TK escapades, was doing things that only a kid would think of doing.

As they were nearing the top after five minutes of climbing, Kyle spoke up. "Hey Guard-Pusses, don't worry about it when we get to the top. I'm going to have Fuzzymore run an area-of-effect shield over the entire dome."

"Okay, Glow-Boy." Mont and Bast replied.

"What kind of shield is that?" John yelled up to Kyle.

"Sorry, that's classified; you ain't listed on the 'need to know' list!" Kyle yelled back with a giggle.

"You either, Benny!" Tyler added as Benny started to speak.

Benny giggled, "Dad?"

"Yes?" John answered.

"Weapon 645-G."

"Oh... fuzzymore?" John asked, his face puzzled.

"I don't wanna ask!" Benny sniggered, "But I'll probably find out. They must think we don't get all the info, huh?"

"Very likely. They are American, after all," John said, after a sidelong look at the others ahead of them.

"I heard that!" came from multiple voices at once.

"Hey, I'm a Royal Prince!" Cory giggled from near the front.

"He's a Royal Hottie too!" Sean added from behind him. "And I get the best view!"

"Hurry, someone feed Cory some garlic!" Ty giggled.

"You do that, and I'll sic Mikey on you!" Sean exclaimed with a laugh.

"Her Maj LET you into the Family? What is the Empire coming to?!" John called back, chuckling.

"She had to make up for YOU, so she added all of US!" Cory shot back.

"Well, my Daddy's SO brilliant that she HAD to lower the tone, or GOD would get jealous!" Benny called back, glad he was further down the stairs from the Patriarch.

At that point they reached the top, and with the help of a Mikyvis, Benny suddenly found himself standing in front of Cory. "You were saying?" Cory asked as he reached out and began tickling Benny.

"My Dad is Spock. Game, set, and match, runt!"

Through his giggles, Benny replied, "He's mine too... hehehehe... my a'nirih!... hahahaha.... so I win... hehehehe... as I've got him AND Daddy!.... DAD, HELP!"

"What? Me fight the Patriarch? Sorry, son. You got yourself into this, you get yourself out. I know when I'm well off, old boy!" John replied as he accepted some popcorn from Tyler.

Therefore, on the cupola of the State House, the Patriarch of Clan Short and one of his VSO Defenders engaged in a fine, old-fashioned tickle war.

Sean was nearly wetting himself laughing.

So was Ted.

John continued to munch on the popcorn!

The rest of the boys giggled at the antics of Cory and Benny, and spread out to check out the unmatched view. Fife found himself 'escorted' by JJ and Adam, both boys grabbing the chance to spend a little time with their new nephew. As they looked out over the southeastern side of town, Fife gasped at the expanse in front of him. "It's so spread out!" he exclaimed. "I can't even see the city walls! He then noticed the two rivers joining on the south side of the downtown area. "Where are the river walls?"

JJ put an arm around Fife. "We don't have to have walls here, Fife. Nothing dangerous lives in the water in this area of the U.S.; the most dangerous thing in the water is humans in boats."

Fife looked up in awe. "It's really that safe on Terra?"

"In THIS area of the world, yes," JJ replied seriously. "There are some areas of the southern hemisphere that are not as safe and the swamps of south Florida ain't that safe. Timmy will fill you in more when we get home; he knows more than the rest of us, since he's friends with some of the native Florida creatures."

"Okay," Fife replied as he went back to looking over the countryside from the safety of the highest point in the Capitol Building. Once Cory and Benny finished their tickle war, the group slowly rotated around the cupola so that everyone got to see the view from every point at least twice. The second round was the most interesting to the boys, as the sun was setting, giving them a bird's-eye view of the Des Moines city lights coming on. As the adults watched in amusement, the boys all ohhhed and ahhhed as the nighttime Des Moines skyline came to life before their eyes.

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Once he was sure that all of the kids were accounted for, a task made harder by two giggling Mikyvis moving kids around as he was counting heads, Ted secured the door to the highest level of the building. "You know, it was a dead giveaway the FOURTH time I counted Cory in the group!" Ted said with a knowing grin at Kyle and Ty.

"We don't know *why* you were having problems counting us!" Tyler said innocently.

"You must be getting senile!" Kyle added with a giggle.

"Nice try, guys!" Ted said with a laugh. He looked at his watch and announced "We're right on schedule, believe it or not. Follow me, guys, I've got another surprise for you."

The boys were all curious as they followed Ted through the great halls. As they reached a large set of double doors, Ted grinned at John, then quickly opened one of the doors and led the boys into a darkened room. Once the last boy was in, John closed the door and Ted slowly brought the lights up to their normal level.

As his eyes adjusted to the room, Cory looked around in wonder. They were in the Iowa Senate Chamber, and every single seat in the chamber was filled with the representatives of all ninety-nine Iowa counties.

"Now that all parties are present, I hereby call this Special Session of the Iowa Senate to order," the Speaker of the House announced formally. "The Iowa House of Representatives is standing by to ratify as needed," he added as a screen behind him came to life, showing the House Chamber, which was also filled to capacity.

The Speaker then faced Cory. "The Senate and House of the State of Iowa welcome you home, Mr. Short. Would yourself and your family do us the honor of sitting in on this Special Session?" he asked, motioning to a row of chairs set up on either side of him, all of which had name plaques in front of them.

Cory smiled, happy that he was being addressed as a person, not a title for once. "Thank you, Speaker, we gratefully accept your invitation," Cory replied, trying to keep formal as well.

As the Speaker nodded his head, formality went out the window. All of the boys quickly scrambled to find their seats, Johnny falling into giggles when he saw that Charlie had his own chair right next to his. Ted was seated in front of the podium, with Cory and Sean seated on the Speaker's right-hand side, and Julio and Jesse seated on the Speaker's left-hand side. Once everyone was seated, the Speaker called the Senate to order once again and began their agenda.

"I have before me a petition for an adaptation to the Iowa Code from the Honorable Doctor Patrick Henderson of Polk County. Doctor Henderson, you may have the floor for ten minutes," the Speaker announced.

A stately-looking man in his early fifties stood from his seat. "Thank you, Mr. Speaker and my esteemed colleagues. As we discussed previous to the commencement of this session, the status of plots 135 through 412 of the City of Urbandale has officially been recognized by Family Clan Short as a Division of the Clan. Current Iowa Code does not have provisions for Diplomatic Properties within State boundaries. I propose that we amend the Iowa Code to read as displayed on your screens. Note that there is a per diem clause inserted in sub-article 345.76.4.12.a as recommended and approved by the Vulcan Consulate for this property. In addition, due to the size of the annexed property, it is proposed that a seat be opened in both the Senate and the House to allow the Division to have a voice in the laws of the State in which they reside." The Doctor paused, and then added, "I hereby open the floor for comments if it is your pleasure, Mr. Speaker."

"Thank you, Doctor Henderson," the Speaker acknowledged. "Are there any comments or objections to this proposal? Please signal the Chair if you wish to speak." He waited an appropriate time, then he announced, "I have heard no calls for additional comment. I hereby put before the Senate a proposal that the House be allowed to comment and propose amendments before final vote to streamline the session. Please signal 'Yea' or 'Nay' to the recorder at this time."

The sounds of multiple notification beeps echoed through the Chamber as fast as the Speaker made his proposal. "I have a 100% response, Mr. Speaker," the Recorder announced a few seconds later.

"Please state the results for the record."

"I have recorded a unanimous 'Yea' to the proposal to allow House debate before placing the petition to a vote," the Recorder announced professionally.

"Thank you; the vote is affirmed. Mr. Speaker of the House, I defer to you at this time," the Senate Speaker announced.

"Thank you, Mr. Speaker." the Speaker of the House replied.

Suddenly it was on. The politicians were in their element. The idea was batted back and forth and every politician had an opinion that they had to have heard.

"The Floor recognizes our distinguished member from Des Moines County."

"Thank you. I would like to first say that I am wholly in support of giving the people of the Des Moines Clan Short Compound a means of active participation in the running of our great state. But I propose that the person from the Clan Short Des Moines Compound be classed as a Delegate."

This was met with a lot of enthusiasm, but as is the way of politics, soon became somewhat muddled by everyone's political agendas.

Of course, not all the Representatives were in favor of this bill. The Representative from Sioux County was the worst of that lot. She came across with a lot of rhetoric about the sovereignty of the State of Iowa being violated by these outsiders. It didn't matter that most of the people in the compound were born and raised in Iowa, or that some of them were Iowans for several generations. Heck, the Sioux County representative was not a native Iowan herself. She was originally from Kentucky.

When it was pointed out that she was not a native of Iowa herself, she responded that "...at least I'm not a Godless queer lover like those Satan-loving degenerates that make up the Clan." This was followed by several similar comments from the less open-minded members of the House. Homophobia, bigotry, and hate were voiced. While the derisive Representatives stopped short of being threatening, it did seem to cross the line of acceptable behavior for the House chamber. What was most disturbing was that these nasty statements were spoken directly into the cameras, so that the boys felt as if it was being said directly to them.

"The perversions supported by the Clan cannot be allowed to be forced on our children!"

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Ted looked up and down the two rows of kids. Their expressions ranged from shock to hurt to anger, the anger most apparent in JJ, who was being physically restrained by Adam to prevent him personally dealing with the issue. Ted stood up and walked up to Eddie. He tapped his head once he was standing in front of his nephew. Eddie nodded, and a few seconds later every one of the boys heard Eddie in his head. "Unca Ted is PISSED, an' he's gonna take care of those dorks. He says nobody talks about his family like that, and we's all his family. That means ALL of us, he says."

What happened, before Ted even got a chance, was that a majority of the Representatives began to do it for him. It seemed that they were not going to put up with it either. The Clan had started in Iowa and it seemed that a majority of the Representatives were proud of that fact.

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"Perversions?!? How can you even say something like that?! What the children they have rescued came from is the real perversion, and we must do something to stop this cycle of abuse. The institutions that have either turned a blind eye or been unable to deal with this abuse are the real perversion and should be changed or eliminated!"

Back and forth the arguments flew. It was truly a minority that was spewing nastiness, but they were an obnoxiously vocal minority.

"The Clan and what they represent is a serious threat to decent and moral people! They disrupt the sanctity of the family and are persecuting people for practicing their religious beliefs! They are sinners and we can't let sinners have the reins of power!"

"How can you say that?! These people have rescued children from horrible abuse and given them a chance at having a decent life! I applaud the efforts that the Clan has made to protect the most vulnerable of our society. Religion can never be used as an excuse to abuse someone, especially not to abuse a child."

Arguments about what constitutes abuse were made. This was made short work of by the Representative from Des Moines. He quoted the definitions under Iowa, US, and Federation Law. He also showed in those same statutes where it was made clear that religion is never an excuse to violate those laws.

Soon the argument shifted gears. Again it was led by the Sioux County Representative.

"Those who choose a homosexual lifestyle are hated by God. Choosing a life of sin should not be rewarded. 'Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortionist, shall inherit the kingdom of God.'"

Once again it was the Representative from Des Moines who refuted the vile woman.

"Get over yourself. Who would choose to be homosexual when all it causes you is torment and abuse from close minded bigots like you? Like it's a choice! Get real!"

"The word you are using as 'effeminate' is 'malakoi.' Its literal translation is 'soft.' In the context of the society in which this was written, it obviously means a person who is lazy, lacking courage, decadent and such. It has nothing to do with an effeminate homosexual person. First-century Roman culture would consider any man who was more interested in pleasure than duty to be woman-like, meaning effeminate."

"'Arsenokoitai,' which you are trying to say means gay sex, is just lazy translating. One root word means something to do with sexuality and bed, and the other refers to males. Trying to take that and make it mean homosexual is the same as someone from a thousand years in the future taking the hyphenated word 'lady-killer' and saying that it means someone who kills women or a woman who kills, which we know it doesn't mean. Arsenokoitai is a word that we do not know the real meaning for. It is such a rare word that its exact meaning is lost to us forever."

"Look what happened to the homosexual deviants from Sodom!"

"Ma'am, and I use that term to avoid being rude, you are totally misrepresenting that passage. It states that 'the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man' had gathered at Lot's door. So every man and boy in Sodom was homosexual. That is just absurd. Besides why would Lot, as reprehensible as I find it, offer his virgin daughters to a bunch of homosexuals? He lived in the city, so if they were all homosexual, then he would know that none of them would be interested in his daughters. So it is obvious that Lot knew that a majority of the men must be heterosexual, and he was trying to tempt them from their violent intentions. What you had was a lawless mob intent on perpetrating violence on strangers to Sodom."

While this silenced the Sioux County Representative for the moment, it did not end the arguments being made. Another Representative decided to take another tack.

"Godless people should have no say in our state."

This was met by the Representative from Blackhawk County.

"Are you honestly saying that we should disenfranchise a segment of our population? Did you really just suggest that!?! The constitutions of this State, the US, and the Federation all forbid disenfranchisement for any reason other than treason and imprisonment. As long as you are a resident, you must have a say!"

Most of the Representatives became very appalled by all the name-calling and soon made it clear. After many more heated exchanges, order was finally restored. The debate focused once more where it should be, on the contents of the bill before the House.

It was argued back and forth as to just what the role of a Delegate from Clan Short Des Moines should have. It became quickly apparent that one Delegate from CSDM would not be appropriate. The Representative from Poweshiek County made the proposal that solved that issue. She proposed that the Delegate actually be two people, one adult and one youth.

It was at this point that the Representative from Sioux County lost all control.

"You are proposing that we bring more of these Godless degenerates into our government. These are sexual deviants and the spawn of Satan himself. They are all going to burn in Hell, and I will see to it that they get what they deserve. I'll personally pull the trigger..."

The Speaker banged his gavel loudly. His anger barely contained as he called his colleague to task. "Shut the fuck up! Mrs. Prawn, you have gone way overboard. The members of this Chamber will not listen to your verbal diarrhea any more. Threats and harassment of any kind are not allowed in the House. You know better. Security please escort Mrs. Prawn from the chamber and detain her for an official judicial review."

There was stunned silence. This hadn't happened but one time since the adoption of the "Public Servant Qualifications and Ethics" law had been signed into law in Iowa in 1982. It had been a major advancement in politics. It actually held public officials to a higher standard than those they served.

The law basically said that all public officials, whether elected or appointed, in Iowa would be held to a higher standard than their fellow citizens. They must abide by the Code of Professional Responsibility, made up of Canons containing Ethical Considerations (EC) and Disciplinary Rules (DR). Failure to fol-

low one of these provisions could lead to any of the following: Censure; Impeachment; Criminal and/or Civil Penalties.

The eight other Representatives that were showing off their nastiness beat a hasty retreat from the House Chamber. They realized that things had gotten out of hand and that they might suffer from association with Representative Prawn.

It took several minutes to restore order to the House Chamber. They got back on track and it was eventually argued that CSDM should have a Delegate in both the House and the Senate. This seemed to stir thing up considerably. It was proposed that the Adult be the delegate for the Senate and the Youth be the delegate for the House. This quickly caused a complete degeneration of the talks.

Finally the Representative from Blackhawk County proposed that it be a total of four Delegates, two adults and two youths. One adult and one youth for the State House and one each for the State Senate as well. Eventually that was to be included.

It was finished up by the Representative from Union County who raised many concerns. Chief amongst his concerns was his worry about the appearance of giving a seat in the State Government to a foreign power. He felt that this clearly was not the case. What was decided was that they would need to make sure that it was portrayed in the right light to the public. One important fact was that the people living in the Clan Short Des Moines Compound would of course all be recognized as residents of Iowa as well as members of the Clan, and that as such they would have a "dual citizenship" of a sort. He also put forward the idea that they should remind Iowans that the role of government was to represent people, not rule over them.

Finally, in an unprecedented move, the new code was written in the House chambers by the committee that brought it forward, incorporating all the changes brought up during the discussions. It passed unanimously with one-hundred-eleven votes in the affirmative. Eight Representatives had effectively abstained from the vote by walking out of the chamber. One had been arrested. Many of the members of the House were heard to comment on how few times they had seen such unanimity within the State House. The one other time was when they had passed the code becoming a "Safe Haven State."

Ted could see that some of what was said had really hurt the kids, even though the House had acquitted itself very well. He turned and looked at them.

"Guys, we will show you that there are adults outside the Clan who are ready to make a real difference," Ted said as he excused himself from his tour group and made his way to the House Chamber.

He found the Representative who was in charge of the Ethics Committee and had words with her. His face was red and he was making violent gestures. She looked pale and shaken after listening to what the Governor had to say. In turn, she made her way to the Speaker and asked if she could have a word. The Speaker's face paled as he listened to what he was being told. A few moments later the speaker called the House to order.

"It has been brought to my attention that some of the statements made about Clan Short... Uhm, constitute Defamation of Character. It has also been... well uhm... How should... should I say this... Uhm... It has been pointed out that several of the statements are actionable in a court of law. I had already decided that most of the statements made are worthy of Censure and will be acted on by the Ethics Committee. A call to the State Attorney General has been made at the request of our esteemed Governor

Ted Jacobs. I call for a vote of 'No Confidence' as indicated in our State's Constitution in Article 15 subsection 2 for all eight of the Representatives that walked out of this special session."

"Mr. Speaker, may I have five minutes to address both Chambers?" the Senator from Sioux County asked as he stood his shock and agitation visible on his seventy-year-old features.

"You may, but be forewarned that neither Chamber will tolerate a repeat of what we just witnessed," the Speaker replied, his tone quite clearly expressing his disgust at the comments expressed earlier.

"Thank you, Mr. Speaker; I have no intention of expressing opinions at that level," the Senator replied. He turned so that he was facing the boys, then began. "Esteemed visitors, Members of the House, Members of the Senate, and Governor Jacobs; as a Senator for Sioux County, I have been selected by the electorate many times to express their voice in the running of this fine State. It is with great sorrow that I must speak for my County in this instance; sorrow because of the misleading comments which were made that have given Sioux County a 'black eye' that is not deserved. From each of the residents of Sioux County, I hereby extend apologies to all present for the travesty which we were just subjected to. In addition, I extend personal apologies to our visitors from Clan Short. I am well-known for my public meetings when not at the Statehouse, and I can say with certainty that while a small segment of the population of Sioux County might not be comfortable with the personal values of some of the Clan's members, they overwhelmingly put those views aside as they tracked the advances the Clan has made since its inception. I was one of the first signers-on to the bill now in debate; a decision made by my constituents for me as they pushed for the new Des Moines Compound to be recognized as a distinct entity within the State Government. For those people, whose support despite their personal views has now been tarnished, I apologize and pledge to ensure Justice is served on the one responsible for the insults and threats which were expressed."

Suddenly a young man leaped to his feet. His name was Myron Smith. He was a member of the House from Sioux County. Until his Senator had spoken, he had been hiding his head in shame. He let out with an explosive "Hear! Hear!" as he began to loudly clap his hands. The entire House Chamber was filled with murmurs, affirmations, and gasps. It was not long before the entire Chamber was on its feet applauding in a show of support for the words from the Sioux County Senator.

It seemed to be a race in the Senate to see if they could beat the House in having full participation in the standing ovation. As the ovation started to wind down, the Senator who had spoken up walked up to Cory and held out his hand. "I am truly sorry that you were subjected to witnessing that display," he said sincerely.

"Thank you, Senator." Cory replied, his newfound empathic skills telling him that this was not just political posturing, but actually a man who truly cared about their feelings.

The Senator moved down the line, expressing his apologies to each of the boys individually. A line started to form behind him, as the rest of the Senate joined their colleague in expressing their thoughts.

The Senator of Iowa County was one of the last to get his turn with the Clan boys, and as he drew closer to them, he could see just how much everything was affecting them; especially the young Patriarch himself.

"Screw this shit," he said. It was likely he was going for a silent exclamation just to himself, but the mix of hurt, anger and pure thanks at the reactions against the terrible actions of the Representative from Sioux County had jarred this big man.

A captain of the football team in collage, Senator Lawrence 'Biff' Jones, was a large man; almost as wide as he was tall. A strong family man, with deep religious feelings and concern for the state of the nation's morality, he had once been like the now arrested Mrs. Prawn - but in the last ten years he had personally seen the results of homophobic hatred. He had researched everything possible on homosexuality, and had even done deep historical and linguistic research on the Bible he cared so much about. His attitudes had more than done a full circle.

He was now an activist for equal rights and treatment for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered rights - yet still a committed Christian in his local Episcopal Church.

And Cory was the first one he reached. Cory was now looking at him warily, for his brief outburst as he drew close to them hinted at another bigot to deal with.

Cory looked up at this six-foot-seven-inch-tall man-mountain before him, his eyes narrowed carefully. Then, Cory's face softened as he saw the tears running down Biff's face and could feel the emotions pouring from the large man.

"My poor boy," Biff said thickly as he picked up and bear-hugged the blond Patriarch.

Even though there were about six states between Cory and his son Austin, and even though there had been zero contact between the two, Cory started copying his android son.

"MEEP!"

It was, of course, due to having his breath whoosh out of his chest that caused the 'meeping'.

"I wish I could take away what that bitch said," the large Senator whispered to Cory as he lessened his grip, but did not stop the hug. "I wish... Patriarch Short. I've said and done some bad things in my time regarding those who are gay. My eyes were opened when my eldest son got beaten to death ten years ago. Now, my second and now only child, has also said he is gay. He's still a little boy, only eleven... I've done everything I know to make a world where he can be safe. I will support you for all my life. God bless you, Cory... God bless you."

Then, and only then, did he lower the now very tearful Patriarch back down to his feet and moved on to Sean... who got just as tight a bear-hug.

Of course, this was why the 'meeping' became catching...

As the rest of the line advanced, Cory's eyes bugged out of their sockets. He was sure that there were not this many Senators. He was certain that he had met just about all the Senators. Who could all these people be? It was then that his eyes fell to the monitor and he realized that the House Chamber was empty. All one hundred and eleven remaining Representatives had come to the Senate Chamber to offer their personal apology. Tears began to flow down Cory's cheeks as he was overloaded from the enormity of the gesture he and the Clan were receiving.

Myron Smith stood in front of Cory with tears of his own. They looked at each other for a moment, then Myron hung his head in shame.

"Patriarch Short. I am at a loss. I don't feel that anything I could possibly say to you can express how I feel in the right way. I..."

He was too choked up to continue. Cory didn't need to hear anything more. He was picking up the heartfelt distress the man was feeling. Cory reached out and took the man's hand. He then pulled him into a hug and whispered quietly in his ear. When Myron Smith straightened himself up to leave his face had a smile on it. He turned back to Cory.

"Thank you for what you said. In answer to your other question. Yes. I would be honored, Patriarch Short. I know..."

Cory cocked his head to the side a bit as he raised an eyebrow.

"I mean Cory," Myron said with a hint of laughter in his voice. "You are one amazing person. I look forward to visiting you and your family. I know my wife will love meeting all of you."

While Cory and Myron were talking, the Speakers of both Houses were in a deep discussion. A young man ran into the chamber and passed a note to them, then quickly exited. After reading the note, they motioned to Ted to join them. After a few minutes of lively muted discussion, the Senate Speaker reached over to his podium and pressed a button. The runner quickly re-appeared and took custody of the note with a reply signed by Ted on it. Once he was gone, the three men waited respectfully for the rest of the members to finish with their guests. Once things settled down, the Senate Speaker picked up his gavel and tapped it on the podium. "Order in the Chamber," he announced.

Once the chamber went silent, the Speaker continued. "We have received a notice of intent to convene a Grand Jury in regards to the recent events within the House Chambers. Governor Jacobs has instructed the State Attorney General to proceed with his request to convene at his earliest convenience. In addition, the Governor has approved a request from both Chambers to institute Special Procedure 27.14.23A. By agreement between the Chambers, I shall be presiding over both Houses as common vote is recorded through the backup Vote Tally Terminal. As stipulated in the Code, the Recorder shall report vote results by Chamber. Representatives, we ask that you make use of the chairs being provided near the positions of your Senator."

As the members complied with the instructions, Ted gathered the boys around him. "Guys, what you just saw is both Houses agreeing to implement a procedure which is designed to streamline discussion in emergency situations or to allow a gathering when it is impractical or impossible for the Houses to meet in separate chambers. Since the creation of the procedure in 1972, it has only been called into play three times. Of those three times, this makes two that were a direct result of something that involves Clan Short. You guys are seeing history happening right in front of you; let the Attorney General take care of the problems that just happened and get back to enjoying the chance you're getting to watch the Government at work. I promise things will be handled; the Attorney General made use of his privilege of high-ranking officials being allowed to utilize Federation Transporters for official business. Based on the note which I signed off on, within the next twelve hours I believe he will have a Grand Jury seated and hearing evidence."

"Thanks, Ted," Cory replied, speaking for the group. "You're kinda proving what you said to me when you came to Charleston; no matter where we stay, we're still Iowans and Iowa always takes care of its own."

Ted nodded. "Not only are you Iowans, but you guys are the Pride of Iowa. Now stop trying to work and relax already!"

"Okay!" the boys giggled. Most of them went back to their seats. JJ wasn't done yet, and motioned for Ted to follow him to a quiet corner of the chamber. Once he was sure they were not overheard, JJ spoke. "What that bitch spewed from that shithole she calls a mouth hurt my brothers. I'll be watching to see what happens; if I'm not happy with what happens to her... let's just say you won't like me when I'm angry."

"Don't go doing something stupid just to get revenge, JJ," Ted responded, chills running down his spine at the tone in JJ's voice.

"I won't do anything...." JJ replied, purposely leaving the rest unsaid as to what could happen. "I'm not responsible for the actions of some of my friends though. Just because they give Satan nightmares doesn't mean anything...."

"I get the point; when it comes to your brothers you're very protective," Ted commented, not really sure if JJ was stretching the truth or not.

"No, Kyle is protective," JJ responded. "I'm the worst nightmare of anyone who crosses me." With that, JJ turned and headed back to his seat.

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### **;Forty-five minutes later:**

The boys were once again enjoying the chance to see professionals at work as they watched multiple bills sail through the process, with Ted signing off on them while the 'ink' was still wet. They watched curiously as the next order of business was brought up by the Speaker.

"It has come to my attention that the Des Moines Clan Short Compound has issued an official crest for their Division," the Speaker began. "As decided in bill 2004.376.2.5, this Crest will be issued on the new official Clan Short license plate, which directly supports the Des Moines Compound. This morning, the Transportation Committee received a response from the US Department of Transportation on the proposed amendment to the bill which remained outstanding pending their reply." He made a few entries on his touchscreen, then read the reply.

"Senators and Representatives of the State of Iowa. While your request to issue Diplomatic Plates is against current procedures, it has been determined that the particulars of the situation warrant a variance in established procedure. As per your submitted specifications, you are hereby assigned as managing entity for plates issued to vehicles used by members of Clan Short of Vulcan. The plates shall have a white reflective background, bearing the inscription 'Iowa Diplomatic' across the top line, bearing the Seal of Clan Short on the left center, with five sequential identifying three inch black alpha-numeric serial numbers proceeded by the letters 'CSV' directly to the right of the Crest. The lower edge of the plate shall contain the word 'Permanent' centered on the plate. You are hereby authorized to immediately

begin deployment of said plates, with reports to the US Department of Transportation within twenty-four hours of plate issuance. State residency requirements for issuance of the plates are hereby superseded by Federal code."

The Speaker looked around the Chamber, then spoke. "By a show of hands, is the issuance of these plates as specified in the letter from the Department of Transportation approved? All in agreement with these stipulations, please signal 'aye' by the raising of your hand."

The Chamber was quickly filled with hands flying into the air. At the nod of the Recorder, the Speaker continued. "The ayes are recorded. Those who disagree with the stipulations, please signal 'nay' by the raising of your hand."

The speaker waited a full minute before announcing "It is recorded that there are no 'nay' votes. Those who wish to abstain, please signal by the raising of your hand."

After another full minute, the Speaker nodded. "It is recorded that there are no abstaining members present in the Chamber. Governor Jacobs; we have received a response regarding the issuance of Clan Short Diplomatic plates and by unanimous vote of all present the conditions stated by the United States Department of Transportation have been approved. The quantity of representatives present is in excess of the minimum required for a quorum."

Ted smiled. "My signature on the bill stands. Print it so I can sign it."

A minute later, it was signed. Ted looked around the Chamber until he found the person he was looking for. "Senator Jones? As the originator of the bill, would you please do the honors? I cheated slightly, the first run of the plates is already completed and the first one off the line is in the possession of the Speaker."

As Biff came forward with a grin on his face, Cory and Julio exchanged glances, both wondering which one would be the target of another rib-crushing hug. They received their answer soon enough, as Biff headed directly to Cory.

"I don't even have my own car yet!" Cory giggled as Biff stopped in front of him.

"Yes you do, courtesy of Karl Chevrolet. He's been holding it for the next time you visited home," Biff replied with a grin. "I hope you don't mind a metallic green Corvette C-5, outfitted in accordance with the standards set by the South Carolina Division."

This time, it was Biff who was on the receiving end of a crushing hug... preceded, of course, by a Timmy-worthy pounce, as the Patriarch of Clan Short launched himself at him.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven...." Sean intoned as he raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Good idea, it worked last time," Mikey commented in Sean's ear, invisible to the rest of the room.

Deep belly laughs started from so deep inside of Biff that Sean felt the need to grab a tricorder and check for seismic activity. "It's quite all right, son," he chuckled as he held onto the hyper Cory.



Sean grinned, for Biff did seem more than happy to be cuddling an emotive teen. Maybe something had been missing since his eldest had died, Sean thought.

After a few minutes of Cory-cuddles, Biff finally was able to open the velvet pouch he held in his hand. With as much dignity as he could manage with a fourteen-year-old hanging off of his side, he presented the plates. "Patriarch Cory Short, in observance to the sacrifices that you have made to improve the lives of the citizens of Iowa and the world in general, it is with great pleasure that I present to you the first plate off of the line to honor the formation of Clan Short and to recognize the unique status of what you have founded." With that, he pulled the twin plates out of the bag and showed them to Cory. Despite the normal procedure of plates being printed in a random order, this plate had been specifically requested to bear the designation 'CSV00001'.

After coaching Cory through his first time signing a registration, Biff filled him in on what to do next. "We had a backup plan in place just in case the Feds did not respond in time; the first Clan Short vanity plate would have been yours if this fell through. Instead, it is being issued to your Mom for use on one of her Hummer limos. Tomorrow at nine am I will meet you at Karl Chevrolet and help walk you through the process of registering your first car. I made some calls already; when I contacted Starfleet to see who I needed to see in the Vulcan Embassy to sort out the entity to place in the insurance block, I was told that as a Starfleet Officer any vehicle that you operate is covered directly by them instead of any insurance company."

Cory just nodded his head, still in shock at the present he'd just received. "Thank you!!" he exclaimed as he accepted the plates from Biff. After another heartfelt hug, Cory returned to his seat, the registration and plates in his hands being repeatedly read over and over as he tried to wrap his head around this new reality.

As Biff found his seat again, Ted chuckled and motioned for Sean to join him. "It appears that Cory is taking a break, so you need to fill in for him, Sean!"

Sean grinned as he looked over at his smiling husband. "It's good for him!" he giggled as he stood up. "You're going to have to work harder to mess up *my* head, though!"

Ted laughed then nodded at the Speaker. "May I have the floor, Mr. Speaker?"

"You may proceed." the Speaker replied, already knowing what was next.

Ted turned back to Sean. "I have been notified by the US Navy that their detailing and preservation of the turret in the USS Iowa that was used to salute those lost in the Montana Massacre has been completed. The turret and the supporting structures for the memorial will be delivered Monday; at that time the Navy will assist your local engineers in providing a suitable location. At this time they are complying with the screening requirements of your Unit in regards to the personnel that will be provided for a 24/7 honor guard. Once it has been completed, the Admiral of the Navy would like to properly commission the memorial with an official ceremony on a date of your choosing."

"That will work out well, I think," Sean replied. "I'm glad it's getting sorted out; it means a lot to all of us that we have something at Headquarters to serve as a reminder of what happened to us and those friends and family that we lost."

"I agree totally," Ted replied seriously. "In addition, by agreement of the House and Senate, it has been determined that, as a tribute to the last commissioned action of the USS Iowa, the State of Iowa is transferring ownership of a piece of the Iowa's history. We are maintaining a holographic copy of the model that was made for the commissioning of the USS Iowa, with a notice that the original model has been deeded to Clan Short for display in a location suitable to them."

"Oh my God... Kenny is gonna have a heart attack!" Sean announced with a grin. "That's awesome! Thanks; between Kenny and Cory, that model is gonna be protected more than Headquarters itself!"

"Does that mean they like models?" Ted asked with a grin.

"They're as fanatic about models as Juan is about his guns!" Sean replied, causing giggles and nods from everyone who knew Juan.

"Or as fanatical as you are about a certain blond patriarch?" Ted asked with a grin.

"You didn't go there!" Sean exclaimed as he started blushing.

"Yes, I did!" Ted replied as he put an arm around Sean. "It's the prerogative of an Uncle!"

The chamber broke out in laughter, all enjoying seeing the normal interaction between Ted and Sean. As it settled down in the chamber, Ted chuckled to Sean, "Shall we let the reps finish their business so that we can go eat?"

At the mention of food, Sean nodded quickly and ran back to his seat. "Kids!" Ted laughed as he walked back to his seat. The normal business of the Chamber resumed, mainly dealing with smaller issues that, while interesting to the boys, did not affect them directly. After the last order of business, one of the Senators stood to deliver a report after being asked for an update.

"My honored associates," the Senator began, "for the last two days the Vulcan representatives have been reviewing the Iowa Codes to prepare themselves for the consulting role that they have agreed to. At this time there are fourteen entries which they are preparing for us to vote on, due to the entries no longer applying in modern society. There are five redundant codes and eight conflicting codes which have been identified and are being prepared for us to debate as to their status. It is estimated that their preliminary report covering major errors will be done next Friday, with a detailed report on the following Friday to include recommendations that would streamline redundancies in various processes and consolidate areas that are duplicating the same function."

"Just to reiterate, they are very clear that they will NOT re-write our laws, simply point out the places that they feel are no longer proper or logical. My contact has expressed a desire to see how we will handle what has been flagged for consideration." He paused for a moment as he stifled a chuckle. "He has even said, and I quote here, 'it will be intriguing to see if humans can bring some sort of logic to their penal code.'"

"But I was so attached to the law about not hitching your horse to the Capitol railings!" Ted commented with a chuckle.

"Yes, they found that one 'interesting' in its phraseology and detail," the Senator replied with his own smile. "If it is possible for a Vulcan to be relieved, I believe they accomplished it after I reassured them that we do not still hang thieves and ruffians on alternate Thursdays."

"Why not?" JJ asked with a giggle. "It'd cut crime!"

"I think every Thursday would be even better!" Johnny added, barely holding himself in his chair from his giggle fit.

"You might even put it on pay per view... you might be able balance the budget that way!" Tyler added with a wide grin.

"Guys, if I'm ever voted in as President, I'm making you my Cabinet!" Cory laughed, which made the rest of the Chamber break out into their own chuckles.

"God help us if that happens any time soon!" Ted laughed. "Sorry for the interruption, Senator."

"That is not a problem, Governor. I was finished, and quite enjoyed the commentary," he replied.

The Speaker chuckled. "Do any other members of the chamber have business to conduct before I close this session?" After giving a suitable time for response, the Speaker banged his gavel. "This session is now adjourned. Dinner is on the Governor!"

The last line caused a cheer to erupt from the boys. "I'll get you for that later, Fred!" Ted chuckled as the kids quickly clustered around him. "Okay guys, follow me," he added quickly, hoping to get the boys out of the chamber before their drool caused water damage to the antique floor.

By the time everyone was seated in the Dining Room, everyone had split into small groups. Each group consisted of a couple of the Clan contingent and various Representatives and Senators. Conversation drifted between general conversation about the kids, questions about what the boys had seen in the chambers, and the adults asking for the kids' perspectives on some of their pet projects.

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Hey Y'all!! Kyle here!

I hope you're likin' how things are goin' in the chapters. Cor an' me are talking some when you ain't lookin'; I think I'm startin' to see what he means about not lettin' this high-race stuff mess with my head so much. I guess it kinda falls back on when Jamie was almost killed by those buttholes who attacked Sammy. I almost lost one of my closest friends, and it's been buggin' me ever since. Mikey says that my kids are startin' to do some stuff that'll make things better; he also says I need to start watchin' them to see how to deal with junk without bein' all grown-up about everything.

It's fun gettin' to be a kid again! I'm tryin' to figure out a good prank to pull on Cory though. I ain't pranked him good in a long time, and I think he misses that! I kinda noticed it when Johnny pranked Julio and Cory really had a good laugh; he ain't laughin' like he used to, and I wanna help him be happy again without havin' to use Mikyvis stuff to do it.

I told Unca AC to go ahead and finish off this chapter so I can get stuff ready for the next one; I got a few things planned that are gonna be awesome kewl to read about! Tommy says we're 'posed to be havin' fun; I'll betya that Cor sends him swimmin' for suggestin' it after me an' Ty start actin' our ages again!

Have fun, and we're gonna start buggin' Unca AC to make him write faster. You can help if you wanna; I think he's gettin' lazy in his ancient age! Me an' Ty are goin' to go check out a few of our favorite play spots while we're back home; if we find somethin' kewl we'll let you know about it in the next chapter.

Seeya!

Kyle

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Author's Note:

Okay, who let the munchkin at the keyboard... that is NOT where I ended the chapter!! Anyway, I do hope that you are enjoying watching the core characters that make the Short and Richardson families as important as they are as they recover by empowering their friends to follow in their footsteps. As you can see, a lot of decisions are being made by our boys as they finally take the chance to look at things fully. In the process, the newest Clan Division is learning from Cory, Sean, Kyle, and JJ what it really means to be sworn brothers. I am really looking forward to Part Two, which is when Julio, Jesse, Johnny, and Eddie are set loose to carry on the tradition started in a suburb of Des Moines two and one-half months ago. Stay tuned, and thank you so much for sticking with the stories as the boys learn just what is important and what should be cast aside.

Oh, a good sign... Kyle has let me have glimpses of the beginnings of Memories Part 3. Let's just say that I think recovery is finally showing its head and you will be seeing parts of the kids that you have not seen in a long time. Just like real life, it takes time for them to get their priorities sorted out. The time is coming when you will see the boys returning back to the characters we all love as they recover from all of the shocks they received in part two.

Thanks for reading!

AC

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Editor's Notes:

Where do you start? What a chapter! Can you believe all the crap that happened in the Senate and House!! My gosh, that lady was mean and I hope JJ gets a hold of her himself. "Those People" just don't have any love in their hearts and seem to be full of hate. I know I have run across a few and figure most of you have. I am just glad that there is a way for Ted to deal with them and permanently too!

I don't know about you, but I need to ask AC to make sure and let me know when Cory will be in my part of the world driving!!! I don't want to be anywhere near him in a Corvette, I like my paint job on my Explorer!! Heehee, I know, dogs don't drive but there is lots of room in the back end for me to play!

So, Cory needs some more rest and play time and hopefully he will get just a bit more of it. I don't like the idea of him looking tired and worried all the time. He and Sean really need some private time too.

Till next time, this is your friendly neighborhood editing puppy!

Boxerdude

Another Editor Checks In:

I absolutely loved seeing the kids being kids again after all that they've been through ... and that Cory in particular is coming back to having fun. Having 'Uncle Ted' take him in hand and promise to show him how to delegate and set policy was an excellent touch, AC. And giving the heart of the Clan and the new Division exposure to the political process working as it is supposed to was also a great idea. But I wonder what Kyle has up his sleeves now!

'D' of D&B

## Chapter Six

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Teri and Bruce almost fell out of their chairs in laughter as the kids returned to the house. Tyler had decided to have a little fun, and had created the illusion that every single one of the kids was wearing bright purple bunny suits. To add to the hilarity of the sight, the younger kids were hopping around in circles around the older ones.

"I thought that you said spending a couple of hours with your kids couldn't have any effects on mine?" Mick commented with a chuckle.

"Sorry, Sir, but on the way home Cory was instructing us on the proper way to imitate rabbits," Jesse commented, causing Teri to actually have to grab the arm of the chair to keep from falling.

"Daddy, why do bunnies need saddles and spurs? Cory said I hadda ask you," Casey said with a twinkle in his eyes.

Mick moved like lightning, and grabbed Cory. Then he gave the teen a world class wedgie. Bruce, on the other hand, sat there in shock, doing a very good imitation of a fish gasping for breath.

Kai laughed as he commented "Bruvs, you be a needing to be finding a tank for Casey's dad! He's turning merman on us!"

Teri shook her head, still laughing. "If I know my two angelic sons, you'll probably understand by morning Casey. At least you will, unless you sleep with earplugs on the other end of the house."

"MOM!!!!" Cory and Sean exclaimed in unison.

"I'll vouch for you, Cory." Julio said with a grin. "It's only halfway across the house that wakes people up!"

Julio was quick, but Sean and Cory were quicker. Within seconds, he was suspended between them and on his way towards the pool.

Tyler finally decided that the joke was over, and just before Julio landed in the water the bunny suits vanished from everyone but Casey, Eddie, and Tina. The three littlest ones were having so much fun that Ty couldn't think of a reason to take their fun away. As a still-speechless Bruce was pounced by his two bunny-kids, the rest of the boys spread out into the Rec Room, drawn by the smell of fresh-baked brownies sitting there awaiting their attack.

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Once everyone was caught up on the escapades of the kids at the Capitol, Mick and Janice gathered their group together for a 'visit' to their own home for the evening. Teri headed into the kitchen to take care of the dishes from the after-trip snack as Bruce explained the sleeping arrangements to the latest additions to the group. Jeremy was more than willing to cuddle Bast through the night, a point he made clear loudly and vehemently. Robin had decided to stay over as well, since he and Tyler still had some training to do with his newly-expanded skills.

"Mom?" A small voice asked uncertainly as Teri felt a light tap on her arm. She looked down to see Kyle, dressed in worn Transformers pajamas and clutching an equally-worn teddy bear, standing there with a look in his eyes that she had not seen since before the attack in Montana.

"What's wrong, little guy?" Teri asked softly as she quickly put down the plate she was washing and turned to kneel in front of Kyle.

"I don't wanna be Superman no more," Kyle sadly stated before falling into Teri's arms and pulling himself in close.

Teri picked up the frail-seeming boy in her arms, then made her way to the chair, which had seen more than its share of mother-son talks over the years.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Teri asked softly as she took a seat and arranged Kyle on her lap. Inwardly, she was wondering if this might turn into one of the few issues that she would not be able to help one of her boys through.

Kyle nodded his head, then after a pause started mumbling just loud enough for Teri to hear him. "It's all my fault, all of it. I went to the Moon and became a Mikyvis, then Sammy got attacked, Jamie almost got killed, and Cory almost died twice. I'm always screwin' up; thinkin' I'm helping' when other people coulda helped. Not only do I gotta watch everyone I love die, I gotta watch Ty suffer because he hasta do the same thing 'cuz I made him as screwed up as I am."

"So it's your fault that Jamie and Jacob are still alive, instead of one being dead from injury and the other being dead from losing his other half?" Teri asked. "Even if Jamie had survived with normal help, his brain would have been damaged so badly that it still would have killed both of them."

Kyle looked up into her eyes, silently trying to incorporate the response that she had given into his own thoughts.

Teri kissed his forehead, then softly continued. "It must be your fault that Axon was killed instead of everyone else being killed, then. I'm pretty sure that it's your fault that Cory had brothers who loved him so much that they kept his head together when it tried to destroy itself... twice. I'm positive that the attack couldn't be your fault; if you'd had anything to do with planning it it would have succeeded instead of failing like it did. If I understand things right, it's your fault that there are N-Gens instead of grave markers; in fact, from what I hear it is your fault that Robin is going to live his full life instead of becoming another statistic, having a death certificate stating cause of death is unknown. It'll probably be your fault if all of us are around a hundred years from now too, because you love us too much to let us die. I'll admit that Tyler is going to have to live with the one he loves more than anything for a really long time; don't you think that was mean making him have to live instead of him getting old and passing on knowing that he would be leaving you alone forever? I'll even bet there are some ancestors of the human race from wayyyyyy back in history that are mad at you because you made it so that their descendants survived instead of being killed off by an insane Ferox."

By this time, Kyle was staring at her with wide big brown eyes. "I kinda guess that stuff is my fault in a way; but it's all good stuff. What about the bad stuff I've done?"

"Let's see... you mean bad stuff like the time that you tried to play me against your dad and pop?" Teri asked with a small smile. "That's history, we dealt with it then. The fight you had with Galli? That was normal brothers; it's over with. Maybe you mean that time you stole Adam's new game just to see what we'd do to you. That is settled too. So far, you have not done anything that I wouldn't expect from any other eight-year-old who has had a bad history. Well, except for your habit of creating sons, but that is not a bad thing, in fact I actually like my Mikyvis grandsons."

"What about Kai? I screwed up there." Kyle insisted.

"No, you did not screw up." Teri said with conviction. "You might have done the lesser of two goods, but there was nothing really bad about it when you healed him. You listened to your heart, which is one of the things that causes all of your brothers to love you. Part of being eight, no matter what species you are, is learning how to interact with the world. You might have a few new twists to what you need to learn, but you are still no different than anyone else that is your age."

"I still don't wanna be Superman," Kyle stated with a pout, his arguments being shot down as fast as he conceived them.

"Then don't be Superman; be Kyle Richardson," Teri suggested. "Kyle Richardson, the boy who can step up and do amazing things if they are needed, but who is just a normal kid otherwise. Kyle, the kid who likes to make dragons for the little kids. Kyle, the kid who hangs out in some people's heads to make sure they never have to suffer again like they did in the past. Kyle, the boy who still thinks shoulder rides are the best thing ever. Are you seeing a pattern here, Kyle?"

"Yeah, but now people expect me to do stuff," Kyle replied.

"That means that you get to use a really big word that is usually reserved for adults," Teri chuckled.

"What word's that?" Kyle asked with a tilt of his head.

"The word is 'No', and it can even be expanded to 'No way in Hell' if they are really insistent!" Teri laughed.

"But then I'd be cussing!" Kyle said with a small giggle.

"Nice try, Angel," Teri laughed. "I hear more than you boys think I do!"

A halo appeared over Kyle's head. "Who, me? I'd *never* use bad words, Mom. Never, Ever, EVER!"

"Is that your nose growing by three feet? Why, I do believe it is, Pinocchio," Teri chuckled as she leaned closer and kissed Kyle's cute button nose.

Kyle giggled, seemingly relieved that his arguments were shot down. "You really don't mind me an' Ty havin' kids, Mom?"

"No, I don't mind at all," Teri replied as she gave Kyle a hug. "In fact, I think you are going to find out that your kids are going to be the biggest help in setting examples for what should and should not be done. They don't have a human background coloring their view on things, so the dividing line between Mikyvis actions and Human actions is clearer to them. Just watch Dylan's pranks and you'll see what I mean. He has one set he uses on family, including you and Ty, and a whole different set that he uses on his brothers. Parents learn more from their kids than the kids learn from their parents at times in a healthy family; take my advice and let them help you sort out the boundaries."

"Are you *SURE* that you want me takin' advice from Dilly?" Kyle giggled.

"Yes!" Teri responded. "If anyone knows how to tailor their sense of humor to the same level as the recipient, it's Dylan. Bryce is great for teaching how not to get caught when something needs done, something that you don't want others to know that you did. Levi is a lot older than he looks if you pay close attention to his eyes; he has wisdom there that is only gained through many years of life."

"He kinda worries me, Mom," Kyle said seriously. "Levi is the only one of our kids who knows how to hide when he's gone from us. I don't know if that's good or bad."

Before Teri could even think of any answer, a quiet voice came to both their ears, **//It is a gift of Forever, little Prince. If you were to know what he needs to do, you may be worried. Simply know that I am looking after my Voice... as for his maturity, you will be surprised by how much he has grown once you return home, Child of Forever//**

"Now as for meddling omnipotent beings, I have no suggestions," Teri chuckled, which caused Kyle to break out in a fit of giggles.

Teri started chuckling as well, but then gasped and jumped slightly as if someone had goosed her.

Which was exactly what had happened.

Kyle laughed harder as the Guardian whispered into his ear before his presence left them.

"I'm not sure I want to know!" Teri laughed. "Are you feeling a little better now, Angel?"



Kyle nodded, and wrapped his arms tightly around Teri as his laughter slipped back to giggles. "Thanks Mom."

Teri smiled and returned the hug. "Don't forget that you can talk to me at any time, Kyle. I might not have all of the answers, but I'll do my best to help you towards making your own decisions with the information that we both have."

"Thanks, Mom, you're the bestest ever!" Kyle stated as he retrieved the teddy bear from next to Teri and climbed down.

"You're a great boy, Kyle. I'm proud to have you as a son," Teri replied, causing Kyle to grow a huge grin. "On your way out, tell Cory its his turn," she added.

"Okay!" Kyle giggled. As he sprinted out of the kitchen, he yelled "Hey, Cor! You're busted! Mom wants to see ya NOW!"

"You're goin' swimming later, Squirt!" Cory giggled as he came into the kitchen. "Is Kyle okay?" he asked seriously as he took over the freshly-vacated spot on Teri's lap.

"He'll be okay; he just needed to know that he's still the same little guy that you knew back at the home. I think it would do both of you some good if you got back into the habit of being more involved with each other's lives."

Cory tilted his head. "Yeah, we used to always find time to sit down at the home and just talk; since the attack both of us got so busy that we don't do it hardly at all."

"Why do you think I let Ted hijack you guys tonight?" Teri said with a smile. "I knew what he had planned, but I also knew that you needed to see how he manages to run a state without going insane. From the sound of it, you guys all learned something. I've already informed Sarek that if you even start to have any issues like you've had in the last week that I'm going to put my foot down. I don't think you need to ask what that would mean."

Cory shook his head. "I know you, Mom. It means Jace would be Patriarch, or else Vulcan will be at war with you. Ted says that he's gonna help me get something set up to make it so that I'm not tryin' to do everything."

"Good. I talked to him while you guys were on the way home; I think you're going to find that you're getting a little more help than you expect."

"Whadda you mean?" Cory asked curiously.

"I mean that Biff and his family have already asked about housing in Orlando. Once he gets things settled here in Iowa, he is moving into my place and is going to take over setting up a proper chain of command for you."

"How do you know about Biff, and why didn't you ask me if it was okay?" Cory asked, his voice hovering between hurt and confusion.

"The Session was being broadcast real-time," Teri replied. "As far as Biff goes, he's married to one of my second cousins. I've known him for years, and right now I'm pulling the Mom card and doing what I think is best for my baby boy."

"Owwww! Mooommmmm!" Cory whined, in his best 'little boy' voice. 'I've still got it,' he grinned to himself as she gave him 'the look'.

After a suitable pause for Cory to gloat, Teri continued. "Seriously, the Clan has grown much too large to be handled by just you, Cory. It is too much to ask of any group of youth to run something this big; in fact most adults could not do it. I can handle FYS because I immediately set up a staff to handle daily operations. In a lot of ways, your group is much more diverse than the FYS group. You need someone in place who has experience with working in a large mixed environment; someone who is willing to fight for children yet has experience in coordinating at a level only seen in government. That is the one bit of experience that nobody under the age of thirty is going to have."

"Galli has," Cory pointed out cheekily. "He's ten."

"Ten billion, yes... smart ass," Teri chuckled as she gripped Cory's ribs to make him squirm.

"Sean says it's a cute ass too!" Cory giggled as he squirmed to try to avoid her fingers. As he saw Teri roll her eyes, he added "Well, he *does!*"

"You two are just as bad as your fathers." Teri said with a smile. "I used to sit down with your Dad and we'd discuss what we thought was hot about Sean's dad... while Cheri was on the other side of the table doing the same thing with Michael. For some reason, Mikey always decided to find somewhere else in the house to play when we did that; and after you two were born he'd drag you with him, sometimes literally, crib and all...."

"He was protecting our fragile little minds from evil parent speak!" Cory exclaimed with a blush.

"MOOMM!!!" Sean yelled from the other room. "That's just **WRONG!!!**"

"What is he complaining about? It's not like I'm discussing what your fathers did when they had a 'boys' night out', now is it? Just because they were bow-legged when they came home...."

"MOMMMMMM!!!!!" Cory groaned, joined by over half of the kids in the other room, thanks to Ty deciding to share his pain.

Teri chuckled. "Paybacks are a bitch, ain't they, kiddo?" She gave Cory a hug, then added "You didn't come in here about Kyle. I know you too well. What do you really want to talk about, son?"

Cory grinned. "You caught me!" His face then got more serious. "I guess I kinda need some advice. After learning all about Tesnian culture from an actual Tesnian, I'm starting to think that maybe I AM too young to be a dad; it seems like I'm not spending enough time with my kids. It's like I'm abusing them by not being there for them."

Teri nodded understandingly. "You're seeing a problem that I can see becoming an issue in the future. You spend about the same time with your kids as an average parent, Cory. You just spread it out over

the whole day. If you keep trying to know about everything, you'll get to the point that you're worried about, but you are not there yet." She paused, then continued once she thought he had absorbed her words. "You have a few sons who need more contact than others; and you're really good at being there for them when they need you. You might just now be saying that you want more time with them, but we can all see that you want more time with them. The kids see it too; and they love you for that."

Cory shrugged. "Wanting it is not good enough, Mom."

Teri nodded. "I'll help try to get you more time. Adults have that issue too, but between me and Spock we can help get the priorities set in a better light for everyone. Just knowing that you are watching seems to make a difference for the Clan that has sprung up; I think there are ways to make this all work out so that you can give the proper attention to both families."

"I guess that'll work, Mom. I just don't want my sons thinking I care about everyone else more than them," Cory replied softly.

"Don't worry, Cory; I'll step in long before that can happen. Grandmas have even better ears than Moms do."

"I'd better warn them about that!" Cory giggled. "It was bad enough the stuff you heard Sean and I doin'!"

"I'm just waiting for the first time that you complain to me about one of your kids keeping you up all night with their antics in the bedroom; that is when justice will be served." Teri responded with a chuckle as Cory turned deep red.

Once Cory recovered, he looked up to see a big smile on Teri's face. "What?" he giggled.

"I'm just thinking about how much you have learned in the last few months," Teri replied. "I can see where you're taking the Vulcan training you've had, and adapted it to solving your own personal problems without excluding emotions. You are learning to balance adult responsibilities with keeping your youth; I'm really proud of you, Cory."

"Thanks, Mom!" Cory replied with a smile. "I think I kinda understand a little better now."

As Cory stood up, Teri commented, "The most intelligent thing to do when you are unsure is to ask questions. You'll never go wrong if you follow that rule."

"I'll remember that!" Cory replied. "Thanks again, Mom; I better go check Sean's tonsils though; it's been almost an hour."

"You're welcome, son. I still wonder about that though. Sean had his tonsils removed when he was five, so just what is it that you're checking?"

"Ummmm... I dunno...." Cory replied as he quickly made his way back to the Rec Room. As he reached the door, however, he turned back with a quirky grin "Making sure they haven't grown back, Mom!" he said as he ducked out the door.

As the adults all decided to retire to the living room to recover from the kids, Cory began flipping through the movies. "How's about 'George of the Jungle'?" he asked.

"Suuure, pick the one with a Lion as a bad guy! See if YOU get any grooming tonight!" Mont replied before breaking out in giggles. "Go for it, Cory. It's good, even though they got the lion ALLLLL wrong!"

"What do you expect, he's not exactly the '*mane*' character!" Sean quipped, which resulted in a bunch of groans and airborne pillows in his general direction.

"Now we know why you two are always kissing; you're trying to prevent bad puns!" JJ giggled.

Cory just nodded with a grin, which caused Sean to send some of his excess pillows in his husband's general direction, while the rest were thrown quite accurately at JJ.

"Kewl!" Tyler exclaimed as he tapped his commbadge. "Hey, Draco, we need more pillows!"

*'Your wish is my command, Queen Tyler,'* the Vulcan AI giggled as the room filled to capacity with pillows. As in, floor to ceiling, and wall to wall. The guys were buried. *'Oops! Too many? How about this?'* Draco laughed as he removed all of the pillows, bar those covering the floor.

"I'll get you later for that 'queen' comment, pico-chip!" Tyler giggled before grabbing a pillow off of the floor with each hand. "PILLOW FIGHT!" he yelled.

Within seconds, most of the kids had at least one pillow in their hands. Fife watched for a few seconds, then once he realized that the purpose was to have fun hitting each other with pillows, he quickly grabbed two of his own and jumped right in. Casey and Tina took care of the low shots, while the older kids handled higher shots. Without it being announced, everyone tailored their strikes to the person they were aiming for, with the little ones getting light taps, and the cats getting pillow-shredding strikes. Amid the chaos, the kids all were laughing and giggling loud enough to be heard throughout the house.

A few minutes after they started, Bruce stuck his head in the doorway to see what the commotion was. One look at the pillow-stuffing-filled room and the still-playing kids made him think twice and he quickly retreated to safety.

Once almost three-quarters of the pillows were destroyed, the kids settled down in the now-destroyed rec room, their excess energy now temporarily burned off. Cory retrieved the movie and once it started, everyone cuddled into groups to watch the show.

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### **Later that evening:**

Teri and Bruce decided to look in on the boys one last time before heading upstairs to check on Mikey and Candy. Teri had to work hard at restraining a chuckle as she looked into the dimmed Rec Room. Every surface of the room was covered with the stuffing from almost a hundred pillows; the pillows

that had survived had been gathered into the center of the room and had become the base for the obligatory 'nest' of kids.

Bruce shook his head in wonder. "Just how can such a small group of kids create such a big mess?"

Teri smiled. "I don't know, but it's wonderful seeing them just be kids finally."

"What about the mess they made?" Bruce asked, confused about Teri's reaction.

"If it takes making a mess for my boys to experience some normal kid time, they can make any mess they want to," Teri replied seriously. "Thanks to some very bigoted people, they have been denied their childhood because they chose to protect other kids. They need fun time, and I'm going to personally strangle anyone who tries to stop them from getting it when they can."

"Aunt Teri means it, too!" a young voice giggled from behind them.

Teri and Bruce turned their heads, and saw Davie slowly appear behind them. "What brings you here, Davie?" Teri asked with a grin.

"Mandate," Davie replied cryptically. "Besides, there ain't no way I was gonna miss out on a First-Class pillow fight! Mom never let me and Booger-Breath have one *that* good!"

"I'll have to talk to Mary about rectifying that," Teri laughed. "You are both overdue. Now what is this about a Mandate?"

Davie grinned mischievously as he let his wings become visible. "You'll see! In fact you gotta see it; that's why I had to wait for you to check on Cor and Sean like you always do. I don't know what was funnier while I was waiting: the movie, or Mont and Bast wanting to take out the lion in the movie for being such a dick!"

"I didn't think angels talked like that!" Bruce exclaimed at Davie's last comment.

"You should hear Pablito!" Davie giggled. "He makes Saint Peter blush!"

A voice from the ceiling corrected the grinning angel. "No, David. YOU make me blush. Pablito makes YOU blush, and gives ME a heart attack! I am just glad I am already AT the pearly gates!" After a pause, the voice added, "And I *was* a sailor back when I was a fisherman, too!"

Davie giggled as he let his halo show above his head. "I ain't *THAT* bad!"

"Just because you have a halo doesn't mean you're innocent," Teri laughed as Bruce shook his head.

"I get no respect!" Davie deadpanned. He made his way around the adults and moved into the Rec Room. He spread his wings wide, and a golden glow filled the room as he announced "Okay, here we go! Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, Cats and Tesnians; its **SHOWTIME!**"

Surprisingly, the kids in the room stayed asleep. As the adults watched with interest, the glow seemed to pulse with a life of its own. "My Mikyvis brothers, it is time for that which has been in your thoughts

to become reality," Davie announced formally. "The One has spoken; it is now the time of the Seal. By Mandate of the Ultimate Power, that which would destroy upon contact is hereby nullified in its effect within this room and those areas which He has declared are needed. That which must be shielded shall be free to perform His Mandate. As I have Spoken, so shall It be done."

As Davie finished, a purple glow began to form around Kyle and Tyler. Unlike any other time, this glow expanded to engulf the entire Nest; after a few seconds, it separated from the group, with the exception of a few tendrils of energy. Each tendril led to a specific person; there was one each for Cory, Sean, Kyle, JJ, Adam, Tyler, Kai, Robin, and Fife. There were other tendrils which seemed to leave the room, their destination unknown.

The ball of energy started to take form, and Davie once again began speaking. "Seal of the Nexus, you are granted the best of those that you have been guided to touch. It is now the Time for you to assume the task of Protectorate of the Nexus. As He has created the Mikyvis to enable the continuity of the Nexus, so has He declared that you shall now be the Mikyvis Protector of His Nexus. If you accept that which He had tasked you with, show thyself and be Named."

The tendrils withdrew into the ball of energy, then it began to swirl with a rainbow of colors. As it floated in the center of the room, each of the other occupants of the room awoke, already knowing what they were witnessing thanks to Davie. They all watched in wonder, even Kyle and Tyler not really knowing just what would happen next. The ball turned into the general shape of a human, then began to take on features. First was the general skin tones, approximating the natural tan of Kai. Next came hair, which was a rainbow mix of the hair of each person touched, but in the natural scalp hair pattern of a Tesnian. Finally came the features, which somehow showed elements of each of the Nexus without singling out a particular one. As the body settled into its chosen physical age of nine, it floated over to stand between Kyle and Tyler.

"Uncle Davie, I accept my Destiny. What name has the Book Of Life given me?" the naked boy asked.

Davie nodded. "Your acceptance has been noted. Kyle and Ty, I present to you your son, Ezra Richardson Short." He then giggled as he added, "You may now hug the birthday boy."

As the glow faded from the room, Kyle and Ty jumped up and gave their newest son a hug. Within seconds, they were joined by the rest of the kids in the room, each expressing their wonder at being witnesses to his birth as they welcomed him.

Once he had been welcomed by everyone, Ezra made his way to Teri. "Grandma Teri, Daddy says I need Grandma cuddles. Poppa says that all the kids get special Grandma meals when they're born; is it too late for me to get one?"

Teri smiled as she picked up Ezra. "I think I can come up with something for our latest miracle," she responded as she and Bruce turned to head to the kitchen.

As she was leaving, Davie joined the rest of the group in the Rec Room. Kyle got to him first, curiosity clearly showing on his face. "Okay, Angel Boy, what gives? Is he a Mikyvis, or something else?"

Davie motioned for everyone to take a seat around him in a circle, then began to explain. "Ezra is a Mikyvis just like the rest of your sons, Kyle and Tyler. Just like all of your kids, he has a purpose in the Universe that is unique to him. While Levi has a purpose that is far-reaching, Ezra has only one purpo-

se; maintain the stability of the Nexus. He is linked to those that the Father has declared key to the continuation of the Nexus; otherwise he is just like any of the rest of you."

"You mean he even watches over his parents?" Cory asked.

"Yep; and he's got the knowledge of a few people in the room to help him." Davie grinned. "Plus a few skills that are unique to him among the Mikyvis. One he picked out himself was the desire to totally fit in with the Clan family, so he's probably going to act less like a Mikyvis than any of his brothers do right now. I think I'm going to enjoy watching this play out!"

Sean smiled. "I get it; you're gonna make us wait to see just what he decided to be. You've been taking lessons from Mikey, ain't you?"

Davie just laughed, then faded from view. "It is not my place to spoil the fun of learning!" his voice announced as he faded away.

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### **Upstairs, Two hours later:**

"Mike," Candy whispered softly. The room was dark except for a simple night light by the bed.

At the foot of the bed, a Vulcan physician stood with a tricorder running. Other than the odd beep from the device, there was no other sound from the dark, quiet house.

Mikey moved closer and sat at the side of her bed. "I'm here, love," he murmured as he reached and took her hand. "I'm here."

"I don't have long, do I?" she said, more of a statement than a question. "You're an angel. You'd know."

Mikey was about to shake his head and deny the obvious, in a very human gesture, but he felt a touch upon his spirit. Instead, he whispered, "No. Not long now, my love."

There was a moment's pause.

"Does it hurt?" she asked. "Dying, I mean?"

Mikey couldn't help but smile. It was the oldest question there was. "No. It's like taking off your shoes after a long, hard day. You've already been through the worst, now, Candy. Taking this next step is just... just that, really. We all take this road, and Our Father made it very easy."

Candy smiled weakly, before turning her head away from her dead boyfriend and looking over at the open doorway and into the hall. Mikey hadn't missed the fear that was still in her eyes. "I'm scared, Mikey," she trembled, her voice just noticeably weaker than before. "So scared."

The Saint gripped her hand tighter and was about to reassure her when a shadow filled the darkened doorway.

Teri.

Her free hand shaking with the strain of simply lifting it off the bed, Candy raised it towards Mikey's mother, and the look in her eye made Teri rush over to grasp that hand. "I'm here as well, sweetheart," Teri whispered softly as she sat down on the side of the bed and reached with her other hand to stroke Candy's hair.

"Couldn't sleep, Mom?" Mikey asked softly as tears trickled from his eyes.

"No," she answered as she continued to look down into Candy's fear-filled eyes. "I just lay there. Then I just... had a feeling that I should be here."

"Thanks," Mikey managed before just continuing to hold his girlfriend's hand.

Smiling gently, Teri brushed her hand along Candy's cheek, "Don't be scared, daughter. There's nothing to be scared about."

Sniffing weakly, Candy whispered, "But what if I'm not good enough? What if I don't measure up? I don't want to... to..."

"You won't," Mikey said with assurance.

"I don't think it works that way," Teri said simply as she shook her head.

"It doesn't," Davie whispered as he shimmered in next to Teri.

The Vulcan man raised an eyebrow, and then decided to go and sit down to watch what was going on. There was nothing more that he could do in this situation in any case.

Davie reached out and laid a hand on Candy's forehead as he looked at her shocked face. "Yeah, I'm an angel too. And if Pablito can get into heaven... well, anyone can."

"Hey!" came the protest from a smaller boy who shimmered in next to Mikey.

"It's true, though," Davie said with a gentle smile.

Candy chuckled, but a coughing fit tore through her frail form as she gasped for breath. Once she was able to speak, after a sip of water that Teri offered to her, she managed to ask, "So it doesn't matter that I've not lived a good life like those preachers say?"

Mikey shook his head slowly. "I always told you that your pastor was speaking a bunch of shi... crap. Sorry, Mom," he winced as he managed to stop himself from swearing. He continued quickly, not looking at Teri as he did so - just in case, "All it takes is love, Candy. You've always been good to other people, and you've helped everyone you could, just because you wanted to. That is what is important. You remember coming to church with me, just before I died? You enjoyed it, right?"



"Yeah," she nodded, then she managed a grin, "you were a bad boy, my parents said. You didn't go often enough... but yeah, I liked your church when we went, but my pastor told me off for going. I wish I'd continued to go there... even... even after you..."

Mikey smiled. "My brother found a better one after I died," he said. "My pastor was great, but Pastor Mills is amazing. It don't matter, Candy. God understands."

Teri leaned forward and kissed the girl's cheek, "Don't worry now, love. God doesn't mind. I agree with Mikey and the others; love is what's important."

There was silence in the room for a long while after that. They all just stood or sat there, keeping the dying girl company and making her feel calm just by their very presence.

"Mom?"

Teri smiled at Candy - it was a large step for her to call her that. "Yes, sweetheart?"

"Remember that song you sang that one time I came with Mikey? In Church? You got up and sang a solo..."

"I remember," Teri nodded.

"Can you sing it again, please? I don't remember the words, but... please?" Candy almost begged, her voice so quiet now that it was all Teri could do to understand what she was saying.

