

# Eric 382 Book 1

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# Chapter One

Friday, September 17, 2004 – Ankery, Iowa

As the rain from the storm continued to pour down across Ankery, a brief triple flash of lightning illuminated the sky above the Stone Crest Children's Home. For a brief instant, the figure of a small 13 year old boy could be seen nearly pressing his face against one of the several windows the lined the home.

The boy was close enough to the window that not only could he hear the pattering of the rain drops hitting the glass on the other side of the window, but he could also feel the very small vibrations that they made.

"Brent?" the boy heard a voice behind him call just as the accompanying crash of thunder arrived, causing him to jump slightly. "You have someone here to see you dear."

Brent did not turn from his position in front of the window. Instead, he continued to let the blond tips of his dirty blond bangs rest on the window glass while he lifted his right hand and pressed it gently up against the window, allowing himself to feel the rain even better. While standing there for a few moments, he realized that the vibrations of the rain felt very similar to the vibrations he felt while touching the windows of a train he was riding in only a few short weeks before.

Suddenly the vision and memory of that final truly happy day flashed before his eyes...

\* \* \*

"Do you two want to be alone?" came a rather familiar giggling voice from behind Brent.

Brent smiled as he dropped his hand from the bus's window and turned to face his best friend Randy. "This was sooo awesome!" Brent said as he reached out and hugged Randy, who seemed to be on the verge of more giggles, "I never ever would have expected this. Thank you!"

Randy returned the hug and gave Brent a kiss on the cheek, "It was the least I could do for someone sooo special!"

"I love you, I always will." Brent softly whispered in Randy's ear.

"I'll always love you more, no matter what happens." Randy whispered back.

The two 13 year old boys continued to hug each other in their seat for several minutes as the bus they were riding on continued to make it's way down the street.

"You sure you want to do this?" Randy finally asked as he pushed himself just far enough away from Brent to be able to look in his eyes.

Brent smiled, and pushed the long dirty brown hair that was covering a portion of Randy's eyes away with his hand. "After the special day you gave me today, I'm sure I could do anything right about now."

Both boys smiled and giggled as they pushed each other away, each pretending to make 'yuck' gestures before they each erupted into more giggles, clearing sharing some inside joke between them.

As the bus approached it's final stop, both boys stood up and slowly started to make their way toward one of the doors, as several other passengers also got up to join them. "No matter what happens, I'll be right here next to you." Randy softly whispered in Brent's ear.

The boys leaped down from the bus platform instead of taking the steps, and started to walk up the street toward Brent's house. Neither boy said much during the 5 minute walk. They simply walked side-by-side with one arm across each other's shoulder.

The boys separated from each other as they approached Brent's condo that he was living in along with his father. Just as Brent was about to open the door to go inside, Randy whispered "I love you" one more time.

"Dad, I'm home!" Brent yelled once he and Randy were inside, and they both threw their backpacks on the kitchen table.

"Didn't that concert get over with a few hours ago?" came the slightly stern reply of a middle aged man.

"Yea, but we also stopped and grabbed a bite to eat for lunch, and stopped by the square so Randy could pick up a gift for one of the other boys in his home that is having a birthday tomorrow." Brent answered while looking in the refrigerator for something to drink.

"Hummm", Brent's father replied as if trying to decide if he wanted to believe his son or not. "So did you enjoy it?"

"Yea! It was awesome!" Brent answered as he grabbed a carton of milk from the fridge followed by two tall glasses from the cupboard, "Aaron Carter was there and NSYNC and Backstreet Boys, this whole clan of kids, and we saw a real message from some Vulcan ambassador and everything!"

"It sounds like you liked it", His dad said as he turned his attention back to some papers that he was looking over.

A few minutes went by as Brent and Randy finished guzzling there glasses of milk. 'Dad seems to be in a fairly good mood', Brent thought to himself, 'So it has to be now or never.' With a final look toward Randy, and getting a supporting nod, Brent walked down the hall toward where his father was standing.

"Hey dad, could I ask you something?" Brent cautiously asked.

"Sure son, you know that you can always talk to me about anything", his dad replied without glancing up from the pile of papers he was looking over.

“You promise not to get angry or mad at me?” Brent asked with even more hesitation.

“Sure, what is it?” His dad again answered, still not looking up from his work.

Brent looked down toward his sneakers as he tried to gather a final bit of courage to say what he was about to say, “You know how Randy and I are best friends and all?”

“He can’t spend the night because you have way too much to do tomorrow, you know that.” His dad answered as he flipped a page in his work to look at another page.

“Oh no no! It’s not that”, Brent returned as he tried to figure out the best wording to use, “It’s just that I think he’s more than a best friend.”

At this, Brent’s father finally stopped what he was doing, and turned to look directly toward Brent, “What are you saying son?”

Knowing he had no way to dance around this any longer, in a softer voice Brent replied, “I love Randy, and he loves me back.”

There was complete silence in the apartment as the man glanced toward Randy, then toward Brent, and back toward Randy again. “I think it’s about time that you left.” Brent’s father said to Randy, as he got up from his desk.

Seeing the fire in the man’s eyes, Randy took a step backward.

“Please dad! It’s not like that”, Brent started to plead.

“Okay, I see”, Brent’s dad barked out, “You want to throw your life away and become a fag? A little queer? Is that what you want?”

“It’s not like that, just listen”, Brent continued to plead.

“I bust my ass trying to provide for you, and this is how you repay me? This is how you repay your mom?” The fury in the man’s eyes clearly building higher.

“You can’t control feelings!” Brent half shouted and half cried.

“Being a queer is not a feeling; you don’t know what you’re saying!” Brent’s dad shouted, “Your mom died bringing you into this world, and this is how you repay her?”

“Love is a feeling! Please just listen to me!” Brent shouted back.

The face of Brent’s father was now beat red with fury. He opened his mouth as if getting ready to shout back, but then stopped. His body seemed to flinch a little as he opened his mouth again to say something. A moment later, however, the man collapsed to the floor.

Both Brent and Randy stood there looking shocked, stunned, and confused.

\* \* \*

Another flash of lightning illuminated a single tear that was starting to roll down Brent's cheek, as he continued to let himself feel the rain hitting the window.

Brent was completely frozen as the voice of an older woman called out from behind him again, "Brent?"

The way she called his name... Brent... The word echoed through his head as he remembered another memory from later that day...

\* \* \*

"Brent?" a voice called out.

Brent looked up to see one of the nurses walking toward where he and Randy were sitting in the waiting room of the hospital. "My dad? Is he going to be alright?"

The caring eyes of the nurse looked down toward Brent for a few moments, before she kneeled down to bring her self to Brent's level. "The doctors did the best they could."

"Is he..." Brent's voice trailed off as his eyes started to fill up with tears.

"Not yet", the nurse said softly as she slowly shook her head, "But you should come be with him."

The nurse led both boys back behind the nurse's station, past the large double doors and into the intensive care unit. Stopping next to the open door of room 102, she motioned for Brent to go in. As Randy started to follow Brent into the room, the nurse put a gentle arm on his shoulder to stop him.

"Your Brent's friend?" the nurse asked as she kneeled down toward Randy.

Randy nodded.

"Brent's dad doesn't have much longer", the nurse quietly told Randy, "Since Brent has no other immediate family that can be here, you're going to have to be strong for him."

"I will", Randy whispered back with a nod. He then slowly continued into the room.

Brent stood next to the side of the bed where his father was in. He could see the various tubes and wires that were hooked up to him, to monitor his heart rate and breathing and other things. Brent could see the eyes of his father open, as he seemed to try to move his head slightly to see how it was that was near him.

"I'm here father." Brent said softly.

"Brent?" the man weakly asked.

"Yes, it's me", Brent answered as he reached down to touch his father's hand.

“I no longer have a son”, the man said as he weakly pulled his arm away from Brent.

Brent stood there shocked, not sure what to feel. A few moments later, the familiar beeping of the heart monitor stopped, and was replaced with a solid tone. A few moments later a small alarm sounded as two nurses rushed into the room and started to attend to the man.

Brent turned around and buried his face into Randy’s shoulder as Randy hugged and supported Brent as best as he could.

\* \* \*

Brent could feel the vibration of the rain against the window being replaced by something more intense. A few moments later, through the hazed darkness of the rain outside, a low humming sound followed by the appearance of a low flying shuttle craft could be seen passing over head of Brent, and heading off into the distance. He figured it must be the hospital that the shuttle was heading toward. That could be the only reason why it would be flying this low to the ground in this kind of weather.

Brent removed his hand from the window and instead used his sleeve to wipe away a large number of tears that were running down his cheeks.

“Do you want me to ask him to come back later?” The voice of the older lady standing behind Brent asked.

Brent tried to answer, but found that he couldn’t speak. Instead he simply shook his head no as another memory from only a few days after his father’s death filled his head...

\* \* \*

The clear evening sky was filled with various shades of red and orange as the setting sun had almost totally disappeared beneath the horizon. Randy and Brent walked next to each other down the sidewalk heading toward the new group home that Brent was now staying in.

“Oh! And the way that Indiana Jones was spinning around and cracking his whip, that was just so wicked”, Randy said as he spun himself around a few times with a pretend whip in his hand.

“Yea, I think that had to be the best part”, Brent replied as he giggled a little at his boyfriend’s antics.

Suddenly, Randy’s mood changed and he jumped behind Brent draping his arms around Brent’s neck and giving him a large kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for doing this with me today. I’m glad you’re starting to get over this.”

Brent stopped and turned to look at Randy as he returned the kiss. He then parted the strands of long dark hair that were slightly covering Randy’s eyes to the side. “That’s only because you’re here with me.”

“I’ll always be here for you. You’re too cute not to be with!” Randy giggled while landing another kiss on Brent’s neck. “Now come on!” he said as he started to drag Brent forward, “We need to get you back before you get in trouble on your first free night.”

A few minutes later, the two boys found themselves in front of the Stone Crest Children's home. With a final kiss, and an 'I love you' from each boy, the boys separated. Brent walked toward the main door and went into the home while Randy walked backward a few steps before turning and heading back down the street.

Inside, Brent found Chuck, the main care giver that was on door duty, and made sure that he was properly signed back in. He then made his way toward the kitchen where he planned on getting a big glass of milk. While drinking his milk, 3 other boys that were also living in the home came in and crossed there arms and made kissing and hugging motions causing Brad to giggle.

"You guys are just jealous", Brent replied back with a smile as he went to refill his now empty glass with more milk.

Just as Brent had returned the jug of milk into the refrigerator, he felt a sharp pain in the side of his ribs that caused him to drop the near-full glass of milk to the ground. The three boys that were standing near Brent simply stared at the sight of the milk splattered all over the floor, while Brent's eyes filled with shock and fear.

A moment later, Brent was running through the house and out the front door as fast as he could. "Brent!" Chuck tried calling out as he had turned his head just fast enough to see who the blur running out the door was.

Brent ran as fast as he could, several blocks down the street. He had no reason why he was running, or where he was running to, he was just running. As he stopped and looked down one of the alleyways, he saw what he had feared most. He gasped at the sight of Randy curled up on the ground, with a trail of blood leaking out from under him.

A short time later, Brent once again found himself in the waiting room at the hospital. This time, he was accompanied by 2 of the care givers from the house.

After what seemed like forever, one of the doctors dressed in a surgery gown walked out approaching where Brent was sitting. Immediately Brent was on his feet walking toward the doctor.

"Randy?" Brent asked as the doctor slowly shook his head.

"There was nothing we could do", the doctor said gently, "He was severally beaten and suffered from multiple stab wounds to the chest and neck."

Brent stood there trembling for a few moments. "He's going to be alright though, right?" he asked as one of the care givers that had been sitting with Brent but his hand on Brent's shoulder.

"I'm sorry." Was all that the doctor was able to say as he slowly turned and started to walk away.

"No!" Brent screamed at the top of his lungs as he tried to dart away, only to be held back by both care givers. "Randy! No!" he continued to scream as he desperately tried to pull himself away from the very firm hands that were holding him. "He can't be dead! He can't die! I love him! Please god, no!"

Brent felt his knees give out from under him. The hands that were holding him back were no longer holding him, but he couldn't run. His eyes now filled with tears made it so that he couldn't see anything other than shades of light around him. Brent collapsed to the ground; feeling hurt like he had never felt before until everything slowly went dark around him.

\* \* \*

It had been two weeks since that memory, and Brent was still standing and looking out the same window he looked out when waiting for Randy to meet him that final day they were able to spend together.

Brent could no longer hear the sound of the raindrops hitting the window in front of him. Everything seemed to get quiet around him as he tried a few more times to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"Hi Brent", a much younger voice timidly said in the background. It was a voice that Brent had heard for the first time only yesterday. Another memory quickly flashed before Brent's eyes...

\* \* \*

There was a gentle breeze flowing through the trees as Brent half-heartedly walked around one of the small play areas that was around the group home that he now lived in. This particular area had a few slides along with some see-saws and swings. He touched each of them as he walked around.

Brent had no real desire or interest in doing much of anything. He was all but being forced to spend a little bit of time outside each day. It was good for him, they told him. It was better for him than standing next to his window all day, so they said. Brent had little desire to do much of anything else but look out his window. But he also had no more will to fight either, so he did as they asked and spent some time walking around outside each day.

"They work much better if you sit on them", Brent heard a voice from next to him say with a slight giggle.

Brent looked up with a small amount of surprise, as he was fairly sure that there hadn't been any other kids around him. What he saw was a boy perhaps a year younger than he was, with short wavy black hair that was so messed up that it looked like it had never seen a comb, big deep eyes that started out orange but became more red toward the center, and a rather light skin-toned face that appeared to have seen very little to no sun.

"I'm Lance", the boy said with a grin.

"Brent", Brent said as he looked away from lance, and grabbed one of the swings and sat down on it, looking toward his sneakers.

"You mind if I hang here a few?" Lance asked.

"Whatever", Brent answered with a shrug of his shoulders and still looking down at the ground.



Neither boy said anything after that for several minutes. Lance swung very lightly on his swing, just enough so that it could count as swinging. Brent continued to shift his weight in his swing, and watched his sneaker make a small hole in the sand that was under the swing.

“I like it out here”, Lance finally said breaking the silence, “It’s easy to think out here.”

“Yea, I guess”, Brent answered.

“Both of my parents were killed in an accident when I was little, and I was just transferred here a few days ago”, Lance continued as he spoke to the air.

“Why are you telling me this?” Brent finally asked, with a slight hint of annoyance in his voice.

“I’m sorry”, Lance replied feeling slightly hurt, “I didn’t mean too.”

“It’s okay”, Brent said, not having intended to hurt the boy, “It’s just that I don’t know you, and I was confused why you would be telling me, that’s all.”

“I just thought you could use a friend”, Lance stated with a forced smile.

Several more minutes went by with both boys sitting there saying nothing, until Brent finally broke the silence. “My mom died giving birth to me, my dad dead from a stroke a few weeks ago, and my best friend was killed a few days after that.”

“Oh man”, Lance answered softly.

A few minutes later, Brent could hear one of his care givers calling out his name. “I have to go”, he said as he stood up from the swing and started to walk back toward the home.

“Brent?” Lance called out from behind him, “Can I come over to see you tomorrow? I mean if you want to and all?”

“I know your just saying that to be nice”, Brent replied as he looked over his shoulder, “But yea sure, whatever.”

\* \* \*

The rain outside had all but stopped, as Brent continued looking out the window trying to quickly wipe away the remaining tears in his eyes. He almost thought he saw a small beam of sunlight trying to break through one of the clouds in the distance as he turned to face Lance who was standing in the doorway to the room.

“Why... Why did you come over?” Brent asked, as he was at a loose for words as to what else to say.

Lance stood there for a few moments looking deflated. “I should go.” He finally said as he slowly turned to leave.

"Please don't", Brent managed to get out quickly, causing Lance to stop, "I meant... Why would you want to come here through all that rain just to see me?"

Lance turned back toward Brent, and he could see all the hurt that had built up behind Brent's greenish grey eyes. "Because we are friends now?" he asked uncertainly as he started to walk closer to where Brent was standing.

Brent looked down toward the slightly smaller boy. Deep in the boy's eyes, he could see the look of genuine concern. He let himself take a step forward and just stood there unable to walk anymore. The tears that he was so desperately trying to hold back were starting to make it impossible to see. A few moments later, Brent felt two small hands wrapping around his waist, as he let his head lower onto Lance's shoulder.

"I said a prayer for you last night", Lance softly whispered up toward Brent's ear.

"God has abandoned me like everyone else", Brent whispered back, "I'm alone now. I have no one left".

"I'm here", Lance whispered in reply.

"But I don't even..." Brent started to answer as his words became sobs. The only thing that Brent found that he could do was cry. He didn't know why, but for the first time since he had returned from the hospital several weeks ago he was letting someone else comfort him when he was crying. All he could do was cry and cry letting out all of his pain and hurt as Lance simply stood there holding him tightly.

## Chapter Two

Brent continued to hold Lance tightly as Brent's emotions poured out. Even after the crying stopped, the fear of letting go remained. For the first time in several weeks Brent felt whole again. He didn't know why, but being around this younger boy made him feel safe and secure.

Over the course of the next 30 minutes, Brent's strong embrace of Lance slowly relaxed. The sweet smell of his hair and the feather light touch of his breathing on his neck provided an unexpected degree of comfort.

"Thank you", Brent softly whispered as he heard a click and turned his head away from the bright light burning his eyes.

A middle aged woman stood at the doorway. "Brent, are you alright dear?" The concern in her voice was matched by the furrow of her brow.

"He will be", Lance looked back toward the woman with a glare in his eyes that dared her to protest.

She lingered in the doorway for a moment before inviting them to join the other boys in the common room to play some video games. With a final thoughtful glance she turned and left.

"You going to be okay now?" He felt the feather like breath of Lance's words press against his ear.

Brent sniffed as he lifted his head from Lance's shoulder, "I think so. Im sorry for being such a baby."

"Youre not a baby. You had a lot of hurt in you that you needed to get out." Lance trailed his fingertips through Brent's light brown hair. "So, you going to show me around this place, or are we going to stand here until I have to go home?"

"Oh... no... yea..." Brent reluctantly relaxed his grip, "I guess we should do that, huh?"

Both boys giggled a little as Brent led Lance out of the room and down the hall. Their first stop was Brent's bedroom. In the room there were 3 single sized beds. A well tanned boy was lying on the bed against the far wall reading a comic book. He had short slate black hair, and looked to be about 10 years old. "Arvid? This is my friend Lance", Brent's introduction caused the boy to look up from his book, "Lance, this is one of the two terrors that claims to be my roommate."

"Stuff it Brent!" Arvid half-heartedly threw a pillow toward Brent before he returned his attention back to his comics.

The boys then went to the single most important location in the entire house, the kitchen, where Brent poured each of them a tall glass of milk.

The clank of empty glasses could be heard hitting the counter at nearly the same time as both boys rushed to be first to finish. Brent then led them to their final stop, the common room, where about 8 other boys were all very intensely involved in playing Halo on an Xbox.

Brent sat on the couch in the back with Lance following his lead. The other boys didnt seem to pay much attention to either of them, as they mostly seemed interested in pointing out on the screen where to shoot.

For the first 5 minutes Lance sat quietly next to his new friend, "What was his name?"

"Who?" Brent's face crumpled into a confused expression.

"The one you lost. The one you cried for." Lance spoke softly while placing his hand on Brent's knee.

Brent thought about the question for a few moments, trying to decide just how much he would dare tell. This was the same question that all the other adults had been asking him for the last two weeks. They wanted him to 'open up and reveal his inner most secrets and desires, but he knew better than that. He knew all about how kids who did not share the ideal beliefs of society were treated. How if *what* they expressed was different to the doctor and shrinks beliefs, they were usually immediately labeled as 'sick and in need of 'treatment to fix those beliefs. Now here he was; faced with this same question once again. But Lance wasnt an adult; he wasnt one of 'them. Not only that, but for some reason, he seemed to feel more comfortable being around him. With head bowed, he uttered one word, "Randy." His voice so soft that only Lance could hear him.

Without saying another word, Lance simply put his arm around Brent, as Brent ever so slightly allowed his head to rest on his shoulder, once again smelling the sweet smell of his hair. The two boys conti-

nued to sit like that for several more minutes as Brent realized even more how comfortable Lance was making him feel. He was pretty sure that he had not felt this comfortable around someone else since...

Suddenly, Brent sat back up and pulled himself away from Lance, as if he had been hit by an electric shock. Looking down at the puzzled, almost hurt expression on Lance's face, he stood up, and started pulling on his arm to get him to do the same. "Come on, it should be dry enough for us to be able to go out."

Both boys left the common room and headed for the side door to get some fresh air outside.

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Outside, Brent led Lance toward the basketball hoop. There they noticed another boy already shooting hoops.

"Hello Arvid!" Lance recognized the nicely tanned 10 year old who he had met in Brent's bedroom earlier.

"Im not Arvid", the boy smiled with a light hint of frustration, "Im Dynal. Arvid is my twin brother, but you will never catch him dead doing anything sports related."

"I guess I should have mentioned that Arvid had a twin", Brent giggled, causing Lance and Dynal to giggle as well.

Without another word, The boys joined Dynal shooting baskets, as if the giggles were a secret language which only they knew. A language which not only asked permission to play, but also granted that request.

After about an hour of shooting baskets and attempting trick shots, Dynal finally got tired and decided to head back inside, leaving Brent and Lance outside alone. Although Lance noticed that Brent suddenly became more tense, he decided not to say anything, as they continued to shoot baskets for several more minutes.

"You think maybe tomorrow you would want to come over to where I live?" Lance attempted to break the uneasy silence.

"I guess", Brent shrugged his shoulders as he took another shot which completely missed the basket.

Lance ran and grabbed the ball and brought it back but held it tightly to his chest. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No" Brent's voice indicating a slight degree of impatience.

After a few moments of thought, Lance half-heartedly tossed the ball back to Brent before he turned and started to walk away. Brent caught the ball, but quickly let it fall to the ground once he saw what Lance was doing.

"Lance, wait!" Brent pleaded.

"Dont bother", Lance called back still not stopping, "Your just like everyone else, Im too much of a pain to be around."

Brent grabbed Lance, and forced him to turn around so that both boys were looking straight at each other. "Please, its not you", Brent tried to plead. Seeing that Lance appeared to at least be willing to listen, he took a deep breath before continuing, "Its just that earlier I felt comfortable around you... and.... I dont know.... I cant let myself do that."

"I get it." Lance sniffed, now forcefully pulling himself away from Brent, and continuing to walk away.

"Please stop!" Brent's voice trembled, as his legs gave out causing him to fall to the ground in tears, "Im not saying this right."

"Dont bother, I can take a hint." Lance's hurt and anger starting to show through in his voice.

"I Loved Randy!" Brent nearly shouted, "I cant hurt him by replacing him."

Lance stopped as if realizing what was going on, and turned around to slowly walk back to the now sobbing Brent. Sitting on the ground next to him, he softly whispered, "You loved him a lot, didnt you?"

Brent nodded.

"Im sorry for getting mad at you", Lance continued in his soft whispering voice, "I just thought you were mad at me, I didnt realize it was because of Randy."

Lance continued to sit with Brent on the ground, as he wiped away his tears. He didnt touch him, as he wanted to give him his space, but he still sat there so that he knew he was with him. After Brent had recovered enough to stand back up, Lance stood up as well.

"Its starting to get dark, I should probably get home." Lance stated as both boys reached their feet.

"Yeah", Brent agreed.

"Maybe we can hang out more tomorrow, just as friends?" Lance peered questioningly into Brent's eyes.

"Id like that", Brent answered with a nod which told Lance that he was serious.

With that, both boys parted. Brent went back inside, and Lance started to walk back to the home he was staying in.

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Once inside, Brent went straight to his room and threw himself onto his bed where he promptly started to punch his pillow before burying his face in it, and letting out a few more silent tears.

"Hey Brent", Brent heard as he looked up to see Arvids twin standing near the door, "Dinners ready man, come on!"

As if by magic, Brent no longer seemed to be as upset. He allowed the smell of spaghetti to lead him to the dining room. After all, what kind of growing boy could ever resist the temptation of anything that had to do with food!

After dinner, for the first time since Randy had died, he played a few games of Halo with the other boys. He didnt do that well, since his mind was still elsewhere, but in a way he knew that just by playing he was taking a step forward.

After Brent was beat by one of the worst 7 year old players ever, he figured that it was time for bed, and decided to turn in a bit early.

Throwing off his shirt, and quickly changing into his sleep boxers, he quickly jumped into bed as the screeching sounds of the stretching bed springs could be heard. He left the light on since he knew that the twins would be going to bed soon as well, but he was so worn out from the emotional roller coaster he was on that day that even with the lights on, it only took a few minutes for him to fall asleep.

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A short time later, Brent woke back up to a rather bright radiating light. At first, he thought that the twins still had not come to bed yet. As his head cleared, he realized that both of them were already sound asleep in bed, the door to the room was closed, and the house was silent. As the light grew brighter and closer, it slowly began to take the form of an angelic young man in his late teens standing at the foot of Brent's bed.

Brent saw that he had large golden wings, a bright golden halo, and a golden glow to him that shouted out only one thing. "Are you an angel?" he finally asked.

The boy smiled and nodded. "Hello Brent, My name is Saint Mikey of Urbandale, Protector of Gay and Abandoned Youth. And yes, you could say that I am an angel."

Brent was suddenly hit by a number of different emotions all at the same time. At first, he was shocked and surprised to actually see a real angel. The shock quickly became doubt and disbelief as he figured he must be dreaming. The disbelief then turned to bitterness and anger as he realized what this meant if it wasnt a dream.

"Why?" Brent asked which sounded more like a cry, "Why did you do it?"

"Brent, there are some things..." Mikey started to say before being cut off by Brent screaming.

"WHY DID YOU LET HIM DIE! Why didnt you protect him? He was everything to me!" All of the hurt and anger that was stored up inside of Brent seemed to pour out with his words.

"Brent?" A sleepy Arvid mumbled, "What are you doing?" Arvid looked up from his bed, and gasped with surprise at the sight of a glowing angel in front of Brent's bed.

"Im sorry little guy." Mikey softly said with his words full of kindness and compassion.

"Why does God hate me? Why have I been left alone?" Brent continued to shout and cry at the same time, as he ignored both twins who were now awake and staring at him and Mikey in disbelief.

"Hi bro", Brent heard a voice say from next to him which made his heart leap. Looking toward the direction of the voice, he saw Randy standing next to him, with a white glow radiating all around him.

Neither boy said a word as Randy sat down on the bed next to Brent. For a long moment, a teary-eyed Brent stared into the eyes of Randy. With caution, Brent lifted his arms up and gently parted the long strands of hair that were partially covering Randys eyes. Both boys smiled as Brent realized with that single action that it was really him.

"Oh god! Ive missed you so much!" Brent cried as he hugged Randy tightly.

"Me too bro, me too" Randy answered through tear filled eyes as well.

"Why did you have to leave me?" Brent sobbed.

"Actually, Randy has never left your side", Saint Mikey interjected softly, "The very first thing he did was to go to your side and try to comfort you. Hes been standing next to you constantly over the last 2 weeks."

"Why didnt I see you? How can I see you now?" A still sobbing Brent asked.

"You can thank Saint Mikey for that; he made it so you could see me." Randy smiled and nodded toward Mikey.

"Why did you have to leave me?" Brent asked, as the sobs went away and were replaced by sadness.

"It was my time, Im sorry", Randy answered softly.

"Brent, I know you have a lot of hurt and anger inside of you right now", Saint Mikey added with a gentle and soothing voice, "but know this, Our Father has not abandoned you. In fact, he has some very special plans for you, and he would never let anything bad happen to his children that would not lead to a greater good."

Brent let go of Randy to pay closer attention to the glowing angel before him, "How is Randy dying a good thing?"

Saint Mikey grinned a little, "I think a very wise little boy that I know quite well summed it up pretty nicely by saying 'Sometimes bad things have to happen so that the good things can happen.' He saved someone I care about's sanity when he came up with that."

"Besides", Randy added, pulling Brent's attention back to him, "This is way cooler! Now I can always be near you and help to watch over you and protect you!"

"I love you", Brent exclaimed as he once again hugged Randy.

"I will always love you Brent, no matter what happens", Randy replied, "But thats something else I need to talk to you about."

"What?" Brent's voice sounded a bit confused.

Randy gently pulled away from the hug so that he could look directly into Brent's eyes. "I know we both will forever share a special piece of each others heart, but you cant let that stop you from sharing your heart with others."

"I could never do that to you", Brent slowly shook his head.

"Nothing you do could ever replace the part of your heart that you share with me. Thats something that will always be special and unique to us. But your heart is big enough so you can share a different piece with someone else." Randy looked deep into Brent's eyes and waited for a few moments to see if what he was saying was making any sense. "Besides, I have a secret."

Randy moved himself closer to Brent's ear and whispered, "I was able to take a peak into the Book of Life, and I know that its going to be a long time before you join me here, and it would really hurt me if you let yourself continue to feel empty the entire time. So do this for me, please babe?"

After taking a few moments to think, Brent nodded his head indicating that he would, and both boys gave each other another hug.

"Brent, could you come here for a moment", Saint Mikey gestured with a loving smile.

After getting an approving nod from Randy indicating that it was okay, a very timid Brent got out of bed and walked toward the tall angel. Mikey reached his hand down, and put it in front of Brent's eyes. Brent was forced to close them tight as there was a brief moment of very bright light. When the light went away, he questioningly looked back up toward Mikey.

"Our father has allowed me to give you a very special gift Brent, because of all pain and hurt you have had to go through so far. Randy will now have the ability to become visible to you whenever he needs to." Mikey was unable to finish what he was saying before a very happy Brent nearly leaped into Randys arms, and both boys bounced up and down with joy. After the boys settled down a little, Mikey continued, "However, you will be the only person who will be able to see or hear him."

Brent nodded and threw his arms around Randy once again. "Thank you Saint Mikey, thank you!"

After a few more moments of hugging, Randy whispered to Brent, "I have to go now."

"Why?" Brent asked, "You just got here."

"Randy has a few things that he needs to learn about his new position. Since he has refused to leave your side over the last 2 weeks, he is way overdue for his appointment at the pearly gates."

Noticing the slight hint of concern on Randys face, Brent gave him a smile and a reassuring nod. "Go on angel boy. Hurry up and learn how to be an angel so you can come back and visit me."



Both boys giggled, and after a final hug and kiss Randy walked over to the outstretched hand of Saint Mikey. "Oh!" Randy said as he stopped in his tracks, and looked toward Brent, "That Lance kid is really cool. I looked into his soul, and he has a lot of love for you and really needs to feel the love of another. Just so you know, I approve."

"Thanks Randy", Brent softly replied as he stood there and watched Randy and Saint Mikey slowly fade away. Within seconds, the room was completely dark.

"WHOA!" Both twins said in unison as they had both been awake and were watching the entire time.

---

By the time Brent woke up the next morning, he could hear that the twins were awake whispering back and forth to each other.

"I had this really weird dream last night", one of the twins started, "I think it was some kind of angel or something that came and was talking to Brent."

"Really?" the other twin answered with a bit of surprise, "I had the same dream, and there was another boy in here too. I think Brent called him Randy or something."

"Whoa!" Brent said with surprise as he jumped out of bed, "You two really saw that?"

Both of the twins nodded.

"Sweet", Brent shouted with excitement, "I was thinking that might have only been a dream!" With that he bolted out of the room.

"Um, aren't you forgetting something?" Arvid called out.

"Oh yeah", a now blushing Brent said as he ran back in the room, grabbed his clothes and darted back toward the bathroom.

Within 10 minutes, Brent had set a new world's record for the fastest shower ever, and was out in the kitchen grabbing something to eat that would pass as breakfast. He had finished breakfast and was rinsing out his bowl before any of the other boys sleepily started to make their way to the kitchen as well.

"Good morning Mr. Curtis", Brent cheerfully exclaimed as he ran into the office where the main caregiver that was on duty was stationed.

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise seeing you all cheery today", the middle aged man replied with a smile.

"Could I sign out to go visit Lance at the Ford Home?" Brent pleaded.

Curtis was so pleased to see that he was finally starting to act like a boy again, that he was more than happy to sign him out, but only after he had made sure that Brent knew to watch for traffic between here and there, and letting him know that he would call ahead and let them know to expect him.

As soon as Brent was out the door, he started running the entire 3 blocks that it would take for him to get to the childrens home that Lance was staying at.

---

Brent arrived at the Ford Home only to find that Lance was sitting outside on the porch steps. Other than a quick glance to see that it was Brent, Lance kept his head down as he watched a few ants wondering around near his sneakers.

"Hi Lance!" Brent called out in a cheerful yet slightly out of breath voice, "Im sorry about how I was acting yesterday."

"Dont worry about it. Im use to it by now." Lance told his sneakers.

Brent sat down on the steps next to Lance, and started to watch his own sneakers as well. "I know you will probably think Im a baby and all for saying this, but yesterday when you were there for me and holding me, you made me feel safer and more comfortable than I ever felt before. Not even... well... being around Randy didnt even make me feel as safe as you did."

Lance stopped looking at his sneakers and started to look toward Brent with a puzzled expression.

"Dont get me wrong", Brent continued as he tried to keep his composure, "I loved and still love Randy with all my heart. We really loved each other. But the way you were making me feel yesterday scared me a lot. I was afraid that you would end up replacing him."

"Id never try to do that, I know how special he was to you", Lance whispered softly with the concern in his eyes clearly visible.

"I know", Brent agreed, "I picked the wrong words yesterday and I was being a real baby about it. I know now that the part of my heart that belongs to him could never be replaced, and if... well... you know... you and I were... well ever to be closer, you would be sharing a different part of my heart."

Several long seconds passed as both boys looked at each other, taking in what Brent had just said.

"Lance, I dont really know what Im feeling just yet, but I would really like to be closer to you. That is, if you can take me acting stupid and like a baby sometimes." Brent's words trailed off as he waited for some indication of what Lance was thinking. Just as Brent figured that his words had done enough damage, and that it was probably time for him to leave, Lance reached out and hugged onto him.

"Id like that, I really would", Lance whispered while fighting to hold back his tears, "Ive never let myself get close to anyone before, but being around you makes me feel different, like its okay."

After a few minutes of hugging, Lance pushed away from Brent and jumped to his feet. "You want to come inside and meet everyone else?" Lance asked in a cheerful voice.

"Lets go!" Brent answered as both boys went racing into the house.

---

Inside, Brent could immediately tell that this was a group home. Although the outside looked a lot more like a normal 3 story house than his group home, the inside was a lot smaller. Most of the floors were hard tile instead of carpet, however the overall atmosphere seemed the same.

They walked through a very small archway that had hooks and cubbies to put coats and shoes and other items in, then they walked into the main common room where there was a small color TV that a few boys were watching cartoons on. There were a few other boys that were playing board games or cards. The sight of two boys playing cards in the corner of the room immediately caught Brent's attention.

Walking closer, he noticed that the cards they were using didnt seem to look like normal cards, and one of the boys didnt seem to be looking much at his cards, but seemed to be starring into space more than anything.

"Ah! I see you found the rug rats", Lance giggled as he walked over to join Brent. "The blond hair boy is Douglas, and the cute little red head with the freckles is Greg."

"Shove it Lance!" A now blushing Greg called out in Lance's general direction, followed by a few giggles from Douglas.

"Greg lost his vision when he was just a baby", Lance stated as a matter of fact.

"How is he playing cards then?" Brent pondered.

"Sometimes I think he can really see and is just faking it. But that kid does not let anything at all stop him. He can even play t-ball a little", Lance beamed with pride, "Hes playing with a special set of cards that let him feel what the cards are, and Douglas calls out what cards hes playing as he goes."

"The two couch potatoes over there are TJ and Martin", Lance continued as he pointed at two boys. Martin looked like he was about 6 years old. He had nicely tanned olive skin, very short spiked black hair, and deep brown eyes. TJ looked like he was 12. He had a thin slender build, light skin, sandy blond hair, and sparkling blue eyes.

"Pokémon", Brent exclaimed with a grin as he quickly recognized what cartoon the boys were watching.

"Yea, whats wrong with that?" TJ asked defensively glaring toward Brent.

"Oh nothing", Brent quickly replied, "I think Pokémon is cool. I even have the game on my game-boy."

"Really?" Martin called out as the mention of the game-boy caught his ears, "Which one do you have?"

"Sapphire", Brent answered.

"Oh sweet! Ive been wanting to play that so badly!" Martin was bouncing so hard he nearly bounced himself off the couch.

"Oh gawd! Now youve found 2 more friends for life. TJ and Martin are the worlds biggest Pokémon freaks." Lance stated causing both TJ and Martin to blush slightly and earning giggles from everyone else.

"Finally, the 3 guys playing monopoly over there are Sterling, Todd, and Bradley." Lance stated as all 3 boys, who seemed to be between 10 and 11 looked up and waved toward Brent.

With introductions out of the way, Lance and Brent were starting to wonder what they were going to do first, when Martin walked up and pulled down on Brent's shirt. "You want to see my Pokémon cards?" Martin asked excitedly.

"Sure", Brent answered as he smiled and picked up Martin. Brent was very surprised at how light the small boy was especially for being 6.

Martin pointed Brent up stairs and to his room with Lance following quickly behind. After spending 30 minutes looking at the nice sized card collection that Martin had, and Brent pointing out which cards were the really rare and special cards, they went back down stairs to find that several of the other boys were heading outside.

Brent was really surprised at how much all the boys made him feel that he belonged there. Even the older boys that were closer to his age made him feel welcome. Outside everyone played on a set of monkey bars for about an hour before one of the care givers called everyone in for lunch.

Once lunch was finished, Greg and Douglas started to play a game of monopoly, and they asked Brent and Lance to join them. Although Brent noticed that each of the cards seemed to be bent or chipped in a certain way, he was really amazed at how well Greg was able to play the game. The only real thing he had to do was to have everyone else tell him what he rolled. He always seemed to know exactly where his piece on the board was, and moved it around as if he could see fine.

As the game was finishing up, the main care giver, Mr. Derek walked over to where the boys were playing. "Hey boys, since you all seem to be getting along with your guest so well, you think we should invite him to spend the night?"

All the boys around immediately shouted their approval with Martin going a step further and running over to Brent and asking him if he would. Although Brent was very surprised at the offer, he looked up at Mr. Derek with a puzzled look.

"Its okay Brent", the man smiled, "Ive already called over and talked to Mr. Curtis about it. He was so pleased that you were actually having a good time for once that he almost insisted on it. As long as the boys and you dont mind?"

Brent looked around the room at everyone waiting for his answer. Seeing the pleading look in Lance's eyes made the question a no-brainer. "Sure! Thanks!" he said finally.

"Okay", Mr. Derek smiled, "You guys hurry up and finish your game and get ready for dinner. The meatloaf is almost done."

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As the boys were getting seated at the table, the conversation quickly turned to trying to decide which movie they were going to put on for their guest after dinner.

Brent noticed that everyone had a plate and was digging in except Greg. A few moments later an older woman came out of the kitchen and set a plate in front of him. "Potatoes at 10, Veggies at 2, and meat-loaf at 6", the woman said as she ruffled Gregs hair a bit before returning back to the kitchen.

Noticing the very confused look on Brent's face, Lance leaned over and whispered, "Thats how Greg knows where everything is on his plate. The numbers are like numbers on a clock."

Satisfied with the answer, Brent found himself quickly involved with the rest of the conversation that the boys were having.

After dinner, Brent decided that he would help Lance clean up, since it was Lance's night to help with the dishes. The rest of the boys would go get the movie ready, which everyone decided was going to be 'Home Alone.

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After Brent had finished helping Lance with the dishes, Lance grabbed him and started taking him upstairs.

"Arent we going to go finish watching the movie with everyone else?" Brent asked.

"Yea, but if you are going to spend the night, we need to get your bed ready." Lance answered, "We dont have any more beds, so you will need to use a sleeping bag."

"Thats cool, I love camping! I use to go camping a lot with..." Brent cut himself off in mid-sentence as both boys realized what he was about to say.

Lance grabbed a large fluffy black sleeping bag from the hall closet and then took Brent to one of the 5 bedrooms. "You can sleep in here with Douglas and Greg. They both seem to like you so Im sure they wont mind."

"Im not sleeping in your room?" Brent asked with a hint of hurt in his voice.

"Trust me; you wouldnt want to sleep near me." Lance stated as a matter of fact.

"I thought we had already settled this earlier?" Brent replied as he thought that Lance might have forgotten the conversation they had had that morning.

Lance jumped up on one of the beds, and then hugged his knees close to his chest and started crying. "Its not that", He managed to get out between sobs.

"Tell me please?" Brent softly begged as he sat down on the bed next to Lance and put his arm around Lance's shoulder. Lance didnt answer, but continued to cry into his knees. "You were there for me yesterday, please let me be here for you today. I wont laugh or hate you or anything else, I promise."

Lance's cries subsided long enough for him to look into Brent's eyes and see that he was telling the truth. "You know how I said I get moved around between homes a lot?"

"Yeah"

Lance looked up again into Brent's eyes as if looking for strength to continue. "Well, one of the reasons is that sometimes at night, I...", Lance paused briefly, "I sleepwalk."

He started to cry even more before Brent lifted his chin and forced him to look directly into his eyes. "Lance", Brent stated as lovingly as he could, "That's nothing to be ashamed of at all. It's something you have no control over."

"It will freak you out though, and I don't want to lose you." Lance sobbed.

"When I used to sleep at one of my other friends' houses, he would walk in his sleep as well sometimes. It's nothing to be ashamed of. In fact I think it was kind of cool." With that, Brent hugged Lance even tighter before whispering in his ear, "Please let me sleep in your room tonight, I swear I won't get freaked out or upset if you do anything."

Lance leaned his head against Brent's shoulder. "You promise?" He questioned with uncertainty.

"I promise." Brent answered with conviction. With that, Lance grabbed the sleeping bag, and took it to another room that only had a single bed in it.

A few minutes later, Brent and Lance were back downstairs watching the rest of Home Alone with other boys in the home. When the movie was over, all the boys headed back upstairs to go to bed.

When Brent was back in Lance's room, Lance closed and stood by his door. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

"Please let me be here for you." Brent replied in a pleading voice that seemed to re-assure Lance that he was telling the truth.

Lance seemed to accept Brent's answer because the next thing he did was to turn out the light. A moment later, Brent was a bit surprised to feel Lance hugging him. "Thank you", Lance whispered softly.

With that, Lance jumped over to his bed. Both boys stripped off their shirts and giggled as they realized they both shared the same night-time ritual. After saying good night to each other a few times, they both quickly fell asleep.

---

Brent woke up later when he thought he heard the sound of a door opening. After taking a few seconds to get his bearings, and to remember where he was at, he looked over to see that Lance's bed was empty and that the door to the room was open.

Realizing what was going on, he jumped out of bed, and went into the hall where he found Lance looking for something in the hall closet.

"Lance?" Brent asked, "You okay?"

Lance seemed to mutter something that Brent could not understand, as he continued to look around in the closet for something.

Brent walked over to Lance, and gently hugged his shoulder. "Come on buddy", he said softly, "Lets go back to bed."

Lance let himself be turned around by Brent. Looking in no particular direction, he mumbled, "I have to find it".

"I know", Brent replied in a reassuring voice, "Lets go back to bed for now, and we can find it in the morning."

Immediately Lance seemed to become completely comfortable in Brent's arms, and allowed himself to be guided anywhere Brent led them. Brent closed the closet door, then led Lance back into his room, and closed the bedroom door. After the door was closed, he gently guided Lance back to his bed, and helped him sit down. "Can you get back in bed for me?" Brent asked softly.

"Yea", Lance answered after taking a few seconds to think. He then lifted up his legs to turn himself around and lay back down, while at the same time pulling Brent to lay down with him.

Brent was mildly shocked by this, but knew that subconsciously Lance was doing what he felt most comfortable doing. If Brent tried to pull away now, he could cause Lance to get agitated, or wake up. Neither of which were good things to have happen to a sleepwalker, so he allowed himself to continue to lay with Lance, thinking that he would go back to his bed after Lance returned to a more peaceful sleep.

Lance's subconscious seemed to have other plans, however. Moments after both boys were lying down, Lance moved himself closer to Brent, and hugged him in a protective embrace, as if trying to protect him from something. Brent couldnt remember feeling this close or comfortable around someone else before. He didnt know how to explain it, but what Lance had done, just seemed right to him, as if that is how things were meant to be. Moments later, both boys had returned to a nice, peaceful sleep.

## Chapter Three

8:00AM – Sunday, September 18th, 2004

By the time morning arrived, both boys had embraced each other in their sleep, and were fairly well tangled together. Brent woke up as he felt something poking against his belly. Before he had a chance to remember where he was, he felt Lance starting to wake up as well.

"Brent?" Lance sleepily asked with confusion.

Brent was so shocked to realize where he had slept for the night, that he fell onto the floor while trying to get himself out of bed. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry", he tried to nervously get out.

"That's okay, I kind of liked waking up with you next to me, it made me feel safe", Lance blushed brightly as he realized what he admitted.

Brent didn't answer, but instead only looked up into the sleepy eyes of Lance as if to try to decide if Lance was telling the truth or not.

"So" Lance continued after giving Brent a few seconds to think, "Last night... Did I...?"

Lance didn't have to finish his question as his pleading eyes gave away what he wanted to know. "Yeah" Brent answered not wanting to lie to his friend.

Lance hugged his knees to his chest, and started to silently cry.

"But it's okay. I think it was kind of cool." Brent got up from the floor and cautiously sat next to Lance.

"Yea right" Lance continued to sob; "Now I freaked you out like everyone else."

"Actually" Brent answered a bit more hesitantly, "I think you look really cute when you're sleepwalking."

Lance stopped crying long enough to notice that Brent was starting to blush.

"When I found you last night, you were up and moving around, but it was like you were totally relaxed. Your face was so calm and peaceful almost like it belonged to an angel. When I touched you to see if you were awake or not, it was like you totally melted into my arms, and you let me guide you back to bed just like that. It was one of the most special moments I've ever shared with someone, and if that's what it means to sleepwalk, I wish I could sleep with you every night."

Now both boys were blushing with embarrassment. A few moments later, Lance reached over and hugged Brent tightly, whispering 'thank you' into his ear.

"That was the nicest thing I've ever heard you say!" Brent heard the familiar voice of Randy as he looked to see the translucent form of his friend standing next to the bed.

"Randy!" Brent shouted as he pounced off the bed and into Randy's arms. A moment later, there was a loud thud as Brent went flying right through Randy and hit the floor.

"Yea," Randy replied slowly, "I guess I should have warned you about that."

"Gee, Thanks" Brent turned himself around and rubbed the spot on his head that hit the wall.

"Um, are you okay?" Lance looked down toward Brent with a shocked and worried expression.

"Oh yea" Randy grinned as he glanced quickly at Lance and then back down toward Brent, "He can't see or hear me, but he can hear you talking to me."



"Sorry", Brent slowly stood back up and walked toward the bed, "I um... well..." Brent sat back down on the bed next to Lance, who was watching very intently. "This is going to sound really weird, but I can kind of see Randy, and he can talk to me."

Lance continued to stare intensely at Brent, but said nothing.

"Friday night this angel came. I think he said his name was Saint Mikey or something... and Randy was there too... and he made it so that I could see and hear him... and Randy told me that it was okay if I shared my heart with someone else... and that's why I don't feel so bad being around you... and... and..." Brent was running out of things to say. The entire time he was talking he continued to watch Lance for any sign of acknowledgment, but Lance continued to stare at him.

Randy faded away as he started to walk toward Lance.

[Let's do this; tell him to hold up some fingers behind his back and under the pillow, and I'll tell you how many he is holding up.]

Brent looked around frantically, "Where did you go? I can still hear you but you disappeared."

[I'm still here, I'm just not visible right now because it's hard for me to do what I need to do and be visible. Now hurry up and tell him before he starts freaking out again.]

"Oh," Brent quickly looked back toward Lance, "Randy says to put your hands behind your back and under the pillow or sheets or something and then pick a random number of fingers to hold out, and he'll tell me how many you have."