The woman simply nodded and started singing softly:

"Wonderful, merciful Savior,  
Precious Redeemer and Friend.  
Who would have thought that a Lamb  
Could rescue the souls of men?  
Oh you rescue the souls of men.  
"Counselor, Comforter, Keeper,  
Spirit we long to embrace.  
You offer hope when our hearts have  
Hopelessly lost the way.  
Oh, we hopelessly lost the way.  
"You are the One that we praise,  
You are the One we adore,  
You give the healing and grace,  
Our hearts always hunger for.  
Oh, our hearts always hunger for.  
"Almighty, infinite Father,  
Faithfully loving Your own.  
Here in our weakness You find us  
Falling before Your throne.  
Oh, we're falling before Your throne.  
"You are the One that we praise,  
You are the One we adore,

You give the healing and grace,  
Our hearts always hunger for.  
Oh, our hearts always hunger for.

('Wonderful, Merciful Savior' by Selah)

By the time Teri finished singing, tears were trickling down Candy's cheeks. Her hands were also loosing their grip on both Mikey's and Teri's, so Teri knew that the time was close.

"You'll look after our son, won't you?" Candy whispered.

"Always," answered Teri. "Forever and always."

Candy added as her strength started to leave her body for good, "You'll tell him about us?"

"All the time, dear child," Teri wept as she started to see the light die in the poor girl's eyes. "He will know his mom and dad, I promise."

Candy's lips moved in another question, but she no longer had the energy or breath to voice it. Instead of trying again, she just seemed to wilt and close her eyes, as if breathing was all she could truly concentrate on, now.

"With all my powers," Mikey sniffed where he sat, "I can do nothing. I wish... wish you could have a full life with our boy, Candy... I really wish..."

"Don't, Mike," Teri wept, "don't. Don't make yourself feel like that."

Mikey looked up at his mother, an answer to her statement forming on his lips, but then his eyes started from his face and he turned to the foot of the bed. So too did the eyes of Pablito and Davie. Respect was writ clear on all their faces; respect and awe. Teri looked but saw nothing; however, a feeling of peace did fill the room to overflowing.

Candy opened her eyes and just looked, and looked... and looked. A smile spread itself over her face as the room started to grow brighter and brighter around her.

This, Teri saw. The wings on the three angels were unfurled and reflecting the light back and forth as it increased, and the feeling of peace grew with each second.

*Fear not...*

Candy shook her head. She could not imagine being afraid ever again.

*... for I have redeemed you.*

Teri closed her eyes and gripped onto Candy's hand tightly yet gently.

*I have called you by your name...*

Candy's hand removed itself from Teri's, and the girl seemed to reach out towards someone that, still, Teri could not see - but she could guess as to who.

*You are mine. Come, Candy - it is time for you to come home...*

The light faded and was gone. The three angels were also gone. Only the bedside night light remained to give its feeble light to the room. Teri stood up and gently arranged the girl's body into a dignified repose, then reached to close the joy-filled, yet very dead, eyes. Then she turned to look at the Vulcan physician, "You know what to do."

The Vulcan man simply nodded. If he had been surprised by the turn of events, he didn't show it.

Teri slowly walked from the room and back to her own. Into her bed she crept, intent on crying herself to sleep - but another thing happened. She opened her eyes to find herself in the Dream Realms, and her Vulcan son was before her...

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Candy, however, felt more awake than she'd ever felt.

With Mikey holding one hand, and a Man holding her other, she was ushered through some rather large and impressive looking gates into the most beautiful place she had ever seen.

"Welcome home, my daughter," the Man said simply as she looked around. "Welcome home..."

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### **Editor's Notes:**

Wow, one comes into the world and another leaves it. What on earth is going on? What has ACFan got in store for us now? Seems like we have a few boys growing up a little bit, and Cory and Sean are going to get some managerial help or lessons too. Just what is going on with Ezra? To many questions for me to even wrap my head around. We need ACFan to get back to writing and not leave us hanging here very long. As they say "inquiring minds want to know."

Your friendly neighborhood editing pup!

Boxerdude

## **Chapter Seven**

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"Daughter," the Man said softly as Candy looked around at the Eternal Realm and the beauty therein. "I have a question for you."

Candy looked up at him and nodded.

"What would you sacrifice to save the lives of those children on Earth who are Abused and Lost?"

She blinked at him, for the question had come at her from out of left field. Of all the things this Man could have asked, this was the least thing she had expected. As she opened her mouth to answer, she felt Mikey squeeze her hand tightly.

"Do not rush your answer," the Man said as he watched the two youths look at each other. "Think about it."

And so, she did. If she had been alive and healthy, then maybe she would have said she would have sacrificed everything except to be a mother to her son. However, now that she knew he was safe with Mikey's mother....

"Everything, Sir," she answered softly. "My... our son is safe. He's going to be loved and looked after the rest of his life. I'd... I'd give anything to see other kids get the same chance."

"What of your child? Would you lay down your right to see him and protect him as a Guardian Angel in order to help all the children of the world?"

Candy nodded without hesitation. "I know he's safe now. I know he's got a grandma who loves him, and uncles and cousins to help him and who will be brothers to him when he needs them. I'm... content."

The Man smiled at her, "I have watched with pride as you showed the love I placed in your heart to all who needed it, Candy. All your life, you lived as I taught and still teach. You heard my Voice even when you did not know it. This is your greatest answer yet, for you could have said you would do anything to help, as long as you could see your son. You could have even asked me to just be his Guardian Angel and I would have allowed it, as I once allowed it for Michael to stand over his family. Since you have shown your willingness to lay down your right to watch over your son in order to watch over others not related, I now appoint you Saint Candy, Protector of Lost and Abused Children. Your new sainthood shall work in tandem with that of Saint Mikey's: he is Protector of Gay and Abandoned Youths, and has, until this point, done the job you now hold as well. Together, you shall be mother and father by faith and belief to all children and youths of the world. And, you shall be known to your son - you are his Guardian Angel as well."

Candy's jaw dropped open, as did Mikey's. Mikey watched as golden feathered wings appeared on his girlfriend's back, and as a halo appeared around her head.

"Also," the Man added with a knowing smile, "you are both still partners in your new lives. Go, now. It is time for the Heart of my Nexus to awaken and seek their breakfast. Go and welcome them, new Saint of Heaven."

With wide, joyous smiles upon their faces, Mikey and Candy flashed away in a shimmer of sparkles, leaving the Man to stand there in the Realm of Eternity.

"... and so it begins," he said with a grin before he, too, vanished.

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**Teri's house, Des Moines, Sunday morning.**

Kyle rolled over and rubbed his eyes as he yawned. A smile came to his face as Ezra greeted him. "Good morning Daddy! Did you sleep good?"

Kyle nodded as he reached out and pulled his newest offspring into a cuddle. "Yeah, kiddo, it was almost like when I was still human," he replied with a small smile.

Ezra giggled. "I know, Daddy. You and Pop got a Gift when I was born; some of the stuff that you missed about being human you can do again just by wanting to. That means that you and Pop can sleep just like all of my other Uncles do now."

Kyle tilted his head, then giggled. "Does that mean Someone heard that I didn't wanna be superman, so they're lettin' me be more like a real human?"

"I know nothing!" Ezra giggled as a 'halo' appeared above his head.

"Let's see... innocent look, imitation halo, soft giggles... yep, he's your son!" Mikey's voice announced with a laugh as he and Candy appeared in the doorway. "You know, Ezra, you should wait at least twelve hours before torturing your parents!"

"C... Ca... Candy?" Kyle whispered as the smile fell from his face.

"Peace, little brother," Mikey stated as he entered the room and spread his wings. "It is time for me to wake up your lazy brothers who sleep too much, then all will be explained."

"I'll help, Uncle Mikey!" Ezra exclaimed with glee as he bounced up and pounced Cory and Sean. The yell from the formerly-sleeping pair was enough to start waking up everyone in the house; between Ezra's pounces and some supernatural tickle torture from both Mikey and Candy, it took barely a few minutes for everyone in the room to be fully awake. Once Mikey assured all of them that things would be explained as soon as they were ready, the boys quickly dispersed to the various restrooms in the house to do mass bladder evacuations. Once that was completed, they all reassembled in the rec room to hear what Mikey and Candy had to say.

Before either of the two Saints could start, however, the door opened and Teri walked in. Sean and Cory's face twisted in pain at the look of loss and grief on her face.

"Guys I've got some... some... *Candy!* Oh my dear!" she yelled as she ran over and pulled the teenage angel into her arms.

As a group, the boys all moved over to surround the two angels and Teri in a mass hug. "You went in the night, Candy?" Cory whispered gently.

She nodded. "Yes. Mikey and Mom were with me. Then I got given a choice...."

Mikey smiled and said, "Let me introduce Saint Candy, Protector of Lost and Abused Children; Guardian Angel of Pattie... and *still* my girlfriend!"

Then, once he'd stopped speaking, he leaned in, moved his mom out of the way slightly, and landed a hot, passionate kiss on Candy.

The rest either pretended to gag (Cory and Sean included... they are his younger brothers, after all), cheer, or say "Awwww! Sooo cute!"

"Do they allow you guys to do that twisted straight stuff still?" Sean asked with a giggle once the two angels had broken their liplock.

"Innocent ears over here!" Ty exclaimed as he covered Ezra's ears.

Ezra giggled. "Sorry, Pop, but I know what Uncle Cory and Uncle Sean do in bed. Do humans all bend that way?"

"You should see what Adam and Logan can do!" Mont said.

"Only if we're flexible," Cory replied with aplomb at the same time.

"Yep!" Sean giggled. "You wanna fill us in on the details about Candy?" he added, trying to change the subject.

Mikey grinned and said, "Everyone sit down and I'll tell you everything. Wait, Mom? Where's Pattie?"

Still with tears running from her eyes, Teri pointed towards the kitchen mutely before carrying on with hugging Candy.

Kyle darted off and returned shortly with Pattie in his baby carrier, and everyone started laughing. Kyle was one of the smallest eight year old's around, and the way he was struggling was so downright cute that they couldn't help it.

He placed Pattie down on the floor and stood straight with his hands on his hips. "What?" he glowered at them all seriously.

"Nothing," Mikey grinned as he came out of the group and picked up his son. He kissed Kyle's forehead and said, "Thank you, bro."

"You're welcome," Kyle murmured before shooting another typical eight year old glare at his older brothers and friends, and then sulking over to the nearest sofa and getting comfortable with as much dignity as he could.

Mikey gestured and waited until everyone was seated - Candy on Teri's lap... yes, she was no longer lap-sized but Teri didn't care. Then the senior Saint in the room began to explain about the night's events.

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If he could form words, he would be thinking that these 'Large People' were noisy when eating. In fact, he would wonder why they were not getting boobie time to eat.

They were nice, though (is what he would have thought, if he could form words), especially the furry ones. Boobie-Person (Candy) now had bright soft things on her back, just like the other Non-Boobie-person (Mikey)... and he seemed to feel safe/home/blood to him.

The others kept on eating, and he smiled - might have been gas, but they weren't to know - while waiting for Boobie-Person (Candy) or the Non-Boobie-Person's Boobie-Person (Teri) to come give him his Pretend-Boobie-Feedie thing (bottle).

One of the noisy ones came over and tickled him under his chin, so he cooed at them. That always made them happy. Then he tickled his ribs, and he giggled. Still needing Pretend-Boobie-Feedie thing, his eyes were saying, but the tickles were nice.

At least... that is what Pattie would have been thinking, had he known how to speak and form words as he watched the gang eat.

"Hey, Mom! You got Pattie's bottle ready?" Cory called over as he continued to tickle his nephew's ribs to keep the infant chortling happily.

"Coming right up," she called back as she moved from the counter and around the table. "Are you going to feed him?"

Cory nodded happily and picked Pattie up and out of his carrier before sitting on one of the chairs. Taking the bottle from his mother, he first tested the temperature on the back of his hand - having fed Cody and Sky's son in Australia helped here - before placing the nipple in the boy's mouth.

Pattie was definitely a 'Short' and fell to his breakfast with gusto.

On the other end of the table, Kyle and Ty were busy instructing their son on the fine art of making faces and designs out of the food on his plate. Fife and Kai were quietly sitting there watching, both amazed at the creativity of the three boys.

"I'm curious," Fife whispered to Kai as they continued to watch. "Does human food like to be played with? Does it make the food feel better about getting eaten and digested?"

"I don' think so." Kai replied. "But as long as Ky an' Ty are enjoyin' themselves, it don' matter."

Just then Casey and Tina joined the 'artistic' group, and Kyle launched into teaching the two youngest ones proper food manipulation as well.

After a few minutes of watching, Bruce leaned over to Teri once he had congratulated Casey on the smiley face made of bacon, eggs, and hash browns that Casey had insisted on showing off. "This is the first time I have seen your boys playing with food. Let me guess, this is one of those 'let it be' times?"

Teri nodded as she watched Adam finally get a fork full of biscuits and gravy into JJ's mouth after the fourth try. "Breakfast has always been a 'kid time' meal for my boys. I was taught that if you start your day with a smile, it makes the entire day better." She tilted her head over to where Robin was, semi-successfully, feeding himself with no hands. "Children don't learn if you don't let them explore. Robin is having fun, but he's also learning fine control. This is the best time of the day for them to all do that."

She paused for a second as her eyes settled on Bast. "Bast, Jeremy had *better* be just retrieving lost silverware!"

Jeremy quickly popped back up from under the table with a fork in his hand. "Yes, Ma'am!" he responded quickly, his blush giving away the other ideas crossing his mind.

Teri shook her head. "I thought so. Spilled food gets cleaned up in the shower, okay?" she commented with a knowing smile.

Both Bast and Jeremy nodded as the rest of the table giggled at them getting busted. Mont shook his head, then stood up and moved over to relieve Cory on the feeding duties so that Cory could eat too. Once Cory was seated next to Sean, both of them began eating and joining in the light banter going on around the table.

As the meal finished, Mikey got everyone's attention. "Here's the shower arrangements, guys. Cory, Sean, JJ, and Kyle, you have first shift in Mom's shower with me. Adam, Ty, Kai, and Ezra have the second round with me. Mont, Bast, Jeremy, and Fife have third round. Casey, Tina, Robin, and Pattie get the last round."

"I'll explain to the rest of you what it means to be showering with Mikey while the first group is in there." Candy added. She smiled as she watched the first round gather to head upstairs, each of their faces showing just how well they understood the implications of Mikey's decision.

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### **Des Moines Headquarters:**

Mick walked into the newly expanded dining area, and took a seat next to Janice. "By any chance did anybody leave a map for this place?" he asked with a laugh as he poured himself a coffee.

Janice shook her head with a smile. "Not that I've found. I'm afraid to ask how they managed to completely renovate and add a lower level in just the short time we were at Teri's place."

"It was fun to watch!" Robin's mom replied as she came out of the kitchen.

"Maybe you can fill us in then, Marcie," Mick commented as he retrieved a cinnamon roll from the tray she had brought out. "It was a little bit of a shock coming home and finding out that your house had migrated next to ours, a common basement had appeared underneath them, and both houses grew multi-story additions containing multiple bedrooms."

Marcie laughed. "Let's see... the foreman was this little blond kid wearing a purple hardhat who was constantly munching on cookies. He basically was conducting the operation like it was the London Philharmonic. They must have had someone really talented operating a tractor beam from somewhere, because they literally lifted the houses, put the new command center underneath, then sat the houses back down on it. I had left a full cup of coffee next to my chair; it was still sitting on the coaster and had not spilled a drop."



"Okay, that is unusual to say the least... but after what I've seen Cory do since he came back to visit, it does not really surprise me," Mick commented. "If this is what he does on vacation, I'm afraid to see him on full duty."

Marcie poured herself a coffee and joined them. "I wonder how Robin is doing. This is the first time he's spent the night somewhere by himself. I actually expected him to call, but he didn't."

"I can tell you why," Janice replied. "Between Kyle and Tyler, I'll bet he never had a chance to realize that he wasn't home. Those two boys are something really special, I hope that you get to meet them before they go back to Orlando."

Before Marcie had a chance to reply, the thundering of teen and preteen feet rushing towards the dining room alerted them to an incoming invasion of the peaceful room.

"MOM! DAD! Me an' Robin's new room is AWESOME!! I didn' even hear Julio an Jesse wrastlin and doing boyfriend stuff!" Eddie announce proudly.

"EDDIE!!" Julio exclaimed as he started blushing from head to toe.

"We'll have to try harder then!" Jesse commented, causing Julio's blush to deepen even further; if that was possible.

Johnny giggled. "Charlie smelled cin-mon rolls! Him and me's hungry!"

Mick laughed as he stood to put his arm around his glowing son. "Just wait until you have kids of your own. I believe that was payback for the time when you were five and walked in on me and your Mom. Your grandma STILL picks on me about what you saw, since you called and explained it to her in excruciating detail!"

Julio grinned. "I thought it was funny!"

Marcie shook her head as she tried not to laugh. "I'm glad Robin is an angel, he never pulled that stunt!"

"What does everyone want for breakfast?" Janice asked, trying to change the subject.

"Waffles!" Julio and Jesse said in unison, causing them to both giggle.

"Bacon and eggs and toast with lotsa strawberry jam!" Eddie replied.

"Sausage an' gravy!" Johnny said, then added "Charlie wants some sausage too, but he says he wants it still oinking!"

Johnny's cat, Cinnamon, chose this time to grace "his" boy with his presence. "Mwerrr? Purrrrrrrrrr mew purrr." he said as he rubbed Johnny's leg.

Johnny managed to somehow lean over while holding Charlie and pick up Cinnamon. "Cinnamon says he wants scrambled eggs with tuna and cheese," Johnny translated.

"Hmmm... I think we're out of tuna," Marcie replied, not really sure if Johnny was translating or not, and not really wanting to find out. "We do have some salmon, though; do you think he'd accept that as a substitute?"

Before she finished, Johnny was giggling madly as both of his 'kittens' began wildly washing his face to show their appreciation of the offer.

"Charlie likes Cinnamon's idea and wants some of that too!" Eddie stated between giggles at the treatment his big brother was getting.

Marcie shook her head in wonder. "Are things always this crazy?" she asked.

"Just wait until you meet the rest of the Clan!" Jesse giggled. "Would you like some help in the kitchen, Mrs. Wilson?"

Marcie looked over at Jesse. "You can call me Marcie, Jesse. There is no need to be formal; if I understand what that little purple-eyed cutie was telling me, we are all one big family now."

"Great! That means I need to fill you in on what Julio and I did last night!" Jesse replied exuberantly.

As a beet-red Julio slid under the table, Mick laughed. "I don't think that will be necessary, son. I'm sure that she can figure it out."

Jesse turned to look at Mick in shock. "Son? You called me son?"

Mick nodded. "That's right. You and Julio are a couple. That means that you are family now, son."

Jesse stood perfectly still, silent tears springing from his eyes. "Son ... son ... I have a Dad ..." he whispered to himself repeatedly.

Mick stood up and came over to Jesse. "Yes, son, you have a family," Mick stated softly as he held out his arms.

Jesse glanced at Mick's open arms, then into his eyes. Without a single word, he fell into Mick's arms and began openly crying.

Mick wrapped his arms around Jesse and pulled him in close. "Let it all out, son." Mick whispered softly as he comforted Jesse.

Julio crawled out from under the table, and came over to check on his boyfriend. Before he had a chance to say anything, Mick reached out his arm and pulled Julio into the hug. "You're family forever, guys," Mick said as he ensured that both boys were equally receiving his attention.

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**Teri's house:**

After allowing suitable time for post-shower bonding, Teri poked her head into the rec room. "Have any of you figured out how we are going to go pick up Cory's new car yet?"

Before anyone could answer, there was a knock at the front door. "Do ANY of your generation understand doorbells?" Teri quipped with a smile as she turned towards the door.

"We don't do analog!" Cory shot back with a giggle.

Teri was about to reply, then thought better of it due to where it would have taken the conversation. Instead she went over and opened the door, finding Benny standing there with a grin on his face.

"Did someone call a taxi?" he asked with a giggle. "Oh, that's right, Cory's in charge... he probably forgot, so I just showed up anyways."

"I heard that, runt!" Cory yelled from the rec room.

"Just for that you get the ultimate punishment... first ride in Cory's new car with him driving!" Sean added. Seconds later, Sean was running out of the rec room and blasted past Teri and Benny, Cory fast on his heels.

"When I get my hands on you...!" Cory was giggling as he zoomed past.

Benny chortled, "You'll kiss his..."

Teri slapped her hand over the cheeky boy's mouth quickly as Cory skidded to a halt with a major blush, thus allowing Sean more time to find a good hiding place.

"You handle Sean, we've got the midget!" JJ and Adam announced as they came up behind Benny and grabbed him from behind. "One wet driver, coming up!"

Benny giggled, an evil glint in his eyes as he pretended to struggle in Adam and JJ's arms. "WAIT!!!! I thought you couldn't get upset at the truth!" Benny cried.

They got him to the pool and threw him into the middle, and only then did they realize what the sneaky little boy had done: from the VSO belt that was hidden under his tee-shirt he had pulled two thin cables and had looped them through Adam and JJ's own belts while he'd been 'struggling' in their hold. This meant, therefore, that as he was sailing over the water to land in the pool, JJ and Adam were suddenly jerked off of their feet and right into the water along with him.

Cory walked up with Sean in his arms just in time to see this. He was laughing so hard that he failed to notice Kyle, Tyler, and Ezra running up behind him. The first indication of a problem were the three screams of "Banzai!!!", the second was the three-pronged pounce that propelled all five of them into the pool.

A nervous looking furry face was staring at them all from around the door back to the Rec Room. "Are you sure there's nothing in there that'll eat my new Dads, Grandma?" Fife asked the woman who was standing fully in the doorway.

"Quite," Teri answered as she moved to pick up the garden hose. After handing it to Fife, she gestured for him to aim it at the boys beginning to climb out of the pool. Then she turned it on.

Fife started giggling as he sprayed each of his new family back into the water with the jet of water, his fur rippling up and down his back in time with his giggles.

Once each of the boys had been 'assisted' back into the pool a few times, Teri turned off the hose and stood back to ensure her intervention would not be needed to protect Fife.

The first one to make it out of the pool was Ezra, who was giggling as he walked up to his furry uncle. "That was awesome!" Ezra commented. "You think you would be okay with a wet hug?"

"You're not going to toss me in that lake, are you?" Fife asked nervously.

"No way!" Ezra replied. "Anyone who tries that is gonna have to worry if Cory, Sean, or me is gonna kill them first!"

Fife tilted his head. "Really?" he asked as he slowly held out his arms to signal the hug was okay.

Ezra came the rest of the way over and began to hug Fife. "Really. I understand why you're scared, and I know what it'd do to you if someone tried it. Uncle Cory does not allow people to do stuff that makes someone panic or really uncomfortable; he gets really mad about stuff like that."

Fife cuddled into Ezra as he pondered the new information. He had not realized that humans held their family so dear; while it was normal on Tesnia, it was something new in his experiences with human interaction.

The rest of the boys exited the pool after a few dunkings, and each took a turn showing Fife that they held no hard feelings for his moment of fun. Cory waited until last, and smiled at Fife as he pulled him in close.

"I heard what Ezra told you. He was right," Cory said as he rubbed Fife's back. "Nobody hurts my family and gets away with it. That means you now, son."

Fife smiled up at Cory and gave him an extra tight squeeze. "Thank you, Dad," he said softly.

Teri smiled as she watched Fife and Cory add another layer to their bond. She motioned for everyone else but Sean to head into the house and get into dry clothes. She followed them inside, leaving the three boys to share their instant of family time.

A few minutes later, Sean and Cory came in, Fife riding on Sean's back. They headed up to Cory's room to get changed, returning a few minutes later with Fife now riding on Cory's back.

Kyle giggled as he ran over and jumped on Sean's back. "KEWL! Horsey rides! All the big goofs gotta carry us little guys!"

"Who you calling a goof?" Sean asked as he tickled Kyle behind the knees.

"You, Fuzz-head!" Kyle giggled back as he got comfortable.

"Hey, you're just as fuzzy as me!" Sean shot back, referring to the hairstyle that both of them were still sporting from the dance.

"Yeah, but yours is a lot bigger than mine!" Kyle responded.

"Thank God!" both Cory and Tyler exclaimed at the same time, immediately both breaking into deep blushes as everyone else began laughing at the 'other' implications of the comment.

"You know, most people wash in the shower instead of comparing body part sizes," Teri added with a glint in her eyes. She chuckled as her jab got it's intended effect, causing both Sean and Kyle to whine "MOM!!!!" as they both turned just as bright with blushes as their husbands.

Both Mont and Bast quickly grabbed their sunglasses, both giving huge cat-grins at the glares they got from their charges. "Hey, those blushes are hard on our eyes!" both boys chorused.

"See if I give you guys any brushings tonight!" Cory commented, his grin giving away the fact that he was not really serious.

Benny shook his head. "Dang Yanks, always screwing around," he giggled under his breath. He paused, then in a louder voice, he asked "Are you goofballs ready to go yet?"

As a group, the rest of the boys blew raspberries at Benny. Teri began guiding the boys out the door as she retrieved Pattie's travel bag, giving Benny a thumbs-up when nobody else was looking.

A few minutes later, they made their way out of the compound gate and Benny pulled up next to a stretched Hummer which was waiting for them, Benny's father sitting at the wheel. "Load up, guys... and keep your hands to yourselves!" Teri announced with a smile.

"You ruin ALL of our fun!" Kyle giggled as he and Tyler scrambled into the very back of the vehicle.

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### **Des Moines HQ:**

With breakfast now over, Mick looked around the table at his growing group of boys. "What are your plans for today, guys?" he asked.

"We gotta message from Unca Gov saying there was a big Hollow-weenie party later today, an' that he wants us to be there," Eddie announced.

Mick had just started to take a sip of his coffee, and half way through Eddie's proclamation he found out first hand that coffee and sinuses do not mix well. Once the pain was down to a dull ache, he replied. "A HALLOWE'EN party? That sounds like a fun idea; are you guys all interested in going?"

"Yeah!" all of the boys replied at once.

"Where is it being held at?" Janice asked.

"Wells Fargo Arena," Johnny replied, still giggling at his little brother's mangling of the holiday. "It's open to all kids, and adults are allowed as long as they pass through Security first or they have Federation or Clan IDs. There's gonna be a concert at the party too!"

"Has anyone told Cory about this yet?" Mick asked.

"Not yet, he's getting his new car this morning, then we'll tell him... if he's not in jail from his test drive," Johnny answered with a giggle. At the confused looks he got from the adults, he explained. "Kyle told me ALL about Cory's driving; he makes Dad look like an old man when he drives!"

"HEY! I'm not THAT bad!" Mick exclaimed.

"Yes, you are!!" Janice, Julio, Eddie, and Johnny exclaimed in unison.

Mick's remaining dignity was salvaged by the ringing of the doorbell. "I'll get it, Marcie." he quickly announced.

As he entered the foyer, the bell rang again. He opened the door, then paused as his mind adjusted to what he was seeing. In the doorway were five kids, two of which had a strong resemblance to the pet raccoon he had as a child. All but one were heavily armed, the last one was wearing a hooded cloak similar to the one that Eddie had been wearing when he informed them of the results of his first mission.

"May I help you gentlemen?" Mick asked, his mind already suspecting just why they were here.

"Yes Sir. I am Lieutenant Tucker Risling, Special Forces Intel," the boy wearing the cloak replied. "We have been instructed to report to Director Hernandez for permanent duty."

Mick smiled, his suspicions confirmed. "Follow me, boys, I have been expecting you."

"How could that be, Sir?" Tucker asked. "Our duty orders were sealed and were not opened until we arrived on the street here two minutes ago."

"Easy; I've known Cory Short since he was in diapers. The only way to beat him is to think faster than him," Mick replied. As he led the boys to the dining room, he announced, "Julio... it looks like Cory's sent you a present!"

Julio looked up, and quickly stood to welcome the new arrivals. "I'm Julio, how can I help you?" he asked.

"Corporal Ricky Raccoon reporting for duty as your personal security as ordered by Patriarch Short," the taller of the two hybrids announced as he saluted Julio.

Julio returned his salute, which signaled his slightly shorter companion to announce "Corporal Rocky Raccoon, reporting for duty, Sir."

Julio also returned the salute from Rocky, and turned to the other two well-armed boys. The elder of the two, looking to be fourteen with dirty blond hair, saluted and stated "Lieutenant Kristopher Carson, reporting for duty, Sir." Julio returned his salute, then turned to his partner, who was about twelve with dark brown hair. "Lieutenant Colin DeYoung, reporting for duty, Sir," the boy stated.

Finally, Tucker introduced himself, then Julio glanced over the orders that each of them passed to him. Once he was done, he glanced over the new group.

"They're okay, bro, both me and Eddie checked them out," Johnny announced. "Their heads match the orders you read."

"Thanks, Johnny," Julio replied. "Okay, guys, at ease or whatever it is I'm supposed to say to make y'all relax."

"Are all those weapons real?" Marcie asked, her worry plain in her voice.

"Yes, and going by Cory's guard lions, I would guess that these boys are quite adept at putting them to use," Janice replied.

Julio nodded his agreement before motioning to some open chairs. "Have a seat, guys; there are a few rules that Cory enforces that I'm going to insist on as well."

The new arrivals all took seats, as Julio walked over to the head of the table and stood there. "Okay, rule numero uno. You guys are Clan, which means that you are family. I expect you to act as such. That means the next one of you that calls me '*Sir*' when we are not performing an official function goes for an involuntary swim in the pool."

"Rule two," Julio continued after a pause. "We are all kids. We all act like kids. That includes all of you, you're expected to join in and have fun with the rest of us. There are times when it is better to not be obvious security, and times where security should be visible. If Cory's lion brothers can fit in out in public, you can fit in out in public. Ricky and Rocky, you're no different than the hundreds of alien species that visit Earth every day. Mont told me what Cory had told him, that most people will just think that you're from another planet. You won't stand out as much as you think you do unless you want to."

Ricky and Rocky both nodded their heads. "So you are saying that you think we can be normal kids?" Rocky asked.

"I know that you can, all that you have to do is want it. I've seen it for myself with the Patriarch's security," Julio replied seriously.

"We don't know how," Ricky replied.

"I'll take care of teaching you!" Johnny interjected. "Tyler's given me some ideas so I can start acting like a kid, and I'll let you join me an' we can all learn together!"

Rocky and Ricky both looked at Johnny in disbelief. Mick noticed it, and reassured them. "You guys can trust Johnny; he's recovering from a lot of bullcrap from his past that took away part of his childhood. I think it'd help all of you to discover things as a group."

"We'll all help you," Julio added.

Jesse walked up and pulled himself into Julio's side. "Sir, why don't they know how to be kids?" he asked softly, his discomfort with the surprise additions obvious in his posture.

Julio didn't even have to look to know that his boyfriend was having issues. "Excuse me a minute, guys, Jesse needs me." he stated quickly before taking Jesse's hand and guiding him into the hallway. "What's wrong, babe?" Julio whispered as he wrapped his arms around Jesse protectively.

"Where did they come from?" Jesse asked, his nervousness obvious. "Who are they, why is one of them hooded, why do they have all those weapons on them inside the house, are they going to hurt us, what do they want to make us do?"

"Remember what Kyle said about letting your brain run away?" Julio asked softly. "Johnny and Eddie have checked them out; they're here to protect us like Mont and Bast protect Cory and Sean."

"But Mont and Bast are not armed like that..." Jesse started to reply, but stopped when Rocky entered the hall, now weaponless.

"Permission to speak, Sir?" Rocky asked, his eye contact making it clear that he was speaking to Jesse, not Julio.

Jesse shrank back. "I can't give you permission. I'm nobody. I can't be called a 'sir', I don't lead anything or anybody."

"I used to think that too," Rocky stated softly. "We were an experiment that didn't turn out like they wanted it to. The only reason we were not just killed off is that one of the doctors helped a bunch of us escape and set up our own little group in hiding. If he had not done that, a lot of our brothers would be dead. The Unit taught us that the lab guys were wrong, we are unique and have skills that make us special in our own way." He paused, then continued once he was sure that Jesse was listening. "May I have the honor of being assigned as your personal security, Jesse?"

Jesse looked shocked and frightened as he stared at Rocky. "But...but...I'm nobody. What do I need personal security for?" Looking over to Julio, he added, "I don't need personal security, I'm not like you." He then turned back to Rocky, "I...no, I'm supposed to serve you, sir."

Rocky proceeded carefully, his memories of how he once felt helping him greatly in his understanding of Jesse's reaction. "Jesse, you are the partner of the Director of the Des Moines Division. Whatever happened in your past has changed; my job will be to make sure that the most important person in the Director's life is safe. I know how hard it is to get used to having people look up to you; I still don't understand it myself sometimes. Me and Ricky are supposed to be sharing security on both of you, but I don't think that would make you comfortable, Jesse. Since we have two more guys to help out with security, Ricky and them can watch over Julio. I want to just watch over you; that way you know who you can count on to have your back. Besides, I think that you and me can learn a lot from each other and help each other overcome our problems from our pasts."



"I agree with him, cutie. You're *VERY* important to me," Julio added, trying his best to support Jesse without seeming unfeeling. "It would make me feel a lot better knowing that Rocky is helping me make sure that you are safe."

Jesse looked back and forth between Julio and Rocky. "But ... but ... I don't know how to give orders," Jesse whispered.

Rocky smiled. "You don't need to. If it involves your safety, I'll do whatever I need to. If it is anything else, we can discuss ideas and then I'll do whatever you and I agree is the best course of action."

"But I *can't* be a Sir," Jesse whispered.

"I've got a secret for you," Rocky said with a typical Raccoon grin. "Patriarch Cory *HATES* being in charge, but he does it anyway. I was told that during the briefing on how the Clan formed. He does it because he can't stand to see anybody hurt."

Jesse's head twisted to get confirmation from Julio. "He's right," Julio said softly, "Cory only takes the lead when he has to. He's always been like that. I'm like him in that way; I think that is why he put me in charge. He's never trusted natural leaders."

Jesse hemmed and hawed that for a moment or two as he turned back to Rocky. "Ummm... look, I... can we just be friends?" he asked plaintively, his eyes boring into Rocky's. "Can the rest of the stuff just... happen? When it's needed? It would make me... more comfortable."

Rocky's eyes went wide. "Really? You really want to be friends? I'm just an experiment, I'm not a person like you."

The comment had an immediate effect on Jesse, as he broke away from Julio and walked up to Rocky. "Can I please?" he asked, obviously wanting to check out Rocky in detail.

"Go ahead," Rocky replied, curious as to just how Jesse was going to react to the differences between him and 'normal' people.

Jesse nodded, and started by taking Rocky's hand. "Wow!" Jesse exclaimed as he took a close look. "Raccoon hands with thumbs! You have the little whiskers under your nails, the horny stuff on them and all! Do you feel stuff just as good as a raccoon does?"

"Yeah," Rocky replied, trying not to laugh at the tickling sensation of Jesse running his fingers over his palm.

Jesse noticed the effect his investigations were having on Rocky, so he moved from the sensitive long-fingered hands up the long forearm to where the long fur that covered most of Rocky's body started at the elbow. "Why do you have two kinds of fur here?" Jesse asked as he investigated Rocky's arm.

Relieved that Jesse was no longer tickling his hand, and calmed by the honest questions, Rocky replied, "I've got fur just like the little raccoons. The really long hair helps keep water off of me, and the shorter hairs keep me warm."

"That's a lot better than clothes!" Jesse giggled, the act of investigating his new friend relaxing him.

Next, Jesse worked up the rest of the arm, surprised at how comparatively short Rocky's upper arm was. It was almost two-thirds the length of Rocky's forearm, but covered in so much fur that it was hard to determine just how muscular Rocky was.

Once he was satisfied, Jesse began the search for Rocky's shoulder. It was a more difficult endeavor than expected, since Rocky's neck was much wider than normal for a human. After much probing around, Jesse found the three inches of shoulder that managed to extend past the neck. He then moved on to Rocky's head, giggling as he placed his hands on each side of Rocky's head just below the rounded ears. "You look so awesome." Jesse giggled. "You've got kewl fur; and a big, cute, furry head. You even have the mask, which is sweet. Do these whiskers work too?"

Rocky laughed as Jesse brushed his hand over the aforementioned whiskers. "Yes, they work! That tickles!"

Jesse smiled, then began working his way down Rocky's body. "You're just a furry version of a human with a lot of awesome extra stuff added on. You even got normal legs, even though I thought raccoons had short legs."

"Actually raccoon legs are pretty normal, but they seem shorter because of how the body sits over them," Rocky replied.

"You got really big feet, though!" Jesse giggled, "Does that mean that...."

"Don't go there, babe!" Julio interjected, his blush beginning just at the thought of what Jesse was about to ask.

"You've got Julio, you'll have to ask my partner if I ever get one," Rocky replied with a laugh. "I can do one thing that is awesome though...." he added as he lifted his leg and rotated his foot so that it was 180 degrees from normal. "It's kinda useful at times!"

"Nice!" Jesse exclaimed as he stood back up, comparing his height to that of Rocky, whose head came up to his shoulder. "How old are you, Rocky?"

"The lab accelerated my growth, so I'm supposed to be about twelve." Rocky replied. "I'm a couple months short of six years old actually."

"They made you short for a twelve year old, since I'm short for thirteen and you only reach my shoulders," Jesse stated factually. "I guess that they were adults who had no idea how tall kids were supposed to be, weren't they?"

Rocky smiled at the jab at the lab techs whom he had no love for. "Yeah, there were only a couple who had a brain."

Jesse grinned. "You know, I think you're a great friend. You're even starting to feel like a brother already!"

Rocky's eyes misted over. "Seriously? I can smell that you are not scared any more, but do you really think that?"

Jesse nodded as he pulled Rocky into a hug. "I don't lie. I got hurt bad if I lied, so I can't do it because it makes me remember the pain. Please be my friend?"

Rocky wrapped his own arms around Jesse, and whispered, "Yes, I'll be your friend. Thank you, I've never had a normal friend."

"You're my first furry real friend, so that makes us even," Jesse replied, which caused both of them to giggle.

Julio smiled as he watched the two boys, amazed at getting the chance to see one of Jesse's protective walls drop. *'I hope this works out,'* he thought to himself. *'Jesse's so fragile; and it sounds like Rocky's not much better. Maybe this will help them both open up more.'*

After giving the two boys a minute to bond, Julio walked over next to them. Within seconds, he found himself being pulled into the cuddle by Jesse. Rocky giggled as he commented, "The manual never covered cuddles with the Division Head. I wonder what else the lab instructors missed?"

Julio laughed. "A lot. I *KNOW* they missed telling you that you're no different than any of the rest of us."

"Is it considered improper to lick the face of your Division Head when he says nice things?" Rocky mused softly.

"No," Jesse replied. "I lick him all the time for how nice he is. He tastes good, everywhere!"

"Oh my God!" Julio exclaimed as his blush returned full force. "You HAD to go there!" he added as he tried to bury himself into Rocky's fur.

"Yes I did!" Jesse replied. "I'm proud of my boyfriend!"

"I know, I know..." Julio moaned, but then he turned his head to give Jesse a quick kiss. "Are you okay to go back out there, babe?"

"Yes, I have my new friend to protect me now while you meet the rest of them," Jesse replied, a new confidence in his tone.

Julio smiled. "Let's get back to it then!" he said as he broke the three-way cuddle and led them back into the room. As they went through the doorway, Rocky stopped Jesse and took the opportunity to re-arm himself. He quickly donned the webbing that he wore to retain his weapons, then quickly restocked it from the pile on the table by the doorway that Ricky was standing guard over.

Julio had turned to watch, and broke into giggles when Jesse asked, "Where is the kitchen sink? It looks like you have everything else!"

Rocky laughed. "Only the bomb guys carry those!"

**Ankeny, Iowa:**

"You drive like an old man, Dad!" Benny exclaimed as everyone exited the limo. "I'm driving on the way home! We got passed by a *GARBAGE TRUCK!!!*"

"Fine, fine, whatever," John smiled. "I'll take the transporter back."

Sean was immediately on his knees at John's side, clutching at the man's jacket. "Don't leave us! Please! Don't leave us!"

Cory shook his head with a grin, then looked around the lot. His eyes went wide as he saw about twenty police interceptors lined up in two rows by the far exit. As he watched, four of them pulled out, their lights all flashing as they sped towards the on-ramp of I-35. He was just able to see the bottom of the northbound on-ramp, and was surprised to see that two of them stopped and began rerouting traffic to exit the interstate.

"I see that your reputation has preceded you!" Benny quipped as he joined Cory. "Congratulations, you outdid me... I've never had the police clear the roads just because I'm going out for a drive!"

"You're a brat!" Cory giggled in reply as he got a quick poke in on Benny's underarm. "See if I let you ride with me!"

"Promise?" Benny giggled as he quickly scampered out of Cory's reach.

Before Cory could chase after Benny, Fife latched onto his side. "Dad? which one of these vehicles is gonna be yours?"

"I dunno." Cory replied. He noticed an older gentleman in a suit walking towards him, and added "I think we are about to find out though, kiddo."

The man walked up to Cory, and with a smile introduced himself. "Cory? I'm Karl Meyer. Welcome to Karl Chevrolet."

"Thanks, Mr. Meyer." Cory replied as he shook the man's hand. "This is Sean's and my son, Fife. He was just asking which car was mine."

Karl smiled and placed his hand on Fife's shoulder. "Please, you may all just call me Karl. Fife, I made sure your Dad's new car was set up special for him. Since your grandma was always such a good customer, it is the least I could do for her famous son." Karl paused as he switched his attention back to Cory. "In fact, I would be honored if you would consider adding me as one of your suppliers for Clan vehicles, Cory."

Cory didn't get a chance to respond, as Fife immediately pointed to a bright orange supercharged Cobalt about fifty feet away from them. "Does that mean that you'll get me that one, Dad? I like the color!"

Cory looked over at where Fife was pointing. By the time he looked back over at Karl, Karl had a phone to his ear. "... need all free sales personnel to the New car area to assist Clan Short."

Sean had seen Fife pointing, and walked up with Benny, just in time to hear Karl's last few words. "Hey, son, did you find something you like?"

Fife nodded and purred, his hair quivering with excitement. "Karl just called for some salesmen to help! He wants to be someone that supplies some of the vehicles to our Clan."

Benny giggled. "I like that kind of service! Patriarch, since you're not supposed to be working, I'll take care of setting up the details with your permission."

Cory grinned and shook his head in exasperation. "I get the feeling that I've got no real say! Go ahead, Benny; with the service Mom's had from here, I'm happy to keep it in the family."

"Sweet!" Benny grinned. He moved far enough away from Cory's reach to be safe, then announced loudly, "Everyone pick a car; Cory's buying!"

Karl laughed as he put a hand on Cory's shoulder and started guiding the group over towards the Cobalt. "Welcome to leadership, Cory. It seems the higher you get, the less control you have!"

"Tell me about it!" Cory giggled. "What is it going to take to get this car for Fife?"

Karl smiled. "How long has Fife been your son?"

"About twenty-four hours." Cory replied as he tilted his head. "Why?"

"I thought so, something about how he interacted with you. This one is on me; call it an adoption present."

Cory started to protest, but was silenced before he could even get a word out by Teri placing her hand over his mouth. "Hello, Karl, are you torturing my boys?" she asked with a smile.

"Not at all, Teri. I'm just giving the little one a present to welcome him into your family," Karl replied.

"So I see," Teri laughed. "Cory, you and Sean take your son to look over his new car. I need to discuss a few things with Mr. Meyer here."

Fife was off like a flash, a huge smile on his face. Cory and Sean quickly joined him, both knowing that Teri being formal meant she was going to be talking business, something both of them tried to avoid hearing if at all possible.

A twenty-ish young man was standing next to Fife's choice, the keybox on the window already opened. "Hello, I'm Tom. Is this the one you wanted to see?" he asked Fife as the little fur ball skidded to a stop near him.

Fife nodded his head enthusiastically, not really believing what was happening.

Sean giggled at Fife's speechlessness. "You want to see how you fit in it, kiddo?" he asked.

"Yeah!" Fife exclaimed, and then proceeded to climb into the car before Tom had a chance to get the door fully open.

"You know any good driving instructors who wouldn't mind about a year in Florida?" Cory quipped, realizing the implications of Benny's announcement to the group.

"Airhead said he'll do it!" Sean replied.

"I said *good* instructors!" Cory replied, causing Sean to laugh.

With smiles on their faces, they both turned to see how Fife was doing. Their smiles grew bigger as they saw their son sitting in the car, a blissful look on his face, his nostrils wide as he took in the new-car smell. Tom was carefully using the power seat controls to see if any modifications would be needed to account for Fife's size, doing his best not to disturb the young Tesnian.

"What do you think, Tom?" Cory asked, hoping there was a way to make the car fit Fife.

Tom looked up. "Not a problem," he replied as he retrieved a small tape measure from his pocket. "I'm actually part of the Adaptive Technologies group as well as Sales. I was involved in the adaptations to your new car, Patriarch. Should I upgrade the safety systems on this one while I am adapting it for his stature?"

Cory's eyes lit up, the knowledge that his yet-unseen new car had extra toys. "He's our son, do whatever you think will keep him safe."

"As you wish. The full conversion process takes about two weeks to delivery unless I have a rush order on it. I'll personally deliver it once it is ready to make sure everything works right."

Cory nodded. "That works, in two weeks Fife should be done with driver training." He then leaned in to talk to Fife, who was now reading the owner's manual with one hand while playing with all of the controls with the other. "Hey, Son, you okay with them getting this to fit you, then bringing it home once it's ready?"

Fife turned his head, and a huge smile appeared on his face. "You mean I really DO get to keep it? YES!"

"Yes, you get to keep it!" Cory replied, which earned him a furry leech immediately attached to his neck, kissing and cuddling him happily.

"Sean, would you mind setting up the details while me and Fife go see what kind of terror Kyle and Ty are starting?" Cory asked as he shifted Fife around for a piggy-back ride.

"Sure, babe; once I'm done I'll round up the natives and we'll meet you up by the showroom," Sean giggled.

"Thanks, cuddle-bear!" Cory replied, which got a giggle out of Fife. He then walked over to where Karl was in conference with Kyle, Ty, Robin, Casey, and Tina. Bruce was standing off to the side watching, shaking his head with a grin.

"What are we missing?" Cory asked Bruce as he came up next to him.

"Not much... just Kyle deciding that the young kids deserved custom go-karts. He's spent the last five minutes haggling over a volume discount price for the GM Kart-series racing karts; he seems to think he should have a bigger discount for buying a thousand of them."

"A *THOUSAND!*?!?" Cory asked in shock.

"Yes, he said he'd like to start with a small order," Bruce said with a laugh.

"Mom's gonna strangle them..." Cory muttered as he moved over to rescue Karl.

"...I'm sure that it would take at least two weeks for any off-road versions to be ready to ship out to you." Karl was saying, obviously enjoying the banter with Kyle and company.

"Just how are you spending our money, li'l brothers?" Cory asked, unable to hide his grin.

"We needed some toys for the littler guys who ain't ready for cars yet!" Tyler answered innocently, Kyle nodding his head in agreement.

"And I'm *sure* that you are not interested in them for yourselves," Cory grinned.

"Actually, we've already arranged for our own karts," Kyle replied with a grin. "These are for all our friends."

"You're a nut, bro!" Cory giggled. "How badly has he tortured you, Karl?"

Karl laughed. "Can I borrow him the next time I need to negotiate prices with a supplier? He's good!"

Cory grinned. "It will cost you... and we demand payment in cookies."

"We'll have to discuss those terms in more detail," Karl said with a grin. "Right now, there are a few executives from Bowling Green who are anxiously waiting to see your reaction to the prototype of the new option they came up with. You've made a lot of news since you moved to Florida, and some people noticed. I had a visit from a purple-haired cherub just after you moved, telling me that you would be back to visit. After everything you've done, I ordered a gift for you, but I did not get what I ordered."

Cory tilted his head, then glanced at Kyle, who was standing there with an innocent smile on his face. "Why is it I'm starting to worry..." Cory half-said to himself.

"Join the club," Karl laughed. "Follow me, I'm just as anxious to see your reaction as they are!"

Cory rolled his eyes as he looked up at the sky. "I'm ready now; it just worries me that Dilly's been involved."

"Ahh, you know the purple cherub," Karl replied. "I was quite impressed; he was quite the gentleman for his age."

Cory decided at that point that discretion was the best course of action, and wisely kept his thoughts about Dylan's maturity to himself.

Karl led the boys towards the showroom, Sean and his group joining in just as they reached the doors. Just inside the open drive-through doorway, a tent suspended from the ceiling covered a vehicle. The area was roped off with velvet ropes, with various signs placed warning of dire consequences if the area was entered.

Just outside the doors, there were four mechanics standing at the ready with air guns, two on each side. Next to them, also covered, was what appeared to be replacement tires for a vehicle.

Cory followed Karl inside, his arm over an awestruck Fife's shoulder. Around the walls of the showroom, almost the entire staff of the dealership waited, the only exceptions being the sales associates who were quickly making their way back to rejoin their coworkers. Cameras were placed strategically throughout the room to capture everything that was about to happen from multiple angles.

Once everyone was present, Karl turned to Cory, who was now getting slightly nervous at all of the fanfare. Karl noticed this, and leaned over to speak to Cory privately. "Relax, son. The Corvette Museum is the only place these videos will be played. I think you'll understand why once you see what was sent here for you."

Cory nodded, and smiled his thanks to Karl. He watched as Karl showed his family to the VIP seats that had been reserved for them, then with Sean and Fife at his side, he moved over towards the place where Karl had opened the ropes for access.

Just off to the side of the tent, a screen came to life, the subtitle on the bottom indicating it was coming from the Corvette Museum in Bowling Green. A young gentleman in casual dress stood up and approached a podium that was centered in the camera view.

"Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen," the man began. "I am Xavior Dunkov, Program Director of the Corvette Specialty Vehicle Division of General Motors. I would like to start by thanking Mr. Karl Meyer for his initial idea and for his continued support with the outcome of the solution. Today we are all proud to be able to show our appreciation for the achievements of the young man standing with his husband and I'm assuming his son in front of us. Mr. Cory Short, the staff of Karl Chevrolet, the Corvette Museum, and the General Motors Corvette Assembly Plant in Bowling Green, Kentucky, wish to extend to you our thanks and appreciation for all of your accomplishments. As an Engineer, you have shown qualities that we look for in our Corvette engineering team, the ability to think outside of the box and to extract the maximum performance without detrimental effects on safety. As the youngest engineer in Starfleet history to have a major modification to be named after him, we believe that it is only right that you have the most advanced technology that Chevrolet has available in your personal vehicle."

By this time, Cory was speechless. Nobody had ever made this big of a deal about his accomplishments this publicly, at least not his non-Clan accomplishments. Pretty much the only thing keeping him standing was Sean and Fife on either side of him holding him up.



Xavior noticed this on his video feed, and gave Cory a small break to recover. "On a more personal note to those gathered today, I wish to thank all of the Clan Short family for their efforts to provide for disadvantaged children. The Corvette family has a proud heritage of reaching out to help the youth in our community, as do the other General Motors plants. I have received an inter-office memo from the GM Board of Directors stating that all divisions are to implement attached procedures for providing support to Family Clan Short effective immediately. Mr. Meyer, these procedures are based on your request for special exemptions for your dealership when dealing with members of the Clan. I was given a copy of the message sent to you, while other dealers have the exemptions that you requested, as the home dealer for the origin location of Clan Short you have been issued special exemptions in accordance with your designation as the official supplier for the core Clan Short family."

Cory smiled, his blush mostly subsided. "I am sure that the GM Board will be receiving a copy of this, so I will direct my reply to their generosity to them. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am sure that I speak for all of my family when I say 'Thank You' for the assistance which you have extended to us. In return, since your corporate policy of assistance to youth is well known to me, I would like to extend the blanket offer of assistance, financially or otherwise, to any and all GM holdings in support of their mission to better their communities. Once I return to Headquarters, I will be in contact directly with you to make arrangements to expedite the process of your company contacting us. Thank you once again."

Xavior nodded his thanks, his expression clearly showing that he was impressed with Cory's response. "Thank you, Cory; I believe you just made everyone here happy. Now it's my turn to return the favor. Cory, the employees of the Corvette Special Vehicle Division and the Corvette Assembly Plant, in appreciation of your accomplishments in Starfleet, we have assembled a special Corvette which is designed just for you. I'm going to just sit back and watch, because I'm sure you'll notice what we changed. Once you've looked it over, I'll list anything you missed; assuming you miss something."

Cory giggled at the last comment, his giggle turning to a laugh when Sean commented, "I'm gonna stay out of the way... I'm not gonna be trampled by an overeager engineer!"

Karl laughed as well. "I'll agree with that! It's my turn to have some fun. Cory, I present to you your personal Corvette!"

As Sean quickly helped get Fife safely out of Cory's way, the tent started to lift towards the ceiling. The first thing Cory spotted was the 20 inch anodized black magnesium wheels, something that Cory KNEW was not in the option book. The next thing was the body lines of the lower part of the body. "That's not a C5!" Cory exclaimed. "That's GOTTA be a C6 ... *nobody* has a C6 yet!" He stood there in awe as he watched the tent lift completely. Sitting in front of him was a brand-new 2005 Corvette C6 convertible, painted a deep metallic pearl green with a double silver stripe running down the center of the hood and the rear deck. Just behind the extraction duct aft of the front wheels, a emblem had been attached bearing the Clan Short seal, with purple flames stretching from it to the rear brake vent duct.

Cory walked up to the car, and stroked his hand on the driver's door. From the center console, a voice spoke up. "DNA analysis completed. Identity confirmed as Cory Short. Initializing ownership activation subroutine."

Cory's eyes lit up. "Awesome!"

"Initialization complete. Awaiting entry for identification."

Cory grinned, then tilted his head when he noticed there were no door handles, just a slight cutout in the edge of the door. He stuck his fingers in the slot to see if the handle was hidden, then was surprised to have the door pop open as soon as his fingers made contact. He quickly glanced at the edge of the door as it opened, then giggled. "Biometric locks? It's about time!"

He quickly hopped into the driver's seat, and spent a minute adjusting everything to be just right. As he sat back and placed his hands on the wheel, the VI in the console spoke up once again. "Are you prepared to take delivery of this vehicle, Cory Short?"

"Yes I am, and you really need to just call me Cory," Cory replied with a grin, not expecting his request to even be noticed.

"Request noted, Cory. Please wait while I delete the pre-delivery access protocols," the VI replied.

Cory tilted his head again, his mind furiously trying to determine the level of automation which had been installed in the car. While there had been limited VIs installed in Corvettes for the last ten years, this VI seemed to be over and above any VI that Cory had seen installed in any vehicle on Earth.

"Pre-delivery purge completed, Cory," the VI announced.

*I wonder...* Cory thought before speaking aloud. "Give me a Configuration Report."

"Acknowledged. Please direct your eyes at the instrument cluster for retinal identification verification," the VI replied. Once Cory had complied, it continued. "Displaying configuration report on console data interface."

Cory quickly scanned through the various options and reports that were listed on the touchscreen. He grinned as he ran across multiple notes from the engineers that had been left for him, some warning of adverse reactions with some settings, others pointing out undocumented 'features' that were known to accompany certain settings. The final note made him giggle, as it stated that they had intentionally 'dumbed down' the VI for delivery, but had set up a subroutine to reinitialize it into the configuration that they had all agreed was the most likely list of options that Cory would want. He activated the display of the list of options that they had selected, and grinned as he found that not only had they selected the ones that he had decided on, but also the ones that he had decided to play with later. "Activate routine Zulu Romeo slash One," Cory stated aloud, grinning as he heard the applause from the screen linking in Bowling Green.

"Acknowledged," the VI stated. "Restarting in ten seconds."

Ten seconds later, the center console flashed then announced, "C6ZR/1 online. What do you wish to be my name, Cory?"

"I think your full name should be 'Stingray', but I think I'll probably call you 'Ray' a lot," Cory replied, his phrasing testing what he thought the notes were suggesting.

"You want to name me after my grandfathers? NICE! I LIKE!" Ray replied. "I'm running a systems check now, you know how flaky analog devices can be. Do you want to look under the hood while I am making sure everything is ready for first launch?"

"Thanks, Ray, that sounds like a good idea. Could you open the hood please?"

"You got it, Cory. I have two systems which verify using the Federation database as Clan Short AI systems requesting access through my uplink port. Should I allow them access?"

"Yes, but tell them I said that your programming is off-limits to them. Only I can authorize changes to it," Cory replied.

"Program locks engaged, and access granted. They both said to tell you that you ruin all of their fun!" Ray replied, a tinge of laughter appearing in his voice. "I am opening the hood, and Draco insists that you need to at least allow the two of them to update my language database. I have verified the storage space required from them, and can assure you that it will not place me anywhere near even an eighth of my total storage used."

"In that case, you can allow just that update. I can see where that could be useful down the line," Cory replied as he opened the door to go check out the rest of the car.

In Cory's sub-vocal, Draco whispered with a giggle, *'You do know I could hack my way into Ray... but I'll be a good little Vulcan AI. Hope you like, and Jace is asking for driving lessons!'*

Cory laughed as he walked around to the now-visible engine compartment, and a low whistle passed his lips as he got his first look at the power-plant. As expected, it had the standard extractor assembly which extracted and mixed in the proper portions the nitrous oxide and atmospheric methane mixture that fueled the engine below it. Underneath the extractor, Cory found something that almost gave him a woody... the largest engine that he had ever seen under the hood of a factory Corvette. He leaned over and checked the data-plate, and exclaimed vocally his shock at what he found. "A 502!!! How the heck did you guys squeeze a 502 in here!"

"A lot of lube, and a really big shoehorn!" Xavier replied with a laugh, his laugh becoming even louder as he saw the Clan boys almost fall down in giggles.

"I'm NOT gonna ask!" Cory laughed. He poked around under the hood for a couple more minutes, happily explaining some of the things he found to Fife, who had broken away from Sean and joined Cory in his inspection. Once they were both done, Cory picked up Fife and lifted him over the door into the passenger seat.

"Umm Cory? Did you just put someone in the passenger seat?" Ray asked.

"Yes, that is my son Fife, Ray," Cory replied.

"Okay, he was not in my list of your family. I've updated the list now. Hi, Fife, I'm Ray. Does this seat adjustment work for you?"

Fife smiled. "Yes, I can see out the windows now!"

"Okay, I'll save it for whenever you ride with Cory," Ray replied. "Cory, all systems check out. I am ready when you are to wake up the neighbors!"

Karl stopped Cory as he was walking around to the driver's side. "I've turned the vent fans on high. There was a note from the factory on the car when it was delivered, stating that the initial delivery launch would be best saved for future generations if it involved tire smoke. Since they sent a replacement set of rear tires with the car, I assume it has the power to do so, despite the lot drivers not being able to even get a chirp out of the tires."

Cory grinned evilly. "You SURE you want to see me smoke the tires in here?"

Karl grinned back. "If you can make it smoke the tires, I'll personally pay to have the marks that you leave preserved forever on the floor."

Cory laughed. "Call the bank; you're in for a show!"

Karl shook his head and gently pushed Cory towards the car. Just to be safe, he had everyone move from behind it and ensured that everyone was a safe distance away on either side.

"Did you hear the challenge, Ray?" Cory asked while giggling at the way Sean ran outside to watch from a distance.

"I heard it, Cory. Do I have your okay for full systems activation?"

Cory grinned. "Are you ready for a fun ride, Fife? Just a warning, I scare your Pop."

Fife giggled. "I ain't no chicken! Kyle says Pop is a chicken!"

"He'll agree with you!" Cory laughed. "Ray, give me everything you've got!"

"I thought you would never ask!" Ray replied. "Strap in and hold on; this is how a Corvette plays!"

The display on the console once again lit up. "Are you going to keep the top down, Cory?" Ray asked.

"Of course, that's part of the fun!"

"Good," Ray replied. A second later, the display began displaying systems online for various modules. The first listed was the M/AM power cell; once its status was online and stable, various other systems including defensive shield and gravitational stability quickly turned green. "All systems have initialized and are online, Cory. I'll keep them running from now on unless there is a problem; that way you don't have to wait for them."

"Thanks, Ray, I was wondering about that," Cory replied. "Are you ready for me to start?"

"Go ahead; the starting and driving is all yours; I just run the safety equipment unless you ask me to do otherwise."

Cory grinned, and placed his thumb in the recess on the dashboard. The cluster lit up, and a second later the engine came to life with a loud rumble. After goosing the accelerator a few times, Cory pressed in the clutch and engaged first gear. *'I wonder how they knew I like the old manual transmissions?'* Cory wondered as he goosed it once again.

"You handle the smoke, I will make sure we go out the door. Traction Control is my department!" Ray announced.

"Thanks, Ray. Hold on to your motherboard!" Cory giggled.

"Got it!"

Cory kicked the RPMs up to just under the red-line, then sidestepped his foot off of the clutch. With a loud squeal of protest, both rear wheels started spinning rapidly, their howls quickly drowning out the roar of the engine. Within seconds, the exhaust fans in the showroom were evacuating a large quantity of tire smoke, while the dura-tile floor was sporting a permanent black stripe as the 'Vette began to creep forward. It took almost a minute for the car to make its way to the doorway; once the windshield passed the frame, Cory lifted his foot off of the accelerator and drove the final few feet to stop in front of the waiting mechanics.

"That is the first time I have ever seen one-hundred-thousand-mile tires burned bald in less than a minute!" one of the mechanics exclaimed as he donned full-arm heat resistant gloves. Three minutes later, the still-smoking remains of the factory tires were sitting off to the side, and the replacement tires were bolted in place.

As they were waiting, Teri walked up to the driver's door. "I'm sure you remember the standing rule, you pay for tires that you destroy showing off, right?" she asked with a grin.

"I know, Mom!" Cory giggled. "Karl dared me, and the factory sent spares!"

"I'll let you slide... this time," Teri replied, a twinkle in her eye. "Just remember, this isn't that old Nova that you learned on when you were ten. Use your ears until you find the shift points; unlike that Nova, this car will probably rev a lot higher before it is time to shift."

"Thanks, Mom," Cory replied sincerely. "I'll feel it out for its happy zone."

Teri glanced to see that the mechanics were all clear. "Okay, go test it out, and bring my grandson back in one piece with all of his hair the same color as it was when he woke up."

"MOOOOMMM!!!" Cory giggled, after glancing at Fife and finding his son sitting there with a huge grin.

"Have fun!" Teri commented as she stepped back to give Cory space to pull away.

Cory waved, then pulled away at a much more appropriate speed. As he turned towards the exit, all but two of the police cruisers sped out of the lot with all lights going. One of the officers stepped out of one of the remaining cruisers, and flagged Cory to a stop next to him.

"May I help you, Officer?" Cory asked as the officer walked up to his side of the car.

"We have made arrangements for you to have a proper test drive due to the capabilities of the vehicle as reported to us," the officer replied. "Due to the nature of your vehicle as a registered interceptor, it is important that any issues are isolated before the delivery is completed. You're authorized to run full co-

de, and we have secured I-35 between here and Ames for you to test the options of the car. We will be your initial rear security; as you pass checkpoints you will receive additional security behind you, as well as having security ahead of you."

"Thank you, I was wondering how this would work," Cory replied.

"Have a safe trip; I'm curious just what this car will do!" the officer replied, then turned to get back in his own car. Cory waited until he saw that the officer was ready, then pressed the 'activate intercept' icon on the touchscreen. Behind the seat, a bar folded up to form a loop over the rear of the seat. On it, a set of red, green, and blue lights began strobing, while at the front of the car a siren started blaring. Cory looked over at Fife, who gave him a thumbs-up with a big smile. Cory then took off, barely keeping to the speed limit as he made his way to the I-35 on-ramp. By the time he reached the bottom of the on-ramp, the car was already doing over 90. Cory kept it at that speed until his chase cars caught up, then he worked his way through the final two gears to bring the car up to full cruising speed.

As he kept accelerating, Cory noticed that the car seemed to be drawing itself closer to the road. "Ray, are you doing something with the suspension?" Cory asked over the wind noise.

"Yes, Cory, I am adjusting for minimal lift of the air passing under the vehicle, and using scanners to ensure there are no obstacles ahead which may damage the undercarriage,." Ray replied. "Also, the gravitronic stability system will cause you to feel slightly heavier as it keeps the tires in optimum contact with the road. I have seven different ways to keep you from rolling over, four of which do not involve me taking any control away from you."

"In other words, if I get stupid, you'll stop me from hurting myself or anyone with me?" Cory replied with interest as he noticed the speed passing 150.

"That is correct. I will warn you first if there is time, but due to the possibility of you having to perform emergency maneuvers at high speed, I will override you for your own safety if needed, doing what is necessary to complete the maneuver without injury to yourself or your passenger."

As if proving the point, Cory felt the accelerator pushing his foot up, dropping the speed to 120. Ray explained it as it was happening. "I have detected a curve ahead which would cause a probable loss of traction due to a hill mid-curve. I have adjusted to the maximum safe speed for the instance, and will hold it there until the issue has passed. Normally I do not tell you about it unless you want me to, but since this is the first time I needed to explain it."

Cory navigated the curve, and as he passed the dip leading into the hill he realized how the car could have become unstable. "Ray, don't bother warning me unless it's something that makes you do a major adjustment; you've got better eyes than me at these speeds."

"Okay, Cory," Ray replied as he returned speed control to Cory.

A few minutes later, Cory felt the car once again slowing down, this time severely. "What's wrong, Ray?" he asked with concern.

"I've detected native wildlife on the edge of the road. Due to their size, the probability of damage to the vehicle, which would disable it, is very high."

"Ahh..." Cory replied. Knowing what the animals probably were, he slowed down even more and disabled the siren and lights. A few seconds later, Fife spotted the offending party... a doe and two fawns. "Daddy! Are those deer? Are they friendly?" Fife exclaimed excitedly.

"They won't eat you," Cory replied seriously. "We can stop and find out, though; you should be able to speak deer with the languages Kyle taught you."

Fife's grin grew even larger if it was possible. Cory brought the car to a stop, and Fife was out of the car before the wheels had completely stopped, chattering away in his first chance to use one of his new languages.

Cory got out and walked around, smiling at his son's excitement. By the time he reached the front of the car, Fife had two fawns nuzzling into the fur on his chest as he held a conversation with their mother.

"Daddy, she adopted this little guy because a hunter killed his mom," Fife exclaimed indigently as he stroked one of the fawns' head. "She's worried that something will happen to her or one of them, since they're always having to cross the roads because there ain't enough food for all of the deer in this area. Can we help them?"

Cory rolled his eyes with a grin. "Yes, Fife, I think I can arrange something." He keyed his subvocal. "Daileass, Fife wants to know if Timmy is interested in hosting some extra visitors."

"I'm already on it, Cory," Daileass replied. "I just told Fife what he needs to explain to them before I move them to their new home. Timmy and Ricky are going to help get them settled in."

"Do you guys even need me?" Cory giggled.

"Of course we do; none of us would be the same if it wasn't for you. That is why we all watch out for you," Daileass replied seriously.

"Thanks!" Cory replied, unable to think of any better response.

Fife's giggles drew Cory's attention. It was all Cory could do to not laugh, for Fife had two fawns licking him at his ticklish spot just below his ribs. "She says they are ready, once these guys stop tickling me!" Fife managed to sputter.

A few seconds later, the fawns stepped back and then the three animals disappeared. Fife listened to his subvocal, his face breaking into a smile as their safe arrival in Orlando was reported to him. He turned and wrapped his arms around the windshield pillar, 'hugging' the 'Vette as he said, "Thank you for helping them, Ray!"