Lance's expression did not change as he continued to look toward Brent in disbelief, but he very carefully put his hands behind his back.

[Three fingers... no, he changed it to five... no, he switched to four.]

"You started out with three fingers, then went to five and then to four." Brent watched as the confused look on Lance's face changed to a look of shock and surprise. "Now you believe me?"

Lance nodded slightly and then spoke in a very quiet voice, "Ask him to tell me what's in my box under the bed."

[Oh man, Brent, it's a picture of his mom and dad. They are both dead. Hold on, I'll be right back.]

Brent reached over and hugged Lance and whispered softly into his ear, "Your parents."

Lance returned Brent's embrace and nodded as he buried his head in Brent's shoulder.

[Brent, Saint Mikey says that both his parents are here and happy and that his mom says that she is really proud of her buttercup.]

"Your parents are both watching over you and your mom says she is really proud of her buttercup", Brent whispered.

"That's what she used to always call me", Lance started to cry more as Brent softly rocked him back and forth on the bed.

After a few more moments, there was a knock at the door, and Mr. Chuck's voice could be heard, "Come on boys, breakfast is nearly ready."

\*\*\*\*

Doug woke up quickly as he heard something hit the wall with a thud from the room next door. Wiping the sleep out of his eyes, he slowly crawled out of bed, and started to walk toward the door to investigate what had caused the noise.

"Doug?" Greg called out from his bed.

Doug looked over and saw Greg was awake and sitting up in his bed, moving his hands around as if trying to find something.

Immediately, Doug walked over and sat next to Greg as he picked up one of his hands and held it between his own for a few moments. As he did this, Greg seemed to relax.

"Could you not look at me first, that's just weird." Greg asked in a small voice.

"Sorry." Doug started to slowly move his head so that he was looked all over the room. As he did this, Greg seemed to smile.

"With Greg, we didn't have to touch." Greg's voice became a little shaky.

Doug tousled the six-year-old's light red hair, "I know. Try not to think of it much. I still think it's amazing how you can even do that at all."

"I miss him." Tears started to form in Greg's eyes.

"I know" Doug released Greg's hand and the two embraced each other in a comforting hug.

Greg pulled himself out of the hug after a few minutes, "Did Brent sleep in here last night?"

"No, I think he slept in Lance's room", Doug answered distantly as he got up and started to pull his bed sheets up so that they looked somewhat presentable.

"Lance let him sleep in his room?" Greg started to get out of his own bed.

"I guess." Doug pulled up Greg's bed sheets as well.

A few minutes later, a knock was heard on the door, "Boys, come down for breakfast now."

\*\*\*\*

Brent was surprised at the smell of bacon as he walked downstairs with the rest of the boys for breakfast. At the home he had been staying at since his dad died, breakfast was usually cereal and juice, but here they were having eggs, bacon and toast.

For the most part, conversation during breakfast was rather light. At one point Mr. Martin, who was the main care giver for that day, asked how Brent slept last night. Doug stated that Lance let Brent sleep in his room which seemed to make everyone else stop and look at Brent.

"It's just that Lance normally does not let anyone else sleep in his room", one of the other boys mentioned after seeing Brent's confused look.

"So does that mean Brent would be interested in spending the night again tonight?" Mr. Martin smiled as he grabbed another piece of toast.

"REALLY?" Both Brent and Lance shouted at the same time.

Mr. Martin smiled, "Tomorrow I'll check about letting you transfer over here, but for now you have permission to spend the night again. You just need to run over and pick up some extra clothes after breakfast."

"That would be really cool", Brent tried to say over the cheers of the other boys.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was nearly 10am by the time that breakfast was finished, and the boys were able to take their showers and get dressed to leave. Greg tried to talk Doug into going along with Lance to Brent's home until Brent had promised him that he would spend some time outside with him as soon as he got back. After letting Mr. Martin know that they were leaving, Brent and Lance were on their way.

"Isn't that cool? You might be transferring over to my place!" Lance smiled happily as he walked next to Brent down the sidewalk.

"Yea, that would be really awesome", Brent replied in a somewhat dreamy voice as he sniffed in the fresh air. For some reason, today seemed to be a bit brighter to him than other days. Perhaps it was the fact that he was with someone he felt to be really special.

"What's wrong?" Lance looked curiously toward Brent, misinterpreting his tone.

"Huh? Oh, nothing", Brent snapped out of his daydream, "I was just thinking that for the first time since Randy was killed, things seem to be looking up."

"Cool!" Lance reached over and gave Brent a quick hug as they approached the second street that they would need to cross.

[Brent, hold up a minute.]

Brent stopped suddenly which caused Lance to once again give him a curious look.

"Randy just told me to stop." Brent tried to answer Lance's question before he asked it as he looked around to try to figure out why Randy had asked him to stop.

[Turn left here, and then go into the alley that's about a half block down. I think there is a kid there who might need some help.]

"Come on! I think there is someone Randy needs us to help", Brent half-shouted as he started running down the street with Lance close behind.

As soon as they turned the corner into the alley they found a small boy who couldn't have been more than eight or nine years old huddled up on the ground sitting next to a large wooden crate. The only part of the young boy's face that was visible was his thin platinum blond hair. As they got closer, they could here soft sobs coming from him.

Brent knelt down next to the boy while motioning for Lance to stay back a little. "Are you alright?"

The boy looked up suddenly with a panicked expression on his face. His tear-filled bluish-green eyes darted around as if looking for a means of quick escape. He started to relax slightly when his gaze fell onto the concern-filled eyes of Brent, and when he saw the same concerned expression on Lance.

"Why do you care?" The boy sobbed as he tried to wipe some of the tears from his eyes.

"Well..." Brent started to reply as he struggled to think of a good answer. Obviously, he couldn't tell him that Randy sent them, which would be way too hard to try to explain. "I guess I know how it feels to feel really sad about something, and I hate seeing others feel the same way."

"I don't need your pity, just leave me alone." The boy buried his face in his arms again as if to signal he was done talking.

Brent turned himself around so that he could sit next to the boy, and lean up against the crate as well. "Sometimes it makes you feel better when you talk about it, and maybe there is something I can do to help."

The boy looked back up at Brent, surprised to see that he was still there. "What? I don't even know who you are."

"Oh, sorry. I'm Brent, and that's my friend Lance." Lance nodded slightly as Brent introduced him, and then he sat down on the other side of Brent.

"Jude", the boy said slowly as he still tried to decide if he could trust the other boys or not, "It doesn't really matter anyway, if I told you, you will just laugh and make fun of me like the other guys did."

"I promise, what ever the problem is, we won't laugh at you, or make fun of you." Brent's voice was full of assurance.

"Yea", Lance added his agreement.

"Whatever! You can say that but I still know you will." Jude sniffed as he wiped more tears from his eyes.

Brent was about to reply, but Lance jumped in before him. "Jude, I have a problem where sometimes I'll walk in my sleep, or have an accident in bed, and I'm twelve years old. So trust me, I know how it feels to be laughed at, and I can promise you we won't laugh at you."

"But that's something you can't do anything about", Jude challenged, "My thing is... well... it's just silly."

"It must be important enough for you to cry over, so please tell us?" Brent pleaded.

"Okay", Jude took a deep breath, "I was hanging with some of my friends, and we were talking about stuff, and some of them were talking about girls that they thought were hot and all, and I mentioned... well... I mentioned a boy's name that I thought was cute, and well..." Jude's voice trailed off as he braced himself for the laughing and teasing that he knew was sure to come.

Brent nodded and smiled, "There is nothing wrong with that. Some guys like girls, and some guys like other guys. There is no difference."

"Yes there is. They started calling me names like faggot and queer and kept making fun of me." Jude sobbed.

Brent lifted Jude's chin up so that he was looking directly in his eyes. "Jude, Lance and I are boyfriends. We both care a lot for each other, and we are both boys. Just like Lance can't control his problems, you can't control who you love. The kids you were hanging around were not really friends. Real friends would accept you for who you are, and wouldn't make fun of you just because you're different."

"He's right", Lance added, "Some kids don't understand, and other kids will come up with any excuse to make fun of others, maybe because they are a little fatter or thinner than normal, they have different color skin, they talk a little differently, or they are attracted to different types of people. And the right word to call a boy who likes another boy is gay."

Jude looked at both Brent and Lance in shock, not quite sure what to say.

Brent lightly placed his hand on Jude's shoulder. "You're still kind of young, so it might be a little too early to say for sure if you're gay or not. If you think boys are cute instead of girls, that's a good indication that you might be. But you still need to wait a few more years to see if you really are. And if you are, there is nothing wrong with that. There are a lot of people that are gay. Some very important people are gay, and they have very happy lives."

"Wow!" Jude seemed to be lost in thought trying to process everything that his new friends had just told him.

"Hey, Brent and I are going to the children's home he lives in so that he can pick up some clothes. If you come with us, we could get you cleaned up a little, and maybe you can make some other friends that will accept you for being you." Lance started to stand up and offered his hand to Jude.

"Really?" Jude was surprised as he accepted Lance's hand and stood up as well.

"Yea", Brent added, "It's not far away, and it would be cool if you wanted to join us."

"Okay, sure!" Jude had a very small smile as the three boys headed back out of the alley.

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The boys arrived at the children's home that Brent was staying at to find the twins, Arvid and Dynal, outside shooting hoops on the basketball court.

"Wow, how did you manage to drag Arvid out into the sunlight?" Brent giggled as he walked up to the edge of the court.

"Hey! I play outside sometimes." Arvid shot the ball toward the basket, but the ball hit the rim and bounced back off.

"Yea, only when I drag you out by your ears." Dynal caught the ball and threw the ball from behind his back and easily landed a basket.

"Showoff!" Arvid left the court and walked over to where Brent, Lance, and Jude were standing, "Actually we were waiting for you to get here. Oh, and who's your friend?"

"Sorry" Brent replied, "Arvid and Dynal, this is our new friend Jude. Jude, these are our twin terrors."

"Wow, it must be nice to only be twins." Jude smiled as he watched the confused faces that resulted from his comment, "I'm actually a triplet. But trust me; it's not always what it's cracked up to be."

"So why were you two waiting for us to get back?" Brent decided that it would probably be a good idea to try to change the subject.

"Oh yea!" Arvid started.

"Mr. Curtis was shouting in the office this morning." Dynal continued.

"Someone called here on the phone, and your name was mentioned a few times." Arvid added while looking toward Brent.

"Along with something about being transferred to another city." Dynal finished.

"That's weird", Brent replied in a distant voice, "I know Lance's home was going to try to look into getting me transferred there, but that's only a few blocks away."

"We are going to have to be back soon." Lance noticeably glanced at his watch a few times.

"Oh yea, I brought Jude over so he could get cleaned up a bit, and I need to grab some clean clothes for tonight." Brent decided not to worry about the twin's information for now.

Since it was getting close to lunchtime anyway, everyone decided to head inside. Jude headed to the bathroom while Lance followed Brent and the twins to their room. While Brent started looking in one of the dresser drawers for some clothes, the twins jumped on their beds, and Lance started looking at the various pictures and other trinkets that were lying around on the dresser and shelves.

"All of these pictures look like they are pictures of the twins. Do you have any of yours here?" Lance asked as he looked toward Brent.

"No. Most of my stuff is still back at my old house." Brent grabbed a pair of cut-off jean shorts and a gray and black Nike t-shirt.

Just as Brent finished getting his clothes together, Jude walked into the room. With his collar length platinum blond hair nicely combed, and all evidence of any tears washed from his face, he could pass as a fairly presentable eight years old.

"Okay guys, we're out of here." Brent stated to the twins once he saw that Jude was finished.

"C-ya Brent!" Both twins answered at the same time.

With a final chuckle, Brent, Lance, and Jude headed back to Lance's home.

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"So why did the twins have a bunch of pictures of themselves in their room?" Lance asked as the three boys walked side-by-side on the sidewalk.

"Don't know", Brent shrugged his shoulders, "I never really asked them."

"Oh", Lance looked up toward the sky to see a flock of birds flying by, "Hey Jude, you going to eat lunch with us today? I'm sure there'll be enough for you."

"Really? That would be cool." Jude answered as the boys crossed the final street that led to Lance's home.

Just as the boys were about to walk up the stairs that would lead into the house, Jude stopped and had a distant look on his face. After a few seconds he then looked toward Brent and Lance, "Actually, I'm going to have to get home pretty quick. I just forgot about something important I have to do."

"Oh, okay. Well it was cool meeting you." Lance started to say as Jude started jogging down the street.

Brent and Lance looked at each other with confused expressions as they walked up to the door. Before either boy had a chance to reach for the handle, the door flew open to reveal Doug standing behind the screen.

"Took you guys long enough", Doug smiled as he opened the door to allow Brent and Lance to enter, "Come on, lunch is almost ready!"

\*\*\*\*\*

After lunch was over and cleaned up, Lance and Brent decided to spend some time outside with Greg and Doug. One of Greg's favorite things to do outside was to swing, since he could do that on his own fairly easily. Since there were three swings, Doug and Brent decided to swing along with Greg while Lance played on the monkey bars which were close enough that he could still hear what the other boys were talking about.

"Do you think you will like staying here instead of at your other place?" Doug asked after the boys had been swinging for a few minutes.

Brent had been thinking of that same question right before Doug asked it. He was thinking about how the last three weeks had been at the home he was staying at, and how almost none of the other kids ever talked much to him, except for his roommates. Then he started thinking about how just in the last two days, almost all of the kids here had gone out of their way to include him in the group.

"I think so" Brent answered after snapping out of his daydream and realizing that Doug had asked a question, "You guys seem to be a lot nicer here."

"Cool!" Greg shouted as he did a flying jump out of his swing and onto the ground with a thud.

Brent was just about to jump out of his own swing and try to help him when he noticed the happy smile on Greg's face in regards to his accomplishment. Doug started to slow down his swinging as well, but instead of going to help Greg back to his swing, he just glanced between him and the empty swing. A few seconds later, Greg got to his feet and walked over and grabbed hold of his swing almost as if he could see.

"Nice job Greg!" Lance praised as he swung himself around on the monkey bars and landed on the ground.

Brent looked at Greg and Doug for a few moments as he tried to figure out what he just saw. "Doug, he can see through your eyes, can't he?"

Doug tried his best to giggle, "What makes you think that?"

"I don't know. Just the way that Greg was starring down at the ground, and how you seemed to be looking at both the swing and him instead of going to help him. It was almost as if he oriented himself to get back to his swing by using your point of view as a reference."

The other three boys sat silently with stunned expressions on their faces until finally Greg's eyes started to tear up.

"What's wrong?" Brent asked fearing that he had said something bad.

"Now you're going to hate me, and think I'm some kind of freak." Greg answered softly as tears started to trickle down his face.



Doug got out of his swing and walked over and gently pulled Greg out of his swing and sat him down on the ground so that he was sitting in Doug's lap. Immediately Greg put his head on Doug's shoulder. Both Doug and Lance glanced over at Brent waiting to see what he would say next.

Knowing that his next statement would not only make or break his friendship with Greg, but also have a big impact on how Lance and Doug looked at him, Brent thought carefully about what he was going to say.

"Greg", Brent got out of his own swing and knelt down next to Doug and Greg, "I'm not going to hate you or think anything bad about you. Actually, I think what you did was really awesome."

Greg continued to bury his head in Doug's shoulder showing no reaction to Brent's comment.

"You have a very special gift. One that seems to help you live a little bit more of a normal life than if you didn't have it. That can only be a good thing." Brent's sincerity caught Greg's attention, as he lifted his head off of Doug's shoulder a little.

"So you don't think I'm weird?" Greg asked softly.

"No way!" Brent ruffled Greg's hair a bit, "I think that was way cool! I wish I could do something like that."

Greg sat up and smiled a little as he wiped the tears out of his eyes.

"See, Doug and I aren't the only people that think that's cool", Lance added as he too moved down to sit closer to where the other boys were sitting.

"It's not all that good; I can only see little flashes every now and then. I use to be able to do it really good with Creg." Greg seemed to be cheering up a little.

"Who's Creg?" Brent asked before realizing that it might not have been such a wise thing to ask.

"Creg was Greg's twin brother. He died along with their mom in a car accident about a year ago." Lance answered in a quiet voice.

"I'm sorry." Brent's voice was filled with regret as he feared how Greg might take this.

"That's okay." Greg's voice still remained somewhat cheerful, "he and mom are in a better place now."

"That's good that you can look at things that way. I know a lot of adults who can't understand things like that." Brent nodded.

"Hey Lance" Doug asked obviously trying to change the subject, "Did you really let Brent sleep in your room last night?"

"Yea." Lance was a bit surprised by the quick change of topics.

"How come you never let anyone else sleep in your room?" Greg asked bluntly.

"It's probably best that we not talk about that." Brent quickly added as he could see the hurt in Lance's eyes.

"That's okay", Lance spoke softly, "It's only fair to Greg since he shared something with us."

Brent nodded as he moved himself closer to Lance so he could put his arm around his shoulder, and give him whatever support he could. Lance immediately responded to this by leaning onto Brent's side and resting his head on his shoulder.

Lance looked down at his feet as he started to talk. "Sometimes at night I'll sleepwalk and it usually freaks out anyone that is sleeping near me."

"It doesn't freak me out; I think you are kinda cute when you do it." Brent quickly added.

"What does sleepwalk mean?" Greg asked as he crawled off of Doug's lap to pay more attention to what Lance was saying.

"I guess it means that sometimes part of my body wakes up but my brain stays asleep, so I'll get out of bed and walk around and stuff without knowing it."

"That sounds scary", Doug stated.

"It's not really scary for me, because I'm still asleep and don't realize what's going on. I usually don't even know that I did it, unless someone wakes me up or tells me the next morning." Lance hugged Brent tighter for support.

"It's not something he does on purpose", Brent added, "In fact he has no control over it, so there is no reason he should feel bad about it. Is there, Lance?"

"I guess not." Lance looked up into Brent's eyes.

"So does that mean you're sick, or that you will always do it forever?" Greg asked.

"No, it's just something that kids, mostly boys seem to do a lot. I saw a doctor about it one time when I was younger and he said that most kids will stop sleepwalking on their own when they are about 12 or 13 and are starting to go through puberty."

"That would be cool if you stopped soon." Doug nodded reassuringly toward Lance.

"Yea, but until I do, I'll probably keep freaking people out. That's why I keep getting moved to so many different homes. No one wants to deal with a kid that sleepwalks and freaks out all the other kids." The sadness in Lance's voice started to become more apparent.

"That's just like me", Greg's voice turned sad as well, "I always get moved around to different homes a lot as well, because no one wants to have to deal with a blind kid."

Lance let go of Brent and crawled over to Greg to give him a hug. "I guess that means the two of us have a lot in common."

Greg nodded.

"Well, you are all together now, and hopefully all of you will be able to stay here together." Brent tried to cheer up the mood a bit.

"What do you mean us? Hopefully you will be transferred over here as well, and then we will all be together." Lance looked questioningly toward Brent.

"Yea, that would be really cool as well." Brent agreed.

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The boys spent the next hour rotating through the various parts of the play area. In addition to the swings, Greg also enjoyed the see-saw. Brent and Lance had to take turns helping him with the monkey bars, and spotting him on the rope ladder. The slides were fun sliding down, but were a bit harder getting up to the top of them.

Finally, Greg and Doug decided that they were going inside to play a board game, which left Lance and Brent alone outside. Brent went back to the swings, and sat down on one only to be surprised by Lance running over and sitting on his lap.

Lance let out a giggle at the small grunting sound that Brent made when he sat down.

"You sure this thing will hold both of us?" Brent Joked.

"Hey!" Lance pretended to slap Brent on the neck before he pushed off the ground with his legs which caused both boys to start to swing slowly.

"So why do you think Jude took off like that earlier?" Brent asked after they had been swinging for a few minutes.

Lance shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe he really had something to do? Or he didn't like that I am living in a group home?"

"Maybe", Brent pondered, "But he didn't seem to have a problem with where I was staying."

"I hope we see him again sometime. He was kind of cute." Lance smiled as he leaned his head back to look at Brent to see what his reaction would be.

"I'll give you cute!" Brent poked Lance in the ribs causing him to burst into a fit of giggles.

"Well, he was", Lance tried to say through the giggles as he reached up and pulled Brent's head down a little so that he could give him a kiss on the cheek, "But you're cuter."

Brent stopped poking Lance, and looked at him with a somewhat confused expression.

"Was that okay?" Lance's eyes looked deep into Brent's to see if he had somehow done something wrong.

Brent thought to himself for a few moments as he tried to figure out exactly what he was feeling. He then returned Lance's gaze and nodded his head slowly, "Yea it was. Could you do it again?"

Lance got off of Brent's lap, turned around, and sat back on his lap so that they were facing each other. Ignoring the questioning look on Brent's face, Lance wrapped his arms around his neck and gave him a long passionate kiss on the lips.

"Wow!" Brent whispered into Lance's ear as the two boys held each other while swinging gently, "I love you Lance."

"I love you too." Lance whispered back.

The two boys spent another hour of quiet time together outside before they decided to head back in and see what everyone else was up to.

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Brent and Lance entered the common room to find all the other boys in a heated game of Monopoly. The game had already been going on for a while, and it had come down to Doug and TJ being the two main players that were left.

Within thirty minutes, TJ had won the game and everyone, including Doug, congratulated him on a job well done.

By the time the game was picked up and put away, it was time for everyone to get ready for dinner. Dinner consisted of spaghetti and meat balls with garlic bread, and garden salad.

Brent noticed that the lady that brought out Greg's food still called out the food placement for him, but he had to smile as he noticed Doug looking over several times at Greg's plate as well. Since he wasn't sure how many other people knew about Greg's ability, he decided that it would probably be best not to say anything about it.

After dinner TJ and Martin stayed to help out with the dishes while the rest of the boys went back to the common room to pick out a movie to watch. Tonight's movie was 'The Wizard of Oz'.

Everything was rather uneventful through the movie except for when Martin returned from helping in the kitchen, and somehow managed to trip over the table that was holding a bowl of pop-corn that some of the boys were sharing.

After the movie was over, all the boys said goodnight to each other, and headed upstairs to their rooms.

After both boys were in the bedroom, and the door was closed and lights turned out, Lance climbed into his bed, and Brent crawled into his sleeping bag. Both boys stripped off their t-shirts at the same time and giggled at what was quickly becoming a shared nightly ritual.

"I'm glad you're here", Lance said in a sleepy voice.

"Me too", Brent answered as he yawned

"Good night Brent", Lance turned himself on his side.

"Good night Lance", Brent closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

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A short while later, Brent opened his eyes to find light coming through the bedroom door which was now open. Within seconds he was on his feet and heading toward the door as he had a fairly good idea what was going on.

Sure enough, Brent found Lance slowly making his way down the stairs. "Lance!" He called out, trying not to be too loud and risk waking anyone else.

When it was clear that Lance was not answering him, Brent decided to follow him downstairs.

"What are you doing?" Brent asked trying to get Lance's attention. Just then Brent smelt some type of smoke. While he was quickly trying to figure out what kind of smoke he smelled, the glint of flames coming from the kitchen caught his eye.

[Brent, you need to wake him up, and then wake up the other boys.]

"How do you wake up a sleepwalker so they don't flip out?" Brent asked quickly glancing around to try to find where Randy's voice was coming from.

[It doesn't matter, just wake him up and get him outside, and hurry!]

Brent nodded as he grabbed Lance's shoulders and turned him around. "Lance! Come on buddy, I need you to wake up for me!"

Lance seemed to try to hug Brent as he casually looked around the room, still showing no signs of waking up.

Brent started to shake Lance as he heard the crackling of the fire getting louder behind him, "Come on Lance! Wake up! Please!"

Lance put his head down and started shaking it slowly as he tried to pull himself away from Brent. After a few more tries, and Brent nearly having to shout, Lance finally woke up startled and confused.

"What's going on?" Lance asked in a panicked voice as he instinctively pushed Brent's hands away from him.

"Lance! Lance! Are you awake now?" Brent asked quickly as he grabbed hold of Lance again.

"I think so", Lance answered still very much confused.

"Okay, there is a fire in the kitchen, and now the dinning room. You need to get out of the house and get help. I'm going to wake everyone else up."

Lance ran toward the door as Brent ran back upstairs and started banging on the bedroom doors for everyone to wake up. He then noticed the flight of stairs going to the third floor and ran up those quickly and banged on the two doors he found upstairs.

Within moments, the sound of screaming and panicked kids filled the halls as everyone ran around in chaos and trying to get out of the house.

By the time Brent ran back down to the second floor, the flames had already started burning in the hallway and were making their way to the third floor. Noticing that all the doors seemed to be open, he quickly followed the last set of kids back down to the first floor and out of the house.

"Randy, is everyone out?" Brent shouted as he ran across the street to meet with the rest of the kids and adults that were gathering and watching the house. Already the sound of sirens could be heard approaching in the distance.

Lance noticed Brent, and immediately ran toward him, "Are you okay?"

"Yea, I think so. Is everyone out? Randy didn't answer me when I tried asking him." Brent replied as he gave Lance a quick hug.

Lance seemed to get a worried look on his face as he glanced around at the other kids that were outside, "Where's Greg and Doug?"

Brent quickly glanced around at the kids as well while the first set of fire trucks started to pull up. He then glanced toward the second floor of the house and saw Doug opening one of the windows, and then ducking back inside the room.

"Oh god!" Lance yelled as he started to run back toward the house.

Brent quickly grabbed hold of Lance's shoulder to pull him back. Seeing that Brent was losing his struggle to hold Lance back, TJ ran over and helped as well. "There is nothing you can do", Brent shouted, "The place is completely engulfed in flames"

"Let go of me!" Lance struggled to break Brent and TJ's hold.

"The firemen are here, let them do their job", Brent shouted back.

Lance stopped struggling and stared intently at the burning house, the fire trucks that were moving into position, and the window that Doug had opened and had smoke pouring out of it.

Brent took the arm he was using to hold back Lance, and twisted himself around so that he had Lance in a strong protective hug. "They will be okay, you'll see."

"Randy tell you that?" Lance asked a bit softer so that only Brent could hear him.

Brent shook his head. "Randy hasn't answered me since he told me to wake you up. I don't know what's up with that."

Lance flinched as part of the roof of the house collapsed. Several streams of water were already being shot toward the house, and a ladder was being moved into position near the open window.

"Please be okay, please be okay", Lance said softly as he watched one man climb up the ladder and disappear into the window, and another man at the top of the ladder waiting next to it.

A few moments later the man on the ladder had one boy in his arms, and a few seconds after that the first man crawled back out the window with a second boy clinging to him.

Brent and Lance finally managed to make their way over to one of the ambulances where Greg was standing wrapped up in a blanket being looked over by one of the paramedics, and Doug was being strapped down and loaded into the back of the ambulance.

"You okay Greg?" Lance asked as he saw the tears trickling down Greg's face.

"He threw himself on top of me", Greg managed to say.

Brent pulled back lightly on Lance to let him know that he shouldn't ask too many questions. Brent and Lance both realized that they were just wearing their sleep boxers when someone put a blanket around each of them.

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It took nearly 30 minutes for all the kids to be checked out, and for the older kids to be asked a series of questions by the police. The fire was starting to get under control, and many of the adults were starting to arrange for the boys to be taken to different homes to spend the night.

Greg was still crying silently as Lance held him and was gently rocking him back and forth.

"You think they would let you stay at my place tonight?" Brent asked as he noticed other boys starting to get into various police cars, and being driven away.

"Greg has to come with us." Lance rubbed Greg's back a little as he continued to rock him.

Brent nodded and ran over to one of the adults who seemed to be coordinating things. "Excuse me sir".

The man looked up from a pad of paper he was using the top of a police car to write on.

"I stay in the Stone Crest Home a few blocks away, and I was wondering if two of my friends could stay there tonight if you are looking for places for everyone." Brent tried to sound as polite as he could.

"Stone Crest, huh?" The man asked as he looked down at his notepad, "Actually we just talked with them and they said that they could take two. Who are your friends?"

Brent pointed out Lance and Greg as the man nodded his understanding. A few minutes later, all three boys were in the back of one of the police cars being driven the three blocks it took to get to Brent's home.

By the time they arrived at the house, two of the caregivers, Mr. Curtis and Mr. Roy, who were already up took the boys inside to get cleaned up. Greg was still clinging tightly to Lance as they walked inside.

While the boys were trying to get washed up, one of the adults tried to peel Greg off of Lance. When Greg refused to let go, Lance had to explain that he was blind, and his best friend that normally watched him was taken to the hospital.

Lance finally managed to convince Greg to let go long enough so that both boys could get washed up. Immediately after, he re-attached himself.

Brent grabbed some clean t-shirts and boxers for himself and Lance from his room, and one of the adults found something clean for Greg to wear from the room of one of the younger boys.

It was nearly one am before the boys made it out to the common room to lie down on the ches. Lance lay on his back on one of the couches with Greg lying on Lance's stomach. Brent lay on the couch that was closest to Lance.

"I think he's asleep already", Lance whispered once the lights were turned off and the adults left to go back to bed.

"He's been through a lot today and tonight", Brent whispered his reply, "Doug was everything to him. That and Doug was his eyes which he has lost again."

"I hope that Doug is going to be okay." Lanced yawned as he tried to adjust his position on the couch to get more comfortable without waking up Greg.

"He didn't look like he was doing too good when they were loading him into the ambulance earlier." Brent signed.

[He got burnt pretty badly when he threw himself over Greg to protect him]

"Randy!" Brent whispered excitedly causing Lance to glance toward him, "Is he going to be okay?"

[He's definitely going to live, although I don't know how bad he's going to be. We won't know that until tomorrow.]

"Oh" Brent thought about everything that had happened and what to ask next, "Why didn't you answer me earlier when I tried to talk to you?"

[I'm sorry bro, but I was busy. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow, I promise. But you guys need to get some sleep now.]

"Okay" Brent nodded. He quickly filled Lance in on the information he had just learned from Randy, and with a final set of good night's the two boys drifted off to sleep; completely exhausted from the days events.



## Chapter Four

8:10am – Monday, September 19th, 2004

With the memories of the previous night's events still floating around in his head, Brent opened his eyes to see two very serious looking, nicely tanned 10 year olds starring down at him. "Hey guys?"

"Brent, what are you doing here?" Arvid spoke softly and took a step closer to Brent.

"And why is Lance here as well?" Dynal stepped next to his twin using the same soft toned voice.

"And who is the kid sleeping on his stomach?" Both twins chimed as they glanced over to the other couch where Lance was sleeping on his back with Greg still latched onto his chest.

"Good morning to you guys as well." Brent sat up and wiped the sleep out of his eyes. "There was a pretty bad fire last night at their home and all the kids got sent to different homes to spend the night. Lance and Greg came here to sleep."

Dynal nodded his understanding. "Is that why a lot of us stayed home from school today?"

"Huh?" Brent couldn't figure out what a fire would have to do with staying home from school.

"All the middle school kids went to school, but they kept all the elementary kids here." Arvid finished his twin's thought.

Before Brent had a chance to respond, a soft moan came from the other couch as Greg started showing signs of waking up. "Doug?" Greg's head shot up from Lance's chest with a shocked expression as he tried feeling around to figure out where he was. "Lance?"

"It's okay buddy, I'm right here." Lance answered sleepily as he put his arms around Greg.

"Doug? Where's Doug? I can't feel him." Greg tried to break away from Lance as if trying to find Doug, but Lance hugged him tighter as he worked on getting both himself and Greg sitting up. After a few moments of struggling, he gave up and buried his face into Lance's shoulder and started to sob. "When is Doug coming back?"

Lance rubbed Greg's back trying to comfort the small boy as he slowly rocked him back and forth.

Brent motioned for the twins to come closer so that Greg and Lance would not hear what he was saying. "Just so you guys know, Greg is blind, so please don't make fun of him. Also Doug was Greg's roommate. He was burned pretty bad in the fire last night when he risked his life to save Greg."

"Wow, that's terrible." Arvid glanced quickly toward Greg in disbelief.

"What was he talking about feeling him?" Dynal added.

Brent thought for a moment trying to decide if he should share Greg's secret with the twins. Then it hit him, they were twins, so perhaps just maybe things might work out. "If you guys promise not to tell anyone else or freak out, I can tell you a secret about Greg."

Both twins nodded their agreement.

"Don't ask me how, but somehow Greg had come up with a way that he could occasionally see things through Doug's eyes." Brent looked at each twin trying to figure out what their response would be.

Arvid was the first to speak. "Wow! That's cool! I read a comic once where these twins were able to do something like that, see out of each other's eyes whenever they wanted."

Dynal poked Arvid in the ribs. "That was just a comic dufus! This is real life."

Brent smiled, and continued in his quiet voice. "Actually, Greg did have a twin brother, and apparently he could do that vision trick a lot better with his twin than he could with Doug. But his twin was killed in a car accident about a year ago."

The twins looked at each other, and then looked back at Brent speaking at the same time. "We're twins!"

All three boys walked over to where Lance was still rocking Greg and hugging him tightly.

"Hi Greg!" Dynal tried to sound as cheerful as possible.

"Greg, this is Arvid and Dynal. They are twins, and have been my roommates here for the last three weeks." Brent said softly as he petted the back of Greg's head.

"Hi." Greg answered weakly, still keeping his head on Lance's shoulder.

"We heard about that neat trick you could do with Doug." Arvid started.

"And since we are twins, we thought maybe you could see if it worked with us." Dynal finished.

Greg lifted his head off of Lance's shoulder, and looked in the general direction of the twins. "Really, so you're not freaked out?"

"No, it sounds cool!" Arvid answered for both twins. "What do I have to do?"

Greg started to use one of his hands to feel out in front of him. "I just need to touch your arm I think."

"Okay." Arvid held out his arm and put it close to where Greg was feeling around. As soon as Greg made contact with it, he immediately pulled his hand back with a slight gasp.

"What's wrong?" Brent asked with his voice full of concern.

"I don't know. I thought I felt something strange." Greg answered as he reached his arm out again.

It didn't take long for Greg to find Arvid's arm for a second try. This time he held onto it for about 20 seconds while he put his head down as if trying to concentrate on something. He then started to shake his head slowly before pulling his arm away. "Nothing."

"Wait! Dynal, touch my other hand, maybe you need both of us?"

Dynal did as Arvid requested, and touched his other arm. Greg reached back out for Arvid's hand again, and concentrated for another 15 to 20 seconds before shaking his head again, causing both twins to drop their hands and sigh in disappointment.

"Thanks a lot for trying guys. The fact that you even tried really means a lot." Brent tried his best to lighten the disappointed mood.

"Yea, thanks." Greg echoed weakly as he laid his head back on Lance's shoulder.

"What do you guys say we go and grab some breakfast? I'm starved." Brent decided that now would be a great time to change the subject.

"We already ate earlier, we would have woken you up, but Mr. Curtis said to let you sleep." Dynal answered.

"But I could use another glass of juice." Arvid started to smile again.

"You would drink an entire gallon of juice if they let you!" Dynal poked Arvid.

"So?" Arvid giggled causing everyone else to giggle except for Greg.

With that, all the boys got up and headed into the kitchen.

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In the kitchen Brent grabbed 3 bowls and 4 large glasses from the cupboard, and placed them on the counter. He poured some Apple Jacks for himself and Lance, and some Coco Puffs for Greg. After filling the bowls and 3 of the glasses with milk, and pouring some juice for Arvid, all the boys sat at the counter to eat.

Greg was not in any hurry to get off of Lance's lap, and he was in less hurry to eat anything, so Lance ended up feeding him.

By the time the boys were half-way through with their breakfast, Mr. Curtis walked in the kitchen, and let the boys know that there were still a few donuts left if any of the boys wanted them.

"Have you heard anything from the hospital about Doug?" Lance asked knowing how impatient Greg was to get any word about his friend.

Mr. Curtis turned around slowly and frowned, "I heard from the hospital about an hour ago. Doug suffered some pretty serious burns to a large portion of his body, and it's going to take a while for him to recover. But, the good news is that he's alive and he should manage to pull through this pretty well."

Greg lifted his head up off of Lance's shoulder and looked toward Mr. Curtis. "Does that mean we can go visit him?"

Mr. Curtis walked over to Greg and ruffled his hair a little. "I'm sorry sport, but not right now. They have to keep him asleep for a few days while his body starts to heal. He would be in too much pain if he were awake, but I bet when you get to your new home in Newton, you'll be able to go visit him when he starts getting better."

"Newton?" Several of the boys said with shocked voices.

"Me and Greg are being transferred to a home in Newton?" Lance asked

"No, just Greg. You're going to be transferred to a different home in Boone." Mr. Curtis got up and started to head back out of the kitchen.

Brent jumped in the conversation before Mr. Curtis had a chance to leave. "But Boone and Newton are in completely different directions, you can't separate Lance and Greg now! They need each other."

"Sorry guys, but that's the way the system works. Rides will be here after lunch to pick Lance and Greg up. This is a closed subject." With a final look to let all the boys know that he was serious, and would not accept any further disagreement, Mr. Curtis left the kitchen.

All 5 boys sat there with stunned expressions on their faces as what they had just been told started to sink in.

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After breakfast Lance and Greg went with Brent, Arvid and Dynal to their bedroom. Arvid and Dynal flopped down on their beds, but neither boy bothered pulling out their books. Greg remained glued to Lance and was now softly sobbing.

"I can't loose you Lance. I know we just met a few days ago, but before I met you I was totally lost, and I can't go back to that again." Brent's face was filled with determination and anger as he looked toward the one person who turned his life back around.

Things were starting to work out so perfectly for Brent yesterday. But now, it looked like the world decided to take a 180 degree turn and suddenly everything was starting to crash down around him. Yesterday Brent was about to be transferred to Lance's home and they would be together. Now, Lance is going to be transferred to another home in another town that is over 50 miles away Yesterday Greg was a happy little boy, and now he's hanging on to Lance as if his life depended on it.

"I don't want to loose you either Brent. You think Randy might know what we can do?" Lance's soothing voice snapped Brent out of his thoughts.

"That's a good idea!" Brent smiled and started to look around the room. "Hey, Randy? What do you say bro? You have any suggestions for us?" Moments later Brent was able to see the semi-translucent image of Randy standing before him looking very serious.

[Do you trust me Brent?]

Brent tilted his head and looked puzzled by Randy's question. "Yeah, of course I do. Why?"

[You don't know how much I really want to tell you the best thing to do. But Saint Mikey showed me what would happen if I just gave you the answer, and I even went through about 5 or 6 what-ifs with him and well... I guess this is some kind of major turning point for you and well... I have to let you make that choice on your own.]

Brent could see the pained look on his translucent friend's face. He could guess how hard it must have been for Randy not to tell him what he knew, and how it must have been something pretty serious for him to hurt himself like this. "That's okay bro. Although I don't understand how it would, you just proved to me that you're really looking out for me, that's why I loved... umm... still love you so much."

"What's he saying?" Lance asked inquisitively while still trying to comfort Greg.

Brent looked toward Lance. "He can't tell me. Apparently some major decision is going to be made one way or the other and it would be bad if he just told me the answer."

"He can't even give you some kind of cryptic riddle or something like they do in the movies?" Lance looked as disappointed as Brent at the news.

[Oh! A cryptic message! Lance, you're a genius! I'll be right back Brent.]

Brent smiled a little as the image of Randy turned around as if to run somewhere, and then faded away. "He said you had a great idea, and then he left and said he would be right back."

Lance looked over at the strange expressions of Arvid and Dynal. "Oh yeah, I guess Brent can see and talk to the ghost of his friend Randy or something."

Dynal smiled. "Yea, we were here a few nights ago when that angel boy with the big golden wings brought Randy to visit Brent."

"You were? Oh wow!" Lance sounded about as close to being surprised as he could, given how sad he was currently feeling.

[Okay, I'm back. I asked Saint Mikey, and he said the best thing that could be said is to follow your heart.]

"Grr! What kind of cryptic message is that?" Brent sighed. He then answered the question that he knew Lance was already getting ready to ask. "Follow your heart is the message that he gave."

[I'm sorry Brent, it would really be best for me to leave for a bit, just remember no matter what you do or decide, I'll always be right next to you, and I'll always love you.]

Lance spoke in a soft voice as he rubbed Greg's back. "I know my heart says I don't want to loose any of my friends."

Brent nodded his head in agreement. "My heart says I just found you, and I don't want to loose you. Not now and not ever."

"So what are you guys going to do? The way Mr. Curtis was talking, there is no way you are going to get them to change their mind." Arvid asked from his bed.

"Maybe they could call the Governor or something, and he could make them change their minds?" Dynal pondered only to be hit in the head by a pillow from Arvid.

"That's just stupid Dyn, although I could think of one thing you could do. But I doubt you would want to." Arvid seemed to get a small grin on his face.

"What?" Both Brent and Lance asked in unison.

"Jinx." Greg mumbled very lightly with his face buried in Lance's shoulder. This forced out small giggles from everyone else.

"You could run away." Arvid replied solemnly.

Everyone sat silently for a few moments trying to ponder the possibilities. Brent put his head down and walked over toward the door with his back turned to everyone else.

"But where would we go? How would we eat? Where would we live?" Lance asked to no-one in particular. "Brent? Are you okay?"

Brent reached out with one of his hands, and very gently put his fingers on the middle of the door. He was starting to learn the vibrations here pretty good. He could feel the washing machine running in the laundry room on the other side of the home. He could also feel someone moving chairs around in the kitchen. Probably trying to sweep under them or something.

"What's wrong Brent?" Lance asked as he took a step toward Brent.

"I got it!" Brent spun himself around with a grin on his face, and walked over to the dresser and picked up a key.

"What's that?" Lance seemed a bit puzzled and surprised by Brent's sudden change of mood.

Brent almost beamed with pride as he spoke. "The key to my old house! Ever since I moved here, they have been after me to go over to my old house and collect all the stuff I was interested in keeping, but for some reason I just couldn't do it."

Seeing the confused look on Lance's face Brent continued. "You and I can run away and go to my old house. I bet there is still a lot of stuff there we can use. Extra clothes, maybe even some money that is lying around. I remember where the old man used to stash some of it."

"What will we do after that? We can't stay there, that will be the first place they'll go looking for us." Lance questioned, although the tone of his voice said that he was seriously pondering the idea as well.

Brent thought for a few moments before answering. "I don't know. But it will give us some time to think. If we don't leave now, after lunch they are going to be hauling you away."

Lance thought for a few moments as well and finally nodded. "Okay, but Greg has to come with us. I'm all he has left now, and I can't leave him. If he's taken to Newton, there is no way they will let him travel all the way back to see Doug."

"Okay, that works for me. Greg can come with us. You two can come with us as well if you want." Brent looked toward the twins who had remained quiet through most of the conversation.

Arvid and Dynal looked at each other as they wordlessly communicated for a few moments. Arvid then began to speak for both of them. "We've lived on the streets before, and we aren't in any hurry to go back."

"Plus, we kind of like it here." Dynal continued.

"Besides, you will need someone to stay behind to help create your cover story." Arvid finished with a smile.

Brent nodded. "Okay, so it will just be the three of us."

"Hold on, there is one more thing that I have to do before I can agree to this." Lance's smile disappeared from his face as he forced Greg to look up into his eyes. "Greg, I know you feel really sad right now, but you are a part of this too. I am not going to go if you won't. So what do you say, do you want to run away?"

Greg immediately jerked his head back and away from Lance's light hold, and then pushed it right back so that he was laying on Lance's shoulder again before speaking in a half-crying tone. "I don't want you to leave me Lance. If it means that we have to run away then I want to be with you."

Lance nodded, and started rocking Greg again. "Okay, let's do it."

"Now to figure the best way to sneak away without anyone suspecting anything." Brent thought out loud.

"That's easy. Just say you're going back to Lance's place to see if there is anything of his or Greg's that can be salvaged." Dynal beamed at the very cool idea he thought of.

"Thanks guys! You two are the best roomies I've ever had!" Brent walked over and hugged Arvid and then Dynal.

"Um, Brent. Aren't they the only roomies you have ever had?" Lance tilted his head slightly.

"Minor detail!" Brent answered with a smile causing everyone else to giggle a little. "Okay, let's do this!"

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"Just remember, make sure you guys are back before lunch, and come straight back if no adults are there." Mr. Curtis reminded Brent one last time as Brent walked out of the office.

As Brent walked down the hall toward the common room, he was somewhat pleased with himself in regards to how easily that seemed to go. Well, at first it didn't look like Mr. Curtis was going to go along with him, but when he was able to explain that Lance and Greg would be gone after lunch, he must have understood that this would have been their only chance.

"So?" Lance asked as he stood up with Arvid and Dynal and walked over to Brent.

"He said yes." Brent answered with a sigh.

What would otherwise have been seen as a major victory and something to be proud of was taken with an unusual solemn tone as all the boys headed outside. Brent left what little he had behind other than his key, ID card, and a small amount of pocket change. He couldn't risk taking anything else without it seeming a bit too suspicious. Lance and Greg didn't have anything to take, other than the borrowed clothes that they were wearing, which most likely would not be missed anyway since they were circulated around so much.

Once the boys made it to the basketball court, everyone stopped and said their goodbyes. When everyone was done with their hugs, Brent, Lance, and Greg headed on toward the burnt down building that Lance and Greg had called home for the last several months. Arvid and Dynal remained watching as the boys walked down the street, wondering if they would ever see them again.

The boys walked in silence. Brent walked with his hands in his pockets looking toward the ground, and Lance continued to carry Greg.

Once they had crossed the second street, Brent realized that Greg seemed to be getting a bit heavy for Lance, as he had been holding him since they had woken up earlier. "Can I hold him for a bit?"

"You mind?" Lance looked down asking Greg.

When Greg shook his head 'no', the hand-off was made in silence, and the boys continued walking with Brent now holding Greg, and Lance taking a much needed break.

"Holy Crap!" Lance said as the boys reached the third street and could finally see first hand the full extent of the damage that had been done.

Nearly the entire third floor had collapsed and was no longer visible. By looking through the remaining second and first floor windows, it was clear that nearly the entire building was gutted. Open sky was exposed in every second floor window, except for one. The one second floor room that still seemed to have a portion of a ceiling was Greg and Doug's room.

"It doesn't look like much of anything is going to be found in there". Brent sniffed as the smell of burnt wood was still very predominate in the air.

"Guess not." Lance was still looking at the burnt down building which had been home for the last several months. "I still don't even remember how I got outside last night."



Brent chuckled softly to himself. "Figures."

"What?" Lance looked toward Brent as his eyes filled with questions.

"You're the reason we were able to spot the fire and get as many people out as we did. If it wasn't for you, I think a lot more people would have been hurt. Some people could have even died. " Brent rubbed Greg's back knowing that some of this discussion might upset him a little.

Lance seemed a bit shocked. "What did I have to do with anything?"

"Well, if I didn't find you sleepwalking downstairs last night, I never would have seen the flames coming from the kitchen. By the time I woke you up enough to get you to go outside for help, the flames had already spread to the dining room. So it was really a miracle that you decided to start sleepwalking when you did." Brent figured he had said enough and decided to give Lance some time to think about what was said.

"I guess." Lance finally answered after several minutes of being lost in his thoughts.

"We can still turn back ya know." Brent quietly spoke as Lance turned his head to look at him. "We can still go back to the home. We might all get split up, but at least we will have a roof over head, and warm food."

Lance shook his head. "All of that stuff would be meaningless to me if I lost you or Greg. As long as we have each other we still have a chance to make things work."

"Don't leave me Brent. Please don't leave me." Greg sobbed in Brent's shoulder using a small voice.

Brent tightened his hug of Greg a bit more and thought about the situation that they had found themselves in. Lance and Greg both seemed determined to do this. Although logically Brent's brain told him that running away was the wrong thing to do, in his heart Brent knew that this was something that had to be done. For any of them to have any hope of a decent future, they would all need each other. Being bounced around from one children's home to another like lost baggage was no way to live. Lance and Brent were most likely too old for anyone to want to adopt, and how many people would want to adopt a 6 year old blind kid? No, Brent had made up his mind; this was definitely the right decision.