The two boys got back into the car, giggling as Ray asked what significance Fife's 'hug' had. Once hugs were explained to the newborn VI, Ray commented, "I like this hug idea." Both Cory and Fife felt their restraints tighten against them for a few seconds before returning to normal tension. "Was that an appropriate hug?" Ray asked, a new tone in his voice.

"YEAH! You learned to hug!" Fife replied before Cory could even start to respond. Cory giggled, and added, "That was a really good hug, Ray."

"Thank you!" Ray replied, this time with an unmistakable tone in his voice... acceptance.

"Okay, are you guys ready to make up some time?" Cory asked. As Fife nodded his head rapidly, Ray made his thoughts known more directly... the 'Vette started itself and revved three times before settling into a deep rumble.

"Here we go!" Cory giggled as he took off, rowing through the gears like a pro. As he settled in to cruise, he looked down at the speedometer and giggled as he read the message on it... "Out of range, watch the road."

"Hey, that's cheating!" Cory giggled. "Ray, how fast are we going?"

"I'm not calibrated to report speed in sub-mach; Draco is attempting to explain the conversion to me," Ray replied, a hint of humor in his voice. "All that I know for sure, is that the BCU is controlling top speed based on tire temperature to avoid blowout."

"Impressive!" Cory replied. He glanced over at Fife and smiled. Fife was sitting there blissfully; his soft fur plastered to his body and a wide, shit-eating grin fixed on his face. Cory turned his attention back to the road, his own face plastered with a big smile.

A few minutes later, Cory glanced in his mirrors, and was surprised at what he saw. Not only was someone keeping with him, but two people were actually catching up to him. Right about the time Cory hit the midpoint of a long flat stretch, two Ducati 1098 super-bikes pulled up even with him, one on each side. Cory couldn't tell right away who was riding the bikes as they were wearing tight red leather racing suits, with oversized full face helmets. That was until one of them pulled up in front of him, and Cory could see the tail that was stretched out behind the person, complete with a little fluff of fur at the end.

"Ray, I just got passed by a lion!" Cory giggled.

"Dailess has suggested a game of 'leapfrog'," Ray replied. "He explained it to me; can I engage the emergency escape power to play?"

"Sure, this sounds like fun!" Cory replied.

The 'Vette lifted slightly, and the soft hum from the rear increased slightly in intensity. The next thing Cory knew, he was running alongside the lead lion, with Fife giggling as he waved at the rider next to him. For the next few miles, Cory and the bike ran side by side, up until the bike reached its top speed. To make a point, Cory accelerated a few feet ahead of the bike, then dropped back and returned to normal driving. By this time, they had just about reached the Ames turn-around. "Cory, can we play in real traffic on the way back? I have everything calibrated now," Ray asked.

"Let me see what the troopers have to say," Cory replied, unsure as to how they would feel about the public being exposed to his high speeds. He saw the off-ramp that he was going to use to turn around, and slowed down just enough to navigate the turns. As he reached the bottom of the ramp, he came to a stop with the two bikes on either side of him.



One of the officers who was securing the ramp came over, shaking his head with a big grin. "Congratulations, you just set a new record for the Des Moines to Ames run!"

Cory giggled. "Not too bad, since I stopped to let my son meet a local deer!"

"You stopped?" the officer asked incredulously. "We are just starting to stop traffic, you were not expected for another ten minutes at least!"

Cory grinned, as he heard two happy purrs coming from the riders of the bikes next to him. "That actually works. I'd like to try running in traffic, Ray says that he has calibrated everything to where it's safe now."

"Ray?" the officer asked.

"Does he need me, Cory?" Ray asked, which earned both of them a shocked stare from the officer.

Cory giggled. "I think you answering made the point, Ray."

As he shook his head in wonder, the officer got on his radio and discussed the idea with the area supervisor. A minute later, he returned to the side of the car. "We have turned on the warning signs notifying drivers of a high speed test in progress. Due to us already starting to redirect traffic, you should be in light traffic for the first half of the trip back."

"That means no outrunning us on the way back, Cory!" Mont's voice announced firmly from on one of the bikes.

"And keep all four wheels on the ground this time!" Bast added from his bike.

"Okay, guys, I'll just drive all of the way back in reverse!" Cory replied with a giggle.

"You try it and we test Karl's pond!" both cats replied in unison.

"You're not gonna hurt my Daddy!" Fife exclaimed, his voice rising in anger.

Both Mont and Bast quickly put up their hands. "Chill, Fife!" Bast said softly. "The pond is safe, there is nothing living in it. We won't EVER do anything that would put your Daddy in danger."

"You better not, or I'll hurt you!" Fife responded, his voice showing that it was not a threat, but a promise.

The two lion boys knew that Fife knew their roles in the Clan, and also knew what little he had told them about life on Tesnia. Based on his description of Tesnian life, they both knew that there was a strong possibility that he could make things difficult for either of them in a one-on-one fight.

"You don't need to worry, Fife," Cory said soothingly. "I trust my furry brothers, and you can too."

"I know, but I am not going to let anybody hurt you, Daddy," Fife replied contritely.

"I know, son," Cory replied with a smile. "I'll tell you the same thing I told Timmy... you can help protect me and Pop, but no killing off our own security."

"You ruin all of my fun, Daddy," Fife replied as he smiled at Mont and Bast, signaling that things were okay between them.

Both cats unconsciously relaxed, grateful that they would not have to test the theory of just how deadly Fife could be. "C'mon, little fur-ball, strap in and let's see if your Dad can drive like a human instead of a Klingon pilot on the way home," Mont said as he picked up Fife and set him back into Ray's passenger seat.

"I heard that!" Cory exclaimed with a giggle. "You're just jealous because Ray can outrun you!"

"With all due respect, bite me, Sir!" Mont replied before sticking his tongue out at Cory.

"Sorry, Mont, but I promised Sean that he would be the only person I engaged in foreplay with," Cory replied with a grin.

Bast and Fife both giggled as Mont rolled his eyes. "TMI, Cory!" he exclaimed.

Cory grinned. "I'd go into detail, but I really don't want to corrupt Fife."

"Don't worry, Daddy; Uncle Tyler already filled me in about ALL of you!" Fife replied through his giggles. "Humans are almost as flexible as Tesnians, especially the furry ones with tails!"

"Ray?" Cory said through his almost glowing blush. "Please start up and get ready to return to the dealership. I have a little brother who I need to hunt down and tickle until he pees himself."

"Oh, shit!" Mont exclaimed as he sprinted towards his bike. "Wait up, Cory, I GOTTA see this!"

Cory sat there tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as he waited for his two 'escorts' to get their helmets on and their riding suits refastened. He was paying so much attention to the mirrors watching them that he was totally unaware of Fife's little fingers dancing across the touchscreen in the center console at almost light speed.

As the two cats finished getting ready, Cory glanced down to see Fife initializing a new program in Ray. "What did you just do, and more importantly how did you do it?" Cory asked in amazement.

Fife giggled. "They only used 256 bit encryption on Ray! I taught him a game that we played on Tesnia, I think you'll like it. I updated his encryption to Tesnian 512 bit too."

"That's proof that you're definitely my son!" Cory giggled. "What is the game you taught him?"

Fife smiled, almost glowing at Cory's comment. "We played a game we called 'Enterprise'. My version is made up from all of the news films and school films that the Federation puts out about life on a Starship, mixed in with the stuff that we know from our own space fleet. Grandpa O'Neil showed me the Federation films while we were coming home for me to meet you."

Cory grinned. "That's a lot of programming... how'd you do it so fast?"

"Dailess and Draco helped after I asked them to. They thought the game sounded like fun, and none of us wanted weak encryption in Ray." Fife replied. "He's set up now so that only you and me can update him, they can help as long as one of us is involved."

"Like father, like son!" the voices of both AIs giggled over both of their subvocals.

Cory grinned, giving Fife a look which wordlessly expressed his love for his newest son. Fife smiled, then said "Engineering, status report?"

"All systems online, awaiting orders." Ray replied in a fake Scottish accent.

The only thing that kept Cory from hitting his head on the steering wheel as he collapsed in laughter was the seat belt holding him in place. He managed to recover just enough to get into the 'game', and began playing along. "Helm, set course for Karl Chevrolet, Warp factor Six. We need to intercept the Tylerinnians before they cause any more damage to that sector."

Fife giggled, happy that Cory was willing to play along. "Engineering, set Warp Six and stand by for the command."

Cory shook his head and placed both hands on the wheel. "Engage!" he commanded.

"Aye, Captain!" Ray responded as the Corvette shot up the exit ramp in a cloud of tire smoke. Within seconds, the two bikes appeared behind them and settled in, taking advantage of Cory's slipstream. Within no time, they had cleared the traffic that had been let through, and had open road until they caught up with earlier traffic at the Elkhart exit. "Stand by for atmospheric re-entry!" Cory giggled as they approached the Oralabor Road off-ramp.

A minute later, they pulled into the lot. Cory spotted Tyler, and was out of his harness and out the driver's door barely before the rumble of Ray's engine settled. Tyler grinned as he sprinted off to the Duesenberg side of the lot, his giggles audible to all as he did his best to escape his pursuing big brother.

Five minutes later, they returned, Tyler still glowing from the tickles he received from Cory as he rode on Cory's back. As they got closer, Cory noticed something that had completely escaped his attention when he pulled in. Next to Ray, Teri was sitting in a deep purple 2004 Duesenberg SJ-75, listening to the sound system along with most of the rest of the boys.

"Mom???" Cory exclaimed as he came to a stop, looking over the expensive car with appreciation. It was one of the fifty 75th anniversary special editions of the J series, a rare deep purple one at that. As with all of the cars from Duesenberg, it still carried the flowing fenders and running boards of long ago, just now they were integrated into the body instead of being separate items. The long, low engine compartment was finished with an elaborate chrome grill and the trademark round headlights and driving lights, both in teardrop housings. Without even looking, Cory knew that under the long hood was a supercharged titanium-alloy flat 16, topped with the latest production version of the extractor that resided under Ray's hood.

Cory started walking again, admiring the classic lines of the car. As he got closer, he was able to make out the interior. The seats were fine leather, obviously hand-tanned. The rest of the interior was also done in matching leather, along with teak and English Walnut inlays. Where stronger materials were required, highly polished aluminum was used. Cory knew that he would not find a visible piece of plastic anywhere in the car, as the manufacturer was renowned for its refusal to allow 'inferior' materials in their creations.

"Umm... Mom...?" Cory said again as he stopped next to the open door.

Teri smiled with a glint in her eyes. "I heard that you were buying... and I always wanted one..." she said smoothly.

Cory groaned as he felt his wallet jump out of his pants and run away in sheer panic. "I need a Vulcan to count the digits in this car's price!" he whined.

Tyler giggled from his perch on Cory's back. "You better tell him Mom, I can't keep him from having a heart attack much longer!"

Teri laughed, and motioned for Cory to turn around. Tyler scrambled from his back as he turned, and Cory unconsciously straightened his hair and clothes as he noticed the men behind him.

Karl was standing there, a big smile on his face. Next to him, a middle-aged man stood there watching the escapades with a small smile. He was dressed in a three-piece dark suit, his shoes shined to a mirror finish and every hair on his head in exactly the proper place. As he extended his well-manicured hand, he introduced himself. "Good morning Mr. Short, I am Chadwick Duesenberg the Third, President of the Duesenberg Division of General Motors."

Cory exchanged a firm handshake as he replied "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Duesenberg."

Without pause, Chadwick began to update Cory on the events since his departure. "I believe that an explanation of the events leading to the delivery of number fifty to your mother are in order. As you must be aware, the Duesenberg family has historically extended the profit which the skilled craftsmen of central Iowa have enabled us to acquire back into our home community. Upon realization that Mrs. Short had achieved her status as Director of Federation Youth Services and that despite her necessary move that she would still retain the offices of the Midwest Central Office in Des Moines, it was determined that her current modes of transportation would be a poor reflection of her status within the world's government. An interesting event occurred at the time, we began to determine a suitable model to deliver to Director Short. As is well known, the SJ-75 is only available to those whose name is selected from the registered list of those with the means and interest in acquiring this limited edition model. It appears that a Mr. Justin Dodds believed that he owed Director Short reimbursement for assistance which she had provided his family. His request was selected for Number 50, and his delivery specifications stated that it was to be delivered to Director Short instead of himself, and all costs were to be billed to his personal accounts. Yesterday we received the vehicle back from Rolls Royce as they had completed the requested interior work using native English materials. As I overheard last evening that you would be present at this dealership today, I took it upon myself to personally deliver the last of the 75th Anniversary Special Edition SJ-75 series automobiles to Iowa's First Lady of Child Protection."

Chadwick paused, then continued once he was sure that Cory had followed him so far. "I have communicated with Mr. Dodds and informed him that his order is completed and that initial delivery is inten-

ded for this morning. He has also been notified that my family is personally reimbursing him for his payment that was deducted at the start of the construction of this automobile. A suitable indication of his intent has been determined, and shall be completed before delivery to your residence in Orlando. I have confirmed with Mr. Meyer, and we shall ensure that your Corvette shall be delivered using our factory delivery system, along with Mr. Dodds' present."

"Thank you, Mr. Duesenberg." Cory replied, unsure of what else his response could be.

"It is my pleasure, Sir," Chadwick replied. "If you will excuse me, I must enquire of the status of the transport for the vehicles. The driver is three minutes overdue, and I detest having the company name sullied by the failure of our employees to be punctual when providing service to our clients. I wish you a good day, Sir."

"Thank you, and have a good day yourself. Please express my gratitude to everyone who has been involved in this," Cory replied.

"I shall do that," Chadwick replied as he turned and headed towards the building.

Cory smiled at Karl, and motioned for him to join him as he headed over to take a closer look at Teri's new car. Cory's eyebrows rose as he got close enough to see the emblem on the grill; just under the red 'D' in the center of the grill were two letters, just large enough to not take attention away from the main emblem... the two letters were 'RR'. '*Holy crap,*' Cory thought to himself, '*This isn't just a little interior work! This car's been through the full Rolls custom design studio!*'

Cory reached the open door, and one look inside verified his suspicions. In the center of the dashboard, framed by a teak inlay, was the top-of-the-line Rolls Royce driver information and cabin entertainment system. While the factory Duesenberg system was one of the best in the world, the system that was *only* available in a Rolls was *THE* best in the world. This one had all the options: the heads-up display, the adaptive cruise control, the 25-speaker digital audio system, and even the theatre displays for the rear passengers. "I want to know just *how* you got that system, Mom; that is one thing Rolls Royce *never* releases for installation in anything but their own vehicles!"

"I believe that I may be able to answer that, Sir," Chadwick stated as he rejoined them. "Upon learning the ultimate destination of this vehicle, the Rolls Royce factory contacted myself and requested permission to provide their top system for the driver's comfort and entertainment." He paused, then added, "I have also determined the disposition of the transport. I estimate that an alternate transport shall arrive within the hour. The original transport was unable to depart due to the chauffeur's wife being blessed with the arrival of twin boys."

"I appreciate his sense of priority," Teri commented. "It would be a much better world if everyone kept their priorities like that."

To Cory's surprise, considering the previous comments he had heard from the man, Chadwick nodded his head. "I am in utmost agreement with you, my lady. I must depart post haste, as I plan on appearing at the hospital to congratulate the family and to ensure that they are receiving only the highest services." He smiled at Cory's expression, and added, "Despite my apparent attitude about punctuality, I carry a strong belief in the importance of my employees spending time with their families, especially for events such as this. I have refused delivery to persons who have insinuated that their purchase is more

important than the presence of an employee at a turning point in their family's history. If you will excuse me, I must depart to attend to my employee and his new family."

Cory smiled. "Please pass on Sean's and my congratulations on the birth of his boys, and our hopes that they have long happy lives."

"Mine as well," Teri added with a smile.

"I shall do so; I am positive that he will appreciate the thoughts. While young Cory and Sean will not know it now, as they grow I am sure that their parents will inform them of the blessing of the ones they are the namesakes of," Chadwick replied. "May you all experience a fruitful conclusion to your weekend, I shall ensure that your messages are delivered." With that, Chadwick turned and purposefully walked towards the Duesenberg side of the dealership.

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### **Des Moines HQ:**

The group of boys were sitting back in Julio's bedroom, taking the time to get to know each other better. Julio and Jesse were cuddled in a chair, while Eddie and Johnny were actively investigating the features of the new furry guards in the center of the floor. The rest of the boys were leaning on the bed, enjoying the reactions of the two little ones.

A scratching sound at the window got Johnny's attention. A huge grin plastered itself on his face as he recognized the furry face staring at him through the glass. "Fisher!" Johnny exclaimed as he bounced up and ran over to the window. As soon as the window was open, an adolescent raccoon slipped through it and made himself comfortable in Johnny's arms. Johnny walked back over to the group, his expression clearly telling Julio that Johnny was deep in a mental conversation with his friend.

After about a minute of updating his furry friend, Johnny sat down next to Rocky. After giving Johnny a friendly nip on the nose, Fisher ran over to the chair that Julio and Jesse were sitting in and gave Julio the usual wet lick on the side of his face. For the first time, though, Julio could understand the chattering that followed the lick. "Thank you for watching my big furless little brother," Fisher chattered in raccoon. Fisher then stretched up and licked Jesse. "You're cute for a hairless!" Fisher chattered, causing Jesse to giggle.

"Now I know that raccoons have good taste!" Julio giggled. He was going to add more, but couldn't speak due to suddenly having a mouth full of Jesse's tongue.

Johnny rolled his eyes, then proceeded to introduce Fisher to the rest of the group. Nobody was surprised to see Fisher's interest peak at seeing Rocky and Ricky, but they still broke into giggles when Fisher waddled around Rocky, who was laying on the floor, and began grooming his head while chattering about nobody teaching hygiene to the two raccoon boys.

Once the giggles subsided, Tucker began his turn at telling more about himself. To start things off, he finally removed the hood from his head. This got everyone's attention, as they suddenly found that their mystery guard was not as human as they had assumed. While the thirteen-year-old's deep tan color seemed normal, his ears clearly gave away his heritage; they were larger than normal for a boy his age, and the top of them ended in a double-point that was just visible under his curly black hair. "Now you

can see why I was wearing the hood," Tucker said seriously. "I did not want to be the center of attention. I've lived with too much of that anyway; my father is the envoy to Rigel and everyone always seemed to want to check out 'the cute little Halanan boy'."

"What happened to your father?" Jesse asked as Tucker paused.

"Nothing, he's still on Rigel," Tucker replied, seeming to relax some as he found the group seemed to accept him as he was. "I was sick when Patriarch Short gave his speech at the conference a while back, so I didn't get to meet him. My father did though, and he really liked how Patriarch Short handled himself. Once I got better, I met up with my friends at our usual park. When I got there, they were playing a new game, they said that Patriarch Short and his family had taught it to them. After the game, we started talking. One of my friends, Tar-min, had just got a message back from our friend Gavin, who had came back to Earth with Patriarch Short. Gavin was letting him know that things were great in his new family. There was also a note from someone named Justy telling us that if we did anything to help out kids, the Clan would back us since we were friends with Gavin."

Tucker tilted his head at the knowing smiles he was getting from the rest of the group, then continued. "I told my father about the letter when I got home that night. He left the room after I told him, and made a call. The next day at school, we all got called out of our classes. When we got to the office, our senior instructor was standing there with the Regional Representative to the Rigellian Council. After talking to all of us, he told us that the Council had contacted the Clan, and been given the approval to empower us under the Safe Haven Act to take care of kids under the agreement they had signed with Patriarch Short."

"So you guys became a Division?" Julio asked. "I didn't know there were off-planet Divisions."

Tucker shook his head. "No, we are not a division, it's more like we are an extended arm of Clan Headquarters. When we heard about the attack, we all wanted to come over here and help out. Justy from Headquarters told us it would be better if we stayed home and kept things safe there. When we got the message back, we were at my residence and my father heard us all complaining about not being able to help out. He sat down with us and talked it over, letting us know that there were a few other planets who were not happy about the attack and they all wanted to be able to prevent it ever happening again."

"I know that feeling..." Julio mused.

Tucker nodded. "Tar-min suggested one of us coming over here to help out anyway. When he said it, everyone looked at me, since they all knew that my Father insisted on rigorous defense training for me since the day I learned to walk, as well as advanced training in using the native skills of Halanans. He always said that he wanted me to be able to take care of myself if something ever happened, and that his job made it quite likely that something *would* happen. My father noticed it, and asked me if I'd accept the job since everyone voted for me. Once I figured out that I wouldn't lose any of my friends, I decided to do it. When we told Justy about our plan, he mentioned that he was waiting for the Patriarch to be ready to approve a new Division here in Iowa, and that if I came over then, he could arrange for me to have some weapons training before I was officially assigned to the Division. He also arranged for me to be able to have an alternate name that was not going to put me or the Division at risk from anyone who was trying to get revenge on him for anything."

"What's your real name?" Jesse asked.

"Tusharka Curishrar." Tucker replied.

"I see why your father suggested the name change, he's almost as famous as Grandpa O'Neil!" Julio commented.

"Grandpa? I didn't know that you were blood to Ambassador O'Neil," Tucker said with surprise.

"I'm not. He told me if I ever called him by his title again, he was going to put me over his knee!" Julio giggled. "He was smiling when he said it, but I'm not taking any chances!"

"That is probably a good idea, knowing Uncle Marcus!" Tucker replied, the joy of finding something in common with his new division making its way into his voice. "When these guys were sent over here to become security, Justy arranged for me to join them. He told me that there was a telepath that could fill me in on details about the Division once I was settled in here."

Eddie giggled at Tucker's last statement. "Uh-huh, thats ME! Kyle says I'm a good mind-leech!"

"Mind-leech?" everyone echoed.

"Uh-huh! We suck out people's heads!" Eddie giggled.

"Ohhhh... can he teach me that, cutie?" Jesse asked Julio, a grin on his face.

"I really hope he did not mean it that way!" Julio answered with a blush.

"You're silly!" Eddie stated with a roll of his eyes. "I'm too little to be doin' the makin' babies stuff! Tucker, they try makin' babies a lot, an' they're always thinking 'bout it!"

Tucker grinned, and showed his new found comfort as he commented. "Really? Did anyone tell them that humans are not able to make babies with two males?"

"We know, but it's sure fun trying!" Jesse quipped as he chased his boyfriend into the space between the cushions.

Once everyone recovered from their giggles, Eddie tilted his head and looked over at Tucker. As everyone waited to see what his next 'words of wisdom' would be, a small smile crossed Eddie's face. After about a minute, Eddie finally spoke. "Kyle an' me's been talkin. Him and Ty had annudder son! We're gonna getta meet him; he's comin' over to teach me about Tucky's head!"

"Tucky?" Tucker giggled.

"Uhh-huhh. You're my brother now, so I'm callin you Tucky!" Eddie replied. "Is that okay?" he added, his eyes giving away his insecurity.

Tucker leaned over and pulled Eddie over to him into a hug. "If Julio says it's okay to be my little brother, you can call me Tucky. I've never had a little brother."



Julio climbed out from under Jesse, then came over and rubbed Eddie's shoulders. "Tucker, Cory insists on his live-in security considering themselves family. I'm the same way; all of you are family if you live here. That means you can consider Eddie as your little brother as long as he's okay with calling you his big brother."

Tucker looked at Eddie's face, and the smile told him more than any words could. He lifted Eddie enough to pull him over onto his lap, and wrapped his arms around the small boy.

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### ***Editors' Notes:***

Wow, we have Cory and a Corvette named Ray. Fife reprogramming Ray and showing some of his true colors and abilities. Then, we have Julio and Jesse realizing that they are important enough to need security and Jesse gaining what he considers to be his first friend.

The new Division seems to be heading off in the right direction but if I know ACFan, smooth sailing won't last long!!! Heehee. I can't wait to see what he has ready for us next. Oh, did I remember someone talking about a Hallo weenie party? I better stop there!!!

Hugs from your friendly neighborhood editing puppy!!

Boxerdude

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What a chapter! We have a new Saint, a couple of reminders of just how much influence Teri and Cory have, and yet another reminder that the CSU is a different world, one like ours but with changes. And AC deftly gives us a bit of character development: of Kyle, Mont, Bast, Jesse, and Johnny, and some interesting new characters, like Ray, Ricky, Rocky, and Tucker. Way to go! - D&B

## **Chapter Eight: "We built this city...."**

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### **Des Moines HQ:**

As Kristopher got ready to update everyone on his history, they were interrupted by the sound of the front door crashing against the wall as it was thrown open. A few seconds later, two boys dressed in to-gas ran into the room, both giggling madly as they raced to be the first one to the bed.

"Beat ya!" the smaller of the two laughed as he landed on the bed after a flying leap.

"That's okay; I'll get you later!" the taller boy responded with a mischievous grin.

"Promise?" the small boy laughed as he wagged his eyebrows.

Julio shook his head. "Hey Bat-boy! Off the bed! Now I gotta get the sheets sterilized!"

"Bite me, Julio! I think one of your crusty spots cut my arm!" the boy shot back.

"Guys, the twerp that just flew onto my bed is Spencer. Just call him 'Mini'; it's the nickname he got for playing with his bat in public."

"That is a BASEBALL bat, freak!!" Mini replied with a grin, obviously enjoying an ongoing sparring contest with Julio. "You're just jealous 'cuz the only so-called sport that you can handle consists of running around a field kicking balls like a little girl!"

"Dude, you guys gotta wear oversized gloves because you ain't skilled enough to catch a little ball!" Julio shot back with a grin.

The taller boy laughed. "Yeah, but you gotta have a goal the size of a shed because you can't aim worth a crap... even though the ball is the size of your head."

As Julio responded "Bite me, Alien!", Mini added, "It's full of the same stuff too; stale air!"

A man's blond head appeared in the still-open doorway. "Hey Mini-Me and Alien, I can hear you guys teasing the poor soccer boy in the living room! Tone it down some, you might give his friends the right idea about him or something!"

"Sorry, Dad!" the two toga-clad boys giggled.

"You're a LOT of help, Bob!" Julio laughed. "Don't you and Dad have some plotting to do?"

"Already started," Bob replied with a grin as he pulled the door shut.

Mini and Alien settled onto the edge of the bed, Mini comfortably under Alien's right arm. "Hey, Julio, did you know there are a pair of HUGE raccoons in your room?" Mini giggled as he finally looked around.

"Julio?" Ricky asked seriously, his eyes the only hint that he was not totally serious, "I know of a few cat hybrids who like to play with their food before eating. Would you like me to call them to handle the rodent problem?"

Julio shook his head. "Naw. He's a cute little rat; I'll keep him. One of these days, I might even break him of his insistence on running in circles."

Ricky grinned, his spirit bolstered by his first attempt at the 'game' that Julio and Mini were engaged in being accepted without question.

Kristopher laughed. "Hey, Boss, does that mean we have to protect his skinny butt?"

"HEY! His butt is mine!" Alien interrupted forcibly. "Anyone wants to get to his butt, they gotta go through me!"

"Ahhh, I see..." Kristopher giggled, "does he blush like that often, Alien?"

Julio shook his head once again. "Kris, while they are both on the list of people I'd expect you guys to watch out for, I think you'd be surprised at just how much damage those two could do."

Colin glanced at Kris, then spoke up. "Hey, Mini, could I please have a look at your back?"

Mini smiled as he wiggled out from under Alien's arm. "Sure!"

Colin waited patiently as the skinny, green-eyed, curly-haired twelve-year-old blond stood up and turned around. He leaned down slightly, pushed Mini's long curls out of the way, and closely inspected the markings that he had spotted on Mini's shoulder. "This is a real tattoo....." Colin mused out loud. "Camo butterfly holding a rifle ... seventeen small butterflies with red 'X' marks over them, two of them freshly added ... 'LLWS 2003 2004' over the top ... is this for real?"

Mini nodded seriously. "Yep; I earned each and every one of them. Alien too, he has his own set."

Colin looked over at Kris. "Remember that kid in Jersey earlier this month? The one who we helped get his friend out of a bad situation?"

Kris nodded. "Yeah, he really had some balls the way he charged in and got his friend out while we dealt with the perv."

Colin nodded. "Butterfly Hunters," he stated as he pointed at Mini and Alien. "Just like Marko."

Alien's eyes lit up. "You guys met Marko? Kewl! How's he doing?"

Kris's face got serious. "He's kicking ass and ordering those behind him to take names. You guys really Hunters?"

Mini nodded. "Yep, the first and the best. Little League World Champs two years in a row."

Tucker tilted his head. "Just what is a 'Butterfly Hunter'? Last I heard, Earth butterflies were not exactly dangerous."

Julio held up his hand. Once Jesse was done sucking on his tongue, Julio answered the question. "The term don't refer to the bugs, Tucker. When someone gets nervous, the flip-flops they feel in their stomachs are called butterflies. You saw Bob a few minutes ago; he's the manager of the local Little League All-Stars, as well as the foster dad to Mini and Alien. He's been managing the team since they were nine. Just after they started their first year together, he gave their team a speech about beating the butterflies they felt when playing the game, and explained that the season is not over for any of them until the lights go out in Williamsporte. He started giving out little temporary tattoos of butterflies that he put on the players' arms each time they beat their nerves and made a big play. When they made it to the World Series, the word got out about their inside nickname for themselves. The newscasters made a big deal out of it, and when they actually won the whole thing, the nickname became official. After the team got back, they all talked their parents into letting them get a tattoo on their shoulder to commemorate being the first Urbandale team in history to win the World Series. They repeated it this year, and on public TV they gave the Jersey boys membership."

"What did they do that was so 'special, bro?'" Eddie asked.

Julio smiled. "Last year, the Jersey kids ended up in fourth place because they choked during a couple of key games, including the final one they played. Bob went out and talked with the team just after they lost. The Butterfly Hunters had already become a legend among the kids, so it was a big thing for him to talk to them. He told them the same thing he told our guys about beating the butterflies, and made it clear that he expected to see each and every one of them this year in the final game. They listened, and before the final game this year Bob and our team made them 'Butterfly Hunters' in front of the cameras. After he gave the Jersey boys their first official butterflies for beating the odds, he told both teams that they were brothers now, so go play like family. It ended up being an eleven inning game before Alien knocked one over the fence to break the tie. The highlight of the game that everyone remembers though was when one of the Jersey guys got hurt...."

Alien interrupted. "I'll tell that one, Julio." He swept his brown hair back, then began. "In the fifth inning, Marko had hit a triple, but twisted his ankle when he slid into third. He was trying to hide it from his coach, but I saw it and called for a conference with Mini on the mound since he was pitching. We thought about what Dad had said about us being brothers, and decided that we needed to show the world why Butterfly Hunters are so special. We had Brick tell the next batter to keep the ball away from third, and we kept an eye on Marko. Chad hit one down the first base line that would have easily let Marko make it home, but Marko started to fall about ten feet from third base. He never hit the ground, because I was right there and grabbed his arm and put it over my shoulder. Andy came over and covered third base, while Brick came up and helped me get Marko to home plate. That tied the game, and it stayed that way until I knocked that one out of the park in the eleventh."

"So THAT is why he was limping," Kris commented.

"Yeah, you shoulda seen the Ump's face when we reached home plate!" Alien giggled. "We had to remind him to call Marko 'safe', he couldn't believe we helped the other team score!"

"Yeah, we were watching it on a big screen in the high school gym," Julio added. "We were all cheering you so loud for being more concerned about playing fair than winning that the adults all had to put their hands over their ears!"

"It was the same on the UNIT base," Colin replied. "That was awesome, guys."

"Soooo ..... where are you guys from, and how much did Julio have to pay you to be his friends?" Mini giggled as he looked around the room.

"HEY!" Julio giggled as he returned to cuddling Jesse.

"What? I gotta make sure that you ain't cheatin' me outta good money!" Mini laughed as he stuck his tongue out.

"Is he *always* this nuts?" Kris asked Julio.

"This ain't too bad, you should hear him when he gets wound up!" Julio laughed.

Jesse laughed, then decided to help steer the discussion back to pre-invasion. "The big furry guy is Ricky, he's the bodyguard for my hot boyfriend here. The middle sized furry one is Rocky, he's my bodyguard. The little furry guy is Fisher, he's one of Johnny's friends. You gotta know Johnny and Eddie

since you know my sweetie. The kewl kid in the black cloak is Tucker, he's from Halanan. We don't know much about Kris and Colin yet, since they were about to tell us more when you got here."

"I can see you needing a bodyguard, you're pretty hot!" Mini commented, then continued as he tried to avoid multiple slaps upside the head from Alien, "But why a bodyguard for Julio? He's about as sexy as a empty soda can!"

"I love you too, midget!" Julio shot back with a smile.

"Alien don't complain!" Mini giggled as he found himself being attacked by Johnny and Eddie as well. Within a few seconds, he was speechless due to the three boys tickling him mercilessly.

Once things calmed back down, Kris tried once again to catch everyone up on his history. "I'm from Clan Short Special Forces, otherwise known as the UNIT. I've been through combat and command training, and have been assigned here as the Division Commander for any UNIT forces assigned to the Division. I've been 'enhanced' to improve my speed and reaction time above what is normal for a human. I don't have any living parents; they were killed in a crash when I was a little kid."

Even Mini had a serious expression after hearing Kris's story. "Welcome to the family," he stated factually.

"Thanks," Kris said with a small smile, knowing that Colin would be next.

Colin stood up and looked around the room. "I'm also from the Unit, and I've been screwed with genetically pretty much the same as Kris. I'm here as the Special Forces Security Director. As far as the trash that provided sperm and an egg to form me, they are no longer breeding ... death tends to prevent it ... I took care of that problem *personally*."

The few words that both boys had just said, told Julio more than he wanted to ever imagine about their pasts. Just based on what he had been told about the UNIT, he knew that the two boys had already led rough lives. In Colin's case it went even deeper; the ice in his tone made it clear to each of them that any discussion of his birth parents was quite likely to be the cause of many nightmares.

Julio smiled at the two boys, "Welcome to my family, guys; you're our brothers now. I've got a better idea than some of the guys about what your life has been like up to now; I'll leave it up to you to tell them when or if you decide to. I'm pretty sure that you've been told this already, but I'll say it to be sure. My Mom and Dad are actually okay adults; they're probably going to treat all of you just like you're their own sons. Bob's the same way. Any time that you need an adult to have your back, you can count on all three of them."

"That explains why Momma Janet told us we'd be safe in our new assignment," Colin mused. "She was always telling me that I needed to learn what real parents are supposed to be."

His musing was stopped by Eddie walking up to him, his arms outstretched in an obvious 'lift me up' pose. Colin complied, and was surprised to find Eddie immediately snuggling into him tightly as soon as he was lifted up.

"Don' be thinkin 'bout them bad people," Eddie said softly. "They's gone, an' you gots a good family now. Gimme some brother cuddles an the goofy brothers can tell you what theys been through."

"You've got that right, little guy!" Ezra commented as he appeared by the door. "Did someone call for a Mikyvis Mind Translator Specialist? Ezra Richardson Short, mind leech extraordinaire, at your service!" he finished with a giggle.

Mini and Alien stared at the new arrival in shock. "What the hell...?" Mini exclaimed. "Where did you come from, and how did you get here!?"

"He's a Mikyvis... kinda like a human, but better," Johnny giggled. "If he's like his daddies, he's really kew! He can go 'bout anywhere with a thought! You got a pet dino yet, Ezra?"

As both Mini and Alien stared at Johnny like he'd just grown a third head, Ezra giggled and opened the door behind him a crack. "Hey Johnny, your friends are done cleaning out the food supplies! Brace yourself!"

Johnny grinned, and began giggling as Cinnamon and Charlie raced through the open door and pounced their human friend. "You're a pair of silly kitties!" Johnny laughed between face lickings.

Julio saw the expression on Mini's face, and answered the pending question. "Yes, that is a sabretoothed kitten, and yes, you are safe! His name is Charlie, and he's a gift from Ezra's parents, Kyle and Tyler. They helped my two little bros a lot, and Ezra is their son so you can trust him."

"He's right," Tucker interjected. "Gavin and Justy keep us updated on everything that happens here on Earth with the Clan, as well as Kyle and Ty liking to bring their kids over to meet us after they are born. Every one of them are awesome. Ezra, have your Dad and Pop decided to listen to all of us? We keep telling them to stop sleeping, because every time they do another kid gets born!"

Ezra giggled. "It's only every OTHER time now! Can I map your head while we're talking? Dad never did it because he had too much fun visiting Rigel and didn't want to ruin it by doing Mikyvis stuff."

"Go ahead," Tucker replied. "try not to blush though!"

A few seconds later, Ezra giggled, then turned to Johnny and Eddie. "You guys ready for an upload? His brain is pretty easy, it maps like a cross between Human and Tesnian."

Both boys nodded, and within seconds they both grinned. "Wait until I tell Uncle Cory that you think he's hot!" Johnny giggled at Tucker.

Tucker smiled. "I think he figured that out already... at least Sean did, and he hasn't let me forget it!"

They all settled down, and Mini stood to give his history. He stuttered for a few seconds, then the confident boy they all knew whispered something that nobody had heard from his lips in years. "I ... I ... can't ... sorry ... I ...it ... hurts ... too ... bad ...."

Mini collapsed back onto the bed, and began to roll up into a ball. Ezra was at his side in a flash, moving even faster than Alien. "'Can I see? Maybe I can help," Ezra whispered to Mini as he pulled him into a hug.

Mini nodded, tears running down his face. "Please? It hurts!" he whimpered.

Ezra quickly pulled Mini tighter to him. Within a minute, Mini was noticeably calmer, but the ever-present smile was now absent from Ezra's face. "This is no longer your problem alone, brother," Ezra stated formally. "There is one here who has shared your pain. I will show you how to shield yourself the same way my Dad shields himself from the past, and with your approval I will ask assistance from Colin."

Mini nodded silently, his recent pain still affecting his speech.

Ezra nodded, and quietly assisted Mini in leashing the demons of his past. He then moved to allow Alien to take his place in the cuddle, then walked over to Colin. "Lieutenant DeYoung, are you prepared to receive official testimony?" Ezra asked formally.

Colin gently placed Eddie on his feet, then stood tall in front of Ezra. "I am prepared for the report from Clan Short Intelligence."

Ezra nodded, and proceeded to give the details to Colin. As soon as he was done, a now visibly pissed-off Colin spoke. "Thank you; this matter WILL be dealt with. Daileass, I need my full fucking kit in here ... NOW!" At the same time, Colin made use of the UNIT telepathic network. *'General Adam Casey, with all due respect, I need to speak with you ... NOW.'*

*'What do you need, Colin?'* Adam answered almost immediately.

*'I'm in the room with the older brother of my 'twin shadows'. I have just been given information via Mikyvis which shows that the twins got the better deal being sold than their brother did. He is unaware of them being alive at this time. Request permission to exterminate the vermin which have violated the rights of Spencer, Logan, and Lucas,'* Colin replied, the venom audible in his thoughts.

There was silence in the link for a moment, as Adam reeled from the shock of the information. Colin, who had gone through the 'conversion' just like the twins did, would never say that they had it better just on a whim. The information that Colin had must have been horrendous for him to so easily say that the twins got the better end of the deal. *'Lieutenant DeYoung, I am activating the on duty ASSAULT team to assist you. They will be told you are the on-site commander. I want these people taken out with extreme prejudice... use your imagination. Just make sure it hurts.'*

Adam paused for a moment to let his temper simmer down some before he continued. *'I will deal with the twins; it might be touchy for a bit, but I'll see what they want to do. Depending on their reactions, I may be making a trip to Des Moines to talk to this Spencer, and let him know what happened to his brothers. Keep me up to date if you need anything else.'*

*'I will do that, Sir. For reference, Spencer required a Kyle-level mind tuning to deal with the memory. I believe the only materials I will need are ziplock baggies,* Colin replied icily.

*'Hold that thought there, soldier. Do what you want to them... but I want them alive by the time you are done. UNIT Justice demands that the twins have the option of dispatching them personally.'* Adam stated, now thinking clearer.

*Could you please define what state of 'alive' you wish, Sir?* Colin asked seriously.

Adam couldn't help but giggle slightly at the question. *'Alive enough so that they will know what is happening to them if the Twins decide to take their vengeance. Remember, you're the one that's gonna have to look the twins in their eyes if you take away what they feel is their just deserts.* Adam paused, then added, *'Also I will instruct the Assault Team to secure the house in case any of the three want anything from it. So don't destroy it. If they don't want anything, we'll just sell everything off and put it into a fund for them.'*

*"Understood, Sir, Colin replied. And if a certain oversized pocket calculator don't hurry up with my kit, I'm going to tell Dave where his power switch is."*

Daileass jumped in at this point. *'I was waiting for you two to stop blabbering. You may want to warn everyone that you're gonna blink out for a second.... Oh, the hell with it!'*

In the room, everyone was shocked as Colin seemed to fuzz out for a second, then was suddenly standing there in flat black full body armor. Colin turned his helmeted head towards a speechless Mini. "Brother, those who hurt you have been slated to appear before the ultimate Judge. Your job is to heal; my job is to ensure their appearance."

"Do I even want to know?" Julio asked hesitantly.

Colin was already out the door, but Kris answered seriously for him. "His codename is 'Nightmare', and those who cross him know why. I don't know the details, and really don't want to... but the last time he was like this, his parents were found in Nevada ... and California ... and Utah ... and Washington ... and Texas ... and there are still pieces missing."

"Oh shit..." most of the room exclaimed under their breath.

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## **Camp Bam-Bam**

The ten members of Strike Team 'The Flying Dutchman' were all gearing up to go on duty in their pod, when a tone came over the speakers. They all stopped what they were doing and looked up towards the ceiling. The tone was the one used to alert people that Daileass was about to talk to them, rather than the 'alert tones' that indicated a pending mission. About two seconds after the tone died out, Daileass's voice came over the speakers. "Hey guys, hate to do this to you, but your 'on duty' time is being covered by the Grave Diggers. You lot have been asked to dress out in full class 'A' Uniform, and report to the General's office ASAP. He wanted me to pass this along. 'Don't take your time, but make sure your uniforms are spotless.'"

First Lieutenant Doug Wilser, the commanding officer for the strike team, looked just as confused as the rest of them. Finally he spoke up. "Any chance you can give us a hint as to what's going on?"

"Sorry, Lieutenant, I am under specific orders not to reveal anything else. Although, I will say that it is something big, that I really think you guys will enjoy. At least, I am sure some of you will enjoy it." Doug knew the second that Daileass called him by his rank, that something big was going on.

"Well, guys, you heard him. Strip out of the cammies, and let's get our inspection uniforms on. Whatever's goin on... it's gotta be big. I want your boots shined to perfection, and everything on your uniform



perfect. We've never failed an inspection before, so I know you guys know what to do. Get to it!" They all popped a quick salute, then ran off to their bedrooms to change. Nine-year-old Second Lieutenant Logan Darwin, the strike team's second in command and the youngest command staff member in the entire UNIT, looked over to his twin brother Lucas and mentally sent to him, *'so, what do ya think's goin on?'*

Lucas, who hadn't spoken a word verbally since he woke up after the 'conversion', shrugged. *'Don't know, but I bet it's gonna be big. General Adam doesn't normally call people to his office 'less he's got a specific mission that's pretty important. Just wonder what it's gonna be....'* His face fell a little towards the floor as he sent the next bit. *'Not sure why he'd want us, though, especially with me being...'*

He never got to finish what he was saying, because Logan slapped him hard across the face, sending his 'younger' brother sprawling towards the floor. *"How many times have I told you; I don't want to hear you talkin' shit about yourself. You're just as important to this team as everyone else!"* Logan said emphatically, then threw himself at his brother when the other boy had gotten to his feet and pulled him into a hard rough hug. *"Damn it bro, it kills me to see you bein' so down on yourself. I know you hate some of the shit that's happened, and the shit you gotta deal with, but I've told you a million times, I don't care if you never talk out loud again. It don't matter here. We're all as much family here as you, me and Spence are!"* Both boys teared up slightly at the mention of their long-lost big brother... the one who used to protect them from their parents before their parents sold the twins. Neither one of them remembered too much about the time before they entered the 'program', but they both remembered their big brother, and a little bit of what their parents tried to do to them that Spence stopped.

After a few moments of hard hugs, hugs that would have crushed a normal squishy, Logan pulled back. *"Now come on, and let's get dressed. General Adam wants to see us, and we better not make him wait. And if you don't hurry up, I'll tell Mama Janet that you've been down on yourself again."* Lucas knew that would mean another session of hugs and cuddles with the UNIT mom, but also a good talking to.

Less than fifteen minutes later, the 'Flying Dutchman' strike team assembled outside of Adam's office. Doug took a moment to look them all over, making sure he was satisfied with the way they looked. After making at least one tweak to every person's uniform, Doug stood back, giving them one final look before he nodded. "Okay, let's get in there and see what we've gotten ourselves into." The last part was said with a grin as he turned and walked into the General's outer office.

Aiden looked up from the desk where he was tapping away at the computer and smiled. "Hey, guys. Go right on in, his grand pooh-bah-ness is ready for you." It took the entire ten man strike team almost three full minutes to compose themselves after Aiden's comment. Of course, Aiden never did more than crack a small smile, knowing there was almost no one else that could get away with addressing Adam that way.

As soon as Doug led them into the office, Adam stood up from behind his desk. Logan Hayes also stood up from where he was working on something on the desk next to Adam's. Doug was probably the only one of them who could tell that Adam's smile of welcome was more than a little forced. They all lined up in front of Adam's desk, went to attention on Doug's command, and saluted. When Adam returned the salute, they all let their hands fall to their sides and stood in perfect formation. Without a word, Adam clasped his hands behind his back, walked around the desk, and took a good two minutes to look over each and every one of their uniforms. Still not saying a word, when he got done, Adam went back around to behind his desk and looked them over critically for a moment. "At ease," Adam finally said, and the entire strike team snapped to parade rest at the same moment.

After a few moments, of trying to figure out exactly what to say, Adam finally spoke. "Your strike team has been slated for possible temporary assigned duty elsewhere. Lieutenant Wilser, please see Aiden outside; he will have your new orders ready for you." Adam paused briefly and then barked out, "Dismissed!" The entire group snapped back to attention, snapped a salute, then made a perfect about face, and started for the door, before Adam spoke up again. "Lieutenant Darwin, Sargent Darwin, please stay behind." The two boys immediately fell out of line, and moved back to in front of Adam's desk, once again at attention.

Adam waited until the rest of the team left, and shut the door behind them, before he spoke again. "First off, guys, why don't you two have a seat? What we need to talk about is not from a commanding officer to his troops, but as an older brother to his younger brothers. Okay?"

As if a switch had been flipped, both boys relaxed and sat down in the chairs in front of Adam's desk. Adam and Logan both came out from behind their desks, grabbed a pair of chairs, and set the chairs in front of the twins before they both sat down. Adam smiled at the two boys, and this one wasn't as forced. When he spoke, it wasn't verbally, but mentally to all three in the room with him, but he also added Dailess, Aiden, Dr. Phil, and Janet into the conversation. For a full-on Squishy, Dr. Phil had gotten surprisingly adept at handling mental conversations. *'Okay, guys... I was just given some information that, even though I am not entirely sure how you guys will handle it, needs to be shared with you two.'* Adam never even mentioned the fact that they were speaking mentally in deference to Lucas, but the fact wasn't lost on the boy, who smiled softly in appreciation.

*'There's two parts to this, and I don't really know how to soften this any, so I will just be frank. I think you both can handle it. Twenty minutes ago, 'Nightmare' was dispatched to arrest, detain, and bring back to the UNIT base...' He paused for a very brief moment before he dropped the bomb on them. 'Your previous parents.'*

Logan looked stunned, but Adam was more concerned about the snarling smile that came across Lucas' face. *'In following with UNIT Justice,'* Lucas spoke softly and dangerously, *'I DEMAND right of the injured to try, convict, and carry out fitting punishment.'*

Logan stared at his brother for a moment, stunned, before he hesitantly nodded. Adam sat back in his chair and looked hard at Lucas for a long moment. The small nine-year-old boy never let his eyes waver from Adam's until Adam finally sighed deeply and nodded. *'So is your right.'*

Lucas sat back but still had a bit of the snarl on his face, although this time it was tempered with a bit of satisfaction. Adam then decided to throw the other bomb on them. *'We've also located your brother Spencer.'*

Both boys immediately jumped from their seats. Logan almost shouted out loud, while Lucas almost shouted mentally, the same thing. *"Where is he... is he all right... can we go see him?"*

Then Lucas dropped to his seat sobbing. Adam, Logan Hayes, and Lucas's twin Logan immediately jumped to him, but Adam was faster as always. Adam had Lucas in his arms before the boy had a chance to really sink back into his chair. *'It's okay, Lucas...'* Adam said soothingly, *'I know what you're thinking, and I will guarantee you this. If your brother really loves you guys like you know he does, he's not going to care what was done to you. He'll love you like he always has.'*

*'You... you really think so?'* Lucas asked in a small voice that seemed like it came from a dying man finding out someone could save him.

*'I know so. Colin's met him, and likes him. I'm gonna go right now and talk with him. He's actually part of the Des Moines Division, so he already knows about us. But I'm gonna go talk to him and make sure. Then I'll have you guys come in.'* Adam paused for a moment, hugging Lucas hard enough to make sure the boy knew he would be there for him. *'But I gotta warn you. I don't know any of the specifics, but Colin said specifically that you guys both got the better end of the deal. You guys may have to be strong for your older brother at times. You think you can do that?'*

Both boys stared at Adam with disbelief, which quickly turned into hardened resolve. Logan was the one who spoke for both of them. *'As you've always taught us... family first, no matter what.'*

Adam smiled as he nodded. *'Very good. Now, Mama Janet's in the other room. Why don't you two go wait with her while Logan and I go talk to your brother. When we're ready, we'll call for you two. Okay?'*

Both boys just nodded, Lucas stood up and wiped his eyes before he and Logan moved off to the other room. Adam looked to Logan and spoke softly after the door closed. "Lets go get this over with, and hopefully we'll have a happy tale to tell when this is over."

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### **Des Moines HQ, Fifteen minutes after Colin's departure:**

The entire group of boys were still quietly comforting Mini when Colin reappeared in the room. Colin removed his helmet, nodded at Julio, then quickly changed into the dress uniform which had appeared on the floor next to him.

Once he was changed, Jesse came up to him, Rocky at his side. "I don't know what they did to Mini, but he's too nice to be hurting like this. Did you find them?"

Colin nodded. "At the request of my superiors, they are detained for final judgment before meeting their Maker. I can promise that their wait is most uncomfortable; they have been given a taste of what is to come."

"Why do they call you 'Nightmare'?" Jesse asked curiously.

"Because that is what I gave my instructors," Colin stated, figuring it best not to go into detail.

"And what he gives to his targets... when they have time left enough to sleep, that is." A new voice said, causing everyone to turn in that direction. Standing there were two boys, both in military uniforms. One had long black hair tied back in a pony tail, with arresting grey eyes, while the other's hair was not quite as long, golden blond, and he had deep blue eyes. The dark-haired new boy walked up to Julio and stuck his hand out. "General Adam Casey at your service." He motioned to the blond with him and kept the introductions going, making sure everyone that was paying attention could actually hear. "This is my Chief Intel Officer, and more importantly my better half, General Logan Hayes."

"I'm glad to meet you." Julio replied. "I think a few of these guys want your attention before I introduce everyone!" he added with a smile, nodding his head at Ricky, Rocky, Kris, and Colin, who were all at attention and holding a salute.

"At ease, guys," Adam replied. He then turned to Colin. "You know why I'm here... wanna pave the way a bit for me?"

Colin nodded. "Yes, Sir." He then walked over to the bed. "Alien, can I borrow Mini for a few minutes? Adam has a few things that Mini really needs to hear."

Alien looked over into Colin's eyes. The cloaked reserve that had been there since their first meeting was gone, and replaced by what could only be described as compassion mixed with hope.

"Come on, babe; let's see if you can get some good news," Alien said softly as he helped Mini off of the bed. Colin gave him a smile of thanks, and gently pulled Mini's back against his chest while wrapping his arms around him.

"Adam, this is my brother, Mini. You know of him as Spencer," Colin stated. "Mini, when I found out what had happened to you, something came up that involves some friends of mine, friends that I consider my brothers."

Adam looked at Spencer, also seeming to be called Mini, and took a deep breath. "My mom always yells at me for not having any tact, but right now, I think that beating around the bush would be a bit of a miscarriage to you. But... before I go into that..." Adam said with a grin that quickly faded. "Boy, I guess I won't get any humor points. Okay... before I can go any further, I need to know if you understand who, and more importantly what, we are?" He was speaking right to Mini, and moved around to sit in a chair because he figured this might take a bit.

"Ezra filled me and Alien in on all of the Clan and UNIT stuff when Colin was away," Mini replied in an uncharacteristic soft voice.

Ezra was watching carefully, and his eyes shot up as he picked up a thought directed at him by Logan. He quickly acknowledged it, then placed a message in Alien's head.

Alien looked at Ezra to confirm his mind was not playing tricks on him, and once he saw the nod from Ezra that it was for real, he shot from his seat on the edge of the bed to the intercom by the door. "Dad, get your *ass* in here, and bring the butterflies!" he commanded into the unit.

The sounds of four adults running to the room quickly assaulted the boys' ears. With Bob leading the way, all four slammed through the door. "What's wrong?" Mick and Bob exclaimed in unison.

Alien took charge. "Sit and listen. Mini needs all of us, and you'll understand soon enough."

Mick and Janice started to respond, but Bob held up his hand. "We need to listen to him. The only time he's ever cussed at me is if there is something that he thinks might become too big for him and Mini-Me to handle together. I learned one thing early from these two; when they want me there as support, they do their best if I'm passive about my opinions unless asked otherwise."

Alien made quick introductions. "Adam, Logan, the big blond version of Mini is our foster Dad, Bob Busch. The lady next to Bob is Robin's mother Marcie. The other two adults are Julio, Jesse, Johnny, and Eddie's parents, Mick and Janice Hernandez. Dad, Marcie, Janice, and Mick, this is General Adam Casey and General Logan Casey of the Clan Short Special Forces, or as they're also known, the Unit."

"Robin's visiting with Unca Cory!" Eddie added helpfully.

As Marcie, Mick and Janice nodded their understanding, Bob spoke. "Mick was just telling me and Marcie about your organization, at least the parts parents are allowed to know. I defer to you, General Adam Casey, and will be here to support my boys however I'm needed."

It took Adam a brief moment to put things together. Logan grew up in Des Moines, and less than 2 months ago, Logan made him watch the Little League World Series because they were from his home town. Thinking back, he now recognized Mini, Alien, and the Coach.

Before Adam could say anything, Logan looked over at Bob and gave a slight smile. "Hey, Coach. Hope you got some more stickers with you."

Bob's eyes shot wide. "I always do... why do I get the feeling this could be a very long day?"

Adam spoke up to answer his question. "Well, sir, here's the thing: in order for a lot of this to make sense, you need to have some more detailed information than what you probably already have. To make it so we don't have to repeat things, if you all are okay with it, I'll have my Chief Intel Officer give you the information mind to mind. It will not take any time, and it will give you four probably a better understanding of us than the kids have."

"Take him up on it, Bob," Mick stated seriously. "I like their way of passing out info a lot more than a bunch of reports."

"Same here," Janice replied.

"It's better than listening to Mick," Marcie said with a smile.

"Then I'd say all of us are game," Bob replied. "And all of it without Mick's jokes... the day got better!"

The last part got a small giggle out of the boys who knew Mick well; it even managed to relax Mini slightly.

Adam nodded to Logan, who nodded back, then Adam turned his attention back to Ezra and had a quick conversation with him about how much he had told the boys here about the UNIT. Nodding his head, he knew he had a few more things to cover to make what was to come mean much. "Okay, guys, I am going to ask that you bear with me a bit. There are a few classified details that Ezra hasn't filled you guys in on, details that I think you'll need for things make sense."

After getting nods from the kids, Adam took a deep breath and then started in on his explanation. "If you have any questions, or don't understand what I am about to explain, hold onto them, 'cause I may answer them before I'm done. About fifteen years ago, a General in the US Army stumbled on something that he had been searching for for a very long time: the ability to genetically alter humans to ma-

ke them into super soldiers. He called it the Genesis Project. To date we have recovered just shy of seven thousand Genesis or 'G' Kids. The reason they are all kids is because in order to make the changes that are needed you need someone who has not yet reached puberty. Anyways, the first Group of G-Kids actually escaped and came to our base. No need to get into the hows or whys, but they found out about my escape, and the rescue of my brothers, and decided they'd had enough, and broke out of their base/lab."

Adam paused to draw a breath and make sure he still had everyone with him. "Those kids that came from that base were mostly human-born that had been 'recruited' by the military by lies and 'other' means to get them there. Then they started the 'conversion.' What that means is this. Every Genesis kid has at least some animal DNA in them to help augment their strength, speed, and endurance. Now, what do you think would have to happen to take someone who is fully human and re-sequence their DNA to the point that it had some Animal in there, and to turn them into more than the Human DNA was ever supposed to make them? And do it while they remain alive?"

Alien uttered one word that echoed everyone's thoughts. "Hell."

Adam sat there for a moment staring at Alien. "You know, I don't think anyone who hasn't been through it has given an answer that is as close as what you just said. If you really want to have some nightmares, feel free to ask Colin or Kris what it was like. They were from that first batch I was talking about. However, I do need to give a few details just to make sure you understand what is to come next. The best out of the first batch is what we call rank A-5 G-Kids. The 'A' meaning they were converted after birth, and the 5 means that they average out to being 5 times stronger, faster, and/or more durable than a normal human of the equivalent age. The lowest would be a rank A-2. I doubt I need to explain that any more."

After getting shakes of the head from everyone, Adam continued on. "The Conversion lasted roughly the first two months that they were at the base, then they went into some serious 'SHIT'. By SHIT we mean Super High Intensity Training. Most of the G-Kids could handle that, because on top of the physical training, they also received several mental additions as well. Such as, every G-Kid has a photographic memory. We're all telepathic, to one degree or another. And you need to understand that speed means more than just how fast someone can run, it also includes their reflexes, and how fast they process things mentally. Now, the SHIT lasted until they were ready to be 'activated' and sent on assignments."

"Now, unless I have lost anyone, I think I've covered enough to get to the real reason that I'm here." Adam paused and looked around to see if anyone had any questions.

"They're understanding it a little too well, Adam." Ezra said seriously. "But it was needed to be that way."

Adam sighed. "Yeah, they probably do understand better than most of the people in the Clan do, but you're right, they needed to." Adam got up, and moved over to be in front of Mini. He then got down on his knees in front of the boy, and took one of his hands. "Mini, while I can never take away what was done to them, just like all the G-Kids I made a promise to do everything I could to help them out. I make that same vow to you. You're gonna need help with this, and I want you to know that you can call on me at any time." Adam took a deep breath to steady himself. "Spencer Darwin, With your permission there are two G-Kids that I want to bring here right now. Their names are Logan and Lucas Darwin."

The room fell silent as Mini stared at Adam in shock. The few seconds of delay gave Colin just enough time to prepare as two things happened at once. The first was Mini falling limp as he screamed in agony and broke into tears. The second was much more audible, and much more ominous. It started with growls and hisses from the four-legged occupants of the room, expanded with the kids using language that their parents had no idea they knew, and culminated with said parents using language that had never passed their lips in the presence of their children. There was one common thread to all of this... the desire to brutally and permanently damage the people responsible for putting Mini's brothers through their nightmare.

Ezra moved quickly to Mini's side, and began to glow as he siphoned off the emotional overload from the small twelve year old. A few seconds later, the sound of thunder in the clear midday sky told those in the know that Ezra was having some success in his efforts. "He feels responsible," Ezra stated as he started helping Mini to stabilize his emotions.

"Oh Hell... I knew this would happen. Okay, Time for Plan 'B'!" Suddenly Adam's eyes started brightly blazing a brilliant blue color and Colin's hair started to stand up on his arms and the back of his neck. Adam was pulling power from all around him as he hammered into the guilt that Mini was feeling and tried to make the boy understand it wasn't his fault.

"Thanks," Ezra sent. While he could easily have done this all himself, the lessons that Kyle had learned about not playing superman were fresh in his head. One thing he realized as he watched Adam at work was that there were other ways to use power to help, and he mentally took notes so that if Adam wasn't around next time, he would know this new way of doing things.

The combined efforts did their job, and Mini's body started to show signs of recovery. After a couple more minutes, he was once again able to stand on his feet without assistance, even though Colin insisted on keeping a hold on his chest. The glow faded from around Ezra, and the young Mikyvis stepped back to give Mini room to breathe.

"They ... they don't hate me?" Mini whispered.

Adam shook his head, but it was Colin who answered. "Oh God, no! They still worship the ground you walk on. You're about all that they would talk about at first."

"Mini, understand, before I came here, I told them about finding you. The only thing they were worried about was if you wouldn't want them anymore 'cause they're 'freaks'."

"They've always been *my* freaks, why would that change?" Mini asked, completely serious.

Adam couldn't help but laugh at that. "They're waiting to know if you want to see them. Should I call them in?"

"Hurry up before I sic Colin on you," Mini replied, still serious. His eyes communicated that it was a promise that he intended to keep if he was separated from them any more than required.

Adam chuckled for a brief moment while he stepped back with his hands held up in the air. "No worries, man, but... just so you know. Well, Colin wouldn't stand a chance. Ask him sometime to show you the vids of the sparring matches. But seriously, there is one thing you *need* to know before I call them in. Since the 'conversion', Lucas has not verbally said anything. He speaks very well telepathically, and

there is no doubt he could talk to everyone at once. His telepathy is rather strong. But he's kinda down on himself 'cause he doesn't talk. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I don't care... **I ... WANT ... MY ... BROTHERS!**" Mini stated, now starting to get agitated.

"Fine," Adam said as he backed up a few more steps, then looked around. "Please clear out by the door. I'll want them to come in from there; that way they have an escape route. I don't think that anything will happen, but you all *must* understand, these kids are highly trained killers who have had their humanity stripped from them. If they feel threatened they could attack." Once everyone had moved away from the door, Adam went to stand by it, then called out to Daileass, "As soon as they're ready, Daileass... Transport them in."

Less than a minute later, two small figures started to appear in the doorway, both of them in perfect UNIT uniforms and looking around nervously, until their eyes fell on Mini....

"Oh SHIT!" Colin exclaimed as he saw Mini opening his arms. That was the last thing heard from his mouth, as the two young boys launched themselves at their big brother. A second or two later, Colin and Mini were both driven back onto the bed by the impact of the two enhanced kids.

"I'm fixing the injuries as fast as they cause them!" Ezra stated quickly. "On BOTH of them, Mini *and* Colin!!"

Adam chuckled for a moment, then lifted his hand reflexively. Suddenly the two nine-year-old boys started to float into the air, their arms uncoiling from around their long-lost brother. Once they were floating in the middle of the room, Adam spun them until they could see him. "Okay, guys, I know you're excited, but you don't want to kill your brother now that you've found him. Remember, he is a full Squishy."

Both boys nodded their understanding, then gave Adam pointed looks that clearly showed their wish to be returned to their brother's arms.

Adam nodded and set them back down on the floor after turning them so they were facing their brother, who had just pulled himself back to his feet.

What happened next caused the room to fall into dead silence. In a soft voice, scratchy from years of not being used, Lucas asked, "Spence... do... you... still... love... us?"

"I ALWAYS loved you, even when I thought both of you were dead," Mini replied as he walked over and pulled them back into a hug, tears running down his face. "I've always loved my little freaks, ever since the day you were born," he added softly.

"But we're really freaks now," Logan whispered.

"You're the same freaks that I've always loved," Mini stated, a little more force in his voice. "Nobody can change the real you."

"Mini-Me is right," Bob added.



"Why does he call you Mini-Me? And why does everyone else call you Mini?" Logan asked.

"That is *our* new Dad, Bob... he's our foster Dad, maybe someday he can be our real Dad," Mini and Alien both answered in unison, which caused all four of them to smile.

"You found a new Dad?" Lucas whispered.

Bob held up his hand. "He found a Dad for ALL of you. Last year, he told me he wished you were here to share in the new family him and Alien found. I told him then, and I'll repeat it now. You are part of my little Mini-Me... if you're here, you are just as much my sons as him and Alien are. If I knew a judge I could pay off for a short-notice adoption, I would adopt all four of you right here and now."

"Funny you should mention that..." Adam said with a grin. "Julio... would you care to do the honors?"

Julio grinned. "Robert Busch, do you take these four kids as your sons, to love and protect them, in sickness and in health?"

"I'm not marrying them, you little rat!" Bob chuckled. "I'm adopting all FIVE of them, if they agree."

"Five?" Julio asked, his joke slightly derailed.

"Yes, I've heard Colin refer to Mini as his brother at least three times, not to mention the fact he considers the twins his brothers," Bob explained. "That's enough for me. Besides, every father needs a son who can spread dirty scum over at least five states."

Everyone heard Adam's whispered response of "Not to mention three countries, and two planets.... he still won't tell me how he did the last part though."

"Even better!" Bob grinned. "What do you say, Colin, you up for having an insane blond, whose most stunning achievement is the forming of the Butterfly Hunters, as your old man?"

Before Colin could reply, Logan kissed Mini's cheek. "Can he? Please? He took care of us when you didn't know how to find us."

Mini looked at Colin, appreciation written on his face. "You did that?"

Colin nodded. "Yes; in fact they're known as my shadows on the base."

Alien smiled. "You're already our brother then; please share our Dad too?"

Colin looked at Adam and Logan, seeking his superior's decision on the appropriateness of the adoption.

Adam moved over to Colin with a smile on his face. "Listen, bro. We'll be your family no matter who you call dad. We're connected by something that will never break or falter. We've bled together, we've fought together... NOTHING will break that bond. If you wanna do this, go for it. Just don't forget about us," Adam said that last part with a grin.

"If he tries to I'll kick his butt!" Mini stated.

Adam threw his arm over Mini's shoulder and hugged the smaller boy to him. "You know something Mini... I think I'm gonna like you. If you ever feel like a few weeks of some real SHIT... let me know, and I'll personally see that you're trained by the best we got. Speaking of which, you can learn a lot from your brothers if you want. Logan is the youngest command staff person we got. He's second in command of his strike team, and to be honest, the only reason he's not in full command is I'm molding him to take command of an Assault Team when one comes up. And Lucas..." Adam chuckled lightly, "well... let's just say you gotta watch out for him. Last week he finished up his doctorate in Molecular Chemistry. He's the Strike Team's explosives and ordinance officer." Adam grinned and waited to see what, if any response that would get.

"Kewl! Maybe we can work out a way to wake up Dad every time he snores!" Mini replied, his sense of humor starting to return.

"Hey, I'm not THAT bad!" Bob chuckled.

"Yes, you are, Dad!" Mini and Alien replied in unison.

Julio shook his head and giggled. "Colin, yes or no?"

"Yes!" Colin replied, trying not to laugh at Bob's expression.

"Daileass, log it!" Julio laughed. "Kids, you may now maul the dad!" he added as he quickly moved as far as he could from the adults.

Before the room could descend into chaos, Adam held up his hand. "After the mauling, I have one more thing I need to do."

The boys all nodded mid-flight as all but Colin pounced on Bob. Colin, using his training, managed to restrain himself long enough for the first wave to get out of the way before launching himself at his new Dad. Once they had all settled in, each having given Bob a strong hug of gratitude, Bob finally had a chance to respond to the events leading up to today's reunion.

"I think we're going to need to visit a tattoo artist shortly," Bob stated seriously as he glanced at each of his new sons. "Normally this would be a team decision, but I doubt that any of the guys would argue after finding out what has happened. Is there any way to get my briefcase from the house?"

"You're a Squishy that actually survived an attack of the Twins!" Daileass announced with a giggle. "Juan lost five hundred dollars due to you being able to walk after that mauling! Which one? I'll get it for you!"

"The grey one," Bob replied, not really sure as to the wiseness of inquiring who Juan was or why he lost money.

A second later, a grey briefcase appeared next to Bob. "Draco and I are both archiving this," Daileass commented. "We both keep records whenever one of our brothers gets honored for something."

"Thanks, I hope this meets the standards," Bob replied as he opened the case. He took out a sheet of something, then commented, "I always hoped that I would never have to use these in a situation like this. The only saving grace is that the people I am awarding are still alive." Bob looked at each of his new sons, mentally deciding how to proceed. It didn't take more than a couple of seconds before he spoke. "Lucas, could you please stand up in front of me, and extend your left arm?"

Lucas glanced at Mini, and at his big brother's nod did as Bob had asked.

Bob stood as well, and began speaking softly. "Lucas Busch, you have underwent trials that would defeat most men. Through it all, you remained true to your family, both blood and declared. The Butterfly Hunters have an award which is only given to those who have endured conditions over and above that which would overcome a normal grown man. This award has only been issued one other time, posthumously, to a teammate who perished after rescuing his neighbors from a house fire. Today I hereby declare you a 'Butterfly Ace' and authorize you to acquire a permanent tattoo of the image I am about to apply to your arm."

As everyone watched, Bob carefully prepped Lucas' skin, then applied the single temporary tattoo on the paper to his arm. Once he peeled the paper away, the group was able to see the award. The image was the expected camo butterfly, except that this one had blood red eyes and was holding crossed swords with blood dripping from their edges. Across the bottom, in red letters with a yellow border, was the single word 'ACE'. "This is not an award which brings congratulations," Bob said solemnly. "I am honored to have been able to present this to you, and will do everything in my power to ensure I never have to issue you a second one."

Lucas looked at his arm, and then looked into his new Dad's eyes. The sorrow and resolve that he saw proved to him that Bob was not just spouting words. After a few seconds of concentration, Lucas croaked out, "Thank you ... Dad." before wrapping his arms around Bob.

Unknown to all except Logan, Adam had something transported in while Bob was talking. When Logan looked down and saw the small box that was now in Adam's hand, his eyes got huge, and he immediately started 'talking' to Daileass to make sure this was being recorded properly. Again, unknown to the others, suddenly four small helicopters were in the room, all outfitted with cameras making sure that every detail of what was about to happen was properly recorded.

In the Utah base, most of the Unit members were stopping to watch, or heading off to a monitor so that they could watch, what was going on. Due to the importance of what was about to happen, at Logan's request Daileass made a base wide announcement, informing all non essential personnel to immediately report to the nearest monitor to watch what was about to happen.

Adam drew a deep breath not really liking what he was about to do, but feeling his chest swell up with a bit of pride at the honor of doing it. "ATTENN-HUT!"

Instantly, reflexively, every UNIT member there went to attention before they even realized it. What surprised Adam slightly was that the two male adults also reflexively snapped to attention. Knowing that something was going on, most of the rest of the people there moved back slightly.

"Specialist Lucas Busch, Front and Center!" Adam barked out, still in his military commander's voice. Lucas immediately rushed over to stand in front of Adam, who had moved to the center of the room. Snapping back to attention, Lucas stood there, wondering what was going to happen next.

Adam stood quietly for a few moments before he clasped his hands behind his back and started to pace back and forth in front of Lucas while he spoke. "On Friday October 29th 2004 during Operation Lightning Freedom, Strike Team 'The Flying Dutchman' came under heavy enemy fire, which ended up wounding two of the members of the Strike Team badly enough that they had to be pulled back. Under the orders of his strike team commander, Specialist Lucas Busch stayed behind to help ensure that his fellow strike team members could make it to safety. After successfully ensuring their arrival to the medical unit, Lucas then ran back to meet up with his strike team.

"During that time, the remaining members of this strike team pushed forward to try and relieve some of the pressure that two other strike teams were under. However, they ended up getting pinned down as well. Regardless of his own safety, Specialist Busch single-handedly opened up a path for the rest of his team to escape. By this point, every single member of the strike team was wounded in one way or another.

"Living up to the creed of the UNIT, that 'no one will be left behind', Lucas made his way to the two teams that were pinned down, many of whom were too wounded to make their way out by themselves. With his strike team providing cover, Lucas carried out UNIT members who would not have been able to make it out by themselves. Through a narrow pathway, and with bullets raining down on him, Specialist Busch made not one trip back to retrieve an injured UNIT member, not two trips, but six. During which time, Specialist Busch was wounded eight times, including having a bullet lodged into his hip which took three hours of surgery to remove and repair.

"At one point, he directly disobeyed an order from a superior officer who told him to hold back until backup arrived. Simply stating that they didn't have that much time, Specialist Busch made his way back in there yet again."

"But he did not stop there. Once everyone was safe, and was falling back, Specialist Busch left his team, and went back towards where the enemy was holed up. Armed simply with a single sidearm and his UNIT sword, Specialist Busch was responsible for more than thirty-five enemy deaths."

Adam stopped his pacing directly in front of Lucas, looked down slightly at the boy who was standing at attention in front of him, Adam let a small smile pass his lips. "For actions that exemplify what it means to be UNIT. It is with the greatest of Honor and Pride that I award to Specialist Lucas Busch this Medal of Honor." Adam opened the box and pulled the large medal out and showed it to the small crowd before gently laying it around Lucas's neck. "May you serve as an inspiration to all that know you, for you sure have to me."

Adam stepped back and saluted, which Lucas immediately returned. When Adam dropped his salute, Lucas went back to attention, albeit with tears running down his cheeks. Adam then stepped up to the boy and pulled him into a hug. When he broke the hug, Adam gently turned Lucas around and said softly to him, "Go on, I think you have four brothers and a Dad that want to share this moment with you." Lucas shakingly stepped up to his twin, his re-found brother, his two new brothers, and his new dad, and fell into a family hug, at which applause broke out in the room.

Once everything had calmed down, Bob repeated the ceremony with Lucas' twin, Logan. While shorter, it was not identical, as Bob brought up the extra support that Logan had provided to Lucas. Colin received one as well, for not only his own experiences but for the support he provided the twins and the immediate response he provided upon learning of Mini's past.

Bob then pulled one more tattoo out of the case. "Mini, please stand in front of me." he asked softly.

Mini stood, but immediately began talking. "I don't deserve one, Dad. I broke down and cried, I didn't do nothing."

"You're right on one point, you didn't do nothing. You did something very important. You survived treatment that nobody that I have ever known before today could have even imagined. You kept your brothers' memory even when you thought they were dead. You welcomed them back, with no concern for any changes which happened to them during their trials. Let me take a vote here from the people who have earned the award," Bob stated.

He didn't need to ask, because Colin spoke up immediately. "I'm the only one of his brothers who knows the full details of what Mini went through. If Mini was eligible for the medal that Adam awarded to Lucas, I know he would have it. I said this to General Adam, and I will say it again. If you compare what happened to Mini with what Lucas and Logan went through after they were sold, any sane person would determine that the twins had it easier than how Mini had it over the same time period."

Logan stood up, a frown on his face. "You earned it before we were sold, Spence. Take it, or we'll BOTH kick your squishy butt!"

Mini glanced over at the two Generals. "I don't deserve it! I failed my brothers!"

Adam moved himself to the couch and sat down, motioning for Mini to come sit next to him. Once Mini was seated, Adam spoke softly. "Mini, how much do you really know about telepaths?"

"I know that Ezra was able to help me lock up the bad stuff and then told Colin about what happened," Mini responded.

"Okay, then you know that we telepaths can look into someone else's mind and see what they have been through. Would you permit me to do this? Would you allow me in to see what you have been through?" Pausing briefly, Adam spoke with as much caring and compassion as he could. "I know what you're thinking, Mini; you're thinking that 'I could have done something to help my brothers.' Let me see what you went through, and then I swear to you, I will show you and make you understand just how much you HAVE done."

"Go ahead, I didn't do anything," Mini stated softly.

Adam slowly entered the boy's mind so as to not cause him any distress. What he saw took almost every ounce of self-control that Adam had. He clamped down so hard on his emotions that it almost hurt, but if he hadn't, he could easily have been pushed into a murderous rage. He sat there with his eyes closed, not moving, until he was sure that he could actually speak without his emotions taking over. Finally he opened his eyes and looked at Mini; however, no amount of control could keep all the tears from running down his face.

"Mini, I am not going to give you a medal or anything like that. Not because you don't deserve it, but anything I could give to you would belittle what you have accomplished." Adam placed a finger lightly on Mini's lips when the boy started to protest. "Please let me finish," Adam said, all previous happiness gone from his voice. "We have rescued close to fifteen thousand kids from all over the world in the last week. Some of the things I have seen those kids put through would have given me nightmares if I didn't

know how to deal with things properly. Hell, my own brother, Juan, went through things that I really doubt I could have handled. He literally went insane because of what was done to him. Until now, I thought he was one of the strongest people I had ever met."

Adam slid off the couch to kneel in front of Mini, and took both of the boy's hands in his own. "I've met someone stronger in some areas than he is now, someone who started with less yet survived a torture that only three other people I know can even comprehend. The very fact that you are not completely insane is a testament to how strong you are. The fact that you have as much love in your heart as you do shows the world that no matter what those... people... did to you couldn't destroy you. I simply can't put into words the admiration I have for you right now."

Adam saw Mini start to cry, and pulled the smaller boy into a tight hug. "When you say you didn't do anything, you couldn't be more wrong. You took everything those people had to throw at you, and you threw it right back at them, all the while holding onto the love that is in you. You not only have my admiration, nor just my respect, Mini, your strength is something I will be striving to emulate."

Adam pushed the boy back a little so he could look into his eyes. "I was thinking of making you an honorary UNIT member, but I've changed my mind. When you are ready, and IF you want, you come to me, and I will PERSONALLY train you in what ever you want."

"But, I let my brothers get hurt," Mini whispered.

Colin walked over and tapped Adam's shoulder, indicating that he would like to answer the statement.

"Do you know something I don't?" Adam asked.

"Yes, I scanned the minds of the piles of shit who gave life to these three angels," Colin stated, a scowl on his face. "Mini, do you want me to answer that out loud, or in your head?"

"You can say it, I know I messed up," Mini said softly.

Colin put his hand on Mini's shoulder and caressed it gently. "You can forget that line of thought forever, bro. Every time that they tried to do things to the twins that you were enduring, you stepped in and took it yourself instead of letting your little brothers suffer. The twins were getting old enough that they were becoming a danger to the adults being exposed, and due to you the adults did not have the fear factor to prevent them from talking. Your former parents were trying to have the twins killed to cover what they were doing to you, but instead they ran across a way to sell them and have them vanish. If it wasn't for you, either the twins would have suffered what you did or they would have died. The new occupants of detention cells Delta Three and Four used their money to buy a lot of blindness; thanks to you being so protective of the twins, the greed of your former parents was able to allow the twins to be placed in a situation where they at least had a chance at survival."

Alien came over to the other side of Mini and wrapped his arm around Mini's chest. "You've helped a lot of the team too, even if you didn't know it. Remember when you told everyone about always bein' taken to a skin doctor to make sure you didn't have scars? You told us how you couldn't say anything because he sent a note to the school telling them you had a skin condition that required medical stuff to be done. After hearing that, three of the guys were able to get help for their parents who had been given too many drugs by doctors, one of the guys got help when his dad lost his job and started taking it out

on his family, and one of the guys busted a teacher who had the wrong idea of what it should take for girls to get an 'A' in his class. That's just the ones I know of."

"I wish I could get my hands on that so-called 'Doctor'," Bob stated angrily.

"Block Charlie Seven," Colin replied evenly. "You'll have to settle for a verbal assault though; that one is being saved for JJ to prosecute."

"Why JJ?" Adam asked.

"What he did to Mini was bad, but he's also 'seen' Kyle," Colin replied. "The charges against him on Kyle's behalf are bad enough that I refuse to take away JJ's rights as brother to try the asshole."

Ezra winced as he spoke up. "I just had a private conversation with Uncle JJ. He says to tell you he's going to have me and Poppa Ty take him to handle the trial tomorrow just before we leave Des Moines."

"There goes my idea about asking for a tour of the base tomorrow," Mick quipped. "If you've got someone there that hurt Kyle, I don't want to be anywhere NEAR there when JJ gets his hands on them."

"CHICKEN!" Julio giggled, causing the mood to lighten in the room as the rest of the boys joined in the giggles.

Even Bob was smiling as he kneeled in front of Mini once again. "What do you say, son? Do you still think that you don't deserve this?"

"I ... I guess I do," Mini whispered. "I ... I never tried though ...."

Bob leaned forward and kissed Mini's forehead. "Nobody who gets one of these tries to get it, son. Just like Lucas didn't try to get that medal that he was just awarded. He did what he knew to be right, and didn't back down until he was done. I know where he learned that, too; he learned it from his big brother."

Mini gave a small smile in response to the compliment, then slowly put his arm out for Bob to place the tattoo. Out of respect for what they had just witnessed, the room stayed silent; none had words that would do anything but lessen the moment.

Once it was done, Mini gave Bob a hug, then held out his arms for his little brothers. Almost instantly, the twins were latched to his side once more. Mini looked over at Alien, and almost begged, "Hold me babe, please?"

Almost instantly, Julio's bed was vacated for the four boys. Alien laid down first, then Mini let go of the twins just long enough to lay chest-to-chest. He then held out his arm, silently beckoning the twins to join them. A few seconds later, they sorted out positions; Alien with Mini securely in his arms on top of him, and a twin on either side being clasped in Mini's arms as tightly as he could. Julio got a cover out of his closet, and put it over the four boys.

"Julio, have Dad fill in the guys about my history, please?" Alien asked softly. "My angel is hurtin' and he needs me."

"Don't worry, just take care of your brothers," Julio replied.

"Well, before we go, there are a few more things I need to do. I was gonna do them later, but what the hell, no time like the present, right?" Adam said, and once again all eyes were on him.

"Due to the large influx of people in the UNIT, we've had to do a major restructure. Colin, Kris, neither of you are aware of this, since you've been here for the last several hours, and since we only rolled this out UNIT-wide about three hours ago. There are now four levels within the UNIT... you have the strike teams, which are ten-person units. Then you have Assault teams, which are again ten-person teams; however, they have either received more advanced training, or they have proven themselves and have been upgraded. Above them you have Divisions, which consist of ten strike/assault teams. Then you have a Battalion, which consists of two strike/assault divisions and one medical/air wing division."

"Okay, now that all of your heads are spinning, there is one last piece of information I need to make you all aware of, so you know what is happening. When a Division is assigned to a base, they will have two primary areas of responsibility. The first is base security, and the second is operations. It's pretty self explanatory; however, security deals with base security only, while operations deals with any operations that will be conducted out of the base. Everyone with me so far?"

Getting nods from most people, Adam smiled mischievously at Colin, who immediately started to protest. "OH HELL NO!!!! I am not gonna be some gad-damned paper pusher!"

Adam started to burst out laughing, then leaned in and whispered conspiratorially. "Just do what I do, and hand all that shit over to your Intel officer... that's what they like!" Colin couldn't help but burst out laughing with everyone else as Logan slapped him upside the head.

Adam took back up talking as he rubbed the back of his head with a grin. "Anyways, yes, Colin... Congratulations, you are now the commanding officer of Division Alpha Seven. Kris will be your XO and responsible for the Operations side of things, while you will directly handle Security. On top of the eight strike teams, and two assault teams, you will also be getting a complete Air Wing, as soon as there is room for them. The Air Wing commander..." Adam couldn't hold his grin on this one, "Will be Eoghan O'Reilley. Congratulations Colonel."

"And just WHO did I piss off to get stuck with the 'Mad Irishman'?" Colin asked with a grin.

"Weeelllll... actually... he *requested* the assignment. He said he liked the way you operated."

"Just because I'm about the only person who hasn't chewed his butt for doing practice strafing runs on the playground doesn't mean that's the way I run things!" Colin protested.

"Well... you'll just have to try and rein him in some.... Good luck with that, though."

"There's about as much chance of that as there is of you two giving up barbecue sauce!" Colin stated as he quickly moved out of striking distance.



Well... anyways... you got him and the rest of his wing... all hand-picked by him, of course, ready to come by as soon as you guys are ready," Adam said, trying to ignore the comment. "And with that... I think it is best for us to get home now."

"With all due respect, sir ... Chicken!!" Colin giggled as he grinned at his commanding officers.

"Well, I think that's our cue to head back home. If you guys need anything, just call for Dailess and he'll let us know." Adam started to walk towards his lover when he stopped and turned towards Bob with a grin on his face. "Oh yeah.. I almost forgot. In about ten minutes, the remaining eight members of the 'Flying Dutchman' strike team are gonna show up. Do you got room for them all, or do we need to get Peter over here for some quick renovations? Oh.. and you need to pick a place for them to store all their weapons and other equipment. Not to mention that Lucas is gonna need a reinforced room for his lab and explosives storage. But, I'm sure that can all be worked out. CYA!" With that both Adam and Logan disappeared.

As Bob and Colin sat on the edge of the bed containing the rest of their family, Bob looked around the room. "Okay, we've all heard, or have been reminded of, too much bad crap today. It's time for a positive history, one that so far has a happy ending. It's the story of Tracy Perkins, known to y'all as 'Alien'."

Bob watched with amusement as Fisher carefully made his way up Colin's leg and made himself comfortable on Colin's lap. "Looks like you've got a new friend, Son," Bob chuckled, gaining him a smile from Colin. "Okay, everyone, except for details which are private between Mini and Alien, here is the story of how we ended up with an alien in our family. I've heard this hundreds of times, since when Mini is feeling down he always asks Alien to repeat it. Alien was born as Tracy Perkins to Mark and Charlotte Perkins twelve years ago on Colony Bravo Five. For the first year of his life, things seemed to be going okay. But then he became a statistic, one that would change Mini's and my lives for the better."

Bob paused, then continued. "Alien is the unfortunate victim of Murphy's Law. He suffers from an affliction which only affects one out of every five thousand residents of the Colony. One of the unique elements, common during growing season in the atmosphere of Bravo Five is tribromofluorohydrate. In most cases, it has no effect on humans, but a small percentage require the equivalent of an allergy shot to prevent their body's pancreas from self-destructing. There is one serious side-effect to the antitoxin; it pretty much blocks the onset of puberty, so it is usually reserved for pre-pubescent and adults. The recommended action once the child is eight is to get them off-planet until they have completed puberty. This is important in one way, and if you all understand it, I can continue with telling you how this led to Alien becoming one of us."

He looked around the room, and once he was satisfied that there were no questions, he continued. "Just after his seventh birthday, Alien's mom brought him to Earth to raise him through puberty. His Dad had to stay on-planet, since the colony is still small and they need every person they've got. The thing about Bravo Five is that its gravity is slightly higher than Earth's; just enough that there is a noticeable difference in strength between those born there and those born on Earth. To keep Alien 'in shape', his Mom arranged for him to be active in summer sports as well as martial arts training and swimming. Once a week, the family would get together over subspace and spend 'family time' together, updating each other on what was happening in their lives. Charlotte took advantage of the time here, and updated her studies by taking courses while Alien was at school."

"And you guys complain about ME being long-winded!" Mick quipped, earning him multiple soft objects flying through the air towards his head.

"That's because I stick to *interesting* subjects!" Bob laughed. "As I was saying. At that time, Mini was pretty much a loner at school. Somehow, he and Alien clicked and began spending time together during recess and lunch. Based on some of the comments that Alien made during the family meetings, Charlotte began to wonder about Mini's home life and started trying to steer Alien into getting his friend to get out of the house. Occasionally she'd manage to convince Mini's parents to let him visit overnight on the summers, which I now know they only gave in to in order to appear normal. Mini started to take an interest in Alien's attempts to learn baseball, so sometime during their second school year they decided to go out for Little League... a decision pushed by Charlotte insisting on watching Mini's little brothers while the older boys practiced and/or played games. That eliminated the only argument that Mini's parents had, so they agreed to it just as sign ups began."

Bob wiped his eyes. "About a month before the first practice, the twins vanished. By the first practice, the only thing keeping Mini going was the support that Alien was giving him. As a side note, that first season was the only break Mini had from his abuse; that much he *has* said. Alien all but dragged Mini to the first practice. The two of them were in the back of the group, sitting quietly, when I came out. I had just taken over management of the team, and had brought in a new coach who I had a lot of confidence in. I had a son myself once; he was taken in a freak car accident. Jake was the same age as the twins, nine, and loved to draw. His favorite two drawings are both on Mini's body now; they were his 'killer butterfly' collection."

After a pause to collect himself, Bob went on. "I had a dream that Jake visited me. In my dream, he insisted that I get temporary tattoos made of these two drawings, along with his little butterfly he signed his drawings with. He insisted in the dream that I use his drawings to form a club with my new team called the 'Butterfly Hunters'."

As Eddie decided now was the time to crawl into Bob's lap and cuddle, a rustling behind Bob made him glance behind himself. To his surprise, the four boys that were laying down previously were now sitting up, tangled in a giant cuddleball, listening intently to his story.

Bob turned back and continued. "I came out and introduced myself, then to lighten the mood, I asked if there were any aliens on the team. To my surprise, one hand was raised... and a new nickname was born. As soon as he told me where he was from, I told Coach Roberts to look up special training to help him. Next to him was a quiet little guy, almost hiding as he tried to be invisible. The boy reminded me so much of what I looked like as a kid that I jokingly told him 'if you don't tell me your name, I'm going to have to just call you Mini-Me.' That made the little angel crack a small smile, probably the first one since his brothers vanished. When he said 'go ahead, I hate my name', the legend of Mini and Alien began. I didn't think much more of it, so I went ahead and gave the butterfly speech that the boys love repeating, then informed everyone that they had made the team by just showing up. By the third practice, both boys had started hovering nearby when we were not actually on the field. Charlotte took me aside one day after practice, and got me in the loop about her suspicions about Mini and the situation with Alien. After that, I took more of an interest in the two boys, and got their teammates to help watch out for Mini."

"Yeah, you cheated," Alien giggled from behind him. "It was a good cheat though."

"I'm glad I did," Bob replied. "Up until last year, we never had enough evidence to get Mini out of his situation. Two weeks after we won the World Series the first time, we were having a team dinner to celebrate after returning home. Charlotte had completed her studies, and since I had become such a good friend to her and her husband, they sprung a surprise on me a week before the dinner. They had made arrangements with one of the other boys' moms who works for CPS. Before you get the wrong idea, remember that Alien understands the sacrifices that his parents had to make to keep him healthy. As colonists, the entire colony depends on each person, just like the Clan depends on every member. The three of them decided that, if I was willing, it would be in all of their best interests if they were to give me custody of Alien so that the rest of his family had a better chance of survival on their home planet. Since Iowa is one of the signers of the Displaced Explorers Act, CPS had an express lane to help fast-track the paperwork for foster care. I was told I could adopt Alien if I wanted to, since neither one of his parents expects him to return to the colony unless he can bring Mini along. I think Mark figured it out first, when he told the boys on one of his calls that they were either brothers or boyfriends, and once they figured it out, let him know so he could plan for either one or two weddings."

Eddie peeked his head over Bob's shoulder, and asked the boys, "Have you figger'd it out yet?"

As the rest of the room smiled at Eddie's innocent question, Mini snuggled tighter into the ball, then softly answered, "Yeah, Eddie. Me and Alien are gonna marry someday."

Eddie smiled back. "Kewl! You's a nice couple!"

Bob tousled Eddie's hair as he guided him back to his seat. "Can I get back to the story now, rugrat?"

"Uh-huh!" Eddie replied with a grin.

Bob shook his head with a grin. "Just before the party started, I was taken aside by Doctor Chazwick, he's our catcher's dad, and Jackie, who is the one that works for CPS. That is when I found out why I had not seen Mini in a week; it seems that Mini had a broken arm... and Doctor Chaz was extremely suspicious about it because of the type of break. Unfortunately, Mini would only say 'he fell' at the hospital, so nothing concrete was known about it. Since they knew I had a habit of gaining Mini's trust, they hoped I could get him to tell the truth about what happened to him. His parents dropped him off and left immediately, since they felt that 'our type' were not high enough on the social scale for them. That was their second mistake... their first was also not telling Alien that Mini had been hurt. The second Alien saw Mini in a cast, he taught most of the adults in the room some very ... picturesque ... words. By the time he had cooled down enough to start using words from the dictionary again, it appeared to me from Mini's expression, that he had just figured out how much Alien really cared for him. This was totally unplanned, but I blurted out, 'Mini, if you don't tell us what happened, we're going to be visiting you at a funeral home soon. I'm pretty sure Alien will be right next to you; it'd kill him if he couldn't protect you.' Mini stared at me for a second, then tears started running down his face as he started muttering, 'They'll kill him...' over and over."

Bob paused for a breath. "Doctor Chaz took the break to tell all of us just how bad Mini's arm was; and how we'd have to help him learn to compensate when he was batting. By the time he was done, the entire team had turned into a lynch mob wanting to hold batting practice on whoever hurt their Mini. As Mini insisted once more that 'they'll kill him', Jackie told him, 'No they won't. If I need to, you'll be going home with Alien to Bob's house tonight... with a twenty-four-hour police guard.' I'm not sure if it was that or Alien growling 'tell us', but Mini walked over to me and wrapped his good arm around me. 'It hurt... I left my window open... Dad said I was gonna get taken like my brothers ... he hadda teach

me a lesson ... he closed it on my arm ... really hard ... five times ... he said I'd learn to listen ... an' if I told he'd ... he'd ... he'd kill Alien.' He then broke down and really started crying."

Bob wiped his eyes, then continued. "That was the fastest I've ever seen a doctor dial a phone, but Jackie was even faster. Within the next minute, I found out that one of the boys' moms had brought her detective boyfriend with her, that CPS had been standing by with paperwork for just this possibility, and never cross a doctor who is friends with the Captain of the State Police in Des Moines. Especially if the Captain overhears a detective stating he witnessed it being said. Within thirty minutes, we were informed that the parents were in custody; and I was informed that I would be taking two kids home that night who were permanently placed in my care."

"We still ended up having the dinner that night, but the team insisted on it being dual purpose; celebrate our win and show Mini our support of his bravery in speaking up. That is when they came up with the tattoo idea, and one of the dads offered to do it for them, as long as each parent signed a permission slip in person in front of him before it was done. He's actually the only one any of the boys will let do it; even the Jersey boys parents paid for him to fly out there to give their sons the badges. Mini's parents managed to find a lawyer who was able to twist things enough to get them off with counseling and classes, with a no-contact order until both were satisfactorily completed. The judge wasn't stupid though... he had CPS select the psychiatrist. Jackie is high enough in CPS that she was able to make sure the Doctor assigned for the counseling was fully aware of the entire situation. Needless to say, last I heard they still had not been cleared."

"Just because they're gonna miss the rest of their appointments...." Colin stated with a satisfied grin.

"That's beside the point," Bob chuckled. "As of this morning, we still have weekly conferences with Alien's parents. Just this morning, we got to meet Alien's new little brother... who checks out just fine; he does not have the allergies Alien does. He's been named after me for some reason."

"Maybe it's because you're a lot better person than you give yourself credit for," a female voice announced over the intercom.

"Charlotte? How'd you get here?" Bob asked in shock, as Mini and Alien stared at each other.

"I'm not here; a nice boy named Daileass arranged for us to listen in while Mini was being reunited with his brothers. We can't wait to re-meet the twins in person; you two have grown to be a lot like your big brother from the sound of it."

"Thanks, Ma'am," Logan responded for both of them.

"You can call me Mom like your brother does if you want," Charlotte replied. "I'm sure Mark won't mind you calling him your second Dad too; he'd tell you himself, but right now he's working off his anger at what happened to you by making trees into toothpicks."

"He's pissed... he HATES chopping wood," Alien confided.

Lucas giggled and stage whispered to Alien, "Tell your dad if he wants, I can send him a good easy recipe that'll make splitting wood as simple as lighting a match."

"I heard that," Charlotte chuckled. "Wait until the next time we have a family meeting; I'm sure he'll take you up on it." She paused, then added, "I really missed getting to know you two better before you vanished. You guys are Mini's life; even while you were gone he never stopped talking about you with us. The slim chance that you guys would be back one day is the only thing that kept him fighting after Bob became his foster father. He told us millions of times about how he wanted to share his new family with you, and no matter how depressed he got, especially when his arm gives him problems, he wouldn't give up just in case you were still alive."

As the twins smiled and cuddled their brother, Ezra walked over to the trio. "Can I see what he did to your arm?" Ezra asked seriously.

"You can look at the outside, but how can you see what was done?" Mini asked.

Ezra smiled. "I can control energy, which means I know how to look at stuff at a tiny level. Uncle Danny let Daddy copy the medical books in his head, so all of us know what bodies are supposed to look like inside."

"He's okay, bro," Logan added. "We've trained with some of the Mickys, they're awesome."

Mini nodded at Ezra to take a look. A few seconds later, Ezra's smile was gone as he finished inspecting the arm. "Plastisteel rods in place of three inches of both bones. Unrecoverable damage to forearm muscles and tendons. Forty-seven percent loss of the nerve bundle in the carpal tunnel. I'm not allowed to judge a human, since I've never been human and can't comprehend human motives. The creature that did this to Mini could get an antimatter enema and I wouldn't shed a tear." Ezra paused to regain his temper, then took Mini's weak hand. "Uncle Bones could probably fix you up so things don't get worse; he might even be able to make them better. I just told Daddy about your injuries, an' he said that Uncle Bones would chew me a new butt if I didn't ask you this. I can make your arm like it wasn't damaged. I won't take your memory of it, but I can fix it. It'll be weaker than your other arm for a while until you build it up. Do you want me to do that for you?"

"Doc Jones said he couldn't fix it really good even with all the new stuff he's getting to play with," Mini replied. "He was gonna see what he could do next week, but he already told me that there was so much damage done that I was lucky I still have an arm at all."

"That's all I needed to hear. Do you want it fixed?" Ezra asked once again.

"You can try," Mini replied, not really believing that the possibility existed of once again having full use of his right arm and hand.

Ezra nodded, then put his hands around the worst area of Mini's injury. A blue glow appeared over Mini's entire forearm, masking the view of what was happening under it. Ezra regressed the injury to before it happened, then regressed again six more times until he finally reached a point where the arm internals had no evidence of being injured. He then accelerated the regrowth of everything, bypassing the injuries that happened over Mini's short life. Once the arm was at the same growth stage as the rest of Mini's body, Ezra returned it to normal time and took a step back. "Try it out," Ezra said with a sad smile.

Mini flexed his fingers, then wrapped his arm around Lucas, slowly squeezing his little brother tighter and tighter. Lucas smiled as he felt the hug actually starting to cause discomfort despite the enhancements he'd been subjected to. "Works ... almost ... hurts ... but ... a ... good ... hurt," Lucas croaked.

"Why the sad smile, Ezra?" Bob asked.

"I had to go back to when he was two to find a time when the arm had not been injured," Ezra stated. "If you'd like, I'll provide the antimatter for that enema ... I fixed a few other things that were really messed up that Mini doesn't tell you about while I was at it. Anything that's left, doctors can fix."

A second later, a glowing bag encased in a magnetic transport box - of the style used by Starfleet to move their 'fuel' safely - appeared in the room at Bob's feet. "There," Ezra said with a stiff smile. "I decided not to wait for a 'yes' to my question."

"What is it?" Bob asked.

"Liquid anti-matter," Ezra grinned evilly. "We don't urinate, but you could think of it as "Mikyvis-piss' if it would make you feel better!"

"You said you fixed other stuff. Is that why my hip feels funny?" Mini asked seriously as he watched Bob shake his head in wonder.

"I know you don't remember it, but your sperm donor and egg donor decided that you were too mobile when you were about eighteen months old. They dislocated your hip, then the sperm donor used his acupuncture knowledge to numb the area. When you learned to walk, you unconsciously learned to compensate for the fact that it was never properly reset, and now that he's not screwing with your body with his needles, you were feeling so much low-level pain from all of your injuries that nothing stood out to tell you it was messed up. You need to tell Doctor Jones about anything you still feel; there are a lot of things left from your years of torture that you're going to notice now that I've fixed the really messed-up stuff." Ezra then turned to Bob. "Tell Doctor Jones to keep needles away from all three of these guys. The twins have seen the misuse of them, and Mini has experienced more of them in his life than everyone else in this room put together."

"That is one order I'll personally ensure is followed," Bob replied, his face white from the shock of the latest revelations of Mini's past.

While this was going on, Lucas had been mentally holding a conference with some of the other telepaths in the room. As Lucas wiggled out of Mini's embrace, Eddie hopped down and grabbed his cloak from the closet that he, Julio, and Johnny shared. Lucas stood up and pointed at Kris then Eddie as he locked eyes with Colin. Despite his obvious pain in doing so, he spoke for the entire room to hear. "The game is over. We are going to hold the parents' trial. NOW! All five of us, we demand justice as a family."

The room shivered at the expression on Lucas' face. There was no anger, no revenge, just an ice-cold determination that clearly said he was determined to ensure his big brother's ordeal was absolutely over... permanently.

"Dailess, do you need a list?" Colin asked, knowing that delaying it was not a good idea.

"Of course not. I helped select the telepaths!" Daileass replied. "That's what you get for not participating in our mental pow-wows. Tell me when you're ready, Wet Dream."

"I'll give you a wet dream..." Colin replied. "Smart-ass."

"I've seen your hardware, it's not up to my standards!" Daileass giggled.

*'If you start giving my boyfriend wet dreams, Colin, I'll personally beam your boy-bits to the moon... leaving YOU behind!'* another AI giggled from the communicators scattered around the room.

"But... but... I don't dream of anything other than you, sweetie!" Daileass replied sheepishly, but with obvious laughter.

Before Colin could think of a comeback, Daileass added, "Ezzy, you're on your own for transportation. Initiating transport." As the seven boys vanished, he added, "They'll be back shortly; this shouldn't take long."

"I'll be right back," Ezra stated as he too vanished.

Mick looked around the room, and chuckled at the lost expressions on most of the faces. "Teri warned Janice and me about this. Welcome to 'Introduction to Chaos 101', everyone! It gets better, she promised... either that or you get used to it."

Julio shook his head. "It's not just that, Dad. How come I never caught on to just how bad Mini had it?"

Bob signaled to Mick to let him answer. "Julio, coming from someone that has a slight idea about it in comparison to Mini, I can probably answer that. Someone who has been abused all of their lives tends to put up walls. If you can't see physical damage, sometimes it is hard to tell unless you've been there. I was as surprised as the rest of you today; Mini's walls were really strong, and he never dropped them after he was safe. My guess is that there are at least four faces of Mini. His public face for those he don't know, his face for his friends, his face for his family, and the face we all first saw today... the hurting little boy who is afraid to reach out because all he knows as reality is pain. I've never seen today's face... I think the only two people who might have ever saw it are his little brothers."

Marcie nodded. "He's right. Mental abuse is known for doing that; in fact in severe cases it can actually lead to multiple personalities if the brain is destabilized enough."

"So I didn't screw up?" Julio asked softly.

"No, you didn't," Marcie replied. "You might start noticing things in the past that you think should have told you. That is just your brain finally figuring things out now that it has a comparison. Don't beat yourself up over it; just take mental notes so that if you see it again, you can be on your guard to help out. Secrecy is a serial abuser's best friend; if you can sidestep it, then you've beat them."

"One other thing," Bob said as he looked around the room. "Mini was damn good at hiding, but he made one mistake which got the attention of those who've been there. It's simple once you think about it. He portrayed his home life as too perfect. He never had the little complaints about parents that every

kid has. It's not something that you'd think about unless you're made aware of it or you've done it yourself."

"How are we going to help kids who are hiding like that?" Jesse asked.

Eddie raised his hand. "I can tell sometimes. Unless they're really hiding hard like Mini was, they always think about trying to keep people from knowing. Even Mini's public thoughts, his thoughts on the top of his head, were not like Julio's or yours, Jesse. He wasn't always thinking kid stuff is the best way to say it."

"Good catch, son!" Mick stated, which gained him a glowing smile from Eddie. "I think we've all learned something today; and from now on we'll all be able to help better."

Ricky nodded. "Part of the issue with my training is that the creeps running the project didn't think about teaching us anything but how to kill effectively. Adam and Logan taught the troops a lot since we became Clan Special Forces, but nobody has really had the time to sit down and explain it like was just done. Dailess, could you please make the conversation we just had into a training vid for the rest of the troops?"

"And could you send me a copy, please?" Charlotte asked.

"You got it, Kris. I will arrange for a courier to deliver a set of the videos to you, Charlotte." Dailess responded.

"Thank you, cutie!" Charlotte replied, causing everyone to giggle as they heard what could only be an audible blush from the young AI.

"Not to change the subject ... but ... INCOMING!" Dailess announced, a split second before the group re-appeared from their trip to the UNIT base.

Bob scanned the faces of his sons. Colin's face was absent of emotion with the exception of a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. Alien seemed shocked, but was caressing both twins' shoulders; his actions those of someone proud of what was done. Both of the twins were obvious; their satisfaction clearly read in their eyes and posture. Then Bob tried to look at Mini's face, and received the shock of his life. He couldn't see Mini's eyes for one reason; Mini was lovingly staring at a newborn baby wrapped in a blanket that he was carefully holding in his arms.

"Bobby's crib is set up in your bedroom, Mini," Ezra announced as he appeared with a second crib.

"Where does this one go, Julio? Bobby's gotta have a place to sleep when he visits with his brothers."

"Bobby?" Bob asked, confused.

"Yeah, he's our new little brother. Really sad too, she died after being in labor for three hours... I think it was too much for her," Mini stated, not even a trace of compassion in his voice.

"Once the trial and birth were done, I brought the guys back in time to the point they were needed, to here," Ezra replied to the unasked question. "I was able to bring her body to the point of going into la-



bor, but for safety I wouldn't accelerate time while the baby was being born. The labor was natural. And just a note, humans are wayyyy too messy giving birth! Ewwww!"

"She was sentenced to death, but had an aneurysm just as our doctor cut the umbilical cord," Colin explained. "Mini requested that we let her die instead of trying to revive her to kill her. We agreed with him, and told the doctor the reason why. Mini and Alien went with the doctor to check Bobby's health, while Lucas and Logan delivered the sentence to the sperm donor."

"What was Eddie doing?" Mick asked, his worry about what his youngest might have seen plain in his voice.

"Reloading needle-guns," Colin replied. "Somehow, his ex-father was transferred to the UNIT holding cells." Ignoring the halo that suddenly appeared over Ezra's head, Colin paused to decide how to phrase his words. "Eddie requested a telepathic review. We found quite a few 'interesting' things that nobody knew about. At Eddie's request, Lucas and Logan carried out his sentence as well; once I tried him for his crimes."

Johnny stared wide-eyed at his little brother. "He's really gone? Not just sittin' in jail?"

Eddie nodded. "Yeah; after he was really really dead, Colin showed me howta use a phaser an' I got to vaporize his body. My tummy feels better now that I made sure he couldn't come back alive again."

Seeing the expression on Mick's face, Colin quickly added "Doctor Phil checked over a telepathic and empathic read of Eddie before we considered the idea. It was his professional opinion that doing such would aid greatly in healing the trauma which Eddie still suffers from his own abuse."

"Doctor Phil?" Mick repeated. "Not *the* Doctor Phil, the one who wrote 'Untangling your troubled teen'? Dan Richardson recommended that book to me when we picked up Julio from that last party at Teri's before they moved."

"One and the same," Kris and Colin replied in unison, causing giggles through the room.

As Julio and Jesse quietly argued over the best place to put the crib, Marcie walked over to Mini. "He's cute, just like his brothers," she commented as she lightly stroked the baby's head. "May I hold him?"

Mini looked up at her. "Yeah," he replied softly. "I gotta get Doctor Jones over here. I promised Lucas that I'd get fixed up so that I can be there for all three of them."

As Marcie carefully took Bobby from Mini, she smiled at Mini. "You're a great big brother. Don't change, and don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

Mini smiled, a genuine smile that had been missing most of the day. "Thank you. Lucas and Logan kinda showed me that too in my head. They've been tellin' me all the good 'big brother' stuff that they remember us doing."

"That's great," Marcie replied with a smile. She made sure the twins were paying attention, then added, "After seeing Lucas and Logan's reunion with you, I can say with certainty that there is one thing they never lost. They never lost the ability to love, which is something that they could have only learned

from you, Mini. I've heard enough about your previous situation to be able to say for sure that you had to be the one who taught them that."

Mini turned his head to look at his little brothers. "They taught me, too," he said with love, causing both boys to smile back at him. "Extra cuddles once I call the Doc," he added.

"He's on his way already," Daileass announced. "He insisted on walking, then insulted me by saying there was no way he'd trust his life to being transported by an oversized transistor radio!" he added with a pout.

"While we're waiting..." Kris chuckled, trying to keep from commenting about the medical profession's dislike of transport, "has anyone figured out where the strike team is going to stay?"

Marcie reached into her pocket and pulled out a purple business card. She smiled as she read the text on the card, then spoke out loud. "Daileass, can you connect me to Peter?"

"Sure!" Daileass replied. A few seconds later, a young voice came over the speaker in the room. "You have reached the Mikyvis Construction Corps, a division of the Quintessential Quantum Quality Quonstruction Group. At this time, we are caught in a time paradox, and are unable to take your call. Please leave a message with your name and Division location, and we will get back to you within thirty seconds. Thank you."

Marcie smiled at the humor, not really expecting that fast of a response. "This is Marcie at the Des Moines Headquarters. It appears that we have a sudden expansion in kids here. Please get with me as soon as possible."

A nine-year-old blond boy wearing a purple hardhat popped up in the middle of the room, accompanied by two boys with sandy blond hair and gray eyes and a prosthetic leg. "You rang?" they chimed.

"What took you so long, Petey?" Ezra giggled.

"I had to stop off and collect these guys - and Leg needed to get his toenails trimmed," Peter giggled.

"Excuses, excuses!" Ezra giggled. "You're such a queen, Leg!"

Everyone in the room had turned to see the new visitors, and they all collapsed in laughter as Leg flipped upside-down and folded over all but its middle toe at Ezra.

"So what do you need, Mrs. Wilson?" Peter asked.

Marcie put her finger to the side of her head in thought. "It seems Bob has adopted an entire strike team, which means his house is definitely in need of expansion. I'll probably need a bigger kitchen already, and that nice boy Adam said something about explosives and places to put weapons...."

"That's all fixed," Eli said.

"Enlarged kitchen AND dining room, twelve new bedrooms, and an armory - and a direct connection under the Wilson house to CIC," Peter said.

"You need to register the rifle range with the Urbandale City Hall, though," Benji added.

"We got that finished on our way here," Peter concluded. "Anything else?"

Leg took a bow.

"A baseball field so we can teach these guys a real game?" Mini asked with a smile.

"Look out the window," Benji giggled.

"Any chance we can get a proving ground near by?" Lucas mentally sent to everyone in the room.

"I think you already *proved* how much mayhem you can create!" Eli giggled. "Look out the window already!"

Mini grabbed his little brothers' hands, and ran over to the window. The first thing he noticed was that their house was no longer directly behind the CIC property, it was now off to the left side, making the complex an 'L' shape. The streets had been rerouted, turning the combination of wooded areas and former yards into one big property. Directly outside the window, there were now three new additions. On the left, workmen were in the process of laying stripes on a brand-new baseball field. In the center, a new soccer field was also in the process of being striped. On the right, a fenced-off area where a sturdy block building was in the process of getting signage warning of explosive and ballistic hazards in the area.

As Mini grabbed his brothers' hands, Peter took a hard look at him, then turned to Ezra. "Nice work, bro!" he said with warmth.

"Thanks," Ezra answered, blushing.

"Lucas says all we're missing is a hanger so he can harass the flyboys!" Logan giggled.

"How big, and where?" Peter giggled back.

Logan giggled as Lucas relayed his answer. "He says far enough away that our house does not get hit by shrapnel, and big enough that it takes a while for the flyboys to evacuate!"

"Naah, the chopper pad and hangar are on the roof of the new addition to the Busch house," Benji commented straight-faced.

"No way!" Mini exclaimed as Logan fell to the floor laughing. "I ain't listening to someone beating their rotors first thing in the morning! That's what Lucas said will happen!"

Leg hopped to the desk, grabbed a pencil between its toes, and studiously wrote for a second, grabbing the slip of paper between its toes and bringing it over to Mini, who read it and began laughing.

"What's it say?" Alien asked.

"Ever hear of soundproofing?" Mini replied.

Eli of course was looking innocent through all this.

"Just what did you add to my house?" Bob asked with a chuckle, not believing the boys would be *that* cruel to each other.

"Oh, twenty bedrooms, each suitable for two boys in bunk beds, an armory, a properly reinforced area in the basement for Lucas's explosives work, a lounge or meeting room for the guys, and of course the helipad and hangar. Oh, and we enlarged your kitchen and dining area." Peter ticked the additions off on his fingers.

Logan spoke up with a grin, "Don't forget the oversized litter pan for the kitties."

"Kitties?" Bob asked, as Mick began rolling on the floor in laughter. "And why so many bedrooms? I HOPE each one has a bathroom!"

"Bathrooms?" Eli said in shock.

"I *knew* we forgot something!" Peter added.

"You expect all of us to use *litterboxes*?" Alien exclaimed.

"Well, it might be funny!" Eli giggled.

"Hey Lucas, I know where Eli sleeps!" Ezra stated between giggles.

Lucas grinned as he had Logan relay his response. "Kewl! Better warn Starfleet about a bed being launched into orbit!"

"Don't be picking on my team, Ezzy," Peter replied, sticking out his tongue at his fellow Mikyvis.

"Okay, I'll ask Dylan to do it for me!" Ezra replied.

Bob was still shaking his head. "That house has two bathrooms. How in the ...."

"Psych!" yelled Peter, Benji, and Eli together. Mini, Logan and Lucas were rolling on the floor in hysterical laughter.

"It has twelve bathrooms, sir," Peter told Bob. "Mostly a bathroom shared between each two rooms, with two rooms having private bathrooms. We figured you might have a couple or two that needs privacy."

"Privacy? Where have I heard that word before?" Bob mused. "Oh, that's right... that was one of the things I had before I took in the two rats giggling with their brothers."

Both Mini and Alien blew raspberries at Bob before Alien replied "Hey! YOU are the one who snores so loud that the neighbors complained to the police about you revving your Harley in the house at 2am!"

"You don't think I know who put the microphone under my pillow, put the speakers in the window, then turned the amp all the way up?" Bob replied with a grin, one which dissolved into laughter when Ezra assisted the boys by giving both of them halos.

Not to be outdone, Peter and his two buddies began wearing halos as well, but also shining with a subdued golden glow. "Umm...: Benji said, hastily crossing his legs.

The escapades were interrupted by a loud yell from the entryway. "What in the Sam Hell! Daileass! I'm going to turn you into scrap, you overconfident reject from the LED watch factory! What did you do to my clothes!"

"Um... I think we're needed back in Syracuse," Peter said hastily, as he, Benji, Leg, and Eli vanished.

"CHICKENS!" Mick chuckled as he headed for the door. "It sounds like the Doctor is in the house!" A few seconds later, Mick's laughter could be heard throughout the house as he greeted the visitor. Shortly thereafter, Mick ran into the room, Doctor Mike Jones hot on his heels swinging a pink purse at Mick's head which perfectly matched the tutu that the doctor was now wearing.

"I'll give you a seven, Daileass!" Ezra laughed as he 'assisted' Mike by returning him to his normal clothes. "You forgot the high heels!"

"It was worth it watching him chase Mick!" Daileass giggled.

"I left a set he can borrow in Bob's entry closet, if they fit!" Charlotte added in helpfully.

"Just remember, Char, you have to get a physical if you come back to Earth!" Mike growled.

"You know, Mike," Janice managed to get out between sniggers, "If you ask nicely, Daileass might give you pictures! Your patients will be laughing so hard they'll forget that you're a doctor!"

"The prints are in your desk, Doc!" Daileass announced cheerfully. "Personally, I think the best one was when you had the direct hit on the back of Mick's head!"

Mike shook his head, finally letting a grin appear. "All those guys who listened to the teachers at Med School who said steer clear of Pediatrics don't know what they're missing. Boring is definitely NOT part of the job!" He looked around the room, and spotted Mini being supported by his little brothers, his eyes running with tears from laughing. "I do believe little Mini is multiplying!" Mike stated with a grin. "I had a message that you wanted me to come over, Mini. Is there something wrong?"

Mini glanced suspiciously at the bag in Mike's hand. "You don't got any needles in your purse... umm... I mean your bag, do you?"

"No needles, promise," Mike replied seriously, ignoring the giggles about the 'purse' slip.

Mini found himself being 'escorted' by his little brothers to the Doctor's side. "You're going to give him a full physical," Logan stated matter-of-factly. "Right now, and he IS going to let you fix whatever you find."

"A mini Mini with an attitude!" Mike chuckled. "What do you say, Mini?"

"He can kick my butt without breaking a sweat, I'm not arguing!" Mini giggled as he put his arm over his brother's shoulders. Mini paused, then added with a grin, "Mike, these are my little brothers Logan and Lucas. When you're done with me, I'm pulling the big brother card; you get to see if you can help Lucas out. He hasn't talked for a long time, and now when he tries it hurts him."

At the sight of Lucas glaring at him, Mini giggled. "Fair is fair, Freakazoid Two."

Lucas's glare immediately vanished, and a smile appeared as he melted against Mini's side. "I missed you calling me that, bro," Lucas forced out, his discomfort obvious as he wrapped his arms around Mini.

Mike's eyebrows raised as his expression softened. "Stand still, let me scan all three of you," he stated as he pulled a tricorder out of his bag. A few seconds later, his professional demeanor vanished. "Son of a sheep screwing moose sucking anal rejected waste of a sperm cell bitch! Find me the worm sucking bastards who fucked with these three... when I get done with them, there won't be enough left to be sent to their maker for final judgment."

Logan looked over to Lucas and stage whispered, "You know... he's almost as good as General Juan is when he gets mad." Lucas agreed with a very telling nod.

"Daileass, where is the nearest open online biobed?" Mike asked.

"We just brought the fourth one online at Blank," Daileass replied, realizing that right now was not a time to joke with Mike.

"It's mine," Mike stated. "Excuse me, but I have two boys to enter into my database and one boy who is alive by the grace of God. We will return shortly. Daileass: Medical code Alpha Three Nine. Why in the hell are we not there yet?"

"Because you're talking," Daileass replied just as the four of them vanished. After they were gone, he giggled. "Doctors are weird... they only like transporting and teleporting if it suits them, otherwise they whine like little babies!"

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### **Intensive Care, Blank Children's Hospital, Des Moines, IA:**

***Code Green, Trauma Two Alpha. Code Green, Trauma Two Alpha. Trauma teams report to Alpha Two and Alpha Three.***

Doctor Chuck Wilson threw his clipboard on the desk and sprinted out of the staff lounge. *Thank God the Starfleet trainers are still here*, he thought to himself as he sprinted down the hall, dodging nurses and interns who plastered themselves against the wall as soon as the call went out. *Our first trauma Code Green since the biobeds came online, and it's a double.*

As he ran into the Decontamination room, another recent upgrade provided to the hospital by the Federation since the designation as a FYS branch hospital, he quickly switched into his scrubs and burst through the doors into Trauma Two. He scanned the room quickly. Bed one was in use helping a young burn victim, monitored by one of the Starfleet Docs. Beds Two and Three were gathering staff quickly, and Bed Four was quickly being given a once-over as if it was about to have it's first occupant.

Thirty seconds later, all hell broke loose. As Mike appeared by Biobed Four with the three boys, two gurneys crashed through the doors one after the other, each holding a seven-year-old boy covered in blood. "What have we got?" Chuck asked loudly, as everyone scrambled to get the two young boys onto a biobed each. Mike turned to the twins and Mini. "I need to help the trauma team; you guys stay over here."

"Screw that; we're both trained as field medics by the UNIT," Logan stated. "Spence, wait here. Dai-leass, scrub us; we're going in."

Mike nodded, never one to argue with qualified help in a trauma situation. as the twins flickered for a second, then appeared in scrubs.

In answer to Chuck's question, the lead EMT replied, "Excessive internal and cranial trauma due to a plane crash outside Creston. The entire extended family was on a flight to a reunion cruise. One of the inboard engines failed, taking out the wing. Everyone but one of the pilots and these two were declared DOA on site. FYS has verified no surviving relatives, and is notifying the local Clan Short office of the situation."

"Consider them notified," Logan stated. "We're going to telepathically scan these guys as we're working. If we tell you something is wrong, don't argue, fix it. Clan Short hereby takes custody."

Logan's words added even more energy to the room, if it was possible. The Doctor from Bed One assisted with interpreting the biobed readouts on both boys, as the teams performed as many repairs to the young bodies as they could at one time.

Over by bed four, Mini was watching his little brothers with pride. It was clear that Logan, and Lucas through Logan, had taken charge of the situation. While not overriding the senior medical staff of the hospital, Logan coordinated the two beds like clockwork, ensuring that no time was wasted.

"You have some pretty impressive little brothers," the tech checking Bed Four commented as he moved over to stand next to Mini.

"Thanks; I didn't know they knew this stuff!" Mini replied, inwardly glad that he wasn't the only one impressed by the twins.

"Do you think that you could help me out?" the tech asked. "I'd really like to verify the scanners on this bed before it has to be used for helping someone like those two that are on Two and Three. Since it appears Doctor Jones is going to be busy for a little bit, it couldn't hurt to run some test scans on you while we're waiting."

Mini nodded. "I'm supposed to get a full physical anyway; he probably won't mind. It don't use needles, does it?"

The tech smiled. "No needles; that is old tech. Nothing that even looks like a needle."

"Okay, I'll help," Mini replied with a small smile.

As Mini got ready to climb on the bed, the tech noticed the fresh temporary tattoo on Mini's arm. Before he could ask, a voice in his head explained more than he ever wanted to know. *'Our brother is a Butterfly Ace. He has faced Death and walked away.'*

The tech nodded his head, then moved to the controls to run the bed through it's paces. "You ready?" he asked.

"Go for it," Mini replied.

Fortunately, Mini was not able to see the tech's face over the next thirty seconds. As the screens filled with diagnostic information, the blood drained from the tech's face. Halfway through the scans, the tech placed Mini in a suspension field to allow for a full deep scan. "Doctor Jones, while this is your patient, may I have permission to initiate medical procedures on several Grade Two issues detected by the bed?"

Mike glanced up. "Proceed, Doctor. I was notified of your qualifications when the biobed installations began."

After repairs to 143 misaligned fractures that had never been properly set were completed, he instructed the bed to begin repairs to various organs that had been damaged by impact at one time or another over Mini's life. At the same time, the bed began filtering multiple toxins from Mini's body that had built up from a systematic long-term poisoning regimen.

Over at beds Two and Three, all of the life-threatening injuries had been successfully mitigated. Under order of Logan, the teams were now doing everything they could to ensure the boys were in good health once released from the biobed. While the doctors worked on the physical side, Logan and Lucas were working mentally with the two boys to help them deal with the loss of their parents and their new family situation.

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## Des Moines HQ

"Hey, guys, I've got an update for you," Daileass announced, interrupting the small talk between the boys in the room. The parents had decided to escape to the saner confines of the living room, while Ezra had returned to his parents. The rest of the group were sitting there, tossing ideas around as to why Mike had been so insistent on taking Mini immediately.

"Good news, I hope?" Julio asked.

"Yep!" Daileass giggled. "Mini's doing fine; it'll be a few hours until he's ready to come home though. Colin, Alien? Get ready, your little brothers seem to be getting some littler brothers for you! Right now, I'll guess that you'll meet them tomorrow; they've been hurt pretty bad in a plane crash."



Jesse giggled. "Can I do the adoption this time, sweetie?"

Julio smiled. "Sure! I can watch Bob's face; two more in less than a day should be funny!"

"Shouldn't you warn him?" Tucker asked, smiling because he knew the probable answer.

"No way!" Alien giggled. "We owe him a few... hundred... thousand... paybacks!"

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Editor's Notes:

ACFan has done it again, created an chapter full of emotional turmoil that we have to deal with! LOL It was really interesting to get to know more about Alien and Mini. The dedication that Mini had to Lucas and Logan. Bob is going to have a heck of a family once they all get settled in. Now I can't wait to see what ACFan has in store for us next!!! We have loads of things to watch out for and this new division is taking off at hyper speed.

From you friendly neighborhood editing Puppy!

Boxerdude

## **Chapter Nine: "INCOMING!!!!!!!"**

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Hey Y'all, it's Dilly!!

I just thought that you might want to know a few things before you start reading these next couple of chapters. You see, having all of us Mikyvis in his head has affected Uncle AC... he's managed to get himself stuck in a temporal loop! Don't worry, Daddy is trying to help him sort it out! What that means though, is that you're gonna see some stuff that refers to things he hasn't written down yet! You know that story in the Mikyvis Chronicles that he started? Yeah, that one, the one where I met Chance. A bunch of things are going to happen in that story, but the results of what happens are going to start to show up in this chapter and continue to surprise you in the next chapter. When you see Uncle Cory's kids doing stuff that you never expected them to be able to do, that is why... and we're gonna make sure Uncle AC fills in the details in the other story as soon as he can. It's all good stuff, it'll just be a little surprising!

I gotta go... DeeJ told me if I'm a microsecond late again he's gonna sic Uncle Galli on me! For a normal human, he's sure impatient! Wait, did I just call DeeJ normal? Sorry, my mistake! There ain't nothin' normal about my cuz! (giggle)

Cuddles!

Dylan

---

Universe Bravo Ten  
Timeline Tau Four  
Nicholsberg, Carolina, CSA

"*Have a nice daa..aaay! Have a nice day!*" As the final notes of the song faded out, DJ looked out over the packed stadium. "Thank you Nicholsberg, you've been AWESOME! We'll see y'all again soon!"

The boys all came to the front of the stage, and after a group bow to the standing ovation they were getting, they vanished from the stage with a clap of thunder and a shower of sparks. As they appeared in the dressing room backstage, Tanner took a quick headcount.

"DYLAN!!!" Tanner exclaimed as he re-counted heads for the third time. "Get your purple butt over here! Why do I count an extra kid here!"

"Don't blame me!" Dylan giggled as he appeared just out of Tanner's reach. "Blame Chance, it was all HIS doing!" He then turned and mooned Tanner. "And my butt ain't purple... see?"

"No, but it's gonna contain my shoe if I catch you!" Tanner giggled as he gave Dylan a playful swat. Tanner then scanned the group, and finally found Chance and an unfamiliar face. Both boys were securely nested under Russ's arms, Chance sporting a glowing halo as he tried to look innocent.

"It's okay, son," Russ said with a smile. "Chance has it all handled. Ulysses is in a small loop. Him and Chance became friends during the concert; in fact he was helping Chance with the effects board. In about thirty seconds, he's going to get hit by a car in the parking lot, and he will have died in the ambulance to the hospital. He's going back to Archnania with Chance, and the ambulance will be arriving with a copy of his body."

Tanner shook his head and rolled his eyes. "What if it was his time?"

"It's not," Davey stated as he appeared in the room, his wings fully extended. "That is why I was told to have Chance save him with Dilly's help. The Book does not list him as ever dying; I think this might be one of those things that was planned long ago."

Tanner smiled, and nodded to the new kid. "I guess that means you're stuck with inter-universal life, dude. Welcome to the insanity!" Something caught his eye, and he quickly turned his head. "TIMMY! PAULY! Get your clothes on, we have a guest coming!"

"But we can't *reach* our clothes!" Timmy replied with a giggle as he pointed up.

As everyone stared at the clothes now hanging from the lights, Davey giggled and announced "Clothes are so over-rated! I'm outta here!"

"Just how did your clothes get up there, little bro?" DJ asked with a giggle. As he heard William cluck in what could only be a laugh, he added, "Never mind; I shoulda known! Okay, featherhead, give them their clothes back!"

After a quick flyby which made DJ duck to avoid being hit, William landed on the light and pushed the clothes down to the boys one at a time. In between giggles, the two little ones got dressed with Tanner's help.

Just as they were redressed, the expected visitor knocked at the door....

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Archnania

As Chance ran off with Ulysses to introduce his new brother to the family, Russ gathered his quasi-sons around him. "Well, going by the response, I think y'all have proved that you've got playing as a group down. I know that all of us are missing home, but we've got one more show to do yet."

"Yeah, I hope we do okay," CD commented, his nervousness apparent to all.

Russ smiled gently at the boys, knowing that all of them were feeling the same as CD. "There's no need to worry, guys; you'll all do great. This is what all of the other shows were about, making sure you were at your best for the last show of the tour."

"But what if Daddy and Pop don't like it?" Calen asked, obviously speaking for all of them.

"They will," Russ stated firmly. "I know your parents, and I know what they think about all of you. You guys are their life. This is the kind of surprise that parents love to get, and I know that y'all are going to make both of them smile. Go get some rest, grab some food, and relax. Once I think ALL of you have recovered from the concert you just held, we'll start getting ready to blow the doors off of the last stop in the tour."

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Des Moines, IA: Teri's house:

"Sean! You're gonna get fat eating all those!" Tyler giggled.

Sean was on his back in the middle of the living room, a glass of milk at his side with a plate of butter-scotch cookies next to it. Every few minutes, Sean would lift up a cookie, dunk it into the milk, then eat it whole. His tee-shirt was pulled up to his chest to allow his rather large, cookie-filled tummy to 'get some fresh-air'.

Cory was just watching him, shaking his head. "You know, I'm glad you don't put on weight when you eat like that, hon." He put his hand over Fife's shoulder, and then led the young Tesnian out of the room. "Do you understand Hallowe'en now, Fife?" Cory asked.

Fife nodded. "Old Earth people were strange! I like the dressing up part though; that could be fun! Can I dress up like a pirate with Uncle Kyle and Uncle Tyler?"

"Sure! I think you'll make both of them happy if you do that, Cory replied with a smile. "All three of you can have fun together, and they can show you some of the fun things that happen at the parties."

"You're not going to be mad that I'm spending time with them, are you, Dad?" Fife asked, a tinge of worry in his voice.

Cory shook his head. "I'll be happy that you'll get to meet some of their friends. I'm pretty sure that your Pop and I will be tied up with a lot of friends that we ain't seen since we moved; this way you're getting a chance to do some of the fun things that a lot of older guys think they have outgrown."

"Okay, that makes sense," Fife replied as he wrapped his arms around Cory. "Thanks, Dad."

As they broke the hug, Tyler walked up to them. "I heard what you asked Cory, Fife," Ty said with a smile. "If you wanna be a pirate, come on up with me. Kyle's already upstairs, and we're gonna start getting ready."

At Fife's look for permission, Cory giggled. "Go ahead, son. I need to pry the Cookie Monster off of the floor so that we can start getting ready too."

"Hmmmmm..." Tyler giggled. "I'll help you, bro...." he added before grabbing Fife's hand and running for the stairs.

Sean's yell of outrage made Cory decide to find out what prank was just pulled on his husband. As he reached the living room doorway, the sight of Sean in a cookie monster costume was enough to make Cory have to grab the doorway to keep from falling in laughter.

"THERE'S NO ZIPPER!!" Sean exclaimed as he was trying to figure out how to get out of the costume. "When I find out which one of the Mikyvis did this...."

"You won't do a single thing!" Teri finished as she quickly snapped a picture from behind Cory. "Just wait until your sons see this one!"

"MOM!!!!" Sean whined. "NOOOOOO!!!"

"You know, the rolling eyeballs and the gaping smile don't help your argument any, hon!" Cory managed to squeak out in the midst of his laughter.

"If you wanna complain, I could suggest they change it to Oscar the Grouch!" Bast suggested helpfully, after ensuring he was out of Sean's reach.

"I'm NOT going to be no freakin' Muppet!" Sean yelled.

As soon as the words left his mouth, the Cookie Monster costume vanished... to be replaced with a Poppa Smurf costume.

"NO!" Sean exclaimed again loudly as the room fell into laughter, Teri just barely managing to get another picture.

"I'm blue, dabodee dabodii..." Cory managed to sing between gales of laughter.

Before anything else was said, Sean found himself dressed as Snow White, then Shrek, then Pinocchio. By this time, Teri was having to brace the camera on the doorway to hold it steady enough for pictures. As a final switch, Sean found himself dressed as Tarzan... and Cory was suddenly dressed as an ape.

Sean glowered at Cory, then grinned, "Wanna banana, big boy?"

Cory managed to squeak his answer out between gasps for breath from laughing. "You... Tarzan..., me... like ... monkeying ... around!"

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Upstairs:

Kyle and Fife were giggling on the bed as they watched Tyler's 'fun' with Sean on the monitor, courtesy of Daileass. Tyler was sitting on the edge of the bed, giggling madly as well while he switched costumes on Sean. Once he settled on Tarzan, then added the ape costume on Cory, he turned to Kyle and Fife with a grin. "You guys ready to get dressed up now?"

Both boys nodded, the vision of Sean dressed as Snow White still leaving both of them speechless. Tyler smiled to himself; his prank had been more to relax the nervous kids in the house than to torture Sean. In fact, Sean had been in on it after the first costume; he was more than willing to help distract the group's thoughts from the upcoming party. He glanced at Kyle, and his smile grew bigger. Of all of the kids, Kyle was the most nervous. Fife deciding to join them as pirates was a good thing, since it distracted Kyle from his own worries. It had come as a surprise to Tyler to find out that Kyle had never participated in Halloween.

"Sean's gonna kill you!" Kyle giggled as Daileass re-played the key scenes of the costume show.

"Naw, he thought it was fun!" Tyler replied. "You ready to try on the pirate costumes?"

Kyle and Fife both nodded their heads as they slipped off of the bed, both still giggling. As Tyler 'retrieved' costumes for the three of them, the other two boys divested themselves of what little clothing they were wearing.

Fife grabbed one of the hats and plopped it on his head. "Okay, I'm ready!" he giggled.

Tyler and Kyle both laughed at the naked Tesnian. "I think you need a few more pieces of costume for it to really work!" Kyle replied.

"I've already got my sword!" Fife giggled.

"Wrong type of sword, silly!" Ty giggled. "C'mon Kylebear, let's help Fife get ready."

After a few minutes of adjustment to get the costume to fit properly on Fife, and a little 'Mikyvis intervention' to the hairs on Fife's chin to make it appear that he had a beard, the two boys stood back and admired their work.

"You look great!" Kyle said seriously as he guided Fife over to the full-length mirror so that he could see for himself.

Fife admired his new look, and then turned to Kyle. "Your turn, Uncle Kyle!"

Kyle giggled as he suddenly found himself being dressed by his husband and his nephew. Once they were done with him, Kyle and Fife attacked Tyler and ensured that he matched both of them.

Once all three were done, Tyler looked at his partners in crime. "I know this is new to both of you. Neither one of you know many kids outside the Clan. I've still got a lot of friends from growing up here, and they'll probably ask us to join them once they figure out it's me. My friends are your friends, and if they don't accept you then they ain't my friends no more. If you play along, you're gonna learn what fun means during a Halloween party."

"You'd really pick us over your friends?" Fife asked curiously.

"Yes," Tyler replied. "You're family. I can always make more friends, but now that I know what real family is like, I'm not gonna give it up."

Fife grinned as he gave both Tyler and Kyle quick hugs. "Thanks for letting me be family," he said softly.

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Des Moines HQ:

"Strike Team Flying Dutchman... A-Tennn-HUT!" First Lieutenant Wilser commanded as soon as the remaining members of his team appeared in Julio's room. "Rheedy AHH...RMS!" he added before marching over and coming to attention in front of Colin. "Sir, Strike Team Flying Dutchman reporting for duty as ordered, Sir."