"My house is a good ways across town, so we best get going." With a final look toward Lance, they both started to walk down the street that would eventually lead them to Brent's old house.

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For the first hour, the boys walked in near silence as they slowly made their way across town. They decided to stick to the side streets and stay off the main roads since they were less likely to be patrolled by the police or those on the lookout for kids skipping school.

Both boys were somewhat surprised at the number of other people that were out on the streets, especially the side streets that they had been following. They even passed one or two other kids, but the large majority of people were adults. Fortunately, so far they had not been stopped or even questioned by anyone.

"You ready for me to hold him for a bit?" Lance broke the silence as they reached a large intersection and had to wait for the 'walk' signal.

"Sure." Brent first checked to make sure Greg was still awake and then handed him off to Lance. "I'm definitely going to have to start working out more."

"So, what do you think will happen to us? I mean, after we get to your house and all." Lance held Greg tightly as the 'walk' signal lit up on the other side of the street, and both boys started to make their way across.

That was actually a pretty good question that Brent really hadn't been able to completely figure out yet. He had just been focusing on getting to his old house, and maybe grabbing whatever supplies and money he could find laying around. But what about after that? He knew that they would not be able to stay at his house for long, as that would probably be one of the first places that would be searched after they were reported missing. So where could they go?

"I'm not really sure yet." Brent finally answered after a few more moments of thought. "We can't stick around here, so maybe get a bus or something and go to another city."

"Where would we go though? We will probably have to find work somewhere to get money for food and stuff, but who is going to hire a 12 or 13 year old kid?" Lance's face was filled with concern.

"Let's get to my house first, and figure out what we have to work with. Once we know where we stand, we can work out a plan of action." Brent tried to make their situation sound a bit more positive, but he didn't think he was doing that well.

"What if we run out of food and starve to death, or freeze?" Greg whimpered, causing both Brent and Lance to realize who else was listening to the conversation.

"Don't worry big guy, we won't starve or freeze." Lance hugged Greg tighter and looked over toward Brent.

"A few weeks ago Randy and I went to this concert that had Aaron Carter, \*NSync, and Backstreet Boys, there was also this group of kids there, some kind of clan or something, and there was talk of a Safe Haven Act. We might be able to use that." Brent quickly tried to come up with some idea seeing that this was starting to upset Greg.

"What's a Safe Haven Act? I think I remember hearing about that concert, the schools only found out about it like a day ahead of time, and our school wasn't able to go." Lance's eyes dropped down filled with sadness.

Brent thought to himself for a few moments. "I'm not really sure. I think it's something that helps to get kids stuck in the system to real families where they can be safe or something like that. I wasn't paying attention all that much."

Lance sighed, "That can't be right. Otherwise they would have gotten all the kids out of the system, and we would have heard about it by now or something."

"Yea, I'll have to see if I can find it on-line or something when we are near a computer next time." Noticing that he was starting to get a bit tired from walking and seeing a small park up ahead, Brent decided this would be a perfect time to try to change the subject. "I could use a quick break and maybe some water. You want to stop for a bit at that park?"

"Sure!" Lance smiled at the chance to take a break. "You getting tired of being carried yet Greg?"

Greg didn't answer other than to shake his head in Lance's shoulder which created giggles from both Lance and Brent.

The boys reached the park which seemed to be little more than a small play ground, and various picnic areas. The most important thing about the park was that it had a small building which had both water fountains and restrooms.

Once both Brent and Lance had grabbed some water, Lance helped Greg get some. After that, all three boys realized that they also needed to pee, and headed for the restrooms that the park very conveniently provided. Once everyone was done, they found a nice bench under a large flowering tree to sit on for a short break.

"How much further do you think we have to go?" Lance asked as a cool breeze lightly tousled the curls in his short slate black hair.

"I think we are about half way there, so we should be able to make it by lunch time." Brent leaned back and looked up at the trees to see the sun shining through the leaves and flowers.

"Cool!" Lance glanced around the park, noticing that no one else was there except for a boy that was kneeling down by some plants on the other side of the swings who looked a little familiar. "Hey! Isn't that Jude over there by those bushes?"

"Yeah!" Brent said as he sat back up and glanced to where Lance was pointing. "Hey, Jude!"

The platinum blond haired 8 year old boy looked up as Brent shouted his name. Picking up a small bag of leaves that was sitting next to him, he stood up and walked over to where Brent, Lance, and Greg were sitting. "Hey guys, I wasn't expecting to see you two here! And who's your friend?"

"Hi Jude!" Lance smiled brightly at the chance to show off his young charge. "This cute little guy with his face buried in my shoulder is Greg. Greg was born blind, and a good friend of his got hurt really bad in a fire last night."

"Hi Greg, I'm sorry to hear about your friend, I hope he will be okay." Jude reached out to gently pat Greg on the back.

As soon as Jude's hand touched, Greg let out a small yelp, and flinched so bad that it almost knocked Lance over. As soon as he recovered, Greg looked up into Jude's eyes with a very confused expression on his face.

"Did I do something wrong?" Jude asked nervously as he took a step backward.

"I'm not sure." Brent leaned over to look at Greg as well, trying to figure out what was wrong.

"Are you a twin?" Greg finally asked a few moments later in a weak voice as he tilted his head to the side.

"Actually, I'm a triplet! But how did you know?" Jude smiled and was obviously relieved that he did not do anything wrong.

"I can see out of your eyes. And I can see really good, almost like I could with my twin." Greg was clearly happy at his new discovery, but his voice trailed away toward the end as memories of his twin brother Creg filled his head.

"Really? You can really see what I'm seeing? Like you can see me looking at you right now?" Jude was nearly as surprised as Greg.

"Whoa, Greg that's awesome!" Lance gave Greg a squeeze to show how happy he was for him.

Greg nodded. "Yeah. Could you look around a bit, I haven't been able to see a thing since yesterday."

Jude started to look around at the rest of the park as he tried to understand what it must be like not only to be blind, but then to also figure out a way to be able to see out of the eyes of others. That had to be pretty freaky to see from a point of view that wasn't yours. Finally, Jude realized a problem with Greg's last comment. "Since yesterday? Didn't Lance say that you were born blind?"

Lance smiled as he decided that a slightly more detailed explanation was required. "Actually, Greg's friend that was hurt yesterday is the one he was able to see through. But I guess he couldn't see that well, just occasional flashes of a picture every now and then. He could see a lot better through his twin's eyes, but he was killed in a car accident over a year ago."

"Aw man! That sucks." Jude looked back toward Greg and could see the obvious sadness appear on his face as Lance spoke of his twin. He didn't even want to think about how he would feel if any of his brothers were ever hurt or killed.

"So Jude, what are you doing way out here? We are a long way away from where we met yesterday." Brent tried to come up with something to quickly change the subject.

"Oh!" Jude seemed a bit surprised as he turned away from Greg, and looked over at Brent. "Actually I live about a block away. I was gathering a few different types of leaves for my biology class."

"They let you out of school to get leaves?" Lance turned away from Greg as he too was a bit surprised about Jude's answer.

"Well, me and my brothers are all home schooled, so it wasn't a problem. But what about you guys? I know you don't live anywhere near here." Jude fumbled with his bag of leaves a little as he looked back and forth between Brent and Lance.

"Um." Lance tried to think of something to say.

"Well." Brent was also having a hard time of coming up with something that would sound good.

"We're running away because they were going to split all three of us up and make us go to different homes that are far away from each other and I don't want to lose my Brent or Lance." Greg smiled at the knowledge that he knew the right answer when the two older boys didn't.

Brent and Lance looked at each other in horror as they realized what Greg had just innocently admitted to. Then they both turned toward Jude to see what his reaction would be.

Jude thought for a few moments before he started to nod slightly. "Yea, I probably would too if someone tried to split me apart from my brothers."

"So you're not going to report us or anything?" Lance asked in an almost pleading voice.

Jude giggled. "Why would I do that? Do you know where you guys are going?"

"To the south side of town, past the tracks." Brent answered, being careful to keep his answer a bit vague just in case Jude was not being completely honest.

Jude looked behind him as if trying to see something off in the distance and then turned back toward the other boys. "It's not that safe for you guys to be heading down to the south of town. There are lots of cops that pick kids up off the streets. Why don't you come to my house for a few hours, and you can meet all my brothers and maybe have lunch with us."

"That would be cool and all, but we wouldn't want to interrupt or be a bother or anything." Brent still was not sure how much he could trust Jude, although he was starting to feel a bit torn as he knew that soon each meal might become a struggle.

"You were kind to me yesterday when everyone else wasn't, so it's really no problem at all. Plus our house is such a madhouse that I bet no one will even notice you." Jude glanced around again while he spoke, as if expecting to see something or someone that wasn't there.

Brent and Lance looked at each other for a few moments as if wordlessly communicating with each other. As soon as Lance nodded, Brent turned back toward Jude. "Okay, that would be cool. But we can only stay for a little while. I want to get to where we are going before it gets dark."

"Not a problem. As soon as the middle schools start letting out around 3, you should be fine going wherever you want to go." Jude turned around and was about to start leading the way to his house when Greg jumped off of Lance's lap and reached up to grab Jude's hand.

Lance giggled. "Looks like you found a new friend."

Jude looked down toward Greg as Greg looked up toward him. Both boys smiled at each other before Jude looked back and nodded toward Lance.

All the boys headed out of the park to head to Jude's house.

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As the boys were walking toward Jude's house, they spotted two other boys walking towards them that looked almost identical to Jude. One of the new boys started running toward them as soon as he saw the group.

"Those are your brothers?" Lance asked with concern as he watched the running boy approach them with amazing speed.

"Unfortunately." Jude answered as he started to slow his pace a little.

"Jude! Jude! There you are!" the new boy quickly said as he grabbed a hold of Jude's shoulder to stop himself and rest. "Who are these guys?"

"Ty, you forgot your meds again today, didn't you?" Jude frowned as he tried to pull away from the boy that looked exactly like he did. Right down to the same sparkling blueish green eyes and fair skin tone.

"Did not!" Ty answered with a tone of disappointment as he pushed Jude away a little.

"The quickest way to get him off of you!" Jude smiled as he glanced toward Brent and Lance.

Just as Jude and Ty were finishing their exchange, the third boy reached them who looked identical to the other two. "Dude, mom is so worried about you! You were just supposed to go to the park and back for the leaves! And you know you can't have any friends over to play until after classes are done."

Jude smiled. "You worry way too much Phil. These are the guys who helped me yesterday. This is Lance, and that is Brent, and this little guy here is Greg." Jude noticed a hurt look on Greg's face as he was introducing him. "Are you okay little guy?"

Greg nodded. "My head just hurts a little and your vision is a little blurry."

Phil and Ty looked toward Jude with a questioning expression.

"It's a long story guys. I'll tell you when we get back to the house." Jude tried to pick Greg up but couldn't.

Seeing this, Lance quickly walked up and scooped Greg into his arms as all the boys continued walking toward the triplet's house.

"I see each of you have different colored shirts on, is that the only way to tell you apart."

"Yea, I wear red because it's the coolest and it's the color of my favorite race car driver." Ty chimed in quickly.

Jude giggled. "When you get to know us better, you will be able to tell pretty easily, but usually we do wear our favorite colors. Ty wears red, Phil likes green, and as you can probably guess, I like yellow."

"You okay Greg?" Brent's voice was filled with concern.

Greg nodded as he rested his head on Lance's shoulder. "I think so. Oh cool! Is that your house?"

Phil glanced back toward Greg and noticed he was looking in the exact opposite direction of where their house was. "Dude! He's not even looking. Is he okay?"

Jude smiled once again. "Yup, this is it. The Von Schuyler residence."

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Both Brent and Lance were slightly surprised as they walked up to the slightly run down, 2 story house. Before they reached the screened porch, they saw several bikes in the front yard along with two skateboards, a scooter, a pair of roller blades, and a seriously rusting wagon.

Although the outside of the house was a bit surprising, nothing could have prepared either boy for what they saw inside. As they stepped through the screened porch and into the living room of the house, they saw several other boys running around. Two boys were sitting at a coffee table in the living room scribbling notes onto a paper as they each stole occasional glances at a book they shared, another boy ran into what seemed to be a kitchen, as another boy ran out from the kitchen and up a flight of stairs. All the boys looked almost the same.

"Dude!" Lance's expression was filled with shock and amazement. "How many of you are there?"

Ty burst out in a fit of laughter at the sight of Lance's expression as Jude giggled and Phil smiled very broadly. Finally Jude filled the boys in on their secret. "Actually there are a total of 9 of us. Three sets of triplets if you can believe it."

"Good lord, your parents were busy!" Brent said before he could stop himself, which caused even more giggles from the younger triplets. Even Phil was caught giggling a little.

"That's Max and Cory in the living room, they're 10 and their triplet is Roe who's probably up stairs on the computer. That's Luke in the kitchen looking at us with that goofy look, he's 12, his triplet Carol you saw running up stairs when we walked in, and his other triplet Matt is at music lessons, but should be home shortly." Jude beamed with pride as he introduced everyone.

"Wow!" Brent and Lance both commented together.

Suddenly Greg let out a soft whine and grabbed his head in pain.

"What's wrong?" Lance asked as he looked down toward Greg.

"Hurts." Greg's eyes started to fill with tears as he rested his head back on Lance's shoulder, still gripping it with his hands.

Ty looked over toward Greg with concern and then started to run upstairs. "I'll go get him some Tylenol from the bathroom, and then he can probably lie down in mom's room."

Jude nodded. "From what you guys told me earlier, I bet some quiet time lying down will help the little guy out a lot."

Brent and Lance followed Jude as he led them through the kitchen and into a back room that opened up into a very nice looking bedroom. Before Lance was able to finish laying Greg down on the bed, Ty had bolted back into the room and placed two pills into Jude's hands.

"That's one advantage of having a hyper brother." Jude smiled as he turned his attention toward Greg. "Here ya go buddy, just take this."

Greg shook his head a little as he sat himself up. "I'm not good at swallowing pills."

Jude lifted one of Greg's hands with one hand, and placed one pill in it with his other. "That's okay, these are junior chewables. Just put it in your mouth and let it start to dissolve, and after a few minutes you can chew it up if you want. It has a cool grape flavor, so I think you will like it."

"Thanks." Greg put the tablet in his mouth, and lay down on the pillow.

"See, that's not so bad. Here is another one, go ahead and eat this one as soon as you finish the first one, then try to take a nap for a bit." Jude put the second tablet in Greg's hand, and then stepped away from the bed.

A faint sound of a door closing could be heard as Ty jumped up and darted out of the room. "I hear mom!"

Jude smiled. "Come on, we need to try to catch her as she runs through."

Brent and Lance looked at each other with concern, and quickly followed Jude out of the room.

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The two boys made it into the living room just fast enough to see one of the older triplets, most likely Matt, come through the screen door holding a trumpet case and running upstairs. Following directly behind him was a rather tall woman at least 6' 2" that had rather short curly platinum blond hair holding a bag of groceries. She had to be at least in her mid to late 30's.

"Mommy!" Ty nearly knocked the woman down as he pounced her from one of the love seats.

"Titus Neal!" The lady's voice was a bit higher than expected, but still a voice that demanded respect, "Have you forgotten to take your Adderall again today?"

Ty looked down at his feet and said nothing.

"It's still before lunch, so go take it right now before you forget." Her voice was smooth yet forceful. The type of tone that dared you not to argue back, which only mothers seemed to know how to do.

"Yes mama." Ty answered in a small voice as he headed upstairs.

"Does anyone know if Luke ate yet?" The woman asked as she took her bag of groceries into the kitchen with Jude close behind her.



"Yes!" Max called out from the coffee table in the living room.

"Luke Cameron! Come on, we need to leave for your group soon." The woman called out in a much louder voice as she set her bag on the table.

"Hey mom?" Jude tried to find a place to interrupt while his mom was running around the kitchen. "Is it okay if Brent, Lance and Greg stay here for a few hours? Greg has a real bad headache and is resting in your room."

The woman stopped briefly to look at Jude and then started taking out stuff from the bag and putting it in the refrigerator. "Oh honey, you know your not suppose to have friends over until after 3pm. Boys! I bought a bunch of fresh cold cuts and got more pickles so you guys can make sandwiches for lunch!"

"They are not friends, well they are, but these are the guys that helped me out yesterday, and they have to go to the south side of town, but Greg needs to take a little break." Jude pleaded.

Jude's mother stopped as she seemed to notice two new boys that did not belong to her standing in the kitchen. "Oh, you two must be Brent and Lance."

Both boys nodded as Brent was the first to speak up. "Yes, mama. I'm Brent and this is Lance. We don't want to be any trouble for you here, so we can get going."

"Nonsense!" The woman knelt down to look into both Brent and Lance's eyes. "Neither of you are my sons, so I don't expect either of you to call me mama. You are both welcome to call me Mary. Also, Jude told me how you helped him out yesterday, so both of you plop yourselves down right here until your friend is feeling better."

"Thanks Mary!" Lance smiled.

Mary stood back up and quickly rushed into the living room where she picked up the sheets of paper that Max and Cory were working on. "Nice job boys. Max, when you get done remember you have math from yesterday to finish up. Cory, you have that book report to finish, and you need to get that poster done before I pick you up at 4pm to go to the booster club."

"Ready!" Luke said as he ran down the stairs with a small folder in his hands.

Mary grabbed the folder and quickly looked inside. After a few moments, her face became very stern. "You did not get 8 hours of sleep last night!"

"Close enough." Luke argued back.

"Carol told me you had another nightmare last night, and I don't see that in here either. Luke Cameron Von Schuyler! How do you expect group to help you at all if you don't write down what really happens?" Mary glared intensely toward Luke, who only looked down at his feet. "Okay, we don't have time for this now, let's go."

Mary quickly gave the folder back to Luke, and then briskly walked out the door. Luke seemed to have a lost expression on his face for a few moments, but soon followed after his mom.

After the door to the house was closed, Brent looked over toward Jude. "Dude, is it always like that around here?"

"Pretty much." Jude smiled as he started to walk back into the kitchen. "Come on, I'll show you what I am going to do with those leaves!"

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Brent and Lance watched intently as a series of colors slowly started to appear on a white piece of filter paper that had its bottom portion submerged in a small tray of alcohol.

"Wow, that's amazing!" Lance continued to look at the paper. "So how exactly did you get all these colors from a green leaf?"

"It was simple, watch as I do another." Jude beamed as he took the filter paper out of the tray and laid it over on another table to dry. "Here, we will do one of these bigger leaves this time. First we take a sheet of filter paper. Then we take a coin and start rubbing the leaf onto the paper like this. You have to rub pretty hard sometimes. We are trying to get a line of rubbed off leaf just like that. And now all we have to do is stick the bottom part of the paper into the tray of alcohol like this, and wait about 15 to 20 minutes and the paper will start to suck up the alcohol and will carry the leaf colors up."

Brent nodded his head in understanding. "I don't think we have done anything like this in science class at school. You do all this stuff because your home-schooled?"

"Uh-huh. Mom says we are really smart or something, so we are able to go a lot faster than normal kids. If I went to public school I would be in the second grade right now, but here I'm doing forth grade work." Jude adjusted the paper slightly to make it more level with the tray.

"That's really cool! I wish I could do that." Lance seemed a bit lost in his thoughts as he watched the alcohol slowly start to get sucked up the paper.

"You guys can watch that for a bit if you want. I'm going to go check in on Greg, and then it will be lunch time. You two could try doing these after lunch if you want." Jude headed out of the room after failing to get an immediate response from either of the boys.

"Um, yeah, sure." Brent said as the filter paper continued to hypnotize him.

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Jude quietly walked into the bedroom where Greg was resting. As soon as he got half-way between the door and the bed, Greg rolled over on his back and opened his eyes slightly.

"Hey little guy, how's your head feeling?" Jude sat down on the side of the bed next to Greg.

Greg sat up holding onto his head. "It feels a little better. Everything is really cloudy and confusing."

Jude put one of his hands on Greg's head to see if he had a temperature. As soon as he touched his head, Greg flinched a little, and opened his eyes up wider, which caused Jude to pull his hand away quickly.

"When you touched my head, I could see clearer, I could just see myself." Greg started to feel around to see if he could find Jude's hand.

Jude nodded. "I bet I know the problem. It's probably the same problem I have. All of my other brothers are able to do this mind thing where they can talk to each other in their heads. They call it the triplet network, but I can never seem to be able to get it to work."

"That sounds pretty cool." Greg stopped feeling around and looked in Jude's general direction.

"Yeah, it would be if I could ever get it to work. But maybe you're just getting overloaded from everyone, and you need to focus on just one person." Jude grabbed Greg's hand which caused the small boy to visibly relax as he was able to see again.

"That feels a lot better. But could you look at something other than me?" Greg smiled.

Jude quickly tried to find something else in the room to look at, and decided to settle on the window. "Okay. Sorry. Now just concentrate on me in your head. Only let yourself see out of my eyes, and ignore all the background noise."

"How?" Greg asked as his voice was heavy with concentration.

"I'm not really sure, since this is the part I could never get." Jude's voice clearly showed a tone of discouragement at his own problem, but he quickly recovered. "Just block everything else out, and just focus on me. Focus... there ya go... perfect! You're doing it."

"No I'm not, you're still touching me." Greg let out a little giggle.

Jude looked back toward Greg to show that he was no longer touching him. "See, you're doing this completely on your own now!"

"Wow... cool... thanks!" Greg was so excited he almost missed Jude turning his head to show Lance entering the bedroom.

"Hey sport, how ya feeling?" Lance walked over to the side of the bed where Greg and Jude were sitting.

"Great!" Greg beamed with pride. "My head doesn't hurt anymore, and Jude just taught me how to concentrate just on him so I don't get overloaded by everyone else."

"Hey, that's really great! Maybe you would like to concentrate on coming out to the kitchen for some lunch before Jude's brothers eat everything up." Lance helped Greg off the bed, and all three boys headed to the kitchen to see if any food had been left for them.

As soon as Brent saw Lance enter the kitchen, he quickly waved him over. "If you guys want anything for lunch, you best get over here fast! The way these guys are eating, there isn't going to be much left for long!"

Lance could already smell the fresh meats and bread that Mary had brought the boys earlier that day, so he didn't need any additional convincing. Within moments he was at Brent's side grabbing for the various supplies needed to make his ham, turkey and cheese sandwich complete with pickles, mustard, mayo and jelly. Jude made Greg a ham and cheese sandwich with just butter and then made a turkey sandwich for himself complete with all the trimmings.

By the time lunch was over, there was not a piece of meat or bread to be found in the entire kitchen, other than the crumbs that had fallen to the floor. A few of the boys grudgingly stayed behind after lunch to start cleaning up the kitchen as the rest of the boys went off to do other things. Apparently there was a small clipboard hanging on the side of the refrigerator that no-one dared not follow when it came to seeing who was assigned to what chores.

After Brent, Lance and Greg finished helping Jude with his science lab, Brent asked if he could use the computer to do a little online research of his own. Carol, one of the 12 year old triplets, was more than happy to help Brent get setup on the computer while Lance and Greg went with Jude to start on some math work.

About 30 minutes later, Lance entered the bedroom where Brent was using the computer.

"What are you looking for?" Lance asked as he walked up behind Brent and draped his arms around his shoulders.

Brent leaned back and sighed at the feeling of his friend's presence. "Hi. Umm... I was just trying to do a bit of research on that Safe Haven act you were talking about earlier."

"Find anything cool?" Lance rested his chin on the top of Brent's head.

"Well, you were a little off on your description of Safe Haven earlier. It looks like it is something that Starfleet created a few years ago to be able to quickly get kids out of dangerous or abusive situations when local governments are not able to move fast enough. So it doesn't look like that would apply to us." Brent tried to figure out what Lance was doing to the top of his head with his chin.

"Yea, I might have been wrong on that, it was just what I heard from some other kids." Lance started to rub his chin around in circles on the top of Brent's head. "Did you know your hair smells REALLY good?"

Brent rolled his eyes. "Um, I've also been reading a little about the group of kids I saw at that concert. They are called Clan Short and I guess they help out a lot of kids and stuff. They use to live right here in Des Moines, but I think they have moved or are planning on moving somewhere else."

"Sounds cool." Lance was clearly not paying much attention to what Brent was talking about.

Brent was about to continue to share some of the other information he had found when he felt something move in his pants which caused him to blush a little. "Dude, stop that!"

Lance let go of Brent and sat down on the bed next to where he was sitting with a hurt expression on his face.

Brent looked over at his friend and sighed. "I'm sorry Lance. It's just, I didn't know what you were doing and it was making me feel kinda weird inside and I was trying to find stuff that might help us stay together and I'm sorry."

Lance looked up toward Brent. "That's okay. I guess I shouldn't have been doing that when you were trying to concentrate. It's just we really haven't had much time alone together and I don't know."

"I don't think right here is the best place for us to have alone time together, but I promise when we get to my old house tonight we will have some alone time just you and me." Brent reached over and gave Lance a loving hug.

Brent finished explaining about some of the other information he found out about Clan Short, as well as a new Starfleet department called FYS (Federation Youth Services), and about the director of this new division, Terri Short, who was also somehow connected to Clan Short. Both boys agreed that they should probably try calling her at some point.

Before Brent had a chance to continue his research, Max came in and had to use the computer to finish an assignment before his mom returned home, so Brent and Lance headed back downstairs to check on Greg. Within a few minutes, they found Greg securely attached to Jude, who was trying to explain to him what fractions were.

Over the next few hours, Brent and Lance watched some TV, and also helped Ty and Phil when they went to the back to do the same science lab that Jude had done before lunch. Greg remained glued to Jude regardless of what he was working on, and Jude seemed to take extra care to try to explain all of the subjects he was working on in terms that Greg could understand.

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Around 3pm, Brent and Lance decided that it was probably best that they continued on their journey before it started to get too late.

"Aw! Can't I stay with Jude a little longer?" Greg whined as he hugged Jude, who was showing him some pictures of a shuttle craft in his science book.

"I'm sorry squirt, but we really need to get going or it will be dark before we get to Brent's house." Lance felt a bit sad as he knew that this would mean Greg would be losing his vision again.

All four boys jumped as Jude's mom went running through the living room shouting on her way to the kitchen. "Roe Patterson! Get yourself changed for gymnastics and drag your butt to the car! We are going to be late!"

"Wait here, I have an idea." Jude said as he broke free of Greg and headed toward the kitchen.

Roe, one of the 10 year old triplets, came running down in a pair of gym shorts and a very tight elastic shirt. "I'm already changed!" Roe called out as he headed out the door.

"Hey mom, is it okay if I walk Brent, Lance, and Greg home since they are not that familiar with this part of town?" Jude asked as he watched his mother grabbing a bag of cookies and heading out of the kitchen.

Mary stopped briefly to look at Jude, before continuing to walk back through the living room. "Sure, just make sure you're back by dinner."

Before Jude could agree, Mary was already out of the door and running to her car where Roe was already sitting pulling a looser shirt on over his elastic shirt.

Jude walked back over to take Greg's hand as he noticed the shocked expressions on Brent and Lance's faces. "You guys don't mind if I tag along, do you?"

Brent shook his head. "I don't."

Lance shook his head as well. "Me neither, and I'm sure you won't get any arguments from Greg."

Greg started nodding his head up and down enthusiastically which caused the other boys to giggle. Shortly thereafter, all four boys headed out of the house, and down the street toward the south side of town.

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The boys walked the first 10 minutes in silence. Brent and Lance were walking next to each other in front, with Jude and Greg following behind. Greg had a very tight grip on Jude's arm as he worked on orienting himself from Jude's point of view.

"So, where in the south part of town are we heading to?" Jude asked as he helped Greg step back up on the sidewalk after crossing a street.

"To Brent's old house." Lance answered as he glanced toward Brent.

"Why ya guys need to go there?" Jude noticed that all the answers he was getting were rather vague so far.

Lance squeezed Brent's hand. "If he's going to be coming with us, he really needs to know."

Brent nodded. "I guess you should probably know Jude, since we are not far from your house in case you want to turn back or something. You remember back when we met in the park, Greg mentioned we were running away? "

Jude thought to himself for a few moments before answering. "Yea, I was a bit curious as to why, but I didn't say anything because you guys didn't seem to want to talk about it much then. I just figured it had to be something pretty important for you to be bringing Greg with you."

Brent waited for Lance's reassuring nod before he continued. "I was just about to be transferred to the home that Lance and Greg were staying at and we were all going to be together. But last night there

was a big fire and the place burnt down. Then this morning we found out that without asking any of us, they were going to transfer Greg to a home in Newton and Lance to a home in Boone."

Lance continued where Brent left off. "I just met Brent last week, and I don't really know why, but I have this feeling that I really need to be with him, and he needs to be with me. And I couldn't stand being so far from Brent or from Greg."

"Me either." Greg added.

"So that's why you all left, but why Brent's old house? You have to know that will be one of the first places they will look for you guys." Jude seemed a bit concerned that he might have found a serious flaw in the other boy's plans.

"I use to live there a few weeks ago before my dad died." Brent paused for a few seconds to gather his thoughts as Lance embraced him in a supporting hug. "After that night I was placed in a group home while the state tried to decide what to do with me. They kept trying to get me to go back to the house to get some of my stuff, but a week after my dad died, my best friend was killed, and well, I didn't feel like doing much of anything after that until I met Lance."

"So we are going to see if any of Brent's stuff is still there that we might be able to take with us. We probably won't be staying there long, maybe just overnight." Lance added as he gave Brent another caring squeeze.

"That would really suck to have your best friend killed. Not that I've ever had one before." Jude was lost in thought as both Brent's and Lance's words started to sink in. He almost missed the next street corner which caused Greg to nearly cause both of the boys to trip.

Brent giggled a little as he looked back to see Jude and Greg recovering. "Yeah, so just be glad you have parents, because life can really suck when you lose them."

Jude frowned. "Trust me, having parents isn't always all that it's cracked up to be either. Especially when you have so many brothers and your parents are so busy they forget that you're alive."

Neither Brent nor Lance seemed to have a reply to Jude's revelation, so all the boys continued to walk in silence for a while longer.

The silence was broken after they crossed a large intersection, and found that they had reached the South-East corner of a large mall.

"Wow! You lived near South Ridge Mall?" Jude's excitement was clearly beginning to rise.

Brent giggled at Jude's excitement. "Well, not too far away, my house is a bit further down past the ball park, on Villa Drive if you know where that is."

Jude smiled. "No, but it has to be cool if you are near the mall!"

The boys continued past the mall until the road they were walking on ended in a parking lot that was right across the street from several baseball fields. After walking through the ball park, and walking

through a small field on the other side of the park, they soon reached Villa Drive. By 4pm, they had reached the front door of Brent's old house.

The driveway to the house was empty. The grass in the yard was starting to show signs of being a bit overgrown. What the boys saw, including Brent's old bike lying in the yard, told them that no one had been living here for awhile.

However, the windows to the house still had blinds up, the same blinds that Brent remembered being there, so they had no easy way to peak in and see if anyone was in there.

Brent took the key out of his pocket and stood in front of the door for a few minutes, while the other boys stood behind him. With a final glance back toward Lance as if to draw on his courage, he placed the key into the door and twisted.

CLICK! The door opened.

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Brent gasped at the sight he saw as he entered the house. Many of the larger pieces of furniture like the sofa and the recliners were missing. There were also several boxes that were laying around all over the floor. It was pretty clear that someone had been in here and was in the process of packing everything up.

"Wow, your house is cool!" Greg said in wonder as Jude diverted him from tripping over one of the smaller boxes.

"It was okay." Brent answered, as he walked into the kitchen and found two large plastic glasses still sitting in the sink. He held up one of the glasses to inspect it more closely. "These are the glasses that Randy and I used the day... the day my dad died. They are still here."

Lance walked over and hugged Brent. "You okay?"

Brent nodded and returned Lance's hug. "With you next to me, I will be." Brent then leaned his head closer to Lance so that he could whisper in his ear. "But please don't leave me."

Lance nodded and looked up just in time to see Jude about to open the refrigerator. "Dude, no! If power has been off for the last 3 weeks, and there is still food in that, then trust me, you DON'T want to open that!"

Jude let go of the refrigerator door handle as he looked toward Lance and saw the serious look on his face. "Okay."

"Come on guys, my room was upstairs." Brent led the rest of the boys through the kitchen, into the hallway area where his dad's desk still sat with several smaller boxes piled on it, and then up the stairs.

Brent entered his room to find that it too had several boxes in it, but that all the boxes were for the most part empty, except for two larger boxes which the clothes that were hanging in his closet had been placed in.



All the boys started to glance around the room in wonder as they saw all the small trinkets and toys that were sitting on shelves and the dressers in the room. On one of the walls hung a picture of a younger Brent in a soccer uniform with one of his feet on a soccer ball. Another picture showed a younger Brent standing on one side of a giant stuffed mouse, and another boy with long brown hair, and dark blue eyes standing on the other.

"Was that Randy?" Lance asked softly as he noticed Brent starring at it.

Brent nodded. "Yeah."

On the other side of the wall, there was another picture of Brent along with about 7 other boys all dressed in Boy Scout uniforms standing in front of a wooden rope bridge. Lance noticed that one of the boys standing next to Brent in the picture looked like Randy, but his long front bangs must have been hidden up in the hat he was wearing.

Brent walked over to the dresser that was under the picture, and picked up a scout utility knife. "We might need this."

All the other boys watched Brent intently as he slowly looked around the room.

Brent looked out the window, and then back toward everyone else. "Guys, it's going to be dark outside soon, so we don't have a lot of time. Jude, if you and Greg could start looking through the bottom of the closet to see if there is anything that might be useful, I promise nothing will jump out at you. Lance, if you can start looking in the dresser drawers to see what clothes we might want to bring, I'm going to see what I can find in my desk."

Everyone started to go to work. Greg mostly sat next to Jude pointing out things that Jude might have missed as he was looking through stuff. They found two flashlights, some spare change and a broken glow stick. Lance was busy picking out clothes that were somewhat light, but that he thought he and Brent would like wearing.

After Brent had gone through his desk, and discreetly took out a few folded pieces of paper and put them in his pocket, he got up and left the room. A few minutes later he returned with a large backpack that Lance could use to start putting the clothes he had found in. He left the room a second time and returned holding several twenty-dollar bills in his hand.

Lance and Jude both looked at Brent curiously.

"My dad loved to hide money under his mattress." Brent explained as he counted how many twenties he found, and came up with 8. "There is \$160 dollars here. Tomorrow we can go back to the mall and get any other supplies we need, and the rest will have to last us for a while."

Lance nodded and noticed that it was starting to get more difficult to see in the room as the light from outside the window was quickly fading. "I think we found about as much as we are going to find tonight. Any idea what we can do for dinner?"

Brent shrugged as he put the newly found money into his pocket. "The fridge is definitely out. I don't even want to think about what will jump out at us if we open that thing. Maybe we could order take out or something."

All the boys froze as the sound of a police siren could be heard in the distance.

After the siren faded away, Jude was the first to speak up. "You guys could always come back to my house. I'm sure mom wouldn't mind if you spent the night. And she is making spaghetti tonight. Since she usually makes enough to save for lunch, I'm sure there will be plenty for you guys."

Brent nodded. "That sounds real cool and all, but we better not. It was nice of your mom to let us hang out there today, but if we stay any longer, I'm sure she's going to start getting suspicious, even if it's during her brief run through the living room."

Jude giggled. "Yeah, that's a point..."

Jude was cut off and froze in his tracks along with the rest of the boys as a loud click could be heard from downstairs. A few moments later, the sound of the front door opening could be heard.

Brent quickly and quietly made his way over to the bedroom door, and gently closed it.

"This isn't good." Lance whispered as all the boys huddled next to each other as sounds of boxes moving around could be heard downstairs.

"The window?" Jude whispered as he glanced toward the only source of light for the room.

"Locked." Brent shook his head. "But if we can get across the hall to my dad's room, that window is never locked."

All the boys nodded in agreement to Brent's plan. However, before Brent was able to start walking toward the door, the sound of the stairs creaking could be heard.

"Sorry guys." Brent whispered as the door handle to Brent's bedroom started to turn, and a bright light shone into the room as the door swung open.

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#### Author's Notes:

Sorry guys! I didn't go into chapter 4 planning on ending it with a cliff hanger. I was really hoping to get through the entire day, but there are still a lot of events that happen over the next several hours, and it took a bit longer to get to this point than I had planned. I hope I'm not drawing things out too long.

Anyway, the good news is that the story has made it to its new home here on the Annex, and I'm finally starting to get the entire process of writing, editing, approving, formatting, and posting chapters down. So hopefully I'll be able to start getting into a good pattern with getting chapters posted. Since chapter 4

ended sooner than I planned, there is a good chance that chapter 5 might not reach a really critical point to the story. Well at least a critical point for me, which I'm going to have to take a lot of extra care to make sure I don't mess up. So either Chapter 5 or Chapter 6 may have a very small extra delay as I work with some of the other CSU authors to make sure everything in this critical part works out exactly as CSU readers would expect. I'm sure most of you can guess what that is, if you have been paying attention to the hints that have been dropping over the last few chapters.

Also, Since this is my first official 'author notes', I just wanted to take a moment to thank Bill6131 and Dibs for their exceptional help at editing, The Story Lover for helping with the final editing along with HTML formatting and posting on the Annex, and most importantly for ACFan. Eric382 would not exist if it was not for his support, encouragement, and all the hard work he's put into writing memories over the last 5 years. From my very first post here in the community, ACFan fan has made me feel like I'm a real brother to all the others that are part of the real life Clan Short.

Anyway, I best jump out of here and start working on chapter 5 before my author notes become larger than the chapter. Until the next time, thanks for reading guys!

- Zacky

Editor's Notes

So does this mean that we editors can now make notes? Hope so. When first I started editing this story, I had no idea it would be moving quite this fast. The last two chapters have been cram packed with excitement. And your description of the Von Schuyler household was like something out of Dahl's books. Great job, really. I cannot wait till for the next installment. An honor to edit for you. Till next you take us on this fantastic voyage. – Some weird Editor Guy

## Chapter 5

5:00pm – Monday, September 19th, 2004

For an instant, time seemed to freeze as all 4 boys found themselves trapped in the corner completely at the mercy of whoever stood behind the blinding light which was now directly pointed in their direction.

Brent could feel his heart beating quickly and his breath becoming shallow. He thought about running, perhaps trying to catch whoever had the light off guard, and knocking him down so he and his friends could escape, but his legs would not move. It was almost as if his body had decided that if he stood still enough, he would turn invisible, and whoever was looking right at him would not see him.

Minutes seemed to go by with nothing at all happening, besides the fact that he could almost feel Greg wrapping himself tighter around Jude's leg. This thought made Brent briefly think about all his new friends. What had he gotten them into? It was his idea to return to his old house. Brent knew that it was a bad idea from the start, but he still insisted on coming. Not only that, but he had dragged three other kids along with him, kids who would now end up getting punished for something that was completely his fault. Finally, Brent's thoughts turned to the one person he had cared for the most, Randy.

As if on cue, Brent could hear the calm voice of Randy whispering in his ear, "It's okay Brent, he's not going to hurt any of you. This is actually a good thing, and part of what I couldn't talk to you about earlier this morning."

Brent wanted to turn his head to look at the face of the one person who could give him strength and inspiration, but his body still refused to cooperate. He knew Randy had meant his words to be calming and reassuring, but right now they were neither as he could not think of any way that this could turn into a good thing. Before he could think about these things much longer, time started to move again.

"I'm not going to hurt you", said the soft understanding voice of a young adult, "I just want to know who you are". The man then slowly lowered the beam of his light so that it was no longer shining directly in the eyes of the boys.

After giving his eyes a few seconds to recover, Brent could start to make out the figure of a tall and slender man. He had short brown hair, lightly tanned skin, and looked as if he couldn't be any older than his mid to late 20's. Since the guy was dressed in casual clothes, Brent could immediately rule out him being a cop or one of the home workers. Perhaps he was a robber, or maybe a neighbor that knew no one was living here, and came over to investigate when he saw 4 kids go inside?

"Why are you boys in here?" The voice of the man remained calm and patient as he waited for the boys to answer.

Brent was not sure what to say. He figured the immediate danger was over, and that the chance of them being killed on the spot was gone. However, he still was not sure exactly what to say as he still did not know who this guy was. "This is my house", he heard himself say.

The man in front of them was silent for several moments as if pondering what Brent had said. "You're Brent?" he asked finally, with his voice filled with sincere curiosity.

"Uh-huh." Brent nodded.

Several more moments went by before the man sighed and flipped a button on his flashlight which caused the light to go off only to be replaced by a white florescent light on the side of the flashlight which filled the entire room with a soft even glow making it much easier to see. "You do kind of look a lot like your father", the man said taking a step inside the room and looking at Brent closer, "But you definitely have your mother's hair."

"You knew both of my parents? But how? My mom died in a car accident when I was three." Brent blurted out his questions before he had a chance to think. Of course this guy couldn't have known his parents. He was most likely just saying this to create a false sense of security or something.

The man placed the light on the small bed stand at the end of Brent's bed and then walked a few more steps closer to Brent, where he knelt down on one leg and looked directly into Brent's eyes. "Brent, my name is Neal; I'm your father's brother."

Brent's jaw dropped in shock and amazement as he could feel the eyes of all his friends suddenly look directly toward him. Several moments went by as Brent struggled to find something to say, but no words came to him.

"Brent, that means he's your uncle!" Greg loudly whispered as he loosened his grip around Jude's leg and beamed with pride at the realization that he was the first person to solve the puzzle.

"How?" Brent croaked, "How can you be my uncle? Dad never said anything about you. I had an Uncle Ron, but he died 2 years ago."

Neal gave a curious look toward the smallest boy in the group before he glanced down toward the ground and sighed. After a brief moment, he glanced back up toward Brent, "That's a rather long story I'm afraid. I'm sure your dad had his reasons for not wanting to tell you about me."

Brent could feel his mind racing again. The fact that he had another Uncle that he was never told about was amazing in itself, but this also meant several other things. Mainly, it meant that he still had some family alive, and he was no longer completely alone in the world. But if Brent still had family alive... Suddenly another thought hit him which he found himself quickly blurting out. "If you're really my Uncle, Then why didn't you come get me? Why did I have to live in that group home thinking all my relatives were dead?"

"Your dad never told me that he and Sara had a son. Probably for the same reason that he never told you that you had another Uncle." A hint of pain seemed to cross Neal's face as he explained this, but it was only a moment before he regained his composure and continued, "I only found out about you last week when I first arrived and started to get the affairs in order and box things up for storage."

Jude softly guided Greg toward the bed so that they could sit down, while Lance stayed close to Brent's side.

Seeing the confusion in Brent's eyes, Neal continued. "When I first saw your room, I knew right away that James, your dad, must have had a son. It wasn't until I started going through the paperwork that I learned who you were. I've spent most of last week calling around trying to find out what had happened to you, but all I was getting was the run around. No one in social services seemed to know anything about you."

"But why? I knew about my uncle Ron, I've even met him a few times before he died. Why would dad not have told me about you? Why would he not have told you about me? Did I do something wrong?" A tear started to form in Brent's eye as he felt Lance move a little closer to him.

"You've done nothing wrong Brent, it was more my fault", Neal shook his head slowly. Seeing the confused and hurt look on Brent's face, he realized that he should probably tell his story now, and risk losing the nephew he had just met, rather than keeping him in the dark any longer. "A long time ago, before you were born, your grandfather, your dad's and my father, disowned me. You see... well... they were interested in girls where as I wasn't."

"You mean you were gay?" Greg called out from sitting on Jude's lap on the bed, pleased that he had figured two things out in a row.

Neal nodded, "This was back in the 80's when being gay still wasn't that widely accepted, and shortly before he died, your grandfather kicked me out of the house and disowned me, completely refusing to accept that one of his sons could be gay. I think your father and your uncle Ron in a way blamed me for your grandfather's death, because after he died, we never talked much anymore."

"I think that's how I killed dad." Brent said softly as he glanced down toward the floor and allowed another tear to slip out of his eye.

"Why would you say something like that?" Neal moved a little closer to where Brent and Lance were standing.

Another tear ran down his cheek as Brent took a deep breath before continuing, "The night when my dad had his heart attack, right before it happened I came out to him, and I told him that I loved Randy. After he heard that he just blew up. He started yelling at us. I tried to explain... But then.... then it just happened.... he got so mad he had a heart attack, we had to call 911 and he was taken to the hospital."

Lance moved even closer to Brent, and wrapped his arm around him.

Neal gently lifted Brent's chin up so that they were once again looking eye-to-eye. "Brent, I need you to listen to me. You had nothing to do with your dad's death. I've been going through his paperwork, and he's been having a number of heart and other medical problems for the last few years, ever since your uncle Ron died. What happened that night was probably going to happen whether you had said anything to him or not."

Brent wasn't sure why, but at that moment it just felt right for him to reach out and hug his newly found uncle. As the two hugged, Brent sobbed softly in Neal's shoulder. Perhaps it was out of relief that the person who had caught them here in the house was not going to do anything to him or his friends. Perhaps it was from the reassurance that he was not the cause of his dad's death, something that had been nagging him at the back of his head lately. Or, perhaps it was because he was no longer alone in that he at least had one of his relatives still alive in the world. Regardless of the reason, the two continued to hug for two or three minutes.

Enjoying the hug as much as Brent was, Neal reluctantly pulled himself away a little. "Come on, let's go downstairs so we can call someone and let them know you are here."

"No!" Brent nearly shouted as he pushed himself away from Neal. "I mean, we can't go back. Not now."

Neal took a few moments to ponder Brent's sudden reaction. "Are you in trouble with the law?"

"Huh? Oh, no! It's nothing like that." Brent's voice was clearly starting to become more defensive.

"Can you tell me why you can't go back?" Neal asked calmly.

Brent stood there looking at the floor, trying to decide what he should or should not say.

Neal took a step closer to Brent, which caused Brent to take a step back. Seeing the defensiveness, Neal continued, "Brent, I want to be able to help you. But I can't if I don't know what's going on."

Brent remained silent.

"I just found a nephew that I didn't know I had. Now that I've found you, I don't want to lose you. I'll understand if you really don't want to tell me, but I really do want to help."

Brent sighed and spoke softly, "We ran away."

"Why?" Neal asked as he knelt back down close to Brent.

Brent glanced toward Lance who silently nodded his agreement. "I had just met Lance last week, and well he makes me feel special inside, kind of like..." Brent's voice trailed off for a moment as he took another deep breath. "Kind of like Randy did when he was still alive. But Lance and Greg's home burnt down last night, and they were going to split everyone up to different homes across the state and... well Greg needs Lance, and Lance needs me, and I need him and..."

Brent's ramblings were cut off as he felt the loving arms of his newly found uncle wrap around him once again. "Shh...", Neal softly cooed as he tried to re-assure Brent, "We don't have to tell anyone right now."

Brent seemed to relax a bit at hearing this, and continued to hug Neal for several more minutes.

"Will you guys at least come downstairs so that I can order us some dinner? You all look like you could use some food." As Neal said this, he immediately saw the eyes of all 4 boys light up.

Feeling somewhat re-assured that, at least for now, Neal wasn't going to try to send them back to their group homes, Brent agreed and the other 3 boys followed Neal and Brent out the door and back downstairs.

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The boys were slightly surprised as they followed Neal downstairs to find three lamps and a small fan blowing.

"I thought the power was off?" Jude asked as he stepped off the last step carrying Greg.

"It is." Neal smiled as he motioned down toward a long orange extension cord. "Since I only have a short amount of time here before I need to head back home, the neighbor was nice enough to let me use some of their power."

"Where do you live?" Brent looked up to see Neal smiling at the amazement of him and his friends.

"Nevada."

"In the desert?" Greg piped in. "Isn't it really hot there?"

"It is sometimes, but since it's so dry it doesn't feel as hot as it really is." Neal couldn't stop himself at chuckling a little. "Now, who here likes Chinese food?"