Colin returned Doug's salute and then turned to Lucas and Logan, who had broken their cuddle with Mini to stand at attention. "You two are on TAD to Mini; unless our brother gives you an order, you're to disregard orders given to active duty members. In other words: sit, rats!"

"As you wish, Captain Ahab!" Logan replied, knowing that he could get away with it only because of the current situation.

Colin grinned, and then signaled for Julio to join him. "Time to play Commander-In-Chief, boss!" Colin chuckled as Julio stopped next to him.

Julio smiled. "Okay, I'll show ya how it's supposed to be done, Colin."

"Dream on!" Colin giggled as he moved towards the line of boys at attention. The two of them then inspected the new arrivals, with Julio using the boots of a few of the new team to make sure his hair looked okay. Just to show he was paying attention, Julio straightened a few buttons and adjusted a few earrings as he moved down the line. As they finished their inspection of the ranks, Julio turned to Colin. "Colonel Busch, I wish to address your troops."

Colin nodded, inwardly smiling at how quickly Julio was adapting to the new situation he found himself in. "Feel free, Sir."

"Thanks," Julio said as he stepped back to where he could see the entire rank. "At ease, Gentlemen."

The Dutchmen immediately went to parade rest, the conversation between Colin and Julio telling them that Julio was certainly high in their new chain of command.

Julio began pacing in front of the line, his hands clasped behind his back. "I am Julio Hernandez, Director of the Des Moines Division of Family Clan Short," Julio stated as an introduction. "Welcome to Des Moines, your new home."

Julio pointed out people as he introduced them. "The cutie sitting there drooling at my butt is my second-in-command, Jesse. The older of the two boys on the bed, the ones that are playing Uno with the raccoon and the rabbit, is my brother Johnny, head of Communications; the younger one is Eddie, head of the Intelligence Group."

Julio re-clasped his hands and addressed the ranks directly. "Now that you know the Division staff, let me fill you in on what you've got yourself assigned to. The Des Moines division is a residential division more than anything; all of our residents are either living in houses with families or awaiting placement with a family of their choice. Strike Team Tango, which works under Kris, has already had this talk with me, and we worked out a plan that makes the most sense. While inside the Compound, as a general rule your uniform will be civilian clothes. Not only will this assist you with blending in to help do your job better, but the clothing is selected to allow you to be heavily armed without it being obvious. I expect you all to interact with the rest of us; everyone in this room has seen the differences in how you live to how we were brought up. You're each no different than any of us; you have your things which you're strong at, and there are things that you are not confident at doing. That proves that you are no different than me, Colin, Jesse, Kris, or anyone else in the Clan. When you reported to Colin, you became part of the Des Moines family; if anyone tries to tell you differently, I'll personally ensure they have a counseling session with Colin in a dark alley."

Colin laughed at the last comment. "You promise?" He then turned to the strike team. "Gentlemen, you have been chosen for an assignment that very few teams qualify for. Your job is to protect and defend the Division Headquarters for the only Division which can claim that it sits in the location where the Clan was founded. Based on recent history, there is a good chance that there are idiots out there who will try to make a name for themselves by attacking this location." Colin stopped, and made eye contact with each of the new boys. "That will *NOT* happen while I am alive; your job is to *proactively* dissuade jerks from turning their attention here. Kris is going to be developing and deploying compound-wide security measures to enhance those already in place. You don't need to worry about that, as you are directly responsible for the safety and security of the command staff of Division Headquarters. If there is a mission, some or all of you will be present on the mission. If Johnny has a field trip to Chicago, he's suddenly going to have a few more classmates. It is a known fact that General Adam only assigns the best to a Division Headquarters; you made the grade, and I look forward to reporting back to him that he made the right choice."

Mini giggled at the display in front of him. "Lucas, is he always like this when he gives speeches?"

"Naw, you give someone a bird and they always seem to talk more than they think!" Lucas giggled back in a soft voice, sounding much better after the work on his throat was completed by Dr. Mike.

As a group, despite their ingrained training, the Dutchmen broke rank and stared at Lucas in shock, none of them believing that they had heard him with their ears.

"What?" Lucas asked with a mischievous grin as he felt Mini wrap an arm around him protectively.

That was the final straw, as the boys rushed over to Lucas and Mini. Colin and Julio exchanged knowing grins, both of them fully aware of the fact that Mini and Lucas had done it on purpose. *'I'll get you for that 'bird' comment later, little brother!'* Colin sent to Lucas with a mental chuckle.

*'You've got to catch me first!'* Lucas sent back.

As the Dutchmen gathered around Mini, Logan, and Lucas, Logan explained what was going on. "Guys, this is our brother Spence; everyone else calls him 'Mini' now. After we got reunited with Spence, Lucas' head decided to let him try to speak again. Doctor Mike, he's the division doctor here, helped fix Lucas' throat so he can talk now if he wants to. If he tries to talk loud or yell he can hurt himself, though, so when we're on ops he's gonna still use mind talk with us." Logan continued for a while longer, filling everyone in on the eventful morning.

As they were just finishing their update, Robin knocked and opened up the door. "Hey, guys, Mom says lunch is ready!" he said as he poked his head around the top of the doorway. As expected, all discussion was forgotten as the room's occupants stampeded towards the door. "Bring your friends, Johnny!" Robin added as the room emptied through the doorway underneath him.

Julio and Jesse were the first to reach the recently re-expanded dining room. "WHOAH!!" Julio exclaimed as he skidded to a stop and stared at the new furniture, ignoring the complaints from behind him as everyone else ended up in a pile trying to avoid knocking over their Division head. "Those tables are AWESOME, they look like they just came outta a castle!" (*Author note: According to a little munchkin wearing a purple hard hat, they did.*)

Once back on their feet, the boys all stared in awe at the huge oak tables. There were two of them in the now-massive dining room. Each trestle table was about one hundred feet long by thirty feet wide, with three-inch-thick tops. Along each long side were matching benches, and at the ends sat chairs which seemed stout enough to withstand the worst any of the boys could do without any damage.

"Now *THAT* is some serious wood!" Julio exclaimed, which promptly caused the boys to break into giggles.

"You're an expert on wood, hon!" Jesse quipped, causing Julio to break into a serious blush.

Seizing the opportunity to get in an extra jab while his son was vulnerable, Mick added, "Speaking of wood, you two, we had a towel dispenser installed under your end of the table."

"DAD!" Julio exclaimed as his blush turned crimson.

"Thank you, Sir!" Jesse added at the same time, an evil grin on his face. "We'll have to try it out!"

"Is that *all* you two ever think about?" Mini giggled, safely sandwiched between the twins with Alien hugging him from behind.



"No, sometimes they stop to think about food," Janice replied as she came over and escorted Julio and Jesse to the head of one of the tables. "Find a seat, guys, the food is getting cold."

The boys quickly dispersed themselves on the bench along one side of the table. The only delay was caused by Lucas and Logan, who were torn between sitting in their normal position within their team or sitting with Mini.

"Make a hole," Doug ordered his team as he realized the problem. "We've got two new Dutchmen; give them room."

With wide grins on their faces, Lucas and Logan quickly escorted Mini and Alien to the space that quickly opened up for them in the middle of the strike team. At Bob's quizzical look, Doug explained his decision. "Only Dutchmen are allowed to train with my team. I have orders from General Adam that both of these men are to train with us. That means they are Flying Dutchmen, even if they are squishy ones."

"HEY!" the twelve-year old Lieutenant sitting to the right of Logan complained. "What's wrong with being squishy? You and me, after lunch, parade ground! I'll show you squishy, sir!"

Doug grinned at his Intel specialist. "Are you *sure* you want to have that much of a workout so soon after lunch, Christian?"

"Workout? That would just settle my food; YOU are the one who's going to get a workout!" Christian replied smugly. "We on, or you gonna chicken out?"

"If we can pick sides, I'm cheering for you... you've got balls!" Mini giggled to Christian, earning him a smile of thanks.

"We're on." Doug laughed. "Whose turn is it to run the pool?"

"Mine!" Logan replied. "Y'all can place your bets with me! Chris is favored at twenty-five to one!"

"You've been taking lessons from Juan," Doug replied with a chuckle. "As I was saying, we're training up two more squishy Dutchmen!"

Bob smiled as he noticed that both Alien and Mini seemed to sit a little taller at being included in the group. "That goes both ways. Either officially or unofficially, all of the Dutchmen are part of my family. You guys decide about how official you want it to be."

At the end of the row of Dutchmen, the smallest boy in the group spoke up. "Yeah, right. We're not 'normals'. We're engineered fighting machines, and proud of it. Why would you want us?"

"What is your name, soldier?" Bob asked.

"Second Lieutenant Travis Leechman, Flying Dutchman Long-Range Weapons Specialist," the nine-year-old redhead stated, his green eyes sparkling at the challenge.

"Sniper?" Bob asked. At Travis' proud nod, Bob smiled. "Here's the scoop, Travis. With the exception of Johnny's two friends who are sitting *on* the table, everyone here is human. Some of you are enhanced, some of you have skills that are unique to you, some of you have genes that are a result of a very warped experiment, but in your basic structure you are all the same. A soldier who only has the military as his family is an incomplete soldier. The Unit is better at providing what you miss than any other organization I have heard of, but now you guys are assigned here, so you won't have as much direct support as you did at the base. On top of that, I already have two sons who are long-time members of your team, two sons who were just welcomed into your team, and one son who gives orders to your team. I had no problem accepting them, so why should it be any different for the rest of you?"

Despite the distraction of the carts full of food that Janice and Marcie were bringing out, Travis pondered Bob's response. What surprised him the most was that Bob had not dismissed his questioning as a little kid being difficult; he had responded to Travis as an equal. "You'll give up," he stated, not really sure just how much of the speech was adult 'fluff'.

"Oh, really? Is that a dare?" Bob asked with a grin.

"Yeah!" Travis responded, figuring he had just found a crack.

"You're stuck now!" Alien giggled. "There are two things you don't do... you don't tell Dad that he can't do something, and you don't dare him. Either one you'll lose! Our team's previous coach told Dad before he took over that there was no way he'd build a winning team out of us; look at what he did, we've won TWO World Series Final games!"

"Travis, watch it... you might have found someone just as hard-headed as you!" Christian giggled as he scrambled to hide behind Logan.

Travis said nothing, but calmly reached into his back pocket and retrieved a slingshot. After removing the gum he was chewing from his mouth and loading the weapon with it, he aimed carefully. A second later, a 'SPLAT' indicated that the gum had found its mark... directly between the area covered by Christian's sun-bleached brown hair and his dark brown eyes. "You were saying?" Travis stated, the smile on his face giving away this being a normal friendly war between the two of them.

"You just made my point, little brother," Christian giggled as he peeled the gum from his forehead and walked over to where Travis was sitting. "I think you lost this!" he added as he stuck the gum just behind Travis' earlobe.

"Dork!" Travis giggled as he removed the gum with one hand while giving Christian a one-armed hug with the other.

"Brat," Christian replied, his tone clearly expressing love. "Now stop being a pain, bro. You know that every one of us swore to help the twins to find Spence and deal with their parents once General Adam gave us a week of free time. Spence has been the 'eleventh Dutchman' since the day the twins became Dutchmen. You heard about the poisoning; Bob saved one of our member's lives before that member was aware he was one of us. What more do you need to know?"

Travis looked up at his adopted big brother. "I don't trust adults," he stated softly.

"I know, bro, but you can't really include adults who proved themselves to one of our own," Christian replied. "Nightmare accepted him as family... that says a lot."

Travis nodded. He looked around the room, finding that every ear was listening to the exchange between him and Christian. "I'm sorry, I..."

"You don't need to explain," Bob interrupted. "In fact, you don't need to feel sorry. Every adult here has received the classified Unit briefing from General Adam. I would be more concerned if every one of you were to blindly trust me than I am with your arguments. The offer is open, and when or if each of you feels comfortable making it official we will handle it then."

"Before you ask," Colin added, "Momma Janet has already said that she is quite happy for us to have more than one family. She said that we've earned the right to have more than one family to make up for what we've all been through."

"Dad's really good with that; he's made sure I keep contact with my birth family every week." Alien added proudly.

The Dutchmen nodded as a group, their worries calmed by Alien's experience. Travis took Christian's hand and led him over to stand in front of Bob. "Sir?" Travis asked, obviously uncomfortable in this new situation.

Bob looked into the faces of the two boys in front of him, their expressions telling him that one was about to take a chance that was never expected, while the other was determined to support his brother in whatever way was needed. "Yes, Travis?" Bob replied softly.

Travis drew on every ounce of courage in his body as he looked straight at Bob. "I've got Momma Janet and Daddy Joe... but they're needed a lot more by my other brothers than I need them for parent stuff... I don't like ta bug them cuz' others need 'em more ... I ... I want a Dad that'll sit with me watching cartoons without him bein' interrupted for emergencies ... I've heard about families that are little enough that the parents ain't always really busy ... I ain't never had one though."

Christian wiggled his hand out of Travis' grip while it was still unbroken, then moved behind Travis and wrapped his arms around him. "I'm with you, bro," Christian whispered.

Despite knowing he might regret it later, Bob held out his hand for Travis to take instead. "Go ahead," Bob said softly.

Travis gripped Bob's hand firmly. "I ... can you ... what is ... .. Dad?" the boy whispered, fear of rejection plain in his eyes.

"Come here, sons, both of you," Bob replied as he stuck out his free arm. Travis fell against Bob's chest, Christian securely attached to his back. "And yes, I understand that you two are bonded as brothers, so unless Christian says otherwise, I'll assume that he's joining you, son."

Christian didn't wait for Travis to ask. "Wherever my little brother goes, I go," he stated firmly, his tone making it clear there was no other option.

"You've earned a lot of respect for that," Bob replied. "I still need you to decide on your own, though, and make it official."

"It was official when you adopted the Twins," Christian stated. "I just wasn't here to say yes in person."

"I get the hint," Bob chuckled. "Whose turn is it to log this and make it legal?"

From the back of the room, a female's voice rang out clear. "I think this one is mine." All heads spun, only to see Janet standing there with a big grin on her face. "Before any of you say a thing, neither Daddy Joe nor myself are in the slightest bit upset if you guys find a different family. We'll always be a UNIT family, but if you guys can find other adults who will love and care for you as adults should, then wouldn't it be rather hypocritical of us to be upset about that?"

She paused to make sure she had everyone's attention. "Do you remember what we said when we offered to be your parents? We said we would fill in until you found a family of your own, and if that never happened then we would always be your parents. So if Bob here is insane enough to want you all, then I say go for it. Grab it and never look back." She took a step forward towards all of the boys, most of them having tears in their eyes. "You guys have come up with a new motto for the UNIT.... what is it?"

As one all the UNIT members spoke loudly. "Talga Vasssternich."

Janet nodded, and then looked at Bob, who had a confused look on his face. "One of the UNIT leaders, Chang, has read a series of books called the 'Sword of Truth.' In it are detailed out the 'Wizard's Rules', Rule number Eight is 'Talga Vasssternich' which translates into 'Deserve Victory'." She turned her attention back to the boys. "How would you deserve victory if you let an opportunity like this just slide by? Do what is in your hearts, and as long as you follow that, I will never be upset with you." She opened her arms wide, and all of the Dutchman kids that were not already occupied in Bob's hug slammed into their first 'mom'.

When the hug broke, she pushed them all back towards Bob and wiped her eyes. "Okay, so is the entire strike team joining in on this?"

Getting nods from all of the boys, Janet spent the next three minutes making it official. As soon as she was done, Bob found himself on the floor with fourteen boys on top of him, all trying to hug him at once.

As Bob was enjoying the attention of his expanded family, the doorbell rang. "I'll get it!" Julio announced as he raced Jesse to the front door. The two boys skidded to a stop at the door, giggling as they fought to open it. Once they got it open, Julio immediately recognized their visitor. "Hey there, Mr. Wilder," Julio said to the fifty-year-old man waiting patiently on the step.

"What an honor, I'm greeted by the new Director and his famous boyfriend!" Mr. Wilder responded with a twinkle in his eye. "Have either of you seen Robert? It seems that him and his house have migrated onto Mick's property somehow."

"He is in the dining room underneath all fourteen of his sons," Jesse responded instinctively. "Would you like to come in and wait for him to find his way from under the pile, Sir?"

"Fourteen sons? This I've got to see! Lead the way, young man."

Julio giggled as he took Jesse's hand. "C'mon, cutie, I'll lead the way. Please follow us, Mr. Wilder."

With Julio in the lead, the three made their way to the dining room. Just as they entered the room, they saw Bob standing and lifting Travis onto his hip. "Hey there, Herman!" Bob said as he saw the visitor. "What brings you here?"

"Were you aware that your entire house has relocated from your property?" Herman asked as he took in the row of boys, all of which had assumed protective stances between him and Bob as soon as they realized someone new was in the room. "Also, could you ask your army to please stand down? Something about pre-pubescent hands on multiple concealed weapons tends to make visitors slightly uncomfortable."

Lucas raised his eyebrow slightly, indicating his surprise that they were caught. Of course the smart-ass side of him couldn't let it stand as is. "Actually sir, these were not the concealed ones. If you would like to know where those are, well... we would have to know you MUCH better," he said softly.

Julio giggled as he looked around at his own security. "Raccoon Brigade, you can stand down," he grinned. The sound of automatic weapons being re-holstered indicated to the room that Julio's security was following his orders.

"You too, Rocky!" Jesse giggled, which caused the sound to repeat... twice.

"He's clean," Logan announced, which finally caused all of Bob's sons to slightly relax their postures.

"He's also ex-Airborne," Bob added. "Additionally, he's my friend of 15 years, so I'll vouch for him."

Colin looked from Herman to Bob, and back again, finally his eyes settled on his new 'dad'. The way he chose his words made Bob take note right from the very beginning. "With all due respect...father... The fact that you vouch for him means a lot; however, all of us have seen that even the nicest adult can change radically when confronted with kids, especially kids who are already 'damaged'. It will take us a very long time I think before we can completely trust any adult on the spot, no matter what anyone else says. That's not meant to be an insult to anyone, it's just the way we protect ourselves. Unless one of the team members says he is okay, we will usually be at least a little cautious."

Bob looked Colin in the eyes. "I expect no less from my sons. You are professionals, and you are trained to be on your guard at all times. If you listen to someone with no training, it puts all of us in danger. When it comes to security, I'll give you my input, but I only expect it to be taken into consideration."

"Thank you, sir.... It... That means a lot... to all of us." Colin said working hard to keep his emotions in check. This was getting to be a bad habit. He *never* had this much trouble keeping his emotions in check. It was about time to go kill someone again, just to relieve his tension on someone deserving of punishment.

"Come here, son," Bob said softly as he held out his free arm. Once Colin was in it, he pulled the boy to his side. "You're not a Vulcan, son; it's okay to show your emotions to family," Bob told him quietly.

Only Bob and those who were enhanced heard what Colin said in response. "It's not showing them to the family that's the problem; it's showing them to me."

"You have two families now to help you learn to work with them," Bob replied gently. "That is what family is about, son."

Colin could only nod his response. It was too soon though for him to let others see his tears. However, maybe soon... maybe.

Bob noticed, and told Colin, "When you are ready son, tell me. No matter what I'm doing, I will be there when you drop that wall to help you through it."

Travis gave Bob a squeeze. "You doing that just for him?" he asked curiously.

Bob shook his head. "No son; I'm doing it for each and every one of you."

"Thanks ... Dad?" Travis said uncertainly.

"You're welcome, Son. And yes, you are allowed to call me Dad."

The smile on Travis' face made the entire day worthwhile for Bob. Still holding Colin under one arm and Travis in the other, Bob turned back towards Herman. "Herman, I'd like you to meet my new sons. You know Mini and Alien, now you get to meet their brothers. Have a seat; it's safer that way."

Herman took the chair offered to him by Jesse, and looked around the room. "Boys, I mean no disrespect, but may I please get myself orientated before meeting you officially?" At their nods of approval, he paid more attention to his surroundings. "Impressive dining room, Mick. I like the tables! I do think that swords would be more appropriate decoration than automatic weapons though, but that's just me. When and how did you manage to do all of these changes? They were not even started four days ago. And Bob, have you noticed that your house can be seen out the back window?"

Both Mick and Bob chuckled at Herman's questions, their chuckles turning into laughter as seven swords were unsheathed and added to the weapon display. Julio took pity on the adults, and answered for them. "The Clan Construction Corps is very efficient; this was done in two phases which took a total of an hour, more or less."

"Efficient?!" Herman exclaimed. "It takes longer than that to ORDER materials!"

Julio giggled. "Hey, Daileass, I need some wood!"

"That's Jesse's job, not mine... but I'll watch!" Daileass shot back. "How big and what type? Any certain shape?"

"Yeah, a teak column with slots in it for sword storage ... built in sharpeners too." Julio giggled, figuring a challenge would be good.

"Jeeze... make me work!" Daileass complained as a column meeting Julio's specs appeared by the entryway. "I like my idea better!"

"You would, you perv!" Julio replied with a giggle.

"Best perv this side of the pond!" Daileass giggled.

"And he's trying to convince me to handle the other side!" Draco added in with a wry chuckle.

Herman shook his head in disbelief. "I'm not too sure I want to know how you did that, but I'm definitely going to ask you the next time I need a remodel!"

Marcie, meanwhile, was watching with a smile as she saw the family spirit building between the occupants of the room. She knew that Daileass was not only monitoring the room to handle any issues with the group as they got to know each other, but he also had offered to assist her with keeping the food hot until things had settled enough to try to start the meal once again.

"Herman, we were just about to eat. Once introductions are done, would you like to join us?" she asked.

"I wouldn't want to short-change any of these boys from a full meal," Herman responded, obviously not wanting to intrude.

Marcie's smile grew bigger. "Don't worry; there is no way that you are going to keep these boys from seconds or thirds. I planned ahead for extra guests."

"Why does that not surprise me?" Herman chuckled. "I see a lot of new faces here, most of which are armed despite trying to appear like they are not. Would you please enlighten me as to who is planning on shooting me, Bob?"

Bob laughed, knowing that Herman was trying to inject some humor into the situation. "Now, Herman, they'll only disable you as long as you keep still! Stop worrying."

"Don't worry, I'm a Doctor... legally anyway..." eleven year old Russell giggled as he pointed to the med kit next to his holster. He shook his white-blond hair out of his face, and tried to look innocent as his grey eyes twinkled with mirth.

"Yeah... and you've even shot innocent people just so you could practice!" Kris said with a giggle.

"Hey... you got better, and how else was I supposed to get the training Mamma Janet said we needed? Not to mention the fact that the other guy mouthed off about General Juan. If I hadn't shot him, imagine what would have happened! I saved the kid's life, in more ways than one!" Russell said with a shit-eating grin.

"Russell, remind me not to complain about politicians in front of you!" Bob chuckled.

"Why not? They are so easy to convince that you're right," Russell laughed. "And anyways... didn't Shakespeare say to kill all the Politicians?"

"Yes, but when one is an Uncle to your Division head, it's not a good idea," Bob replied with a chuckle. "Herman, that is my son Russell. His specialty is medicine, with a secondary interest in killing bad guys. The angel on my right is my son Travis; his specialty is causing lethal discomfort at long range."

Under my left arm is Colin ... let's just say his hobby is leading the armed members of this Division's property and surrounding states. We won't discuss his day job."

Travis giggled. "Lethal discomfort at long range ... I like that! Wait until Juan hears that one!"

Bob smiled at Travis. "I thought you'd like it!" He then nodded towards Christian, who had moved a chair to sit near Travis. "That is my son Christian, the family spook and Travis' personal sidekick. On either side of Mini are my mini-Minis, Lucas and Logan. Lucas has a knack for making big rocks into space debris, and Logan is second in command of the team."

"THREE Minis!!" Herman chuckled. "There goes my garden! It was bad enough with *one* Mini raiding it for snacks!"

"I left *some* for you!" Mini exclaimed innocently, which caused the twins and Alien to all giggle.

"I think that was his point, son," Bob chuckled. "Before you incriminate yourself any more, let me introduce the rest of your brothers!" Once the giggles of the boys subsided, Bob continued. "The thirteen-year-old sandy-brown-haired angel over there is the leader of my little army detachment, Doug. Don't let his ice-blue eyes fool you... he's about as innocent as a rabid wolverine."

"I think furry Logan would take offense at that!" Doug giggled, his team all nodding their heads in agreement with smiles on their faces.

"I'm not going to ask... it's safer that way," Bob chuckled. "The black-haired ten-year-old next to him is Lance, otherwise known as Shorty. If you couldn't figure it out by the argument about mounting a rocket launcher to the table that he's having with Doug, Shorty likes heavy weapons."

Shorty grinned, a twinkle in his gold eyes. "Daaad!!! Doug won't let me have any fun!"

"Let the paint dry on the walls before you start making holes in them," Bob replied, which caused Doug to roll his eyes and Shorty to grin.

"Now you've done it!" an auburn-haired eleven-year-old giggled from the other end of the table. His light grey eyes danced as he added "Now we're gonna have to eat food reheated with mortar exhaust!"

"Don't worry, Larry, I don't approve of weapons launching while eating," Bob replied, which drew groans of disappointment from a few of his boys. "Herman, that is my son Lawrence, and the two boys next to him are Huey... he's the chrome-blond eleven-year-old, and Lewis, the dirty blond ten-year-old."

Herman nodded as he looked over the group. "It's nice to meet you boys; I hope that once you've had a chance to sit down with Mini and Alien, you'll begin to feel a little more comfortable with visiting me." Herman stopped, and held up his hand for quiet. After a few seconds, he turned his head to Colin. "Incoming, sounds like three Blackhawks and a MI-26 transport. All are running stealth."

"Damn! You're good!" Dailess announced as the room echoed with weapons being readied for combat. "Stand down, guys, it's just Air Wing Charlie."



"That's the Mad Irishman!" Shorty exclaimed. "Screw standing down... where's my LAW? Larry, get that window open. Daileass, get my launcher in here and give the squishies some MickeyMouse ears!"

A mad giggle was coming over the speakers. Daileass didn't say another word. Suddenly, next to Shorty, a LAW Rocket Launcher, along with a Class A noise suppression system (AKA ear protection, the Mickey Mouse Ears) appeared. The heads of every non-enhanced person in the room also received the "Mickey Mouse Ears."

Shorty jumped out the window to the ground and hid behind the bushes. He quickly shouldered the LAW with a practiced ease, and took aim. Bracing himself with one foot on the corner of the building, he aimed the LAW at one of the incoming helicopters. He depressed the 'trigger.' With a loud 'WHOOSH' the rocket ignited and flew from the end of the rocket launcher. The helicopters almost immediately started to perform evasive maneuvers.

"Ain't gonna help you this time, you crazy-assed Irishman! I got your number!" Shorty cried with obvious glee.

As most of the adults stared in shock, Travis wiggled his way from Bob's arms. "Hey! Wait for me! I still owe them for strafing me and Christian when we were out jogging Wednesday!" he exclaimed as he grabbed a rifle off the table and joined Travis at the window. "I got the transport!" he announced as he sighted in and began squeezing off rounds.

"Are you going to say anything?" Herman asked Bob in surprise, shouting to be heard over the hearing protection.

"Nope! This is fun!" Bob replied, obviously hiding something by his grin. "Boys will be boys!"

The reason for Bob's attitude became apparent as the lead helicopter suddenly was sporting a large splotch of bright pink paint directly over its engine cover. "GOT 'EM!" Shorty exclaimed in glee, as he was sighting his next target.

"Take *that*, Captain Nutcase!" Doug added. "Nice shot, Shorty!"

The transport banked and went up, obviously going for the front yard as the 'hit' helicopter broke formation and came in for a landing. As Travis sprinted for the front of the house, Ricky and Rocky grabbed their weapons and joined him, huge grins on their faces. The rest of the team spread out, taking positions to avoid being splattered by the return-fire paint weapons as they systematically took out each of the remaining choppers.

Less than two minutes later, the boys put down their weapons with satisfied grins. Ricky and Rocky came back into the room, both splattered with green paint but grinning. "We got them as they were firing!" Rocky announced proudly. To make the point, Travis appeared paintless, escorting six rather dejected 'prisoners' into the room, all of which sported purple splotches of paint somewhere on their body. A few seconds later, led by a fourteen-year-old with bright red hair, the four helicopter pilots walked in, all of them obviously not happy about the ambush. The leader was complaining in a VERY thick Irish accent, cursing the boys' parentage as well as promising some very interesting revenge. Fortunately, not many people could understand his thick accent when he got going like this.

Herman looked over the pilots. "Which one of you was flying the Hind?" he asked. "That was a smart move, using the MI-26 to hide your rotor wash."

"That'd be me," the redhed stated, stopping mid-rant. "Captain Eoghan Patrick O'Reilley, Commander Air Wing Charlie. Your name would be?"

Herman stood up and faced Eoghan. "Brigadier General Herman Clyde Wilder, 14th Airborne Flight Wing Commander, Retired."

The next few seconds surprised every Unit member in the room. "Air Wing Charlie, FALL IN!" Eoghan ordered as he suddenly stood tall.

The recently defeated force quickly fell into ranks at full attention. Eoghan marched to stand at attention in front of Herman, and saluted as he spoke. "May I respectfully request a review of the recent operation, General Wilder, Sir?"

Herman quickly fell into his years of military training. "At ease, soldier," he replied as he returned the salute. "Instruct your Wing to assemble at the unoccupied table, Captain."

"Yes Sir!" Eoghan replied before spinning on his heels. "You heard the General ... MOVE IT!" he ordered.

Herman turned to the rest of the boys. "This is not a game. The rest of you find seats at the table for debriefing as well. You had two 'casualties'; that is two too many."

Colin smiled; while Herman might not be on the trusted list yet, his decision to share his experience had just increased his respect level in Colin's eyes. "You heard the General, guys. Fall in for debriefing."

The boys were momentarily distracted by Julio's yell of surprise. "JESSE!!!!!"

"I'm just following orders, babe!" Jesse replied as he fought Julio for control of Julio's zipper. "The General said we're supposed to de-brief!"

"He DIDN'T mean my underwear!" Julio protested, causing the entire room to fall into laughter.

"Íosa Críost guys! Is é an ginearálta a thairiscint duit a chuid taithí agus tú clann motherless de whores iad ag gníomhú ar an bollocks. Tá am ina áit sin, agus nach bhfuil sé anseo. (Jesus Christ guys! The general is offering you his experience and you motherless sons of whores are acting the bollocks. There is a time and place for that, and it is not here.)" Eoghan barked at everyone, even though he could not keep the grin off his own face.

Everyone did manage to quiet down quickly as Herman began his de-briefing. It all boiled down to two main issues. His first point was that the air assault should always have up to the moment telemetry on wherever they are. (i.e. Because this took place on your home turf, your helicopter crews should have known where everyone was). The second point he made was that the ground assault did not make proper use of their complete surprise attack. The Retired Brigadier General made it painfully clear that what had caused casualties in the ground crew was a lack of professionalism. They hadn't taken the

exercise seriously. He pointed out that while it was fine to have fun during a training exercise you always had to 'play' like your life and the lives of others were really on the line. He also made it perfectly clear that their lives really did depend on it.

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"Okay, Sky Jockeys. Listen up and listen good. Every time you are in a military aircraft for any reason, you are on a military mission. You never take your surrounding area for granted. You have to be on the same level of alertness when you are on a test flight after repairs or maintenance that you would be when flying into enemy territory on a raid! It must become second nature because that is what keeps a pilot alive during combat. If you do any less, you are only counting on luck to keep you alive."

The General paused. He made note of the varying levels of comprehension playing across the young faces. Having been a father and an instructor for the Army Airborne, he could read the kids very well. He knew he needed to clear it up for them and make sure they understood it...

"Let me be perfectly clear... Luck is a fickle protector at best, because in a combat situation skill will almost surely win out against someone with just luck. The person with just luck is outnumbered two to one. I can see by the looks I am getting it is obvious I am not explaining myself clearly. One soldier has 'Skill' and 'Luck' on his side. That is the two on one side, while the other soldier only has 'Luck' on his side being just one. You need to know this so you know how to live long enough to be a Retired Brigadier General and not end up a dead Private, Lieutenant, Colonel, or whatever rank. A good soldier is a soldier that lives to fight another day and can get the job done. They don't allow themselves, their fellow soldiers, or the people they protect to come to harm if they can accomplish that."

"Now let's talk about the people on the ground. The ground crew should have been casualty free. When you enter a battle you rely on your training. If your training isn't serious, then your reactions in a real battle won't be serious. You can't rely on your skills in combat if you haven't practiced the skills that you need for combat."

Seeing that he had again lost some of the kids, and perhaps some of the adults as well, Herman decided to take another tack. He looked over at 'Mini' and pointed a finger at him.

"Mr. Mini, front and center please."

Mini was taken by surprise. He didn't expect to be singled out. After all, what did he know about fighting, let alone winning, battles?

"Uhm. Okay. What can I do for you?" The shake in Mini's voice showed a bit of unease at being placed center stage. You could almost feel the weight of his recent issues as they began to form a protective wall around the boy.

"You have been shamelessly raiding my garden for quite a while now, haven't you?"

"Well uhm. You know it's not like I was... I mean you know... I take the fifth, because I don't have to say nothin' that will make me look guilty." Mini had gained back some of his normal bravado.

"Mr. Alien?!?" The General barked.

Alien did his best impression of a bug-eyed monster as he stared at Herman in surprise.

"You and your compatriot there have been violating the borders of my poor defenseless garden for how long?..."

"If I were someone who would raid a poor defenseless garden, it certainly would not be yours. I mean, come on... Razor wire, cameras, hidden trip lines and snares... Not to mention the motion detectors and mortars... And that sniper rifle of yours hurts like Hell when you get hit, I mean would hurt like uhm heck if you got shot... I mean if... Never mind! I wouldn't call that defenseless."

"Well, you two..."

The Retired General eyeballed the boys, but it only resulted in the pair doing their best imitation of angels.

"Not going to buy it, guys. You didn't always get away without leaving evidence proving that you were the culprits. Cutting the power to the cameras must have seemed like a foolproof way to cover your tracks, but you need to remember that a good soldier never puts all his eggs in one basket."

"Aha! So you are saying that your garden was raided and sometimes you couldn't prove who it was?" Mini all but accused Herman.

"It's a bum rap, I tell you! I was never there... I don't recall anything like a 'raid' on your garden, General Sir!" Alien said while snapping a crisp military salute for Herman.

"The point is that every time I added something to my garden to protect it, you two would find a way around it..."

"Sir. I respectfully request that you stop dragging our good names through the mud with these unfounded allegations," Mini deadpanned.

"Yes sir. I am deeply disturbed by this unfair mudslinging. You are making a political debate look clean," Alien said in a voice overflowing with disbelief and hurt.

Herman smoothed his hair back and let a small smile cross his face. "You two just don't know when to surrender."

Alien and Mini both looked Herman directly in the eyes and said as one voice, "What is this 'surrender' you speak of? I've never heard the word before."

Bob, who was about to say something, stopped mid-sentence. "Now boys..." His mind went back to the first time Herman had come over asking about his missing vegetables....

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About a year ago....

"Bob. I need to have a word with you about my garden."

"Okay, Herman. You have my full attention."

"Your sons have been raiding my garden every day for the last week. They seems to like my carrots the best."

"Now hold on a minute, Herman. What are you saying here? Are you telling me that my sons are trespassing on your property and stealing from you?"

"Yes, Bob. That is exactly what I am saying"

Bob paused a moment. He thought about when he was a kid. He always felt that the grownups always took other adults word over the statements of their own children. It had always made him mad. He had sworn to himself to always take his child's side. It did not mean that he would not punish them when they did wrong. It just meant that he would never just take someone's word that his children had done something wrong. If one of his kids said they didn't do something, then he believed them unless he had proof that was not true.

"I suppose you have proof that it's them? What I am saying, Herman, is that I won't just accept your word on this. I need proof or a confession."

"Are you calling me a liar, Bob?" Herman said with an air of outraged anger.

"Not at all, Herman. You may very well be telling me 100% fact right now, but I will always take my son's side."

"Hey dad! Hey General Sir." Mini announced as he waved the slightly dirty carrot he was munching on as he walked into the house.

"Yeah. Hey General Sir and Dad." Alien said as he followed Mini into the house munching on a cucumber.

Both men stopped, looked at the boys, then back to each other, the disbelief clearly showing on their stunned faces. They recovered quickly and followed the boys inside. They found the boys in the kitchen getting some juice.

Bob took a deep breath. "Boys, where did you get those vegetables?"

Mini looked up at Bob. "What vegetables?"

Bob blinked and looked at both boys and saw no evidence of the vegetables they had walked in eating. The boys looked at him wide-eyed and innocent, so he knew instantly they were up to something. He knew what, but he had no proof.

Bob and Herman looked at each other, shook their heads and walked into the back yard.

"I just can't believe what we just saw,Herman," Bob said, barely able to keep himself from laughing.

"Bob, I'm sorry I bitched at you. Your boys are welcome to all the vegetables they can steal, but I am not going to make it easy on them. As of now I declare my garden a war zone!" Herman said as his eyes glinted with mischief. He grinned at Bob, gave his hand a shake, and went home mumbling about the traps he was going to have to make today....

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Nope. Bob decided he wasn't going to say a word.

Several of the Dutchmen had small notepads out, and were taking notes furiously. The disbelieving looks on the rest of the faces in the room were almost comical. Every accusation was fended off by the boys, but it never stopped Herman. He just kept finding different avenues of attack and mercilessly pressed them into use....

"What do you mean by hard evidence, General Sir?" Alien said as he pouted at Herman.

"It means just what it says. Hard evidence. The proof that you and your cohort there are guilty. I've got you dead to rights, boys." The triumphant look on Herman's face was making Bob crack. He was beginning to giggle. He felt lucky to have this crazy Retired General living next door. He had done so much to build up the self-confidence of both boys.

"Pfffffft!" was the dismissive sound that came from Mini.

Herman just smirked at him. He had them once and for all. He wanted to jump in the air and pump his fist. He wanted to gloat. It had been a long time coming though, so no need to rush things.

Alien and Mini watched Herman carefully. They were nervous. They could see the look of triumph in his face. Their minds were racing, trying to figure out where they had made a mistake. They could not find one, so with the assuredness of youth they decided that he had to be bluffing.

"General Sir. I do believe that you have us confused with someone else," Alien stated in a rather hurt tone.

Mini however turned to Bob. "Daaaaaad. The General is picking on us again. Make him stop. Puhleeeeeease."

Bob couldn't help himself. He started with just a snigger, and then it became a chuckle. Soon he was indulging in a full belly laugh. Herman just looked at Bob and did his best imitation of a Vulcan and raised one eyebrow. Mick and Janice were quiet through all of this, wondering if their suspicions about who was assisting in the supposed raids would be accurate. With a somewhat dramatic flair, Herman pulled a PADD out and tapped it with a finger.

"Right here, boys. The proof that you've been the ones stealing my vegetables all along."

Herman punched something up on his PADD and showed it to the boys. It was satellite surveillance of Herman's garden and it clearly showed two boys coming from Bob's house. The first boy produced a lighter and began lighting and tossing something into the garden. Soon the objects began to spew smoke and the whole garden was covered with a thick cloud of smoke. The other boy used a rope with a

weight of some kind on the end to catch a tree branch. Once the rope was secure, he tied off the rope on a tree near the property line. He put on a gas mask and used the rope to place himself above the carrot patch. Hanging by his legs he gathered several carrots and made his way back to Bob's yard. With a flick of his wrist he unwound the weighted rope and the weight landed at his feet. The two boys gathered everything up and wandered off into some bushes and out of sight while munching on one of the carrots.

"...and?" Alien said.

"Yeah. Just who were those two and how did they get into Bob's house. Have you told the police about these intruders you saw in our house?" Mini said, sounding as alarmed as he could muster.

"Boys, come off it. That was you guys and you know it," Herman said, sounding very sure of himself. He punched up something on the PADD and then held it up to the boys. "See. Close ups of your faces."

"Uhm, General Sir. No disrespect, but that looks like a giant raccoon and a rabbit to me," Mini said, looking to Alien for confirmation.

"Yeah, that's what it looks like to me, General Sir," Alien said in an absolutely serious voice. "I didn't know they grew them so big around here."

Herman quickly flipped the PADD around and looked at the images. They were indeed a giant rabbit and a raccoon. As a matter of fact every image and video now showed the same thing: a large rabbit and a raccoon coming from the bushes on Bob's property and stealing the carrots from Herman.

"All right, boys! How in the Hell did you pull that off!" Herman said with all the disbelief on his face evident in his voice.

"Pull what..." Alien started.

"...off, General Sir?" Mini finished.

Suddenly Bob made a dash for the door. He was barely able to get his question to Logan out though his laughter. "Bathroom? Where is... the bathroom, son?"

Off to the side, unnoticed by anyone, Johnny was sitting there doing his best angel impression, minus wings and halo, of course! Sitting in front of him were a very familiar looking rabbit and raccoon munching on carrots. Herman could swear that when he had noticed them, that they had shrugged at him.

When Bob returned he found Herman muttering curses as he furiously punched things on his PADD. "Where in the Hell... I know I stored these on my server at home. What is going on... They aren't on the cameras either. Okay... *what the fuck?* They aren't on the servers at the base either?!? The home cameras I can understand, but the satellite images... There's just no way... Oh... damn..." Mini and Alien were busy looking innocent. Bob shook his head as he returned to the room. His boys looking that innocent made him sure that he didn't want to know anything about it.

Herman gave a big sigh and shook his head. "Okay. I don't know how you boys pulled this off, but I am going to get back to the point."

Mini and Alien just looked at Herman with big round eyes.

"Knock it off, you two. The day that you two are innocent is the day that Hell has frozen over!" He smiled broadly and looked around the room. "What you just saw is an example of what I am talking about. Those two NEVER give up or in, no matter what."

"Mini. Let me ask you something?"

"Go ahead, General Sir."

"Do you do any weight training?"

"Yes, General Sir. I do."

"When you lift, do you just lift random weights with no real focus?"

"Of course not, General Sir. I work hard at it. I have a routine I follow and I concentrate equally on pushing and pulling the weight so I properly work the muscle in both directions."

"Thank you, Mini."

"You're welcome, General Sir," Mini smiled at Herman. You could see that he really liked the retired General and had a lot of respect for the man.

"Alien?"

"Yes, General Sir. What can I do for you?"

"When you play a sport, your lives aren't on the line, are they?"

"Uhm... Of course not, General Sir. It's just a game, after all."

"Exactly, son. So answer me this. Do you have to practice hard to win?"

"Yes sir, General Sir. If you don't practice like you mean it you won't get far."

"Do you enjoy your practices?"

"Not all the time, General Sir, but when Bob isn't being a slave driver it is a lot of fun."

"Slave Driver. Oh, you are soooo going to be running laps for me the entire next practice, Son." Bob's grin could not be hidden, but Alien noticed something in Bob's eyes that told him that he'd just lost.

"Aw man. Dad. Jeez. You see what I mean, General Sir?"

Herman smiled and looked around the room. He had everyone's attention.



"Listen to what I'm saying here. You can have a lot of fun while training seriously. You can do it with smiles on your faces and a joke to break the tension because you know that it is going to help you to survive the real thing. Don't ever do it half-assed!"

"Sir, why would anyone want to cut a donkey in half? That's cruel!" Johnny asked seriously, still in innocent mode.

Herman remained unfazed. Years of dealing with unknown situations made him a hard man to shake, but even when shook he could do what was needed. "Yes it is, son. Sometimes life is just cruel."

"I catch anyone cuttin' donkeys an' I'll get my best friend Kyle to fuzzymore fry him!" Johnny stated factually.

"Well, of course you will, Son. Okay. You heard the guy with the rabbit and raccoon. Anyone caught making half asses will have to deal with this Kyle and his 'fuzzymore,' whatever the hell one of those is," Herman said with absolute calm and seriousness.

A screen dropped out of the ceiling, and a video began playing of Timmy taking out one of the men attacking his Daddy in Montana. "THAT... is a fuzzymore ... and a VERY pissed-off five-year-old," Logan commented.

"See what making Half Asses will get you. I for one have never halved an Ass in my life and I never will, but if I was so inclined, that..." Herman said dramatically pointing to the screen that wasn't in the ceiling a moment ago... "would definitely change my mind."

"What about this?" Logan asked with a smile, pointing as the screen changed to show JJ's famous 'visit' to a police station.

"Good. That is a perfect example of not halving an Ass if I ever saw one. All of you should take that as an object lesson," Herman said, pointing at everyone in the room.

As Herman caught Mick's eye, Mick held out his hand and a LARGE flask of Irish Whisky appeared in it. "Present from Clan Short Intel. This is straight from the home distillery," Mick chuckled.

Herman took the offered flask and noticed it was engraved with his family crest and his full name and rank... Curiously, Herman noted, the 'Retired' was left out. He undid the cap and took a long swig. He let out a slow airy sound before he commented. "Smooth. This reminds me of Laphroaig (Pronounced: La-froigk) from Islay! This is good stuff!"

Herman noticed the look coming from Eoghan just before the boy went off. "Céard is brí leis tú ag caint faoi roinnt cacamas dara ráta na hAlban i os comhair mac na hÉireann! (What do you mean talking about some second rate Scottish crap in front of a son of Ireland!)"

Herman just gave the crazy Irishman a slight nod of the head as he spread his arms in a placating gesture. "No offense meant, of course. No one could possibly besmirch the Cooley Distillery in Riverstown, Cooley County Louth in Ireland, Son. Connemara Cask Strength Peated Single Malt Irish Whiskey sets its own standard."

"I give him an eight on his recovery attempt; he forgot to kiss Eoghan's feet," Lucas giggled softly.

"Son. There is nothing but truth in what I said. Connemara Cask Strength is a fine whiskey that many copy, but few can match." Herman kept an absolute neutral tone the whole time. He was stating fact, nothing but fact.

Just then, Ezra appeared directly in front of Herman, complete with a glowing multi-colored aura. "Special Delivery, for Brigadier General Herman Wilder, from Clan Short Special Forces Airborne Operations Center," Ezra announced formally as he held out a large box with one hand.

The General eyed the box suspiciously. This was most definitely a battle, and one he was not sure he could win. He was being set up, but he wasn't sure how. "Thank you, son. You can set that down over there by the door. I will get it on my way out. Just a minute there, son. Let me get you some help. Hey, Mini! Would you please put that box over there by the door for us."

Mini smiled. "Sure, General Sir!" He walked over, placed one hand under the box and one on the side to steady it, and then took it from Ezra. He walked over to the doorway, and carefully sat the box on the ground. "Anything else, Sir?" he asked innocently.

Herman smiled too, but the look on his face could not be called innocent. He was showing his mettle now. He knew that he was being challenged and that the enemy was cunning. He had watched as Mini and Alien, with nothing but their own imaginations, had worked their way around all his traps and defenses. Just because they were kids did not mean they were unable to outsmart you. "Thank you, Mini. Well now that you mention it, I would appreciate if you could carry that home for me too. That is if you don't mind the imposition?"

Mini giggled. "Chicken!" He picked up the box and placed it on his head. "I'll be right back!"

Herman made clucking sounds and completed the image by placing his hands in his armpits and flapping his arms like they were wings. "I'd rather be a live chicken than a dead whatever, Mister Mini." He grinned fondly at the boy.

As the boys giggled, Mini took off at a jog. A few minutes later, he returned, munching on a carrot. "Before you accuse me, it was on the table!" he said with a grin. "I put the box on your bed for you; that way you don't forget it," he added.

"Looks like I'll be sleeping on the guest bed for a while," Herman muttered to himself.

The kids tried hard not to laugh as they heard Daileass in their earpieces. "*I made copies... there is one on every bed, sleeping bag, blanket pile, couch, and chair in his house!*"

As laughter was beginning to fill the room, Herman looked around. He smiled warmly at the kids as he shook his head. "I may not be sleeping in the house for a while either by the sound of things." He looked at Bob for some sort of support, only to receive a shrug.

The retired Brigadier General was taken with these kids. He really was beginning to like them. They were an interesting conundrum. They all seemed to take the criticism very well. They didn't get all defensive, but then for the UNIT kids he guessed that was understandable. They had known military discipline for most, and in some cases all, of their lives. What surprised Herman was the way the rest of

the kids had taken on that professionalism just like the UNIT kids seemed to be learning how to be kids from them.

"General Sir! Would you be willing to discuss my performance one-on-one, Sir?" Travis said as he came to attention and snapped a crisp salute for the retired general.

"Of course, Son. I'd be happy to go over anything anyone wishes to discuss. Let's step over here to the side out of the way." Herman knew this was not an end to this battle, and while he would not be able to win this battle he would never surrender and admit defeat.

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Author's notes:

Hey Y'all! Just so you know, this is actually only part of what I have written – the chapter got so big that I'm breaking it up into smaller parts and posting each as its own chapter. I'm really enjoying this storyline, and want to thank Fibita, Ilu, and Roland for their input into the kids' escapades.

As Dilly said up top, there are a few things that you're going to see in the next few chapters that I'll be writing up the background for in the Mikyvis Chronicles as soon as I get a chance.

Thanks for sticking with me, and watch for another chapter a LOT sooner than this one took!

AC

## **Chapter Ten: "Pumpkin Pie in the Sky..."**

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As they went to the side, Ezra looked over at the wall. "Oh, crap... Peter forgot a patio door and ramp!" he commented out loud. Without warning, he froze time long enough to have a crew come in and add the door and ramp. Once it was done, he brought the occupants of the room back into normal time, just in time for a Samoyed mother with two pups to appear pulling a wagon containing a large pumpkin and three groundhogs. "Johnny, I think you have a delivery!" Ezra giggled.

Herman sat down slowly in a chair that had not been there a moment before. He looked the strange sight over for a few. His face would have made a Vulcan proud, especially since the swirling emotions and abject disbelief were ricocheting around inside his skull like a 50 cal. inside a safe. He looked Travis right in the eyes and asked him in a very quiet voice, "Now what was it you wanted to ask me?"

Johnny giggled as he watched Travis distract Herman with something more in his realm. "Lucas? Logan? Can you help us carve a good Halloween pumpkin after we eat lunch? Millie and her pups brought us the one I liked, and they're gonna watch us. The pups ain't never seen a jack-o-lantern!"

Lucas looked at Logan a bit uncertainly for a moment. His face furrowed. At first, he looked like he was going to leave, but then he grinned and said, "Sure, but I don't know anything about carving on no pumpkins, Johnny."

"Kewl! I can show you what to do. I bet you guys are really good at it. The pups can't wait to see what you do!" Johnny said, barely able to contain his excitement.

Several minutes later Johnny had all the implements necessary to carve the pumpkins. He was looking at Lucas and Logan expectantly. A look of fear gripped the brothers for a moment, but then they both got a look that can only be called mischievous.

"You thinking what I'm thinking, Lucas?"

"You mean the birthday cake specials?"

"Reading my mind like always."

Johnny just looked lost. "Uhm. Birthday cakes? What's some cakes gots to do with carvin' pumpkins?"

Lucas and Logan drew the confused boy close and they pressed their foreheads to his. The three whispered for a while, and the grin on Johnny's face grew so wide it threatened to pull his face in two. Soon all three boys were giggling like mad men.

This began to draw others to the giggling trio. As soon as they spoke with them the new arrivals would toss their heads back and howl with laughter, and enthusiastically ask Dailess for more pumpkins and lots of paper and pencils, pens, and markers so they could make their plans.

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Herman was busy explaining his thoughts about the jump from the window. His main criticism was that, "You guys should have taken a moment to coordinate before going out the window. In that way you could have maximized the benefit of the surprise attack. It might have been possible to take all four helicopters out before they could respond. I would recommend surprise actions like this one where you concentrate on learning how to coordinate an offense or defense in a matter of seconds. It can make a difference in many battles. The side that can do it the quickest has a decided advantage in any combat situation. Do you see what I mean, Mister Leechman?"

"Yes General Sir. Uhm... Well how... I mean..." Travis let out an audible exhale of breath and seemed a bit unsure of himself.

"Go ahead, Mr. Leechman. The only stupid questions are the ones you don't ask. Never be afraid to ask a question, son, NEVER." Herman said, putting a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder.

While Herman and Travis were talking, Lucas and Logan had become completely engrossed in their plans with Johnny for the pumpkin carving. The Samoyed pups were bouncing yipping, barking and growling as they added their own ideas to the mix.

Suddenly, Herman gulped and took a deep breath as he realized that he could understand what the pups were saying. He must be imagining... Now he was confused because he could swear one of the pups just asked if they could go sniff Lucas' and Logan's butts.

"Uh General Sir?" Travis said as he looked at Herman's confused face.

"I'm sorry, son, but I thought I just heard those Samoyed pups ask if they could sniff Lucas' and Logan's butts." Then realizing what he had just said, he froze for a moment. "Uhm... never mind, Mr. Leechman, just ask me again."

Travis couldn't help himself. He began to laugh, then stopped abruptly at the look on Herman's face. He snapped to attention. "I am sorry, General Sir. I meant no disrespect." The boy looked like he was about to cry.

Herman put an arm around the boy and began to laugh. "No problem, son. I must be losing what little mind I have left. Dogs can't talk... Uhm wait a minute. Maybe they can but people can't... You understood them too, didn't you, son?"

Travis couldn't help it. He burst out laughing again and Herman joined in with him. "Yes General Sir. Animals can talk although most of them don't have much to say that we would be interested in, but they do talk. Well, most of the clan can understand most earth based languages, and that includes animal languages. It is part of being accepted into the Clan."

"Right." Herman said with a bit of disbelieving acceptance in his voice. "Well, where were we before butt sniffing interrupted our conversation?" Travis just looked at Herman with wide eyes before bursting out in another bout of laughter. Soon Herman was laughing with him.

Ezra was looking at Herman with a satisfied smirk on his face. It served him right for trying to sidestep the box. Ezra of course knew that Herman knew more about the Clan than he let on. Herman had actually been excited when the offer to sell his house had come and he realized that he could stay within the Clan compound. The man was Clan material and had never stood a chance.

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Travis stood up and extended his hand to Herman. "Thank you, sir. I can see that you really know your stuff, but I never thought a General would be so... I don't know how to say it, sir."

Herman looked at the boy and gave him a serious but friendly look. "Son. It has been my experience that when you don't know what to say, you should just spit it out as plainly as you can."

"Thanks, sir, but I mean I really don't know how to say it. I don't have the words. You are different... Uhm kinda like Adam. I would follow Adam anywhere because he is one of us. You know... I... Uhm..."

Herman patiently waited for the boy to continue. He could tell that the boy was suffering from some very conflicted emotions.

When Travis saw the gentle but serious expression on Herman's face as he patiently waited for him to continue he relaxed a bit. "What I mean, sir, is you don't act like a grown-up. Oh God! I... Well, I didn't mean... Oh shit." The last being said as his eyes lowered to point at the ground and his voice faded away to an embarrassed whisper.

Herman took the boy's chin in his thumb and forefinger. He raised his face and looked him in the eyes with a small crooked grin on his face.

"Son, I think I understand what you are trying to say. I am just another person like you; why should I treat you differently than I treat anyone else? I have always believed that how a person acts with you, and what they do, are far more important than what race, creed, or some other such nonsense they may be."

"But we're freaks...."

Herman slapped Travis in the face. Not hard, but enough to get his attention.

"Don't you EVER refer to yourselves as freaks EVER AGAIN! You have never been and never will be freaks. You are all wonderful people and that is all there is to it."

Travis started to say something else, but the tears in Herman's eyes, along with the serious and hurt expression on his face, made him change his mind. Instead, he threw his arms around the man and hugged him before turning and running out of the room. Herman began to follow, but was stopped by a restraining hand from Janice. Herman looked at her questioningly.

"Honey, I know you want to go to him right now, but you need to give him a moment. These kids are not used to the emotions they are having to deal with, and sometimes they need a little space. You just wait here and let me go talk to him." Herman made an attempt at a reply, but she shushed him with a finger to his lips. "You just save it for Travis, teddy bear. Trust me here."

All Herman could manage was a nod of his head. Travis had gotten to him in a way that few had before. He felt a connection to the boy and a need to help him succeed in life. It was then that he noticed the boy, Ezra he recalled, looking at him with a very self-satisfied impish grin on his face. Herman returned the look with his own mischievous grin and winked at the boy, who began to glow warmly as he giggled. Herman knew Travis was part of his life. It was just a matter of figuring out just what part he was and wanted to be. Well, he would just let it unfold as it would and deal with what was in front of him as always.

A couple of minutes later, Herman was growing impatient as he paced back and forth. He was beginning to be worried that Travis was taking so long...

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As Marcie made sure the food would hold okay for just a while longer, the kids began gathering the supplies they were going to need. They began to break off into small groups, the older kids making sure the younger ones were included. It was something you would not often see, but it was SOP for the Clan and the UNIT. Everyone was having a blast. Plans were being made and soon all the groups had PADDs in addition to their other supplies.

Some of the adults noticed that the kids were doing some sort of calculations on their PADDs. They also took note that Daileass seemed to be helping everyone with the calculations. Suddenly several large and very heavy looking boxes began to appear. They all had locks on them and the U.N.I.T. emblem on all sides. Closer inspection showed that they had the words Danger, Flammable, and Explosives on them as well under a stencil that said "From the Labs of Jory Casey."

The adults present were certain this was going to be interesting. Mick looked at Bob with a grin. "Should I order the full hazmat suits now, or you think we can take the chance?"

Bob grinned. "Why ruin their fun? It'll wash off!"

"...blood does wash off, doesn't it?" Mick said in a tone that Bob was not so sure didn't contain a serious question.

"Yes... use cold water. Trust me, between Mini and Alien I learned that one instantly," Bob replied semi-seriously.

Suddenly he felt a tap on his shoulder and he was certain that he was in trouble, but as he turned he saw a multi-colored-haired boy grinning at him with laughter in his eyes.

"Do I need to talk to Grandma Teri?" Ezra asked mischievously.

Yep. He was in trouble all right.

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Janice made her way out of the building and immediately headed around back to the firing range where she knew she would find Travis "working on his emotions." As she rounded the first corner she saw about twenty kids heading toward her. They were all going on about carving pumpkins. It made her smile. As she came around the other corner she found a lone Travis on the firing range. He had fifteen or so guns in front of him. Almost faster than she could follow he was grabbing guns and emptying their contents into the targets that were randomly appearing all over the firing range. He wasn't missing. In fact he was literally shredding the targets.

Janice stayed back with her hands over her ears, and let Travis finish working out his emotions. She shook her head and grinned as he grabbed the last gun... well, grenade launcher. Explosion after explosion after explosion shook her. She walked up behind Travis, who was still pulling the trigger even though the launcher was empty, and wrapped her arms around him.

"Listen, sweetie. It's all right to like Herman. He is a good person, and I know he likes you. He wanted to run out here after you, but I told him to wait."

"He WANTED to follow me? Why in the world would he do that?"

Suddenly Travis pulled a gun from under his arm and put eleven shots into the head and torso of a target.

"That won't work, honey. You can't distract me with a little noise."

Travis broke down and put his head on her shoulder and sobbed.

Janice took Travis' chin in her hand and brought his eyes up to meet hers. "Baby, he loves you. I could see it in his eyes. You have touched something deep inside him..." She stopped mid-sentence as she saw Herman come around the building from the opposite side she had arrived from. Travis immediately spun around to see what she was looking at. When he saw who it was his body went rigid.

"Sir?!?"

Herman didn't say a word. He just walked up and put his arms around the frightened boy and hugged.

"I'll leave you two alone so you can talk," Janice said as she walked away with a satisfied smile on her lips.

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**Thirty minutes later:**

The adults looked on in amusement as pumpkin carving began to take over the room. Herman began to become concerned. Were these pumpkins coming from his garden? He sighed, resigning himself to the never-ending battle protecting his garden was. Then he began to grin and laugh before he blurted out loud, "Yes. Yes! Now this is what retirement should be!"

Realizing that he had said that out loud only embarrassed the man for a moment before it made him grab Bob in a bear hug. He put his mouth next to his confused-looking friend's ear. In a whisper that Bob could just hear over the noise the kids were making, Herman began to speak.

"Bob, don't you ever dare to tell those boys I said this, but thank you so much for bringing those two into my life. After what happened with... Well. I was not enjoying retirement anymore till they came along!"

Bob grinned at his old friend and gave a gentle nod of his head.

"Yeah. Me too... Me, too."

Both men wiped a tear from their eyes.

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It was time for the kids to show off their pumpkins. The pumpkins were all lined up on tables in front of everyone and the only visible cutting was that the tops had been removed and were sitting next to the pumpkins. They all had wires coming from inside and patches of various shapes and sizes all over the outsides.

Logan, Lucas, and Johnny were standing in front of everyone. Logan held his hand up and everyone got quiet. Johnny stepped forward, and began to speak. As he did the dogs made a bee-line to the door and retreated outside. All the kids were standing in front of the adults. There must have been fifty plus kids at this time and at least thirty adults.

"Thanks for coming, everyone. My buds Logan and Lucas did great with the pumpkins. They never done it before. Okay, you all ready?"

Everyone said yes almost at the same time. Logan stepped forward. His voice rang out.

"Three. Two. One!" All the kids dropped to the floor almost as one. "Fire in the hole!"



The pumpkins suddenly underwent an amazing transformation. There was a flurry of pops, cracks, and hisses coming from all around the room. The faces of the pumpkins now had images carved in them. No more than a second later there was a loud bang and some of the adults found themselves covered in pumpkin guts.

Janice, untouched by any of the airborne debris, looked at Mick as he wiped almost the entire contents of a pumpkin off his face. "I TOLD you that the boys would get you for your pranks sooner or later!" she laughed.

Herman, who had also found himself spared from the attack, sniggered at his neighbor. "I tried to tell you, Mick, a good soldier knows when to pick his battles."

The kids all got up and began to laugh, but the adults in the room were not about to leave it where it was. It started with Mick as he scooped the pumpkin guts off and hurled them at the nearest kids. Soon the adults all joined in and the kids were just as covered as they were.

Once the food fight had calmed, Julio tapped his commbadge. "Hey Daileass, could we get a little help with cleanup here? I think the General's compost pile could use a little extra pumpkin guts."

"Save the seeds for the squirrels!" Johnny quickly added, as a line of squirrels waltzed through the open door.

Suddenly the kids and Herman were once again completely free of pumpkin guts, and there was a small table on one of the larger tables that had a sign reading 'Reserved for T. T. S. R. D.' with a pile of seeds on it. "No problem, Director, but the adults are on their own."

"I see where we rate...." Mick mumbled as he started towards the bathroom to clean up. He made it about four steps before vanishing for a second. He returned... now not only clean and soaking wet, but also carrying a beaver in his hands. "Johnny, I believe this little guy has heard of you...." Mick quipped as he finished spitting the water from his mouth.

"Kyle was telling me about that... thanks for bringing him home, Daddy!" Johnny giggled as he came over and took the beaver from Mick. "Hi there, Benny!"

The beaver gave Johnny a toothy grin, and made itself comfortable in his arms. Janice and Marcie found themselves suddenly void of any pumpkin remnants, which caused them both to smile sweetly at Mick.

"Is anyone here hungry?" Marcie asked as the food reappeared next to her. Once the yells of 'YES' subsided, she added "Find a seat if you want to eat!"

The boys all scrambled to find seats, while Janice retrieved the baby Bob from his bassinet and began feeding him from the bottle that appeared with the food. The animals that had ran for shelter during the pumpkin explosion returned, all of the smaller ones joining the squirrels and Benny on the table near Johnny while the larger ones picked spots between kids to join the meal.

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After the meal was complete Herman stood, tapped on his glass with his knife, and cleared his throat. Once he had everyone's attention he began to speak. "Guys. If any of you want to talk to me about anything, I live next door to Mini and Alien... Oh yeah... Bob lives there too. If you need to get in touch, they will be able to tell you how. Whenever I leave they watch my place for me, so they always know how to contact me."

Eoghan and Ezra, who had disposed of his aura, came over to Herman. "Sir?" Eoghan said, his voice uncharacteristically unsure, "May we speak candidly with you?"

"Go ahead, son." Herman replied.

"Sir, I need to be up front with you. Not only have you passed the background checks that I requested after meeting you, but you also responded well to the minor details of Clan and Unit life which are a daily occurrence. I have discussed the results with my men in Air Wing Charlie, and we have all decided that we would like for you to take command of our air wing as our parent. Before you make your decision, I believe a briefing by Ezra would be in your best interests."

Herman looked at Ezra. "How long will this take, Ezra?"

Ezra smiled. "I am, among other things, an extremely adept telepath, General. You may check my credentials with Mick and Bob, if you wish. Once you are sure that you wish to proceed, I estimate that it will take no more than two minutes. For the protection of the Air Wing, I will also ask now if you will allow me to perform a full scan of your memories. I hold a Zulu Foxtrot One security clearance level, so nothing in your memories will be compromised."

"Do it, Herman; he's not messing with you," Bob yelled across the room. "I knew he came back for something!"

"I second Bob's comment," Mick replied as he joined them. "I could tell by the way you were standing what you were asking, Ezra. You learned that one from your Dad."

Herman nodded. "In that case, feel free to proceed, young man, with both options."

Ezra nodded. "Just relax; it makes things easier for humans."

Almost two minutes later, Herman opened his eyes and looked around the room with a new appreciation of what he had experienced that day. "I had heard rumors... but... what can I say; you young men are something that no words can describe. I'm honored to even be considered as an advisor to your team; to be asked to be the parent of Air Wing Charlie is an honor beyond words. Eoghan, I'll accept on one condition. Each one of your team must ask personally. I will not say no to any of them, but I do not believe such a move should be done without individual attention."

Colin came over, leading the rest of the wing. "Ezra, next time you decide to break into the command network, could you at least *warn* someone?"

"I did... tomorrow!" Ezra giggled. "It's easier to issue security clearances that way!"

They stood and watched as Herman expanded his family, Colin doing the honors of making each one official. After he was done, Herman asked, "What is the procedure to contact Daileass? You told me about him, but not how to contact him."

"I thought you'd never ask!" Daileass giggled as a commbadge and earpiece appeared on the table. "You can just say my name though in here and in your house. I've got monitors in all Clan and Unit properties."

Herman nodded. "In that case, soldier, I will state this where all can hear it. When I heard you the first time, I assumed that you were a boy sitting at a console. I now know that you are more; you are a soldier serving his brothers in a way that no other could possibly achieve. Your humanity is never in doubt. It is time for me to call in some favors. You *WILL* be recognized for your efforts, without violating the secrecy necessary for your status. There is a clause in the regulations for issuance of the Congressional Medal of Honor which allows for key persons to advise Congress in the instance of highly classified operations instead of releasing the information to civilians. Your life is known to all of the proper types of personnel as of right now; and I will not sleep until the calls are made. I will not allow anything less for a soldier of your caliber."

Daileass replied respectfully. "Sir. If you're wanting to give me this honor for what I have done, then you will have to do that not only for me but for my brothers and for all the UNIT kids. What I have done, and what I have gone through, is no greater or no lesser than what they have."

Without warning, Logan, Adam, Alvin, Simon, and Theodore appeared in the room. Before anyone could say anything, Logan spoke up. "General, I am sorry for interrupting you, but there's a few things that you may need to know. First off, we all appreciate what you're trying to do here, but I am afraid that you may be doing this with some misinformation, or not all of the information. If you would please, explain *WHY* you want to give this honor to Daileass. I know you have already, but I need you to do it again where others that didn't hear it before can hear it."

Herman looked around the room. "May I enquire as to if everyone in this room is cleared for this discussion?"

Daileass was actually the one to respond to them. "We've hidden this for too long. Those in this room are our family. There is no reason to hide from our family, so yes... everyone in this room has the clearance to hear this."

"Well, this is about you and your brothers, so I will bow to what you want. Just be sure that you have thought about the consequences for you and your brothers in regard to who knows about this young man." The softness of Herman's voice betrayed his emotions.

"Sir..." Daileass began. "I am fully aware of what the people in this room will learn, and to be blunt, what you know is not the full story. As soon as you explain what you know, I will fill in the blanks. But again, those in this room are family, and as such, deserve to know. I am also recording this and will make it fully available throughout the Clan network. The time for hiding certain things is over." Even though Daileass's voice was strong, everyone could hear the fear in it, although few knew why.

Herman looked around the room. "As you wish, son. As many of you are probably aware, Daileass is a young man who has experienced the loss of his body, yet has continued on within an electronic body. Unlike the expected response of most humans to such a situation, he has turned this event into a me-

thod to ensure the protection of those he considers family, both blood and adopted. During this, he has retained his youth and is without a doubt still a very honorable specimen of humanity."

Logan took a step forward. "Sir, would you like to explain the rest, or would you prefer I do? Many of the people here do not know even what you have already said, let alone the rest."

"Thank you, Logan. I know I don't have the full story, so I would like to let you tell everyone. However, please allow me to say something more." He paused for a moment and received a nod of the head from Logan. "Daileass, you were put through a hell few could imagine, and you have come out of it a better person than most people twice your age. Your humanity and compassion are inspiring. I am honored to know someone of your character. I cannot say enough how inspiring it is to see someone with the sheer presence of mind and will to perform to the best of their abilities and make a hard situation their own to control. So many give in to the situation and let it rule them." With that said, Herman called everyone to attention, snapped a salute, and gestured to Logan. "Son, seeing as you know more about this outstanding young man than I, please illuminate us."

Logan smiled. "By the way, Daileass, you're running out of auxiliary Liebert units... stop blushing!" That got a chuckle out of everyone, then Logan turned serious again. "Some of you know this, some of you do not. My brothers were created as General Adams and his team were trying to recreate the intelligence they saw in me. Unfortunately, while my brothers are highly intelligent, they did not succeed in attaining the level they wanted. Of course, they never could reach what they wanted because genetics are fickle like that. But that's besides the point." Logan sighed, and started to pace around the rather crowded room as he spoke.

"A little over three years ago, the good General decided that since they were not able to get what they wanted, they would try something else. They decided to go ahead and take a personality imprint from my brothers and transfer their memories, personalities, and everything that makes them, them, into a positronic matrix, and place that back into their bodies. Now, there is an argument raging amongst my brothers as to whether they actually died when that happened or not. I will not speak to that, since I feel that is something they each must decide for themselves."

"Now, Daileass is actually the oldest, and the first one they tried this on. What they didn't think about at first was the fact that a Positronic Matrix is actually significantly heavier than a normal brain. As soon as they stood him up, his neck snapped under the weight, and his body died instantly. They were able to save the brain though, and then made sure from that point forward, to reinforce the Cervical spine so it could handle the extra weight."

"Anyways, not being one to miss the opportunity, the doctors, under General Adams' orders, took Daileass and put him into different military vehicles seeing if he could operate things like ground vehicles, tanks, helicopters, airplanes, and even smaller ships. The question was, could he operate them as well as a human could, and if so, how much damage the different vehicles could take and still operate. What they either didn't know, or didn't care about, was the fact that Daileass was able to 'feel' each and every vehicle he was in, as if it were a body, because it was." Several people were able to hear a quiet sob escape from the speakers around the room before they quickly fell silent.

"At the time of their escape, Daileass had been placed in a shipping crate so he could be moved to a different base, where they were going to install him into a prototype bomber drone, to see if that would work as well. When I found him, we hooked him up to a computer system, and asked what he wanted to do. At first he had wanted us to simply destroy him, so that he could finally die. After he was reassu-

red that he would never be used the way he was, and that he and his brothers had actually escaped, he readily agreed to become part of the base, with the agreement that he would always be the one to agree to any new systems or upgrades that we wanted to do BEFORE we did them." Logan paused for a moment to get his breath back, before he finished up. "That's almost all of it, but before I tell you the last part, are there any questions, or anything that I was not clear enough about?"

Mick was obviously agitated. "Give me five minutes with the bastards that did this ... and a Mikyvis to make it the longest five minutes in history."

Ezra looked at Mick. "I believe they have already been Judged, Mick. More than that is above my status to tell you."

"My God Son! A Congressional Medal of Honor is not nearly enough... It just..." Herman choked out as he fought back his tears. "I wish to apologize on behalf of the US Military men and woman who serve in order to protect. What was done in our name is shameful to us as a country and has sullied our name as military men and woman. That you and your brothers came from this humbles me." Herman fell silent. Tears flowed openly down his cheeks. His military had been injured by this. It deeply troubled the man. He still had contacts, and by God he would use them to ferret out anything else even remotely like this.

Logan walked over and stood directly in front of Herman. "General, Sir, do not allow this to sully your opinion of the country that you served for many years. What was done was done by a few evil men that used the military as a cover for what was being done. This was NOT sanctioned by anyone in authority to do such. We know that General Adams used his position to cover this up from anyone ever finding out about what was happening."

"People knew stuff, son. But I am sure you already know that. My honor as a warrior for my country has been smeared by them. I will not let this or anything like it stand. Now that I know, I will act. I am a good judge of people, and you have depth to you. I expect you know my reputation, and probably know what I am likely to do. Honor is not some intangible, it is the foundation that everything a warrior is comes from." Herman's eyes shone with the fierceness and determination of a protector. It was what he was to his core.

"And that, sir, is exactly why Daileass and my other brothers *volunteered* to go through what they did!"

"Yes Sir. I understand you perfectly." He looked the boy in the eye and extended his hand.

Logan nodded and took the General's hand and shook it with a smile.

Meanwhile Kris spoke up. "Okay... I understand the honor part, but what the fuck do you mean volunteered?!"

"What I mean is this. Something that very few people know is that I have the ability to see certain things in the future. Also I was in contact with my brothers mentally since they were old enough to speak mentally. Anyways, I knew what was going to happen, including what was going to happen to Daileass. When I explained to my brothers what would happen, and what would have happened had they escaped before the General was able to go through what he did. All of them, to a man, agreed to let it happen. My youngest brothers were only five years old at the time, and I made damned sure they understood what was going to happen... I made sure they ALL knew what was going to happen. Becau-

se it meant the most lives of our family would be saved, they all agreed to let it happen. That is what I meant my volunteering."

Herman again looked to Logan and received a nod. "Do any of you know what honor really is? I see honor in all of you. You have honor, and the most amazing thing to me is how you don't seem to know it. Do any of you know what honor means? I don't mean the definition you find in the dictionary. I mean inside yourself where you keep the things that make you who you are. Do you understand honor there? When you volunteer to become a soldier you take on the real possibility of dying. You have taken on the responsibility for others' lives. When you do that you cannot fail, because if you do the ones you are protecting will be harmed or die. That is honor. That is what you all are. Honorable men." Herman had a respect for this boy and his brothers that not many could gain. For that matter he felt that type of respect for all the people involved in this 'Clan.' He knew the unfortunate reality of government. He was a General after all. Part of what he did was politics and it left a bad taste in his mouth. "Honor is a young man who takes in two boys and makes them his little brothers." he said as he looked Julio in the eyes. "Honor is a young man who protected his twin brothers, then kept going in the hope that one day he could find them. Honor is accepting the responsibility for a Division not because you want it, but because you are the best person to do the job." He paused and looked Ezra in the eyes. "Honor is having ultimate power, yet only using that power when no other option is possible."

"Sir, if I may?" Daileass's voice came over the speakers, still sounding a bit choked up. When the General nodded, Daileass started to speak and everyone could feel the emotion in his voice. "My brothers and I appreciate what you want to do with the medals. Please do not ever think that we don't. But to us, they really are just fancy pieces of metal. I do not wish to take *anything* away from those who have received them before, but to us, we don't really want that. To us, receiving those kinds of awards aren't needed. What we really want is something so much simpler, yet infinitely harder to achieve. All we want is for people to love each other. To have a family that cares for us, a mom and dad who know that we're different and don't care. Yes, we know that we could die at any time, and that doesn't matter to us. Because we know that if our lives were lost, we'd die making others' lives better. We'd die helping other kids find a family like we've found. *That* is what we want. To be able to help other kids find the love and family that we have."

"Yes, that is exactly what you're getting the medal for, Son. Honestly. I would never give a medal to someone who thought that the fancy pieces of metal were worth anything. A medal is a recognition of what sets you apart from most people. Most people on the Earth probably understand what you are talking about wanting. I bet most people want the same things. You and your brothers actively *do* something to achieve it. *That* is what a medal is about. It is saying this is someone who gets it done," Herman said as he gestured around the room.

"I'll put it this way, guys..." Mick added as he caught each of the clones' eyes, "people who go out looking for awards and medals end up dead or permanently disabled. A medal hound is more dangerous than the enemy in a combat situation. Some of the best men I have ever worked with have never earned the 'Good Conduct' medal or any of the other trinkets that have been created to make medal hounds feel good about themselves. If you put them in full dress uniform, though, the few medals that you would see tell the whole story. Each and every one that is on their chest tells the story of a warrior who did what was needed when the time came. Daileass, could you please fetch the General's dress tunic?"

"Okay..." Daileass responded. A second later, the General's dress white tunic, complete with all of his medals, appeared on a rack in front of Mick. Surprisingly, there were only two rows... but each of the awards held at least one gold pip on them.

"Could we get a cross-reference list of the awards on this tunic on the screen?" Mick asked. Once it was displayed, Mick commented on the various awards. "This is my point here... Herman has a 'Presidential Citation' with three gold pips, yet there is not a single 'Good Conduct' or any of the other 'fluff' awards in this set. The amazing part is that he has awards from every one of the services. Anyone who looks at this selection knows that Herman earned his rank and awards by being honorable, not by kissing ass."

"Enough already," Herman said. "I think the point is made, Mick. I've never been popular with, as you termed them, the 'medal hounds'. I've never believed in awarding people for breathing; when I authorize awards it means the recipient has performed an action above and beyond what most would consider doing in an effort to assure the success of a mission. In the entire span of my career I have never recommended any award near the level of a Medal of Honor; in my opinion I never believed that an action was worth that honor... until today."

Logan was clearly fighting back his own emotions, but he was able to say clearly. "General, on behalf of my brothers and myself... Thank you."

"It is my pleasure, Sir. I am honored to be able to do this," Herman said as he saluted Logan and his brothers.

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### **Wells Fargo Arena, Des Moines, later that afternoon:**

Cory grinned inside his ape suit as his 'Tarzan' led him onto the arena floor. As he looked around, he was amazed at the setup that was laid out in front of him. Off on the north end of the floor, a curtained stage had been set up. Around the perimeter, it looked like the Midway of the State Fair, with games and concessions forming a horseshoe of things to do. The center of the floor consisted of tables and padded chairs laid out in a haphazard pattern, each having a Hallowe'en-themed centerpiece of some sort. Despite the fact that they had arrived early, the arena was already holding over a thousand kids, all running around and having fun as their parents watched from the comfort of the stands.

"*Awesome!*" Tyler exclaimed as he grabbed his fellow 'pirates' hands. "Avast ye mateys, thar be treasure over thar to be plundered!" he exclaimed in his best pirate voice as he pointed at the midway.

"Lead the way, Capt'n!" Kyle giggle as him and Fife followed Tyler.

"Wait up!" a Klingon-clad Casey exclaimed. "You ain't plunderin' without me!"

As the four boys ran off to begin their adventures, Tina pulled on Cory's fur. "Unca Cory! Look! A *dragon!*"

Cory turned to look at where she was pointing, and sure enough, an obviously illusional dragon was 'walking' across the tables towards them, being led by a strangely familiar 'wizard' and being followed by a growing group of little kids.

"Hi, Uncle Cory!" the little wizard said as he got closer.

The voice erased any doubt in Cory's mind as to the identity of the 'wizard'. "Hey there, Dylan! I thought you'd be helping out with the Orlando party!" Cory replied, mentally crossing his fingers that Dylan was not in a pranking mood.

Dylan giggled as he walked up to Cory and gave him a hug after handing his staff to JJ. He was dressed in a classic blue wizard's robe, covered in silver stars and moons. On top of his head, a three-foot-tall wizard's cap made sure he was easy to find. The costume was completed by a large wooden staff that he carried in one hand. "Don't worry, Uncle Cory, I'm helping the little ones have fun by doing 'magic' tricks," Dylan replied softly. "Besides, I *am* at the Orlando party... or I was ... or I will be ... something like that!"

The last bit had its intended effect, causing Cory to laugh. "You're a nut, Dilly!"

"Yep!" Dylan giggled. "You've got a table by the stage, Uncle Cory. Julio's table is by yours; I'll make sure he finds it when his group gets here." Dylan made the rounds of the rest of the group, giving each of them a hug before kneeling down in front of Tina. "Hi Tina, I like your princess costume! Would you like to come with me and help me do magic tricks for the kids your age? Every Wizard needs a Princess!"

Tina nodded, a big smile on her face. Dylan took her hand, retrieved his staff, then turned to his group of 'followers'. "Cookie break! For my next trick, I'm going to make us all appear at the cookie table!"

The group of kids cheered, and a second later they vanished in a cloud of smoke, dragon and all. Cory looked down at where Tina had been standing, and shook his head. "Hon, I think our nephew has been practicing somewhere."

Sean nodded, his own impressions amazingly similar. "Yeah, but it looks like he's having fun with it. Something tells me this will be an interesting night!"

"Ancient Chinese Curse...." JJ giggled, his Spiderman costume showing each muscle of his body twitching in concert.

"I refuse to comment on grounds of not wanting to be pranked," Adam added as he rearranged his Batman cape.

"*Chicken!*" Cory giggled, getting him a nod of affirmation from Adam.

"There was no reason to insult chickens!" Bast giggled, his arm around Jeremy's waist. "Let's find our table, then raid the munchies!"

"Lead the way, sir!" Cory giggled. With Bast, Mont, and Jeremy leading the way, all three dressed in impeccable three-piece suits, the group found their way to the table reserved for them in front of center stage.

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**A few minutes later...**



'Alpha squad reports entry secure... roll with plan Charlie Seven.' Larry announced as he scanned the arena from the edge of the entry ramp. Not only Larry, but the entire Dutchman team and Air Wing, had dressed as Secret Service Agents, complete with black suits, dark glasses, and ear pieces. At his announcement, the rest of the Dutchmen quickly moved into protective positions along the entry as the Air Wing circled the division staff and 'escorted' their charges into the arena.

"Don't you think this is going a little bit overboard?" Julio giggled as he was escorted in. Tucker was walking on one side dressed as Rambo and Ricky was on the other dressed as a cat.

"No, overboard is if I had let Eoghan bring his chopper like he wanted to," Colin laughed. "At least this is in character for their costumes, and they are following their training."

Logan smiled as he and Lucas personally escorted Mini and Alien. "Why do you think me and Lucas decided on Roman Guard costumes? Since our brothers were wearing togas, it made sense... plus we get to carry some awesome swords!"

Tucker looked the four boys over and grinned. "Like you'd even use the swords? All four of you are packing much more lethal weapons... not that anyone can tell, you did a great job of teaching Mini and Alien how to properly carry a concealed weapon, Lucas."

"Thanks," Lucas replied softly. "You trained them, so I wasn't going to let them go without their phasers. Tomorrow Logan and I are going to teach them about *real* weapons though."

"Yeah, nothing like a good 'BOOM' to keep you awake!" Logan giggled. "You know, Rocky, I don't remember the Terminator having a tail... I think we need to watch the series again to double check!"

"I won't argue with that!" Rocky replied from Jesse's side. "Maybe Colin will learn something!"

"Bite me, furball! I taught him everything he knows!" Colin replied with a grin.

"Whaaaatevvvverrrr, Day-Dream!" Rocky shot back, causing Jesse to almost stumble as he broke into a fit of giggles.

Julio shook his head as he smiled at the interplay between the group of boys that were quickly bonding into a core divisional family. "Hey, guys? Has anyone noticed if Patriarch Cory is here yet?"

Lewis hopped onto Huey's back, and quickly scanned the crowd. "Target acquired, bearing 295, range seventy-five yards. Target is stationary at a table near the stage," he announced professionally.

"Oh, *this* is going to be good!" Tucker chuckled as he watched Eoghan order his air wing to form a classic 'Flying Vee' to lead the group to Cory's table.

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Cory and crew had just sat down when Mont started giggling. "Hey Cory, looks like Julio's got himself some security!"

Cory turned his head, and smiled as he saw the group heading towards him. "Hey JJ; when did you add that chapter to the security book?"

JJ laughed. "I didn't! You have to admit, it looks awesome though!"

A few seconds later, the incoming group arrived at the table. With a knowing smirk at JJ, Colin immediately ordered "Des Moines Division... Security Detail... *FALLLL... IN!*" as soon as they came to a stop.

With a 'you'll pay for this later' glare, JJ stood and approached Colin, who was now standing at attention waiting for him.

"Sir. Des Moines Division Security Detail standing by for inspection, Sir!" Colin barked, obviously enjoying what he was doing to JJ.

JJ said nothing, but walked down the line of 'secret service agents' checking sunglasses for smudges. He then reviewed the personal security, complementing the raccoons on their choice of costumes. Finally he reached the Toga Crew; the twins both standing with swords across their chests, along with Mini and Alien doing their best to match their little brothers. "Butterfly Hunters with swords... *THAT* is impressive!" JJ commented with a smile. "Hey Mini, who are the mini-Minis? When did you guys join Security?"

Mini proudly replied, "These are my little brothers Lucas and Logan. Alien and me are training with the Dutchmen, which means that we need to learn to act like Dutchmen. We're all brothers now; Dad adopted the entire team."

"Sweet." JJ replied. He then turned and went back to Doug. As he was going, he asked Daileass on his subvocal "*Did Doug take a new last name?*"

"*Yep, he's a 'Busch' now... just like his other fourteen brothers.*" Daileass replied. "*You've gotta see the recording; Bob's face was classic!*"

"*Get it to me after the party!*" JJ giggled. "*Thanks!*"

JJ came to a stop in front of Doug. "Lieutenant Busch, I've been informed that you have taken in two additional persons for training. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Sir," Doug replied, his eyes showing that he was unsure at how this first official interaction with JJ was turning out.

"Good," JJ replied. "I expect you to cross-train with the personnel that you have taken in. You and your men are to spend time daily with Mini, Alien, and other civilian Division personnel experiencing everyday youth activities which do not involve military functions. Unless your team is on a Unit operation, you fall under my command; I require my personnel to participate in everyday activities unless the situation specifically requires otherwise. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Doug replied.

"Good," JJ said with a smile. "Your cross-training begins right now. Dutchmen, go have fun, that's an order."

"You heard him... Dutchmen, *Fall OUT!* Mini, you have lead," Doug ordered.

As Mini led the group off to investigate the attractions in the arena, JJ motioned for Robin to join him. With Robin at his side, he approached Eoghan. "Captain O'Reilley, did you hear and understand my orders to the Dutchmen?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good. I hate repeating myself," JJ replied with a smile. "I know how much fun you guys have with the Dutchmen tormenting each other; Daileass gives us weekly videos of your latest exchanges. Making you guys hang out with the Dutchmen would be like making Bast sweep out an entire catnip warehouse... by the time it's over everything in sight would be destroyed!"

"Hey!" Bast exclaimed. "Not *everything* would be destroyed ... maybe ... if I was careful ...."

"Point made!" JJ laughed. "As I was saying... when it comes to fine control and quick reflexes, air squads have the best training out there. Your lives depend on it. Robin could learn a lot from you, and in turn you can learn to just be kids sometimes from him. As of right now, you are to go with Robin and have fun. If any of you get stuck in the rafters, you're on your own. One other thing... it seems that Colin is having memory issues; I'm tasking your team with keeping him on his toes."

"Understood, Sir. I'm *sure* Robin will be happy to assist," Eoghan replied with a smirk. "Move out, Robin has lead!" he added as he spun to his wing.

JJ watched the group follow Robin, then turned to Colin. "Now, about your memory, Colin...."

"What?" Colin replied innocently. "And what did I do to deserve you setting the 'Mad Irishman' loose on me?"

"You forgot my standing orders on introductions." JJ replied. "Just be glad I didn't set Bryce loose on you!"

"You wouldn't...." Colin began.

"Try me." JJ interrupted. "Hey Julio, a bit of advice... keep a whip handy with this one!"

"Naw, I heard he enjoys it... I'll stick with threatening health food!" Julio replied. "Hey Cory, how'd the car trip go?"

"It went good; I think Biff ended up with writer's cramp helping everyone with their new cars... not to mention the thousand karts that Kyle bought." Cory giggled.

"Only a thousand?" Julio laughed. "What about the rest of us?"

"You're as bad as he is!" Sean and Cory said in unison. "Should we go attack the games?" Cory added.

"Lead the way, Boss!" Julio replied. "One Clan invasion, coming up!"

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### **Later that evening:**

Cory was surprised to see just how well Dylan had behaved during the party so far. When he wasn't doing 'magic' tricks for the little ones, he was playing air guitar on the speakers set up for the party music that had been playing. As a group, everyone took a break from their celebration when Dylan announced that he was holding a costume contest. As everyone watched, he brought groups of contestants on stage, and issued awards for multiple categories. Julio and his group cheered loudly when Logan and Lucas won the "Best Old World" prize, while Ezra's 'Wolverine' costume won the prize for "Best Costume on a Non-Human".

As the contest finished, Dylan stood midstage and waved his hands, seemingly causing the lights to slowly dim. "Hey guys and girls... did someone say they wanted more music?"

The crowd yelled in unison, obviously wanting to see what trick Dylan had up his sleeve this time. The area near the stage became completely dark, while perimeter lights ensured the safety of the thousands of kids in the building. The roped-off platform near the north ramp suddenly came to life, the sound and effects units glowing and the occupants scurrying to get in position. In the ceiling of the arena, static sparks began jumping from beam to beam, culminating in a bolt of 'lightning' which struck to the right side of the stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls..." Dylan began as he appeared in the exact spot the 'lightning' had just struck, "We promised you a band, and now it's time to party! Culminating a three-year multi-dimensional multi-universe concert tour which crossed 73 timelines, bringing you songs from throughout the known and unknown musical dimensions, I give you the one ... the only ... the multi-universal sensation ... the band known as *'Time Touched'!*"

The Arena lights dimmed as Dylan pounded the base of his staff on the stage. A blue ball of energy appeared on the top of the staff about the size of a softball, then quickly grew to the size of a basketball before flying towards center front stage. As the ball of light reached center stage, tendrils of static energy began to spring from it in a 360 degree arc from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, making a curtain of blue static. With a sudden flash and a burst of smoke, the ball exploded. As everyone's eyes tried to adjust to the sudden darkness, the Arena echoed with a group of young voices singing....

***"We built this city ... we built this city on rock... and... roll ... built this city... we built this city on rock and ro...ooo...ooolllllllllllll....."***

Cory's eyebrows shot up as he recognized some of the voices on the stage. As his eyes adjusted to the light, they confirmed what his ears were telling him. Up at the front of the stage, Austin and Beau were handling the main vocals, Conner and Tanner's fingers were flying over a pair of keyboards, CD had his birthday bass out and cranked, Joey was keeping the beat on a huge drum kit, and the most shocking was Timmy prancing around the stage on lead guitar dressed as a cowboy.

As the song wound down, Toby came up to replace Beau, a guitar slung over his shoulder. As Tanner hit the opening notes of 'Here I Go Again', KC replaced Timmy on lead and Pauly took a seat at the second drum set, his Vulcan costume amazingly realistic in Cory's eyes.

The song finished, and Austin stepped up to mid-stage. "**DES MOINES!!!**" he yelled, causing the assembled kids in the crowd to yell back at him. Once they had settled down, he continued. "We've been on the road for a LONG time, but we saved the best for last... look out Iowa, Patriarch Cory's kids are back home ... and we're gonna ... ROCK ... THE ... ROOF ... OFFA ... THIS ... ARENA!!!"

The crowd exploded again, and it took almost a minute before Austin could speak. "Just so you're up to date, let me introduce the band. Guys, come up here as I introduce you. I'm Austin, as you heard, I do lead vocals, sax, and synthesizer. Beau sings, plays trombone, and shakes anything that'll make noise. Brandon plays bass and rhythm guitar. CD sings, and pretty much plays anything with a string. Calen sings and also plays sax and the synth. Back on my right, Conner tickles the piano, the keyboards, and does vocals. DJ handles some of the lead vocals, and plays trumpet as well as acoustic and rhythm guitar. Joey sings, plays hot drums, and occasionally picks up a violin. KC handles vocals, the steel guitar, lead guitar, and cello. Leo does vocals, flute, harmonica, and tambourine. Pauly is competing with Joey, he also handles drums as well as the shaker box. Over there on my left, Tanner handles vocals, keyboards, and the Hammond Organ. Timmy is trying out for the world's youngest lead guitarist, and also plays acoustic and sings. Our last member is Toby, who sings, plays acoustic and rhythm guitar, and plays a mean electric violin. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we are the one ... the only ... **WE ARE THE 'TIME TOUCHED'!**"

The assembled band took a group bow, then scattered as Leo took the microphone from Austin. "Any of you guys heard of 'Fleetwood Mac'?" he asked as Pauly headed for his drums, Timmy grabbed a guitar, and Brandon picked a bass. As the kids yelled their acknowledgment, Leo grinned. "They've gave us some great advice, y'all need to listen .. and whatever you do ... 'Don't Stop!!!"

Tanner fired up the keyboards as Conner started making the concert grand on his side sing. As Brandon and Pauly sang their respective vocals, Cory and Sean shared a smile at their youngest son's drumming and singing.

"Are those ALL my brothers?" Fife asked from his seat on Sean's lap, his fur quivering with excitement.

"A couple are your nephews, and a couple are only part time, but pretty much they are!" Sean replied with a smile.

Cory was about to comment, when Dylan appeared on his lap. "Hi Uncle Cory! Do you like our little surprise?" Dylan asked, an unusual worry creeping into his voice.

Cory smiled. "I think it's kewl, Dilly. I didn't know the guys could all play like this. It sounds awesome!"

Dylan smiled, almost glowing with happiness. "We all spent some outside-time time practicing, and then we toured for about three years before coming here to play for you."

"Nobody looks any older...." Cory commented as he looked over at his sons on the stage.

"I took care of that... we toured some places where time runs opposite of what it does here." Dylan said proudly.

Kyle and Tyler were listening in, and both giggled at their son's ingenuity. "Way to go, Dilly!" they chorused.

Dylan cuddled into Cory's chest with a contented sigh. "Wait until you see what's coming next!" he giggled.

They didn't have to wait long, as CD grabbed his bass and prepared to lead directly into 'Help is on it's Way'. Austin and Tanner took vocals, Timmy was on acoustic guitar, KC had lead and Brandon swapped to rhythm guitar, Tanner followed CD's start with the keyboards, and drums were handled by Joey *and* Pauly. The reason for the double drums was obvious about halfway through the song, as the lights dimmed and the two young boys broke into a 'drum war', the acoustically-tripped lights in their kits strobing madly as each tried to outdo the other. After a five-minute solo, the rest of the band kicked back in, a grinning Timmy now playing from atop KC's shoulders while KC continued playing lead.

The song ended, and Timmy hopped from KC's shoulders to grab his electric guitar for 'Gemini Dream', while CD, Brandon, Conner, and Tanner immediately launched the music. DJ came up to sing, and Joey took the drums. Throughout the song, Timmy danced alongside Brandon and CD, all three smiling widely. Cory had to giggle, because it appeared that Timmy was starting to get a little fan club at the base of the stage.

"Hey DES MOINES!!! 'Do You Feel Like We Do'?" DJ announced as KC joined him for vocals. Timmy hit the first few chords of the Frampton tune, with CD joining in as soon as he swapped his bass for a double humbucker Stratocaster. Both drums came alive, and Tanner filled out the band with the keyboards. At the eight minute point, the reason for CD's instrument change became clear as he hooked up the vocoder and began making the guitar talk... literally. CD got creative with his guitar vocals, slipping in a 'We love you Dads' and a 'Des Moines Rocks!' among other things.

After the song ended, KC came up and pulled the two guitarists under each of his arms. "Let's hear it for our two miniature guitar masters!" he announced as the platforms behind Joey's drums started to fill with brothers bearing their favorite brass instruments. The 'fan clubs' for each of the two boys made their presence known, trying to outdo each other in noise. KC let his two grinning brothers go, then announced "We're gonna slow things down for a few. Dad, Pop... you're our inspiration, and while the words of this song might not fit, the title does. This next song is by a band we know as 'Chicago Transit Authority', and it's called 'You're the Inspiration'.

With Tanner taking the lead vocals, and most of the front stage harmonizing with Austin's backup vocals, the boys showed that ear-blasting rock wasn't their only skill. Conner kept it going as the song ran out, going directly into Styx's 'Come Sail Away'. KC took vocals, with Conner and Austin backing him up.

As the song began to pick up its pace, Julio and his crew migrated to join Cory and his group. "When did your kids learn to do this?" Julio asked with a grin, trying to be heard over Timmy and KC's lead guitars.

"Ask Dilly, I have no idea!" Cory replied. "Whoa... AWESOME!!" he added as the laser light show began with the synth solo.

"I'm not telling!" Dylan replied innocently. "You gotta ask them... AFTER you get home!"

"You should know better than to ask, Cory. I swear, sometimes you give us blonds a bad name," Lucas said after leaning over to where Cory could hear him.

"Bite me, Luca... whoa!!! Did you just *TALK!*?" Cory exclaimed as he pulled Lucas on top of him and Dylan.

*'You're pretty observant for a Squishy!'* Lucas sent to Cory, trying not to interrupt the rest of the boys hearing 'Carry on Wayward Son'.

Taking the hint, and knowing the toga-clad boy in his lap would hear him, Cory responded mentally as well. *'You're pretty brave for someone whose head is inches from a Fuzzymore while laying on the lap of a Mikyvis. You wanna fill me in, midget?'*

*'I'm not worried about you; your aim is a legend!'* Lucas sent as he stuck his tongue out at Cory. He relayed a question through Logan to get Julio's okay, then replied as he got the thumbs-up from his Division Head. *'I'll take this slow, since I know squishies like you can't handle real telepathy,'* Lucas sent with a grin, which grew wider as Cory flipped him the bird. He then proceeded to fill Cory in on the happenings within the last day at the Des Moines Division Headquarters, including details that could not have been reported verbally. They stayed in conversation through DJ singing lead on 'No More Mr. Nice Guy' and 'Bang Your Head', finally completing the conversation as the opening notes of 'Another One Bites The Dust' hit their ears.

They both looked over, having immediately noticed the stronger bass notes. Cory grinned as he saw both CD and Brandon on bass. As they watched, the two young bass players handled vocals as well, giving their own feel to the song.

"They're singing the next one for me!" Dylan giggled. "They say that it's what my tour schedules feel like!"

DJ and Tanner adjusted their microphones as Timmy grabbed a Strat and KC grabbed his Les Paul. Conner took over keyboards, while Brandon took bass and Pauly took drums. The band launched into 'Twilight Zone', with DJ and Tanner both center-stage putting the emotion into the song. The drummers swapped once again as the final notes fell, and Tanner immediately went into 'Turn Me Loose'.

At the last drum beat of "Turn Me Loose", the stage went dark. A single blue spotlight came up, highlighting Joey sitting at his drum kit. With flashes of light from his drum's audible-triggered strobes, Joey launched the band into 'Land of Confusion'. Cory's jaw dropped as he heard Joey doing the lead vocals, not a single trace of his speech impediment in his voice. On the rest of the stage, lights came up as the other members supplied the background vocals, showing the two bass players, Timmy on lead, Tanner on keyboard, and Pauly on the electric drums. By the time the song was done, you couldn't hear the backup band members doing the "Ohhhh.. ohhh. ohh..." lyrics; the audience was into the song as well, and were quite vocal in their assistance.

Once again, the stage went dark. This time it was backlit by a soft light which pulsed with the notes being played by Tanner on his synthesizer. As he did a very convincing imitation of helicopter rotors in the distance, Conner came in on a second keyboard. With an explosion of light and sound, the band launched into 'Fantasy', KC and Timmy mirroring each other on guitar while Brandon and Pauly did their duties with bass and drums. Tanner and DJ handled vocals, DJ hamming it up near Tanner's keyboards.

After his last vocal section, DJ began dancing his way back stage and around the drums, up onto the riser, where he was met by Leo, Beau, Austin and Calen. Fantasy ended with the siren like synthesizer part and three synchronized blasts of sound from the entire band. Without more than a second's pause for the audience to cheer, Conner, Tanner and Joey began the introduction to "Silly Love Songs".

With a snare hit from Joey, CD began playing the memorable, booming bass line, ending sharply, but with the sound echoing around the arena. The band began again, with Brandon joining CD on bass and KC singing the lead vocals. The first time KC sang, "Cos here I go... again!" the horn section came blaring in.

The horns harmonized with Tanner's synthesized strings during the chorus. At the second verse, behind the rest of the band and the vocals, the horns played the familiar syncopated harmony. Behind KC's lead, Joey repetitively sang "I love you."

Adding to the dramatic impact of KC singing, "Well, what's wrong with that? I need to know," Joey's drums flashed with every hit from the triggered strobes. At the middle instrumental break, the four-person horn section began grooving, dancing with the music and always keeping their horns swinging in sync.

Cory glanced around at his family and friends, pausing briefly to grin widely at Kyle and Tyler dancing around, swinging their little butts around, the swords hanging from their pirate costumes also swaying, and swatting their butts. All around the area within Cory's view, the assembled kids were dancing and having fun; the most amusing being the 'Secret Service Agents', who were trying to look like they were doing their job while dancing. JJ and Adam were dancing along with everyone else, their hands on each other's hips.

The best part of the song was near the end when the vocalists were singing three different parts in a 'round' fashion. As the song wound to a close, the harmonized '...What's wrong with thaaaat...?' echoing through the arena, the entire band worked their way to center stage for a group hug. As the hug broke, Conner motioned for the stage to clear. A few seconds later, the only ones left on stage were Conner, Timmy, DJ, Pauly, CD, and Toby. Timmy and DJ each took a seat on a suitably-sized barstool, both holding acoustic guitars. Pauly quickly got set up at his drum kit, while CD and Toby bracketed the two guitarists with violins in their hands. Tanner and Timmy began picking the first chords of "Dust in the Wind", Conner taking lead vocals with DJ and Timmy harmonizing. After the first stanza, Toby and CD kicked in with their violins.

Timmy went directly into the next song, "Love Song", playing the opening notes as KC came up front with an electric guitar strapped to his shoulder. Toby replaced DJ, picking up with his acoustic to match Timmy. As KC sang the first stanza, Joey sat at his drums and Brandon picked out a bass. At the end of the second stanza, KC prepared to join with his acoustic guitarists, slowly upping the tempo until Joey and Brandon kicked in. KC egged the audience on, getting them to sing along with him whenever it was time to sing "Love will find a way...".

As Timmy played the final chords, the lights dropped except for a single spotlight on Conner, who was sitting at his concert grand piano. He began the solo for "The Load Out", singing as he played the notes on the piano. In the semi-darkness of the rest of the stage, KC set up his pedal steel guitar, CD picked his bass, Tanner took his spot at his keyboards, Joey sat at his drums, Timmy and Brandon grabbed guitars, and Austin brought his sax down to front stage. The rest of the band assembled on either side, and once the song had led into "Stay" they joined in, providing backup vocals to Conner.



Once the song wound down, Timmy came up to center stage and announced "We need to take a cookie break! We'll be back in a few minutes, so y'all don't go nowhere!"

As Timmy came off stage he was surprised to see Takamura with three boys, a dog, and a cat suddenly appear just a few feet in front of him.

"Greetings, Munchkin. I hope I am finding you well."

"Unca Taco!!!" Timmy exclaimed as he launched himself at Takamura. "Did you bring cookies?" he added with a giggle.

"Of course," Takamura responded, pulling some no-bake chocolate and peanut butter cookies from inside the left sleeve of his Gi.

Prince and Shelley (the dog and cat) intercepted the little redhead, and began winding their way through Timmy's legs, making it almost impossible for the little guy to move.

Timmy put the cookies in his waist pouch after a quick sample, then quickly picked up the mini Chihuahua and held him in one hand while he assisted the cat with climbing into his other arm. Once both were comfortable, he giggled, "You're new! I gotta take Unca Taco ta meet Johnny, you wanna come 'long? Me an' Johnny's been talking through William when I ain't singin' or playin'."

The little dog let out a series of barks, yips, and growls. He seemed very serious. Shelley, however, didn't seem very moved by the whole thing and draped herself casually around Timmy's neck like a white stole and began purring contentedly.

Takamura gently ruffled Timmy's hair and introduced the three boys to him.

"Don't be so impatient, Prince. We will get there soon enough. Timmy, let me introduce you to my young friends. They all help me out when I am 'Traveling' and are all very special to me. This is of course Jake," he said, indicating the nine-year-old with green eyes and dirty blond hair.

"These two over here are Thomas," he said, pointing to a nine-year-old with short black hair and dark brown eyes, "and this is Billy," he indicated by pointing to the shy looking four-year-old with blue eyes and platinum blond hair. "They came along to offer support to Jake."

Timmy giggled. "Kewl! C'mon, guys, you can help me an' Johnny plot while we're tryin' these cookies out!"

Takamura let a smile play across his face as he watched them follow the little red-headed spitfire. Within a few seconds, Timmy had wiggled his way through the mob and was introducing his new friends to Johnny, furry ones first of course.

As the introductions progressed, Bob looked over to see what the little redhead was up to. His eyes went wide, and he quickly sat down as he exclaimed, "Oh my dear Lord in Heaven!!!"

Takamura's smile changed slightly, taking on a hint of sadness, as he made his way toward Bob. He knew the man was going to need a bit of support as he had never fully dealt with his loss. Putting a hand on Bob's shoulder, he whispered in his ear.

"It was his time, Mr. Busch, but I know that doesn't make the pain you felt and still feel any less. He is a wonderful boy. You should be proud of him. Now go say hello to your little boy."

Tears began streaming down Bob's face as Takamura lifted him to his feet and gave him a shove in the direction of his boy.

Bob managed half a step before he found Mini and Alien under each of his arms, with the twins orchestrating the Dutchmen clearing a path for Bob to be reunited with his deceased son.

Billy could not grab hold of Jake's hand outside of the Astral Realm, but that didn't stop him from trying. Thomas on the other hand put a hand on his shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze.

Jake looked up at his father. His voice was very small as he held up a hand in a sort of wave.

"Uhm. Hi daddy."

Mikey had seen what was coming, and quickly appeared next to Takamura. "You know, I think trouble follows you, Uncle Taco!" Mikey said with a grin as he dramatically waved his hands. "One reunion override, coming up!"

"Don't sass your elders sonny. Even if it is the truth. I was cursed a long time ago. My brother once said to me that we would live in interesting times and his words have followed me for thousands of years. It's not my fault. I blame my misguided elder brother," Takamura said, trying in vain to keep the smirk from showing on his face.

Bob, meanwhile, was still in shock at seeing his son. Logan shook his head and announced with a grin, "Dad, if you don't give our brother a hug in the next ten seconds, I'm going to put you over my knee!"

"If I don't do it first, right after I get done with the so called Saint over there," Takamura responded while wagging a finger at Mikey. The mischievous grin could no longer be concealed on his face as his eyes sparkled with the youth of his soul.

Mikey stuck his tongue out at Takamura, then guided Jake to stand in front of his father. "Go ahead; I've made it so the two of you can interact with each other," Mikey said softly.

Without a word, Bob dropped to his knees and pulled Jake into a tight hug, silent tears running down his face. The rest of the boys watched with small smiles, wordlessly giving Bob time with Jake.

Lucas looked over at Logan, and said with a giggle, "Not too bad for a squishy; I give him an eight on the hug!"

Logan shook his head. "Naw, seven point five; I don't hear any ribs cracking."

Mini grabbed the twins and put them (willingly) into twin headlocks. "You two freakazoid goofballs need to keep your day jobs; comedy is not your strong point!" he giggled.

The twins broke free, and wrapped Mini in a double hug, his pet name for them causing both to feel the need for brotherly love.

Not a word was spoken between the father and son for a few moments, but it seemed like an eternity to those watching them. Takamura, seeing that Mini, Alien, Lucas, and Logan were not going to make a move, reached out with his mind and literally grasped each boy by the seat of their pants and deposited them with their father and brother. He gave them a telepathic command. "Let your father and brother know how much you love them right now."

Alien was the first to comply, and by the time the other three had separated from their own hug and joined him, the word got out over the mind-link. A few seconds later, Bob and Jake were completely hidden from view due to all of Bob's sons joining the hug, literally looking like a ball of miniature Secret Service Agents from the outside.

While all of this was going on, Timmy, Johnny, Prince, and Shelley were in serious discussions about various things, including the value of cookies and how to pull off Timmy's latest idea. Occasionally they looked over at the actions occurring around Bob, but seeing as there was nothing happening that they could be involved in, they kept to their plotting.

Meanwhile Billy had become very shy. There were just too many people around that he didn't know. A look at Takamura was all it took for the boy to be lifted onto the man's back. He wrapped his arms tightly around his neck.

"Little one. I need to breathe in this realm. Please ease up on my neck," Takamura said very gently to the little four year old.

Billy blushed so violently that from his neck to top of his head he turned bright red. He felt safe and loved when he was with Takamura, and his gentle teasing made him feel like a real boy and not a freak.

The ball of kids surrounding Bob began to break up, Jake splitting off with Mini, Alien, and the twins as they gave Bob room to catch his breath. Bob glanced up at Takamura, and seeing the little boy clinging to his neck, Bob decided that his presence would be helpful. He made his way over to the pair, and gently pushed a lock of hair from Billy's eyes. "Jake says that you're his little brother now. Can I get a cuddle from my new son?"

Billy let out a little yelp of fright and vanished. Bob gave Takamura a startled look.

"Don't worry, Mr. Busch. You did just what he was hoping you would do, but he never thought it would happen in a million years. I will have a talk with him."

Bob blinked his eyes in surprise as Takamura was suddenly standing in front of him holding Billy's hand. It was as if no time had passed.

Takamura asked Bob in his head if he could have a quick talk with him. As soon as Bob said yes, he found himself standing in what appeared to be the same place, but everything seemed to be insubstantial.

"Billy is a very unusual child. He can do something that only one other being I had met before him was able to do. He can travel physically through the astral realm. At one time I was only aware of the being who taught me how to travel being able to do this without causing themselves terrible bodily and mental harm. That is until I met Billy in the astral realm. He has been living in the astral realm for a long time. I have yet to determine how long. That is why he is in some ways older than his physical age would have you believe, but at the same time he is still very much a child. I would say he could not have been living in the astral realm for more than a year or so. It is obvious to me that he had something very bad happen that triggered his mind taking him into the astral realm, but he cannot seem to remember it and has asked me not to try and help him remember yet. He just keeps saying it isn't time yet. Other than your son and his friend Thomas, I am the only one he will talk to besides Logan Hayes. He thinks of your son as his big brother, but he never thought you could think of him as a son. You need to be very careful with him. Just be there for him and he will eventually come to trust you. His mind is strong but undisciplined still. He needs to learn and come to trust over time."

Bob nodded, and everything seemed to return to normal. Bob looked directly into Billy's eyes as he softly said, "I know all about waiting for the right time to deal with the past. I recently had a reminder as Mini was able to open those locked doors in his head and finally deal with the horrors of his past. Takamura's description of you is inaccurate; you have a special gift, Billy, and just like my other sons with special gifts, my only concern is helping you make the most out of the gift that was given to you."

Billy looked into the Bob's eyes as if he was searching the man's very soul. In a small voice he finally spoke to him.

"Uhm. Jake's... Ma biwg brudder. He nice. Nawt like da udder peepawls."

The boy seemed to visibly lose his nerve and he looked at the floor. He grabbed at himself with his left hand. Soon he began twisting his shirt with his other hand while one foot made small circle on the floor. His whole body eventually wiggled self-consciously.

Bob smiled with understanding. "Jake has always been able to tell good people from bad people. Since he likes you and made you his little brother, that means you must be really good people."

Billy took a deep breath. Then at the break-neck speed that only little children and over-caffeinated coffee junkies can muster, he let the rest spill out.

"Da bawd peepawls dey huwted me wots an mawde mys hawr and eyes wook nawt da same sows down sees me fowr weal an dey hitted me an i cwied an nowse bawdies wuved me..."

The little boy ran forward and grabbed Bob in a bear hug.

Bob managed to hoist Billy up so that he could hold him in his arms, Billy shifting his hug so that his little arms were wrapped around Bob's neck. "If I have any say about it, nobody will ever hurt you again, Billy," Bob said softly. "If you let me, I promise I will make up for them not loving you by loving you double. If I ever find those people that hurt you, I'll send one of your big brothers after them; he's called 'Nightmare' because of what he does to people that hurt kids, and he gets really mad if it is one of his brothers that gets hurt."

Billy suddenly kissed Bob on the cheek before wiggling out of his arms.

"Dank yous. I gawts gows nows. sees ya waiters?" The last part said in a small almost frightened voice betraying the child's insecurities.

Bob barely managed to get out, "Of course you can see me anytime you want to..." before the little boy just was not there any more.

Takamura let out a sigh as he released the breath he had not realized he was holding.

Bob smiled. "Make sure Billy knows that he is welcome at any time."

Takamura smiled warmly and placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Mr. Busch, he already knows what is in your heart. He can feel it from you just as I can. He is just not ready to believe that it will last."

"It'll last," Bob replied with a smile. "Just as surely as me setting Teri loose on you if you don't start calling me Bob, he's got a family here."

"Of course, Mr. Busch, whatever you say, Mr. Busch." Takamura deadpanned as he stood at attention and fired off a salute. 'I've been spending too much time with Juan' was his thought as soon as he realized what he had just done.

"Ohhhh TERI!!!!" Bob called out loudly as he waved for her to join them.

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While his Dad was talking with Billy, Jake was investigating the temporary tattoos on his brother's arms. "This was my favorite butterfly," he said quietly as he ran his fingers over Mini's arm. "I wish I could sign it; you're my brothers now, and I'd like to make it special."

Mikey overheard Jake, and responded with a twinkle in his eyes. "If you love your brothers, that love will make anything possible, little one."

Jake smiled as he once again ran his fingers around the edges of the temporary tattoo. This time, however, the tattoo seemed to glow as his finger crossed it. The colors changed slightly, and it seemed to sink into Mini's skin. Jake leaned over and kissed Mini's arm just below the left wing; when he lifted his head, his name was clearly present underneath in his trademark nine-year-old scrawl. He made his way around all of his new living brothers, gifting those who were not aces with one or another of his favorite drawings, while making each of the aces' arms uniquely their own.

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Takamura's first thought was that Teri needed to meet Morgana before he would need to worry about her, but then he nixed that idea as soon as it entered his head. No, she didn't. She was doing just fine on her own. His next thought was to telekinetically gag the man and then remove him from the room, but the Mikyvis would never let that stand, so he tossed that away in disgust just as quickly. Then he realized that Teri had already seen Bob's gesture and was coming toward them.

"That will not be a problem, Bob," Takamura said in his most dignified voice.

"You're EVIL, Dad!" Jake yelled over at Bob.

Bob grinned and stuck his tongue out at his son, resulting in a flurry of giggles.

Teri walked up and joined them at that point. She smiled at Takamura, her eyes twinkling with mirth. "Has the Taco pup slipped his leash again, Bob? I'm *sure* I can find a stronger one if needed."

"My leash is freely and happily given, child." Takamura's eyes glinted with the infinite mischief of his soul. "You don't get to be my age by fighting losing battles, nor to do you go to war with someone when there is nothing to fight over. You have my infinite support." Then he gave Teri a warm hug and a gentle kiss on her cheek.

"You *do* realize that you're managing to disappoint my two little Time Boys, don't you?" Teri replied with a smile. "They were *so* looking forward to popping a corner in here for you to stand in. Who are your little helpers?"

"I will stand in a corner any time if it will make them happy. They are my family and I will always try to do my best for them in all things. I cannot solve everything, but I will always strive to not make things more difficult than they are. You came into my children's life. Genesis and all that it was before it took that name is the responsibility of my family. As I am the eldest member of that family alive, it is my responsibility. You have given these children something that I could not dream possible except through many, many years of hard work and sacrifice. I stand ready to help."

Takamura smiled gently at Teri, then gestured to a nine-year-old with short black hair and dark brown eyes standing off to the side trying very hard to just become part of the scenery.

"This is Thomas. He is trying very hard to be unnoticed right now, but I would never let that happen."

Takamura grinned as Thomas noticed him gesturing and talking about him and the boy began to fidget. He made a gesture to the boy to come forward.

"Thomas, please come here. I would like to introduce you to Teri Short. I have told you about her and her two sons, Sean and Cory."

Thomas came forward and shyly took Teri's hand in his. "Uhm. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Short. I'm Thomas. Oh. You already know that. I am just running off at the mouth again. Uh. Sorry. Uhm."

"You're too young and cute to worry so much," Teri said with a smile. "You want to climb up here for a cuddle? We can discuss which works better for you while you catch up on cuddles, calling me Aunt Teri or calling me Mom."

Thomas sighed contentedly. He sank right into Teri's arms as he remembered being in his own mother's arms before he had died some four years ago. He missed his family, and to be honest he was feeling jealous that Jake was getting to speak to his father. He silently cried into Teri's chest as he mumbled something about how much he missed cuddling his family.

Teri rubbed his back, softly whispering to him as he released his pent-up emotions. Bob and Takamura both just stood and watched silently; acutely aware of the healing which only Teri could do.

As Thomas calmed down, Teri kissed his forehead. "You know, you've got a really big family now," she told him softly. "All you have to do is ask, and your special brothers will help you visit when you want cuddles from any Clan mom you choose, as well as letting you join in with your new brothers when they're playing games or watching movies."

Thomas stared wide-eyed at Teri, then he looked at Takamura.

"That goes for me too, little guy," Bob added sincerely.

"But I can't let Uncle Taco..." He paused briefly at the use of the nickname and chuckled. "I mean I watch stuff for him and all. You know. I need to do it."

Takamura smiled broadly at Thomas. "It is true that you are my eyes when I cannot be there to see, and my ears when I cannot be there to hear, but you are important. Not what you can do for me, but you. You need to seriously consider what she has said and be with your family as much as you can and want to."

Before Thomas could respond, Bob added, "You're my son too, you know. I saw it in Jake's eyes when you and him interacted... he's declared you his brother, which means you're my son as well."

"Thank you, Sir. I really appreciate it very much." Thomas said as a blush crept over his face. He felt a warmth in his soul that grew. He felt it when he was with Jake, but this was more intense. He didn't feel so alone. The ache for his own parents was much more tangible, but it was now tinged with warm fuzzy memories. He was with people that really cared about him. Him the person. These were rare people and they were trying to become less rare by spreading who they were to others. He grinned and for the first time in four years felt complete, the way he had when he was alive with his family. Sometimes bad things happen so that good things... He laughed out loud. "Thanks... Pop and Aunt Teri."

Before he knew it, he was the subject of an 'adult-kid sandwich'. Over with his new brothers, Jake looked over and smiled; his closest friend since the day of the accident was happy for the first time in years.

Takamura smiled warmly. "I am most satisfied now. Thomas looks far happier than I have seen him in years. So Teri. The little one who looks somewhat like Mini and Bob is his son Jake. He and Thomas hang around together in the Astral Realm with me. He is my other assistant. He also helps me to watch things when I can't watch them. I am most proud of both of them and the way they take care of little Billy. However, that little guy is now hiding in the Astral Plane. I will introduce you some other time, but I believe that Bob can tell you a bit about him. I also have a couple of furry friends, that have attached themselves to your grandson who is shooting daggers at me because he still needs to introduce me to... I believe it was Johnny, lil' spitfire?" Takamura gave Timmy a wink.

Timmy nodded as he commented. "You old peoples are too slow!" At Teri's tilted head, he quickly added, "Not you, Granma... Granma's ain't never slow, an' they ain't old 'neither!"

Takamura chuckled at Timmy's comment. "Very smoothly recovered, little man. You show great potential."

Timmy giggled as he watched the three adults, with Thomas on Teri's hip, come over. As soon as they arrived, Timmy began introductions. "Unca Taco, this is Johnny, he's an animal friend like me! Johnny, that's Unca Taco... he's old, but he's kewl cuz he knows where all the awesome animals hang out!"

Takamura knelt down so he was eye level with Johnny and held his hand out to the boy as he looked him in the eye. "Well hello there sir. It is very nice to meet you."

Johnny tilted his head and giggled. "It is an honor to meet you as well, sir." he replied in a passable British accent as he shook Takamura's hand.

"Spot on there chap. I am chuffed as nuts that we can be family," Takamura said as he played up his own British accent.

"Aye Laddie; 'tis best when ye' be giv'n ye kindred quality time," Johnny replied, switching to a Scottish accent that would make Cory's father smile in glee.

In a perfect Irish accent Takamura replied to the youngster while his eyes danced with even more mischief than usual. "Maith mo buachaill. An gceapann tú gur féidir leis an munchkin beag inis dom cén fáth go raibh sé chomh tábhachtach chun freastal den sórt sin a lad fineáil chomh duit féin?" (Well my boy. Do you think the little munchkin can tell me why it was so important to meet such a fine lad as yourself?)

Both Johnny and Timmy giggled, obviously having fun with this 'game'. Johnny caught his breath, then replied. "Now, y'all knows that thar ain't no rushin' no kin time. Them thar fields be pick'd when they be ripe."

"Watashi wa nani mo rippana musuko o isoi tsumori wa arimasen." (I have no intention of rushing anything honorable son.) Takamura said in the modern version of his native tongue. He was quite enjoying the game as much as the boys.

Timmy grinned as he heard Johnny reply in Seminole. "The Great Spirit shall reveal the time as it is due. Mother Earth is honored by the things Tvmketv-Lvmhe has passed on that you have done."

Takamura replied in a series of coos and clucks in the manner of a pigeon. "May your nest have many eggs and your beak find much to eat." Which basically meant 'thank you'.

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Cory and Sean, meanwhile, were much too occupied to really pay attention to the activities of the other kids. As a matter of fact, their eyes were so clouded with tears of joy that they could barely make out each other. While Timmy was plotting his extra surprise for them, the rest of their sons and grandsons formed a line to get some long-overdue attention from the pair of boys.

CD had managed to be first in line for Cory's lap. After stripping Cory of his ape head, CD leaned in to kiss Cory's cheek. "Are we doing okay, Daddy?" he asked in a small voice.

Cory pulled CD into a tight hug. He caught the eyes of the rest of the boys, letting them know the answer was for all of them. "You guys are awesome. I'm proud of all of you."



CD latched on tight, obviously not letting go anytime soon. "I missed you and Pop sooo much..." he whispered.

Cory began rubbing CD's back as he replied, "I understand, little one. I love you, and I really do love the surprise that you guys came up with."

"Timmy and I came up with a lot of it," CD replied shyly. "Timmy's claimed last cuddle though, he says he ain't lettin' go until we gotta play again."

"You mean you'll give up your spot for Timmy?" Cory asked.

"Nope, we agreed we're sharing... everyone else gets the other side of your lap!" CD giggled. "You're all of ours, but me and Timmy's in charge of collecting cuddles for everyone."

Sean, on the other hand, was transfixed by the narrative which Leo was giving him. Once Leo had been assured that he was missed, he launched into a detailed review of every single concert that they had performed, describing the various places they had visited and how they had adjusted their sets to the audience. The realization of the sacrifices his family had made to prepare for this one day were what brought the tears to Sean's eyes... this one concert was an act of love that each of the boys had consciously given up contact with everyone else to ensure it was perfect for their parent or grandparent.

Each of the boys took their time with both Cory and Sean, sharing the lap with the two "Lap Monitors", who never moved from their positions. Those who were not occupied with Cory and Sean took their turns at welcoming their newest brother/uncle, each in turn taking the time to bond with Fife once it was explained to them what the bonding meant.

Just as Joey came up to take his turn on Cory's lap, KC came over and tapped on CD's shoulder. "Hey Superfreak, grab an axe and get your skinny butt on stage, the Chief needs ya."

"Stuff it, Crash," CD replied with a giggle. "I'll be right back, Daddy. This is gonna be fun!"

KC 'helped' CD down, then looked over at Sean and Leo. "You too, Lion-Boy!" he giggled.

As DJ 'assisted' Leo off of Sean's lap, Leo playfully whined, "Uncle DeeJ, Crash is pickin on me!"

DJ laughed. "You love it and you know it, Leo. Get up there with your uncles, I'll be right there after I steal a hug from Pop."

## Chapter Eleven: "Keep Pushin' On"

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"Hey Adam, check out the munchkin!" JJ giggled as he pointed towards the stage.

Adam turned his head, and immediately joined JJ in his giggles. Up on the stage, Timmy was surrounded by about twenty squirrels which had *somehow* made it into the building. They seemed to be listening intently to what he was telling them, and as Adam watched, they split off and spread out over the stage.

By this time, DJ, Leo, CD, Joey, and KC had rejoined Timmy on the stage. "Hey Y'all!" DJ announced as he turned on his mic. "Just so you know, we like having fun while singing too! This wasn't scheduled to be in the concert, but none of us are immune to our little brother when he gives us pouty eyes. Have fun, and if you know the words, feel free to join in!"

DJ hit the opening notes on Tanner's organ as one of the squirrels hopped onto his shoulder. As he began singing the opening words to "Mississippi Squirrel Revival", the remaining squirrels, with the exception of one that decided to help KC with the steel guitar, formed a line along the front of the stage. At the first chorus, they did an amazing imitation of a Rockettes dance line. As the kids watching laughed and began singing along, the boys started to really get into the song. By the second chorus, the squirrels had formed a Conga line, with Timmy leading it while playing guitar and Leo bringing up the end while playing his harmonica.

All this time, the first squirrel was perched on DJ's shoulder, chattering away at appropriate moments. The Conga line broke up as DJ wound up the final chorus. The boys made their way to the front of the stage, and took a bow along with the squirrels. "Thanks for joining in!" DJ announced before the boys headed back to their parents, Timmy and CD making a beeline for Cory. DJ, with his furry shoulder partner, followed behind, watching as the rest of the squirrels spread out in the arena and began picking humanoid friends to hang around with.

Cory quickly found himself host to three boys on his lap: Timmy, CD, and Pauly. While still managing to breathe despite the crushing hug Timmy was giving him, Cory finally noticed Pauly's costume. "Wow, that's a pretty awesome Vulcan costume, kiddo." Cory stated.

"Thanks Daddy, I hadda LOT of help with it!" Pauly giggled.

Before Cory could say anything else, Timmy finally decided to speak. "I missed you TONS, Daddy," he said in a small voice.

"I've missed you too, Fireball," Cory replied as he tilted his head to kiss Timmy's cheek. "It hasn't been as long for me, but I still miss you a lot; I miss all of you guys."

"I love you, Daddy. Promise that you'll never ever ever ever leave us?"

"I might be away here and there, but I'm *NEVER* gonna abandon you guys," Cory stated firmly.

"Pinky swear?" Timmy asked hesitantly, holding up his hand with the pinky extended.

"Pinky Swear," Cory replied, hooking pinkies with his son.

Sean watched with pride as his husband comforted their first child. He turned his attention to his own 'groupies'; Leo and Joey had taken up residence on his lap, while the other boys were happy just being near Cory and Sean and watching them with the little ones.

"You sounded great singing up there, Joey," Sean commented.

"Weawwy? Was I weawwy good?" Joey asked.

Sean smiled. "You were perfect. I think Danny would be proud of you on the drums too!"

"Keww! Unkah Danny wikes pwayin' dwums, and I wanna be jusd wike him!" Joey said with excitement.

Sean giggled. "From what I saw, he might just be asking you to teach HIM a few things!"

"You'we siwwy, Poppa Sean... I'm jusd a kid, he's a big guy!"

Sean giggled. "Trust me, lil' guy. You're good."

"Told ya!" Leo giggled as he put his free arm around Joey. "Grandpa Sean knows EVERYTHING!"

Joey giggled, then resumed his cuddles with Sean... after sticking his tongue out at Leo.

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On the other side of the table, Kyle, Tyler, Ezra, and Dylan were spending a little family time of their own.

"...So you're saying that you've spent five years helping these guys?" Kyle asked as he wrapped his arm around Dylan.

Dylan nodded. "Yeah. I had fun with it too! We had a bunch of concerts where linear time runs opposite of Alpha Prime time, so I was able to keep the guys' physical ages right. Quint and me's gonna check all the guys out before we take them home, just to make sure none of them have lost sync."

Tyler tilted his head. "You really need to take some time to learn how to be a kid, Dilly."

Dylan grinned. "You worry too much, Pop. When I wasn't doing stuff to set up the concerts, I was hanging out with my cousins. That's why I'm playing wizard tonight; Timmy, Joey and Pauly say it's really fun when I do the little 'magic tricks' and play around. DJ made me start doing stuff like the rest of them just after we started this; he said that I needed to learn stuff just like they were, or else it'd make some of the guys jealous of me."

Both Kyle and Tyler smiled. "I'm glad you listened to him," Tyler commented. "Kyle-bear and me've been talking, and we think all of us need to stop showing off in front of everyone."

"Yeah," Kyle added. "I'm not gonna go someplace else to live, and we keep messin' in stuff other people can fix. We gotta stop doin' that, or we're gonna have to leave to keep from hurting our brothers."

Ezra looked at his parents with a grin. "Dad, Pop? You are worrying too much! Do I gotta get Uncle JJ over here to straighten you out?"

"You wouldn't da... oh crap!" Kyle replied. "You're goin' swimming when we get home, Brat!"

JJ giggled as he joined them. "I heard you, little brother; it's not Ezzy's fault... this time. Remember what I told you? We all love you just the way you are; you AND all of my nephews! Just have fun

being my little bro and his husband; I'm pulling the big brother card and I'll worry about helping my nephews fit in, however each of them needs to."

"He's still goin swimming!" Kyle and Tyler said in unison.

"Dang it, and I'm gonna miss it!" Dylan giggled.

"From what I hear, you've had your share of being on both sides of throwing people in pools lately," JJ said as he put his arm over Dylan's shoulder. "We're all really proud of you and what you've done, Dilly. The guys all have told us how much you helped them out; you did good."

Dylan blushed slightly at the praise. "I just did what Daddy and Pop taught us before we were born. I might have never been human, but I know me and my brothers all want to be just like Daddy and Poppa... which means that we gotta learn to live like our cousins do. Quint's having fun watching us; no other high race has ever tried to live with the race they came from, so we're all learning things nobody's learned before."

JJ nodded his head. "And you're doing a great job. Ky? Just let things go as they go, little bro. No other eight-year-old I've met, not even Clan members, could have handled being forced into what you have went through. You've handled things just like I would expect you to; you followed your heart, helped a lot of people, and are getting back to yourself now that you're getting used to the power that you've been gifted with. Most grown-ups would have went on a power trip; you never did. I think that is why you got it instead of someone older: you don't misuse it. Instead you're making it work while living with your family, something that nobody older would have even tried to do."

"What if I screw up?" Kyle asked softly.

"Then you screw up, and we help you fix it. That's what family is for, bro," JJ replied calmly. "I know that you're still learning what family means, Kyle. I know you spent most of your life without real family; that is why all of us have your back as you figure this stuff out."

"Look at it this way, Kyle," Eoghan said as he slid into the seat across from him. "I've heard a lot about you, and what guys like you can do. To be blunt, the thought of me having the kinda of power you do would scare the hell out of me." Eoghan was purposely making sure his accent didn't come through, so everyone could understand him.

"But, while I can't call you human, I can call you mortal, and that means you'll make mistakes. There's nothing wrong with that; as a matter of fact, if you didn't screw up, I'd be a lot more worried than I am. But there's something else you really gotta understand, something that is very hard for people like me and my boys to learn; I have a feeling it's hard for you, too. You gotta be able to lean on others, you gotta be able to trust that the person next to you, your brother or sister, is there to help hold you up when you need it, or even pick you up when you fall down."

"Someone who is not only able to accept help, but willing to accept it, is as close to perfect as you'll ever find."

"But there's another side to this whole thing too," Eoghan said as he leaned forward and put his hands on top of Kyle's. "You've also got to let others make mistakes and deal with the consequences of their

fuck-ups. That'll probably be the hardest thing you'll ever do. Especially if someone's life is on the line."

"But look at it this way..." Eoghan's eyes actually watered at this point. "All the family we lost in Montana was terrible, but imagine what would have happened had all those kids NOT died. Just think about that."

Kyle nodded. "I know... I went and looked... more kids ended up dead when there wasn't an attack," he replied softly.

Eoghan nodded and smiled sadly. "Sometimes I think you realize that what you have is not only a blessing, but also a curse. They call it the curse of immortality for a reason. It's not the same thing exactly, but you get my point. And THAT is why I would NEVER want to be able to do what you can do, and why I will say with all honesty, you're a hell of a better person than I am." With those words, Eoghan got up, moved around the table, and pulled Kyle from his seat and into a hard hug. "Don't be afraid to lean on others when you need to, even me."

"What did I do to deserve this though?" Kyle asked softly from the hug.

"You kept your big heart for one," JJ said with certainty.

Eoghan pulled back from the hug, but kept his hands on Kyle's shoulders as he looked into the younger boy's purple eyes. "You kept your humanity more than a lot of people who are still human. You let your heart guide you, and your love flow to everyone who is around you. That is why I feel honored to be able to call you a Clan Brother."

"And you gained a cute glow when you blush," Tyler added as he hugged Kyle from behind.

"You're not helping any, cutie!" Kyle giggled as his blush increased. "I wanna be just a kid again; I don't like being Superman."

Eoghan shook his head. "You've never been Superman. That is why none of us are intimidated by you, Ty, or your kids. You guys are kind of like Juan; if he wanted to, he could take out anyone who even *looked* at him or his friends funny. He doesn't, though; a lot of the Unit looks at him as an example of how to serve justice without becoming as bad as the people we are after."

"You know how to have fun, too," JJ added. "You are like Eli and 'Leg'; Eli has a skill, and he uses it to play around with 'Leg' with the kids. Dilly was using one of your best ideas earlier tonight; he had an illusional dragon walking around the arena. All the little kids love that kinda thing, and it's something that only YOU guys can pull off. That kinda stuff is being a kid, bro... and you're really good at it."

"I guess...." Kyle started to respond, but the rest of his argument was cut off by Dylan.

"Pop? Has anyone mapped Tesnians yet? DeeJ wants to have their new brother join them for a song for our favorite Uncles, and I don't know my way around his head yet to teach him the song."

Ezra smiled. "I'll help you, Dylan. Fife is still kinda shy, so I think he'll feel better if I'm with you inside his head. We'll be right back!"

As the two Mikyvis boys vanished, Eoghan looked Kyle in the eyes. "THAT is what I mean. Those two boys learned that from YOU. They care about how others feel, and ask for help if they are unsure about doing something."

Kyle tilted his head as he thought about what had been said. "But Tyne said I need to take control of my species...."

"Stop right there!" Eoghan said firmly. "General Adam is the Alpha Male for the Unit Hybrids. He leads by example, not by sitting on some damn throne jerking his meat. Whoever this Tyne person is, he's full of more shit than a porta-john at the end of the opening day at the State Fair. There's a reason the first word in Dictator is *DICK*. If you wanna lead, ask General Adam for help. If you wanna make enemies out of your own kids, listen to that Tyne prick."