Immediately, everyone forgot about the fascination of the extension cord, and had their thoughts turned toward the direction of food. Taking the eager reactions of the boys as a hint, Neal took out his cell phone and a Chinese menu. After each boy had a chance to glance over it, and pick what they wanted, Neal called the order in.

The boys moved some of the boxes around so that they could use them as chairs to sit on while waiting for dinner to be delivered. They were softly talking among themselves discussing the events of the day when Neal re-entered what used to be the living room carrying some paper plates and plastic silverware.

Neal took a seat on one of the boxes opposite from the boys, and everyone remained quite still not sure what exactly to expect from each other. Finally, looking toward Jude, Neal decided to break the silence.

"So Jude, were you also living in the home that burnt down last night?"

Caught off guard, Jude hesitated slightly before answering. "No sir, I'm just here helping Greg a bit."

Neal nodded. "I'm not THAT old, so you don't have to call me sir. Neal will work fine. After getting a nod of understanding from Jude, he continued. "How exactly are you helping Greg?"

"Greg is blind, but he can see out of Jude's eyes." By the time that Brent had realized what he was saying, it was already too late. After getting piercing glances from Lance and Jude, all the boys looked toward Neal to see what his reaction would be.

Neal thought to himself for a few moments and then nodded. "Well, I guess that would explain why Greg was pointing out things on the menu that he wanted when Jude had it, even though he wasn't looking at it."

The boys all nodded in agreement with what Neal had said.

"That must make you a pretty special boy, Greg." Neal looked toward the small redhead that was attached to Jude's side, noticing for the first time, the slight hazy gloss that covered the young boy's brown eyes. "I don't think I've heard of that many people that are able to do things like that."

"That's nothing!" Greg said, realizing that instead of being looked at as a freak, he was being praised. "Brent can see and talk to the ghost of his dead best friend!"

Even though Brent had half expected this conversation to move toward him at some point, he was still rather shocked at Greg's open statement. But then again, he had just said something personal about Greg, so perhaps it was only fair.

The boys remained quiet as they waited to see what Neal's reaction to this latest piece of information would be, and just how much weirdness he would be willing to take.

"I see", was all that Neal was able to get out after spending a few minutes in thought.

Brent was starting to think about things he could say that might make his new uncle believe him when he heard Randy whispering in his ear. [Tell him that his full name is Neal Odus Knocks-Downing and that his husband's name is Richard Garret Knocks-Downing.]

"Husband?" Brent's shocked voice blurted out before he had a chance to realize that no one else had heard Randy.



"Husband?" Neal repeated with slightly more confusion.

"Oh, sorry." Brent's face started to blush a little, "Randy wanted me to tell you that your full name is Neal Odus Knocks-Downing, and that your husband's name is Richard Garret Knocks-Downing."

Neal's jaw nearly dropped onto the ground. "How did you...?" His voice trailed away as he was clearly lost in thought. It appeared that he was about to say something else when a knock came from the front door indicating that dinner had arrived. Still in shock, Neal slowly got up and walked out of the room to answer the door.

A few minutes later, Neal walked back into the room carrying two big bags of food which he passed out to each of the boys. For now, the uncomfortable conversation was done as the more pressing matter of filling their tummies took over.

The conversation through most of the meal was rather light and trivial. Jude and Greg realized that they both enjoyed Pokémon, so a large part of the conversation was centered around that, with the others occasionally injecting their very limited knowledge of the game.

About half way through the meal, as the Pokémon discussion seemed to be winding down, Neal got a more serious look on his face. "I know that we've just met each other, and that you've probably been through a lot today...", He stated as the boys all looked up toward him, "And I'll understand if you feel it's too soon for this, or that you might already have other plans..."

Seeing all 4 pairs of eyes firmly focused on him, Neal decided he should just get to his point. "Rick and I have already been talking about adopting for awhile now, and well, since we are family and all now... Brent, if you will have me, I would really like to adopt you."

A completely stunned and surprised Brent sat there looking at Neal as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had only met this guy less than an hour ago, and already he wanted to open up his home and life to him without question or without even knowing him. As badly as he wanted to say yes, and get back to a normal life and put the last several weeks behind him, Brent's thoughts turned toward Lance and then toward Greg. Finally, with a small degree of reluctance and sadness he spoke up. "I can't leave Lance and Greg. That's why we ran away from the home in the first place."

Neal nodded in understanding. "After seeing how you guys have interacted together just over the last hour, I figured as much. Which is why I would like to adopt Greg and Lance as well if they will have me? The offer is open to Jude too."

"Really?" Greg said with excitement.

"Our place in Nevada is pretty big, so it would have no problem holding all 4 of you." Neal smiled

"Thanks, but I already have 8 brothers at home that would miss me if I left, not to mention my mom and dad." Jude looked down at the hopeful expression on Greg's face.

"Fair enough", Neal agreed, "But the offer is still open to the three of you. I know it's a big decision to think about all at once, and I don't really want you to give me an answer now. I just want you guys to think about it for a bit."

About the only thing that Brent could manage to do was to nod slightly and get out a rather weak 'O-kay', as he was still in a considerable amount of shock. Not only was this mysterious uncle who he didn't know he had until an hour ago offering to adopt him, he was also offering to adopt two other kids that didn't have any relationship to him at all. Not only this, but this was being presented to him in such a way that it made Brent feel that he was the one that was going to make the decision. Through most of his life he was used to grownups making all the decisions for him.

Very little was said over the rest of dinner as everyone pondered Neal's offer. Finally, once every last scrap of food was cleared out of every box and container, and each boy was sufficiently stuffed Neal got up and started to collect the trash with each boy quickly jumping in to help.

Once dinner was cleaned up, Neal glanced around the room and then looked toward Brent, "You know, other than your room I just about have everything done here. I wanted to leave your room until last just in case I managed to find you. If you and your friends wanted to help finish getting things packed up upstairs, I can finish up down here, and we can have things finished up tonight."

Nodding in agreement, the boys took one of the lights and dragged it and its long extension cord upstairs into Brent's room.

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When the boys re-entered the bedroom, Lance noticed that the flashlight which doubled as a florescent light was still sitting on the night stand at the end of Brent's bed turned on, so he turned it off and ran it down stairs to Neal, bringing a few empty boxes back up with him.

The boys started to put things that they had already gone through and decided not to bring with them, into the empty boxes. With all four boys working together, it didn't take long for the boxes to start to fill up. From time to time, Brent would still put something into the large backpack instead of putting it into one of the boxes.

"So what do you think?" Lance asked as he noticed what Brent was doing, but wasn't quite sure how to approach the subject.

Brent shrugged his shoulders as he continued to sort through a pile of clothes. "He seems like a great guy and all, and he probably wouldn't have a problem with you and I being close and all. But I don't know. It seems almost too good to be true. There has to be a catch here somewhere."

Lance nodded. "That's what adoption is all about sometimes. Just being lucky and having the right people find you that will care for you and love you. That's what every kid who's living in a foster home or group home is dreaming about, finding that one special family."

Brent sighed. "So you think we should go along with him?"

"I'm not sure." Lance answered a bit more cautiously. "He's your uncle, and the offer was primarily made to you. But Greg and I will be by your side no matter what you decide to do."

Brent seemed to understand the position he was being put in. "Maybe, but both you and Greg will need to be part of this decision as well, since this will also affect you two."

The small discussion which Brent and Lance were having was interrupted by Jude calling out to them from the other side of the room. "Hey Brent! Is this Randy?"

Jude and Greg were working on going through a box of old odds and ends that was at the bottom of Brent's closet when they found a rather old picture that Brent had completely forgotten about. Brent walked over to look at the picture from over Jude's shoulder. The picture showed two young boys standing next to a fountain of some sort, each wearing t-shirts and shorts. One of the boys, who slightly resembled Brent, had rather short light brown hair and was holding hands with another boy that had much longer, darker brown hair.

"That was a picture of me and Randy when we were 9 or 10 I think." Brent finally answered.

Jude nodded, and handed the picture to Brent, who took the picture to the other side of the room where he carefully placed it into the backpack.

About 30 minutes later, just as the last few items were being placed in the last box that had any room in it, Neal came upstairs and looked into the room. "Wow! You guys work pretty quickly."

All the boys smiled and nodded as they watched Neal glancing over the room admiring their work, until his eyes fell on the still filled backpack.

"Well, it's starting to get kind of late." Neal stated. "I just called a friend of mine who I've been staying with while I've been down here, and unless you've already made up your mind to leave, he said it would not be a problem to have a few more people spend the night. Then tomorrow, after you have had a good night sleep, you can decide what you want to do."

"We wouldn't want to be any extra burden." Brent said half-heartedly as he had already mostly decided to go along with Neal, at least for the night.

"Nonsense. He has an extra guest room with twin beds in it that you can sleep in. It won't be any problem at all."

Glancing toward Lance and then back toward Neal, Brent nodded his agreement.

"You're welcome to spend the night as well, if you would like Jude." Neal offered.

Jude glanced toward Greg and sighed. "Actually, I should probably head home before my parents start to get too worried."

"Okay." Neal agreed. "But it's already dark outside and I don't think you should be walking home this late at night by yourself, so how about you let us drop you off on our way?"

With Jude's agreement, the plans were settled and everyone headed downstairs to turn off the lights, and to pile into Neal's suburban.

It only took a few minutes for them to drive down the road and reach Jude's house. A trip that took them nearly two hours by foot earlier that afternoon. The boys all hugged Jude and said their goodbyes.

Jude whispered 'Good Luck' into Brent's ear and gave a loving kiss on the forehead of Greg whispering to him to 'Stay Strong'.

Finally, after noticing one of his brothers looking out the front window, Jude reluctantly separated himself from Greg, got out of the car, and started walking toward his house. As Neal carefully backed the car out of the driveway and started to head down the road, the last thing that Greg could remember seeing clearly was the door to Jude's house opening, and two nearly identical versions of Jude greeting him at the door.

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It took about 20 minutes for them to drive from Jude's house to where they were going. Although Brent didn't know exactly where they were, he knew that they had driven to one of the suburbs that were on the outskirts of town that contained some of the more up-scale neighborhoods.

Finally, they pulled into the driveway of a rather nice sized 2 story house. The house seemed to have large white shutters next to all the windows, but it was still a bit difficult to see because of how dark it was.

With the car parked, Lance picked up Greg, and everyone headed up to the door where Neal rang the doorbell. A few minutes later the door was opened by a slightly smaller and chubbier man who wore glasses and had a well defined reseeded hairline. The man immediately welcomed them and invited them in.

Neal introduced the man as his friend Rodney who he used to work with a few years ago, and then he introduced Brent as his nephew and Lance and Greg as Brent's friends. After taking a few minutes to get the normal pleasantries out of the way, and realizing that Rodney wasn't that bad of a guy after all, they were led upstairs to a spare bedroom that had two single beds in it.

"You have kids?" Brent asked as he noticed a few toys lying on the sides of the room, and a few models on one of the dressers.

"My son sleeps in here sometimes when he is visiting. But most of the time he lives with his mother." Rodney answered in a tone that was both courteous but conveyed that it was a topic that he did not enjoy talking about much.

Neal, who had followed the group upstairs decided to change the subject before the discussion got much further. "You boys can go ahead and get settled in up here. I'll be downstairs talking with Rodney a bit if any of you need anything.

The boys nodded.

"I put some clean towels in the bathroom in case you boys want to take a bath or shower later." Rodney added.

Seeing that none of the boys had any further questions or comments, both Rodney and Neal left the room closing the door behind them, leaving the three boys alone. As soon as the door was closed, Brent threw the backpack that he had brought up with him from the car onto one of the beds and quickly threw himself down beside it. Lance fell onto the other bed with Greg still tightly wrapped around him.

Brent wasn't sure how long they were laying there saying nothing to each other. It seemed like ages ago since they were sitting in the kitchen back at Stone Crest eating breakfast when they were told that Lance and Greg were each going to be split up and sent to other group homes far away. It seemed amazing how much could happen and how much his world could change in such a short amount of time. They had gone from being alone, to being homeless runaways, to nearly getting caught breaking and entering, to possibly finding a relative he never knew he had and who wanted to adopt him and his close friends all in the same day.

"I like that." Greg said softly breaking the silence.

Glancing up, Brent could see that Lance was gently rubbing Greg's back. "So what do you think of him?"

"Huh?" Lance asked, slightly confused.

"About Neal?" Brent looked up at the ceiling and watched the fan blades that surrounded the light slowly turn.

"He seems like a nice guy." Lance answered half lost in thought. "If he has a husband, then he definitely wouldn't have a problem with us liking each other and all. Not many families are like that."

"Yeah." Brent agreed. "And he's definitely a lot nicer than my other uncle who would always yell at me anytime we would visit him."

"Even though we could probably pull it off, having a loving home really beats trying to live on the streets." Lance continued, "I've been bounced around in the system for awhile, and I've seen what that kind of life can do to kids. It's not pretty."

"I like 'em." Greg added followed by a yawn.

Brent and Lance both giggled at the thought of Greg's simple comments being the deciding factor of the huge decision that was placed before them.

Everyone remained silent for a few more minutes until Brent finally sat up, apparently having decided on a course of action. "I want to do this, but only if both of you also agree. He will be adopting all three of us, so I think all three of us need to say yes. If any of us aren't sure, or says no, then we all say no."

Lance struggled to sit up with Greg still wrapped tightly to him. "I say we do it."

"I want Neal to be my dad too." Greg added.

Brent nodded. "Okay, let's go tell him."

With that, the boys headed out of the room, and downstairs in search of Neal.

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The boys found Neal sitting in the living room watching TV and talking to Rodney. He immediately noticed the boys as they peered through the door. "Hi guys, you can come in and watch some TV as well if you want."

Brent hesitated for a few moments since it seemed that the two adults were talking about something important before they entered the room, "Neal, can we talk to you for a minute?"

"Absolutely!" Neal got up from where he was sitting and led the boys through the hall and into the kitchen. "What's on your mind sport?"

Brent looked toward Lance and Greg just to make sure that neither of them had changed their mind before he continued, "Well we've been talking a bit about stuff. You know, when you offered to adopt us and all."

Neal nodded and thought for a few moments before he responded. "Okay. It's a big decision, so you guys can take your time in thinking about it."

"We have." Brent continued. "We would really like for you to become our father."

Neal nodded. "Are you sure about this? If we go through with this you will be stuck with me until you're at least 18."

"We are." Lance added getting a nod from Greg as well.

Neal sighed and smiled. As he saw the unsure expressions on the faces of Brent and Lance, he opened his arms and embraced all three boys in a loving hug. Even Greg managed to let go of Lance's neck long enough to twist himself around and hug Neal as well. "You don't know how happy that makes me."

Everyone remained in the hug for several minutes. Brent hugging his new found uncle, Lance and Greg hugging the man they hoped would soon become their father, and Neal hugging the three boys that he hoped would soon become his sons.

Finally, Neal broke the group hug, and took a more serious attitude. "I really think we should at least give your group home a call to let them know that you are safe, and to at least get the ball rolling with being able to adopt you three."

"Yea, about that." Brent's face was filled with concern which matched the same expression on Lance's face. "We've were doing a little research earlier, and there is this really cool group of kids that put on this huge concert last month called Clan Short, and their mom is the head of the new Federation Youth Services, and they specialize in helping out kids like.... like us."

Neal smiled. "Well, it seems that you have certainly been doing your homework. But I think it might be a bit early to start thinking about having to involve the Federation in this. Would you mind if I at least tried to talk to your home first?"

Both Lance and Brent reluctantly shook their heads, and Brent gave Neal the number to call Stone Crest. A few minutes later, Neal had his cell phone out and was calling.

"Hello?... Yes, My name is Neal Knocks-Downing, I'm Brent Knocks' uncle. I would like to let you guys know that he is safe and currently with me, and I would like to know what I would need to do to start the process so that I could adopt him, Greg and Lance.. Yes... okay, I'll hold."

"What did they say?" Brent asked.

Neal put his finger over the mic hole on his phone, "He's going to get the home director."

"That would probably be Mr. Cane; he's a pretty nice man." Brent responded.

"Yes, hello. I'm Neal Odus Knocks-Downing. I'm Brent Knocks' uncle and I would like to know what I would need to do to adopt him as well as Greg and Lance... Yes, they are... It's already pretty late, and I really don't mind keeping them for the night until we can get this worked out..."

Suddenly Neal's expression changed to that of mild disgust.

"Now listen here. I don't know who you think you are, but Brent is my nephew and as his only living relative, it's my right to be able to adopt him. I was hoping to be able to work with you on this, but if I need to I'll go directly to Social Services... Really? Then perhaps you could tell me why your people have been giving me the run around all week with trying to find my nephew...?"

As Neal continued to talk, a small degree of anger crept into his face, but he still managed to remain calm and collected to whoever it was he was talking to on the other side.

"What do you mean? On what grounds...? What? So you're saying your sole grounds of refusal is because I'm gay...? I think my nephew was right. It was a mistake to think that we could work this out in a civilized manner. Perhaps I should call Federation Youth Services instead to deal with this matter... No, I'm simply pointing out your unreasonable and uncooperative tone and... We'll see."

Neal pressed the END button on his phone to end the call. The boys stood watching him very closely as he took a few seconds to regain his composure. "What was the name of that Federation Youth Services person you were talking about?"

Brent took out the paper from his pocket where he had written the information he had found earlier that day on the net about Teri Short, Clan Short, and Federation Youth Services, and handed it to Neal. A few moments later, Neal was once again punching numbers into his cell phone.

"Hello, Mrs. Short? My name is Neal Knocks-Downing. I'm sorry for bothering you so late but I just had a very hostile conversation with Social Services and wasn't sure who else to contact... Thanks Teri. This would be with the Iowa Social Services. My brother recently passed away, and last week I learned that he had a son, and that I was his only remaining living relative. Iowa SS has been preventing me from finding him, and now that I have found him, they are not only refusing to allow the adoption on the grounds that I'm gay, but they have threatened to have me arrested..."

Neal nodded and smiled as he was listening to the response of whoever he was talking to. "Okay, that sounds great... Yes, he's right hear next to me... Okay sure..."

Neal put his finger over the mic hole again and looked toward the boys. "Can you boys go back into the living room for a few minutes? I'll come and let you know what happens as soon as I'm done."

Both Brent and Lance nodded, and headed back out of the kitchen with Greg in tow, down the hall, and back into the room where Rodney was still sitting in his chair watching T.V.

"How you doing guys?" Rodney asked as Lance sat down in the love seat with Greg still clinging to him.

Neither boy said anything, and Rodney did not push them. Other than the sound of the TV, everyone remained quiet until Neal entered the room about 10 minutes later. Both Brent and Lance looked up at him expectantly.

"Would you boys be disappointed if the answer was no?" Neal asked as he sat down.

"Yeah." Brent replied as both his and Lance's head went down in dejection. Greg simply buried his face. "Teri can't help us, can she?"

"Well, I'm glad I don't have to disappoint my new sons then!" Neal waited for a few seconds until his words registered, and he suddenly had two pairs of eyes looking at him very intensely.

"Serious?" Brent asked with surprise.

Neal couldn't hold back a slight chuckle. "It's not 100% official yet, but that's how it looks now."

"Sweet!" Lance screamed. After a quick glance toward Brent, Lance set Greg down and both boys pounced into Neal's lap.

"We are so going to get you for that!" Brent giggled as both boys started tickling Neal, until a few minutes later the tickles turned into hugs until Neal thought he heard a small sob coming from the couch. "What's wrong Greg?"

"Brent and Lance are getting a new family and a new home." Greg started to sob more.

Lance started to get off of Neal to pick up Greg, but was stopped when he felt Neal's arm on his shoulder indicating to hold up.

"Greg, you know that I promised to adopt all three of you, right? I'm not going to let you guys get separated ever again." Neal walked over and knelt down next to where Greg was sitting.

"Yeah" Greg sobbed, "But I'll just be in the way all the time. I can't do anything anymore. And Lance won't always want to hold me everywhere."

"I don't mind carrying you everywhere!" Lance said defiantly from the chair that he and Brent were still sitting in.

"Besides, what makes you think you can't do anything?" Neal added.



"Duh! I can't see!" Greg stated coldly.

Neal thought to himself for a few minutes, and then moved himself so he was on the side of Greg.

"Greg, go ahead and reach out and touch me."

Greg reached out to his side and touched Neal. As soon as he did, Neal shifted himself around again so he was on the opposite side of Greg. "Okay, touch me again."

Once again Greg reached out to the side where Neal was sitting, and touched him again.

"I thought you said you couldn't see? How were you able to touch me?"

"That was easy! I could hear where your voice was coming from, I didn't need to see you." Greg's voice was still pretty confused as he couldn't quite see what the two had in common with each other.

Neal smiled as he took Greg's hands, and pulled him onto his lap. "Exactly! Since you can't use your eyes, your other senses have become a lot stronger, so you were able to do with your ears what other people would normally have to do with their eyes."

As if a light went on, an expression of understanding filled Greg's face. "Wow, I never thought of it like that."

"I bet there is a lot that no one ever bothered to teach you. But there are lots of things you can do. You don't have to be totally helpless just because you can't see." As soon as Neal finished, he felt Greg's small arms wrap around him embracing him in a hug.

"Thanks Neal! I've never had such an awesome dad like you!" Within moments of Greg saying this, Neal nodded to Brent and Lance letting them know it was okay, and then all 3 boys joined in hugging their new dad.

After about 5 minutes of hugging, when the boys started to break from the hug, Neal handed Greg to Lance, and stood up. "Okay guys, it's getting late. Rodney has some towels out in the bathroom upstairs if you guys want to take a quick bath, but then you need to get to bed. Tomorrow is going to be a long day, and if everything works out well in the morning, I might have a big surprise for you.

"What surprise?" Lance tried his best puppy dog eye impression when he asked.

Neal smiled at Lance's attempt. "That's not bad Lance, put your shoulders down a bit more, and you should have it perfect."

Lance immediately put his face straight and folded his arms in defeat after being so easily discovered.

"I can't tell you just yet, since Mrs. Short asked me not to mention anything, but by the time you guys get up in the morning, there might be something really cool that we will be able to do in the afternoon. But not if you guys don't get upstairs and get a bath and to bed."

"Okay" All three boys said together as they headed out of the living room and headed for the stairs.

Once the boys were out of earshot Rodney turned toward Neal, "If that was any indication of how you're going to do with them, I think your going to do just great."

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Lance and Brent stood in the doorway of the upstairs hall bathroom looking in and seeing the three sets of towels that had been laid out for them. The tub was a combination tub / shower that seemed big enough for all three boys to easy fit in. In addition to the normal shampoo and soap that could be seen sitting on the rim of the tub, a bottle of Buzz Lightyear bubble bath gave yet another hint that a boy occasionally visited this house.

Brent was holding Greg close to him with one hand, while using his free hand to run his fingers through Greg's light red hair. "So big guy, how do you normally take your baths?"

A hurt expression immediately filled Greg's face. "Doug use to take baths with me."

Brent nearly kicked himself. This was a stupid question for him to ask. He should have known better than to ask that.

"Would you like it if I took a bath with you?" Lance asked with a brief glance toward Brent, letting him know not to worry about it.

"Okay!" Greg immediately cheered back up. "Can you take a bath with us too, Brent?"

"Um." Brent swallowed hard as he was caught off guard by the directness of Greg's question. This could be a good chance to finally get to 'see' Lance, but with everything else that was going on, he really was not sure if that was something that he was ready for yet. "Nah, you two take a bath, I'll grab one when you get done."

"Please?" Greg pleaded.

Brent could see the dejected look in Greg's face as he handed him off to Lance, but it wasn't nearly as bad as the hurt and disappointment that he could see in Lance's eyes. Still not sure himself if he was making the right decision, he quickly walked off toward the bedroom as soon as he was sure Lance had a good grasp on Greg.

As soon as Brent had the bedroom door closed behind him, he let out a sigh and flopped himself on the nearest bed. "Great going Brent", he said to himself as he sat himself up and wrapped his arms around his legs, pulling them close to his chest.

Brent starred into space for a few moments thinking about everything and nothing. A few moments later, he could hear the water starting to run in the bathroom. Once again he let out a sigh, and let his head fall down and rest on top of his knees.

[Long day, huh?] The familiar voice of Randy could be heard coming from behind Brent.

Brent said nothing as he continued to sit with his head on his knees, and his arms wrapped tightly around his legs. A few moments later, Brent could feel two small, yet firm hands start to slowly massage his back as only Randy knew how to do.

"For a ghost, you sure feel pretty real." Brent said softly as he sniffled, and let his shoulders relax slightly.

[That's because I am real, silly! Well, at least as real as the ghost of a dead boyfriend can be.] Randy waited for a few moments after he spoke until he heard a barely audible chuckle come from Brent, which indicated his statement had the desired effect.

"I miss you Randy. I really do." Brent sniffled again.

[I told you, I will never leave your side. Even when you can't see me, I'm still here.] Randy started to work his way down to the mid-section of Brent's back.

"Oh wow! You think you could teach Lance this?" Brent sighed, letting himself loosen up more.

[No, but I bet he would really appreciate it if you showed him.] Randy continued to work in for a few seconds longer until he moved a bit lower down Brent's back. [Which reminds me, what in the heck do you think your doing?]

Brent's relaxed expression immediately changed to one of mild surprise. "What are you talking about?"

[I think you know exactly what I'm talking about Brent, you being in here while Lance and Greg are in there.] Randy stopped massaging Brent's back, and walked around Brent so that he could sit right in front of him.

Brent shrugged his shoulder. "I don't know. I kinda wanted to but... It just doesn't seem right... I mean... I don't want anyone to think... well, you know."

Randy lifted Brent's chin up so that they were looking eye-to-eye. [Brent, listen to me. I'm dead; nothing is going to change that. I'm not going to be upset with you or mad at you if you find someone else special to love. In fact, if you don't find someone special, I'm going to have to kick your butt!]

"I guess." Brent sighed and closed his eyes so that he was not looking into Randy's any longer.

Randy leaned in closer to Brent and wrapped his arms around Brent's neck so that both of their foreheads were touching each other. [Bro, your not only going to end up being mad at yourself if you don't do this, but your going to really hurt both Greg and Lance's feelings. You keep forgetting I'm a ghost now, which means I get to peek into the great book from time to time.]

Brent opened his eyes and smiled a little. "I thought that was considered cheating?"

Randy giggled. [Okay, so I still totally suck at following the rules.]

Brent giggled as well as he wrapped his own arms around Randy giving him a warm hug. "Thanks bro!"

[Don't mention it, now go get in there before the water starts getting cold!] Randy faded slightly, which caused Brent's arms to go through him, and land at his side. With that, and a playful shove off the bed, as Randy suddenly became solid again, Brent was on his way back out the bedroom door.

Lance and Greg were both sitting in the bubble filled bathtub as Brent stepped into the doorway which caused Lance to immediately look up toward him and Greg to stop what he was doing sensing that something was going on.

"You really think there is room in there for me?" Brent asked hesitantly.

"Lots of room!" Greg shouted as his arms went flying up into the air sending bubbles everywhere.

Lance nodded in agreement while smiling at Greg's antics. "Come on in, the water's great!"

With that, Brent quickly stripped off his clothes and jumped in the tub so that he was sitting right behind Greg.

Not another word was said as Lance and Brent went to work lathering up Greg, and making sure every part of his body was clean. After they had rinsed Greg off, he slid to the back of the tub and quietly started to play with the bubbles as Lance and Brent went to work cleaning each other.

Both boys were extra careful to make sure that they gave enough attention to cleaning every part of each others body, sometimes going over certain areas twice to make sure. Lance decided that he needed to make sure that the small number of thin black pubic hairs that he found on Brent were extra clean. Although Brent tried his best to try to find some on Lance, he decided instead that the same area on Lance needed to be extra clean for when Lance's hairs started to show up, which he assured Lance shouldn't be much longer.

When everyone was squeaky clean, the boys all got out, and made sure each other was completely dried off. Although Greg was starting to get into the spirit of things as he tried to help dry Brent off, Lance decided that Greg needed a hug instead to keep his hands occupied since Greg's drying efforts seemed to be more like hits into the face for Brent.

All three boys ran back into the bedroom so that Lance could find them some clothes to wear to sleep in. "Oh crap, we don't have anything for Greg to sleep in!"

"That's okay; I don't mind not wearing anything." Greg answered hesitantly.

Brent looked toward Greg and then toward Lance. "Lance, what do you say to all of us sleeping with no clothes on, so Greg won't feel out of place?"

"Sure!" Lance answered immediately.

"You guys would really do that for me?" Greg asked with surprise.

Brent nodded. "You betcha buddy!"

With that, all three boys squished into one of the beds, with Greg snugly positioned between Brent and Lance. Within minutes, everyone was sound asleep, completely tired out from the very long day's series of events.

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The boys woke up in almost the same position that they fell asleep, except that both Brent and Lance had their arms protectively draped over Greg. Brent was the first to wake up. As he opened his eyes, he remained motionless as he looked at the peacefully sleeping faces of his two friends. It didn't take him long to realize that another part of him was not so peaceful, but was pressing firmly against one of Greg's legs. To try to avoid any unnecessary explanations, he decided to try to sneak out of bed and hit the bathroom before the other two woke up.

"Where ya goin'?" came the sleepy voice of Greg as he popped his head up trying to figure out what direction Brent was in.

"I'm just hitting the bathroom big guy. You need to go pee as well?" Brent tried to keep his voice down as to not wake up Lance.

Greg nodded, as Brent reached over and lifted him out of bed. Greg immediately wrapped his arms around Brent's neck for the short trip into the hall bathroom. By the time the two returned to the bedroom, Lance was already out of bed and making his way for the door.

"Watch out! I need to pee... bad!" Lance quickly walked past Brent and Greg as he slid into the bathroom and closed the door.

"I'm hungry, what's for breakfast?" Greg asked still clinging tightly around Brent.

Brent couldn't help but smile. "Hold on big guy. What do you say we try to find you something to wear first?"

"Oh yeah." Greg blushed slightly.

Lance came back into the room almost as quickly as he left, and made straight for Brent's large backpack. "It looks like Neal or Rodney must have found some clothes for Greg, since there are some laying on the other bed for him."

While Brent worked on getting Greg dressed, Lance got out some clothes for them as well. Once everyone was dressed, all the boys headed downstairs for breakfast.

Neal was already in the kitchen and in the process of laying 3 bowls out on the table when the boys walked in. "Morning boys, sleep well?"

"Yes!" All three said together as Brent sat Greg down in the chair on the far side of the table.

"Great! You looked pretty tired last night so I figured I would let all of you sleep in a bit." Neal grabbed a box of Frosted Flakes and a box of Wheaties and put both on the table. Just as he expected, Brent and Lance both went for the Frosted Flakes. What Neal wasn't expecting to see was how when Lance

got the box of cereal, the first thing he did was to get Greg's bowl filled up before he started on his own.

"So what was that surprise you were talking about last night?" Brent asked with a half-full mouth of Frosted Flakes.

Neal chuckled. "You guys don't miss a beat. Do you?"

All three heads shook back and forth.

"Well, it just so happens that while all of you were still in dream land, Mrs. Short called me back with the news." Neal paused briefly as he knew what was going to come next.

"And?" Brent said quickly and impatiently.

"What did she say?" Lance got in almost as fast as Brent.

"It seems that social services were really not interested in letting you guys go, since they charged me with about 7 different crimes last night." Neal sat down in the empty chair at the table.

"What?" The surprised voices of all three boys again chimed together.

"Don't worry boys, Mrs. Short already looked into it, and has verified that they are all fake. However, while the mess gets cleared up, she said that it probably would not be a good idea for you three to remain in the state, so to make a long story short, she granted us tentative guardianship of all three of you and if you are interested, we can fly out from the airport after lunch and you can come live with me in Nevada." Neal sat back smiling to himself as he looked at the speechless expressions on each of the boy's faces as they tried to figure out what was just said.

Greg was the first to find his voice. "You're going to be our dad?"

"We're going to fly on a plane to Nevada?" Lance asked shortly after Greg.

"What do you mean by 'us'?" Brent followed taking the longest to digest everything that was said.

Neal couldn't help smiling at the excited expressions from each of the boys. "Greg, yes I'm going to be one of your dads. Lance, yes you boys will be flying with me in my Cessna back to our home in Las Vegas. Brent, you caught that pretty quickly. What I meant by that was that myself and my husband, Rick."

"What if he doesn't like us?" Greg asked slowly.

Neal stood up and walked around the table to give Greg a hug. "I had a long talk with him last night after you guys went to bed, and he is very excited about having all three of you. This is something both of us have been wanting for a very long time."

"What if..." Lance hesitated a bit before finishing his sentence. "What if, we don't like him?"

Lance was next on Neal's list to hug. "That's a great question Lance. That's why we only have tentative custody of you guys. Once we get settled, Mrs. Short is going to come visit us out in Vegas, and if you don't like either of us for any reason, all you need to do is let her know, and she will help you find other families.

"Okay." Lance returned Neal's hug.

Neal finally made his way around to the other side of the table and hugged Brent. "What about you, kiddo?"

Brent wrapped his arms around Neal and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I think this all sounds way cool! Are you REALLY going to fly the plane all by yourself?"

Neal chuckled and ruffled Brent's short blondish brown hair. "You betcha! But, if we are going to be able to get out of here on time, I have a little more paper work that I need to take care of to finish making arrangements to get the rest of the stuff from your old house put in storage. So Rodney's going to keep an eye on you guys here, then when I get back, we will have lunch and head for the airport."

"Awesome! Cool!" Brent and Lance nearly yelled.

"What if the police come to take us away while you're gone?" Greg asked in a small voice as he looked down toward the table.

"I don't think you will need to worry about it, they don't know where you guys are at. But just in case, I put Mrs. Short's number next to the phone and she said to give her a call if there are any problems." Neal made sure that he caught the eyes of both Brent and Lance to let them know that his statement was just as much for them as it was for Greg.

"Okay." Greg nodded, seeming to be a bit reassured.

Neal grabbed a stack of papers that were sitting on the counter, and then walked over to the sink to look at the small kitchen window that was there. "Ya know, it looks like there might be a few swings in the backyard. Maybe you boys could play out there for a bit this morning."

Hearing nothing other than the sound of scurrying feet, Neal looked over at the empty table and realized that he must have said the magic word.

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Rodney's backyard was not overly big, but it was still big enough to have a small above ground pool near the back porch, a large tree near the back fence which looked almost perfect for climbing, and a swing set that was in the center of the yard.

Even with Greg latched on to him, Lance still managed to beat Brent to the swings and was able to claim the highest swing for himself and Greg to swing on. Brent was forced to take the lower of the two swings, although he didn't mind much.

The boys spent the first 10 to 15 minutes just swinging, and checking out the view. The backyard that they were in seemed to be surrounded on all sides by the backyards of other houses. Each house seemed to be nearly as big as, if not bigger than the one that they were currently staying at. Although it looked like the house to the right of them also had a swing set, they were not expecting to see any more kids that they might be able to play with since it was a school day.

Once the normal swinging started to become boring, Lance decided to start flying off the swing with Greg still in his lap. After the first flying leap was a great success, the new game was officially started with Brent and Lance taking turns leaping off their swings with Greg on their laps.

"You really think Neal's husband will like us?" Lance asked while he was waiting for Brent to get going enough in his swing to make another leap with Greg.

Brent leaped off managing to go a few inches further than Lance last landed and then handed Greg off to him, so that he could start his next turn. "You mean Rick? I don't know. I hope so. Neal seems to think so and I think we can trust him."

"I hope so too." Lance stated as he did a leap off his swing, but landed at a bad angle which caused both him and Greg to go falling to the ground.

Brent was immediately at their side, lifting Greg up off of Lance. "You guys okay?"

"I think so." Lance stood back up, and started brushing himself off.

"Yeah." Greg agreed.

"I think that's enough of that game." Brent got in as Lance took Greg back and was heading for the swing to try again.

"I guess." Lance agreed but still started to swing with Greg in his lap. He looked up just fast enough to see Brent walking over toward the tree. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing." Brent answered as he leaped up and grabbed the first big branch and started to pull himself up.

"Where did he go?" Greg moved his head to look up toward Lance.

"I guess he's going to try climbing the big tree that's behind us." Lance answered.

Greg looked down toward the ground.

Lance lifted Greg off his lap and sat him back down so that they were both facing each other. "What's wrong big guy?"

Greg let himself fall forward so that his face was resting on Lance's chest. "Nothing. You'll just laugh."

"Greg, I promise that whatever it is, I won't laugh." Lance wrapped his arms around Greg and let the swing start to slow down on its own.



Greg let out a small sigh. "I miss being able to see."

Lance said nothing for a few minutes and just hugged Greg tightly as the swing got slower and slower. "You remember how you were able to see through Jude's eyes yesterday? Maybe if you tried hard enough you could see through mine?"

Greg shrugged his shoulders. "I doubt it."

"Hey Lance, why don't you look up here toward me and give him something to work toward seeing?" Brent called out from almost the top of the tree.

Lance nodded and turned the swing slightly so he could get a good look at Brent who had to be at least 15 to 20 feet off the ground in the tree. He watched Greg scrunch his face a bit as he tried to concentrate as hard as he could. "See anything?"

Greg sat there for a few moments, and was starting to shake his head no, when a surprised expression filled his face. "I think I can see something!" Greg shouted.

Lance quickly turned his head back to look up at Brent in the tree. "Can you see Brent up there?"

Greg paused a few more moments. "I think so... it's a bit fuzzy... but I think I can see him waving."

"Sweet!" Brent called out as he started waving faster.

"Greg, that's awesome!" Lance hugged Greg while still looking up toward Brent.

"I thought you said the tree Brent was in was in our yard?" Greg pushed himself away from Lance a bit to try to concentrate harder.

Lance looked down questionably toward Greg. "It is, it's only a few feet away from us."

Greg tilted his head to the side slightly. "Then why does it look like he's one or two backyards away from us?"

Lance immediately looked up toward Brent as he had a feeling that he knew what this might have meant. Before he could say anything, he could already see Brent surveying all of the backyards that he could see for someone else.

"You just looked right at me!" Greg said, as he too had now caught on to the fact that he was not seeing through Lance's eyes, but someone else's.

"Oh crap!" Brent leaned forward a bit to make sure what he was seeing was correct. "Lance, look over in that yard that's diagonal to us. In the center of the yard under that big umbrella, does it look like that kid is chained up?"

Lance stood up with Greg and walked closer to the tree that Brent was in to get a better look. It didn't take long for him to see what Brent had spotted. In the yard that was diagonal to theirs, it seemed that a

small boy maybe 9 or 10, dressed in a white jumpsuit had some type of collar around his neck and was chained up to a poll. "No way! Who would chain up a kid like that?"

Brent made his decent down the tree in record time, leaping from the final branch down to the ground. "I have no clue, but that's not right. Look at that kid's face; it looks like he's been there a pretty long time."

"We need to help him." Greg stated, which seemed to answer the question that the other two boys were thinking. Within moments, both boys were sprinting toward the back fence.

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Brent was the first to hop across the point where the fences met into the yard where the boy could be seen. As he turned back around to look at Lance who was still holding Greg, it was clear they were both trying to figure out how to get Greg over.

"He's looking right at us, so I think I can get over the fence on my own." Greg answered the unspoken question as he reached out to grab hold of the fences. It took Greg a few minutes to get his hands and legs in the right position, as he clearly seemed to be having some issues coordinating his movements with what he was seeing, but he really didn't care as it was far better than seeing nothing at all.

Once Greg was completely over and holding onto Brent's side, Lance easily lifted himself up and over the fence to land almost on top of Brent. All the boys carefully approached the boy that was sitting close to the center of the yard.

Sure enough, the boy, who looked to be no more than 10, had a dog collar around his neck which was tied to a large black pole a few feet away. Brent was disgusted at the thought of how anyone could possibly treat such a beautiful boy like this. The boy had rather shiny collar length sandy blond hair which seemed to go along almost perfectly with his fair skin. What caught Brent's eyes the most was the captivating light blue eyes that seemed to be fixed on watching his, Lance, and Greg's every move.

"Hi! I'm Greg!" Greg smiled as he held out his hand toward the boy. "What's your name?" Greg could see the image of his hand outstretched as the boy was looking at it very intently.

"It's okay; we aren't going to hurt you or anything." Brent decided to jump into the conversation once it seemed clear that the boy was not going to answer or to take Greg's hand. "We saw that you were tied up over here and we figured we would come to see if you were alright."

Brent and Lance glanced at each other as they tried to figure out why the boy was not replying. He didn't appear to be frightened or scared, he just seemed to be intently looking at them, with his face filled with curiosity.

"Maybe he can't speak, or speaks a different language?" Lance asked after a few more minutes of waiting.

"Can you speak English?" Greg asked a little louder as he reached his hand out further to touch the boy's hand. As soon as he did this, he immediately pulled his hand back as if he was shocked by electricity and both Greg and the boy had very surprised expressions on there face.

"You okay bud?" Brent looked down at the surprised Greg to make sure that he was not hurt that bad.

"His name is Eric." Greg said slowly, as if he was remembering something that he had known a long time ago, but was just now recalling.

"How do you know that?" Lance asked with curiosity, and then turned to address the boy directly. "Is your name Eric?"

The boy gave Lance an unmistakable nod that it was, which caused both Lance and Brent to look back at Greg with a surprised expression.

"Did he tell you that in your head?" Brent asked.

Greg scrunched his nose a bit as he tried to figure out himself how he knew. "I'm not really sure, I don't think I heard words in my head or anything, it was just like I felt his name was Eric."

"Wow, that's awesome!" Brent's voice was filled with admiration for the newest ability that Greg seemed to have found, which gave him yet another reason to believe that Greg was an extremely special boy.

Lance also seemed to be equally impressed. "Can you find out anything else about him?"

"I'll try." Greg answered as he looked up toward Eric. As soon as he did this, Eric immediately turned his head to look directly into Greg's deep brown eyes.

Brent and Lance watched in silence as the two boys appeared to be locked in a staring contest. It only took a few moments before Greg pressed his hands onto his head and squeezed his eyes shut. "Ouch! Too fast! Stop!" Instinctively, Lance moved himself between Greg and Eric which caused Eric to turn his attention toward Lance.

Brent quickly reached down and pulled Greg up into his arms. "Greg, are you okay?"

Greg nodded as he wrapped his arms around Brent and buried his face into Brent's shoulder. "He made Eric do nasty things!"

"Who did bud? And what nasty things?" Brent started to gently rock Greg back and forth to try to calm him down.

"I don't know!" Greg started to sob more. "Some old man, maybe his dad I think, because he saw him a lot. And he did things with Eric's pee-pee, gross things."

"The kid's being abused by his own dad?" Lance's face started to turn red with anger at the very thought that someone would even consider doing something like that to the innocent kid that sat in front of them.

Brent continued to comfort Greg. "Shh... shh... It's okay Greg, don't think about it anymore..." As he was saying this, he continued to look around the back yard surveying the situation. "Lance, get that thing off him."

Lance nodded as he reached down to un-hook the collar around Eric's neck. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. Let's get him back to the house and we can call Mrs. Short and see if she can help him too." Brent thought out loud as Lance continued to work on the collar.

Once the collar was off, Lance looked Eric right in the eyes. "Will you come with us? We are going to get you somewhere safe where you won't be hurt no more."

Eric nodded his understanding as he looked in awe at the collar that sat on the bench next to him, which was no longer around his neck.

"How do we get him over the fence?" Lance asked.

Before Brent had a chance to think about a reply, a streak of bright yellow light flew a few inches over his head, and exploded in a nearby tree. Moments later, an angry voice could be heard coming from a man looking out of one of the open windows in the house. "You damn kids get the fuck out of here and leave my boy alone!"

Brent looked at the location where the phaser blast came from and grabbed Lance's shoulder just as Lance was starting to dash for the fence. "That's way too exposed; we need to go for the side gate!"

Lance started to sprint toward the side gate of the house with Brent quickly following while still holding Greg. "Come!" Greg shouted as he looked over Brent's shoulder and could see himself with Brent, and Lance getting further away. A few moments later, Eric seemed to get the idea and started to run with amazingly fast speed toward the other boys as a second streak of yellow energy whizzed past them.

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Lance was the first to reach the small wooden gate that was on the side of the house. He started to try to work the latch when his worst fear had suddenly come true. "It's locked!"

"Watch out!" Brent shouted as Lance barely had time to move himself and Greg out of the way before he leaped into the air while running at full force and let the full weight of his body slam into the side of the gate. Fortunately the gate was no where close to being strong enough to take Brent's impact, which caused both the gate and Brent to go crashing down to the ground.

"Are you okay?" Lance tried to shift Greg's weight around so he could free up one of his hands to help Brent up.

"I'm fine! Run!" Brent shouted as he struggled to get back up on his feet.

Within moments, the boys were off and running down the front yard and toward the sidewalk. The entire time they were on the side of the house, they could hear the angry voice of an older man inside yelling and cussing at them.

"Where to?" Lance called out.

Brent looked ahead as he was running. "Let's try to cut through the yard of the next house to get back to Rodney's house."

[Bad idea, you guys will get slowed down too much.] The familiar voice of Randy sounded behind Brent.

"Oh sure, now you show up!" Brent shouted!

"What?" Lance yelled back.

"Nothing! Forget cutting through the yard, let's keep running around the block, which should get us back to Rodney's house." Brent hoped that Randy was right as he had serious doubts about the large strait paths they would be taking.

As soon as the boys reached the first corner, another streak of yellow light zoomed over their heads. Out of the corner of his eye Lance was able to see, a middle aged gray haired man reaching the sidewalk in front of his house, and starting to run down it toward them.

"He's chasing us!" Lance called out as the boys started to run as quickly as they could to the second corner. "And he doesn't look happy!"

The entire time that they were running, Greg had to periodically call back out to Eric to get his attention as he would start to slow down or even stop as he seemed to be very easily distracted.

When the boys were still about 10 yards away from the second corner, yet another streak of yellow light went past them. This time, Lance let out a yelp as part of the beam grazed his arm causing him to nearly stumble and drop Greg.

"Lance?" Brent spun around nearly falling over himself at the quick change of direction.

"I'm fine! Go!" Lance called out, having recovered from his near fall, and started running again.

The boys made it to the second corner and started to sprint down the final stretch of sidewalk that would lead them to Rodney's house.

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The boys reached the door to the house and ran inside, almost immediately spotting Rodney with some paperwork spread out in the dining room.

"No running in the house guys!" Rodney called out just as they were entering the room.

"There is a guy running after us!" shouted Brent as soon as he ran through the doorway.

"He tried to do bad things to Eric, and he's shooting at us with a laser or something." Lance added.

"He chased us around the block and is on his way here!" Brent continued.

Rodney stood up and held his hands up in the air. "Whoa, slow down guys! What are you all babbling about? There is no one here that's going to try to hurt you."

"He already hit Lance in the arm!" Brent shouted back as he motioned toward the scorch mark on the sleeve of Lance's shirt.

"Okay guys, slow down and tell me what's going on, and who is your new friend?" Rodney asked, making a noticeable effort at talking very slowly himself.

"There's no time, we need to do something!" Lance pleaded.

"Enough!" Rodney started to raise his voice. "I know you boys have been through a lot in the last few days, but isn't this going a bit too far?"

Before any of the boys had a chance to answer, several loud knocks came pounding from the front door.

"That's him!" Both Lance and Brent shouted.

"Okay, you boys wait here; I'll get to the bottom of this." Rodney gave a final glare to make sure they knew he was serious, before he walked out of the dining room and went to answer the door.

As soon as Rodney was out of the room, the boys went out of the other door into the kitchen.

"What now?" Lance was starting to panic.

"We'll call the police!" Brent offered as he looked around the kitchen for the phone.

"They want to arrest us!" Greg cried out with his face buried in Lance's chest.

"Good point." Brent agreed as he spotted the phone, and also the small note next to it with the phone number to Terry Short. "Better idea, we can call Mrs. Short... Come on... upstairs!"

The boys ran for the stairs as quickly as they could while Brent was fumbling with the buttons to the phone in mid stride. During the brief seconds that they were in the hallway to get to the stairs, they could already hear the older man talking to Rodney demanding that he hand over the kids.