Tyler touched Kyle's arm as Kyle's eyes flashed. He looked at Eoghan. "Sorry, bro, but cool it a little on saying things 'bout Tyne. He saved my Kyle-bear's life and Kyle looks up to him. We'll be taking what you said seriously, but give me a minute to cool down my little hubby."

"I'm fine," Kyle breathed out, closing his eyes. "Sorry, Eoghan. You don't know Tyne like we do, so I shouldn't get angry like that. But you're right. I *don't* wanna be a dictator."

JJ thought for a second before adding his own opinion, inwardly knowing that whatever he said would be taken as law by his little brother. "In his own way, Eoghan has a point. There are different ways to lead, and Tyne's way might not be the right way for you. Actually, after watching your kids, I think Eoghan might be right about it making them into enemies. Look at how people like Adam and Cory lead, and sit down with Q to get ideas from what he has seen. Until you decide, just keep doing what you're doing; it works."

Q popped in. "Did I hear worship directed at me? Oh, JJ! How wonderful! Here, have a gift!" he cried happily before snapping his fingers and making a large Cuban Cigar appear in JJ's mouth.

"Cherry bubble gum?" JJ asked as he tasted the cigar. "Sweet! I was just telling Kyle that he needs to talk to you about leading his species." He glanced at Eoghan, and saw where his hand had shot to. "Chill, Eoghan; he's on our side. This is the almighty amazing one-of-a-kind master of multitudes, Q."

"And a water-gun wouldn't do much against anyone... other than a paper towel," Q winked at Eoghan, who found that his gun had turned into a see-through water-pistol.

"What the FUCK!! Where in the HELL is my gun!" Eoghan exclaimed, fortunately in his natural brogue, so not many understood him.

The gun turned back to normal and Q chuckled. "I'm pleased to meet you, Eoghan. You're easy to tease... I like that. You can be sure that you'll see more of me. I'll be with Pablito." Then, as Eoghan turned pale, Q turned to look down at the sniggering Kyle. He sat down and pulled Kyle onto his lap. "You want to talk to me," he said, more a statement than a question.

"JJ says I do." Kyle giggled. "He thinks you know howta lead."

"What?! Lead? Me?! Never! NEVER, I TELL YOU!" Q exclaimed, winking at the now laughing youngster on his lap. "I'm the first of my people, but I never wanted to lead. I left that to those who

thought they could do it better. And look what THAT did. No, Kyle, I'm not the one you should ask about leading anything. I have to learn to do that myself, now, to sort out the mess the Continuum has made of itself. It's going to be harder for me than it is for you, what with your race being so young."

"What's the Continuum like?" Kyle asked curiously.

"It's ruled by iron-clad laws. Break them and you're on the Council's shit-list for eternity. That's me, if you hadn't guessed. But since I'm 'Prince' they can't do much, even though they've tried. You can try setting up your people with laws like that, but I don't think it's generally the best way in your situation. My race all turned after I did. Well, that's cos I MADE them. My fault. We weren't a family like you Mikyvis. We were a planet made Q, so we had to set up differently. Then it went too far.

"You're going to need rules, don't get me wrong," Q continued, "but since you're starting small and working up to a full blown species you can set rules and guidelines and then live by them as an example. That will be far better for you and your kids – and the others – than to make a law and enforce it. Work up to the 'laws' if and when they are needed. Not before."

JJ giggled. "Told ya so, bro. Q knows how not to lead, which makes it easier to lead right!"

Q looked at JJ and winked, and JJ suddenly had a super-atomic-wedgie.

Kyle giggled as he watched JJ trying to extract his boxers. "Why does Tyne think that I need to control my species then?" he asked Q.

Q closed his eyes and sighed. "Because of what he has experienced."

"What do you mean?" Tyler piped up.

Q looked at him and sighed again. "He saw the birth of the Vampires. He saw the results of his own race's mistakes. He saw the mess that came due to the Ferox. He did not tell you two to control your people because he is a dick, but because he is frightened. If the Moroi, or the Vampires as they are now called, could cause that much damage, how much more could the Ferox do if they *really* lost control? And how much more again if just *one* of your kids lost control? Take Levi... no, bad example, you're not meant to know yet. Take yourself, Tyler... if you saw ten people rape and murder Cory, what would you do? Explode? Rupture the sun? Destroy this solar system? You HAVE that power. Tyne guesses that you have that power, and he's right. And he's scared. Not OF you, but FOR you and FOR this entire planet. Doesn't mean he's right to tell you to 'control' your race in the way he's thinking, but that's his reasons."

"Eoghan thinks that I'd make enemies of our kids if I tried that," Kyle mused.

"Well, I don't think enemies, but you'll confuse them, hurt them and upset them if you started to do that," Q clarified, nodding at Eoghan. "Peter, you'll piss off and the two Down Under will be confused and hurt... no, it's not the best way to rule a family. I'm surprised you haven't thought about asking your Grandfather, Sarek. Or your Grandmother, Elizabeth. Both can give you insights on ruling; one with a large family the other with a Kingdom. Also, talk with Gallifrey. He could tell you how 'not' to rule as well, only his experiences are a little different from my own."

"Walk with the wise and you will grow wise," came the voice of Mikey from above them. They looked up to see him floating upside down above their heads. "A good Man taught me that after I died, little bros."

Q looked up and nodded, "Al'vo Mikey. It is an honour."

"You spyin' on us again, Mikey?" Kyle giggled. "Why can't I just be a kid?"

"What makes you say you're not one?" Mikey asked as he righted himself in the air and floated down to sit next to Eoghan. "Take Quint. He's a Q yet still a kid as well. And Galli - he's the oldest still-living person going, yet he's a kid again and loving it. Why can't you do the same? You've got power, yes, but if you want to be a kid, then BE one. And from what I've seen over the past two days, you're doing a really good job on that."

"I agree," Candy said as she shimmered in next to Kyle and Q. Then she winked at Q and together they tickled Kyle so much that, had he been human, he'd have wet himself.

Tyler giggled as he watched Kyle being tickled. "You mean we don't have to be all grown up to lead our species? I thought only old people like Cory could be leaders."

Mikey started laughing so much that he fell off his seat, and Eoghan was dragged right with him, laughing fit to bust himself. They were laughing so loudly that Cory and Sean noticed and came over to investigate, their youngest kids still attached to them.

"What's so funny? And when did you pop in, Uncle Q?" Cory asked with a grin.

"In reverse order, I came because this wonderful JJ was worshiping me, and I like worship. And they are laughing because, in the eyes of eight-year-olds, you are... one, two, three, guys?" Q prompted Kyle and Tyler.

"OLD!" they chorused, setting Mikey and Eoghan off into more fits of merriment.

After a quick mental agreement as to who was getting who, Cory and Sean pounced Kyle and Ty; Cory taking Kyle and Sean taking Tyler. "Old, huh?" Cory giggled as he furiously tickled Kyle.

Satisfied that their parents were going to be occupied for a few minutes torturing their uncles, Timmy led his other brothers towards the stage, where Ezra and Dylan were just finishing up with Fife. Timmy immediately made a beeline for his newest big brother, and almost purred as he wrapped his arms around Fife and nuzzled his cheek into some exposed fur on Fife's chest.

DJ giggled as he watched Timmy's actions. "I think it's official now; Timmy only cuddles brothers like that!"

Fife smiled as he ran his fingers through Timmy's hair, bringing the young boy's sounds of contentment even closer to a purr. "He sounds just like a Tesnian little one who is family-bonding." Fife whispered.

DJ moved over to sandwich Timmy between him and Fife in a loving hug. "That's because that is exactly what he's doing," DJ replied. "He's my little big brother, and our family's favorite little fireball."



"Little big brother?" Fife asked curiously.

DJ giggled. "It's a long story. We both have the same mom; his Dad was in a Starfleet time experiment, so he was born before I was and brought back to regular time. That makes him my little big brother."

"Uh-Huh!!" Timmy giggled from between them. "I'm the cute one, too!"

"That you are, munchkin!" DJ laughed as he pulled back and picked up Timmy. "C'mon, Fife, let's get this thing going before Timmy decides to indoctrinate everyone in the building!"

"I don' wanna play doctor wit' everyone! There's girls here, they ain't got fun parts!" Timmy exclaimed indignantly.

"You've been hanging around the eight-year-olds way too much, lil' bro!" DJ laughed. "C'mon, you've got some singing to do, munchkin!"

Timmy giggled and stuck out his tongue at his big brother. "Meanie!"

Fife smiled at the interaction between the two boys, glad to have been included in his new family. He joined Tanner, DJ, and Timmy at the front of the stage as the rest of their brothers filled out their favorite positions in the band behind them. Fife reached into his pack, and put on his breather; previous experience with singing solo when in private told him that he would need the extra atmospheric assistance.

Conner began playing the opening keys to "The Perfect Fan", Timmy taking the first stanza. When he replaced the word 'mom' with 'dad' while looking directly at Sean and Cory, it became clear to all that this song was being done just for them. Cory's smile could be seen a mile away when the other three boys kicked in on backup vocals, all of them looking directly at Cory and Sean.

DJ took the second solo, Timmy stepping back to sing backup vocals next to Fife. Tanner stepped up with DJ to start the duet mid-song, taking the stanza before the chorus kicked in again. When the song switched to alternating between solo and chorus, Fife took the solo parts, his voice surprising everyone with its range. For the alternating solos near the end, Timmy joined Fife, their voices bouncing off of each other in an amazing harmony. The final circle of solo parts was done with the boys' arms over each other's shoulders. The final 'I love you, Dad and Pop', said by all of the boys in the band in unison, brought tears to the eyes of every parent in the building. Timmy scrambled onto Fife's back, and the two of them led their brothers to rejoin Cory and Sean. After a heartfelt hug and a tearful kiss on the forehead for each of the boys from both of them, Cory and Sean led them to an empty area of the floor and arranged a group cuddle.

Jesse and Julio watched as the family bonding session began. "I wish we could have kids like that," Jesse commented, more to himself than anything.

Julio giggled. "Be careful what you wish for, Babe. We're Clan now; anything is possible!"

Jesse smiled shyly. "I'm not like Cory or Sean though," he said as the pair started walking out into the arena. "They're strong, I'm just me."

Julio put his arm around Jesse's waist. "I'm glad you're just you. You're strong in a different way, and I like it."

Jesse thought over Julio's words as the two walked. About half way across the floor, they spotted a face-painting booth that had a large crowd of kids standing around it. As they got closer, both of them smiled as they got a glimpse of why everyone was so interested in it. The booth was being ran by a pair of art students from Drake University. It appeared that they had received some help however... help that was making their booth "the" place to visit.

"Hey Huey! Nice leopard!" Julio said as they walked up.

"Thanks!" Huey replied as he put the finishing touches on the face of the five-year-old in front of him. "I didn't know that camo painting could be this much fun!"

"You're doing great." Julio assured the boy as he looked around the booth. Most of the Dutchmen were present, helping the booth's owners with the crowd of willing canvases. The owner's smiles gave away how much fun they were having; between giving tips to their new helpers, and asking questions about techniques they hadn't thought of, it was clear that everyone was learning something while having fun. Off on one side, Doug was 'holding classes' for anyone interested in learning how to professionally apply camo paint for blending into an environment.

"Hey, Julio, check out Travis!" Jesse giggled.

Julio turned his head, and busted out in giggles. Travis had borrowed a table from somewhere, and was obviously enjoying himself as he gave demonstrations to an amazingly large group of kids on how to safely modify their water pistols and super soakers for increased range and accuracy.

"I'll have to remember this for the next time one of them wonders about fitting in!" Julio stated as he brought his giggles under control. "Let's wander around a little more; I think these guys are going to be occupied for a while."

"What's that over there?" Jesse asked, pointing off to the left. Just visible over the crowd, there was a booth with the new Division flag up against the wall at the edge of the arena.

"I don't know... lets check it out," Julio replied, unaware of any Clan-based activities planned for during the party. They worked their way over to the booth, and grinned as they saw who was running it. "Okay, Dad; what's up?" Julio asked as they approached the front.

Mick laughed and pointed at Janice. "It was your Mom's idea, I swear!"

Janice shook her head. "Mick, you have not been innocent since the last time you wore a diaper, so give it up," she commented with a smile. "Your Dad suggested we help out by giving the kids here a place that they can ask questions about the Clan or ask for help. We're seeing a few parents stopping in too, asking about helping you guys out. Daileass made up some flyers for us to use, so while you are taking a break we can do our part to help you."

"Kewl, you didn't have to do that!" Julio said with a smile. "I thought you'd enjoy a break after today."

Mick looked at Julio seriously. "You're our son, and you've just become the most important teenager living in the state of Iowa. If it means quitting my job to spend all day supporting you, I'll do it without a second thought. You and the boys around you are our life's work; anything else is secondary. Besides, I'm enjoying answering the questions that are being brought to us."

Before Julio could reply, Q appeared between Mick and Janice, immediately putting his arms over both of their shoulders.

Both Julio and Jesse giggled at the surprised looks on Mick and Janice's faces. "Mom, Dad, meet Q. He's like a grown-up cross between Cory, Kyle, and JJ all wrapped in one," Julio said as way of introduction.

"Ahh, so you are requesting the group rate, Director?" Q asked with a smile. "I will happily oblige, I so enjoy the expressions on humans' faces when they become grandparents multiple times over."

Julio, Janice, and Mick all gave "Q" a 'say what' look in unison.

"What are you talki .... oh SHIT!" Julio and Jesse chorused, their response interrupted by the sensation of multiple hands tapping them on the back.

Julio turned his head, and his eyes almost fell out as he saw three sets of twins standing behind him: a set of blonds, a set of redheads, and a set of brunets. "The nice man in the middle said that you're our new Dads," all six chorused as one.

Suddenly Q was wearing a doctor's gown, complete with a stethoscope and thermometer. With a concerned look on his face he stuck the thermometer in Mick's mouth, started taking Janice's pulse, and was listening to Julio's heartbeat with the stethoscope.

"Impressive, nobody fainted," Q commented. "I must try harder next time."

Another copy of Q popped in, and began using a tricorder on Jesse. He looked at Q and just shook his head sadly.

Q looked at Q and said, "My handsome prince, there is something I must discuss with me." Q looked expectantly at Q and said, "What can I do for my handsome self?"

"There seems to be a very young Q who has recently left his sire's side, since his sire was a real stick in the mud. I believe that these fine older people here might be just the thing the Doctor ordered."

Julio rolled his eyes, then him and Jesse turned to the group of boys who were now apparently their sons. "Hey, guys," Julio said to the group of pre-teens, "welcome to the family. Whadda you say we do a quick introduction so we all know each other's name at least before Q figures out what his next miracle will be?"

The boys smiled, and looked at each other before one of the blond twins spoke up. "I'm gonna speak for all of us. We were all playing in the orphanage yard when that nice man popped in. A bunch of Starfleet guys showed up and took the staff away for being mean to us, and a nice lady gathered up the rest of the kids and took them somewhere. Then he said he knew some Clan Short guys who wanted kids

and he knew we'd be perfect, so he brought us here and showed us where you were. We can all talk to each other in our heads, so I'm the speaker for us; the man said I should tell you that because you would be okay with it."

Jesse beat Julio to his response. "That's sweet; you're gonna fit in with your new Uncles great!"

"That's for sure!" Julio said with a smile. "You're gonna fit in great with the family, guys."

The boys all nodded with smiles, and then the blond speaker for them resumed his introductions. "I'm Bobby, and my brother is Bruce. The redheads are Riley and Reese, and the last two are Kent and Kurt. Me and Bruce are ten, Riley and Reese are eleven, and Kent and Kurt are nine."

"I'm Jesse and he's Julio, the Director of the Des Moines Division," Jesse said helpfully.

"And the two *normal* people behind us are your new grandparents, Mick and Janice," Julio added, not able to resist the temptation to take a poke at Q.

"Hey now! There's no need to call me insulting names!" Mick laughed, unsuccessfully trying to dodge a jab in the side from Janice.

"Well Dad, compared to Q..." Julio responded with a grin.

"Compared to 'Q' what?" Said a third, rather impatient looking 'Q' that suddenly appeared in front of Julio.

"Well, hello, 'Q.' Don't I look handsome?"

"Yes, I do at that. What do you think, 'Q'."

"Well, I do have that special something, 'Q'."

Julio looked at 'Q' and deadpanned, "Compared to 'Q', a six-legged, five-horned giant tree sloth is normal."

"Didn't Ty say that Timmy had one of those?" Jesse asked seriously.

"Yep. It's quite nice, and compared to 'Q' here it IS very normal," Julio said in a matter-of-fact voice.

'Q' looked to 'Q', who in turn looked at 'Q', who said, "Don't look at me."

'Q' shrugged and said, "Well, don't look at me either."

'Q' suddenly looked very put out. "Wait a minute, I'm the sane one here."

"Oh right! Here you are talking to yourself."

"Well, you are answering yourself!"

"Don't take that tone with me"

"I'll take any tone with myself that I please!"

Suddenly 'Q,' 'Q,' and 'Q' were garbed in fencing outfits and began to go at each other with rapiers.

"*En garde*, you rapscallion!"

"How dare I call myself a rapscallion!"

"I won't take that from myself. I am an insufferable lout!"

Through all of this, Julio and Jessie giggled as they watched with their six new kids... which became seven, then eight, then...

"Waaaaait a minute!" Julio exclaimed.

A brunet-haired Dylan looked up and grinned, along with a normal blond Ezra and a redheaded Bryce, all the same size as the six new boys. "Well," Dylan grinned widely, "you couldn't expect us to NOT watch and help when Uncle Q is showing us how to REALLY prank, could you?"

Suddenly Mick and Janice felt tentative tugs on the back of their shirts. When they turned around, they found themselves looking at three Hispanic kids. The oldest one spoke up almost immediately.

"Hi Mamma and Pappa. The crazy man in the white suit said you were goin' be our new family. My name is Abejundio. I'm nine. Abelard is eight and Agapito is six."

Mick looked at the boys and smiled. "It's nice to meet you guys, but who is the baby in Mamma's arms?"

Agapito looked up with a smile. "She says her name mean Arrow, pappa!"

Mick smiled and said, "Hello, Arrow. You are such a cute little princess."

This was met with a satisfied coo from Arrow.

"She approves of the name, I think," Janice said with a content smile on her face.

---

Cory, Sean, Kyle, and Tyler found themselves being pushed, pulled, and generally prodded as they were 'escorted' onto the stage by their respective sons. As they stood there, Dylan and Ezra ensuring they didn't run away, Timmy pulled a step-stool over to the microphone so that he could be heard. "We heard Daddy an' Poppa did some dancin' an were awesome, but we didn't get to see them, so we're gonna make them dance so we can see it too."

"I know THAT song! Mom had it in her music collection!" Ezra shouted from the huddle the rest of the band members were assembled in.

"Sweet, you got lead, bro; that's out of my range," DJ replied as the huddle broke up. "Places, guys... I wanna see if Dad and Pop are as good as everyone says!"

"Every single one of you are going swimming when I get home!" Cory shouted, his grin giving away the fun he was having.

"Gotta catch me first, Daddy!" Timmy giggled as he scrambled to grab his acoustic guitar. Joey and Pauly managed to scramble to their drums without knocking over Austin, Beau, Calen, DJ, and Leo, who were heading to the horn section. CD and Brandon both grabbed their bass guitars, Conner and Tanner hit their synth booths, and KC picked up a glowing teal and black Fender Stratocaster. Toby joined Fife up front, and announced "Chance, hit the lights! We're flashin' back into the old days of the Seventies... we're gonna light a Disco Inferno!"

The four unwilling dancers exchanged glances, their faces breaking into huge grins. The lights dropped, with a disco ball appearing from nowhere above their heads. With a single drum beat leading it off, the horns and then the basses kicked in. The boys not playing horns gave the opening chorus, with Toby giving the final 'Burnin!'. Fife took over, the small Tesnian dancing around the rest of the front stage band members as he sang. At the front of the stage, Cory, Sean, Tyler, and Kyle strutted their stuff, giving the show everything they had. Out on the floor in front of the stage, kids were dancing along, their faces glowing with fun.

As the song progressed, Kyle and Ty let themselves have even more fun. They slowly rose up, and began dancing above Cory and Sean's heads. A few seconds later, with Kyle's help, Cory and Sean joined them in mid-air.

Fife grinned as him and CD made their way forward. Once under the dancing foursome, they began dancing along as they each performed their part of the song. KC, Toby, Timmy, and Brandon joined them, all hamming it up as they played.

About a minute into the song, Tyler held out his hand, and suddenly JJ and Adam found themselves joining their brothers. After taking a second to get used to the "Mikyvis Floor", the two new arrivals joined into the fun with huge grins.

Towards the back of the stage, the horn section was moving in unison with the rhythm. Joey and Pauly were playing off of each other, sometimes playing in unison and other times swapping the beat back and forth between each other. A few times they even swapped sticks, a spare stick in mid-air at all times as they continued to play with their free hand.

Six and a half minutes after the song started, it finally wound down. Kyle and Ty lowered the dancers down to a safe spot in front of the band, Cory reaching over and pulling Kyle into a hug as soon as they landed. "I told ya it'd be fun to dance in the air!" Cory giggled.

Kyle grinned wordlessly, his expression showing that he was beginning to understand that there were times being a Mikyvis was a blessing.

Toby grinned as he announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen, let's give a hand for the Clan Short Command Dancers!"

The arena broke into loud applause. Once it settled, and the blushes from the dancers stopped blinding him, Toby continued, "Also let's hear it for our newest brother, Fife!"

The arena exploded in applause once again, this time accompanied with whistles and stomping. Fife's grin became huge, his feeling of being family being bolstered by the second.

DJ came up front and put an arm around Fife. "You sounded awesome, bro! I can't wait to teach you the songs we do!"

Fife's smile grew even wider. "Really? I get to do this again?"

"Yep!" DJ giggled. "You're a member of the band, bro. You get to sit this one out and watch us, but next time we play, I plan on you being right here with us."

Fife twisted around and gave DJ a hug as Cory smiled. "Looks like Fife is finding out about Short brotherhood!" Cory giggled.

Sean nodded as he led the dancers off the stage. "I'm proud of all of them; they all welcomed him with open arms."

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A minute later, after getting hugs from each of his new brothers, Fife joined Cory and Sean back at their table. "That was fun!" Fife exclaimed as he settled back into Cory's lap.

Cory grinned and gave Fife a hug in response as DJ got everyone's attention from the stage. "Okay, Des Moines... you heard our warmup set... are you ready to hear our main set?"

With an explosion of sound, the arena overwhelmingly showed their approval. DJ grinned, then waved to his brothers to get ready to resume the concert.

DJ stepped back and grabbed his guitar as the lights dimmed. Tanner and KC stepped forward, and with a strum on the strings by Timmy on his acoustic guitar the band launched into "Blaze of Glory." As the song wound down, Tanner finished the final vocals, then turned the microphone over to KC. The band dropped into "Dream On," KC's voice rising high and strong. Timmy showed his stuff on the lead guitar, him and Brandon playing off of each other perfectly.

The song finished, and the stage went dark. The entire band scrambled to get in position, a single spotlight falling upon KC as he took a seat on a stool mid-stage. Austin hit the opening notes on his piano, and KC started the next song.

*When you were young, and your heart was an open book...  
You used to say 'Live and let live...'*

{Songwriters: McCartney, Paul / McCartney, Linda  
Live And Let Die lyrics © EMI Music Publishing }

As the chorus started the lights went bright and the horn section fired up full tilt. Joey was a wildman on the drums, and Brandon played a bass that would have made Paul McCartney proud.

Next, the band jumped into "Invincible," Joey taking the lead vocals from his drum set. They then fell into "I'm Still Standing," with KC back at the microphone.

As the final notes echoed through the arena, DJ stepped up to the microphone. "We're gonna slow it down for a few, this next song is called 'Turn the Page'."

Calen's sax pulled at everyone's heart as he put his soul into every note. DJ put all his emotions into the song, the verses meaning a lot to the entire band at this point in their long tour.

As the final note echoed from Calen's sax, the boys began to scramble to prepare for the next song. DJ, KC, Austin, Calen, and Toby came front-stage, while Conner and Tanner manned their keyboards, CD and Brandon each selected a bass, Joey sat down at his kit while Pauly fired up his electric drum, and Timmy grabbed his lead guitar. As soon as everyone was in place, the boys launched into "As Long as You Love Me," the five boys in the front dancing in unison as they sang the vocals.

The band shifted once again, KC taking the lead with Austin backing him as they fell into "Let Your Love Flow," Timmy playing the Telecaster lead.

Austin stepped up front at the end of the song. "Des Moines, this song is for you," he stated before the band launched into "Don't Stop Believin'." Next up, DJ and Joey took lead on Head East's "Never Been Any Reason," KC and Timmy playing off of each other with their guitars to the enjoyment of the audience.

For "Draw The Line", KC doubled on lead vocals and one of the lead guitars, with Conner doing backup vocals. Timmy had second lead, and Brandon played rhythm with CD on bass and Pauly on drums.

KC stepped back to join Timmy at lead guitar for the next song, with Conner and Tanner taking over vocals. Joey took over on drums, and the band launched into "The Zoo."

The full band hit the stage once again as they launched into a well-executed cover of "I'm Just a Singer (In a Rock And Roll Band)." KC and Tanner ran the vocals, while the rest of the band hit the song with every ounce of energy that they could spare.

Tanner stepped up to the microphone as the rest of the band reached for the nearest bottle of water. "You're AWESOME, Des Moines!" he announced. "For some reason, after the last few songs, the guys think we need to slow it down again! How many of you have figured out that we select our sets to send a message?"

The arena exploded in noise, obviously showing the band that their message was coming across loud and clear.

Tanner smiled. "Kewl! Hey, we're gonna do a song that don't apply if you're Clan, so y'all ain't got to worry!"



Everyone switched around to their next positions, and the band started with "Only The Good Die Young," with Austin at lead vocals. For their next song, DJ took vocals for "Old Time Rock and Roll."

Timmy came up front at the end of the song. "This one is by a really good friend of me an' CD, Alex Smith. He likes it when me, Calen, and Conner sing it, he says it sounds just like he dreamed it should sound like. He calls it "What About Me?"

Timmy took the first stanza, his voice bringing tears to most of the eyes in the arena.

Well, there's a little boy waiting at the counter of the corner shop  
 He's been waiting down there, waiting half the day,  
 They never ever see him from the top  
 He gets pushed around, knocked to the ground,  
 He gets to his feet and he says...

What about me? It isn't fair  
 I've had enough, now I want my share  
 Can't you see, I wanna live  
 But you just take more than you give...

Calen immediately took the second verse, finishing off the job that Timmy started.

Well, there's a pretty girl serving at the counter of the corner shop  
 She's been waiting back there, waiting for a dream,  
 Her dreams walk in and out, they never stop  
 Well, she's not too proud, to cry out loud  
 She runs to the street and she screams...

What about me? It isn't fair  
 I've had enough, now I want my share  
 Can't you see, I wanna live  
 But you just take more than you give...

More than you give...

Once Austin finished his heartfelt sax solo, Timmy jumped back in, singing harmony with Calen.

Take a step back and see the little people  
 They might be young, but they're the ones...  
 that make the big people big  
 So listen as they whisper:

Timmy took the next line solo, his pain from recent events showing in every word.

"What about me?"

Conner stepped up for the final stanza, fully aware that there was not a dry eye in the house and intent on driving the point home.

And now I'm standing on this corner,  
 all the world's gone home  
 Nobody's changed, nobody's been saved  
 And I'm feeling cold and alone  
 I guess I'm lucky, I smile a lot  
 But sometimes I wish for more... than I've got...

All three boys sang the next chorus, the band members who were not playing silently walking out on stage during it.

What about me? It isn't fair  
 I've had enough, now I want my share  
 Can't you see, I wanna live  
 But you... just... take... more ...

For the last chorus, everyone in the band not playing an instrument joined in.

What about me? It isn't fair  
 I've had enough, now I want my share  
 Can't you see, I wanna live  
 But you just take more...  
 you just take more...  
 you just take more ... than ... you ... give...

As the rest of the band members fell quiet, Timmy sang the last three lines, the only other sound being Tanner's keyboard.

What about me?  
 What about me?  
 What about....me?

The lights came up, revealing clearly the tears in each of the band members' eyes. The applause was heartfelt, showing that the boys had achieved the delivery of their message. Once the applause tapered off, Conner walked slowly to a microphone at the corner of the stage. "May I please have your undivided attention?" Conner said in a soft voice. The arena fell silent, quickly aware that something unusual was about to happen. Once he was sure he had everyone's attention, Conner continued. "A little while ago, in Montana, we lost some of our brothers to an attack by an organization which believes that the Clan is evil. Every concert, we have vowed that we will ensure that their sacrifice is never forgotten. Would everyone please stand in honor of our fallen brothers?"

Without question, the occupants of the arena stood as one. Pauly came up to stand next to Conner, a single snare drum at his waist. Without prompt, he began a slow cadence as the rest of the band lined up and stood at attention facing the four flagpoles which were now illuminated by spotlights. From backstage, a Marine Honor Guard, black armbands on their uniforms, marched out half-step towards the flagpole. In each of the four lead Marines' outstretched arms were four folded flags.

Once the Marines reached the poles, Pauly changed the cadence, as they split into two groups, eight at the flagpoles and eight at attention with weapons at the ready.

The first pair of Marines stepped forward, solemnly unfolding a Federation flag, slowly running it up the flagpole then lowering it to half mast. They stepped back, and the next pair stepped up to repeat the procedure with an American flag. They were followed by another pair who repeated the procedure with the Clan Short flag. The final pair repeated the action one last time with the Unit ensign.

Once the operation was complete, Pauly silenced his drum as the Flag Officer stepped forward. "Honor Guard, Tennen-HUT!" The Clan boys on stage joined the Honor Guard flag bearers as they saluted the flag. "Present ... ARMS! Ready ... ARMS! FIRE! ... FIRE! ... FIRE!"

"Please join me in a moment of silence in memory of our lost brothers," Conner stated simply before stepping back and bowing his head. For the first time that night, the arena became so quiet that you could actually hear the ventilation fans.

The lights had been dimmed so only the spot lights on the flags could be seen, but slowly the light level of the stadium grew as people reached into their pockets and pulled out lights, cell phones, or anything else that they were carrying that lit up.

From the back of the stadium, a lone bugle was heard as it started to play taps, only to be answered by another at the front. Every person on stage came to attention once again, tears flowing freely as they listened to each note.

As the last note echoed through the arena, the boys saluted the flags once again. As Conner moved back to the microphone, DJ and Timmy picked up their acoustic guitars, Brandon picked up an as-yet-unused black electric guitar, and CD and KC brought their cellos to front stage.

As the rest of the band held their salutes, the lights dimmed except for the lights on the flags and a single spotlight on the six boys front-stage. Timmy and DJ took a seat on a set of stools behind Conner, and began playing the opening notes to "When the Children Cry." As Conner began singing the vocals, a large screen dropped from the ceiling and began cycling through pictures of those that were lost, each picture giving the name and age of the lost brother.

Out in the arena, every Clan and Unit member in attendance was at attention, each and every one holding a salute throughout the song. In addition, Mick, Bob, and Herman had joined their sons in paying respect for their brothers. In fact, as soon as the ceremony had began, Herman had requested his dress uniform, quickly echoed by Bob and Mick.

As the last note of the song was played, Herman was clearly heard in the auditorium. "Des Moines Division, Fall In!"

A minute later, the crowd in front of the stage parted as Herman led the full Des Moines detachment, now in dress uniform, to the base of the flagpoles. Herman came to attention and saluted the flags, then removed his hat, placed it reverently at the base of the Unit flagpole, and stepped off to the side. Bob and Mick repeated his actions, followed by each of the members of the Des Moines detachment. As they finished, the line of kids and adults that had formed behind them began following suit, each placing something personal of theirs on the quickly growing memorial. The Orlando crew were not exempt, as each of them took their turn in remembrance.

As the line finally became a trickle, Eoghan watched as a little boy, no more than six, came up and gently placed a worn teddy bear on top of the pile. "Take care of Mark, Teddy. He needs you now, and

I can't take you with me," the boy said softly as he made sure the bear was securely in place. As Eoghan smiled, he saw a white mist form by the boy... a very familiar looking mist. The voice he heard next proved his eyes were not playing tricks on him... the spirit of Mark had heard his name.

Eoghan looked around, and realized that none of the other people on stage were seeing this. He turned back just in time to see the mist surrounding Mark encompass the boy. "Thanks, Jerry. Teddy and I will be watching you for a long time. My Boss says I can do special stuff sometimes if it feels right, so I'm gonna fix ya so those gene thingies stop hurtin' ya. You see the goofy Irish kid over there? When I go again, he's gonna take you and your Mommy to meet his new Dad. That way your Mommy has work again."

Eoghan couldn't help but grin... Mark had tagged him as 'the goofy Irish kid' from the first day they had met, and had never called him anything else. He understood now why he was seeing this, in Mark's own way he was making sure Eoghan knew what to do.

*'Took you long enough to figure it out, Goofy!'* Mark's voice giggled in Eoghan's head.

Before Eoghan could respond, Mark was gone, along with the teddy bear, and Jerry was looking over at him with a confused look on his face. Eoghan waved him over, waiting until Jerry was next to him before saying "Yes, it happened... yes, he probably healed you... and no, I'm not going to try to explain it until MUCH later."

Eoghan spent a minute teaching Jerry how to pronounce his name, and was about to suggest leaving the stage when KC tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, dude... the Purple Prankster says you're gonna say something, and he says to tell you that Angelic Interventions don't get you out of what you were planning. Here's the mic; when you're done, just turn it off, Joey's got his own."

"Tell Dylan I said he's a smart-ass," Eoghan said as he took the offered microphone.

KC grinned. "I tell him that every day... and he agrees with me. We'll get ready for the next song while you're handling whatever you gotta say."

Eoghan nodded, and put an arm over Jerry's shoulder as he moved to the front of the stage. "May I have your attention?" Eoghan announced, trying very hard to keep his words understandable. "Before 'Time Touched' resumes the concert, I wanted to say something. When my team was assigned to Des Moines, we were told to expect to be welcomed into a large family. Tonight I realized that the family is not just the new Des Moines Division... as I watched and listened to each of you, I found out that the family is the entire Des Moines metro area. I swear on the graves of my forefathers and my forefathers' forefathers that I will expel my last breath protecting all of you from anyone who dares to violate the Des Moines boundaries."

As Eoghan turned and left the stage, DJ giggled and commented, "If you see a Hind gunship patrolling I-80, don't worry... it's just Eoghan looking for someone!" He looked around, making sure everyone was in place, then continued. "The next two songs kinda fit in with our tribute. Joey's going to give up his drumsticks for a minute to take lead vocals; you got it, little bro!"

As DJ adjusted his acoustic on his neck, Timmy, Pauly, Leo, Beau, and Calen began singing:

*"Step by step ...  
heart to heart ...  
left right left ...  
we all fall downwwnnn ...  
like toy soldiers...."*

Joey took over, the other boys filling in chorals at the appropriate time. As the final acoustic chords faded, Calen gave a grinning Joey a hug before taking the microphone. "This one's for all the kids who've had to live though parents breaking up," he announced as Pauly began the drum intro to Everclear's "Wonderful." Calen sung lead for the song, with the other playing members covering vocal backup and Brandon doing alternate lead.

The boys quickly shifted once again as Tanner took lead. "This one's for Dad and Pop!" he said as DJ started strumming his acoustic to begin "I Remember You." As soon as the twin electrics kicked in, Timmy and KC began mirroring each other, Timmy's left hand guitar inches from KC's right hand model. Pauly attacked the drums with a vengeance, him and CD exchanging grins during the slower parts of the song.

For N'Sync's "Everything I Own," DJ, KC, Austin, Calin and Toby lined up along the front of the stage. Conner took over keyboards, with CD on bass, Timmy on acoustic guitar, Joey at his kit and Pauly once again at the electric drums. They choreographed their steps just right to end up in the right spots to almost instantly go into Eric Clapton's "It's in the Way That You Use It."

By this time, the crowd was really into the concert once again. Tanner grinned as he took the lead. "Des Moines! You're awesome! Uncle Jon says y'all know this song, so feel free to join in!" By the second note, the crowd was screaming.

With a huge smile, Tanner started. "This ain't a song for the broken hearted...."

By the time they reached the final "It's ... My ... Life ...," almost every person in the arena was singing along. The stage went black, and the audience went wild. After a minute of clapping, yelling, and stomping, DJ, Pauly, Brandon, and Timmy re-took the stage, all in tie-died t-shirts and torn jeans. "Thank you, Des Moines!" DJ announced as Timmy hit the first notes of "Purple Haze," DJ playing air-guitar alongside him as Timmy played the pearl-white, reverse strung, right-handed Fender SG Custom.

As Timmy was winding up, Toby, Joey, KC and Brandon finished setting up. Joey immediately hit the opening drum beats of "We're Not Gonna Take It." Once again, the audience sang along with what was quickly becoming the theme song for the Clan.

As Tanner played the opening notes of Triumph's "Fight The Good Fight," Austin moved up for the vocals. Joey showed off some, juggling sticks during breaks in the drum riffs. KC and CD doubled up on lead guitar, with Toby playing rhythm and Timmy on acoustic. With CD being busy, Brandon took the bass duties. As the song faded out, the lights once again dimmed until the stage was black. The arena was even louder than before, the adults being just as loud as the kids.

It took three minutes before the lights rose once again on the stage. "So you guys want it loud?" KC asked as the stage started filling with band members. When the crowd got even louder, he grinned. "Hey, Russ! Turn off the safeties; we're gonna blow the roof off this place!"

KC dropped back to grab a guitar as Toby prepared for the vocals and watched for the band to be ready. Conner was seated at his piano, both drummers were in place, CD had his favorite bass, and Timmy and Brandon were standing by with guitars in their hands. Once KC had his guitar in place, Toby raised his fist in the air. "Look out, world! We're in Des Moines, and to quote Bryan Adams, 'The Kids Wanna Rock!'"

Toby dropped his fist, and the band kicked it into high gear. The three guitarists were all over the stage, while Conner was bouncing on his bench as he made the concert grand sing. The rest of the band members came out and joined in on the backup vocals. Next, they went immediately into REO Speedwagon's "Keep Pushin'," each member kicking it up even higher to give the crowd a real show.

As the last note faded, the arena suddenly went completely dark. As lightning began arcing across the ceiling, red strobe lights began flashing around the perimeter of the arena. A single lightning bolt struck the stage, immediately followed by the sound of two synthesizers ramping up. Within seconds, there was the sound of two synthesized tornado sirens circling the arena, seemingly chasing each other 180 degrees out of phase. After the third circuit, lightning once again struck the stage, this time bringing a bright flash as every light on the stage was brought online.

By the time everyone's eyes were adjusted to see that the entire band was onstage, Toby was at the front edge motioning for them to stand while Timmy and KC were repeating the opening notes. "Last Song, Des Moines!" Toby shouted. "Show me your hands!! We're Iowans, and we're Ridin' the Storm Out!" With that, Pauly and Joey kicked in the rhythm, and Toby launched into the song. Halfway through the song, the four guitarists grouped up, Timmy and KC on lead bracketed by Brandon and DJ on rhythm.

As the song wound towards its end, Timmy and KC ramped it up even more, each trying to outdo the other. By the time the synthesizers ramped up for the finale, Russ was warily watching the level meters on his two lead guitarists. As planned before the concert with both boys, they kept it just under the redline until the last thirty seconds. When the final synth started, it became a free-for-all between the two brothers. Everything held together until KC crouched down; at that point him and Timmy touched the bodies of their guitars together, creating a feedback loop. It was timed perfectly with the final notes of the song. As Pauly and Joey ran the circle on their kits, the cones on Timmy and KC's amps decided they had suffered enough torture, exiting the amp cases and sailing out into the crowd.

The final drum beats echoed through the arena as the band began making their way to the front of the stage. Once all there, they linked arms and took a group bow. "Thank you, Des Moines, it's great coming home and you were the best audience ANYWHERE!" DJ announced. "We'll see you next time!" he added as a swirl of smoke began whipping its way around the group. Once it was thick enough to obscure their features, the boys vanished from the stage in a flash of light. They re-appeared by Cory and Sean, who suddenly had their laps filled with sweaty, happy munchkins.

"I beat ya!" Timmy giggled as he appeared on Cory's lap, sticking his tongue out at KC.

"Dream on, Squirt!" KC shot back with a grin. "There ain't no way a little twerp is gonna launch a cone further than me!"

"You're just jealous cuz Unca Jimi said I'm a better lefty than you are!" Timmy giggled.

KC lifted Timmy slightly, moving him over enough so there was enough room on Cory's lap for both of them. "Of course you are, dufus; you're left handed, I'm ambidextrous!" KC commented as he messed up Timmy's hair.

"My cone still went farther!" Timmy shot back.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Not!"

"Too!"

"Not Not Not!"

"Too times a hundred million gazillion!"

"Not times infinity!"

"Too times Dilly's Mickymouse time!" Timmy giggled with a look of finality.

Cory's face sported a huge grin, the argument between the two boys telling him more than any words could explain about how the preparations for the concert had affected the group.

"You two are nuts!" Cory giggled as he pulled both boys into a cuddle.

"Of course; we take after our parents!" KC responded as him and Timmy settled into the cuddle.

"Yep, we take after you, Daddy!" Timmy added.

Sean giggled as he watched, Pauly and Joey both already asleep in his arms. "They've got a point, Cor!"

"You're no help!" Cory laughed as he flipped his middle finger at Sean.

"Not in public!" Sean laughed. "I might take you up on the offer later, though!"

"POP! GROSSS!!!!" the rest of their assembled sons exclaimed in unison.

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Editor's Note:

Wow, what a party!! Lots of entertainment and tricks and magic. Loads of people and cool outfits and one heck of a band!! This is a celebration of all celebrations!! ACFan really knows how to throw a party!!!

Now, what on earth could be next for our guys! With a party like that, who knows what kind of excitement ACFan will stir up.

Your favorite neighborhood editing puppy!

Boxerdude

## Chapter Twelve: "Family Ties"

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"That was awesome!" Cory exclaimed once again as they entered the house.

"So you've said fifty thousand times already!" JJ giggled, the squirrel in his arms chattering his agreement.

"Well, it was, Squirrel Boy!" Cory sniggered as he stuck out his tongue at JJ.

"Leave Dale outta this." JJ shot back with a grin. "He joined up because he was attracted by all you nuts!"

"So he chose the biggest nut to partner with?" Teri chuckled. At JJ's faux hurt look, she added "Remember, ALL of my sons are fair game!"

JJ rolled his eyes, and followed Adam into the living room. "Parents are weird..." he muttered to Dale.

Within a few minutes, after bathroom breaks and refrigerator raids, the boys were all assembled in the living room. The couples were paired up in various seats, while the singles all piled onto the couch in one big cluster. Adam retrieved the remote from the table next to him, intending to see what movies were on. As the screen came to life, it showed the Channel 5 nightly news. Adam's finger quickly slipped away from the channel up button as he saw the banner flash onto the screen to accompany the words of the newscaster. "... After these messages, breaking news about the Metro's own Family Clan Short Division."

"I wanna see this." Sean stated. "I wonder what they're covering?"

"MOM, BRUCE!" Cory yelled. "Come in here! The news is covering something about the new Division!"

The boys had almost convinced Kyle and Tyler to go move the newscast ahead in time so they wouldn't have to sit through any more commercials when the newscast resumed. All eyes were glued to the screen, each wondering what would be said.

"Now for tonight's top story." the well-dressed newscaster began with a smile. "For those not aware, Patriarch Cory Short made it official this weekend that the Des Moines compound in Urbandale is a full Family Clan Short division. With the Clan now having a permanent base at the location of its founding, we all were expecting great things, and I for one was not disappointed. In cooperation with the Capitol, the boys of Clan Short held the First Annual Halloween Bash in Wells Fargo Arena this evening. Before we go to our live coverage, the State Police have just announced that two of the top ten at-



large sex offenders were captured by the Clan at the party, and are now in State custody pending trial. Now, we'll go to Bridgett, who is standing by at the Wells Fargo Arena."

"Thank you, Fred." Bridgett replied as the newscast went full-screen. She was standing just in front of a long table, almost all of the seats filled with obviously wealthy adults. The exceptions were in the center, where Jesse and Julio were seated on either side of the podium, their six new sons behind them, three to a side. "Behind me, you can see that some of the most powerful people in the Metro area are taking their seats to participate in one of the largest outpourings of unity in the history of our State. If you missed the event, which is just winding up, you missed the party of the century. It looks like things are about to begin, so you'll get to watch this as it happens."

Herman stepped up to the podium, looking to ensure that everyone was present. "Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. For those who don't know me on sight, I am Brigadier General Herman Wilder, Retired. As the newly-adopted father of the Des Moines Division Air Wing, I am honored to have been selected to officiate this ceremony to show official support for our Division. Understand that by our, I don't mean the Clan's... I mean Iowa's. The persons assembled tonight are here for one reason only; they wish to make their support for Iowa's finest youth public knowledge." Herman then introduced the people at the table, ending with Julio, Jesse, and their sons.

Back in Teri's living room, Bruce looked at Teri in shock. "Do you realize who some of those people are?"

Teri nodded. "I know some of them personally. I can tell you one thing; this isn't a publicity stunt. At least half of them are the type that have their underlings do the publicity posturing. The fact they are doing this personally without any kind of warning means that anything they say tonight you can take at face value."

"MOM!" Cory stated, obviously wanting to concentrate on the newscast.

"Sorry...." Teri chuckled. "We'll talk later, Bruce."

Bruce nodded, and they both turned their attention back to the screen. As they watched, Julio signed mutual support agreements with all of the local medical facilities, then contracts with HyVee and Casey's for them to provide supplies to the Division at cost. Quite a few other metro companies also provided their services in whatever way would benefit the Clan. By the time it was done, Julio was obviously beginning to develop a case of writer's cramp. Herman took the podium once again, the final speaker having stepped away to shake both Julio's and Jesse's hands. "Before Director Hernandez takes the podium, I would like to comment that the last time I saw that many signatures I was enlisting in the Army."

Everyone at the table chuckled, and Julio took the podium. "Thank you, General; my eyes are starting to hurt, I think I need more carrots!" he commented with a giggle. "I want to thank all of you for the support that you've shown tonight. I know this is on the news as well, and I would like to let the viewers know that I didn't ask for this; neither did Cory. Everything you've seen tonight was done without any prompting by any of the Clan, it was proof to all of us that Iowans take care of their own. I want to thank each and every one of our new partners for their generosity; tonight Iowa's business community has taken the lead in protecting our youth. Now if someone wants to do my homework, I'll be all set!"

Julio paused as the adults gave knowing laughs. "Seriously, the party and now this have pretty much taken away my worry about how I was going to handle running the new division. I didn't need to worry, because I now know that all I have to do is ask. The Metro area will handle the rest! Thanks to each and every one of you once again."

The camera cut back to Bridgett. "As things are winding up, let me add my own thoughts." she stated. "Tonight I saw the sons of Cory Short put on a concert like no other, I saw an entire arena pay respect to the boys lost in Montana, I saw children who couldn't afford the simplest costume walk out of the arena with huge smiles, new costumes, and top of the line face-paints. I saw parents stepping up and assisting at the various attractions to ensure they ran smoothly. I've seen things tonight that you would not believe unless you saw them yourself... but the one thing that never wavered throughout the entire night was the sense of family helping family. Tonight I have seen the best of Iowa, and as anyone who was here tonight will agree, my life will never be the same after living through this event. Back to you, Fred."

Fred came back on the screen. "I'll have to agree with you, Bridgett. Unfortunately I had to leave early to make it here, but my wife and son are still there. With what just happened, any other news story would be disrespectful. So we'll leave you tonight with footage of the band 'Time Touched', the sons of Cory and Sean Short, as they paid tribute to their lost brothers with the song 'When the Children Cry'."

Everyone watched as the song played, the shot wide enough to catch the flagpoles as well as the backdrop. Once the song finished, the camera kept rolling, saving for eternity the memorial. The screen went black as Eoghan started his speech, his voice clear as the words "In memory of the brave souls who made the ultimate sacrifice in Montana to protect youth. Iowa will never forget." appeared on the screen. Eoghan's speech finished, replaced with the audible of 'What about Me?' from the concert, the memorial screen still in place. After a respectable silence at the end of the song, the screen faded and the channel switched to the tail end of the national newscast. Adam hit the mute button on the remote, fully expecting Cory to make a comment now that it was complete.

Cory looked around the silent room, pulling Sean into his side as he took in the faces around him. "I didn't know." he said in an awestruck whisper. "I really didn't know. Is our promise to each other really this big now?"

JJ waited a second, then added his thoughts. "It's only been a couple of months since we got together. How'd things get this big?"

Sean nodded, his eyes still wet from watching the memorial. "Yeah, we might have a fancy title, but we're still a bunch of kids. Why's everyone doing this?"

Kyle smiled as the first three looked at him. "I packed up my Superman cape; I'm only hanging around for the shoulder rides!" he giggled, which brought smiles to the faces of those who had first heard him utter those same words.

Teri came over, and after assisting Kyle in securing a seat on her hip, she turned to the rest of the group. "I'm not going to pretend to know the answers to those questions." she said as she poked a giggling Kyle in the ribs. "I will say that you've captured the imaginations of a lot of people, and it looks like good things have come from it."

"I agree." Bruce added. "Don't change a thing. Do whatever you need to do to free yourselves up to be able to do the kind of things that started this, but don't let the support that you're getting make it impossible for you to do what you do best."

"I'll go one step further... I'll make that 'Mom's Orders!'" Teri stated jokingly.

Mont looked at Bast. "Daddy Joe said that if Momma Teri gives an order, we're to take it just like if Momma Janet gave it."

Bast nodded with a grin. "Yeah; that means we get to toss our bosses in the pool whenever they get too serious."

"Nuhh uhh!" Cory giggled.

"Actually I like that idea..." Teri chuckled, somehow managing not to be disintegrated by the glares from her non-furry sons. "Or.... if you would prefer... tongue baths... in public." she added as she walked over and put Kyle on Sean's shoulders.

"You guys are on break, so stop worrying about things and have fun. Yell if you need anything." Teri stated as she motioned for Bruce to join her as she left the room.

Once the adults were gone, Sean tickled behind Kyle's kneecaps. "Okay, Bro... any requests for movies?" he asked the giggling munchkin sitting half on his shoulders and half on the back of his chair.

"How's about JJ's theme movie, Terminator 2?" Kyle giggled.

"Sure, we can follow it with your theme movie, Shrek!" JJ shot back with a giggle.

"Hey, just because I like the movie don't mean I wanna be an ogre!" Kyle said as he braced himself on Sean's head to keep from falling off from his giggles.

"Terminator 2 followed by Shrek, got it!" Adam laughed as he keyed up the two movies.

The boys settled in, occasionally poking fun at JJ because of the similarities between him and the Terminator, and making comments about the cuteness factor of John Connor. As the first movie's credits started rolling, JJ stood up. "I'll be bahck" he stated in a very bad impersonation, then headed for the restroom.

Tyler had decided to take up residence on Cory's shoulders sometime during the movie, and poked Kyle, who was still comfortably perched on Sean. "You've got a weird brother, you know that?" Tyler giggled.

Kyle nodded. "He's good weird though!"

As JJ came back into the room, Cory turned to him with a grin. "Hey bro, Arnie called. He's gonna call back tomorrow. He needs some pointers on how to take out some bad guys in the next movie!"

JJ blew on his nails then polished them on his shirt. "When you're good, you're good... and then there's awesome like me!" he giggled.

"A little conceited ain't we?" Mont chuckled.

"Nope; conceit is a fault, and I have no faults so I can't be conceited!" JJ replied.

"I'm glad we're on some shoulders, the poop is getting deep in here!" Ty laughed.

Bast almost fell over in laughter as Jeremy, safely cuddled against his side, began singing "Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble..."

"Sit down before your swelled head takes out a wall, Babe!" Adam giggled. "We got a movie to watch!"

"I swear, the great get *NO* respect around here!" JJ play-whined as he plopped down on Adam's lap. "Cuddle me, everyone's pickin on me." he giggled.

Kai rolled his eyes as he tried to keep Fife from falling off of his lap in laughter. "Bruz, you're *ALL* nuttier than the fallout from a coconut tree!"

"Guilty!" Sean, Cory, Tyler, and Kyle all exclaimed in unison, which caused them all to fall into another fit of giggles.

"Starting the movie now, guys...." Adam laughed, fully aware that this would go on forever if nobody said anything.

"Spoilsport!" Tyler giggled as he stuck his tongue out at Adam.

Adam just grinned and nodded as the second movie started. The room somewhat calmed down as they began to pay attention to the screen. Before long, the comments started about ogres, and then donkeys. Fife was unique in the group, as he had never saw the movie. As such, the boys had no issue replaying parts of it multiple times, especially since most of the parts he wanted repeated were some of the funniest parts of the plot.

As Shrek finished, Teri stuck her head into the room. "Oh, you are alive! I thought you had all drifted off to another universe. The refrigerator hasn't been raided for hours! I've got a small snack on the table if any of you are interested!"

Teri barely managed to evacuate the doorway as the room emptied in record time. She followed the horde into the dining room, her smile growing as she found them ravenously attacking the homemade pizza that she had set out. She silently swelled with pride as her boys once again ensured that Fife's section of the pizza was left for him.

"Mom, this tastes awesome!" Cory announced in between taking bites out of the pieces that he held in each hand.

"Thanks Mom!" Tyler said as he reached for another slice, his first one vanishing faster than a Mikyvis transport.

"Thank you Cory, and you're welcome, Ty." Teri replied as she carefully watched for an opening where her hand would not be mistaken for a slice of pizza. She saw a break, and quickly grabbed two pieces for herself. Bruce had played it safe and retrieved his share before the natives arrived, and was now watching in shock as his two little angels did very good impressions of pizza piranhas, holding their own quite well against the larger kids.

Fifteen minutes later, there was no indication that the pizzas had ever existed; JJ had went so far as to lick a stray streak of sauce off of the pan in front of him. The satisfied smiles on all of the kid's faces was all the thanks Teri needed; despite various events over the weekend, her boys had finally let go and released their inner kid once again. As the boys quickly began cleaning up, Teri motioned for Tyler and Kyle to join her.

"Wazzup Mom?" Tyler asked as they followed Teri into her office.

Teri phrased her response carefully, not wanting to ruin the two boys' evening. "I had a good call while you guys were enjoying the movie. Logan was wanting to know how you two were doing."

The two boys took a seat in one of the chairs. "What did you tell him?" Kyle asked.

"I told him that I finally got to see my favorite 'Shoulder Pirate' for the first time in months." Teri replied, which brought smiles to both boys' faces.

Tyler was still grinning as he asked "Why is he worried about us?"

Teri smiled as she looked at her two angels. "Actually, he's hoping that you two are getting time to just be yourselves. I let him know that you were, and he wanted to know if you'd like some tips; he said you'd know why he's asking."

Kyle tilted his head. "I didn't wanna ask him; that stuff is private. He really wants to help us out?"

"I think so; that's what it sounded like. It is up to you, he said, and he's willing to come over if you want to have a talk without being interrupted." Teri said, her eyes saying that she knew more than she would say.

Kyle grinned. "You're not 'posed to figure that stuff out, Mom!" He then turned to Ty. "What you think?"

Tyler nodded. "Sure! You better hide all the BBQ sauce though, Mom!"

"I don't buy his favorite brand for just that reason..." Teri chuckled; "Janet and I know a lot more than you guys give us credit for."

"But we know more about what you think you know about us than you think that we know about what you think!" Tyler replied with a giggle.

"Yeah, if we gave you credit for what we know that you knew then you'd know we know; but you don't know what we know you know so you can't know all there is to know about us." Kyle added with his own huge grin.

"With all the circular logic going on here, it's almost like you're trying to describe Cory's Family tree." Logan Hayes said with a grin from behind them.

"What took you so long to say something, you've been standing there for 734.8953 nanoseconds!" Kyle giggled without turning around.

"I had to wait for you two big mouths to actually take a break." Logan said with a chuckle as he walked around and gave Teri a hug. "Hi mama Teri."

"Hello Logan; after that comment about Cory's family tree I hope these two have fun twisting your head around!" Teri said with a smile as she returned the hug. "I'll leave the three of you alone in here; it's safer for everyone's sanity that way!"

"But Mom, we wouldn't do anything...." Tyler and Kyle chorused as halos appeared above all three boy's heads.

"Now I KNOW it's not safe; you gave Logan a halo!" Teri laughed as she made her way to the door. "Just come out after you're done reformatting reality!"

"Just so you know Mama Teri... I'm severely wounded by your statement. They re-form the future, I re-form the past. Reality is just so boring to play with."

"There's no such thing as reality, it's an illusion that people use because they can't handle the universe as it stands." Kyle added, trying to keep a serious face.

"You know; the scary part is that you might be right, Kyle!" Teri said as she reached for the doorknob.

Logan watched as Teri left the room, then sat down in a chair, nodding for the two younger boys to do the same. With a tired sigh, he managed to smile at both boys. "It's good to see you two both being kids again. I've been waiting for that to happen."

Kyle and Tyler made a show of looking down the front of each other's shorts, both giggling. "Yep, looks the same, he's still a kid!" Tyler quipped as Kyle nodded his head in agreement.

"So whatcha wanna talk about?" Kyle giggled as he saw Logan roll his eyes. "Ya need us to teach ya tic-tac-toe?"

Logan sniggered softly while shaking his head. "You know the difference between maturity and being a curmudgeon? Maturity means you know when to act like a kid and when not to, a curmudgeon loses the ability to be a kid."

"Like Adam?" Kyle asked, his expression showing that he wasn't completely being serious. "I think no maturity is more fun; it makes surfing lessons a lot betterer!"

Logan laughed, but shook his head. "You've missed my point. You're both kids with more power than most of us can imagine, but you can't afford to lose yourself to that power. That's where the maturity comes in. It tells you when to be a kid and when not to. They say that absolute power corrupts absolutely, but that's not always true."

"Yeah, that's why I hung up my Superman cape." Kyle said with a smile. "Besides, Ty says it was hiding my butt from him!"

"That's only when it was all you were wearing!" Ty giggled.

Logan let his head fall onto the table with a bang. he lifted it again, and let it fall once more. All the while he muttered, "Dear Lord, please give me the patience to deal with your discards."

"Will this help?" Tyler asked as a padded mat imprinted with a target and the words 'In case of emergency, bang head here' appeared on the table between bounces of Logan's head.

"You're not helping...." Logan murmured.

Logan sat back and looked at both boys, the smile on his face almost a mile wide. "Basically, I came here to try to help you guys learn some of the lessons I learned... learned the hard way."

"You mean things like not using the three alarm BBQ sauce as lube?" Kyle asked innocently.

"No..." Logan said seriously. "I would never defile the nectar of the Gods in such a way. I was more meaning learning when to act, and when not to." Logan grew very serious as he leaned forward. "Trust me... I have learned from experience. I've fucked up more times than you guys probably want to know about."

"I know that look..." Tyler commented, "He's going 'big brother' on us and is going to teach us stuff."

"If he's gonna be big brother, does that mean we get to pounce him if he gets too serious?" Kyle asked.

"Yep. that's our job as little brothers!" Tyler replied with a grin. "It's *good* to be Kid!"

Choosing to ignore the comment, Logan simply shook his head and began talking with a smile. "Look guys, I know that both of you are far from stupid, but I also know that you're just coming into your powers so to say. I've had mine for as long as I can remember, and started playing early. I'm no where even close to being on the same plane as you guys are, but some of the things I learned, and learned the hard way, may help you guys out in the future, okay?"

Kyle giggled. "We're listenin', but you're gonna have fun tellin' us 'bout it even if you don't wanna."

Logan shook his head sadly. "Sorry guys, some of the stuff I'm gonna talk to you about ain't funny. some of it is though."

"You can still have fun without being funny." Tyler answered sagely. "Just watch Sean telling a joke!"

Logan sighed and shook his head, although he couldn't stop the grin that appeared on his face. "I'll be sure to NOT tell him you said that."

"Why not, it's the truth... just ask Mom!" Tyler giggled.

"Anyways..." Logan said trying, in vain, to get them back on track. "I guess I'll start on the biggest thing, and probably the hardest thing to learn. When to NOT get involved, even though every fiber of your being is telling you to."

"You mean like the time I messed up an entire planet's war because they got me mad?" Kyle asked, surprisingly seriously.

"On one side, the entire U.S. Army with arms that look like they dated back to the Great War; on the other side, one Federation starship and crew," Tyler giggled. "Guess who wins?"

"Yeah, something like that." Logan said seriously. "As I said, you guys can do things far and above what I can, which is why I wanted to talk to you guys as soon as you were ready."

"The main thing i can tell you guys is to let your heart guide you, but it's gotta be tempered by your mind. Both of you are big hearted kids who never want to let anyone suffer, but remember what Timmy said, 'Sometimes bad things have to happen, so good things can.' If you guys would allow me to, I'd like to show you a few times where I did what I though would be the best thing, would help the most people. Sadly I was wrong, and a whole lot more people got hurt and died than if I'd done nothing at all."

"Hey, a Field Trip!" Tyler giggled. "Did Mom sign the permission slips for us to go?"

"Nope... I forged her signature." Logan said with a grin as he opened up his mind and allowed the other two to join him in his mental scape.

"What? No cookies? I *always* have cookies for people when they visit in *my* head!" Kyle play-pouted as him and Tyler plopped down in a soft-looking chair.

Logan simply grinned, then suddenly it was raining cookies, until the two were hurried up to their chests in them. "Ask and ye shall receive."

"That's enough for us; what are you gonna snack on?" Tyler giggled as he grabbed two handfuls of cookies.

Logan held out his hand, and a bottle of BBQ sauce appeared in it. "This'll do me." he grinned as he dipped a cookie in it.

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"Well..." Logan said as he brought them all back to where they started in his mental scape. "I think you guys understand what I'm talking about now. It's not always bad to get involved, but the hard part is figuring out how much to get involved. Right?"



Kyle nodded. "I think I understand better now what Cory was trying to tell me about doing short-term good and messing up long-term stuff."

"Exactly." Logan paused as he ran his hand through his long blond hair. "I really want to make sure that you guys never have to feel the way I do. I mean you saw what happened, I'm no better than a war criminal. Because of my arrogance, I didn't take what I was doing serious enough. I mean hell... It makes me feel like I'm a third world dictator who went into a village and killed every man woman and child, just on the hopes of getting one spy. I've always done what I thought I had to, and I have no guilt about honest mistakes; even if I do feel bad about them. But you should never act without truly understanding what the possible consequences are."

"Is that why you showed us the things where you shoulda done stuff but didn't, too? So we wouldn't be stupid and not do stuff that we needta do?" Tyler asked curiously.

"Exactly. That's the hard part of the responsibility that you guys have, simply by being what you are. You have to ask yourself, every time, what would be worse, to act, or to not act." Logan said seriously.

Kyle leaned over and grabbed another handful of cookies from the rapidly vanishing pile. "Thanks Logan; it helps a lot being showed this stuff by someone that's made goofs and isn't afraid to show other people what happened so that they'll not goof up as much."

Logan smiled and nodded. "There's no reason to not show you. No matter what I've done, if it helps you guys not screw up like I did a few times, then my job is done here." Grinning, they all exited out of his mental scape only to find a huge plate of cookies sitting on the table in front of them.

"Somebody loves us!" Kyle giggled as he reached out and grabbed a cookie from the plate. Kyle quickly looked around the room, and immediately spotted who was responsible for the cookie plate. "LEVIS!!!" he exclaimed loudly as he jumped out of his chair and ran over, pulling his Ferox brother into a hug that would have made a mere human wince in agony. "I've missed you! You doing okay now? What you been doin', bro?"

Levis shook his head with a grin, and began trying to answer Kyle's questions as fast as they were being delivered.

Miah, who had wisely decided to stay a safe distance from Levis, grinned. "I see that being the leader of a species hasn't had any ill effects on your personality, Kyle."

Tyler walked over and put an arm around Miah. "It has, but we're fixin' that." he said seriously. "How are YOU doin'?"

Miah looked at Tyler in wonder. "I'm okay, why are you worried about me?"

Tyler smiled. "I know what it's like being the husband of someone Fate decided to use as it's tool. Whatever's going on in the Universes, you and I are just as caught up in it as our husbands are; and we both feel the effects of what they get caught up in."

Miah nodded. "You sound just like Xanus; she had a *really* long talk with Levis and I about a few things that happened since we met Kyle. Things like the fact that Kyle was not far off when he called

Levis his brother. She said that Kyle's direct line of ancestors were actually the ones who provided the genetic material that was modified to make her."

Tyler looked over to where Logan, Kyle, and Levis were deep into a conversation about the effects of manipulating circumstances to achieve desired results. "So you're sayin' that they're kinda brothers; just seventy thousand years or so apart?"

Miah nodded. "More or less, I'd have to look up the exact figures. Do you mind if I see how you're doing, since Kyle's obviously occupied?"

Tyler giggled, eyeing the bag slung over Miah's shoulder. "I *knew* you were gonna ask that, and I didn't even have to use my 'mighty Mikyvis powers' to figure it out! Go for it; I'm kinda curious to see if we've stopped changing into what we're 'posed to be."

Miah smiled as he began checking Tyler's changes. After a few seconds of thought and some note taking, he nodded. "It appears the changes to your bodies have stabilized. Did you consciously change your eyes to purple, or is that a genetic change?"

"They just changed by themselves." Tyler replied, quite comfortable with the sharing of information with Miah. "I can change them back or to any other color if I want to, but Timmy thinks that they are kewl, so I leave them purple to keep him happy."

"I can understand that, Timmy is addictive." Miah laughed. "I've managed to keep up with you guy's sons whenever they are in the home universe. I'm actually impressed at how fast each of them has found their niche; each of them are teaching the others and they are integrating themselves into life with humanity a lot faster than I anticipated. I actually managed to catch Dylan before we came over here; I'm looking forward to seeing the look on Xanus' face when she hears just how much work he's put into helping improve human's mood with music without causing inconsistencies in the space-time continuum."

Tyler grinned. "I'm still trying to really understand what all he's done myself; all I know for sure is that he's happy and has made himself a place where he and his cousins can help make people happy."

"That is the unusual part." Miah stated. "He didn't snap his fingers and give his cousins the ability to become a band. He told me about the process he went through; while he used his skills to make sure each of his cousins were able to learn from the person best suited to their musical style and interests, they had to learn just like anyone else. You haven't seen it, but he's actually took some lessons himself after watching how much his cousins enjoyed it. I know that you guys can't see it since you are part of it, but watching from the outside it is amazing to see just how well you and your kids have integrated with the Clan."

Tyler smiled, actually blushing slightly. "Thanks!"

Miah quickly jotted down another note. "Interesting..." he murmured.

"What's that?" Tyler asked as he tried to sneak a peek at the notes.

"No fair looking at the notes so that you can prove me wrong!" Miah said with a smile. "I know all about the sense of humor both you and Kyle have! What I found interesting is that when you blush, it's

not just a visual phenomenon; your actual energy signature changes. It is quite similar to a normal human's blush in that your thermal emissions increase. It is not a normal trait for energy beings, it is something unique to your race and is quite human-like in its manifestation."

"So we blush like our brothers?" Tyler asked, trying to simplify what he heard.

"Yes, you blush just like any Human does." Miah replied. "I should have noticed this before...."

Tyler giggled. "You had more important things to worry about, namely Levis. I'll update you on one of your notes... we can sleep like our brothers again, real sleep with dreams and everything."

Miah's eyes sparkled with interest. "Really? How did that happen?"

"Ask Ezzy, I just asked him to come in here." Tyler replied.

As the words left Tyler's mouth, Ezra opened the door and walked into the room. "Wazzup, Pop?" he asked as he came up to Tyler and gave him a hug.

"Your Uncle Miah has a few questions for you." Tyler giggled. "Ezzy, this is Miah; Miah, this is your newest nephew, Ezra."

Miah grinned. "A new Mikyvis to study? Thank you, Tyler! It's nice to meet you, Ezra. How old are you?"

Ezra grinned. "Almost a day, Uncle Miah... if you're counting Alpha Prime time only. Is that Uncle Levis over there with Dad and Uncle Logan having a dimensional geek conference?"

"I heard that, Ezra!" Logan stated loudly. "Watch it, or I'll sic the Chipmunks on you!"

"Promise?" Ezra shot back. "I think it'd be fun!"

"Note to self, investigate the possibility of a sense of humor being passed genetically...." Miah muttered as he jotted a note on his pad. "What can you tell me about this sleeping change, Ezra?"

Ezra explained about the gift that Davey had given to his parents, then covered the circumstances that led to his birth and the purpose that he was given as his responsibility in the Mikyvis scheme of things. Once he was finished, and Miah had a second notebook almost filled, Ezra turned to Tyler. "That cover it, Pop?"

"Just about; you still need to get your check-up from Miah though." Tyler grinned. "I'll be over with Logan, Levis, and Kyle; y'all can join us when you are done."

"Thank you, Tyler; this should be an interesting checkup." Miah said with a grin. "Have a seat, Ezra."

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Des Moines Division Headquarters:

"Now THAT was a party!" Julio gushed as the family walked into the house.

"I loved it!" Jesse added from his favorite spot... tucked securely under Julio's left arm.

Julio looked back at Mini, Alien, Lucas, and Logan; shaking his head with a grin. "You know guys, that looks sooooo wrong!" he giggled.

"What?" Mini replied innocently from his perch on Logan's back. "You try picking these guys up; they've been fed REALLY good!"

Lucas grinned from his perch on Alien's back. "Yeah," he replied in his soft voice, "we had fun with the weight guessers! They thought their scales were broke!"

Alien added his own two cents. "I'm gonna do this more often, it's a lot more fun than the weights I usually wear to simulate higher gravity when I work out. I'm liking having cute little brothers to carry around!"

Lucas had to adjust his grip quickly to keep from falling off as he reacted to Alien's words. Out of habit, he responded mentally, transmitting so that the entire room could hear. "Cute? But I'm a freak! I ain't normal! Did you just call me your little brother?"

Both Mini and Logan froze, each waiting to see just how this would play out. Logan knew just how fragile his twin's self esteem had become post-experiment, and silently hoped that Alien might be on the road to repairing it just a little. Mini, on the other hand, was feeling very protective of the brothers that had just been returned to him; at this point, if anyone hurt them in any way he was more than willing to go off the deep end on them.

Alien made his way to a nearby chair, sat Lucas down, then turned around and picked him up again so that they were chest-to-chest. "Little brother, you are no more of a freak than me, Jesse, Cory, or anyone else around here. You are just you; nothing that has been done to you changes that. Sure there are things that you can do that I can't; but guess what? There are things that Julio can do that neither one of us can, and Robin can do things that none of us can do. My Mom told me once that the word 'normal' is a lie, every person is unique and nobody fits the definition of normal once you really know them. You two learned a lot from Mini before you were taken away; more than you realize. Logan is a lot like Mini's public face when he's trying to hide his insecurities; you're a lot like the Mini that only his closest friends and family ever get to see. Since we can all agree that Mini's not a freak, that means that neither you or Logan can be freaks since you're just like him."

Lucas locked eyes with Alien, his mind furiously trying to find holes in what he had just been told as he looked for any signs of deceit in Alien's eyes. As the spark of hope began to glow in Lucas' heart, Alien continued.

"You guys are my little brothers because I want you to be. It don't matter who you are related to, I love you guys as brothers because of what makes you guys you. As soon as you guys walked into the room, I felt the warm glow in my heart that told me that you were family. It's a different love than what I feel for Mini, but it's just as strong now that I've had a little time to get to know you guys. You can protect all of our bodies all day, little brother, but it's my job to protect the little boy that you still are and make sure that he's allowed to grow without anyone messing him up. When we're working, you're an aweso-

me soldier; when we're at home with just family, you're my little brother and I'm gonna make sure that you get the time to BE a little brother."

The spark in Lucas' heart took hold, and quickly became a roaring fire. Mini's acceptance of them, while questionable in their minds before reuniting with him, strengthened their bond with him but didn't really affect their feelings of self-worth. Even the acceptance into the family had little effect, since they were already Mini's brothers. This was totally different; this was someone that was special to their brother going out of his way to accept them as themselves, not as the little brothers of his boyfriend. "Do you really love me?" Lucas whispered, his eyes communicating his need to hear the answer to be sure.

Alien caught the need expressed by Lucas' tone, and made sure that he was very clear. "Lucas, I love you. You're my little brother, and nothing will ever change that."

For the first time in years, with someone not related by blood, Lucas let his shield down totally and allowed his inner self into public view. His voice almost squeaked as he replied "I love you too, Alien." before breaking eye contact and burying his face in Alien's shoulder. Years of pent-up tears were released as Lucas let Alien comfort him.

As Alien had been talking, Mini had climbed down from Logan and was now standing behind him with his arms wrapped around Logan's chest. "Do you wa...?" Mini started to ask.

"No; this is his private time; I'm not going to ruin it." Logan interrupted. "I do feel like some Spence cuddles though. I heard Alien include me in that; I'll get my time with him later."

Mini smiled as he came off to Logan's side and took his hand. "Let's go find us a cuddle chair."

Logan nodded his head with a small smile; while not ready to lower his personal shields just yet, he was fully aware that the time would come soon. For now, he was more than happy to allow Mini the special access to the inner Logan that only he was allowed to see.

Assured that a fight was not about to break out, Julio and Jesse quickly motioned for all of the adults and kids to move into the Command Center to allow the four boys some privacy. Julio's eyes grew wide as he found all the console seats occupied by volunteer parents from throughout the Compound. "Mr Douglas? How did y'all get trained to operate this stuff? I haven't even had time to train my guys!"

Shawn Douglas turned in his chair, shifting his attention from supervising the console operators to Julio. "Hello Julio! I hope you guys enjoyed the party; it looked like fun from here. We all decided that there was no way that we'd allow some of the kids to miss the party because they were stuck here. I talked with Lieutenant Patrick over at Security Headquarters; with the assistance of Dailess he was able to get some of us with prior military experience doing these kind of things up to speed on the equipment that you have here. When this neighborhood was set up, we all pledged to work together to make it work; now that it's officially a Clan Division, us parents are going to step it up to make sure that you have support from ALL of the occupants of the Compound."

Julio thought for a second about what he had just heard, and considered how he thought Cory would react. Once his own thoughts were solidified, he replied to Shawn. "Mr. Douglas, I think that you might have just helped me with something that I was having trouble figuring out. I know there are a few kids who want to help out by working in CIC, but I know that I don't have enough volunteers to staff it all

the time without them basically living in this room. I know that this was kinda thought of as a one-time thing, but would you be interested in taking charge of staffing CIC?"

Shawn smiled. "You just saved me from having to figure out how to suggest it to you without seeming like an adult trying to take control. You have a lot of really important things that you're responsible for; it's a very smart decision to delegate day-to-day staffing concerns to someone. I spent twenty-five years as a communications officer in the Air Force and have not had a good use of my training until now; I would be honored to help out by making sure that the kids and adults who are interested in staffing CIC get trained and placed where their skills are best used."

Julio stepped forward, and after sealing the deal by shaking hands he tapped his subvocal. "Daileass, what was Shawn's military clearance?"

Daileass giggled. "I knew you were gonna ask that! His highest clearance was 'TS2 Eyes Only'."

"Thanks, I guess the boring lecture about security won't be needed!" Julio giggled. "He's now in charge of CIC staffing, you're authorized to give him whatever support he needs. If there is anything that you're not sure of, just ask me. If Adam and him decide that reactivating his commission would assist in his ability to do what is needed, you've got my okay."

Daileass sniggered over the com. "What do you say Shawn, do you want to be re-activated?"

"If it will help to keep me from having to annoy Julio with day to day business, I'll do it in a heartbeat."

"Okay, then I will give you two choices. You can either be reactivated in the US Air Force at the rank of Colonel, or you can be activated in the UNIT forces at the rank of General." Daileass replied in a sweet, singsong voice.

As Julio tried hard to hide his giggles, Shawn asked "What is the difference? And why a General; I'm not tested out to be that rank!"

"Well here's the thing. Being reactivated with in the US Military will restrict your access to certain things, however, that will not impact your job here. If you're interesting in joining the UNIT military, you'll have to have the rank of General with full access to all but the very top level of security. It will mean a short stint of training that will take about three months on the training planet, and about fifteen minutes on Earth. That's simply because there are certain things that all UNIT officers must have training in." Daileass's voice was now rather serious.

"As far as 'testing out'... we run things differently here. You tested out when you spent six hours running CIC. It's just the way we roll."

Shawn looked over at Julio, who was having a hard time with not breaking out into laughter. "I'm not going to do my job halfway; when I say I'm doing something, I plan on doing it right the first time. When do I need to be ready for my training?"

"Is now too soon?" Daileass asked with a giggle. "We don't fart around here."

"Vance? You want to take the hot seat for a few minutes?" Shawn asked the twenty-six year old sitting at the secondary communication terminal.

"I've got it, Mr. Douglas." Vance replied as he reached out and adjusted his console. "You're relieved, Sir."

"Okay Shawn, stand on one foot, wiggle your nose, and you'll be off." Daileass said with a giggle. "Oh and Vance, you're next on my list...."

"Nice try, kiddo..." Shawn said with a laugh. "I'm not a Jarhead, gullible is not part of my job description." he added just before he vanished.

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Front Gate, Des Moines compound:

Captain Hamilton looked up from his post at the entrance to the Clan Short Des Moines Division, and saw a twelve or thirteen year old boy riding his skateboard towards him. He was not really sure why, but the hair on the back of his neck stood up when he saw this boy. Knowing better than to disregard his instincts, Captain Hamilton stepped out of the booth to greet the boy, hand resting comfortably near the phaser he wore on his side. "Can I help you son?"

The kid stopped and looked the uniformed man up and down for a second, before flipping his longish blond hair up out of his eyes. "Maybe. Can you let me talk to one of the Clan guys?"

The man looked the boy in his soft blue eyes, and knew, deep down that something was wrong here. "Sure, can you tell me who you are, and how old you are."

The boy gave a half smile that never made it to his eyes, and shrugged. "Name's Garrett Tyce, and I'm twelve."

Hamilton nodded and gave the boy a gentle smile. "Just give me a second, and I'll get someone down here." Stepping back into the guard shack, the Captain picked up the radio and pressed the transmit button all the while keeping an eye on the boy. "Front Gate to HQ." He said and waited for the reply.

"HQ... go." Vance said from the other end of the radio.

"I have a twelve year old... Garrett Tyce down here asking to speak to someone in the Clan. Is anyone available?"

"Right now most of them are trying to recover from a laughing fit, but I think I can find someone who isn't holding their stomach in agony." Vance replied with a chuckle. "Someone will be right there."

"Copy that." Hamilton said then put the microphone down. He reached under the desk, and grabbed a couple of sodas from the small refrigerator there. When he stepped back out of the booth, he looked to the boy and smiled. "Someone'll be down in a minute or two. You want a soda while we wait."

The bright smile that came from Garrett radiated out, and the man couldn't help but grin himself. Garrett took the soda, popped the top and drank about half of it in one go. "Thanks mister... I needed that."

"No problem. Do you need anything while we wait?" Hamilton asked, knowing that it's best not to get into why someone is there until someone from the Clan was there as well. Garrett just shook his head, then took another sip of his soda.

Five minutes later, Hamilton looked up at the sound of a golf cart coming down the street towards them. The man couldn't help but smile as he recognized the boy driving. "Well, you're in luck." He said as he glanced over to Garrett. "That's Tracy, though he prefers to be called Alien. He's part of the Clan leadership around here."

Garrett didn't respond, just smiled towards the Captain and waited for Alien to get there. When the cart came to stop in front of the pair, Alien jumped out and walked right up to Garrett. Sticking his hand out he spoke. "Hey I'm Alien. I hear you wanted to talk to someone in the Clan?"

Garrett nodded, looking suddenly nervous. "Yeah...." He trailed off, and Alien's smile faded.

"Hey. You don't have to be nervous. I'm here to help if you need it."

Garrett's soft blue eyes met Alien's, and for a moment he seemed to be weighing the boy in front of him. Alien had no problem meeting the slightly older boy's eyes, and waited for him to come to a point where he could talk. Finally after a long moment of silence, Garrett's eyes fell to the ground. A moment later he reached into his pocket and started to talk. "I guess I better start by giving you this." With a look towards Captain Hamilton, he pulled a Glock nine millimeter pistol out of his pocket. The way he held it by the grip with two fingers told Hamilton that the boy wasn't going to use it, still his right hand went to his phaser, releasing the strap on it, so he could draw it quickly if he needed to.

Garrett took a long look at the pistol then held it out to the Captain, who carefully took it in his hand, then set it inside the guard shack. All the time this was happening, Alien just stood there waiting to see what Garrett was going to do. When Garrett met Alien's eyes, there were tears threatening to fall from them. "I live at 309 Elmhurst Drive. Inside you'll find my father, dead, in the upstairs hallway. I.. I shot him."

Hamilton gasped at the words, but Alien just took a step forward and pulled the boy into a hug. "Why?" He asked quietly into the boy's ear.

"I.. I didn't want him to... do it to me again." Garrett said in a small voice, but still loud enough for Hamilton to hear. When Alien nodded to Captain Hamilton, he stepped back into the guard shack, switched his radio frequency to the tactical channel, depressed the transmit button and spoke softly into it. "Guard Shack to on call strike team."

"Captain Hayes on, Strike Team Tango on stand by." Came the professional response back.

"Alien requests an investigation at 309 Elmhurst Drive. One possible casualty on site, the father of a twelve year old boy who is at the front gate. Youth is a possible rape victim."

"Understood." Was the clipped response, but Hamilton knew the boys well enough to know that Captain Hayes had a fire in his eyes, and was all business now.



Alien nodded his thanks, then placed a hand on Garret's shoulder. "C'mon; you and I have an appointment with my little brother for a long talk."

Garrett nodded his head, fully aware that he was now past the point of no return. He allowed Alien to escort him to the cart, and sat in the seat with his head hung low as they made their way to CIC. As they made their way through the streets, Alien used his subvocal to silently contact Vance. *Vance, this is Alien. Contact the State Prosecutor, give him my apologies but I need him to be on-site within the next five minutes. You are authorized to use Daileass for transport.*"

"Understood." Vance replied, the tone that Alien spoke in telling him that this was a serious situation.

As they were nearing their destination, Alien's communicator went off. "Alien, this is Captain Hayes."

"What did you find, Victor?" Alien responded, immediately switching to the protocol Colin taught him by using the Captain's first name, avoiding confusion over which Captain Hayes he was referring to.

"Urbandale PD were on site and had secured the premises. Based on our information, a complete search of the premises discovered materials and stained clothing which backs up the allegations. Due to the nature of the crime and the order of events, they have requested this be left open as a joint investigation pending release of whatever information you obtain."

Alien considered what wasn't said as he replied. "You have a go for joint operations, Victor. Inform your contact that I will update them within the hour on status."

"Understood; joint operation commencing immediately." Victor replied, his tone telling Alien that he'd just made the right decision. "Captain Hayes out."

"What's gonna happen now?" Garrett asked weakly as Alien put his communicator away and brought the cart to a stop.

"We're going to give you a chance to show us exactly what happened." Alien replied in a caring tone. "After that, I guess we're about to find out just how willing the judicial system is to work with us. You're in a spot that makes the outcome anyone's guess right now."

"Thanks for being honest." Garrett replied. "At least you guys are gonna try."

Alien smiled and gave a nod back, not speaking due to a man in jeans and a tee-shirt appearing on the sidewalk next to them. He motioned for Garrett to join him, then he stepped out of the cart and greeted the newcomer. "Hello. I'm Alien Busch, Clan Short Security."

"Guy Folsom, State Prosecutor's office." the thirty-ish man replied as he stuck out his hand. "I understand that I was needed here?"

Alien nodded. "Yes, we have a situation which needs to be resolved between us before the news media gets wind of it. If you'll follow us inside, we can get started."

Guy smiled, his face reflecting his genuine approval of this new procedure. "Thank you for involving us; it makes things a lot easier when the press does not get a chance to pre-judge what occurred during a crime."

Alien sensed Garret's nervousness as he joined them, and placed an arm over Garret's shoulder. "Let's get this over with; that way all of us can sleep tonight." he said with a smile. "If you wouldn't mind following me, Mr. Folsom?"

"Just call me Guy; we're working together." Guy replied. "Lead the way."

Alien guided Garrett into the CIC main entry, Guy following directly behind him. In the main foyer, Lucas was waiting for them, and motioned them to follow him into the conference room off to the side. Once they were in the room, Colin closed the door behind them and joined them as they found seats at the table.

Once everyone was seated, Alien began. "Guy, for your benefit, I am going to initially keep things vague to help you keep the facts separated from initial speculation." He pointed out each person as he introduced them. "The people here with us are Lieutenant Colin Busch, Clan Short Special Forces; Lieutenant Lucas Busch, Clan Short Special Forces, and Garrett Tyce. Garrett is the defendant in this situation. What I need to say next will depend on the answers to my first two questions. Garrett, are you willing to submit to an official full telepathic scan to determine the exact chain of events which led to your arrival here today? And Guy, are you willing to accept as de-facto evidence the results of the scans by two certified Clan telepaths to determine the State's course of action on the events which led to our requesting your presence? You will have the choice of a verbal or a telepathic summary right now, with a full transcript provided at your request if needed."

"Yes." Garrett stated firmly, realizing now just what Alien was doing.

Guy nodded his head. "I accept your proposal. I understand the lack of details now as well; it is the same reason that we dismiss jurors who have formed opinions based on news reports."

Alien smiled. "We're ready to begin then. Colin, would you take first reading please?"

Colin nodded as he closed his eyes. A minute later, he opened them and signaled to Lucas to begin. Once Lucas was done, he quietly stated "Ready, bro."

Alien cleared his mind. "Okay guys, let me see it."

As he received the readings from the two telepaths, you could visibly tell by the flush of his skin just how angry it was making Alien. Once both scans were transferred, Alien looked at Garrett. "I wish you'd come to us first." he stated, his tone suggesting that he had a personal idea of how the situation would have been resolved. Alien then turned to Guy. "Before we discuss this, how would you like to view the evidence?"

Guy thought for a moment, then replied. "Going by your response, I believe that there are a few things that would be detrimental to the defendant's well being to have to listen to verbally. I will accept a telepathic transfer."

"If you require assistance with placing this information somewhere in your memories that it won't affect your normal life once you've reviewed it, just ask and I will help you." Colin stated. "I would recommend at the minimum a summary for your records once we're done today."

"Noted, and thank you." Guy replied. "I'm ready when you are."

The boys transferred the information to Guy. After turning the notepad that he was planning on using into a very tightly crumpled wad of cardboard and paper, Guy looked over at Alien. "I see the situation is unique. I believe we all know the details, so we can keep the discussion to generalities."

Alien nodded. "I have determined that Garrett Tyce has been subjected to continual non-consensual anal rape by his father from the time of his tenth birthday until yesterday at eleven PM. Today he obtained a pistol from an illegal source and proceeded to shoot his father upon his arrival from work. Due to the increasing frequency and roughness, I find the subjects belief that his life was possibly in danger to be a valid concern."

Guy took his cue from Alien's pause. "The State of Iowa agrees with the determination of Clan Short. Based on the evidence provided, it is the State's belief that justice will be best served by ceding jurisdiction to Clan Short for the rehabilitation of the Defendant. The State of Iowa hereby declines any motions to press charges against Garrett Tyce for the events of 31 October, 2004."

"Thank you." Alien replied. "As of this moment, Garrett Tyce is a Ward of Clan Short. Garrett, it is standard procedure within the Clan for a telepath or a Vulcan, depending on the situation, to assist those who have applied a death sentence with preventing damage to their mind from the experience. Due to what I know about the events, I am going to strongly recommend that you agree to a Vulcan Mind Meld to keep this from screwing up the rest of your life."

At Garrett's shocked expression, Guy explained. "There is a legal term for what you did, son. It is called Justifiable Homicide. While it does not make what you did right, it allows for the fact that what you did can be justified as an act which most of the population would do in the same situation. I would suggest that you follow Alien's advice; I know I am going to take advantage of Colin's offer to help me, and I wasn't the one who suffered."

Garrett turned his head to Alien, his emotions finally breaking loose after all he had just been through. Alien stood up, and caught Garrett as he tried to stand himself. Garrett fell into Alien's arms, sobbing loudly as he repeated "I killed him!"

Colin quickly keyed his communicator. "Daileass! Bro, I need a Vulcan, NOW!"

"S'pilash is here, I'll finish updating him and send him over." Daileass replied. "I kinda figured you'd need him."

Fifteen seconds later, S'pilash appeared next to Colin. Without a word, he strode over to the now incoherent Garrett and placed his hands on Garrett's temples, reaching around Alien's head to do it. "My mind to your mind..." he began.

The rest of the room was silent as they watched the Vulcan assist Garrett. after fifteen minutes of silence, S'pilash pulled his hands away and addressed the much calmer Garrett. "My apologies for my indi-

cretion in not receiving proper approval prior to providing assistance, Garrett. The state of your mind upon my arrival made it illogical to proceed immediately."

Garrett nodded his head. "It's okay. Doesn't it hurt you to remember the stuff that you walked through in my head? It's not hurting me no more, but I can still feel enough to tell me right from wrong."

"I am trained to perform the healing of the minds of multiple species. While I retain knowledge of the experiences that you suffered, I do not have the Human emotional ties to those experiences." He then turned to the rest of the group. "I find that your method of handling this situation was unique in it's logic. I find it to be a quite effective use of both judicial systems in harmony. I shall ensure that other Divisions are apprised of this option and shall recommend it's use whenever possible."

"Thank you for your assistance." Alien replied. "Will you be staying?"

"I must return to Utah. I have duties there which must be completed." S'pilash stated. "I shall accept your invitation on a future date, if that will be acceptable."

"That will be fine." Alien replied with a smile. "Live long and prosper." He added as he managed a reasonable first attempt at a Vulcan salute.

"Live long and prosper." S'pilash replied. A few seconds later, he vanished as Daileass returned him to what he had been doing previously.

Colin came over and gently moved Garrett from Alien's arms to a spot under his own arm. "Guy. if you would join myself and Garrett, I am going to introduce him to his new family. I believe our Director would also like to meet you while you are here."

Hearing the unspoken hint, Guy smiled. "I would love to do that. Lead the way, Sir."

Colin escorted the Division's latest addition out of the room, Guy following immediately behind him. As the door closed behind them, Alien took a seat against the wall and motioned for Lucas to join him. "I believe we've got a cuddle to finish, little bro." he said with a smile.

Lucas smiled, and without a word came over and curled up in Alien's arms. "I love you bro." Lucas whispered as he allowed his eyes to close.

"I love you too, lil' bro." Alien replied softly, the feeling of having his brother in his arms calming him immediately.

Five minutes later, Bob checked on his boys. His face broke into a smile as he saw the two sleeping boys, arms tightly intertwined with each other, both snoring softly. "Sleep well, Angels." he whispered as he quietly closed the door and returned to the rest of the group.

## Chapter Thirteen: Life Goes On...

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### Teri's house:

Cory opened his eyes slowly, enjoying the feeling of his family all cuddled into a pile on his and Sean's bed. He managed to wiggle around just enough so that he could see everyone, and his smile grew as he saw the migrations that had happened during everyone's sleep. Mont had both Casey and Tina cuddled under his furry arms, while Bast and Jeremy were in one big tangle. Sean had decided that Cory's chest made a good pillow, which meant Sean's face was now in the dead center of Cory's belly. Kyle, Tyler, and Ezra were wedged between Sean and JJ, all three snoring softly. Fife had gravitated into Kai's arms, and was purring in his sleep. JJ and Adam were in their usual tangle, apparently trying to occupy each other's bodies. Cory's eyes got wide as they settled on Adam's back. "Holy Crap!" he exclaimed in shock.

"What's wrong?" Kyle asked sleepily.

"Look at Adam's back!" Cory replied, waking the rest of the group.

Kyle wiggled around and looked over the pile of kids. "I don't see nothin' wrong with it." he stated, his mind still foggy from having a real sleep.

"Exactly! His scars are gone!" Cory said as an explanation.

By this time, JJ had sat up and was looking closely at his husband's back. "He's right, they're gone!" JJ said in amazement.

Ezra giggled as he watched everyone checking out Adam. Tyler looked at him and said "Okay, Rainbow Boy; you know something we don't, what is it?"

Ezra smiled at the new nickname his Pop just gave him. "I'm pretty sure it's got to do with Beau becoming a N-Gen along with Jamie and Jacob. Uncle Adam? Did Uncle Beau ever take some of your pain away from you?"

"Yeah, a few times." Adam replied. "After he found out I was hiding it, he made it a habit to do it every couple of days; he never waited to see if I asked or not."

"I thought so." Ezra replied. "He's got a little bit of a link to you, I saw it when I was born. I think his power has tied in with Uncle Jamie and Uncle Jacob; so he somehow managed to heal your old injuries without being here."

The pile had rearranged itself so that JJ could investigate Adam more clearly. All of the still-forming scars on his visible body parts were completely missing. Without thinking, JJ pulled off Adam's boxers to check the areas that he couldn't see.

"Casey, look! His thingie is silver too!" Tina giggled, causing JJ to remember just *why* they were all dressed.

While dodging repeated attempts at a slap upside the head from Adam, JJ quickly re-dressed his husband while blushing so brightly that it lit the room. "We'll check that later...." he mumbled.

"Yeah, in about fifty years!" Adam shot back, causing the rest of the group to giggle.

"Unca' JJ's in trrrroouuuubbbblllllleee!!!" Tina said in a sing-song voice.

"Yes, he is." Adam stated as he glared at JJ. "I'll ... punish ... him later."

"There goes the lotion supply...." Sean giggled under his breath.

Fife climbed over and cuddled up to Adam. "Is the pain gone too, Uncle Adam?"

Adam stopped glaring at JJ long enough to actually pay attention to what he was feeling. "Yeah... usually I can feel my skin being kinda tight and some of my joints were kinda numb from that idiot that tried to kill us. It's all gone, the stuff that was just there ain't there no more."

"Good, I don't want my family to hurt." Fife stated. "You ain't gonna hurt Uncle JJ for showing us your penis, are you?"

Adam looked down into Fife's face. "Don't worry, little guy. Your Uncle JJ and I understand each other a lot better than we let people think. No matter how mad we get at each other, we'll never hurt each other."

"Okay." Fife replied with a smile. "I didn't smell danger, but your words said there was danger so I was confused."

Adam smiled. "I see what you mean. Trust your sense of smell when you hear any of us talking. Sometimes we'll tease each other but not really mean what the things we say suggest. We only do that with people we know really well though."

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### **Des Moines Division Headquarters:**

"BONZAI!" six voices yelled in unison as they landed on top of Julio and Jesse.

"Jesse! Save me! We've been invaded by twins!" Julio yelled in mock horror, his grin giving away his joy at their wakeup crew.

Not realizing how their new parents slept, the six boys rolled off of the bed and stripped it of it's covers in one unanimous pull. Kurt was the first one to comment; and in standard nine-year-old fashion, he was blunt. "Dad! You've got a furry weenie, and it's HUGE!"

"Pop too, he's just not all hairy like Dad!" his twin Kent added.

With their younger brothers drawing their attention to those parts of their new parents' bodies, Bobby, Bruce, Riley, and Reese openly looked themselves.

"Why you got stiffies?" Reese asked curiously.

Julio sat up, motioning for Jesse to sit next to him, then said "Have a seat guys. Your Grandpa and I had this same talk when I walked in on him and your Grandma getting out of bed. First, I'm gonna tell you guys the same thing he told me; when it comes to what's between your legs, don't be shy about asking us questions or coming to us if something don't seem right. If we don't know, we'll ask Grandpa for you."

All six boys nodded as they took seats on the bed in front of Jesse and Julio.

"Okay, first off, even though we use other words normally, I'm going to use the proper names for the body parts when we talk. If you don't understand something or have a question, stop me and I'll make sure you understand it before we go on. There are no stupid questions here."

For the next forty minutes, Julio and Jesse performed their first teaching action as parents. Once the triple twins found out that Julio was serious about answering every question, they opened up and unloaded a ton of questions and perceptions. As they finished, Jesse looked around at his sons. "You guys asked some questions that tell me that a couple of you should be taught proper cleaning of your genitals. Why don't you guys go grab some extra towels, and you can all shower with me and your Dad."

"Okay!" all six replied as they scrambled off the bed.

Once they were out of hearing, Julio stated "They were being groomed to become sex slaves in a few years, weren't they hon?"

Jesse nodded seriously. "Yeah, they were told a lot of the same stuff as me. You helped me too by telling us what the truth was."

Julio frowned. "That sucks. I dunno how to help more than that though."

"I do." Jesse said with uncharacteristic assurance. "It's called Cory Magic; and you've learned to do it well."

Julio looked into Jesse's eyes, and realized that for the next little bit, the shy boy from the dance was going to try to take the lead for the first time in his life. "You lead, I'll follow and learn, hon." Julio said softly as he heard the boys returning.

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### **An hour later:**

Janice was sitting at the table, feeding a very happy Arrow while Marcie was taking breakfast orders from Janice and Mick's new sons. They had found that the boys had come from a very good home, but their family had fallen victim to a corrupt local welfare worker who had everyone but the children deported, despite the family being in the country legally. Unfortunately, the bus the family was in had an axle failure while navigating the SoCal coast; by the time rescue crews arrived there were no survivors from the bus going over the seaside cliff that the highway ran along.

Once Janice finished telling Daileass to have the welfare worker skinned, rolled repeatedly in honey then in a nest of angry fire ants, then dipped in hydrogen peroxide, and *then* he could start punishing her, the two parents discussed their new life with the boys. They found out that, as in most close families, the boys usually answered to nicknames their parents had given them instead of their formal names. (Unless they were in trouble!)

Janice smiled as she thought back to the glow in all three boy's faces when she asked them what they liked to be called. Due to the similarity in their given names, each had a nickname that made it easier to tell who was being referred to. As the eldest, Abelundio was given the nickname Abe, which happened to be the same as his grandfather had used. Abelard was usually addressed by his middle name, Arlo. Agapito's nickname was given to him by Abe; as a youngster Abe had had trouble pronouncing his littlest brother's name, so he just called him 'Petey' and the name stuck.

When Janice asked if they would like to still be called by those names, all three boys nodded happily, Abe adding that it would make him feel like he really was home. Once Janice and Mick agreed to the use of their nicknames, they had found themselves dealing with three boys bouncing between them, giving them joyful hugs.

Janice looked up, and saw Marcie had fixed the boy's breakfast while she was musing over the recent conversation. All three boys had decided upon Chilaquiles once they were told that Marcie had learned to cook from a Mexican neighbor as a child.

(Link to recipe at end of chapter)

"This is almost as good as what MaMa used to make!" Petey exclaimed after he took a tentative taste. "Thanks Marcie!" he added as he turned into a living vacuum.

"Thank you, that's the best compliment anyone's ever gave me, Petey." Marcie replied with a genuine smile.

"Thanks!" Arlo and Abe added, their expressions clearly stating that Marcie had just earned some respect for how she had responded to their little brother.

Just then, Julio led his husband and sons into the dining room, all of them obviously freshly showered as shown by their still-damp hair. "What's for breakfast? That smells GOOD!" Julio stated as he stopped and inhaled.

"Abe, Arlo and Petey decided on Chilaquiles. I can make more of them, or I can make something else if you want."

Julio looked over his shoulder at his sons. "Whatever you want, just ask."

"She's gonna teach me some stuff that I don't know about cooking." Jesse added.

"We think it smells good too!" Bruce replied.

"If that is what..." Bobby began.



"You're gonna have Dad,..." Riley continued with a grin.

"Then we'll try it too." Reese said, picking up the thread.

"We're gonna learn the stuff you like..." Kent giggled, seeing the faces of the adults starting to scrunch in pain.

"Because we're a family now!" Kurt completed.

As Mick held his head in mock anguish, Janice laughed at the escapades of her grandkids. "I could tell that as soon as y'all walked into the room; I can see it in your eyes."

"There's something in our eyes?" Kurt asked with a grin.

"Dad!" Kent added.

"You forgot..." Riley giggled.

"...to wash..." Bobby said with a smirk.

"...our eyes!" Bruce and Reese completed in stereo.

Jesse and Julio exchanged grins, and five seconds later an eight-boy tickle war was in full swing between the table and the dining room doorway. Mick decided to assist Julio and Jesse, which led to Abe, Arlo, and Petey deciding to join the fun between rounds of breakfast. With Robin in the lead, Johnny, Eddie, Rocky, and Ricky came running into the room, immediately joining the free-for-all as Marcie and Janice watched with amused smiles.

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### **Teri's house:**

While the boys cleaned up after breakfast, Teri thought over the eventful weekend as she finished feeding Patty. While she was not sure that it really would qualify as a 'vacation', the weekend had definitely changed the boys. Ty and Kyle had finally realized that their family didn't expect them to be little adults because of their powers, Adam and JJ had come to terms about the changes to Adam and were now deciding what to do based on what they wanted instead of what others wanted, Cory and Sean had let go of some of the stress that had been eating at them, and her favorite kitties Mont and Bast had finally taken the time to be kids.

The fact that her family had grown didn't surprise her in the least; compared to what Julio's parents were going through she considered herself lucky. Candy's arrival with Patty and her subsequent passing was a bittersweet moment, yet the boys made it through it without any serious problems.

"Earth to Mom!" Cory giggled. "Come in, Mom!"

Teri shook her head, then looked up to see all of the boys standing there giggling at her. "Yes, little rats?"

"We've been trying to get your attention for the last five minutes!" Sean exclaimed.

"Did you hear us asking if you wanted to join us at the park?" Tyler giggled. "We only asked a gazillion times!"

"Sorry guys!" Teri laughed. "That sounds like a good idea. Any certain reason why?"

"Yeah, Julio's bringing his crew and I'm gonna grade him on his kid collecting!" Cory sniggered.

"You didn't... wait... knowing you turkeys, yes you did!" Teri chuckled.

"Mom, we *wouldn't* **ever** be mean to our friends like that!" the boys exclaimed in unison, halos appearing above all of their heads.

"If all of you are innocent, I'm next in line for the British Throne...." Teri laughed.

"I bet Quint can arrange that...." Tyler stage whispered.

"And I bet I can make him stand in a corner until his hair turns grey... naturally." Teri retorted.

"Someone call Juan; I'm placing my money on Mom!" Sean mock-yelled.

"I wonder... does Juan accept cookies?" Kyle giggled.

"Yes!" JJ and Adam exclaimed in unison. "They have to be fresh though." Adam added.

"You know this *how*?" Teri asked with raised eyebrows.

"Uhhh... rumors!" JJ answered a little too quickly.

"I would suggest you guys get ready to leave before I decide to ask Ark just what you've been doing when I was occupied elsewhere..." Teri said with a smile.

Within five seconds, the only signs of the boys was the dust still hanging in mid-air as they made a world-record exit from the room. "I thought so!" Teri yelled after them as she began to get things ready for her and Patty to join them at the park.

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### **Fifteen Minutes later:**

Cory was the last to exit the tram as they arrived at the park. What had once been a set of commercial office buildings was now a large field with areas of trees scattered throughout it. It was outfitted with entertainment for all ages; from rocking animals for the little kids to soccer and baseball fields and arcades for the older kids. What made Cory pause was the sign the tram had stopped next to.

Michael P. Short Memorial Park  
Dedicated to children everywhere  
in Memory of Michael Short  
Big Brother of Patriarch Cory Short

Julio was waiting for Cory, and gave him a hug as he exited the tram. "Whadda you think?" he asked.

Cory smiled, wiping the tears from his eyes after he broke the hug. "It's awesome. Who named it?"

"Dad did." Julio replied proudly. "It's not really official yet though; they just finished it Friday, and we need to have a ribbon cutting yet."

Cory glanced around again, and realized that, while there were over a hundred kids there, not one was taking advantage of the various activities. "When is that?"

"Just as soon as you get over there and say something official and cut it!" Julio giggled. "Consider it paybacks for making me a Director."

"You *DO* realize that this means war, don't you?" Cory said with a smile.

"Bring it on Blondie, I've got an Air Wing and a Strike Team on my side!" Julio laughed.

"If I was you, I'd be running right now..." Cory replied with an evil glint in his eyes, while reaching out to grab Julio.

"Too slow!" Julio giggled as he twisted to avoid Cory, then took off in a sprint.

Cory tore off after him, the kids hanging around scrambling out of the way as they watched their Division Head run for his life from their Patriarch.

Julio zig-zagged as Cory kept on his heels, the two of them covering almost all of the park as they continued in their chase. They were almost back to the pavilion in the center of the park when Cory anticipated one of Julio's zags and tackled him, tickling him mercilessly as soon as they hit the ground.

Julio did his best to return the favor, and after a couple of minutes of mutual torture, both boys rolled onto their backs. "Bet you don't try that again!" Cory panted.

"You got lucky!" Julio replied, just as out-of-breath as Cory.

"You wish!" Cory laughed.

Before Julio could retort, Mick walked up, shaking his head with a grin. "And you two are in charge?" he laughed. "Stop hogging the park and get up here so everyone else can enjoy it!"

Cory and Julio exchanged glances, then in unison blew raspberries at Mick. "Spoilsport!" they chorused, which caused the quickly-assembling group around them to giggle.

They got up and followed Mick onto the stage, where a green ribbon was stretched across the center. "May I have your attention please!" Mick announced as he picked up a microphone. He gave the crowd a minute to settle down, then continued. "Today I'm proud to say that one of my pet projects has come to fruition. I watched as two of my son's friends suffered through the loss of their big brother, one so bad that he's recovering to this day. I then watched as the same two boys took their recovery and turned it into something that is changing the world as we speak. As all of you know, I'm talking about Cory and Sean Short. They invited my sons to join them, and they have already made their mark on the world themselves. When I thought up the idea for this park, it only seemed fitting to name it after the boy who was not only the guiding hand that made Cory and Sean the people they are today, but also the unofficial 'big brother' to most of the kids in the neighborhood."

Cory's grin was contagious as he heard Mick saying things about Mikey that brought fond memories forward. He put an arm over Julio's shoulder as they both listened to Mick continue.

Mick smiled as he saw Cory showing his friendship with Julio. "Mike's lessons to the neighborhood kids are what made it possible for all of you to be here today. It's only fitting that the first new recreational area in the Des Moines Compound be named after the one person that affected the lives of the boys who became Clan Short and the Des Moines Division. Before we get to the cutting of the ribbon, I believe your grass-stained Director has a few words."

"You're just jealous because we can all out-run you, Dad." Julio commented as he took over, Cory still at his side with his arm on Julio's shoulder. "A lot of you have never had the luck of spending one-on-one time with the Short family, so I'm going to give you an idea of what it's like so you believe it when those of us who have been there treat you like we've been treated. I'll start with Momma Teri; whatever you do, don't *ever* call her Mrs. Short! She'll talk your head off!" Julio had to pause as everyone who knew Teri giggled loudly. "Seriously, Teri is one of the nicest grownups I've ever known. You ain't gotta be her kid to be able to talk to her with problems or get a hug if you had a bad day. Even before there was a Clan, if you knew her then you were one of her kids. That leads us to Mikey; he was the big brother to all of us. It didn't matter how old you were, if you wanted to hang with Mikey you didn't even have to ask. If anyone had a problem with it, he'd chew them out. He even kicked a couple of guy's butts for complaining because me, Cory, and Sean were hanging with him and a couple of his friends."

"Oh *really*?" Teri said loudly, her tone making it clear that she was not in the least bit surprised.

"Oops; I wasn't supposed to tell you that!" Julio laughed, which brought chuckles from the crowd. "Now for the two guys who most of you have heard of, Cory and Sean. I can tell you from being there that both of them thought Mikey was the best thing ever, and they always tried to do things the way that he did them. Actually, most of us did, but they are lots better at it. Even today, when y'all saw Cory chasing me around, it was because Mikey brought all of us so close that we're more brothers than just friends. Don't let Cory or Sean fool you; they're the best friends you could have, but if you ever hurt someone while they're around you'll feel that hurt double. Whenever Cory's around, I realized this weekend that people always acted nicer to each other, even if nobody else knew him. Cory's got a special magic all his own, and Mikey made sure that he wasn't forced to hide it. That's why Cory is our Patriarch; because he's got something special that Mikey helped him grow into something that affects all of us."

Cory's blush was so strong that Julio could actually feel the heat, so he decided the timing was right to pass the microphone. "I'm done embarrassing Cory, so now I'll give you Patriarch Short for the official ribbon cutting."

Cory took the microphone from Julio and grabbed the scissors from Mick. "Y'all want official?" Cory announced with a grin. "I'm officially tired of all these words, it's playtime!" With that, Cory turned and cut the ribbon in half. "Last one on the playground is a rotten egg!" he quipped as he tossed the scissors on the floor and jumped off the platform, breaking into a run towards the fields as soon as his feet hit the ground.

The rest of the crowd took his lead, and with screams that would make a banshee green with envy they followed him out into the park. Within minutes, games of soccer and baseball had started, the swings and slides had lines as they got their first true test, and the arcade was ringing with the sounds of the free games being put through their paces. The parents which had attended the ceremony were spread out as well; some sitting and watching the kids being kids, while others were actively involved in games or helping the little ones on and off of various toys.

A few minutes later, Cory, Julio, Jesse, and Sean were taking a break from free-for-all soccer game that they had joined. "Dudes, this park is awesome!" Sean commented as he looked around at the quickly-growing crowds enjoying all of the activities.

"Yeah, it's like when Mikey used to take us out, everyones having fun and nobody is fighting." Julio added.

Cory nodded, a smile on his face. "Yeah, I think your Dad finally used his brain and did something right; a lotta kids are getting to have fun in someplace safe."

Jesse smiled as he cuddled into Julio's side. "Cory, I don't want to ruin the fun, but when is Candy's funeral?"

Cory blinked, but recovered quickly as he realized that Jesse was still going to have issues with determining appropriate timing. "You're fine Jesse; I just didn't get a chance to tell you guys, Mom filled me in yesterday. That's why she had a Vulcan doctor watching her. She told Mom that she didn't want me to go through what I did with Mikey, so no funeral. The Vulcan doc took her to the Research Institute as soon as she died so that they could research what killed her and try to find ways to prevent it from killing other people. Mom said that her and Candy talked about it, and Candy liked the idea of helping others like that."

Jesse nodded. "That is really nice; she thought about other people instead of just herself. Now I can answer it if anyone asks."

Not wanting to stick on the subject, Julio asked Cory "Do you want to meet our Division before you gotta leave?"

"Sure!" Cory replied, fully aware that Julio was trying very hard to make sure that he didn't have a relapse.

Julio tapped his commbadge. "Des Moines Division, assemble outside the Arcade for Patriarch Inspection." he announced.

Cory glanced at the arcade, his eyes going wide as he saw a very large crowd appearing in front of it containing kids and even a few adults. "Umm, who's running CIC?" Cory asked, assuming that EVERYONE was coming in.

"Dailess is helping out until we get organized." Julio replied as he started to lead the group towards the arcade.

As they walked up, Herman announced "Des Moines Division, A-TEN-HUT!"

Cory grinned as he saw that even the non-Unit trained kids did their best to follow the example of their division brothers. "At ease, ladies and gentlemen." he stated.

Julio took care of official introductions as they moved through the ranks, Colin joining them and assisting with the members of the strike teams that Julio had not interacted with yet. When they reached the non-Unit kids, Cory smiled when he found that Ted Jacobs' grand-nephew Richie was included in the group. Julio was glad to see that his new brothers and sons had decided to hang towards the back, because he wasn't sure how Cory would respond to having competition in the son collecting department. "Cor, these are my brothers Abe, Arlo, and Petey. Their baby sister Arrow is hanging with Mom right now." Julio said as he pointed out each of the boys.

Cory smiled at the three hispanic boys. "It's great to meet you guys; you've got a really great new big brother. He's kinda weird, but it's a good weird. You can trust him though, he's never gonna lie to ya."

Abe looked at Cory, obviously speaking for his brothers as well. "Thanks, Sir. We know he's been busy, but he's still made time for us. Dad was telling us about the Clan, and it really means a lot that you trust our big brother to run one of your Divisions."

"I'm putting you guys in charge of making him laugh whenever he gets too serious." Cory replied with a giggle.

"I think we can handle that!" Abe replied as his two younger brothers giggled softly.

Julio decided that it would be best to move on before Cory cause him any more trouble. "Cory, the last six are our new sons...." Julio said, the rest of his introduction cut off by Kurt.

"He's Riley..." Kurt said, pointing at his brother

"and he's Reese..." Riley added, continuing the circle.

"he's Bobby..." Reese said, adding the fun they were having.

"he's Kent..." Bobby giggled.

"he's Bruce..." Kent said while holding his sides.

"and he's Kurt!" Bruce finished before all six of them collapsed in laughter.

Cory and Sean exchanged amused glances. "Better you guys than us!" Sean giggled at Julio and Jesse.

Cory helped the six boys back to their feet. "Welcome to the family guys!" he giggled. "You're nuts; that's a good thing though. You can help your uncles keep Julio and Jesse sane."

"They're sane?" most of the assembled division muttered, the combined mutterings turning it into a shout.

"I used to be!" Julio shot back. "Y'all are fixing that quickly though!"

"Welcome to leadership!" Cory laughed. "It gets better though, they've got this nice white coat with really long sleeves that you get to wear when you wanna relax!"

Julio smiled, the hint that Cory was quietly giving him registering fully. "I guess I'm getting too serious?"

"Duhhh!" all six of his sons said in unison.

Cory nodded. "I'm learning it too, bro. These guys are your sons for a reason; all six of them are going to be learning from you while letting you know that you need to lighten up sometimes. You can't feel things like I'm learning to, but these guys love you a lot already; just like you two love them. Mick taught you a lot about being a Dad, now you need to teach them what he taught you."

Julio smiled. "Thanks Cor." Before he could say more, half of his sons decided it was time to play 'attack the parent' with him, the other half going after Jesse while giggling wildly.

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### **Teri's house:**

Fife purred as he cuddled into Mont's side while watching his new family assembling in the front yard of the house. Bast and Jeremy were comfortably cuddling on the front porch steps, JJ and Adam were sitting on the ground, watching as Kyle, Ezra, and Ty played catch with Kai. Bruce had Casey and Tina on his lap, as he listened patiently to their descriptions of the highlights of the Orlando base. Teri, Mikey, and Candy had found a shady spot and were all three fawning over Patty, who was willingly soaking up the attention. The only two missing were Cory and Sean, who had decided to take a tour through the house before heading back to Orlando.

Inside the house, Sean joined Cory, who was sitting at the kitchen table with a small smile on his face. "What'ca thinking about, bro?" Sean asked as he put an arm over Cory's shoulder.

Cory scooted closer to Sean. "I was just thinking about stuff since the last time we left the house. You know, how things seem so different but when you put them all together they're the same?"

Sean thought it over for a minute. "I think I get it. We're all still family even though things have changed a lot?"

"Kinda." Cory nodded. "We still need Mom. We still like having fun, playing games and joking around. I think all of us forgot that for a little bit."

"Yeah; I think the buttoles almost won." Sean said seriously.

"If we'd let them turn us into adults they would have." Cory replied. "I think that's why we got sent on this little vacation, we were acting like adults instead of kids. None of us were having fun anymore."

Sean looked over at Cory, the full realization of what he was saying hitting him hard. "That's why we were all freaking out all the time?"

Cory nodded. "Yeah; everyone says that the Clan follows what you and I are doing and does it that way. I kinda figured it out when Julio had his entire Division staff report for an inspection. He's already doing it, and he's only been a director for a couple of days. The stuff we did before we moved worked because we were being ourselves; we gotta start doing that again or all the kids we've helped will end up lost again."

Sean nodded. "Yeah; I know Kyle seems to be feeling a lot better since he's not trying to be a King anymore."

"Yeah, I think we need to give him and Ty extra little brother time." Cory replied softly. "Mikey woulda done that for us if we'd had something like becoming a Mikyvis happen."

Sean nodded. "Yeah, and we shoulda been helping Adam and JJ too."

Cory leaned over and gave Sean a quick kiss. "We gotta watch each other, I guess. Nobody else really knows us like we do."

"Sounds like a plan." Sean replied seriously. "You ready?"

Cory nodded, then both boys stood and headed for the front door. As they closed it behind them, they looked out at their family in the front yard. "Thank you." Cory said as he glanced up.

"I'm supposed to pass you a message, Tigger." Mikey said loud enough for Cory to hear. "You're welcome."

Cory grinned his thanks at his brother. "Has anyone chartered us a flight on the Mikyvis Airways yet?" he giggled.

"I'm the pilot!" Tyler giggled. "Anyone who leaves cookie crumbs in the seats hasta listen to Mick's full pun collection though!"

"Pop! That's cruel and unusual punishment!" Ezra giggled.

"Nah, you ain't had to listen to Ty when he hasta clean cookie crumbs outta his ears!" Kyle laughed.

Cory and Sean ran over and pulled both Kyle and Tyler into a four way hug. "We love you guys." Cory stated, obviously speaking for Sean as well.

Tyler and Kyle both giggled. "We love you too." Tyler replied.



"Thanks for being my big brother even when I screw up." Kyle whispered in Cory's ear.

Realizing that Cory and Kyle were needing a private moment, Ty and Sean moved off into a side cuddle.

"You ain't screwed up any more than I have lately, bro." Cory said softly. "I can't expect you to learn from me if I'm not doin' stuff right either. I promised you back at the home that I'd be your big brother forever, and I'm keeping that promise."

"But you're gonna..." Kyle started to reply.

"I said forever, and I mean it." Cory said firmly. "I keep my promises."

Kyle smiled. "You're so hard headed, I bet you'll find a way!"

"If that is what it takes to keep you from turning into a grumpy old Q, that's what I'll do!" Cory giggled.

"You're the best big brother ever." Kyle mumbled as he buried his face in Cory's chest.

"I'll second that." JJ added as he joined them and sandwiched Kyle between them. "Thanks for looking out for us, Cory. I think you even managed to keep Dad from going crazy after Mom died."

Cory smiled. "You two had just as much to do with it as I did. We're family, and we need to start acting like it again."

Both Kyle and JJ looked into Cory's eyes, smiling as they saw the brother that had welcomed them into his family once again in control. "You got it, bro." they said in unison.

After another quick cuddle, they broke apart and waved for everyone to join them. Once the entire group was assembled together, Cory announced "I came here as Patriarch Short with members of my Vulcan family. I'm leaving here as Cory Short, and all of you are either my brothers, my son, my nephew or niece, my uncle, or my parent. It don't matter if everyone else in the Universe sees us as a Vulcan Clan; we're the Short family, and we're gonna treat each other and anyone that we help like the Short family always has."

"What about me, Mont, and Bast?" Jeremy asked.

"I said brothers, that includes you guys." Cory said with a smile. "I'm just waiting for Mont and Bast to decide to make it official, they're already brothers in my heart."

"Told ya!" Bast said with a toothy grin as he playfully poked Jeremy.

"You do realize that Janet and I have had the paperwork done to make it official since three days after you two were assigned to Cory and Sean, don't you?" Teri asked with a knowing smile.

Mont raised his furry eyebrows at Teri. "Why?" he asked.

"Because both of us saw how you two were bonding with the family." Teri replied. "You made yourself a second family just by interacting and caring about the ones that you were sent to protect. That's why I don't worry about Cory and Sean; you protect them because you love them, not because you have to."

Mont and Bast both nodded their heads, their minds busy processing the fact that they had really been accepted by this family.

From behind them, they heard a low rumbling voice. "You must do what is in your hearts to do." Kwan Ti said, his blazing wings furled up behind him.

"You both have families in many places, this is just one of them. It doesn't matter what a piece of paper says; who you call mom and dad or who you call brother is all that matters. Becoming an official part of this family is not a disrespect to the rest of your brothers. They're happy that you've found another family. But they also know that you will always be brothers with them as well."

He walked up and pulled them into a tight hugs, including Jeremy in the group. Speaking into Jeremy's ear, Kwan Ti said softly. "You're good for my brother. Thank you for looking past what he looks like, and seeing the person inside. That means more to us then you will ever know." He stepped back and grinned at all of them before vanishing.

"Think about it guys; you can come talk to me about it whenever your ready." Teri stated softly. After looking around at the group, she added "Is everyone ready to return to the madhouse?"

Once everyone replied that they were ready, Teri motioned to Tyler. "Take us home, son."

"Yes Mom!" Tyler said with a smile before emptying the front yard.

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### **Des Moines HQ, Lunchtime:**

"Line up for hamburgers and hot dogs!" Mick yelled, making sure that he had something non-deadly in his hands first to deter any rabid kids.

The junior residents of the Headquarters compound quickly dropped what they were doing and lined up near the twenty-foot long grill that Mick, Bob, and Herman had been happily slaving over.

"That's cheating!" Mick laughed as he saw Johnny, Robin, and Eddie floating over the crowd to the front of the line.

"I'm glad to see that the boys have their priorities straight though." Herman added as he pointed to the moving gap that showed that another group was being shifted to the front. Sure enough, a group of the youngest members were being escorted to the front by Lucas and Logan; the group consisted of all three of Mick and Janice's newest sons, both of Mini and Alien's new sons, as well as Kurt and Kent.

Bob smiled as he watched how Lucas and Logan seemed to be guarding their nephews. He couldn't help but to think back to the events that had led to him becoming a grandfather to twin seven-year-olds just after they got back from the park.

**Flashback:**

Bob walked into the door of his house, Mini and Alien leading the rest of their brothers in behind him.

"I'll take care of Bobby, Dad." Doug said as he took their baby brother from Bob. "He needs big brother time!"

Bob smiled, fully aware that his youngest had the most protective big brothers that any kid could ask for. "I think he's getting hungry, you okay with getting a bottle ready?"

Doug smiled back. "I got it Dad; I'll cheat. Momma Janet has given Daileass all the specifics on making up food for Bobby for us."

"If you guys talk to her before I do, tell her thank-you." Bob replied. "That's not cheating, it's being smart. Now that I know about it, I'll probably do the same thing. That way if she decides that he needs supplements we'll all know that he gets them."

Doug's smile grew larger; being told that he was doing something right that he'd never been trained for by his new dad boosting his sense of worth as a member of a normal family. "Thanks Dad, I'll tell her!" he said as he headed out of the room.

Bob collapsed in his favorite chair. "You guys wore me out!" he joked.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lucas and Logan prodding Mini and Alien toward him. "Get over here and spill it, guys. Did Herman finally catch you in his garden in a way that you can't tamper with his evidence?" Bob said with a laugh.

"We didn't tamper with ... uhh ... how can there be evidence if we wasn't there?" Alien sputtered.

"I thought so." Bob said with a smile. "C'mon guys, this is dad you're talking to. There's no need to get nervous now."

With Lucas and Logan at their sides, obviously to keep them from chickening out, Mini and Alien made their way to where they were standing in front of Bob.

"Sit!" Bob stated as he patted his legs. "Lucas, Logan? You want to hop on these two turkey's laps once they're seated? That way all three of us know they can't run off."

Realizing that they were outnumbered, Mini and Alien took the offered seats, wrapping their arms around the twins as they took the positions that Bob had requested. "You know when I went to the hospital?" Mini asked softly.

"Yes." Bob replied seriously, understanding from Mini's tone that this wasn't an area where he really felt comfortable.

"You remember me tellin' you how proud I was about my little brothers helpin' the doctors with those two boys that were in a plane crash?"

"Go ahead, son." Bob said as he wrapped his arms around all four boys. He felt Lucas and Logan flinch, but as he was about to pull his arms back they both grabbed them and held them in place.

"They ain't got no family anymore, and the Doc says they're okay to leave the hospital..." Mini continued, still speaking so soft that Bob had to pay attention to hear him.

"How would you like to help them?" Bob asked, the fact that Alien was being silent telling him that this wasn't a situation that would be found in any parenting handbook.

"I ... umm ... we ... umm ... naw, it's stupid." Mini said, his voice becoming deflated.

"If whatever you're thinking of was stupid, there wouldn't be a pair of mini-Minis sitting here to make sure you don't run." Bob stated. "You know the rule; the only stupid question is the one that you never ask."

Mini turned his head, his eyes showing the insecurity that he was feeling. "You're not gonna laugh?"

"I won't laugh; if this wasn't serious I wouldn't be holding four very brave young men on my lap." Bob replied.

Mini seemed to steel himself as he gripped Logan tightly. "Me-and-Alien-want-to-adopt-them-and-make-them-our-sons!" he blurted out quickly, hanging his head in preparation of the expected response.

"Logan? I'm sure you know more about these boys than I do. Is there anything that you or Lucas have found that would make this a problem?" Bob asked. "Answer in my head please."

Logan nodded, and gave Bob the pertinent information that he would need to make an informed decision. "Thank-you." Bob said as he thought over what he was just told. After a minute, he made his decision. "Guys, there are times when other parents say I'm crazy for how I raise you. I ignore them because I've seen that it's working. You're asking me for permission to take a step that most kids your age couldn't handle; but I've seen the other side of the coin with your Clan brothers. You guys might not know it, but all of us old people talk too, and we've been given advice on what works when you ask this question. The answer is yes, but there is a condition."

"What's the condition?" Mini asked warily.

"The condition is that you have to be willing to come to us adults for advice." Bob stated. "You're going to need kid time too, and my job is to make sure you get it while still being the great parents I think you'll be. You're going to run into situations that you have no idea how to handle; you need to ask for help instead of trying to do it all yourself."

"That's not bad." Mini said. "What else?"

"You four need to go get my new grandsons out of that stuffy hospital while I arrange for someone to make it official." Bob replied. "The sooner the better!"

"That's really it?" Mini asked, his surprise evident in his tone.

"Yes, now give this old man a hug and get moving!" Bob chuckled.

Once all four boys evacuated his lap, Bob stood up and pulled Mini and Alien into a double hug. After the hug broke, he was pleasantly surprised to find Logan and Lucas taking their own turn. *"Thanks; you made our big bro feel better."* Lucas sent telepathically.

"You're welcome, and thank you for watching out for Mini and Alien." Bob replied just loud enough for the two of them to hear.

### **End flashback**

Bob smiled as Lucas escorted the two new family members to the front. Frank and Fred hung onto their Uncle Lucas, still not sure of themselves in this big group of kids. The seven-year-old twins sported medium-length reddish blond hair, not a true strawberry blond yet not really blond either, and bright green eyes. They were actually easy to tell apart, as Frank was just over an inch taller than Fred.

"You sure that the big kids ain't gonna be mad?" Frank asked, his freckled face scrunched with worry.

"If they get mad, I'll kick their butts." Lucas stated, surprising force behind his soft voice. "Then we'll sic your Grandpa on them!"

"And I know how to use a spatula as a deadly weapon!" Bob added, as he struck a swordsman pose with the spatula. "En Garde!"

That was enough to break the twin's worry, as both of them broke into a giggling fit at the comical sight of Bob fencing against thin air with a spatula. Lucas just smiled as he sent to Bob *'Not bad, I'll have to ask General Adam to teach you how to **really** use that as a deadly weapon!'*

"You're nutty, Grandpa!" Fred exclaimed.

"Yep!" Bob replied as he took a bow, his strike team sons applauding his display. "Lucas and Logan are in charge of making sure all of you guys under ten get plenty of food. If we start to run low, we'll make more. Eat up, guys!"

The kids began filing through, and by the time the last member of Air Wing Charlie had filled his plate it was obvious that the size of the grill was just barely adequate. The adults got their share, and soon everyone was concentrating on their food. Richie had taken a seat by Julio, and finally got the nerve to ask "What happens now?" as he was finishing his plate.

Julio held up his finger as he swallowed the last bite of his third hamburger, then turned his full attention to Richie. "After we're done out here, Jesse, me and our sons are gonna help you get your stuff set-up in your new room. Your Mom and Dad deciding that you were old enough to choose to join the Clan yourself makes everything really easy. I think that you're the only one on the command team besides me and Robin that can say their first parents helped them become part of the operation here. I figure that you'll need a couple of days to get used to your new home, then I'll hook you up with Dailess to get you up to speed on some new geek toys that you ain't been able to play with before."

"Am I gonna live in some kinda group home?" Richie asked.

"Only if you consider my house a group home; it just seems like one lately!" Julio giggled. "Mom and Dad claimed you as soon as Uncle Ted told them you were going to move here."

"Why?"

"Because you're family, even if it's a little distant." Julio replied. "Besides, Dad heard a rumor that you like to play with other people's servers. He said that you need to be close to CIC if you're gonna keep up that hobby."

"But... grown-ups think kids like me should be in jail." Richie said in surprise.

"Not when you're doing it for good reasons." Julio stated. "You know that new version of Space Sim that was just released?"

"Yeah." Richie replied with a frown. "I'm still trying to figure out how to unlock the stuff they hid again."

"You can stop trying!" Julio said with a grin. "Almost all of the code in that release was written by Patriarch Short and his top two hackers. You can't unlock what isn't there, but I'm sure that once Cory hears about you he'll make some time to visit with you and get you set up on the full version if you and him agree on the responsibilities that go with using it."

"So they were hired to write it?"

"No, Cory found the same holes you were using, and was offered the chance to fix them by Starfleet. When he got done, Mr. Gates was given the choice to either distribute what Cory had brought to them or lose his company."

Richie really smiled for the first time since his arrival. "Uncle Ted wasn't lyin' then; I might get to really do good stuff!"

Julio nodded. "Yep; and there are gonna be times where I'm gonna ask you to break into a network because there is information there that is needed to help kids, and there might be times that you'll need to crash one to help support an operation. Each of us tries to do what we're best at, and you joining us has just about completed the team we need for running operations."

"Thanks, I'm already starting to like it here!" Richie grinned. "You think your Dad will let me have another hot dog?"

"I think he'll chew your butt if he finds out that you didn't get one when you wanted to!" Julio replied.

"I sure don't want him to do that!" Richie laughed as he stood up and grabbed his plate. "Be right back!"

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**Two hours later:**

Julio rolled his eyes with a grin as he headed out of Robbie's room to go get some drinks. When they had arrived in the room, Unit engineers were just finishing running a dedicated power trunk to the area where the computer desk was to be set up. As they left, Julio found out why; Daileass began transporting in not only Richie's personal belongings, but also some 'welcome to the Clan' gifts that Daileass had personally picked out. Richie acted like it was Christmas as he opened the multitude of boxes; in no time the already formidable computer setup he owned quadrupled in size and power. Somehow, and Julio was pretty sure it involved Daileass, Christian decided to come over to 'help'; he hit it off with Richie immediately and the two of them began to obsess on making sure each of the fifteen monitors was in exactly the right position.

Just as Julio reached the stairs, his commbadge beeped. "Pacific Rim Division to Des Moines Headquarters."

"This is Director Hernandez, go ahead." Julio replied to the unfamiliar voice.

"Whoa," the deep teenage voice softly gasped and then apologized, "Sorry, Sir. I was just calling to offer you folks a little vacation here in paradise. We've met a few Clan from Orlando and a bunch from Utah, but not much else. Anyway, the invite is open, so just give us a call when you can make it."

"Slow down!" Julio giggled. "You call me 'Sir' again and I'll sic Aunt Teri on ya! I'm Julio, okay?"

Sounding relieved, the teenager chortled, "I'm Kaleo, communications officer here. I was just surprised that you were there to receive the call, Julio. My boss, Prez, is in the dining room, but about to head out for a school concert."

"You caught me getting drinks for my geek squad, Kaleo!" Julio responded. "They're setting up my new IT intel officer's bedroom; fifteen friggin monitors!"

"Umm... okay," Kaleo sniggered, "he'll be warm at night anyway, I guess."

"Yeah, but the laser levels seem a bit much." Julio deadpanned. "As far as your invite goes, by Wednesday I should be about ready for a vacation the way things are going; in the last three days, I went from having two little brothers to having a live-in boyfriend, six sons, three more little brothers, a baby sister, a live-in strike team, and an air wing as next-door neighbors. To top it off, my little bro has adopted a Sabre Toothed Tiger kitten!"

Taken aback, Kaleo was speechless for a moment and then roared laughing. "I know the feeling," Kaleo chuckled, "with about a dozen gorillas, another dozen G-cats, chimps and ferrets roaming around here."

"I didn't mention our furry brothers!" Julio giggled. "Me and my boyfriend have an awesome raccoon hybrid each to guard us. They're kewl, I like them!"

"Well, the Scoobies are a little larger than most ferrets, but they still love shiny things. That's how we met them Saturday..."

"Just a sec!" Julio said. "Hey Robin, drop me a couple of those cookies as you're going over my head!!"

"Sure!" Robin giggled as he passed over the top of Julio, three cookies floating off of the plate in his hand and landing in Julio's lap.

"Thanks, bro!" Julio said. "Sorry Kaleo, Robin's mom baked fresh cookies, and if I didn't grab some now they'd be gone by the time I get back upstairs!"

"Cookies are important," Kaleo said with an obvious smile. "We must go through hundreds of 'em every day. I just finished breakfast and had a sticky-bun."

"You were talking about the ferret kids?" Julio continued. "I think I've met one; Joel had a furry kid with him who claimed the disco ball from our dance with Robin's help."

Sounding confused, Kaleo stammered, "Umm... they took a disco ball... off the ceiling?"

"It's a long story; we'll have to sit down and go over it when we come over." Julio giggled. "Kyle thought it was funny!"

"OH NO!" Kaleo loudly laughed, "the creator of twenty-foot-kid-crushing waves!"

"Really? We're going to have to compare notes so we can compile a blackmail list!" Julio laughed. "I owe him a few hundred paybacks!"

"HEY!!!! He had help..." Daileass interjected into their conversation. "I seem to remember a large underwater explosion happening to kick things off!"

"That was the other waves," Kaleo giggled. "Guess it's only a different manner of death - from crushing or being blown to smithereens!"

"That sounds like Kyle and Ty alright!" Julio giggled. "Whadda ya think, Wednesday sound like a plan?"

"Should be kewl," Kaleo agreed. "I'll let Prez and the rest of the Core Rimmers know."

"Not going there!" Julio giggled. "I better get going, my triple twins just came out of the Geek Room, and from the looks on their faces I'm about to be escorted to the kitchen for their drinks!"

"Pool first, then kitchen, Dad!" Kurt said loud enough to be heard in Hawaii.

"Oh crap!" Julio muttered.

"Priorities!" Kaleo laughed, and then said, "Pacific Rim Division out."

"Des Moines out!" Julio exclaimed as twelve hands grabbed him at once.



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## The End of CSV-DSM Part One

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### Note from ACFan

It's one day short of the tenth anniversary of Memories, and I thought it would be fitting that you would get to see the formation of the Des Moines Division being completed. Julio and crew are just getting started, and I promise that you will see much more from their little base in the middle of the U.S. I think at one point or another every single author in the CSU has had their fingers in the events that led to this point, and I am grateful for their input and assistance.

Most importantly, thank you to all of you readers, you have stuck with me when real life made writing move slower than a Yugo with bald tires on a frozen lake! Thanks for the last ten years, and I'm looking forward to the next major anniversary where we'll get to say 'wow!' once again!

Thank you, and may all of your lives be blessed!

AC

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For the recipe for Chilaquiles, follow this link: [Chilaquiles at Mr. Breakfast](#)

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