As it turned out, the first room that was reachable from the top of the stairs was the bathroom, so that is where all the boys piled into as Brent finished typing in the final numbers and was putting the phone up to his ear.

"Hello? Mrs. Short? This is Brent, Brent Knocks, my uncle Neal talked to you earlier, we need help, they are trying to kill him, I don't know who else to call." Brent took a quick look around at Lance holding Greg, and their newest friend Eric who seemed to have a completely confused look on his face.

"Umm... Yes, sure... sorry, but we don't have much time, he's at the door." Brent talked back into the phone as he nervously glanced back and forth between Lance and the door leading back out into the hallway.

After a few seconds of listening, Brent continued talking, but at a somewhat calmer rate. "okay sure... umm... we are staying at my uncle's friend's house waiting for my uncle to come back and we were outside in the backyard playing and saw a boy in the other yard chained up outside so we went to see why he was chained up. He wouldn't talk to us, but Greg could talk to him, and we tried to unchain him, and this guy tried to shoot us with a phaser and we ran home, he followed us, Lance got hit in the arm we made it home but he's right behind us."

The entire house echoed with the loud shrilling sound of a phaser blast. Then there was the loud thud of a body hitting the wooden floor in the hallway below.

"Oh god! He's in the house!" Brent shouted as his and everyone else's heart started racing even faster.

"I don't know, Rodney was shot downstairs, we are upstairs, he's going to get us!"

Brent could see the panic on everyone else's face. What had he gotten them all into? As he listened a bit more on the phone, he started frantically glancing around in different directions. "I think so... in the closet in the bedroom at the opposite side of the house from the door."

A few more moments went by.

"Yea, hurry! Please...! Okay..." Brent threw the phone down and grabbed Eric by the arm dragging him out of the bathroom with Lance and Greg quickly in tow.

Brent led everyone to the bedroom that they had spent the night in and started making his way for the closet.

"What's going on?" Lance asked as soon as he had a chance to breath.

The closet door flew open as Brent started to push things to the sides as quickly as he could to make room for all of them. "Some guys are coming to rescue us, but it's going to take them a few minutes to get here, so we need to hide here until then."

Once some space was cleared, Brent motioned for everyone to get in. With everyone in, he reached out and closed the door, engulfing them all in total darkness. As soon as the door was closed, it seemed like all of the sounds from the rest of the house could very easily be heard. Someone was definitely walking around downstairs, and the sounds of chairs and other pieces of furniture being moved around could be heard.

After what seemed like ages, Brent's spirit was slightly lifted, as it sounded like things downstairs were getting quieter. 'Perhaps he gave up, and is going to leave us alone.' He thought to himself.

Those higher spirits were quickly quashed as footsteps could be heard coming up the stairs.

Brent felt Lance grabbing onto his hand. 'Man... What have I gotten us into? This isn't how things were suppose to end? Randy, where did you go? Maybe we could try fighting the guy? No way! Not when he has a phaser!' The thoughts continued to race through Brent's head a mile a minute.

Time seemed to slow down to a crawl as all 4 boys remained huddled in the closet. Brent had managed to silently move some of the clothes that were on the floor in front of them, but he knew that there would be almost no chance of them actually hiding them if the door was opened.

A few moments later, the door to the room opened up and heavy footsteps could be heard, slowly entering the room. Everyone seemed to hold their breath, as if that would prevent them from being found.

The footsteps continued to slowly walk around in the room as the sound of the bed being pushed could be heard. How long had they been hiding there? It seemed like it had been forever since he hung up the phone with Mrs. Short and her son. But he was sure that most likely it was only a minute or so. What if they didn't get here in time? What if they didn't come at all? He was definitely a kid, he didn't even sound any older than he or Lance. What if he was just fooling around and didn't really come at all?

Finally, the footsteps stopped in front of the closet door and the door handle began to turn. Brent felt the squeeze of Lance's hand on his own as the light from the bedroom started to creep into the closet with the door opening further.

The old man let out a small laugh as he immediately spotted the boys. "Game over kids!" The man stated as he raised his phaser up and pointed it directly at Brent's head.

'I failed them.' Was the only thought that came to Brent's mind as he closed his eyes and awaited the yellow beam of energy ripping through his body turning him into a pile of dust. Seconds later the high pitch sounds of the phaser firing could be heard, followed by a loud thud a second later.

"I'm still alive." Brent thought to himself, as his brain registered the fact that he was still hearing sounds, and that the amount of pressure from Lance's hand squeezing his own was suddenly getting less. "Oh god! He shot Lance!"

"Are you guys okay?" A young voice that Brent did not recognize called out.

Brent slowly opened his eyes to see that the old man was lying flat on his face on the floor in front of him and that Lance, Greg, and Eric were indeed still alive and unharmed.

"It's okay guys, we are here from Clan Short. We're here to help you." Another somewhat young voice called out.

Brent climbed out of the closet to see that there were five other boys standing in the room, four of whom had phasers drawn and trained on the old man lying on the floor.

"Who are you guys?" Brent asked with amazement as Lance made his way out of the closet next with Greg wrapped so tightly around his neck that he was almost choking him.

The tallest boy with collar length bright blond hair answered first. "My name is Cory, the teddy bear next to me is Sean, over there is JJ, Gabe and David. We'll give you guys a lot better of an introduction later, but we really need to get you somewhere safe first." As soon as he finished answering Brent's question, Cory turned toward the three boys standing in the doorway. "David, can you stay here with JJ and Gabe, and secure the prisoner and work cleanup while Sean and I get these guys back to the compound?"



"Sure thing Cory." David answered as JJ immediately moved toward the old man, pulling his arms behind his back.

"What about Rodney? The guy shot him downstairs!" Lance asked as soon as he gained the ability to speak.

"He should be fine." Sean, who had similar collar length hair as Cory, but auburn instead of blond, answered. "He was only stunned. But we really need to get you guys out of here."

"How?" Brent asked.

"Have you guys ever heard of a transporter?" Cory grinned as he immediately saw shocked faces on Brent and Lance.

"No way!" Lance nearly shouted as Eric managed to make his way out of the closet looking totally and completely confused.

"Yes way! Sean, get these guys ready to go while I call Terra Main." Cory couldn't help but smile at the surprised looks on each of the boy's faces.

Sean started to get everyone in position on the other side of the room. "Hey munchkin, No one can be carrying you during the transport, so I need you to stand beside Lance for a few minutes. Okay?"

"He's blind." Lance explained as he gently set Greg down in the position next to him that Sean had indicated.

Cory looked around at his group. "Is everyone ready?"

After getting nods from everyone, Cory took out his communicator. "Terra Main, this is Clan short. Requesting 6 to transport directly to the Clan Short CIC."

A few moments later, the communicator that Cory was holding crackled to life. "Clan Short, this is Terra Main. Confirming request to transport 6 from your location to Clan Short CIC. You are first in line. Ready to transport on your command."

Cory smiled. "Thanks Terra Main! Energize!"

A few seconds later Brent, Lance, Greg, and Eric found themselves engulfed in columns of shimmering light along with Cory and Sean as they slowly faded away to begin their new life.

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#### Author's Notes:

Wow, getting chapter 5 out took even longer than I expected. Unfortunately both real life, and the need for me to re-read through the entire Memories: Part 1 again to make sure I don't mess up what's about to happen, made this chapter take a lot longer than I hoped. Because of this, I decided not to end the

chapter in the cliff hanger position that I planned, which would have been at the point that Brent heard the phaser fire, but instead let it play out a bit further until everyone was being transported away.

I'm not expecting chapter 6 to take as long as it took chapter 5 to get out. However, I will be taking the next chapter a bit slower, as it will be covering a few key days in Clan Short history that are not covered in any of the CSU stories. As such, while you're waiting for Chapter 6, I would recommend reading over 'Memories: Part 1' by ACFan, as chapter 6 will be taking place a few days after Memories Part 1 ends, and a few days before 'One Door Closes' by Multimapper begins.

Finally, just to answer all the questions that I know I am going to be asked. The Eric that we just met is the same Eric that the story is named after. However, there is a lot more to learn about him before the full meaning behind the story name becomes clear.

Anyway, until next time, thanks for all the great comments and kind words!

- Zacky

P.S. Just wanted to throw in a quick word of things to both Willy and Some Weird Editor Guy for the great job both have done with helping to edit this and previous chapters. Thanks!

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#### Editor's Notes

Wow, what an exciting chapter. I tell you, when I first read the description of Eric sitting there with the chain, I was ready to start throwing things. Love the way it is tying in with CSU so neatly. Now don't be so slow with the next one.

– Some weird Editor Guy

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#### Editor's notes:

Well, about time, too! At least we finally get an introduction to a very enigmatic Eric! I'm as much in the dark as to where this story is going as the rest of you, so I'll be on tenterhooks waiting for Chapter 6, too. Anyone want a bucketful of surplus commas? What is it with CSU writers and commas? I hope I got all the spelling errors etc, as I do tend to get a little caught up in the story.

Until next time...

- Willy

## Chapter Six

8:20am PST – Tuesday, September 20th, 2004

Evan woke up to the feeling of a soft breeze blowing across his face. He still had his eyes closed and was still half asleep as he started to get his bearings. His neck was stiff, and it felt like something was poking his back. He opened his eyes to see that he still had his arm protectively around his younger brother as they both lay under some small shrubs near the edge of a clearing in the middle of nowhere. It was at that moment that everything came back to him that lead him and his brother to have fallen asleep in this spot. He didn't have long to think, however, as he heard his younger brother moan slightly and start to wake up as well.

Haden gasped as he pushed his older brother's arm away and sat up looking around. "It wasn't a dream?"

Evan shook his head and sighed, "The bastard finally did it." His voice cracking slightly as he could still see the nail marks in his younger brother's neck.

Haden's eyes started to tear up as he looked down toward his lap and softly started to sob.

Evan lovingly wrapped his arms around Haden and held him tightly. "Don't worry little bro, I told ya I would always look out for you even if HE wouldn't, and I don't plan to stop now. We'll find some way through this."

The two young boys said there at the edge of the clear for several minutes until finally Haden looked up at his older brother. "What are we going to do Evan?" Haden sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve and tried to clear some of the tears away.

The older boy thought for a few moments before he replied, "I think the first thing we need to do is find something to eat. I don't know about you, but I'm kinda hungry." As if on cue, Evan's stomach rumbled which caused both boys to smile slightly.

"Come on!" Even said as he stood up with a slightly lighter mood, and both boys headed out into the clearing in search of something to fill their empty stomachs with.

\* \* \* \*

11:30am EST – Tuesday, September 20th, 2004

The light humming sounds of the transporter effect could be heard as 6 shimmering columns of light appeared in the center of a large square room filled with several wall sized screens, and various computer equipment on each of the sides. A few moments later the sparkles of light started to fade, they were replaced by the forms of Brent, Lance, Greg, Eric, Cory and Sean.

Even before the final visible sparkles had gone away, Lance already had his hands flinging up into the air! "Wow! That was wicked cool! You could feel the tingles and everything!"

"I think that's the first time I've heard anyone refer to the transporters as wicked cool." Cory grinned as he quickly glanced around to make sure everyone had arrived safely.

"I don't know, I seem to remember another certain blond who's reaction to his first transport wasn't to different." Sean smiled as he walked up next to Cory.

"Anyway" Cory raised his voice slightly as a clear indication that he was making things a little bit more serious. "Welcome to the Clan Short CIC guys!"

Brent took his eyes off of Lance, and the antics of his rescuers to glance around the rather large room that they had appeared in. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought that he had landed in the middle of some kind of high-tech control center. There were a few chairs and couches placed around the room, but along most of the walls were various types of computer terminals and work tables, most of which appeared to be off. On one side of the room, there were a few work men using a small lift to install one of the largest screens that Brent had ever seen.

"You guys will need to excuse the dust, we're still kinda in the process of getting moved in and everything set up." Sean added.

"Bout time y'all made it back!" A shaggy brown haired boy who was a little smaller than Brent said as he entered the room from behind them, "Y'all done nearly gave mom a heart attack with y'all rushing out so fast like that!"

"Hey Tommy, stop complaining and get over here and meet your newest brothers." Sean replied as he tried to restrain his laughter at the surprised looks of the rest of the group.

"You done went and got me kin folk?" Tommy exclaimed as he was embraced in a sideways hug by Cory so that he could still see the new guys. "Hiyas!"

"Hello" was the only thing that Brent could think of to say. He tried to think of some other comment, but his attention, along with the attention of the rest of the boys, was quickly pulled to Greg.

Greg had fallen to his knees and had a death grip on his head with his eyes clinched shut.

Lance immediately lost interest in the room and knelt down next to Greg. "Hey bud, what's wrong?"

"Hurts." This was the only word that Greg was able to get out from his soft whimpers. Already, tears could be seen starting to drizzle down from his eyes.

Cory placed his arm lightly on Lance's shoulder. "Come on guys, grab Greg, and let's get him and the rest of you to Doc Austin's office. He should be able to figure out whatever is wrong with him." Cory then looked up toward Tommy just in time to see the boy give him a nod as he released Cory and ran over to one of the communication terminals.

Lance scooped up Greg, and all the boys followed Sean and Cory as they quickly went through a large set of doors and past what appeared to be the start of a security checkpoint station. Once they went through a second set of doors, they were outside in bright sunlight walking across a grassy courtyard toward another set of buildings.

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A few moments later, they were entering another building, and after walking through what appeared to be a living room that was doubling as a waiting room, they entered another room that looked like it was a cross between a small library and an office. To make the room appear even weirder there was even a rather odd looking bed that was placed against the opposite wall.

"Hi guys, Tommy just called me to let me know you were coming." A middle aged man with light blond hair dressed in a white doctors coat said with a rather cheerful sounding voice.

"Something is wrong with Greg, can you help him?" Lance asked with pleading eyes as he looked up toward the man.

"Doc, these are our new brothers that we just rescued out of a rather hostile situation." Cory answered Doc Austin's unasked question as he seemed a bit puzzled by the new arrivals.

"Gee Cory, you just can't seem to stop collecting, now can you?" The man teased as he started to look Greg up and down.

Both Cory and Shawn rolled their eyes while everyone else had puzzled looks.

"I'll see what I can do." Doc replied as he grabbed his tricorder from the table and pointed it toward the small boy curled up in Lance's arms.

"Is that a real tricorder?" Brent asked as he tried to shift his position to get a better look at the device that Doc Austin was using to scan Greg with.

Doc smiled as he started to press buttons on the tricorder to view various test results, "Yes it is. It's actually a specialized medical tricorder.

Brent got as close to Doc as he thought he could without getting in the way. "What's it telling you?"

"That there is definitely something odd with his vision that might be causing his headaches", Doc answered as he turned off the tricorder, "Go ahead and lay him down on the biobed and we should be able to get more detailed information."

"He's been blind since birth." Lance took the sobbing boy over to the bed and tried to lay him on it.

"It hurts!" Greg whimpered again, not wanting to let go of Lance.

Doc Austin brought a small hypospray over and placed it next to Greg's neck. "This should help a little."

"What are you doing go him!" Lance asked with alarm.

"It's just a mild pain reliever that should help until we get a better idea as to what is causing the problem." Doc injected the hypospray into Greg's neck, almost immediately causing the small boy to relax.

"Wow! My head doesn't hurt as much." Greg wiped a few of the tears out of his eyes.

"That's a good sign, now let's see if we can get a better idea as to what the problem is." Doc put the empty hypospray down and walked over to the front of the bed, and pressed a few buttons on the control panel. "I've just instructed the biobed to run through an entire suite of tests, so this will probably take a few minutes."

"Thanks Doc!" Sean stated, noticing that the other new arrivals were too tied up in watching Greg and Doc.

Doc glanced back toward Sean with a smile and nodded.

Cory wrapped his arm around Sean and gave him a loving squeeze. "Hey babe, you think you can keep an eye on these guys while I go back to CIC and see how David, JJ, and Gabe are doing?"

"Sure thing." Sean answered as he gave Cory's hand an extra squeeze before the two separated, and Cory headed back out of the room.

Brent briefly glanced at Sean, then back toward Doc, and then toward Sean again.

Sean smiled as he noticed the concerned look on Brent's face. "It's okay Brent. You will find that most the kids you meet here are gay, and the adults are totally cool with it."

"Really? They don't get mad at you or anything?" Brent blinked in disbelief.

"Why would we get mad if our kids are happy and in a relationship they want to be in?" Doc answered for Sean as he pressed more buttons on the biobed.

Brent thought for a few moments. "I don't know. I just thought that... well.... I'm not sure."

Doc gave Brent a knowing smile before turning his attention back to the biobed. "Your parents didn't approve of you being gay, did they?"

Brent glanced down toward the ground. "Something like that I guess."

Sean jumped back in before the conversation went too much further. "Don't worry Brent, you don't have to talk about it now. Later when you meet the rest of the clan, you will understand more. But for now, just know that being gay is the norm around here. In fact, if you are straight you are considered to be in the minority."

Brent nodded as Lance moved closer to him, and hesitantly placed his arm around Brent's side while keeping an eye on Sean just to make sure it was really okay.

"Okay." Doc stated which broke the tone of the mood that was quickly forming. "There is a lot of rather odd information here, it's going to take the computer a little bit to sort through it. Right now it can't really find anything directly physically wrong with him, but it has a lot of detailed analytical data to sort through."

"Thanks Doc, whatever you can find out would be very appreciated. To be honest, we were not even expecting this much. I thought biobeds were a reserved starfleet technology." Lance tightened his squeeze around Brent.

"It's my pleasure to be able to help. And normally your right, but you have just been rescued by some of the most powerful kids on the planet. I'm sure they will explain things to you in greater detail when you meet the rest of the clan. For now, while the biobed is processing Greg's data, how about we check the rest of you guys out?" Doc Austin smiled as he glanced over toward Eric.

Lance walked over to the biobed, and lifted Greg off the bed and into a hug. "He doesn't seem to be able to talk for some reason, and I don't think he can understand a lot of what we are saying."

"I see." Doc answered as he motioned toward the biobed, and helped Eric up onto it.

"He's actually the reason we are here. We saw him tied up to a pole in his back yard, and when we tried to free him, some guy started chasing and shooting at us with a phaser." Brent added.

Doc fought to restrain his anger as he gently pushed Eric's chest back to help indicate that he wanted him to lay down on the bed. "Well, I'm sure you guys don't need to worry about that now. Your probably in one of the safest places you could possibly be."

Knowing where Doc's thoughts were headed, Sean jumped in. "Clan Intelligence is already on it Doc. We should have a lot more answers pretty quickly, if we don't already have them."

"Thanks, we really appreciate that too. Although, I'm still not sure where here is exactly." Brent added.

"You guys are very welcome, and your actually at our main clan compound in Orlando." Sean stated as he moved closer toward Lance to get a better look at Greg.

"Orlando, Florida?" Brent asked with surprise.

"That would be the one." Sean smiled back.

"Wow! That transport couldn't have been more than a few seconds, and we went all the way from Iowa to Florida!" Brent momentarily forgot about watching Eric and was lost in wonder at Sean's words.

"Actually, you first went about 30 miles above the earth to the Terra Main station, and from there you were transported to Orlando." Sean was starting to find it hard to prevent himself from giggling.

"No way!" Brent nearly shouted with excitement.

"Careful Sean, he might never want to leave your side." Doc stated jokingly as he continued to look at some of the biobed readings.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll find ways to prevent that." Lance jumped in as he kissed the back of Brent's neck, causing Brent to jump a little, and turn his attention back toward Lance, making both Sean and Doc giggle.

"Hmm, this is a bit disturbing." Doc stated in a more serious tone.

"What's wrong?" Brent asked as he immediately became serious as well.

"Well, physically Eric seems to be fine. But I'm detecting brain utilization and power readings that are a lot lower than they normally should be for a boy his age." Doc stated as he continued to review additional information from the biobed.

Just as soon as Doc Austin had stopped talking, the door to the office burst open, and two kids with shoulder length strawberry blond hair ran in.

As Brent looked at the two boys, he could tell at once that they were identical twins. They looked like they were about 9 years old, and both of their faces were filled with millions of freckles.

"Jamie! Jacob! What are you guys doing over here? Aren't you suppose to be at school?" Sean asked with surprise.

"Sorry Sean, but Greg has been blasting every telepath in Camp Little Eagle." Jamie answered as he fought to catch his breath.

"I don't know if blasting fits. Grabbing would probably be more like it." Jacob added as he too tried to catch his breath as well.

"You guys should at least knock before you come barging in. What if I had a patient undressed in here?" Doc asked as he got weird glances from both twins.

Lance finally recovered enough from the surprise entry of the new arrivals so that he could talk. "What do you mean Greg was blasting and grabbing?"

"Greg is a pretty strong telepath but his mind doesn't know how to control his abilities." Jamie answered as Jacob walked over toward Greg and Lance.

"His mind instinctively searches and tries to pull visual information from any other mind it can, to try to make up for the lose of his own vision." Jacob added.

"And with there being so many telepaths here, I think Greg's mind basically got overloaded, as it tried to pull vision information from all of us at the same time." Jamie finished.

"You guys definitely talk like twins, but how can you possibly know all this?" Lance asked with disbelief evident in his voice.

Sean answered first. "Sorry guys, we haven't really had a chance to do proper introductions yet, but your going to be meeting a lot of really unique kids here. Jamie and Jacob are telepaths and are the head of the clan's intelligence division, which is why I was so sure earlier that we would be getting everything we needed to know about your attacker."

Lance nodded as he glanced at Jacob walking over to Greg.



"Hey Greg, we heard you and I want to try to help you, okay?" Jacob stated turning his attention toward Greg who was still tightly clenching his arms around Lance's neck. After getting a small nod from Greg, Jacob continued. "I need you to focus on me, and just focus on my voice... There ya go big guy, turn all your focus toward me, ignore all the other noise."

After a few moments, Lance could feel Greg's grip loosen.

"I can see myself now." Greg softly whispered.

"That's right. Wow, your pretty good at that." Jacob smiled.

Just then, the door to the office slammed open again as another boy about 14 years old with slightly curly blondish-brown hair ran in. "Have any of you seen.... Oh, there you guys are. And I see you already found Greg."

"Justy, you're as bad as your little brothers!" Doc commented.

"Of course Doc, someone has to teach them!" Justy smiled as he moved toward Jamie and Jacob, sharing brief glances with each of them. After a few moments, he then turned toward toward Brent and Lance. "Hi guys. I'm Justy, and I see you've already met my little bros Jamie and Jacob."

"Hi." Brent answered hesitantly, "You guys can really read people's minds?"

Justy giggled. "Yea, that's what telepaths can usually do. My little bros probably know more about you guys right now than you guys know about yourselves. But don't worry, they won't share any of the information they find unless you are doing something wrong, or planning on hurting someone."

"Can you guys help Greg?"

"We might. Right now, Jacob is helping Greg to keep his mind focused on him, so that should stop his head from getting overloaded from everyone else's signals. Doc, did you get to check on his eyes?" Justy answered as he looked up toward Doc Austin.

Doc punched a few buttons on the biobed, and slowly shook his head as he looked at the data. "I'm afraid not, it seems that Greg's optic nerves, along with a number of other key components needed to allow the brain to process visual signals never developed. We can't even do nerve regeneration since there was nothing there to regenerate from."

Justy exchanged brief glances with Jacob and Jamie again before he continued talking. "We think that we can help teach Greg's mind so that he has more control over his mental abilities, but he's still pretty young, so we are not sure just how much control that will be."

"That sounds like it would be awesome!" Brent stated.

"How about it angel? You want to let our new friends try to teach your mind how to control itself better?" Lance asked Greg as he brushed some of the hair out of his eyes.

Greg nodded yes.

"What do we have to do?" Lance looked up toward Justy.

"Jamie and Jacob will just need to take him over to the other chair. You can't hold him since your minds will be too close together, and they are going to need to be able to focus completely on him." Justy answered as he glanced toward an empty chair on the other side of the room.

"Can we watch?" Lance gently sat Greg in the chair and took a few steps back.

"Sure, but there is not going to be much to see." Justy smiled as Jamie and Jacob walked over to the chair that Greg was sitting in, and keeled down so that they were at eye level with him.

Several minutes went by while everyone in the room sat or stood in silence. Brent thought that he felt a very faint, light tingling sensation in his fingers, but quickly chalked it up to his imagination.

"Of course I can hear you." Greg said out loud, breaking the silence.

"That's good Greg, Now try using your mind to answer us instead of your mouth." Jamie replied.

"I don't know how to do that." Greg stated shyly.

"Just think of what you want to say, but instead of saying it, just pretend you were saying it to us." Jacob added.

A few more moments of silence went by until Greg once again interrupted it with a huge smile on his face. "Cool!"

"That's pretty good Greg." Jamie stated as he ruffled Greg's hair and stood up with his brother.

"That's it?" Lance asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"Told ya there wasn't much to see." Justy answered with a grin.

"So Greg is not going to hurt anymore or do any of the blasting stuff you were talking about earlier?" Brent asked.

"Some of his abilities, like visual intercepting are very strong since he's used them almost constantly since he was very young. But he's still going to have to work on all his other abilities." Justy replied.

"Maybe later we can get Kyle to sit down with Greg a bit to help him with focusing as well. He's had a lot more experience working with younger minds." Jamie stated.

"Can you guys help Eric too?" Greg asked as Lance reached down to lift him up again.

"He's not a telepath like us." Jacob answered.

"But I could see out of his eyes really good." Greg pleaded.

Jamie glanced over toward where Eric was still laying down on the Biobed. After a few moments, he tilted his head slightly as Jacob joined him in his gaze toward Eric.

Justy glanced over toward Eric as well. "Humm, he's definitely not a normal telepath, but there is something a bit different about him."

"Different as in that he can't seem to talk?" Brent asked.

"Yeah, that's odd as well." Justy answered somewhat lost in thought. "It's like he's mostly empty. Almost like all of the events in his life have been erased up to about 3 weeks ago when he was first purchased."

"Purchased?" Lance's voice clearly showing signs of annoyance.

Justy nodded slowly. "I think we can help teach him some basic language skills to at least let him talk with us. But we might need one of our other brothers to help finish the job later tonight."

"If there is anything you can do to help him, that would be great." Brent stated, as he too was showing signs of disgust.

Jamie and Jacob walked closer to the biobed, and Justy walked up between the two twins, holding on to a hand from each of them.

While they waited, Brent was almost certain he could feel a mild tingling sensation in his fingers. Just as he lifted one of his hands to investigate it further, Eric sat up on the bed.

"Thank.... you?" Eric's soft 10 year old soprano voice said very hesitantly as he lifted one of his hands to feel his throat.

"Your welcome Eric, and I promise you, if my brothers ever find out who did this to you, they will pay for what they have done." Justy replied softly.

"Thanks... you... Gurg see now?" Eric said, still feeling the strange new vibrations from his throat.

"I can see through people's eyes better now, but I still can't see with my own eyes." Greg answered as he twisted himself around in Lances arms to get a better look at Eric.

"Thanks you" Eric answered.

"It's going to take Eric's head a little while to sort out all the knowledge we gave him, but over time he should be able to put thoughts to words better."

"You guys are amazing." Brent said as he reached out and hugged Justy. "You have no clue how much you've helped both of these guys today."

Justy lovingly returned Brent's hug. "Thanks, but there is still a lot of work for both of them. We are going to need Kyle to help with finishing with Eric's language skills later tonight, and Greg is still

going to need a few more sessions with the twins, and possibly Kyle as well to help him with more of his telepathic skills."

"I'm not sure how long we will be here, but if we are, that shouldn't be a problem at all." Brent stated.

"From what clan intelligence has been telling me so far, you guys will probably be here for at least the next day or two." Sean jumped in.

"Okay, well I need to get these two back over to school, and I'm guessing that Eric and Greg will probably need to take a nap somewhere quiet so their brains can start to sort out all the new stuff they learned." Justy stated as he glanced toward the twins, and then back toward Eric and Greg.

"I do feel kinda sleepy" Greg commented, and he shifted himself back around to rest on Lance's shoulder.

"Okay, that sounds good. When will we see you guys again?" Brent asked.

"You will see us after school, and you will also get to meet the rest of the clan. I'm pretty sure they are all going to be really interested in meeting you guys, especially after what Greg did with all the telepaths!" Justy grinned.

Not quite sure how to take Justy's last statement, Brent simply waved as Justy along with a somewhat sluggish Jamie and Jacob headed out of the room.

"Okay guys." Doc Austin stated to get everyone's attention back. "I would like to do biobed scans on Eric and Greg again to get updated readings, and then get Brent and Lance up here for their scans. After that, we can let Eric and Greg sleep in the back room for a bit."

Before long, all 4 boys had their scans complete, and Doc lead them into another room that had two couches and a desk in it.

Once Eric had laid down on one couch, and Lance laid Greg down on the other, Doc brought in a few blankets that he used to cover each boy.

Once they were out of the room and had the door closed, Doc looked at the remaining three boys.

"They are probably going to be asleep for a few hours. You guys should probably think about getting something to eat."

"That was my plan exactly." Sean stated as he got agreeing nods from both Brent and Lance. "We will be over in the main CIC building. Can you call and let us know as soon as they wake up?"

"You bet. Now you guys go eat before you die of starvation!" Doc giggled as the boys headed out of Doc Austin's office.

\*\*\*\*

Brent and Lance followed Sean into the main dinning room of the CIC building to see Cory already sitting down with a lady that he assumed to be Mrs. Short, and a guy they recognized immediately as Neal.

"Neal!" Both boys shouted as they ran over to hug him.

Neal jumped out of his seat and soon found Brent and Lance on each side of him. "Hey boys, are you two okay?"

"Uh huh, This place is beyond awesome! They have a huge computer center, Starfleet bio-beds and other starfleet tech and telepaths and a giant soccer field and everything!" Brent bubbled as he and Lance were led by Neal to sit back down at the table.

Sean couldn't help but grin at the antics of the two boys, "If you guys think that's cool, just wait till you see the Olympic sized in-door pool that we have!"

Both Brent and Lance looked at each other, and then at Sean. "Seriously?"

Neal simply giggled, "I guess I should leave now and come back in a month."

"No way! I just found you, I'm not loosing you that fast." Brent stated and emphasized it by hugging Neal a little bit harder.

Teri felt it was her turn to jump into the conversation. "Actions guys, that's what we were just starting to talk about before you came in, so I'm kinda glad you got here when you did." She could see the puzzled looks on the faces of both Brent and Lance, so she continued. "You might not realize this, but when Cory, Sean, and their brothers rescued you, you immediately fell under the protection and custody of Clan Short and the Safe Haven Act."

Neal got a somewhat concerned look on his face. "So your saying that I no longer have the option of adopting my nephew? "

Teri nodded slightly. "In a manner of speaking, that's a valid possibility. With the escalation of the situation today, there are more factors that we need to look at in consideration of what's going to be in the best interest of the boys."

Cory smiled as he could see that most of this was going over Neal's head. "In English, what mom is trying to say is that you might still get to adopt them, but there are also a bunch of new possibilities that have also become available now that need to be taken into consideration."

Teri nodded as Sean couldn't help but jump in. "Gee, I guess keeping a blond around has it's advantages after all."

Brent and Lance both giggled at this as Cory pretended to strangle his brother, and then whispered something in his ear that no one else could hear, but it seemed to have the desired effect as Sean immediately shut up.

"Teri, I'm only interested in what's going to be best for the boys. If that means staying with me, then I would gladly accept that. If it would be in their best interest to instead be somewhere else, then I'm willing to accept that as well. So I'll follow your lead on this given you and your sons seem to have a lot more experience at this than I do."

Teri nodded. "Thanks Neal. That right there says a lot about you. Not many adults would be willing to look at the larger picture and accept that what they want is not always what is going to be in the best interest of the children. But there is still a lot that needs to happen and be discussed before we can really get to that answer."

Neal agreed as he looked down at the two sets of smiling faces that were looking up at him.

Lance gave Neal another squeeze and looked over toward Teri. "Mrs. Short? You said there were a number of options that you were going to discuss?"

Teri nodded and smiled lovingly toward Lance. "Yes, there are. However, since you were rescued by my sons and their brothers, I'll be treating you just like any of my other sons which means that you can call me Teri, or if you would like, you can call me mom, but you don't need to call me Mrs. Short. Okay?"

Both boys nodded.

The conversation was interrupted as Helen brought over a tray of sandwiches to the table. Teri thanked Helen and then looked back toward the boys. "As far as the different options, I'll tell you what they are, but first I think we should take a break to eat some of these sandwiches."

Lance seemed to completely forget about his question as both he and Brent started to dig into the food, not having to be told twice. This was quickly followed by Sean and Cory digging in as well. Both Teri and Neal smiled toward each other as they too decided to start eating before the living food disposals left them with no sandwiches at all.

\*\*\*\*

Doc Austin had to step out of his office for a few minutes to deal with another matter that had come up. When he returned, he decided to peak in on Eric and Greg. What he saw when he cracked the door open melted his heart. Both boys were fast asleep, but at some point, Greg had crawled up onto Eric's couch, and was snuggled up next to Eric, with Eric's hand protectively draped over Greg.

Doc pointed his tricorder toward both boys briefly, before he just as carefully closed the door once again to allow the boys to finish their nap.

\*\*\*\*

Brent looked at the empty tray as both he and Lance were finishing up the last bites of their sandwiches. "This were really good sandwiches Mrs... umm... I mean Teri. Thanks!"

Teri smiled and nodded. "Thanks, however Helen is the one that made them. You will have to be sure to thank her when you see her later."

"We will." Lance stated with Brent nodding his head in agreement. "So what were those options you were talking about earlier?"

Teri couldn't help smiling again as she could already start to see the similarities between how these two younger boys acted and her own sons. "Well, that's a very good question. First off, you should know that the Safe Haven Act gives me the authority to place you in a home with parents that I feel will be the most benefit to you."

"I don't know if I can take much more of the foster homes, that's kinda what we were trying to get away from." Lance stated, with his voice full of concern.

Teri nodded, "I'm not talking about putting you guys back into system. If your placed, it will be a permanent placement with parents who will care for you and love you and accept you for who you are, regardless of what that may be. That might end up being Neal, or it might end up being someone else, or if you don't feel comfortable with any of the available families, you will be able to stay across the street at Camp Little Eagle." She then waited a few seconds to make sure both boys understood what

"Plus, there is another option that you guys can think about." Cory added, which caused both boys to look at him, and then back toward Teri until they saw her nod in Cory's direction. "You could accept to become full members of the Clan."

Lance and Neal both had confused looks on their faces, but Brent's expression was more of shock and surprise.

Cory continued talking before either boy had a chance to say anything. "Before you guys answer that though, you're going to need to know what you would be getting yourself into, and I think Eric and Greg will need to have a say in it as well."

"How will we know what we are getting into?" Lance asked.

Cory grinned as he glanced toward Sean who took over. "At some point after dinner tonight, we will have a clan meeting where you will be introduced to all the rest of the guys, and learn a bit about their history, and some of the stuff that we do as a clan."

Brent was slowly recovering from his shock, as he already had a good idea about how much good the Clan had already done. "We could really become members of Clan Short?"

"If at the end of the meeting tonight, that's what you decide, then Yes." Cory gave Sean a loving squeeze as he stood up from the table. "But you guys will need to really think about it first. There is a lot of responsibility behind it, as you will see tonight."

Both Brent and Lance nodded their understanding as Sean stood up to join his brother.

"And where to you guys think your going?" Teri asked eyeing her older sons.

"Geez mom, you can't expect us to skip school the ENTIRE day, can you?" Cory grinned. "Besides, there are a few other things Sean and I need to check on over at camp before things finish up for the day."

"Can we go with you?" Lance asked before realizing that his question may have been out of line.

Cory nodded giving silent indication that the question was fine. "Probably not today, since there are only about 2 hours left. But I'm sure it would be fine if you wanted to come over tomorrow. You'll also know more of the guys by then as well."

"Kewl!" Both Brent and Lance stated at the same time, and then giggled, before they both said "Jinx!" at the same time, which caused them to giggle even more.

Sean shook his head slowly, "Everyone should start getting back over here at around 3:30pm." With that he and his brother left the room.

Once the older boys left, Teri looked back toward Brent and Lance. "I still have a lot that I need to talk to Neal about. I know you guys have been through a lot today, so if you want, there is a bedroom right over there at that you two could take a quick nap in so your ready for the rest of the Clan when they get back from school."

Brent thought for a few moments before answering. "Actually, do you think it would be okay if Lance and I went to check on Eric and Greg?"

"I don't think Doc Austin would have a problem with that as long as your quiet and don't wake them up. Do you remember how to get there, or would you like us to walk over with you?" Teri started to gather the empty plates on the table and place them on the empty sandwich tray.

"We remember." Lance answered for both of them.

"Okay, but if you get lost, just come back here, or ask any adult that you see for instructions."

"We will." Brent assured her. With that, both boys got up and headed out the other door leaving Teri and Neal alone so that they could start discussing more specific details about what the future might have in store for the 4 boys.

\*\*\*\*

Doc Austin was sitting behind his desk writing some notes in one of his medical folders when he heard a light knock at the door. "Come on in Brent and Lance."

Brent entered the office with Lance close behind. "Wow, how did you know it was us Doc?"

Doc Austin couldn't help but smile at the surprised looks on the two boy's faces. "Simple. Besides the fact that almost everyone else is across the street at school, most of the other kids around here have a very bad habit of forgetting to knock whenever they stop by. I figured they didn't have a chance to break you two of that habit yet."

Doc's statement had it's desired effect, and both boys giggled a bit. "I don't think I've ever met a doctor like you before Doc, your actually kinda cool."

"Thanks Lance, I try. But I doubt you guys came over just to see me."



Brent nodded. "How are Eric and Greg doing?"

Doc got up from his desk and grabbed his Tricorder as he walked toward the large double doors behind which Eric and Greg were sleeping. "They are both still sleeping. My guess is that they will sleep for another hour or two.

"Are they okay?" Lance watched as Doc took a few readings after opening the door to the room up a little.

Doc Austin nodded as he reviewed the Tricorder information. "Yes, it seems that way. I've been taking periodic readings on both of them just to make sure there are no other surprises."

Brent and Lance both nodded and smiled in gratitude.

"You know, there is a free couch in there. If you two can be quiet and not wake the other boys up, you can lay on it while you wait." Doc Austin put the Tricorder back down on a table and then walked back to his desk. A bit surprised that he did not hear a response from either boy, he turned back around only to be slightly surprised by the fact that both boys were gone.

"I guess that works for being quiet" he said to himself as he walked back over to the door and peaked into the room to see that both Brent and Lance had already crawled onto the other couch. Gently closing the door, he returned back to his desk to continue his work.

\*\*\*\*

Evan watched as his younger brother finished up the rest of his cinnamon swirl bread. It wasn't much, but they were both hungry, and with neither of them having any money, it was the only thing he had managed to swipe over the last two hours.

"How is it?" He tried to lighten the mood a bit as he couldn't help but notice how nervous and out of place his younger brother looked.

Haden gave several quick bobbing nods. "It's okay, I mean good, it's good. Thanks."

Evan sighed to himself. His younger brother had probably spent more time outside in the last 12 hours than he did over the last year. Just the fact that he had a nice tan complexion compared to Haden's pale, almost ghost white complexion was enough to confirm that, but he also noticed that Haden really wasn't use to being outside much because he was real nervous about anywhere he walked or anything he touched.

Why the hell did his step father have to treat Haden like that? Evan couldn't figure it out. Haden was his own son. If anything, he figured that it would be the step children that adults would pick on and frown on.

Why couldn't Frank pick on him instead of his own son? At least he could deal with it better. Maybe that was why though. Maybe it was because Haden was a lot more passive than he was, that Frank choose to pick on him more.

"What are we going to do now?" Haden asked, breaking Evan from his thoughts.

Evan thought for a few moments before answering. "Well, we can't go back. And we can't get too close to the roads. Frank will have the cops out looking for us." Evan looked toward the rolling hills head of them. "The city should just be over those mountains, if we can get there we can probably hide there, and no one will find us."

Haden nodded slightly. "You sure it's safe? I looks like a long walk, and I read that the desert is usually filled with things like snakes and scorpions and stuff."

"We'll be fine. They're a lot more scared of you than you are of them." Evan actually wasn't sure about that last comment, since he realized that his little brother was actually rather scared so he through in a bit more re-assurance for good measure. "Besides, you'll have your big brother to protect you."

Haden grinned. Evan's remarks clearly had the desired effect on the younger boy as he walked over and grabbed the hand of his older brother, and the two boys started off toward the mountains leaving what little remnant of civilization that was left behind them. But not before Evan grabbed the bag that had the second half of the loaf of cinnamon bread, since he really wasn't sure what else they would find on their way that Haden would be willing to eat.

\*\*\*\*

The sun was shining brightly as Teri and Neal walked down a sidewalk that would lead them to the main Youth Services building.

"I have to hand it to you Teri, this is a truly remarkable place you have here." Neal stated as he was still glancing around in amazement.

Teri smiled as she continued to walk. "Thanks Neal. Believe it or not, I had very little to do with it. The real credit goes to Cory and Sean."

"Your sons? They helped inspire you to build this?" Neal seemed somewhat confused.

"Not exactly." Teri stopped so that she could look directly toward Neal. "Everything that you see here, and a lot more that you don't, is a direct result of what those two and all of their brothers have created."

Neal started to look even more confused. "I'm not sure I understand. I know that your sons work with the children that you bring here, but I don't see how that makes them responsible for all of this."

"I'll give you the longer story tonight when we sit down with the rest of the adults, but for now I'll just say that these kids simply don't know the meaning of words like 'impossible' or 'can't'. Not only have they brought themselves together to help each other cope with their own problems of the past, but they have also taken it upon themselves to help others out there who have been hurt like they have. Everything you see around you Neal is a direct result of actions they took. What they have accomplished on their own over the last month would have taken any other organization years to do, and then still possibly not reach the same level of results."

Neal gasped as Teri's words finally started to sink in. "You mean..." Neal tried to continue several times, but the words just weren't there to express what he was trying to say.

Already having a good idea of what Neal was trying to say, Teri decided to help him out. "That's right. It's the kids that really run the show around here. As adults, we simply provide the stability and foundation for them, and help out from time to time when we can."

"Okay, now I'm even more amazed." Neal finally was able to mention after taking a few more minutes to think about what Teri had said.

Both continued to walk toward the large building ahead of them.

"So, what happens now?" Neal asked after several more long moments of silence.

"Well." Teri started as she took a few seconds to collect her own thoughts. "From the comments the boys made before they left earlier, they will have a full clan meeting this evening where your boys will probably learn the histories of all the other guys in the clan, and will most likely be invited to join the clan themselves."

"I see." Neal stated not really sure what to think of that.

"There is a good chance the meeting will run pretty late, so you should probably plan on spending the night at my place. Then once we see what the boys have worked out, we can review our options in the morning, but I don't see why you would not be able to head back home tomorrow if everything works out well.

"With or without my boys?" Neal asked with a very serious look on his face.

Teri took on an equally serious expression. "I won't lie to you Neal, there are a number of possible outcomes which would involve your boys staying here, some of those outcomes involving you being offered a job here as well, and some possibly not. It will really depend on the outcome of their meeting tonight, and what decisions your boys make."

Seeing the look of panic on Neal, Teri continued. "However, I can also assure you that we would never separate you if you really care about them, and they really care about you. We are simply looking for what is going to be in the best interest of the kids, and a lot of that decision is going to be based on what they want."

Neal nodded. "Okay, that sounds fair. Thanks for being honest with me Teri."

"It's the least I can do Neal." Teri smiled as she reached the door of the building they were walking to. "Come on, there are a few other adults I would like you to meet."

\*\*\*\*

Helen was just getting ready to put a tray of cookies into the oven when a hazel eyed, chestnut brown haired boy ran through the door nearly knocking her and the cookies over in the process.

"Hey mom! Where are the new guys?" The boy asked.

"Kelly Joe McCarthy!" Helen set the tray down as she turned to face her son. "How many times do I have to tell you to not run inside?"

Kelly had a somewhat surprised expression on his face, but after a few seconds, it registered as to what he was being yelled at for, as he lowered his head and looked down toward the ground. "Sorry mom, I guess I was just excited to meet my new brothers."

Helen smiled and hugged her son. "It's okay, just try to be more aware of what your doing." After a few seconds, they broke the hug. "How about you make up for it by grabbing the other two trays of cookies over there so I can get them all in the oven at the same time."

Kelly nodded and walked to get the other cookie sheets, just as two more boys a bit smaller than Kelly came into the kitchen.

At the first glance of the smaller boy's white-blond hair and blazing blue eyes, she knew immediately that it was Toby and the chocolate brown haired boy next to him was his boy-friend Ian. Helen could only smile at how precious Toby looked. Even though she knew that he was the same age as her son, he looked like he could easily be two years younger, which made 11 year old Ian a small bit taller than Toby.

"Are any of the new guys in here? We can't find them anywhere in CIC." Toby asked breaking Helen from her thoughts.

"Last I heard, they were all over at Doc Austin's sleeping. Although, I would guess that they should be over here soon. I bet by the time you guys get your homework done, they will be over here, and by then I'll also have some new warm double chocolate chip cookies ready to snack on."

"Cool!" All 3 boys chimed as they headed back out of the kitchen.

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"Jamie? Jacob?" Greg mumbled as he slowly started to wake up.

"Huh?" Brent asked, as he had not really slept much, but was more resting and enjoying the closeness to Lance.

"I can't hear Jamie and Jacob no more." Greg sat up and started to rub his eyes a bit. "I could hear them in my head earlier."

Lance, who wasn't really sleeping much either, got up and walked over to pick the little guy up as he could already see the panicked look starting to form on his face. "It's okay angel, you will probably get better at it as you practice more."

"Mmm... Voices?" Eric's soft soprano voice could be heard as he too sat up and rubbed his eyes from waking up.

"Hey Eric, you sleep well?" Brent asked.

"goodly... I think?" Eric hesitantly replied.

Brent and Lance shared an understanding look between each other. Although it seemed that Eric was still struggling to pick the right words to say, it was much better than not hearing his voice at all, as both boys agreed it was a very cute voice.

All 4 boys jumped as the two large doors leading in the room they were sleeping in suddenly flew open to reveal Doc Austin standing at the doorway. "I see you guys woke up just in time. The rest of the clan has just made it home from school, and already I've had two calls from people looking for you and wanting to meet you."

"Meet us?" Lance was somewhat surprised. "Why would they want to meet us? We aren't anything special."

Doc Austin walked over and put his arm on Lance's shoulder giving him a loving squeeze. "I know you guys haven't had much time around your new brothers yet, but please don't look down on yourself like that. All of you guys are each special in your own ways. Just look at what you have been willing to do for Greg. How many other 12 years do you know that would put their own fun aside so that they can make the life of a younger blind boy better?"

"But I care about Greg! Doc." Lance answered in protest, although his voice indicated that he knew what Doc was talking about.

"That's my point exactly Lance." He gave Lance another squeeze before he stood back up. "I think most of the guys are over in the main CIC building. Would you like me to walk you guys over, or can you get there on your own?"

"I think we can get there fine." Brent answered as he, Lance, and Eric headed for the door. "Oh, and thanks Doc... for everything!"

"Your welcome." Doc Austin smiled as the door to his office was closed.

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"New brothers!" A small, skinny redhead boy yelled as he leaped in the air toward Brent, just as Brent was walking through the door of the main CIC area.

"Wha...?" Brent gasped. Although the young boy couldn't have been more than 4 or 5 years old, the surprise was so great that Brent went flying backward knocking into Lance, almost causing him and Greg to fall down as well.

"Timmy!" Sean half yelled and half laughed as he went running over to collect his son. "What have I told you about doing that to our guests?"

"Sorry pappa." The small boy fake pouted. "But you said they were new brothers not new guests."

Greg started giggling from Lance's arm. "That was kewl! What was that?"

"A pounce!" Timmy answered as if Greg should have already known that.

"A what?" Greg's giggles stopped and were replaced by a rather puzzled look.

"You don't know what a pounce is?" Timmy seemed surprised by this, and stood there thinking for a few moments. "Come on, Ricky and me will teach you, and then you can play with some of our toys and meet the rest of the tribe!"

Greg got a really excited look on his face as he was just about to leap out of Lance's arms to join the first boy that he saw met here that looked close to his own age, but then the look disappeared almost as quickly as it arrived. "I can't."

Timmy had a confused look on his face for a few seconds, and then tilted his head slightly. "Oh! That's okay, William says that you can see through his eyes while your playing with us, since his eyes are a lot cooler than normal human eyes."

"Who's William?" Lance asked for Greg, as he tried to figure out which federation race would have better eyes than a human, and tried to look around the room for aliens at the same time.

As if on cue, a large eagle swooped down from somewhere above and landed on Timmy's shoulder causing Brent and Lance to take a step backward, and Timmy to smile brightly. "William is a spirit guide, he helps to watch over Camp Little Eagle."

"Wow! Kewl!" Greg was once again excited.

"Ricky has one too! Come on, you can meet him!" Timmy bubbled as he walked over to pull on Greg's hand to lead him away, almost forgetting that he was still being held by Lance.

Lance and Brent both looked at Sean questionably.

"It's okay guys." Sean smiled. "The eagles that Timmy and Ricky have really are spirit guides, and they really can talk to Timmy and Ricky. I'll explain the whole story later, but if William says that he will watch out for Greg while he's playing with the other little guys, I don't think it would be possible for him to be in any better hands."

Both Brent and Lance nodded their understanding as Lance lowered Greg to the ground, only to immediately have him dragged away by Timmy in the direction of several other of the smaller kids.

Sean took a few moments to smile with pride at how well Timmy seemed to understand how to integrate the younger kids into the tribe, but quickly turned his attention back to the three boys that remained. "Come on guys, I think it's time you met everyone else."

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For the next several minutes, Brent, Lance, and Eric were lead around CNC and the dinning area to meet most of the other clan members, as well as some of the adults. Eventually, they ended up in a lar-

ge rec room where some of the guys were playing video games, board games, or just spread out relaxing on the floor catching up on homework.

Brent found himself slowly walking toward a large TV screen that had a car racing game on it. Before he knew it, a small boy with auburn hair and hazel eyes was looking toward him, offering him a controller. "Wanna play?" the boy asked with a hopeful expression.

Looking over and seeing that Lance was in a conversation with one of the twins, and Eric was next to his side, he took the offered controller and sat down. "Thanks. Your CD, right?"

"Uh-huh." The boy smiled, and without another word, the competition began.

Although Brent was not familiar with this particular game, he was fairly good with racing games in general, so he and CD were evenly matched, with each having won 2 races. By the end of the fourth race Lance and Eric had wondered over to watch as well.

Just as Brent was getting close to winning the final race, Lance felt someone's leg brush up next to him. Since he was so focused on watching how well Brent was doing, he ignored it at first, but when the leg kept brushing up on him, he finally looked down and saw only a leg!

Lance's eyes grew big as he took a step back trying to make sure that he was really seeing what he thought he was seeing, as the leg just seemed to dance around behind him. "Umm... did someone lose something?" Lance hesitantly asked causing a few giggles to be heard from various parts of the room.

Before anything else could be said, Timmy, Ricky, Greg, and several other smaller boys came running into the room. "Leg! Get back here leg! We're gonna get ya!" They were all shouting as the leg took off with the kids close behind.

Having won the race, Brent looked behind him just in time to see a leg leaving the room along with a bunch of little kids, and an eagle close behind. "Wow, I think I've been playing too many video games lately." Brent started shaking his head not sure if what he had seen was real.

CD giggled next to him. "Don't worry, that's just Eli playing with his 'pet' leg again."

Brent looked at Lance, who only shrugged.

\*\*\*\*

"Dinner Time!" Someone shouted, and like a herd of wild animals, everyone started to head into the large dining area.

It didn't take long for Brent to figure out why. As soon as he stepped into the room, he could smell the homemade spaghetti sauce and freshly baked bread. In the center of each table were laid out several huge bowls filled with pasta, sauce, salad, and baskets of warm butter bread rolls. He even thought he heard some snickering about garlic bread from some of the kids around him, but he was pretty sure the bread in the baskets was not garlic.

"Guess who?" Greg's familiar voice rang out as his little hands reached up to cover Lance's eyes which caused Brent to giggle.

"Humm" Lance thought out loud. "Is it Brent?"

"NoOoOoOo! He's sitting right beside you!" Greg couldn't help but to giggle.

"Oh yeah.... humm..... is it Timmy?" Lance guessed again.

"NOOOOOOO!" Greg burst out laughing even louder drawing the attention of several of the other boys sitting near by. "He's with his daddy and papa!"

"Well... In that case... It must be..." Lance allowed a long dramatic pause until he quickly twisted himself around, and in a single fluid motion, grabbed onto Greg, lifting and twisting him so that he ended up on his lap, where he then proceeded to start tickling his ribs as he quickly finished his answer. "A Greg who needs to be tickled!"

Of course, this caused the small boy to immediately start flailing his arms and legs around as his giggles turned to surprise which quickly turned to all out uncontrollable laughter. This continued for several seconds until one of Greg's kicks ended up kicking the table, and causing the plates and bowls to bounce up slightly, which caused Lance to finally stop and give Greg a warm hug before putting him in the seat next to him.

"Did you have fun playing with the tribe?" Brent asked once Greg had recovered.

"Uh huh! Timmy and Ricky showed me how to pounce and then we played duck duck goose, and then he showed me some of his pets that he had and they were really cool and he said he would see if he could find a pet for me and then the whole tribe went to some of the older boys and we got lots of hugs which was cool because they give really really good hugs!" Greg excitedly bubbled which caused both Lance and Brent to smile even more."

"Wow, sounds like you did a lot of cool stuff!" Brent gave Greg another squeeze as he reached over and started to put some spaghetti on his plate.

"Were you really able to see through Williams eyes?" A voice asked that Greg did not recognize.

"Yup! He answered. Still getting views from William who was not that far away, he saw a small black haired boy walking up to them, who looked like he was maybe 8. But then he saw two other slightly taller boys with strawberry blond hair that he did recognize. "Jamie! Jacob! Can you guys sit near us?"

"Sure" Jamie started.

"As long as Beau can sit with us too." Jacob finished.

"Who's Beau?" Greg was somewhat puzzled.

The smaller black haired boy waved as Jamie answered for him. "He's OUR boyfriend!"



"Are they allowed to do that?" Greg asked no one in particular.

Lance giggled, "As long as they are all fine with it, they are."

"Cool!"

Brent finished getting Greg's plate ready as he started to work on his. "Okay big guy, you got a bunch of spaghetti at 6, some broccoli at 10:30, some applesauce at 12, and bread at 2."

"Thanks Brent! But William is perched above us, so I can see my plate a little."

Both Brent and Lance glanced up to see the large eagle sitting in a rafter not far from them keeping a watchful eye on their table.

"Hey!" Greg started again after he took a few bites of his dinner. "When I woke up after my nap, I tried to talk to you guys in my head like we did earlier, and I couldn't hear you."

"That's okay Greg." Jacob answered between a mouthful of bread and spaghetti. "You're still really small, so it's going to take a bit for you to get access to all of your abilities. "

Jamie chimed in next. "But we talked to Kyle, who's a lot better at this than we are, and he said he would help teach you some stuff later tonight which might help some."

"Cool!"

"It must be pretty cool being a telepath and being able to know what everyone is thinking and know their secrets and all." Lance giggled, but then stopped when he saw that no one else was giggling with him. "Did I say something wrong?"

This time it was Beau that answered. "I know you're new here, so you probably didn't know. But just about every kid that you see in this room has had some really bad stuff happen to them through most of their life, so it's not really all fun and games for them, but almost the opposite."

"Really?" Lance felt ashamed for what he had asked. "I didn't know. Sorry if I hurt you."

Jamie nodded. "It's okay Lance, you didn't know and we know you were actually trying to give us a complement."

"Besides, it's not all bad stuff, plus Papa Spock has taught us how to push a lot of the really bad stuff away." Jacob added.

After a few minutes went by, being curious about telepaths himself, Brent spoke up. "So, like you can tell what I'm thinking right now and stuff?"

Seeing both Jamie and Jacob nod at the same time did not really surprise Brent. However, what happened next did surprise him. Right after the twins nodded and started to eat their dinner again, he heard one of their voices in his head. "Don't worry bro, you don't have anything to prove. If Cory and Sean

didn't like you, you would have been over at Camp Little Eagle with the other rescues. It doesn't matter how much crap you've been through, it matters more who you are inside."

Brent lowered his head a bit. He simply couldn't figure out what was so special about him, and why these guys who he had just seen a few weeks ago at a concert, and who were close to living legends in his eyes would be treating him so nicely. He couldn't even protect his own guys.

A few moments later, Jamie or Jacob's voice could be heard in his head again. "It's because of the fact that you DO see Lance, Greg, and Eric as 'yours' to protect, and that you DO care so much about them and everyone else you meet. That right there sets you apart from 99% of the other 13 year olds out there. You just need to learn to trust in yourself more. But hanging around here a bit will probably help with that a lot."

Brent allowed himself to smile a little and nodded an unspoken 'thanks' to the twins as he continued eating.

All the boys continued to talk small-talk amongst themselves during the rest of dinner. When just about everyone was done, the entire room suddenly got quiet. Lance looked up, and then could see why, as Cory was standing up next to one of the tables on the other side of the room.

"I don't know about you guys.." Cory started with a smile. "But I think Tommy, Tyler, and Helen really out-did themselves on this one!" Suddenly, the entire room erupted in cheers of agreement.

Once things calmed down, Cory continued. "Also, I'm sure a lot of you have already noticed that we have a few new faces here with us tonight. Sean and I both figured that since we haven't really had a full clan meeting yet with all of us down here, that now would be the perfect time to do it. So tonight after dinner at around 6:30pm, all the kids are to be over at Southcrest for our clan meeting. That way we can make sure everyone is properly introduced.

Brent saw many nods of agreement and understanding, but not as many cheers. That was, until Cory added his next part.

"Also, be sure to bring your swim suits for a quick swim after the meeting, and plan on spending the night there, since JC has already agreed to let us have a sleepover there tonight."

Several of the kids started to cheer and clap until one of the adults on the other side of the room jumped up yelling. "I did?" This caused many of the kids to laugh.

"Thanks for agreeing with me!" Cory added, which caused everyone to totally loose it, as Josh realized what he had done.

With that, Cory sat back down, and everyone started to finish up dinner, as well as eat the cup-cakes that were brought out for desert.

Lance was surprised to see that when dinner was over, just about every kid in the room was helping with grabbing all the dirty dishes and putting them into large bins that were lined up on one side of the room.

"Well, we'll see you guys later, okay?" Jacob asked as he, Jamie, and Beau were about to leave.

"Sure." Brent answered, "But what should we be doing while you guys are having your meeting tonight?"

"Since your one of the main reasons we are having it, I'm really hoping that you will be there." Cory smiled as he walked up holding Timmy in his arms, and Sean walked up next to him holding CD.

Brent was somewhat confused by this. "But you said we were not full clan members yet, and that the meeting was a clan meeting."

"Your right, I did. The reason you are not full members yet is that you did not agree to become full members. And before you make that agreement, I think you should probably know what you will be getting yourselves into, which is what you will be learning about at the meeting."

"Ah, okay!" Everything finally started to make sense to Brent.

Greg, on the other hand, seemed a bit more worried. "But you said that we should bring swimsuits, and we don't have any swimsuits."

Sean smiled. "Don't worry little guy, we have plenty of extras around here. I'm sure we will be able to find some that fit you. How does that sound?"

"Cool!" Greg cheered, now content that the more important matter had been addressed.

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A large group of the kids were gathering with their swimsuits and towels in the CIC, getting ready to leave, when Brent spotted Neal walking over to them.

"Neal!" Brent shouted cheerfully running over and giving him a warm hug, as Lance and Greg quickly joined. "Are you going to be coming to the meeting?"

Neal gave Brent an extra squeeze before breaking the hug. "No kiddo. The clan meeting is just for the kids. I'm going to be with Teri and a bunch of the other adults over here getting some paper work and other stuff taken care of."

"That's not fair!" Greg jumped in. "You should be allowed to come to, I'll ask if you can join the clan as well."

Neal's heart melted at how much concern Greg had for him. "Thanks big guy. But this is really something you guys need to do without the adults. I'm sure they will explain why it's best to be this way."

Greg was about to protest when Adam and JJ walked up to their group. "He's right." Adam said in a calm voice. "Tonight you guys are going to be learning a lot of really bad, really personal stuff about all the other kids in the clan. A lot of us have been hurt really badly by adults, and we are able to handle and deal with this stuff a lot easier when we are just talking with other kids."

"Oh" Greg answered, thinking that what Adam said might have made sense.

"Besides." JJ added. "We still involve the adults in a lot of stuff, and they all help us out a lot. It's just some things that we have to do as a clan that doesn't involve them. But a lot of that will be explained tonight at the meeting."

"Okay." Greg nodded.

"Speaking of which. You guys ready? Everyone else is already starting to walk over."

"Yup!" All 4 boys chimed. After getting a final round of hugs and kisses from Neal, they were on their way.

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None of the boys were really prepared for what they were about to see. The only words that Lance could come up with to describe the size of Southcrest was that of a mansion! The 'house' was huge! The lawn and landscaping was even huger! They could even see part of the large, fenced in pool in the backyard as they heading into the house, and into the large study where all the kids of the clan were gathering up.

One of the first things that Brent noticed is that all the usual cheerful fooling and joking around was not heard or seen. Instead, the mood seemed to be much more somber. It also seemed that in some say, everyone was divided up into groups. As he would learn later, they were actually split up into their family groups so they could be there to give each other the support they would need to get through the meeting.

Even the sight of two boys 'floating' into the room did not seem to cause any reaction at all from anyone. Brent was almost starting to get worried about what he might be getting himself and his friends into given how everyone else around them was behaving.

A few moments later, Cory stood up from where he were setting with Sean and their kids, and walked to the center of the room causing everyone else to stop talking.

"Hey guys!" Cory started. "Sean and I have actually been planning to have one of these for the last few days now, but with a bunch of us still working on getting settled in our new homes, and with our trip to the Enterprise last night and all the other stuff that has been going on, this is the first chance we've had."

Brent noticed all the other kids nodding in understanding. All that is, except for two 13 year olds toward the back of the room that seemed to stiffen up a bit when Cory had mentioned that the Enterprise trip last night. But two smaller boys next to them seemed to comfort them fairly quickly. He wasn't sure what that all meant, but if he had to make a decision about really becoming a full part of this clan, he would need to watch every little detail that he saw in tonight's meeting.

"Also, as I'm sure most of you already know we have a few visitors. Brent, you want to introduce yourself and your guys?"

Brent was caught off guard slightly as he was not expecting Cory to call on him for anything, but he recovered fairly quickly. "Well, let's see. I'm Brent."

Giggles could be heard coming from some of the younger kids, as Brent continued. "This cute guy sitting next to me is Lance. The little elf that Lance is holding is Greg, and the boy on the other side of Lance is Eric."

All the other kids nodded toward the 4 boys. A few boys that Brent had not met yet waved or said quick 'hellos' to them.

Cory continued. "Tonight Sean's going to be going over backgrounds of everyone, and then after that, Brent, Lance, Eric, and Greg will be able to decide if they accept being full members of the clan or not."

"So does that mean we have to wait until AFTER the meeting to start pouncing them?" One of the boys that Brent did not recognize asked which caused several other of the kids to giggle.

"No, Timmy already gave Brent a good pounce earlier." Another boy called out causing even more giggles.

"Timmy and Ricky taught me how to pounce too!" Greg stated as a matter of fact from Lance's lap.

Cory walked over and picked up Timmy before sitting back down with him. "Yeah, that sounds like Timmy, making sure that every new little kid here knows the art of pouncing."

Timmy for his part, just sat there trying to look as innocent as possible. Of course, this did not work that well, and for anyone who knew Timmy who was not already giggling, was doing so now.

After a few moments, Sean then stood up and walked to the center of the room. "Okay guys, here is the serious part. I knew a bunch of you have been through this with me before, but since this is the first time in a while we have had everyone together in one place, I'm going to go over things a bit more than I usually do. So everyone be sure to sit close to your family, and be sure to give plenty of hugs and cuddles to those that need them."

Neither Brent nor Lance were really sure what Sean meant by that, but all the giggling stopped, and many serious faces simply nodded their understanding, as a few of the kids shifted where they were sitting slightly so they could be closer to the others around them.

Sean looked around the room to make sure everyone was situated. "Let's see. Where to begin?"

Over the next 1 1/2 hours, Sean went over the general history of the clan itself, as well as the histories of all of the clan members.

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(flashback)

Sean started from the very beginning, and explained how everything started when Cory and Sean's older brother Mikey was on his way to pick the two of them up at the mall after football practice when he was hit and killed by a drunk driver. Both boys loved their older brother immensely, but Cory also seemed to blame himself for Mike's death. Things got so bad that Cory ended up lapsing into a comma, and when he woke up, he had lost just about all of his memories, which ended up causing him to have to go and stay in a group home while his mind tried to heal itself and while Cory tried to regain his memories.

Despite a large amount of corruption in the home, and an intentional effort to prevent any of the kids there from getting better and being able to leave the home, about a year after the accident, Cory had finally started to regain enough of his memories that Cory's therapist Daniel (Dan) Richardson felt that Cory was ready to be able to return home to live with his mother and brother. However, when Dan tried to call the group home to arrange for Cory to be released, they flat out refused to release him, and order that he be returned immediately.

Expecting trouble, after getting a court order from a family judge for Cory to be released back to his mother, he contacted a friend of his, a sheriff John Martin, and together they went to the group home to get Cory's stuff. As expected, the administrator of the home tried to cause problems, and long story short, the home ended up being shut down that night due to intentional fraud, mismanagement of the children, and a number of other issues.

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"Wow" Lance piped up. "I heard about that. It seems that when that home was closed, that caused the state to start reviewing a bunch of the other group homes, which caused a few others to get closed as well, and a bunch kids where getting shifted around and all. But I had no clue that was all started because of the clan!"

Sean smiled. "Actually, the clan wasn't even close to be created yet, this was all started because of Cory."

"That sounds pretty wild." Brent added.

"Oh, it gets a lot better, we are just getting started." Sean smiled again before continuing.

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(flashback)

Like Lance mentioned, the closing of the group home caused some kids to be released, since they were past being ready to go, but the home had lied on their records, or to be relocated to other place. That was, everyone except for one little 8 year old boy named Kyle.

Shortly after Cory, Sean, Teri Dan and sheriff John made it back to Teri's house from getting Cory's stuff at the group home, Dan got a call from Judge Jamie, the family judge that filed the papers earlier to force Cory to be allowed to be released. It seems that Kyle did not have anywhere to be placed yet, and due to his past abuse and very high distrust for adults, he was tearing up the court house. Since Dan's son JJ was one of the only people Kyle would listen to and trust, since Kyle had been spending

every other weekend with Dan and JJ, the judge asked that Dan get his son, and go to pick Kyle up so Kyle could be placed with him for a bit.

So they went and did exactly that. They made it to the court house, and JJ was about to get Kyle under control, and then they all went by to Teri's.

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"I heard that Kyle kicked some of the police men in the marbles! Was that true?" Ian asked from his place sitting next to Toby.

"Oh yeah!" JJ answered. "My little brother can have a mean right kick when he wants to, and had several of those guys singing soprano before I could finally talk some sense into him." This caused a bunch of the kids to laugh and for Kyle to blush.

It didn't take Kyle long to recover, however. He started to hug Tyler even more than he was, because he knew all too well which part of the story Sean was about to tell next.

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(flashback)

After they made it back to Teri's house, Dan got a call that his wife Sarah had been found unconscious and had been taken to the hospital. John took Dan to the hospital, and arranged for JJ and Kyle to be able to spend the night at Teri's with Cory and Sean. Later that night when Dan and John made it back to Teri's, everyone learned that Sarah had died due to a brain aneurysm. It was then decided that Dan, Kyle, and JJ would stay at Teri's for as long as they needed.

The next morning, Tyler, who was a friend of Sean's and who had been watched on occasion by Teri showed up on Teri's doorstep crying. It turned out that Tyler had been abandoned by his parents. He had not seen his parents for several days, and he just then found out about it by finding a letter his mom had left for him in a cereal box. His mom also turned 'the brat' over to Teri, along with all the needed legal paperwork.

What no one knew at the time was that Tyler's parents had left Tyler for his older half brother Adam. They didn't find out until later that afternoon when Mikey was able to get a message to Kyle that Tyler's parents had his half-brother Adam at a local hotel, and that he was about to get hurt real bad. By the time they were able to get to him, he had blisters and bruises over his entire body from being beaten all day because he had mentioned to them that he thought he might be gay.

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"Wait, I don't get it." Lance interrupted. "How could Adam and Tyler be brothers if they never knew about each other."

Adam quickly answered. "That's because I'm only Tyler's half brother. My parents got divorced when I was younger. I lived with my mom, and my dad went and got married to Tyler's mom. I didn't find out

about Tyler until my mom started to get really sick, and she told me that I was going to go live with my dad, his wife, and their son Tyler."

"Ah, I guess that makes sense."

Adam continued. "The real kicker is that when they picked me up that Friday afternoon, they told me that Tyler had died. Looking back at it now, I guess that's how they really saw it, because they had abandoned him and left him for dead."

JJ gave Adam a warm hug and brushed some of the tears away from his eyes. "But you two have each other now, and things ended up working out a lot better in the end, huh love?"

Adam nodded and rested his head on JJ's shoulder as Sean continued.

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(flashback)

The next two clan members to be added were Jamie and Jacob. We had gone to the hospital so that Adam could be checked out and mom could get some special cream to help his skin heal. After that, since it was so late, we decided to go to Perkins for dinner. When we got there, we found Jamie and Jacob shirtless, and trying to get food from the dumpsters.

Their mother died when they were born, so they just lived with their father. A few years ago, his father had caught them touching each other. Since then, he would sexually molest them every night, forcing them to allow him to touch their privates, while he would get himself off and force them swallow when he shot. Besides that, they only had 3 sets of school cloths and one pair of shorts for at home. They were not allowed to have friends, they were not allowed to leave the yard. If they were outside, they could not wear shirts, and if they were inside they could not wear any clothes at all. For dinner they only got two slices of bread and milk, and for breakfast they got two slices of bread and juice.

You know how I said he would only touch their privates and rub himself? Well, one night that changed, and he started to stick his finger in their butts. Since they both already knew they were gay, they both knew where that was going to be leading, so they decided to take their chances on the street, and ran away the next day. They were on their own for 3 days before we met them at Perkins.

Later that night Dan got an e-mail from Anne Richardson, where he not only learned that she was his real mother, but that he had a number of brothers and cousins who cared about him and who wished to offer their condolences toward his wife. One of his brothers, Kevin, and one of his cousins, Brian Littrell are the Kevin and Brian involved with Backstreet Boys, and his other cousin Chip Dodds was a commander in Starfleet.

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"Wait!" Brent interrupted. "That wouldn't be the Commander Dodds that's part of the U.S.S. Enterprise's bridge crew, would it?"

Sean grinned. "Uh huh, that would be him."



"Wow! You think we will ever get to meet him?" Lance was now almost excited as Brent was.

This time, Cory answered as Sean was too busy snickering. "I would hope so, given that you are currently sitting in his house."

Neither boy could say anything as they just looked at each other and then toward Sean and Cory with their jaws on the floor which caused everyone else to giggle.

"Not only that! But Uncle Chip is married to JC from N\*Sync!" CD added. This caused everyone to laugh even more as both Brent and Lance accomplished the impossible and made their jaws drop even more than anyone thought was possible.

When things calmed down, Sean continued.

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(flashback)

Okay, the reason I mentioned all that, is because that brings us to our next 3 clan members. All of Dan's new brothers and cousins came to Des Moines. Chip and JC brought their 14 year old son Justin who very quickly became attached to Jamie and Jacob. Then the following day the rest of Dan's extended family arrived, which included Nick and Ashley Carter, and their son Johnny and Aaron who was rescued by Chip a year earlier.

During this time, a lot of other changes were happening to members of our family as well. Cory and I were promoted to acting Ensign's for the U.S.S. Enterprise (eventually, we get promoted to full ensigns), Mom was appointed as the director of the new Federation Youth Services Bureau, Dan was appointed as the head of the psychiatric department for Federation Youth Services, and John was appointed as Chief of Security for the Southeast United States for Starfleet.

A day or two later, we met our next two clan members when the entire family went to Denny's for breakfast. We found Robbie and Rusty sitting in one of the back booths. Robbie is strawberry blond 6 year old that is sitting on his 12 year old cousin, Rusty's lap. Robbie's mom abandoned him about a month earlier, so he went to live with his cousin Rusty. About 3 weeks after that, Rusty's mom left both of them, so they were living on their own for about a week before we found them. They were actually using the last of their money to have one final meal together before they would have to turn themselves into the state to be split up and sent to different foster homes.

Denny's is also where we met Andrew, who was not only one of JJ's best friends, but also the son of the store manager, Cecil.

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"That's also when we found out Rusty was sick." Robbie added as he hugged his older cousin.

Sean nodded. "Yeah, Rusty got really weak while we were there, so we had Doctor McCoy beam down to check him out, and found out that he had diabetes.

Brent and Lance both gasped. "How come he didn't know until then?"

This time, Rusty answered. "My mom knew for awhile, but whenever she would see the warning signs that my blood sugar was low, she would just give me a candy bar or something. But now I hardly have any problems at all with it. I have a test kit now, and I'm watching my diet better, so it's not really that much of a problem."

"That's good at least." Brent stated, and Lance and Greg both agreed.

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(flashback)

Okay, moving on... You guys remember how I mentioned that John was given the position of Starfleet Chief of Security for the Southeast United States? Well, on his very first day on the job, while he was at the Orlando Spaceport, John ended up rescuing our second set of twins, the two platinum blond 10 year old's sitting over there, Sebastian and Samuel.

Their father had taken to excessively beating and abusing the boys for any little thing at all they did wrong. John was even able to catch their father in the act when he came into the bathroom to start beating them because they had been taking too long.

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This time it was Greg's turn to ask a question, which surprised a bunch of people, since he had been quite the entire meeting. "Why did your daddy try to hurt you like that? Didn't he love you?"

Sebastian started the answer. "He didn't really love us, he just thought we were sissies."

"He would tell us stuff like it was the only way for us to learn and to become men." Samuel finished the answer.

Adam started to snicker, and as some of the other kids were starting to look at him, he told everyone what he found amusing. "The best part of this was that their father was an officer on the Enterprise at the time, assigned to the Helm Division, and Uncle Chip was his superior officer. So needless to say, I doubt their dad will have to worry about taking his anger out on his sons ever again."

Everyone else nodded in agreement.

After a few seconds, Sean clapped his hands together. "Okay, well... does anyone remember who it was that was added next?"

"Oh, you are SO going to get it later!" Cory grumbled between grunts and trying to protect his most prized possessions from the now extremely hyperactive bouncing fireball that was raising his hand and intensely bouncing up and down on Cory's lap.

"Timmy? Do you know?" Sean called on the little guy as he was laughing himself.

"Me!" Timmy said with pride. "It was me!"

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(flashback)

That's right. The next member to get added to our clan was Timmy. The night after Sebastian and Samuel were rescued by John, we were all driving home from a special dinner the captain at thrown for us for all of our accomplishment, when a car literally went flying across the road in front of us.

It turned out that both Timmy's father and grandfather were important diplomats, and someone had tried to kill Timmy and his father by putting explosives on their car. One of the bombs went off which caused the explosion that sent the car flying. We found out later, that the second bomb only had 6 seconds left before it went off before Cory ended up cutting the wires as a result of his rescue attempt of Timmy.

Unfortunately, Timmy's father did not survive. However, as as last request, he requested that Cory and I adopt, and raise Timmy as our own, which we accepted that night.

"How can you guys adopt a kid, you two are both kids too?" Lance was somewhat puzzled.

Sean smiled. "Since both Cory and I are commissioned officers in Starfleet, then legally, we are treated as Adults, which meant we were allowed to adopt Timmy."

Brent was surprised. "Wow, that's really cool. I don't think there is any way I would be able to raise a kid like that."

"It's s'okay!" Timmy bubbled. "My daddy and poppa have lots of help from my grandma and all my other aunts and uncles. Grandma even watches me sometimes when dad and pop are busy playing horsey."

"TIMMY!" Both Sean and Cory called out in unison, as they both started to turn red.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to!" Timmy giggled, his voice clearly indicating otherwise.

JJ Couldn't help joining into the fun. "You know Timmy, you better be careful. If you lie too much like that, God might strike you down."

"Nut uh!" Timmy said in defiance when suddenly everything went black as all the light and power in the house went out. Timmy gasped and hugged Cory tighter as a small faint glow could be seen forming in the center of the room.

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Author's Notes:

Hey guys! I would like to apologize to everyone for there being so much time since the last chapter. A number of real life issues required me to leave the net for awhile. But over the last month, things have

been settling down rather nicely, and I'm starting to get free time again, so with any luck, chapters will start to get posted a bit more frequently. The story has a lot of catching up to do to get to the main time-line, but there are lots of exciting adventures planned for all of the kids to get us there.

Also, yes, I realize this is somewhat of a cliff-hanger, but if you have read any of the other CSU stories, I'm sure you probably already know what it is. I mainly just wanted something to transition between this chapter and the next.

Right now, our guys are learning what it means to be a part of Clan Short. The big question is, will they be up to the task? Guess we will have to wait and see over the next few chapters.

Finally, some of you have asked where in the CSU time line this chapter is taking place. This is taking place in the period of time between Memories Part 1 and Memories Part 2. More specifically, this is CSU day 33, the day before was the final two chapters of A New Day Dawns, and in 3 days, the events of One Door Closes start to occur.

- Zacky

## Chapter Seven

5:00pm PST – Tuesday, September 21st, 2004

"You doing okay Hay?" Evan asked his younger brother, as he glanced back to make sure he wasn't getting too far ahead. The terrain was starting to get slightly more difficult to transverse as they were getting closer to the mountains.

"A little hungry." Haden replied as he cautiously grabbed hold of a small tree to steady himself as he climbed up one of the steeper sections of ground.

Evan smiled to himself at how amazingly well his brother was handling himself. He knew his brother had to be more than just a little hungry, as they had been walking almost all day, and other than the second half of the cinnamon bread that they had as lunch, had not found any other food to eat. He would swear that he even heard his little brother's stomach growl from several feet ahead of him at several points over the last few hours, yet his little brother complained very little.

"How could anyone ever try to hurt someone like him?" Evan thought to himself as his smile slowly faded.

Evan also became aware that hunger was not their only problem as his brother caught up with him and he could see him shivering slightly, and he could also see that the sun was already setting below the horizon. Given the time of year, he knew the night would get cold. "Come on, let's get some sticks, and see if we can find a place to build a fire and stay warm for the night."

Although clearly tired out, Haden glanced up toward his older brother and after a few moments of considering his situation, gave his nod of agreement. He knew how dangerous fires could be, especially if you accidentally fell into one, however he was also getting kind of cold, and he knew that he could freeze at night if they didn't have a way to stay warm, so in the end he decided the benefits of staying warm would outweigh whatever dangers might be presented.

With that, the two boys set off on their task of finding wood, completely unaware of several small sets of eyes that were watching them not too far away.

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In the darkness, Timmy held on tight to Cory, as he was not sure what to expect. It didn't take long, however, for his expression to change completely. The faint glow that was forming in the center of the room quickly became the form of an older teen with a golden halo and golden wings.

"Unca Mikey!" With all traces of fear gone, Timmy leaped from Cory's lap causing yet another grunt, and did a flying pounce into the angel's arms. "I told you to stop scaring us like that!"

Adam giggled, "Wow bro, you've really outdone yourself this time, making all the lights go out and all."

"Thanks, but it wasn't me." Mikey grinned as he ruffled the bright red hair of the squirming fireball he was holding in his arms. "A car hit a telephone pole causing some of the power lines to break."

"Don't worry guys." Justy piped in, "Any moment now Southcrest's emergency generators should..." Before Justy was able to finish his statement, the lights in the room flickered back on.

A few sniggers could be heard around the room as just about everyone started to glance toward the new guys waiting for the expected 'first' response at seeing a guardian angel appear in front of them. Unfortunately, most of them were disappointed.

"Mikey!" Both Brent and Greg shouted with surprise at the same time.

"You already know him?" Justy asked from where he was sitting.

Brent smiled, "Yup! I met him a few nights ago before all of this started and he..." Brent's voice trailed off as he clearly was not sure whether he wanted to actually say what he was about to.

Mikey nodded towards Brent's pleading eyes. "It's okay Brent, I know why your hesitating. The first answer is yes, you are allowed to say it, your part of the family now. The second answer is that no one here will ever force you to say anything before you are ready to say it. Go ahead and finish listening to the stories of everyone else, then you can decide if you want to say anything or not tonight."

Brent quickly glanced around the room, and saw several of the other guys nodding in agreement.

"Thanks Mikey!". Brent's expression suddenly changed as he realized that Greg had recognized Mikey as well, "Greg, how do you know Mikey?"

Greg beamed with pride from Lance's lap. "I met him before dinner when Timmy and Ricky were telling me about their eagles."

Timmy's head started bobbing up and down in agreement as he sat on the angel's lap. "Uh huh! He was ask'n some questions about William and Duke that we didn't know the answers to, and Unca Mikey stopped by to help."

Lance gave Greg a squeeze which caused the small boy to smile even more.

"So why ya here now big bro?" Cory asked a bit more seriously.

"Someone has to keep an eye on you guys." Mikey then floated over to sit near Cory and his other brothers. It took only seconds for another boy to 'appear' on his lap as Ricky decided that angel laps were easily big enough for two.

Eli couldn't stop himself from giggling at Mikey's answer. "Yeah right! We all know you REALLY came here because you know what part of the story is next."

Eli's statement caused a few of the other guys in the room to also giggle. Seeing the guardian angel stick his tongue out toward Eli caused even more of the guys to giggle, including Brent, Lance, and Greg.

"Okay guys." Sean said while raising his hand to get order and trying to stop himself from giggling at the same time. "We really need to keep going, or we are not going to have any time to hit the pool before bed."

Suddenly, the entire room was miraculously dead silent.

"So you guys added Mikey to the clan next?" Brent asked when the silence got too much for him.

Mikey smiled. "I've been a part of the clan from the day that Cory, Sean, JJ, and Kyle made their original promise to each other."

"Ah." Brent nodded, deciding that he will just wait for Sean to continue.

"The part Eli was talking about was when Mikey was officially made a Saint, which was the night Timmy was rescued." Benji added, as, with a glance directed toward Eli, he too started to giggle.

"So which of my brothers were added next?" Greg asked Sean which caused Lance to give him another squeeze.

"I was" Kelly said while he got a squeeze of support from Tommy, who was sitting next to him.

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Sean nodded, "Yup. First, you need to know that Kelly was not always the perfect angel that he is now."

Kelly looked like he was about to say something, but instead only nodded toward Sean.

"A few years ago he was caught vandalizing a place, and the judge sentenced him to be taken from his mother and forced to live in a shelter until he was 18." Sean paused a moment to make sure the new guys understood what he was talking about. "Second, you need to know that Kelly was on the same soccer team that Cory and I were on."

Brent, Lance, and Greg nodded which caused Sean to continue to explain that the day after Timmy was rescued was the last game of the season for their soccer team, and how a bunch of his new family wanted to go to the game to watch. He also mentioned how at the time, although he knew that Kelly lived in a shelter, they didn't really know the details behind it, and how when Aaron showed up with them and started talking with Kelly, he found out the reason, and after that made it his personal mission to get Kelly back with his mom.

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"Wait." Lance seemed a bit puzzled, "So you made Kelly a part of the clan, but his mom didn't do anything wrong and still loved him?"

Sean grinned as he already knew where this was going. "Uh huh!"

"But... Kelly lives here with the rest of the clan... why isn't he with his mom?" Lance was getting more confused.

Sean couldn't continue to confuse the poor boy any longer, so he gave Lance the parts that he was missing. "Kelly does live with his mother. On further investigation we learned that Kelly's mom was a really good house keeper and an even better cook, so she was hired by the clan to work here."

"Kelly's mommy works here?" Greg asked with surprise.

"Yup!" Kelly beamed, "Who do you think makes all the food around here. Of course, Tommy and Tyler help her out a lot too."

"Cool!" Brent, Lance, and Greg all exclaimed.

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Teri entered the CIC Dinning Room area where she found Dan and Neal still chatting quietly. "Looks like everything was fine, was just a car hitting a power pole a little outside of the main compound."

"I had a feeling it was nothing serious." Dan agreed taking another sip of his coffee.

Neal seemed puzzled, "What would make you say that?"

Teri smiled answering for Dan, "Because, knowing these guys as well as we do, if it was anything serious, they would all be over here and on top of it in a heartbeat."

"Ah." Neal said lost in thought for a few moments before the obvious hit him. "Speaking of kids, where are they all? This place was packed not that long ago, but over the last hour or two, I don't think I've seen any kid at all."

"Then consider yourself lucky." Helen tried to keep a straight face as she came out from the kitchen bringing a cup of coffee for herself and for Teri. "This is one of the rare times during waking hours that you will see something like this."

Seeing that Neal was still somewhat confused, she continued. "Right now all the kids are across the street at the Southcrest ranch having a clan meeting."

Neal thoughtfully took a sip of his coffee. "But my guys are not part of the clan. Are they?"

This caused the rest of the adults at the table to chuckle slightly, as they each knew what Neal was most likely going to be involved in. It was Teri, however, that answered his question. "If I know my sons at all, I have no doubt that by the end of tonight, not only will your kids know the entire history of the rest of the clan, but the clan will know their histories as well, and they will be invited to become full clan members. Whether they accept that or not, will be their choice."

"Well," Neal started as he tried to put his thoughts together. "If it helps my boys heal and get past their hurt then I don't think I would have a problem with that."

Dan placed his hand briefly on top of Neal's as a sign of support and to get his attention. "Neal, You already know my background, and I can personally say that there is something really special about this group of kids. Working together, they have helped each other heal more in the last two weeks than I could ever hope to have accomplished with 2 years of sessions with them."

"There is a touch of magic in the air with this clan Neal." Helen added, "I've seen it several times myself. When these boys get together, I can't think of anything else to call it. It might be a little bumpy and nerve-wracking at times, but you will never see anything else like it."

Neal nodded taking another sip of coffee.

Helen continued her speech. "I don't think anyone can really say where your boys would fit in the clan if they do join. But I can say that whatever it is, the rest of the clan will bring out the best in them, that's what they seem to do, bring out the best in each other."

"Just hope your boys don't end up like mine, and decide to bring home every stray boy they find." Teri added with a smile.

Neal gasped slightly, "Well, I guess it's good that Rick and I decided to keep our house after all. We have 8 bedrooms, 6 of which are currently unused."

Dan took a final sip of his coffee finishing up the cup, "That's good to hear Neal, that might hold you for a few days."

Everyone else could not help but laugh when a small amount of coffee came flying out of Neal's nose as he gasped looking toward Dan.

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Alec and Travis were both being held close by their respective partners while Sean was recounting their part of the story on how they came to be a part of the clan. Travis could be seen wincing a few times as Sean explained that their mother died when giving birth to Travis, and how their father always seemed to treat Travis poorly since he blamed him for that death, and would often take out that blame in the form of beatings that otherwise had no apparent reason.



Things went from bad to worse for the two brothers when Travis and Gabe got caught kissing each other at Gabe's house. When Gabe's parents called their father to let him know they were okay with it, he went ballistic, and literally threw the 12 year old out of the house, and refused to allow him to come back. It was then that Alec, who had always swore to protect his younger brother, decided to run away with him, and leave their abusive father. Alec was able to get a hold of Clan Short, which allowed mom to protect both of them under Safe Haven.

Lance seemed a bit curious, "How did Gabe get to stay with Travis if Gabe's parents were nice?"

"That's the cool part!" Travis smiled as he looked into the eyes of his boyfriend, "Cory found out Gabe's dad was pediatrician, and since Aunt Teri didn't have a doctor yet for her FYS office, the clan was able to hire him."

Lance nodded.

"It's a good thing too." Sean continued. "Otherwise we would not have Ricky either."

"Wait." Brent raised his hand before Sean was able to continue any further "You said Travis was your younger brother? But you two look about the same age?"

Both boys nodded as Alec answered, "Yeah. Where as Travis is 12, I'm actually 15. For some reason, I just didn't grow like I should have." By the time he finished answering, he was looking toward the ground.

The bright red haired boy that was hugging onto Alec smiled, lifted Alec's chin up, tilted it so they were facing each other, and gave him a loving kiss. "I love you just the way you are Alec, never forget that. If you did grow up normally, we probably would never have been able to have as close of a relationship as we have."

"Thanks Andrew. I know, and I love you too." Alec smiled returning the kiss creating some 'oooo's from a few of the youngest boys.

One small boy who was noticeably not taking part in the 'oooo'ing was Timmy's friend Ricky. Sean seemed to notice this as well. "Timmy, will you make sure to hold Ricky really close for this next part?"

"I will!" Timmy beamed nodding his head enthusiastically. As proof of his commitment, he proceeded to squeeze Ricky as hard as his little arms would let him. For Ricky's part, he ended up making a sound that was a something between a 'Squeak' and a 'Meep'.

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When Sean felt that Ricky was being supported sufficiently by Timmy he continued. "I know you met Doc Austin earlier today. Well, before he worked for the Clan, he was working at a smaller clinic. One of his patients that he had been seeing for the last 6 months was Ricky. Ricky's mom didn't really want Ricky because she was too busy getting high on drugs and having fun with her boyfriend's all the time. Not only was he constantly neglected by his mom, he was never allowed to have anything of his own,

he got very little to eat, was never cared for, and was only used by his mother as a way to get free stuff like food stamps."

Brent let out a small gasp while Lance held Greg tighter. If it were possible, Timmy would have hugged Ricky tighter, but thankfully for Ricky, he didn't.

Sean continued. "Doc hoped that her run-in with the law would help get Ricky's mom's head on straight and the court ordered constant monitoring of Ricky's health and well being for 6 months would encourage her to be a more responsible parent, but it only seemed to make her more defiant and hostile toward anyone who tried to help her."

Timmy moved his cheek closer to Ricky as a small sob could be heard coming out from the small boy.

Not wanting to drag this out any longer than needed, Sean finished up as quickly as he could. "Doc's last day working at his clinic also ended up being the last day that Ricky was going to be required to be checked up on. So, since his mother still showed no desire to care for him, and showed every intent that things would get much worse for Ricky when she no longer had to have him checked on, Doc Austin used the Safe Haven act to put Ricky under clan protection, and adopted him as his own child."

Sean looked up to see if the new guys were following his explanation when he noticed Brent was gone. Slightly surprised by this, he glanced around the room and saw him next to Timmy and Ricky.

Ricky had his head buried in Timmy's neck when he felt a gentle tap on his shoulder. Looking up through his tearing eyes, he saw Brent's compassionate face.

"Can I hug you?" Brent timidly asked. It only took a few moments for Ricky to consider the situation and see the sincere look in Brent's eyes before he reached up and allowed the older boy to lift him up and embrace him.

Brent and Ricky continued to hug like that for a long moment as they each could feel the emptiness from the other as only two abandoned boys could feel.

Sean could feel a tug at his heart as he watched Brent comfort Ricky in the only way he knew how. He had already made up his mind that the new guys would fit in perfectly with the clan. He could only hope that they would make that choice as well.

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As Brent and Ricky's hug continued, it was Brent's turn to feel a little tap on his arm. Looking down he saw Timmy smiling up at him. "It's okay Unca Brent, me and Ricky 'came real good buds as soon as his daddy brought him to my house when my daddy was make'n us a Clan and look'n for the bad guys that hurt my other brothers."

Wiping a few stray tears out of his eyes with his free hand, Brent looked up toward Sean in confusion.

Sean Grinned. "I think Timmy just covered the next parts in one sentence." As quickly as Sean's grin appeared, it disappeared. "The same day that Doc Austin brought home Ricky, we had learned that in addition to hurting Sammy and Sebastian, their father, and those he trusted to care for them when he

was gone, would force the twins to do sex stuff together, not only for their own personal pleasure, but so they could also take pictures and sell those pictures on the internet for profit."

"What?" Brent hugged Ricky tighter as he was slightly in shock from what he just heard.

Sean nodded. "We had the same reaction as well when we found out. To put it mildly, none of us were that happy when we heard that, so we decided that we would find some way to hunt everyone involved down, and do whatever it took to get every picture of the twins removed from the net. In doing this, I guess Ambassador Surak found out, because he called Cory in the middle of the meeting we were having to get our search organized, and told him that in order to assist us in ensuring that justice was carried out, we were all being made an official Vulcan Clan, and that Cory would officially be our Patriarch."

Brent continued to hug Ricky as Sean talked a bit more about how they ended up finding a bunch of people that were going to need to be rescued and protected as a result of the massive internet investigation they launched. He told about how Camp Little Eagle was set up as a result, how Timmy and Ricky became Indian braves and how they each were picked to be a spirit guide for an eagle spirit. This caused Ricky to smile a bit as he tried to push the bad thoughts out of his head.

Sean went on to talk about Benji and Elijah, or Eli as he preferred to be called. The twins had loving parents, but there was a plane crash and both of their parents died, leaving both Benji and Eli seriously hurt. Sean stated that they both closed themselves up and refused to say much to anyone as they were moved around from doctor to doctor, because they felt responsible for the crash due to their unique talents.

"Talents?" Brent asked as he and Ricky broke their hug.

"Uh huh." Came the soft soprano voice of 10 year old Eli Michaels who was sitting close to Sebastian. It was at that same time that Brent noticed that Ricky started to get lighter and lighter until he was literally floating. A few moments later, Ricky floated out of his arms, and floated back down where he was originally seated next to Timmy.

"You can make things float?" Greg asked with surprise as Brent walked back over to sit next to him and Lance.

Ricky answered before Eli had a chance to. "Yup, they can! And it makes you feel funny too when they do it, it's really kewl!"

Sean agreed. "As a result of the plane crash, Eli lost his right leg and his right arm, and Benji lost most of his left hand. For a long time, they thought that it was their fault that the plane crashed, but now they know that it wasn't."

Everyone nodded while Greg spoke up again, "Can you make me float like that too Eli?"

Eli smiled, "Sure, but maybe after the meeting."

"Okay!" Greg beamed and sat back into Lance's embrace.

Just when Brent and Lance thought that they had heard the worst of what their new brothers had gone through, Sean started to tell Antonio's story. For the next 5 minutes, they sat in horror as Sean recounted just a small number of things that Antonio's own father did to him. How he was repeatedly raped and molested. Some of the worst things he left out because of the young ears in the room, but all 4 of the new guys already had a pretty good idea in regards to what was being said.

Sean also explained how Antonio was special in that his physical aging seemed to be drastically reduced, such that his body only physically aged 1 year for every 4 years that went by, and that because of this, each year his family would have him brainwashed so that he would forget everything that happened the prior year, and so that he could continue to be abused. By the time Sean finished, even Eric seemed to be emotionally hurt from some of the stuff that was being said.

"It's okay now." The small 9 year old tried to re-assure his new friends as he himself was being hugged tight by Byron. "It's all over now, and I have a new dad and a new family who loves and cares for me and who I care for back."

Brent wasn't buying it. "How could anyone ever think of doing stuff like that. Especially to their own son?"

Antonio sighed. "He got what was coming to him, plus in the end he will have to answer to HIM." Antonio's eyes first fell on Mikey before they glanced upward to the ceiling. "Besides, something cool that I didn't realize at the time was each year my brain was being wiped, I would study a different medical book, and now that the wipes are gone, with all the knowledge I have, I am now a doctor, and I can help a lot of other people as well."

"That still doesn't make it right." Brent steamed.

"Lot's of things in the world aren't right. There are a lot of messed up people out there, like Sammy's and Jeffy's Uncle Calvin that killed my mom. We just need to make the best of it." Tommy, who had been quiet for most of the meeting, added in.

Brent shuddered in shock, but decided to remain quiet and let Sean give the full explanation.

Sean nodded. "Well, you guys already know how Sebastian and Sammy's father was treating them. The thing is, their father wasn't the only one, their Uncle Calvin was in on it too, but we were never able to track the slime down until he managed to track the twins down instead when we were out celebrating Alec's birthday. As it turned out, he was keeping himself pretty busy, since he no longer had access to the twins, he went after Tommy. He caused his mom to OD so he could take Tommy and sell him out for prostitution instead, then to clean things up, he planned on capturing and killing Sebastian and Sammy."

Sean continued to describe the events that occurred at the Chuck E. Cheese where the party was being held. He explained how in the process of trying to take the twins, he hurt Ricky breaking two of his fingers, and tried to kill Eli before he and Benji were able to use their 'talents' to not only disarm, but also knock Calvin in the groin so hard that he flew onto the stage. Finally, without going into too much detail, he talked about how the clan had it's first Vulcan trial right there at Chuck E. Cheese to address the actions and intents of Calvin.

By the time Sean finished, neither Brent nor Lance could think of anything to say or do, other than sit there in shock.

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Neal thoughtfully took a sip of his Coffee. Teri Short and the other adults that were relaxing in the clan's large dinning room had spent the last several minutes taking turns explaining various aspects of clan life to him. When they were done, Neal smiled. "I have to say that I am thoroughly impressed with how much trust and freedom all of you have given to the kids. But, aren't you concerned that you are not getting involved enough in what they are doing?"

"Normally I might agree with you," Teri smiled. "However, there are a few things you need to keep in mind. Besides the fact that this group of boys is anything but normal, most of them have spent the majority of their lives being lied to and hurt by adults. Something I learned rather quickly with this group is that they have the ability to help each other far better when it's done on their level and you don't have adults constantly getting in the way."

Seeing that Neal was not convinced, Dan added his thoughts as well. "She's right. If you look at it from a psychological perspective, it's going to be a lot easier for a traumatized child to trust another child than it will be to trust an adult, especially when it was an adult that violated their trust in the first place."

Neal nodded in agreement as he continued to try to wrap his head around the realities of clan life. "I think I can see what you mean. I guess my only other question would be, what happens if my guys do join the clan? Will we need to move here or what?"

Teri thought for a few moments before answering. "There are actually a number of possibilities as far as that is concerned. Given the clan's relationship with Starfleet, transportation and communication is not really an issue, so things could still work out fine with you living in Nevada. Depending on how active your boys will be, it's also possible that we could find some work for you to do here, and you could live here at the compound with the rest of the guys. But overall, I've found it best to not make too many plans ahead of time since the boys usually end up working out something that not only have we not thought about, but works out better in the end."

Again, Neal nodded his understanding and then sat in silence as he started to worry about just what it was that he was getting himself into.

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Seeing that everyone had calmed down a bit, Sean continued. "Okay, that brings us to Caleb and Noah." Sean nodded toward two 12 year olds with their arms wrapped around each other. One had short medium blond hair with bright green eyes while the other had short medium brown hair with deep blue eyes.

"About a month ago, Caleb's parents had adopted Noah. Right from the start, he and Noah hit it off 'well' together." The way that Sean phrased 'well' caused a few of the other boys to giggle. "Then, about a week before we rescued Timmy, Caleb's father went to wake Caleb up and found them not only slee-

ping next to each other in only their undies, but given how boys usually are when they wake up, their stuff was hanging out."

Greg giggled from Lance's lap, "You mean they both had boners?"

Sean nodded which caused Greg to giggle more, which in turn caused a few of the other little kids to giggle just because.

"We weren't even doing sex stuff or even awake at the time." Noah added. "We both liked each other, yeah, but that's just how we ended up when we were sleeping, and Caleb's father totally flipped."

"It turned out that they weren't even my real mom and dad. They had lied to me my entire life saying I was their real son but I was also adopted as well." Caleb added with a small hint of scorn in his voice. "And to say my parents flipped was an understatement."

Noah continued. "Caleb's dad went out of town that day for a business trip so for the next week it was just Caleb's mom, but for the entire week she treated me like crap, and wouldn't let us be alone together, ever. We thought that maybe they would calm down after a few days, but it just keep getting worse and worse to the point that she was saying she wouldn't let me 'corrupt' Caleb or anything like that."

"And when it came time for my dad to come home from his trip a week later, they were still so upset that I knew for sure that when he got home he was going to force Judge Jamie to take Noah back, so that's when we both ran away and went to Teri's house." Caleb gave his boyfriend another tight squeeze.

Sean smiled. "So, two days after we got Timmy, Caleb and Noah showed up on our door step, mom tried to call Caleb's parents, and when they went off on her, she basically put her foot down and brought both Caleb and Noah under the protection of the federation, and they became part of the clan shortly after that."

"Why would Caleb's mommy and daddy be mad at Caleb and Noah if they weren't doing anything?" Greg asked somewhat confused.

"Sometimes adults get so caught up in their own feelings and beliefs that they become really closed minded and can't deal with anything that's different. It's kinda sad, especially when those adults are parents or foster parents, and they can't accept their own kids being different." A well tanned 13 year old boy with strawberry blond hair answered. "Then you get other adults that just try to use you."

"Yeah, Tanner's right." Another 13 year sandy blond haired boy hugging onto Tanner added. "Tanner's parents died, and his foster parents didn't care about him at all, they were just after his inheritance money."

Lance scrunched his face. "That's terrible."

"That's nothing. DJ's dad was just using him for porn, he would take pictures of him doing things when he didn't even know it!" A black haired, blazing blue eyed boy who was sitting between Jamie and Jacob jumped in. Compared to the two twins, he looked like he was about 8 years old.

DJ winced slightly but nodded his head in agreement.

"Thanks guys, that actually brings us up to the next group." Sean smiled at how everyone seemed to be jumping in right where they belonged. Motioning first toward Tanner, and then toward DJ he continued. "The cute strawberry blond with the long thin pony tail over there is Tanner, and the boy hanging off of him is David, but he prefers to be called DJ."

Timmy started to bounce up and down again. "Yup! It's really cool! DJ is my older younger brother!"

"Huh?" Both Brent and Lance were confused.

"Whoa, slow down fireball, your jumping ahead a bit." Sean grinned. "The next 5 guys that became part of the clan are kinda grouped together. As you already heard from them, Tanner's foster parents didn't really care about him, they were more interested in getting his inheritance money, so he was constantly being abused and yelled at. DJ's mother died as well so he was just living with his father who was constantly trying to take advantage of him sexually, so they decided to run away together. Timmy was the first to know about DJ being in trouble because of the link he had. We didn't know it at the time, but Timmy and DJ were half brothers."

"Why did Timmy call DJ his older younger brother? Is Timmy like Antonio?" Brent pondered.

Sean tried to figure out the best way to answer. "No, not really. This gets kind of complicated, but basically Timmy's father was involved in some top secret temporal mechanics research work for Starfleet, there was an accident, and instead of getting sent back in time 13 minutes, he was sent back 13 years. By the time he was located 2 years later, he had met Timmy's mom, and Timmy was born. When Timmy's father came back, he brought Timmy with him, so temporally Timmy will always be 11 years older than he currently looks. Timmy's mom eventually found and married another guy and they had DJ, that's how Timmy and DJ are half brothers. Starfleet never allowed Timmy's father to contact his mother and everything was classified, which is why we never knew about this until our Intelligence team started researching DJ."

Brent's eyes rolled slightly. "Your right, that does sound a bit confusing, but I think I get the general idea."

"Cool." Sean smiled. "So, Tanner and DJ ran away and were starting to make their way here. We didn't pick them up right away because we were told they had a bunch of issues they needed to work out first, so we held back and just kept them under surveillance the best we could."

"It's a good thing too, otherwise Beau and I never would have met them, and I don't really want to think about what we were about to do if we didn't." A white blond haired boy who looked to be about 10 added.

"Actually, Our Father already knew exactly what would have happened to you if I had not been given permission to intervene." All eyes turned toward Saint Mikey who, up to now, had remained silent from where he was sitting near the corner of the room. "Beau, Toby, do you two mind if I tell your brothers what really happened?"

Both Beau and Toby nodded their heads in agreement, which caused Mikey to continue. "Beau and Toby's mom and dad loved them very much. However, they were a rather poor family and they had a hard time making ends meet. After their mother was diagnosed with Cancer, their father ended up killing himself, which put their mom in the impossible position of trying to care for the boys on her own. Although she really wanted to, as time went on and the cancer progressed, she simply was not able to. As a last resort, she put the boys on a bus to Iowa with instructions to find their Great Aunt Gloria and live with her. What no one knew is that their Aunt was also dead, and with no family here to take care of them, and being faced with having to be split up, the book of life already had it recorded that Beau and Toby would have decided to follow in their dad's footsteps and kill themselves."

Gasps could be heard across the entire room as Toby only nodded. "He's right I think. We never really discussed it much, but Beau and I cared about each other a lot, and could not bare to be separated from each other, and forced to live with people who didn't care or want us, so that was the direction we probably would have taken if we didn't meet Tanner and DJ."

Mikey nodded and allowed his love to flow throughout the room to help comfort the boys as he continued. "Fortunately, Our Father has a plan for all four boys, and he allowed me to intervene, so I was able to help encourage events so my brothers here at the clan did not pick up Tanner and DJ until they had a chance to meet Beau and Toby and agree to be brothers for each other."

"If it was you helping, why did you let DJ get shot?" Ricky challenged.

"That wasn't the work of our father." Mikey sighed. "The guy downstairs has his own plans which often go against those of Our Father. In this case, he managed to allow DJ's father and Tanner's foster parents to not only track them down, but to also catch up with the boys while they were at a layover in Cheyenne, Wyoming. His plan didn't work out that well though, because my brothers were already inside a shuttle, and were able to reach DJ, Tanner, Beau, and Toby pretty quickly when Tanner called for help. Now, all 4 boys have a whole bunch of parents and brothers who will always be there for them and never let them be alone again."

After waiting a few moments to make sure Mikey was done with his explanation, Lance turned his focus back to Sean. "Sean, you said the next 5 members of the clan, but you only mentioned 4. Who was the 5th?"

"My boyfriend, Ian was." This time, Toby jumped in before Sean could answer. "On our way here, we met two really nice adults that helped us out, Russ and Sara. They let us spend the night at their house, and fed us and were really nice. Ian lived next door to them. Although we didn't get to meet him when we were there, after we were rescued in Cheyenne, when we got here, Ian was waiting here along with Russ and Sara."

"I guess that makes sense." Lance replied thoughtfully.

"Okay guys, we are just about done. If we can get through this, we should still have some pool time left before bed." Seeing everyone become quiet and motionless, Sean continued, "The next day a bunch of us took a trip to the mall, and that's where we met Clint and Crystal. They are helping out their parents tonight so they couldn't be here, but you will get to meet them at breakfast tomorrow. Basically, Clint got Crystal pregnant, and she is going to have triplets. Although they are both 15, they both decided to take responsibility for their action, and both want to raise the babies."



Brent and Lance both nodded that they understood, so Sean continued. "Unfortunately, their parents were not as understanding. After we got home, mom arranged a meeting with Crystal's father and Clint's mother and father to see how they would take the news."

"I bet they didn't like it." Greg offered.

"That's an understatement," Adam grinned. "Terry didn't make it half way through what she was going to say before JJ had to stun Crystal's father when he tried to leap across the table to strangle Clint. Then Sammy reported some of the things that Clint's parents were planning on doing to both Clint and Crystal."

"Actually, that was Sebastian, but yeah, they had so much hate and anger flowing off them, all the telepaths could feel it." Sammy corrected.

"Anyway, that brings us to our last day in Iowa before leaving to move here," Sean continued. "Just about everyone else had left to come here, but mom decided to let us stay one more night at our old house for some family bonding time and all because things had been going so crazy. So, we ended up having to go to the store to pick up a few things. On our way out, William and Timmy spotted a car at the far side of the parking lot. When we got there, we found Calen."

Sean gestured toward an auburn haired 11 year old sitting near Cory as he continued. "I'm not going to get into all the details, but to sum things up, we found him chained up in the back of the car, nearly dead, partially castrated, with the heat of the car going at full blast. Cory got Doc. McCoy to come down from the Enterprise, got him stable, and then took all of us back up to the ship to finish helping him. While we were there, he mentioned his younger brother, CD, had run away a week earlier, so we started searching for and managed to find him registered in a shelter about 50 miles southeast from where we lived in Iowa."

Sean started to worry that he might have been covering too much too quickly as he knew both Brent and Lance were fairly overloaded already in everything that they have heard, but seeing that they were both following fine, he continued. "Adam had found some information on the shelter that made it seem rather suspicious. When we got there, Tyler was able to confirm that all 15 kids in the building felt incredibly scared and hungry. And when we got in there, we were able to see for ourselves that none of them had anything on other than light boxers, and that they all were being physically and sexually abused."

"So you were able to find CD?" Greg asked.

"Yup. That would be the slightly smaller version of Calen that is sitting next to him. We were able to rescue him and the other 14 kids that were being housed in that hell hole. Let's just say that the scum bag that was sexually abusing them only had a few seconds to regret his mistakes." Sean replied.

"What happened to all the other kids?" Lance looked around the room and saw they were out of additional kids for the clan.

"That little guy sitting near Timmy and Ricky became JJ's and my son. The others are staying at Camp Little Eagle. You'll get to meet most of them tomorrow as well if you want." Adam answered as he motioned toward a small blond haired 6 year old that was sitting next to Mickey.

Looking around to make sure that he did not miss anyone, Sean rubbed his hands together and looked toward the new guys. "Okay guys, You've pretty much heard the histories of every member of the clan that is here in this meeting in addition to Clint and Crystal who had already given us their permission to be mentioned. At this point, we usually give you guys a chance to say anything you might feel comfortable saying about yourself. What's said will just remain within the room, unless it's agreed on by all of us.

Lance looked like he was about to say something, but Sean stopped him and continued. "I also want to make it clear that you don't have to say anything at all right now if you don't want to. That's totally alright, and it will not effect the last part of the meeting. It's just that some guys feel better saying things right off the bat and getting it off their chests while for others it takes a little bit before they are able to get to the point that they can feel comfortable about it. Whichever way you choose, just remember no matter what it is, there is not one kid here that will laugh at you or tease you about it, and everyone here really does want to try to help you."

Lance and Brent looked at each other for a few moments before Brent stood up and started talking. "Well, I thought my life was pretty sucky. That was, at least, until I came here and got to meet some of you guys."

Brent looked around the room and saw several knowing smiles, and a few uncontrollable giggles from the littlest ones. "My mom died when I was 3, so I never really got to meet her. It was really just my father and myself for most of my life, and he was usually busy all the time with work stuff to pay attention to me."

Brent could see some of the smiles turning to frowns. "It's not like he abused me or neglected me or something, well maybe he did, I don't know, but sometimes he would get home really late from work at nights, and he would still spend a little time with me, and sometimes on the weekends. When I started getting older, he would invite some of his lady friends over on the weekends, but we didn't really do the things I heard other kids in school talking about what their dad's did with them."

Seeing the frowns turn to nods, Brent relaxed and continued. "I think when I was ten was when I met the first person I could ever call a best friend, and that was Randy. He was only like 2 months older than me, and we did everything together. A lot of times, when my dad would be working really late, or when he had to go overnight on business trips, Randy's parents would invite me to stay over at their house so I wouldn't be home all alone."

Brent noticed that just about everyone seemed to be paying very close attention to his story now. "I guess about 2 years after we met each other, right after we had both turned 12, we started realizing our bodies were starting to change, and, well, I don't want to say everything, but we also realized that there was something between us that was more than just best friends."

There were a few giggles from a few of the youngest boys there, which were quickly stopped. "So, for the next year, we tried to figure out how to best let his parents and my dad know about how we felt for each other. Being 'gay' wasn't exactly something that either of our families accepted. In fact, I think Randy's parents were starting to catch on that something was going on, because over the last year, I kept getting invited less and less to spend the night at Randy's. Then, the clan held it's concert in Des Moines for all the local schools. Both Randy and I were there in the audience. It was one of the best concerts ever! We also learned a lot about the clan, and that being gay doesn't always have to mean

something bad or evil. So, with Randy's support, I made the decision to out myself to my father that night."

At this point, the room was completely silent, even the normal shuffling around had stopped as everyone waited with baited breath for Brent to continue. "I started to try to tell my dad about how I loved Randy, but as soon as I started, he blew up on me. He called me a fag and a queer and started yelling that this is how I repaid him and mom, and kept yelling and getting madder until.... until he just stopped and fell over because he had a heart attack."

"We called 911. The ambulance came and took him to the hospital and we had to wait there for hours. Hours of waiting not knowing what would happen. I don't know what I would have done if Randy had not been right there next to me. Finally they let me in to see him.... the last thing he told me.... before he died..... was that he had no son." With this, Brent started to cry softly where he stood. Lance gently transferred Greg into Eric's lap, then stood up himself to embrace Brent and give him all the comfort he could give him.

Brent finally managed to continue, "Randy stayed at my side the entire time. I didn't think I had any other relatives alive that wanted me, they couldn't find any, so I was allowed to spend a day or two at Randy's at least I think it was a day or two, it's hard to remember. But eventually they came to me, and told me that I would have to live in a children's home, for kids that don't have anywhere else to live, and that's where I stayed."

Feeling Brent's sobs, Lance tightened his squeeze letting Brent know that he was there and safe. "A week after \*sniff\*... A week after dad died, Randy finally talked me in to going out to watch a movie with him, that was the first time I let myself start to have fun around him again, and was thinking that perhaps there was some better reason things happened the way they did. It was a great movie, and we were having fun together. After the movie he took me back to the home I was living at, we kissed and said we loved each other, and then he headed on toward his home, and I went inside."

Not knowing that he could, Lance squeezed Brent even tighter to give him just a little extra support for what he knew Brent would need to say next. Although no one other than Lance and Brent could see it, Randy too joined in with the hugging of Brent. Filled with Sniffles, Brent continued. "About 5 minutes later while I was inside getting a drink, I felt a sharp pain go through my stomach. I don't know how I knew, but I just knew something was going wrong. I darted out of the house and ran faster than I ever thought I could run. I didn't know where I was running to, I just ran, and I ended up in an alley, and that's where I found him.... \*sniff\*... found him dead. Randy... \*sniff\*..... found him dead..."

At this point, it was clear that Brent had totally lost himself. He might have babbled a few other words, but nothing was coherent. Lance gently pulled Brent back down so they were both sitting, and silently tried to calm him with his love.

"Why did you guys let him go so far?" Cory sharply called out as he glanced toward the double J's.

"It's a good hurt Cory." Jamie replied

Jacob directly followed his twin. "It's something he had to say before he could start to heal."

Cory only shook his head.

It took a few minutes, but between Lance's gentle and love filled embrace, and some of the other telepaths helping to stabilize him a little, Brent managed to calm down to the point that he was at least coherent again. "Sorry guys." Brent finally said weakly.

Although it was clear that several were getting ready to offer answers, Sean was the first to speak. "Don't worry about it bro. Like you said, just about everyone here has been through a lot, or at least enough to know what your going through. There is no one here that is going to laugh at you or anything you say. No one here will ever think your stupid just because it's how you feel. We are all brothers and we work together to help each other through the hard times, not just the good times."

Brent nodded and gave a weak smile of thanks. Through Lance's and Randy's combined love, and the love and support that flowed over him from the other members of the clan that were there, Brent recovered fairly well, but he was still emotionally exhausted and couldn't think of saying or doing anything else.

After a few moments, Sean glanced over to the new group. "Anyone else want to say anything? Remember you don't have to if you don't want to."

Hesitantly, Greg pushed himself off of Eric's lap, and stood up a step or two away. "I guess I could tell you a little about me, but there is not much to tell."

Everyone turned their attention to little Greg, as he stood alone, looking toward nothing in particular. I was born blind, something in the way I developed makes it so doctors can't fix me. Mom didn't have enough money to let me go to any off-world doc's, since our dad was a druggie and left mom as soon he learned she was going to have twins, so we didn't have much money, but it was okay because I had Creg, who was my twin, and I could somehow see through his eyes which was also cool."

Greg stopped babbling and took a breath as he felt a pair of hands reach around his neck and chest giving him a gentle hug of support. Immediately, he realized the presence of Lance. "Then about a year ago, mom was taking us to pre-school and a big truck ran a red-light and slammed into us. Mommy and Creg were both killed instantly since they were both in the front seat. But I was in the back seat, and just bruised up a bit. I was sent to live in a children's home since there was no one else to take care of me, and that's where I met Doug who is like a year older than me, and somehow I was able to see a little bit through his eyes too. Not as good as I could with Creg, but it was good enough."

A number of boys nodded as everyone continued to listen patiently. "Then a few nights ago, there was the fire.... Doug made sure I got to safety... but then he got burnt really bad, and now I don't know where he's at either... So Lance has been taking care of me, but I can't see through his eyes at all. He tried, but I can't, and then Lance was going to run away with Brent, and Lance took me with him. We found Eric, and I could see through his eyes a little, and then we came here to meet all of you guys."

Cory made a mental note to make sure he got up with the twins later in regards to Doug. 'We're a step ahead of you bro. We are already working on tracking down Greg's friend. We should have it pinned down later tonight.' Cory heard Kyle send into his head.

After another squeeze, Lance guided Greg back to sitting on Eric's lap. But, instead of returning to his own seat, he took a step or two forward himself to stand before everyone. "If Brent and Greg can do this, I guess I can say a little bit about myself as well."

"Compared to all of you guys, my life is going to seem pretty boring." Lance heard a few small giggles from around the group, which was just the effect he was looking for to break the ice a little. "My parents had me when they were both really young. My dad was 18 and my mom was 17, so I don't think either of them were really ready for me yet. My first memories from when I was 3 or 4 always involved my parents fighting and arguing with each other. Then when I was 5, my parents got a divorce, dad went away and to this day I've never heard from him again. The state gave custody of me to my mom."

So far, so good Lance thought to himself as he continued. "Then when I was 6, maybe a little before, mom started to get a lot more angry about stuff. She started blaming me for my dad leaving us, and then she started hurting me. I guess one of the neighbors saw mom beating me or something, and the police came and took me away. They made me live in a group home with other kids for about 2 years while mom went through counseling and therapy classes and stuff. She would come to see me on the weekends sometimes, but they never let us be alone. Then when I was 8, they said I was her's again, and she could take care of me, so I moved back home with her."

Brent was now paying very close attention as well, since there was very little of the past of the boy that he loved that he knew about.

Lance took a moment to catch his breath before continuing. "I guess there is something about me that turns people bad or something, because it wasn't long after I started living with my mom again that the problems started. At first, everything seemed okay. People from the state would come by from time to time to check on us and make sure I was doing okay. But soon they stopped coming, and that's when my meanness started turning mom bad again. It started out with little things at first. But by the time I turned 9, she was back to beating me every night, if I made a mistake, I got beat... if she made a mistake, I got beat, if someone at work pissed her off, I got beat. One night I was so scared of being beat again that I ran across the street to the neighbor's house, but mom came over and started beating down their door to get to me, and then when Mr. Persay answered it, my mom started beating him up as well."

Everyone seemed wide-eyed and shocked at what Lance was telling them, so Lance continued. "I guess it's different when an adult beats up another adult than when an adult beats up a kid, because then the cops came. They took my mom away and threw her in jail. I think they said she is going to be there for the next 40 years or something. That also meant that I got sent back to the children's home, and that's where I've been ever since."

Sean walked over and wrapped his arms around Lance in a loving hug. "That was very brave of you to share that with us bro, but there is one thing that you said that I don't agree with, okay?"

Lance accepted the older teen's embrace and smiled before looking up in his eyes. "What?"

"I never want to hear you say that you were the one that caused your mom to be mean, or that you were the reason that your parents got a divorce." Sean answered.

Lance looked puzzle. "But it was me."

Brent came up and joined in hugging Lance. "No way man, I've felt how much love can flow out of you, and there is no way you could possibly turn anyone 'bad'."

Sean nodded in agreement. "Besides the fact that if that were true, one of the telepaths here would have let us know. Sometimes adults try to raise kids long before they are actually ready. Sometimes adults have a lot of their own issues, and many times a defenseless kid seems to be the best way to take out their frustrations."

"I bet your mom did it intentionally." JJ called out. "From what you described, she knew that when she got you back, CPS would continue to keep an eye on you and her for a bit, just to make sure there were no problems, so during that time she kept up her 'being nice' act. But when she knew that they would not be checking anymore, she dropped the act, and you became her punching bag again."

Sean nodded in agreement.

Lance wanted to say more, there was so much more he wanted to argue. But, they had already been at this whole meeting thing for so long, he simply gave in with a nod and smile. "I guess you guys are right. Thanks."

As Lance and Brent sat down, Sean started to walk back to the center of the group to continue the next part of the meeting, but stopped himself as Eric, the small sandy blond 10-year old that had remained silent through the entire meeting, stood up. Everyone started to look in his direction, not sure what to expect.

Eric stood there blinking. A few times he opened his mouth as if he were about to say something, but then stopped.

"Guys." Kyle jumped in. "Everyone needs to give Eric a few minutes here. He just learned to talk a few hours ago. I can see him trying to put his thoughts together in his head, but I think it's important for him to be able to say this on his own."

Everyone nodded in agreement and with understanding. The room was quiet for almost a minute as Eric was given a chance to put his thoughts into words.

Finally, when he spoke, it was with a very light, high tenor voice. "It hurt." He started to say, then moved his hands up to his neck as if trying to remove something. "The ropes... around me." Eric's eyes began to tear up, and for a moment it looked like he was going to sit back down.

"You can do it Eric, I know you can!" Greg reassured gently.

Eric nodded and tried to continue. "By day.... outside.... alone, I was... on rope." Eric's eyes started to tear up more. "Mean man hurt.... Was all I knew." The small boy was clearly trying to say more, but nothing came out. Finally, he looked toward Kyle pleadingly. "Help?"

Kyle smiled and nodded. "You did a good job Eric, it will take a little bit for the words to settle out in your head, but the more you try to say things, the easier the words will fit."

Still teary eyed, Eric nodded and sat back down. Immediately, he found a Greg crawling into his lap.

"Okay guys, basically what Eric was wanting to say is that there is not much that he can remember. But, the memories he does have mostly center around his former owner tying him up with a rope and

leaving him outside during the day, and at night he would be brought in the house where he would be hurt." Seeing that many others were about to jump in, Kyle held up his hand. "And before anyone says anything, his former owner was already dealt with. Unfortunately, he died before I was able to get to him."

"How was he hurt?" One of the other boys hesitantly asked.

Kyle shook his head. "That's part of the confusing part. Eric isn't completely sure. He has some memories of physical abuse but most of it is cloudy and fractured." Kyle tilted his head slightly and thought for a few moments. "He has some memories of being injected with something. If I had to guess, I would say that he was commonly given drugs that made it hard for him to remember things, which would also perhaps explain why there is no knowledge in his head about any time before a few weeks ago."

The room remained silent for a while longer as no one was quite sure what to say. It was Brent who broke the silence by walking over to Eric, and wrapping his arms around both Eric and Greg. "Don't worry bro, somehow we will find who else was responsible for this".

Lance then got up and joined in to make it a 4-way hug.

After giving the four boys a few moments, Sean continued. "Guys. This brings us to the last, and most important part of the..."

"Hold on little bro." Mikey Interrupted. "There is still one more person that needs to speak before you do what you were about to do."

After doing a quick re-count of the new guys, Sean scrunched his face in confusion. "Who's that bro? I'm pretty sure we covered everyone."

Mikey did not answer Sean, but instead looked toward Brent. "Brent, would you like to do the honors?"

Brent seemed as confused as Sean. In fact, if it were not for several of the other kids suddenly looking past Brent and gasping, he would have said the same to Mikey. Instead, he looked where everyone else was glancing, and standing slightly to the side of the four boys, with a faint white glow around him, was Randy.

"Everyone can see him?" Brent asked with surprise.

Mikey nodded. "Since I'm around, I can make it so everyone can see him, at least for a small amount of time."

[Hi guys!] Although he did his best not to show it, Randy too looked rather surprised at everyone's ability to see him.

"Uncle Mike?" Ricky asked looking back and forth between Randy and Mikey. "Is Uncle Randy a guardian angel like you?"

Mikey smiled toward Ricky. "Not like me, little one. Our father has a special plan for him that not even I am sure about. But I'll leave it up to Brent and Randy to decide what they share with you."

All eyes now turned toward Brent and Randy, who had now walked to stand next to Brent.

"Well." Brent started, trying to figure out exactly what to say. "You guys know how I said Randy was killed a few weeks ago? Well, on Friday Saint Mikey... Umm... Uncle Mikey? Visited me when I was still living in the home, and made it so I could see Randy. Then, after Lance and I started getting close, we learned that he could see Randy as well."

[Brent had just lost his dad, and had been forced to move to the children's home. I loved him so much, but there seemed to be so little I could do for him, his life was turned upside down.] Randy's voice was soft and trembled slightly as he talked. [I remember laying in the alley after I was attacked, the only thing I could think about was Brent, and how his life was going to be even worse now, and wishing that things could be different, and that I could somehow have shown my love for him more before I died. I know it sounds pretty stupid.]

A single tear started to make its way down Brent's cheek. "I never knew that, and I don't think it's stupid."

Mikey smiled warmly. "Actually, it was that selfless love and devotion you had toward Brent, which was partly responsible for you being able to remain here with him now."

"Really?" Brent and Randy both said together.

Mikey nodded.

"You said his love was part. What is the other part?" Lance asked.

Mikey's smile widened. "Your right, I did say that. The other part has not even been revealed to me. I just know that although it's a factor, the love that Brent and Randy shared with each other was not the only factor."

Sean jumped in at this point. "Well, I guess that settles it. That means that all 5 of you have an important decision to make."

After seeing that he had their attention, Sean continued. "You guys have heard the stories from all the members of the clan that are here, and we've heard your stories. Now, you have a decision to make. I don't think there is anyone here that does not feel that they would like you to become a member of the clan. However, the choice is up to you. Mom has already declared Brent, Randy, Greg, and Eric as being under the protection of the Federation's Safe Haven act, so no matter what you choose, you guys will still be protected and safe."

[Wait, your including me in this? How can I be a part of the clan?]

"Why not?" Adam spoke up. "Everyone here considers Mikey just as much a part of the clan as anyone else. Just the fact that he feels it is important enough to make it so we can see you is good enough rea-



son for me as to why you should be allowed to be in the clan if you want. The fact that your going to be watching out for Brent and Lance and probably others of my brothers is extra icing on the cake."

While Randy simply nodded, not really sure what else to say as he was clearly surprised by what he was being included in, the rest of the boys sat there and thought for a few moments before Lance spoke up. "What's the difference between being in the clan and not being in it?"

"I can answer that." Cory jumped in. "In short, everyone who is in the clan has taken an oath to be there and protect every other member. If you guys accept our offer, you will basically be making the same oath. In effect, everyone in the clan will become your brother, and you will become ours. If you don't become clan, that's fine as well, we will all still be friends."

All five boys nodded in understanding.

After waiting a few seconds, Sean continued. "If you guys want, you can go into the room over there and discuss this between yourselves before making your choice."

The five boys wordlessly spoke between each other for a few moments before Brent spoke up. "I don't know about the other guys, but I don't need any time to decide. I would like to become a member of the clan."

Lance spoke up immediately after Brent stopped. "I would like to become a part of the clan as well."

[If Brent and Lance are choosing to be in the clan, and if you guys will have me, I too would like to be a part of the clan.]

"You guys are all really nice. I want to be clan too." Greg added.

Everyone was silent for a few moments as Eric struggled to say the words he was looking for. "Clan... I would choose."

"Then it's official." Sean smiled. "Welcome to Clan Short guys!"

Without warning, the entire room erupted with cheers as everyone got up and circled around the five newest members of the clan. For several minutes, there were many hugs, handshakes, and congratulations exchanged.

A few minutes into all the hugging, Mikey announced that he would need to leave now, so everyone also said their goodbyes to Mikey and Randy. A few moments after Mikey left, to everyone other than Brent and Lance, Randy slowly started to fade away until he was no longer visible.

When things started to calm down, Cory got everyone's attention. "Okay guys, we have about an hour before we need to head home, which means if anyone is interested, we can get some pool time in."

Almost instantly, the room was empty.

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Evan sat with his back against a tree and Haden in his lap as his hands clasped those of his younger brother's. Both boys were focused on watching the small burning fire that cheerfully crackled a few feet in front of them.

"I'm hungry." Haden softly murmured.

"I know." Evan replied as he used his upper arms to squeeze on the sides of his younger brother. "We'll find food somehow, I promise."

Truth be told, Evan had already been thinking a lot about it. Unfortunately, he really had no ideas on how they would manage to get food in the middle of nowhere. He knew his younger brother had to be starving, given how little he would ever complain about anything unless it was really serious, but he just couldn't come up with any solution.

The sun had set about a half of an hour ago, and the final lights in the sky had all faded such that beside the flicker of their small fire, darkness was all around them. He had seen some small critters crawling around here and there, and he knew from his survival training, some of them were edible, but he also knew that his younger brother would literally allow himself to starve to death before being willing to eat anything like that. Forcing him wouldn't work either since he knew how sick it would end up making him, regardless of the fact that he had already promised himself to never force him to do anything he was not willing to.

A small breeze caused both boys to shiver slightly which also caused Evan to wonder if the heat of their small fire would be enough to keep them warm. Last night it had gotten rather chilly, but they had a nice sheltered area of bushes they were able to crawl under. Tonight, there would be no such shelter, but probably be just as chilly.

A small scratching sound suddenly caught the attention of both boys. It was the sound of something scratching on some type of hard surface. A few seconds later, from the direction of the sounds, the boys could see two yellowish eyes look up and start peering at them.

"What is it?" Haden whispered as his entire body began to tremble uncontrollably.

Evan didn't answer. He just sat there holding his younger brother as tightly and as still as possible. As his eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, he was fairly sure that he could make out the faint outline of a wolf like creature.

After staring at each other for a few seconds, the wolf started pawing at something solid a few more times, almost as if it were a bull getting ready to charge at them.

Evan reached out and grabbed one of the small sticks from the fire. Although no flames were visible, the end of the stick was glowing bright red. As he tossed the stick in the direction of the wolf, the wolf took off in the opposite direction, disappearing into the darkness.

Both boys sat motionless for several more seconds. "Is he gone?" Haden finally asked still trembling.

"I think so." Evan answered. He moved Haden off his lap as he stood up, and started to walk cautiously toward the stick that he had tossed, which was just now was starting to go completely dark.

"Careful!" Haden's voice was filled with concern toward his older brother.

Evan reached down and picked the stick up. Taking a few more steps forward with the stick in hand, his foot hit something solid. Reaching down, Evan could feel that it was smooth and metallic. "I found something." He calmly stated as he started to investigate it more.

"What?" Haden softly asked, still not daring to speak too loud, less the wolf return and find them.

"I'm not sure. It's kinda like a brick or metal block. It's buried in the ground partially." As Evan continued to feel the metal object, his fingers came across a small latch, which immediately let him know what it was. "It's a metal lock box! With no lock."

Haden remained silent as he watched the shadow of his older brother investigate the object.

"Holy crap!" Evan reached down into the box taking out an object, then started walking back toward his younger brother. When Evan was close enough, Haden was able to easily see the large can of raviolis that Evan was holding in his hand.

Instantly, Haden's eyes lit up, and any lingering trembling was gone. He would not starve to death after all. At least not tonight.

"Umm... Evan?" Haden asked quietly when they were both sitting back together.

"Yeah bro?" Evan asked with a hug.

"Umm... How do we get it open?" Haden's voice started to fill with concern again.

Evan hugged his smaller brother tighter. "Relax little bro, it has a flip top, and my utility knife has a fork that we can share."

Haden's only reply was to cuddle deeper into his older brother's chest.

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Other than Sean and Cory, who decided to slip away for some alone time, all the kids were outside enjoying themselves. Any sign of the hurt and pain that everyone had just re-lived was gone.

Brent sat on the side of the pool watching all the other kids playing in the pool. The larger boys were having a jumping and diving contest in the deep end where one boy would do something, then the next person would try to do a jump or dive that was cooler. What surprised Brent the most was how well all of them seemed to be able to handle the stuff they have been through, and still be able to act like kids.

Lance, Eric and the smaller kids were hanging out in the shallow end of the pool. They had decided to play Marco-Polo, which most thought that Greg would do well at since the game involved one person not being able to see anything, and trying to tag another player. As it turned out, Greg was doing remarkably well. If it were not for the fact that everyone knew that Greg was blind, and for the fact that the double J's had insisted that Greg was not using anyone else to see through, many would have thought he was cheating. Not that anyone really would have minded if he were, since the game was

specifically picked for Greg, and he certainly seemed to be enjoying himself and finally finding a game that he was good at.

"You know, we don't have much pool time tonight." A boy's voice said.

"Sorry?" Brent was startled out of his daydreaming as a slender 12 year old with straight, collar length black hair boy sat down next to him.

"You're just kinda sitting here. If you're going to go swimming at all, you should soon because we will have to go back home soon." The boy's deep gray eyes seemed to sparkle slightly.

"Oh. Umm. Alec, right?" Brent asked trying to place a name to the face.

Alec nodded. "Yup!"

"Oh, sorry." Brent wasn't really sure how he wanted to answer the question. In fact, he wasn't really sure himself why he was just sitting instead of swimming. "I was just kind of thinking. So many people have gone through so many terrible things."

"Yeah, kind of unreal. Isn't it?" Alec's boyfriend, Andrew, swam up to where Brent and Alec were sitting, and pulled himself up to sit next to Alec. "Sometimes you just have to accept the bad things that happen, because if they didn't, then the good things that come out of them wouldn't be able to happen either."

Brent sighed, "It's not that. It's just we've been made a part of the clan, but I don't know if I can do what Cory and Sean do. I don't see how I can go out and hunt down kids to rescue."

Alec let out a small giggle that he quickly tried to stop. "No one goes out looking for kids to rescue. And, I know for a fact that Cory, Sean, or anyone will never expect you to do that."

"Yeah," Andrew agreed. "Sometimes it just kind of happens. Like last weekend when Alec came with me and my parents to visit my grandparents in Tampa. We were just walking into Denny's to get some lunch, and there was a little guy begging for change outside."

Alec agreed, "Yes, exactly like that. We were just being ourselves and talking with Arlo. When we found out he had run away because his parents were going to try to have him committed to a mental institution, Andrew called Aunt Teri, and she just told us to bring him back with us, then she took care of everything and now he's safe living over at Camp Little Eagle."

"Wow, that's kinda cool," Brent agreed. "But what if we are never in the exact right place at the exact right time for that to happen to us?"

"Then you don't rescue anyone," Andrew smiled.

"Yup," Alec agreed. "You're not a part of the clan because we think you will rescue lots of people. You're a part of us because we all care about you and want to help keep you safe and be the best you can be. If you find others, you find others. If you don't, then you don't."

"That makes sense," Brent smiled.

"Come on!" Alec stood up which caused Andrew to stand up immediately after. "Let's see if you know how to do any cool dives."

Brent agreed. Deciding that he had pondered enough on the topic for now, he decided to join Alec, Andrew and the other older boys in their diving contest.

A short while later as the younger boy's game winded down, the older boys joined up with their younger brothers in the shallow end, and games of toss-the-kid ensued as the older guys would lift up and toss the smaller guys into the slightly deeper water. This, of course, had the added effect of causing large amounts of laughter and giggling from the younger kids.

After everyone had been swimming for about an hour, Cory and Sean came outside and informed everyone that it was time to head back home. Once everyone had gotten out and rinsed off in the outside showers, most were ready to go.

Lance noticed that a number of the smaller boys stripped off their swimsuits and never put anything else on. He wasn't going to say anything about it at first, but as a larger number of the boys seemed to be doing this, he finally decided to ask Adam about it.

Adam could only smile as he told Lance that most of the guys were doing that because they knew they were heading back to go to bed, and that's how most slept at night. Accepting this, Lance went along with everyone else as they made the short trip across the field and across the street back to the compound.

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As all of the kids started piling into the rec room inside of the main C.I.C. building, the adults were just heading out from the dining room. With Lance at his side carrying Greg, and Eric not far behind, Brent walked over to talk with Neal.

"Hey guys, how did the meeting go?" Neal dragged all four boys into a group hug.

"It was okay." Brent admitted.

Lance let out a sigh. "I can't believe people would do some of the things that have happened to our brothers."

Greg bounced up and down in Lance's arms. "It was cool! We got to meet two angles, I got a bunch of new big and little brothers, and I was the bestest at catching others in the pool!"

"Whoa! Slow down there tiger!" Neal couldn't help but smile at the small boy's enthusiastic attitude. "New brothers, huh? Does that mean you have become members of the clan?"

All four boys nodded.

Dan walked up behind Neal and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Heaven help you now Neal."

Walking by with a pile of large fluffy blankets, Kyle overheard Dan's comments. "Don't worry dad, Uncle Mikey said he would keep an eye on all of them as well, and help out where he could."

"Uncle Mikey?" Neal was clearly starting to get confused.

"You remember how I told you that Lance and I could see Randy?" Brent's expression was dead serious as he waited for Neal's nod before continuing. "Well, during the meeting, Cory and Sean's older brother Mikey, who happens to be Saint Mikey, stopped by and made it so everyone at the meeting could see Randy."

Neal glanced toward Dan for confirmation.

Dan nodded. "He's being serious Neal. Teri's oldest son was killed in a car accident a little over a year ago and has been watching over everyone in the clan since it started. Just recently, the pope officially proclaimed him to be Saint Mikey of Urbandale, Protector of Gay and Abandoned Youth.

At hearing Mikey's name, Teri walked over to investigate. "Is that angelic son of mine causing more mischief and havoc?"

"Apparently he stopped by the clan meeting earlier tonight." Dan answered.

Teri nodded in understanding. "As I said earlier Neal, give it a few days, and you should start getting use to the craziness around here."

Neal smiled, unsure exactly how to respond.

"Uncle Neal?" Lance hesitantly asked as he was unsure if the reference was appropriate. "Do you know where we are going to be sleeping tonight? I think Greg is getting pretty tired."

"Uncle?" Neal asked.

"Actually guys." Teri interjected. "I was going to wait until breakfast to let you know, but I see no harm in you knowing now. As of a few hours ago, Neal and Rick are officially your parents. The only thing that is not set in stone yet is what your last names will be. Each of you can decide if you want to keep your current last name, or if you would like their last name of Knocks-Downing."

"Cool!" All four boys responded then each in turn indicated that they would like to have Neal's last name.

"Great, then with any luck, I should have some good news for you by lunch tomorrow. As far as where you will sleep, that is mostly up to you. If you want, you can sleep in the overnight room with Neal, however, I'm guessing that the rest of the guys would like you to sleep in the nest." At seeing the confused expressions on the boy's faces, Teri pointed behind them where they saw a large number of blankets and pillows.

Seeing Neal's face filling with both question and concern, Teri decided to continue, "Although they have not been doing it as much lately, it's sort of a tradition in the clan to build a large 'nest' where all the guys that want to, can sleep together."

Dan also added his professional observations, "A lot of the kids here have been hurt pretty bad in a number of ways. It seems that sleeping in the nest helps a bunch of them feel safe and secure, knowing that they are with a bunch of others who care about them and will protect them."

"Also, you don't have to worry about any of the guys trying to touch or do anything else that your boys don't consent to. Everyone in this group is very sensitive to that, and if one person tries something, they will have to answer to everyone else," Teri finished.

Neal nodded, "I'm okay with that. However, I think the decision should be up to them. What do you say guys? Do you want to sleep in the overnight room with me, or would you like to sleep in the nest?"

Glancing back at all the other kids that were helping to lay out pillows and blankets for the nest, Brent looked up toward Neal with a hesitant smile. "Would you mind if we decided to sleep in the nest tonight?"

"Not in the least," Neal answered seriously. "I want you guys to be happy, and if sleeping in the nest with all of your new friends will make you happy, then that's what I would want for you to do."

"But, what about?" Lance got a worried expression on his face as he looked at Brent trying to decide the best way to ask his question.

Brent waited for a few moments for Lance to finish his question, but then figured out what he was trying to ask. "I'll just keep an arm around you while your asleep, that way if you get up, I'll know about it. Would that work?"

Lance nodded and smiled, feeling relieved that his concern had been addressed without too much embarrassment, as well as a new sense of love toward his boyfriend who cared about him so much that not only had he known ahead of time what Lance's concerns would be, but also thought of a great solution to it.

"You guys best go and get yourselves a good spot then." Neal's voice drew Lance out of his thoughts. "I'll be right across the hall in the overnight room if you need me."

After each of them had given Neal a kiss and hug good-night, Neal left the rec room along with the rest of the adults who were still lingering around after giving their respective kids kisses and hugs.

With the adults gone, Brent turned his attention back toward the nest. With all the blankets and pillows they had, it looked very comfy. Already, a number of boys were finding their spots for the night. Then, something hit him. All of the boys that were in the nest, as well as several of the boys that were still wandering around adding a few extra blankets here and there, had forgotten to put their clothes back on.

Brent then started to look around the room to see if he could find Cory or Sean to let them know about the error that everyone had made. It only took a few moments for him to spot both boys already sitting and talking in the center of the nest, also missing clothes.

"Sup guys?" An equally naked Kyle asked as he walked up to the group with a large grin on his face.

"Everyone's naked?" Brent asked looking toward the nest, and then back at Kyle.

Kyle put his hand under his chin as if seriously considering the question. "I don't think Kelly is yet, because he had to take something over to Helen. But I'm sure when he get's back he will be."

Brent and Lance looked at Kyle.

Kyle smiled. "It's okay guys, must of us are nude because it makes it easier to sleep. But you guys don't have to if you don't feel comfortable about it. Even though no one will ever touch you or do anything to you unless you give them permission first, it can take a little while to get used to sometimes. I know it took a bit for me."

"Why is that? You look fine to me." Brent asked, then covered his mouth with his hands as he realized what he had said.

Kyle blushed slightly. "Thanks! But I'm already taken. Besides, I wouldn't want to make Lance too jealous."

Now it was Brent's turn to blush as he looked toward Lance.

Just as Brent was about to come up with a good answer and try to explain why he and Lance didn't feel comfortable yet sleeping nude, Kyle nodded and answered loudly for them. "Okay everyone! Brent and Lance are going to sleep in boxers tonight, they are not ready for clan style just yet. Please, no one tease them about it. They don't have a problem with everyone else sleeping nude. Greg doesn't mind sleeping nude though, which is fine since he's going to be sleeping with Timmy and Ricky tonight. And Eric.... well, I think he just made up his mind.

Just as Kyle predicted, Eric dropped his shorts where he stood, giving his answer.

Brent and Lance were not sure whether they should be glad that Kyle answered for them, embarrassed from what he said, or surprised that he knew exactly what they were thinking.

Timmy, on the other hand, was not as amused. "Hey, we were just going to ask Greg! But Uncle Kyle? William says it's best to let people ask their questions first."

Kyle grinned. "Sorry squirt, but I'm tired, and I need my Ty-Bear time."

Timmy was about to say something back, but he decided he was tired as well. "So you want to Greg? We have a nice comfy spot over here."

"I thought you were going to sleep with us tonight fireball?" Cory asked.

"I was, but Ricky and I need to keep Greg safe tonight so that Unca Brent can keep Unca Lance safe." Timmy replied.

Deciding not to argue with their son, Cory and Sean laid down and cuddled close to each other. Timmy came over to collect Greg from Lance and took him over to where the rest of the little kids were slee-



ping at. Everyone else finished whatever they were doing and made their way to find spots in the nest as well.

Within 5 minutes, the lights were turned out. Within 10 minutes, everyone was sound asleep.

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At some point in the middle of the night, Brent woke up as he felt Lance sitting up. "Lance?" Brent whispered as to not wake anyone else up.

Lance said nothing, but started to stand up.

"Oh no ya don't. Lay back down with me babe." Brent prevented Lance from standing, and then draped an arm around him as he pulled him back down to the blankets. Instead of trying to get back up, Lance simply wrapped himself around Brent, snuggling closer, and fell back asleep.

Brent laid awake for a few minutes, listening to the rhythmic breathing of everyone around him. He wasn't sure what to think about this new clan that he was now a part of. However, he couldn't help but admit that he did in fact feel safe, and for the first time in his life, he felt that he might have found somewhere to really belong. Within minutes, Brent drifted back to sleep as well.

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Brent awoke to light tapping on his arm. "Unca Brent?" a young voice whispered.

Opening his eyes, Brent saw Timmy standing over him. "Good morning Timmy. Is Greg okay?"

"Uh huh!" Timmy replied. "Greg hasn't had a shower in a few days, so Ricky and I were gonna to give him one. We wanted to know if you and Lance could help us."

Brent's eyes went wide with surprise as small giggles could be heard coming from different spots of the nest.

Cory whispered over to them. "It's okay guys. Timmy and Ricky do this with everyone they like. I think it's their way to be able to take notes on everyone's packaging. Besides, we wouldn't have allowed you to join the clan if we didn't think we could trust you with the little guys."

Lance woke up as well while Cory was giving his explanation.

Brent nodded. "Okay Timmy, as long as your dad's are okay with it."

Timmy ran over to fetch Ricky, Greg and Eric.

"Really, it's okay guys." Cory reassured. "Go get showered up, and by the time your done, breakfast should be ready in the dinning room."

"Okay, thanks Cory." Brent helped Lance up while at the same time giving him a quick kiss good morning. The two boys quietly made their way out of the nest where the three smaller boys were already

waiting for them. More giggles were heard as Timmy and Ricky stood on each side of Greg to help guide him while with their free hands impatiently dragged an uncertain Brent and Lance out of the room and toward the shower. Eric timidly followed behind them.

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Haden sat with his arms wrapped around his legs, staring at the burnt out fire, waiting for Evan to return. Evan woke up about 30 minutes earlier, and managed to sneak out from under Haden so he could do some quick scouting around and get up.

"I figured you would be up by now." Evan called over to Haden as he jumped a small hill that was not far from where they were sitting.

"I saw smoke, Haden!" He wrapped his arms around his younger brother. "It might be another campfire, or it could be a small house. It's not going to be hard to get to, it's just over the next ridge.

Haden nodded.

"Can you make it up?" Evan offered his hand, which Haden took to pull himself off the ground. After giving Haden a few minutes to brush himself off, the two boys headed in the direction that Evan had found the smoke rising from.

What Evan and Haden had found was neither a camp fire, nor a house, but was instead a small double-wide trailer setup in the middle of nowhere. The trailer was surrounded by a ragged fence which seemed to have been hastily constructed. There were many trinkets and nick-nacks that surrounded the trailer as well. Most of them were inside the fence area, while some of the larger ones were outside of the fence.

Both boys took a few moments survey that which they were actually seeing. Just about every type of trinket that one could ever want to put in one's yard was there. There were lots of different types of garden gnomes. Various types of plant holders, decorated flower bins, lifelike statues of various farm animals, everything from small chickens to sheep, and lamas.

"You boys look hungry," came the scruff sound of a middle aged man who was wearing a green sweat suit, and holding a hose in one hand that had water spraying out of it.

Both boys stood there saying nothing. They were both trying to size up the strange looking man that was in front of them. He could easily have been in his late 40's, or early 50's. Most of his hair, though short, was gray and stringy.

"If your here for the shop, It don't open until 2 more hours, I don't make a habit of letting customers in early. Lots of stuff to do around here." The man continued as he directed the water from his hose to start spraying some of the plant containers that their main plant had died months ago, or were now sporting small weeds.

"Don't have no money." Haden hesitantly offered. Evan looked and scrawled at Haden. Why could the kid never get a clue that sometimes always being honest is not the best course of action.

The man snorted and looked back at his plants that he was watering, before turning the water off and looking back at the boys. "Well, come on then, breakfast it is." A few moment later, he started walking toward the trailer.

Haden looked up at Evan as if questioning what to do. Given that they were still very hungry from only having a half can of Raviolis each, Evan figured it should be safe enough to see if he was really going to make breakfast for them. Thus, the boys entered the yard, and walked up toward the door to the trailer that the older man left open.

"Come in! Come in! You'll let the flies and gnats, and other nasty critters in." The old man glanced at the two boys briefly to make sure they were inside, then closed and locked the door behind them.

Now that they were very close to the older man, the man took a few seconds to properly size each boy up. Looking at one boy for a few seconds, he would sniff, then look at the other boy, and sniff again. "Yes, yes, two lost boys have come to me for food, but they have no way to pay for food, creates a bad position for us don't you think?"

"We could work it off sir?" Haden offered bringing the mans attention back to him.

"Evan is very crafted with paints, sir." Haden took a moment to take a look around the stench filled trailer. In contrast to outside which was very messy and disorganized, inside had been kept very neat and tidy. "I can help with dishes or cleaning things up or maybe helping you in your yard for a bit."

The old man nodded. "So I see. You are willing to offer your services freely in payment for a well cooked meal?"

Both boys nodded.

The old man clapped. "Bright boys indeed! What do you say we go ahead and get some food into you guys now, and then we can work out the specifics later, after you're not so hungry."

More nods from the boys.

The old man smiled as he pointed at Haden. "You, my boy, look like you are a pancake boy."

Haden smiled a little.

With that, the old man set to work making a breakfast with pancakes. He suggested that the two boys go sit in the front room and watch some T.V. while they waited for him to get done, which they did.

The boys did not have long to wait. In almost no time at all, they were being called back to the kitchen. Evan was asked to get three plates down, and Haden was instructed where the cabinet containing the silver-ware was at. By the time the boys had three places set on the table, the old man was plopping down large sized pancakes, fluffy scrambled eggs, sausage, bacon, a small bowl of fresh home-made applesauce for each boy, and small glasses of orange juice.

The meal was eaten mostly in quiet. Haden and Evan, who had eaten very little over the last two days, were surprised at just how yummy this food was, and couldn't seem to scarf it down fast enough. The

old man, in addition to eating his food at a more respectable rate, constantly tried to steal looks at the boys trying to figure how they might have ended up here.

When they were finished, and the dishes were brought to the sink, the two boys thanked the man for his generosity and hospitality. Evan walked over to the door to open it so he could walk back outside, but was surprised when the door was locked.

"You wouldn't be trying to walk out on our agreement, would you?" The old man asked looking toward Evan and seeing Evan's hand on the door.

Evan immediately removed his hand. "No sir! I just thought I might... well, you know... while I was waiting..."

"I understand," The man replied. "Why don't you two go back in and watch a little T.V. while I finish cleaning up the kitchen, and put something on that we can snack on later. Then we can discuss just how, specifically, you could pay me back."

Even and Haden went back into the T.V. room to wait for the man to finish up his work in the kitchen.

About 10 minutes went by and the old man was still doing stuff in the kitchen. Evan wasn't really interested in the show they were watching, because almost suddenly, a strange desire to sleep had started to come over him. "Hey Haden, you okay bro?" Evan asked in a sleepy voice.

"Haden did not answer. When Evan touched Haden's shoulder, Haden fell over onto the pillow, sound asleep.

"Drugs," Even grumbled. He had landed himself and Haden right in the middle of a trap, and there was nothing he could do about it. He could feel it himself, he was at the edge of falling asleep. His body was filling up with that warm sensation, what could he do?

"9-1-1," he saw a phone on the other side of the table that he started to crawl toward. Even if he couldn't say anything, his pressing buttons frantically and his gasping and dying on the floor should get their attention, if he could just reach the phone. If the damn thing would stop getting further from him as he got closer, until finally the phone disappeared.

"Don't tell me you're looking for this?" The old man held up the phone that Evan was trying to get to.

Evan tried to raise one of his hands to reach the phone.

The old man shook his head. "Uh-huh." The man croaked and continued to watch the boy struggle against himself for a few more seconds, until he too collapsed on the floor, sound asleep. Placing the phone back in its original position, he lifted Evan back onto the couch, and then set both boys up in a sitting position. They might have seemed awake if it were not for their very relaxed facial muscles, their eyes being closed, and light snoring coming out of each boy's mouth.

"Okay." The old man said out loud as he is started to unbutton the first boy's shirt. "Let's see what beautiful play-things our God as delivered unto me today!"

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Doubly nearly had the small boys shoe off when the door bell rang. "Two hours until we're open!" He called out, forcing himself to stand up to check out the window, closing the living room doors behind him. Seeing who it was, he went to unlock the door.

"Director! You've picked a wonderful time to visit." The man insisted the younger woman come inside.

"You know why I'm here Doubly, this is your final chance. Do you have something for me or not."

Bowing lower, "I live to serve."

"I'll take that as a no, have a pleasant life, Doubly."

"No! No! I have.... I have two! I do.... this way.... now...." Doubly motioned for the director to follow him.

"If this is another statue or fake, I swear I'll end you my...." The director never managed to finish her threat when the living room doors were opened, and she could see two kids, one around 11 and the other around 9 sitting motionless and shirtless on the couch.

"Did you kill them?" The director asked as she walked over to the first, lifting his head up by the chin and looking him over, then doing the same to the older boy."

"No Director, it was done exactly as you explained. In their applesauce, the younger boy was gone in 15 minutes, the older boy took 20."

"They are both clean?" The director asked.

"They are! I scanned them myself.... twice!" Doubly answered.

"Great, then finish getting them ready, And I'll bring in some of my equipment to the back."

A few minutes later, two naked boys slowly walked into a back room. Each of their necks were being held by Doubly.

"Careful you fool! We need undamaged goods." The director said, somewhat annoyed by a large camera objective she was working on.

"Nahh." Doubly answered back a bit hurt. "You can make the body of a kid do almost anything you want them to do if you know the right places to apply pressure." Haden's arm started waving up and down.

"We can't afford to have any of these damaged. Not yet. I'll have some of the rejects brought over later that you can play with."

"Mmmm," Doubly grunted as he sat the first boy on a chair, and left the other lying off to the side. "We got less than 90 minutes with 'em boss?"

"That should be more than enough," the director answered as a bright white flash went off signaling the first picture had been taken.

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Timmy and Ricky ran quickly into the C.I.C.'s large dining room area, followed a few moments later by Brent, Lance carrying Greg, and Eric. "Daddy, Daddy!" Timmy called out as he made his way for a table where Cory and Sean were sitting along with Teri, Neal, and another man.

"Hey Munchkin, did you make sure your new brothers got all nice and clean?" Cory asked as he caught a pouncing Timmy in mid-air.

Timmy giggled in Cory's arms, and grabbed some quick daddy cuddles. "Your silly daddy, told ya I'm not a Munchkin." Timmy leaned in closer to Cory's ear as if to whisper something, but still spoke loud enough for everyone near by to hear, "Sides, Eric is different!"

"You mean he's uncut like some of your other brothers?" Sean reached over to make it a 3-way hug.

Timmy shook his head. "Nope, different from that too."

"Guys?" Teri looked over at the the boys with a face that suggested that this was probably something that did not need to be talked about right now.

"Neal!" Brent and Lance called out as all four boys started to run toward Neal, who had just stood up.

"Good morning boys, did you guys sleep well?" Neal asked as he wrapped his arms around all 4 boys created a huge group hug.

"Yeah, it was great." Lance answered.

"Uh-huh! I got to sleep next to Timmy and Ricky. Their eagles were watching over us to keep us safe," Greg bubbled.

It was around this time that the boys first registered the presence of another man who had stood up along with Neal. He looked a little younger than Neal with long black hair and brown eyes.

Neal broke the hug to allow the boys to see the visitor. "Guys, I would like you to meet Richard Knocks-Downing, my husband. He flew in earlier this morning."

Brent hesitantly walked toward the man to stand in front of him, "Does that mean Richard is our new papa?"

The man knelt down slightly so that he could be at the same level as Brent. "Please, call me Rick, and I am only your new Papa if you will have me."

Brent couldn't help but notice Rick's gentle face as he looked deep into his eyes to see if he was lying. Seeing that Rick was being sincere, he wrapped his arms around him. After a few moments, Lance, Greg, and Eric joined in the hug.

"That goes for all of you." Rick spoke softly as he hugged all 4 boys. "None of you need to call me pa-pa, or Neal as daddy until you feel that we have earned it, and you feel comfortable saying it."

All four boys nodded as they continued their hug.

When the hug was finally broken, Teri got their attention. "Guys, if you want, you can eat at our table this morning, then we can discuss a few more things over breakfast."

Brent glanced toward the table. It wasn't until then that he noticed that the rest of the clan was already busy eating. Each table had a large bowl of eggs, along with plates that contained bacon, sausage, and toast, along with pitchers of milk and juice. Each seat also had a small bowl of fruit in front of it.

Brent, Lance, Greg, and Eric took their seats as Cory sat Timmy down next to Ricky and everyone began or continued their breakfast.

Cory was the first to speak. "Well, I guess that answers the question about how the guys will take to Rick."

Sean nodded in agreement.

"Does that mean you've decided on where Brent and the others will be staying?" Teri asked leadingly.

Cory nodded. "I didn't want to make anything final until we had a chance to meet Rick, and see how the guys would take to him. Now that we have, I don't see any problem with either option. I think we should let them make that decision."

"What decision?" Lance asked as he took a bite of eggs.

Sean answered for Cory. "There are 2 main options. Either you guys can live here in Orlando with us. We are still getting things setup here for the Clan, and mom still has a lot of positions to fill for F.Y.S, so I'm pretty sure we could find jobs for Neal and Rick. Or, the other option is that you could live with Neal and Rick in Henderson."

"I hear Neal and Rick have a pretty big house in a rather nice neighborhood. How many bedrooms did you say it had?" Teri asked.

"Eight." Neal answered.

"I just met Timmy and Ricky and a bunch of other new friends. I don't want to loose them like my other friends." Greg spoke softly as if about to cry.

"Don't worry Greg," Cory replied. "You won't loose any of your new friends. If you guys decide to live in Henderson, before you get home we will have a special communication terminal setup there, and you will be able to use it to talk to any of your friends here whenever you want. Also, since you are part of the Clan, we can use the Starfleet transporters on Terra Main so that whenever you want to come for a visit, it will only take a few seconds."

This got a series of really's and wow's from all four boys.

Lance looked thoughtful for a few moments, "So, that means that if we wanted to, we could transport over here for a clan meeting and sleepover and then transport back home in time for school?"

"Well," Teri answered, "You will need to keep in mind that there is a 3 hour time difference between here and there. But yeah, essentially that is exactly what Cory is saying."

Cory rolled his eyes, "Mom, we're kids. We can handle time zones."

Teri slowly shook her head as all the kids at the table grinned.

Brent seemed a bit more hesitant. "What if we were to try out living with Neal and Rick and didn't like it?"

"Then you can move back here," Teri answered. "Regardless of what happens, the overall objective is for you guys to be living somewhere that you feel safe, and somewhere that makes you happy."

Brent nodded, "I think Neal and Rick both like their jobs, so I would hate to make them have to change them, and the large house sounds cool, so I think I wouldn't mind trying out living in Henderson with them."

Lance and Greg nodded in agreement.

Cory smiled, "Great, then it's settled. I'll arrange to have a clan communications terminal setup at your house. Neal, is there anyone who would be able to let them in?"

Neal thought for a few moments, "Miranda is kind of like our house keeper. She should be there by 8."

Cory checked his watch. "Okay, so that would be eleven am our time. Let her know to expect a team of Vulcan technicians there at 8:30. It should only take them about twenty minutes to set the system up. I'll make sure Tommy shows Brent and Lance how to use it with the one we have here before you guys leave."

"When will we be leaving?" Lance asked as he finished the rest of his bacon.

"I know Doc Austin wanted to run a final set of quick tests on Greg and Eric after they ate lunch, but unless there is anything else that needs to happen, I don't see why you couldn't leave after that." Teri sent a questioning look toward Cory.

Cory nodded, "After lunch would work for me. That actually fits perfectly. We were hoping to be able to take them over to Camp Little Eagle with the rest of us after breakfast. Maybe let them see how the classes are run there."

"I can go to Timmy and Ricky's school?" Greg asked.

"Why not?" Cory replied. "But that's only if you want to."

"That sounds like a cool idea," Lance stated as Brent nodded his head in agreement.



"Oh, and before I forget," Teri handed a large envelope to Neal. "This is for you. It's the paperwork that officially changes Brent, Lance, and Greg's last name to Knocks-Downing. Eric's change isn't completed yet since we are having some issues tracking down legal information on him. But one way or the other, we should have that cleared up in a day or two."

"Thanks Teri. I can't even begin to thank you for everything that you have done for us." Neal took the envelope and then handed it to Rick.

"It's my pleasure. That was the easy part. You and Rick will be faced with the hard part of raising your new sons. Just remember, just as the kids will be in constant contact with each other, you are both welcome to call or visit at any time. My door is always open to any kid or adult that needs to talk, and I mean it." Teri made sure that both men knew that she was serious.

As it became clear that a large amount of the clan had already finished breakfast, and were helping to clear the tables, Cory stood up to address everyone. "Okay guys! We're running a few minutes behind schedule, so go ahead and finish getting your stuff cleaned up, and then we need to head over to the camp."

Once all the tables had been cleared, the clan started filing out of the C.I.C: heading across the street to Camp Little Eagle. Before they left, Cory, Sean, and Timmy all gave Teri a kiss goodbye. For their part, Brent, Lance, Greg, and Eric each gave Neal and Rick a hug goodbye. Soon, the adults were once again sitting in silence, with only the occasional clang of the dishes being washed in the kitchen being heard.

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Cory and Sean were among the last of the group that were making their way toward the camp. They were walking along with Brent, Lance, Greg, and Eric as they continued to explain more things as they walked.

After they passed and greeted the two guards who were standing at the guard station at the camp's main entrance, seeing the resulting confused looks on Brent and Lance's faces, Sean decided to fill them in. "Basically, we have some kids that stay here at camp, which because of what they were forced to do to survive in life, there are a number of government agencies out there who would love to get their hands on them. The guards and defenses you see here are not designed to keep people in, but are actually designed to keep unwanted people out."

"Kind of like how the FBI was wanting to get a hold of Eli and Benji?" Brent asked.

"Exactly like that." Cory agreed. "Legally, the way the camp is setup, there is no earth based organization that has the right to forcefully take any kid that is here under our protection. But sadly, that doesn't stop some of the less bright from still trying from time to time."

As they continued to walk by various buildings, Brent could not believe how beautiful the grounds and scenery were throughout the camp. The feeling he got was one of peace and security while at the same time, a sense of adventure. It was a rather curious sensation. Just as he was about to pass the building everyone else was walking into, Lance reached out and tapped his shoulder, bringing him back to reality.

A large man was already standing near the door as the boys walked in, "It was nice of you to join us today Cory and Sean. Are these new students that you have brought with you?"

"Good morning Mr. T," Sean answered. "They are probably not going to be new students, but we were hoping that they could sit in as part of the class this morning to see how things worked here before they leave for their own home this afternoon."

Mr. T nodded in understanding. "I believe our lessons for this morning will fit into that just fine. Feel free to have them sit with whatever group you feel would be most appropriate for them."

Brent noticed that the room was already split into several smaller groups of kids. Each group seemed to be a little older than the next group. Although there were occasionally some exceptions, a kid taller or shorter than the rest of the group here and there, he figured the groups were organized by grade or ability level of some type.

"Hey Greg!" Timmy called out from where he was sitting with the littlest kids. "You can come and sit over here. We saved you a seat!"

Greg blinked his eyes a few times as he seemed momentarily confused. Then he looked up toward one corner of the classroom and saw one of the eagles seated on a small perch looking back at him. Smiling, Greg was set down by Lance, and he carefully walked over to where Timmy had indicated.

Right behind Greg, Cory walked up with Eric, "Hey guys, this is Eric. I know he's not as little as you guys are, but he just learned how to talk yesterday. Do any of you think you might be able to help him out a little this morning?" Before Cory could finish his question, every hand, except Greg's, went up at the table which caused Cory to smile. "Thanks guys, I'm sure Eric will appreciate it."

As Cory walked away, he could already see Ricky racing to get a seat for Eric to sit in.

"Which group should we sit with Cory?" Brent asked as he continued to look around at each of the groups.

"Well." Cory thought about his answer for a few moments. "Although it might be a little challenging to Lance, since it's just for this morning, I was kind of thinking you could sit with Sean and I and the other 13-14 year olds."

Brent and Lance both agreed, and within moments, everyone was seated with a group.

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"I don't think I've ever seen a school setup anything like that before. The way that we were all in our own little support groups, and how there was a main overall lesson being caught, but that each group had a different take and way of addressing the lesson. It was awesome!" Brent bubbled as he walked through the main C.I.C. doors leading into the dining room area.

"And you..." Lance added as he gave Greg an extra squeeze while holding him. "You were incredible as well, I had no idea you were so smart."

Greg beamed with pride. "Thanks, but don't forget about Eric, he helped a lot too."

Brent and Lance both gave Eric a pat on the back and a squeeze. "Thankful." Eric responded.

"Come on guys." Cory nudged the group a head a bit. "If we don't get in there, we might not have much lunch left to eat."

With the threat of the lack of food on top of them, everyone increased their pace a bit to get to the dining room as quickly as possible."

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As the boys entered the dinning room area, they noticed that there seemed to be a much higher level of chaos and commotion than there had been in the morning, even though the total number of kids seemed to be much less. Immediately, they found their way to one of the front tables where Neal, Rick, Teri, and Dan were sitting.

As they reached the table, Cory walked up and whispered something into his mom's ear. Teri nodded. "I'm sorry guys, but if you will excuse me, there is a small issue that I need to deal with."

As Teri got up and left the table, the rest of the boys sat down.

"So?" Neal asked impatiently. "How did you guys enjoy Camp Little Eagle?"

"It was funny!" Eric spoke up, his soft high voice surprising everyone else. "My friends, they helped me, and we learned fun."

"Well, looks like at least one of my new sons enjoyed it," Neal chuckled softly.

"It was really cool Neal, nothing like any school I've been in before," Brent offered.

"Umm," Lance looked around hesitantly at their empty table, and then at several of the other tables where kids were busy eating, "Where's lunch at?"

"See Neal, you are always forgetting the important things in life," Rick joked. "Looks like they are just having sandwiches today, and most of them, along with some drinks and other snacks, are up on the front counters. Just take your plates up and help yourself."

Within moments, nearly every kid at the table was gone. While they were waiting for the kids to come back, Rick gave Neal a warm, loving squeeze.

"What was that for?" Neal asked.

Rick smiled, "Just so you don't forget that I love you, and love everything you are getting us into."

Neal nodded and smiled.

"I hope you still say that in a few days once you have met some of our new brothers and sisters, Rick!" Brent said as he sat back down with a plate filled with two ham sandwiches and a turkey sandwich.

"Now Brent!" Lance fake scolded as he sat down with his own plate of two roast beef sandwiches. "What I have I told you about trying to scare away the adults so quickly?"

Everyone else at the table giggled.

Lance was watching Eric carefully carrying his own tray back toward the table when suddenly he stopped, tilted to the left slightly, then collapsed to the ground. Everyone else noticed as well as the loud clanging of Eric's plate and glass hitting the ground could be heard.

Sean and Cory were both up in an instant heading toward Eric, "Tonio?" Sean called out.

Within seconds, another boy, about 9 years old, was standing over Eric, with a medical tricorder scanning him.

After a few seconds of looking at his readings, the small boy shook his head, "This doesn't make sense Cory, Eric is unconscious, but I can't see any type of injury or issue that would cause this."

Cory nodded and took out his communicator. "Cory to Doc Austin."

A few moments later, Doc Austin's voice responded. "Go ahead Cory."

"Doc, we have a medical emergency in the C.I.C. dinning room. Eric, one of the new guys, has just collapsed and is unconscious. Antonio can not find any problems in his scan." Cory spoke into the communicator.

"Understood. Doc out." With that, the communicator went dead.

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#### Authors Notes:

Woot! Finally managed to get another chapter posted, thanks to all of the support and encouragement of the other CSU authors. Unfortunately, our visit to the clan's Orlando HQ isn't going to take the two chapters I had hoped for, but with everything that needs to be done will take 3, and possibly part of 4, although if the kids will let me, I'm going go try to keep it to 3.

As you have probably noticed, one of the main things that ate a lot of the chapter size was the clan meeting. However, since no other CSU story has ever covered a full clan meeting like this, I felt that it was a fairly important thing to do.

Finally, I would like to apologize for where I left Haden and Evan. This was not something I had originally intended for them to have to suffer through, but as I hope will become clearer as we read chapters 8 and 9, it was necessary, and better than the other alternatives that were available. I'll be happy to discuss this in more detail when we get to that point of the story, but for I hope that you can just trust me

when I say nothing really bad is going to happen to them that otherwise would have, and in the end, because of what is happening to them right now, a lot more good is going to come out of it.

With that being said, I now turn chapter 7 over to some great editors as I jump right into working on chapter 8. I think it took about 3 weeks to write chapter 7 which included taking a week off to help with testing of the new tree house that Timmy has set up for us, so with any luck, by the time you are actually reading this, a very good chunk of 8 will be ready to go.

- Zacky

## Chapter Eight

**12:30pm EST - Wednesday, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004**

**(C.I.C. dining room, Orlando, Florida)**

By the time Doc Austin arrived in the dining room pulling a gurney behind him, most of the dishes and the tray that Eric was carrying had already been moved away by some of the nearby kids. The only thing that was left was a small puddle of milk on the floor.

"What do you have Antonio?" Doc Austin asked as he parked the stretcher near Eric, and started to lower it down.

Antonio was still scanning Eric with his tricorder and trying to make sense of the readings as he answered. "He's unconscious, in a comatose state, I can't find a cause. His blood sugar level is fine, his blood pressure is a bit low, but nowhere near danger level."

Doc took out his own tricorder and started scanning as well. "How exactly did this happen?"

Lance, who was not standing that far away answered. "He was just getting some lunch, and walking back to the table. He kinda stopped for a moment, and then collapsed."

Doc Austin nodded. "Did he complain about any headaches, stomach aches, dizziness, or anything else?"

"No." Both Lance and Brent answered.

Doc returned his tricorder to his belt. "Okay, it should be safe enough to move him. Cory, grab his feet and help me get him on the stretcher, I want to get him over to my office, the biobed there is still calibrated to him from yesterday."

Cory did as he was asked, and helped to get Eric on the stretcher. He and Doc Austin then lifted the stretcher up slightly as Antonio unlocked the trolley wheels into place. Antonio then took Cory's position and started to help Doc Austin wheel Eric out of the dining room.

Lance grabbed Greg, and Brent ran to grab the door for Doc and Antonio, then all 3 boys left to follow them to Doc Austin's office.

Antonio assisted Doc Austin in sliding Eric off the stretcher and onto the biobed, then both went to work on trying to diagnose Eric's problem. At one point, the Doc looked up and noticed that Brent, Lance, and Greg were still in the room. He was about to ask them to wait out in the waiting room, but as he realized that they were going out of their way to remain as quiet and out of the way as possible, so he decided against it.

Brent had no medical training, but he could see a number of the bar graphs and little arrows on the readout displays getting lower, which he figured could not be a good thing. A few moments later, the fact that two different alarms started to go off, and some of the bars that he was watching started to flash, seemed to confirm this.

"Heart rate is fluctuating and getting weaker." Antonio called out.

Doc Austin nodded as he continued to look at the biobed readings. "20cc of Metrazine."

Antonio ran over to a side table to prepare the requested hypospray, and then handed it off to Doc Austin, who promptly injected it into Eric's neck. Almost instantly the alarms stopped, and some of the bars started to go up.

"You did it!" Brent called out, before he was able to catch himself and cover his mouth with his hands.

"It's okay Brent, just try not to talk much." Doc reassured. "And no, he's not out of the woods yet, just a bit more stable so we can start some more in-depth tests."

Brent nodded while lowering his hands and allowing them to wrap around Lance instead.

A few minutes later, the door to the room quickly opened up as Cory walked in. Brent expected Doc to yell at him, or something. But neither Doc Austin nor Antonio even seemed to register the fact that he was there at first.

"How's he doing Doc?" Cory asked closing the door behind him, only this time a bit more quietly than how he entered.

"Stable for now, but we are still trying to find a cause, it's almost as if various parts of his body are just deciding to stop working as they should be working." Doc Austin answered as he moved over to another display panel.

Cory nodded and then looked toward Brent, Lance and Greg to make sure they were doing okay.

"Were you able to find any information on him?" Antonio asked.

"Actually, that's the weird thing." Cory turned his attention back to Antonio and Doc Austin. "We checked every database we have access to, and we could not find any record of Eric anywhere. It's as if he never existed."

Antonio grunted.

"I'll tell ya Doc, it looks like someone went through a whole lot of trouble to delete his existence from every known database, and then to wipe his mind completely clean of every event that ever happened to him up to a few weeks ago." Cory continued.

Something seemed to click inside of Doc Austin, as he stopped what he was doing and thought to himself for a few moments. "Antonio, reconfigure the bed to do an in-depth genetic profile please, include the RNA markers as well."

Antonio blinked at the doctor's change of direction, but instantly went to making the needed configuration changes. "In work."

"Sup Doc?" Cory asked, as he recognized the change of direction as well.

Doc Austin allowed his eyes to roll at Cory for a brief moment before going back to look over some of the readings that the biobed was providing him with. "It's just a hunch, but I might have an answer as to why someone would go through so much trouble."

Everyone remained quiet for several minutes as the intensive scan ran its course, and mass amounts of data started to flood both of the viewing panels that Doc Austin was looking at. A few moments later, Doc started to nod his head up and down, and then cleared both screens. "Antonio, reconfigure for cellular protein scans."

Again, Antonio seemed to be a bit surprised by the doctor's request, but immediately started the reconfigurations as asked.

Cory, Brent, Lance, and Greg all stood there staring at Doc Austin waiting for the explanation.

"Okay." Doc Austin started. "I believe I know why Eric cannot be found in any database, and all his memories up to a few weeks ago have been completely erased."

"Why's that Doc?" Cory managed to ask before any of the other kids were able to.

"Because Eric is only a few weeks old, and never existed prior to a few weeks ago." Doc Austin waited to see if anyone would catch on to what he was saying.

"How is that possible?" Lance asked. "He looks like he is at least 9 or 10."

Doc nodded in agreement. "Your right Lance, physically, he has the appearance of a 10 year old boy. However, without getting too complicated, the DNA which is contained in every cell in our body has something like a timer which can be used to track how old the body is. There are also certain types of cells that can only develop at a certain rate regardless of any other tampering, and everything points to the fact that Eric was born 3 to 4 weeks ago."

Brent and Lance looked at each other completely confused, but Cory seemed to catch on. "A clone?"

Doc Austin nodded.

Cory still seemed somewhat skeptical. "That would certainly explain why he can't be found anywhere, and why his memories only start a few weeks ago, but I thought human cloning has been outlawed."

Doc Austin agreed. "It has, but has something being banned or outlawed ever prevented someone from doing it anyway?"

"Good point." Cory nodded in agreement.

A small beeping sound could be heard coming from Antonio's panel. "I think I found something Doc."

Doc Austin walked over to Antonio and glanced at his panel and nodded. "That's what I was afraid of."

"What's wrong?" Brent's voice was filled with concern.

"It would seem that Eric's body is missing a key enzyme needed to allow his cells to create Type 2 and Type 8 Collagen's. Without those key enzymes, then all the cells in his major organs will gradually start to break down, just as they are doing now." Doc Austin explained as he walked back over to his terminal.

"Can it be fixed?" Cory asked.

The doctor started pulling up reference information on one of his screens. "I'm not sure yet. From what I can tell, the enzyme was periodically given to Eric either as a pill or an injection. Then if he didn't get it after a certain amount of time, he would die."

"Sounds like a good way to cover your trail." Brent sighed.

Cory nodded, "Yeah, makes sense, if you are doing something illegal, and your property gets away or is rescued, the evidence won't last long."

"And unless you were not as smart as Doc, and didn't know what to look for, the death would appear as dying from natural causes." Antonio added.

"I want to find whoever did this to him." Cory nearly growled.

"Me too." Brent agreed.

"Okay," Doc Austin caught both boys' attention. "It looks like we might be lucky. It seems that this particular behavior was intentionally designed to be fixable if needed. At least, I believe it's possible to have the biobed attempt to correct the problem."

"What are the risks, Doc?" Cory asked.

"Synthesizing the enzyme is not an issue. So if we do nothing, Eric will need to a special enzyme pill every day for the rest of his life. If he misses more than 2 or 3 days in a row, then he'll slip into a coma like he did today, and then die. If the biobed is successful at the repair, then his body will start producing the enzyme as it would normally do, if it fails, then we are just back to having to take the enzyme supplements."



"So there is no risk at letting the biobed try to fix him?" Lance asked.

"No, it's just a somewhat long procedure, and will probably take up to an hour to complete. Eric may feel a bit sick for the next day or two as his body gets used to its new configuration."

Cory Nodded. "Okay Doc, let's do it. I don't want this kid to have to take a pill for the rest of his life. I think a day or two of discomfort will be well worth not having to do that."

"I agree." Doc Austin went back to his biobed terminal. "Antonio, I'm going to need your help with the configurations."

Antonio nodded and walked over to doctor's terminal to see what he needed to do.

A few moments later, Cory's communicator went off. "Adam Short to Cory Short."

Cory opened up his communicator and pressed a button. "Cory here, what's up Adam?"

"We just completed a hostile rescue and are over at the camp administration building, but an issue has developed that we could probably use your help with." As if to strengthen Adam's point, in the background a boy could be heard screaming at the top of his lungs. "Get away from me! Everyone stay away from me or I'll do it!"

Cory sighed fearing that he knew what the problem was. "I'll be right over bro."

"Thanks Cory, Adam out." And with that the communicator went dead.

"Sorry guys, I need to run." Cory started to head for the door but stopped and just stood there for a few moments as if trying to hear some distant conversation. "Brent? Would you care to join me? I think you might be able to help out a little."

Brent was clearly surprised. "Me?"

Cory nodded. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

Brent looked at Lance, who gave a nod of support, then turned back toward Cory, and followed him out the door.

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Brent had to walk quickly to keep up with Cory as they made their way toward the main entrance for Camp Little Eagle. "So, umm... what is it that you need me to do here Cory?"

Cory briefly glanced back toward Brent. "I just thought you might want to see how I handled a situation. You don't really need to do anything. But if you feel there is something you can do to help then by all means, do it. You're part of the clan now bro, no one is going to yell at you for being yourself."

"What if I mess up and say or do something wrong?" Brent hardly noticed that they had already walked past the front gate guard station.

"As long as your intent is to help out and do the right thing, then it doesn't matter. If you mess something up, you mess it up. Whatever it is, we can deal with it." Cory replied.

"Okay." Brent nodded, but was still not convinced. A few days ago, he was just normal Brent, now he had been flung head first into the clan, and the head of the clan was basically going to be looking to him to run his own section of the clan. He was still having trouble with making decisions for himself, let alone all the others that might be with him.

Adam met Cory and Brent just outside the Administration building entrance and started to brief them on what was going on. Basically, he and JJ were on a hostile rescue where a kid's mother was shot and killed in front of him. They had calmed him down and were helping him through the admittance process so that he could live at the camp, when somehow he had gotten a hold of a hand gun, and was threatening to take his own life.

"Can't you just stun him with a phaser?" Brent asked.

Adam seemed to really notice Brent standing there for the first time. "That's a good thought. However, he already has the gun to his head and the shock of being stunned could actually cause him to pull the trigger."

Brent nodded.

"Let's see what we can do." Cory said as he opened the door and the three walked in.

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Inside, Brent did not find anything close to what he was expecting. Inside the main Administration lobby, standing against the back wall was a small, frail 9 year old boy with short sandy blond hair, and ragged blood stained clothes. Tears filled his eyes as his right hand was holding a pistol up to his head. Standing in a semi-circle around him were 3 adults and 4 older kids. The only person in the group that Brent recognized was JJ.

"It's going to be okay." One of the boys said semi-calmly. "I know you feel hurt right now, but you need to think about the future."

"It doesn't matter," the small boy shouted back. "There is nothing left here for me."

"Yes, it does matter. Every life is important, you matter just as much as anyone else," a second boy replied.

The small boy only seemed to get more upset. "I'm not going to spend the rest of my life in a foster home somewhere with people that only care about getting money for each kid they have! You might like that, but I don't."

JJ spoke up next with his voice full of compassion. "That's not true Darren. You won't be staying in a foster home, you'll be staying here in Camp Little Eagle, surrounded by people that care about you and want to help you."

"He's right." Cory added. "You're under the protection of both Clan Short and Federation Youth Services. No one is going to hurt you ever again. All of us really do want to help you."

Darren glared at Cory, anger now replacing the hurt in his eyes. "Where was all this help when my mom was killed? Why couldn't you protect her? She wasn't bad, she didn't deserve to die!"

Brent could see this was not going well. No one seemed to have an answer to his questions, and he could see the hurt and anger in his eyes. Brent could tell that for whatever reason, the boy seemed like he was at the end of his rope, and was on the verge of pulling the trigger. Brent couldn't figure out why he was even here, or what Cory expected him to be able to do. He didn't know anything at all about this kid or his situation. Having your mom killed in front of you would definitely be pretty crappy.

"Darren, no one here can answer that." One of the adults finally interjected. "The clan got there as quickly as humanly possible as soon as they got the call, but your mom was killed before we even got the call, there was nothing that could be done."

'What the hell?' Brent thought to himself. This was not what this kid needed to hear right now. Why don't they just rub it in further? Why does there need to be so much hurt in the world?

"You could have helped her! You could have saved her! You have fleet tech, I know you do. You could have used one of those biobed things." Darren cried out.

"She was already dead when we got there." The first boy commented. "Star Fleet does not have anything that can bring someone back to life after they are already dead and had lost so much blood."

"I don't care! You could have tried! You could have!" More tears filled the boy's eyes.

"Darren, please. Just put the gun down and we can talk this out." Adam added.

"No!" Darren shouted back. "You can't understand! No one can. There is nothing here for me anymore."

"That's not true," the second boy replied.

Brent could see that this was going nowhere fast. No one seemed to be able to get through to the small boy. Brent could understand why too. His entire world was shattered. He has no one left anymore, and he doesn't want to go through life feeling empty. In a way, Brent knew how the kid was feeling since that was the same way he felt when Randy was killed. Randy! Brent couldn't believe it, but he knew what he had to do."

Taking a step forward, Brent softly replied. "I can understand you."

Instantly, Brent realized that he might have made a very serious mistake, as all eyes turned toward Brent, and the kid's hand stiffened up as if to pull the trigger. One of the older boys seemed to try to make a motion with his head to tell Brent to step back, but now it was too late.

"No you can't!" Darren shouted back, his voice starting to tremble.

"I can." Brent kept his voice soft. "I never knew my mom because she died when I was 3. My dad died last month, and then my best friend was stabbed to death and ended up dying in my arms. I had no one left. I felt empty, alone and at the time I felt like the only thing I wanted to do was kill myself and be done with it."

For several seconds, Darren said nothing. He only stared deep into Brent's eyes as if looking for something. Finally, after what seemed like forever, he answered. "Why didn't you?"

Brent thought for a moment. "Honestly, I don't know. Maybe I wasn't as strong as you. Maybe it was because I was too afraid inside. But whatever the reason, I'm glad now that I didn't. Because although I felt like the world betrayed me and it hurt a lot for a while, I soon met more friends and now I'm in an even better position than I was." Brent could feel his stomach tightening up. He could only hope that he was doing the right thing.

The boy's arm that was holding the gun started to quiver slightly. "I'm not strong. I'm just a small little shrimp that no one is going to want. No one will want to be friends with me, so it doesn't matter."

"You're wrong. I'll be your friend, and every other kid you see here will be your friend." Brent replied, and continued on before the boy had a chance to challenge him. "Just look in our eyes. See if any of us are lying."

Darren glanced around the room looking into the eyes of each kid and each adult. Everyone he looked at, he saw the same thing. Whether it was because of this or because the small boy just couldn't deal with this any longer, Brent wasn't sure, but the boy lowered his now trembling hand and slowly allowed himself to sink down toward the ground crying. Two of the boys that he didn't know walked over to him, one taking the gun from him and handing it to JJ while the other picked him up, allowing him to cry into his chest.

Soon everyone was around the crying boy offering their comfort and support. The crisis was over and somehow it was Brent that had resolved it.

After a few minutes, Darren was carried out of the administration building and taken to the medical center to be checked out and cleaned up. Adam, JJ, Cory, and Brent headed back to the C.I.C.

On their way back, Cory wrapped his arm around Brent. "You did a good job back there."

"It was nothing." Brent timidly answered. "For a second, I was scared that I was saying the wrong thing."

"It wasn't nothing." Cory corrected him. "No one there, including myself, was able to get through to him. You were able to use your past experience to be able to relate to him, and calm him down enough so we could help him. That's what a real leader does."

Brent allowed himself to smile a little. "Thanks."

"No, Thank you, bro." Cory gave Brent another squeeze as they continued to walk.

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Cory and Brent walked into Doc Austin's office to find Lance standing near the end of the biobed holding Greg, and Eric still lying unconscious.

"How's he doing?" Brent asked.

"He's doing great." Antonio answered from the terminal he was working on. "The biobed was able to successfully isolate and repair the parts of Eric's body that were responsible for creating the missing enzyme. He's going to need to rest for another couple of hours while his body stabilizes itself more."

"There were a bunch of alarms going off at one point, and we weren't sure if Eric was going to make it or not because the bad people that did this to him made it tricky to fix." Greg added.

"Wow." Brent replied. "Thanks guys, I'm glad you were able to help him."

"It's our pleasure." Doc Austin put one of his terminals in stand-by mode. "It was mostly Eric. The kid's a fighter."

"How did things go with you?" Lance asked.

"Okay." Brent answered. "There was a 9 year old that was going to kill himself but we were able to stop him."

"Actually, it was Brent that was finally able to get through to him." Cory added.

Brent smiled as Lance wrapped his arms around him so both he and Greg could hug him.

After the hug was finished, Cory suggested that since Eric would be here for a few more hours, that they head over to C.I.C. and grab something to eat real quick. Then they could either hang out there until the rest of the clan returned from school or they could go back over to camp and finish up the rest of the school day there.

All 3 boys excitedly indicated they wanted to go back over to Camp Little Eagle to finish up the school day there with all of their new friends. Antonio decided to join them since Doc Austin could easily monitor the sleeping Eric on his own. With that everyone left the office, save Doc Austin and Eric.

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### **12:00pm PST (somewhere in the desert...)**

The first thing he felt as consciousness slowly began to return to him was the pain and pounding in his head. Not long after that, he felt the cool breeze blowing against his body which caused him to quickly realize that he was naked and laying on something semi-soft. The only thing Evan couldn't figure out before he opened his eyes was anything in regards to his younger brother.

When he finally did decide to open his eyes, he was mildly concerned when, other than a blur of colors, he couldn't see anything. 'This isn't good', he thought to himself as he closed his eyes again. Sitting there in silence, he tried to piece together what had happened. He remembered running away with his younger brother, Haden. He remembered being hungry and looking for food. He remembered seeing

the smoke and finding the trailer... the trailer... that was it, that was what caused all the rest of his memories to flood back into him.

Evan could now remember everything; finding the old man, accepting his offer for breakfast, feeling weird after breakfast, trying to reach for something, anything and after that, nothing. What had he gotten himself and his younger brother into? He should have known better than to put them in a situation like this and to let his hunger get the best of him. Finally, after spending a few moments hating himself for the poor choices he made, he decided that there would be time to kick himself later. Right now, he needed to focus on how to get them out of the situation that they were in. And to do that, he had to figure out exactly what the situation that they were in was.

Daring to open his eyes again, Evan realized his vision, although still blurry, was not quite as bad as it was when he first woke up. Squinting a few times, his eyes finally began to focus. He was lying on his back, and he could see a wood paneled wall next to him, as well as a white ceiling. The only light coming in the room was light coming in through a window from outside.

Not knowing what to expect he slowly tilted his head to the side. If there was someone else in the room with them, it would probably be best if they didn't know that he was awake. Neither seeing nor hearing anything, Evan risked raising his head a little. He was lying on a mattress which was lying on the floor in the corner of a small room. Other than a single door on one side of the room and a window with security bars on the other, the room was empty.

In the other corner of the room, off the mattress and scrunched in a corner, he could see Haden, who was just as naked as he was. He knew Haden was awake because he could here an occasional sniff and see his entire body shiver from time to time.

"Haden?" He whispered as he quietly crawled closer to his younger brother, "You okay?"

Haden said nothing, and because his back was toward Evan, it was hard for him to get a good read on just how bad off his younger brother was.

Evan went to reach for his younger brother to do what he could to try to comfort him, but he quickly pulled his hand back, when at the lightest touch, Haden's entire body violently jerked away from him. "Oh Haden," he sighed as he could only imagine what his little brother had to be going through right now, and it was all his fault. "Find a way out of here first Evan, worry about blaming yourself later," he silently reminded himself.

As he stood up, he was able to confirm a lot of what he had guessed while he was laying down. Not only was there no sign of their clothes in the room, other than the child sized, urine stained, mattress, the room was empty. Walking toward the door, he slowly tried to turn the handle, only to find that it was locked. It looked like a standard lock you would see for a bedroom, only the handle was reversed and the lock was on the outside of the room, designed to keep people in.

Next, Evan walked over to the window. Not only was the glass misted so that other than allowing light to enter, it was impossible to see anything outside. More than likely, the intent was to prevent anyone from seeing anything inside. From the best that he could tell, going by the shadows, not only were there security bars on the inside of the room, but there were also security bars on the outside of the room. The window was definitely out.

"We're gonna die, aren't we?" Haden whispered as he twisted his neck around to look at his older brother. It wasn't until that moment that he could see both the dried and fresh tears on his face. Haden had obviously been awake a lot longer than Evan had.

"We'll get out of this somehow, Hade, I promise." Evan whispered back, still being careful not to speak too loudly, as he didn't want to draw any attention to them, at least not yet.

The wood paneling on the walls looked fairly cheap, so he started to make his way around the room, trying to push the wall in at different spots, trying to get an idea of just how solid it was. Unfortunately, it felt fairly solid, definitely not your typical trailer walls.

Looking up, he could see a single light fixture on the ceiling. However, he was a good 3 feet too short to reach it, before trying to do anything with it would even start to become an option. Maybe if he could convince Haden to sit on his shoulders, they might be able to do something, but even as he thought of that possibility, he knew there was no chance of that happening.

Looking behind him, Evan could see that his younger brother was still watching him very closely, as he was trying to figure out how they could get out of here. "Everything seems to be secured pretty good. The only thing I can really see so far is the door handle looks like one of those normal bedroom door handles, where you can stick a bobby pin or something through the little hole, to unlock it. But I don't have anything small enough to stick in it."

The way that Haden stared back at him, concerned Evan a bit. Was he about to break down again? Did he just crush the last of his little brother's hope? Was he continuing to make things worse with everything he said? 'This is not working,' he thought to himself. He was doing it again, letting his mind focus on how much he had messed up.

As Evan was thinking all of this, Haden began to slowly make his way back to the mattress and started picking at it.

"Whatcha doing?" Evan looked curiously to his younger brother.

Without looking up, Haden only muttered one word, "Springs," but that was enough. Immediately realizing the idea his younger brother had come up with, Evan joined his brother on the mattress and went to work picking at a weak spot in the material.

It didn't take long for Evan to make a good sized hole in the worn out mattress and to separate one of the small metal springs from the rest. From there he was able to get it straightened out, at least enough to shove it into the door handle. Moments later, he could hear the small 'click' which told him the door was unlocked.

Scared that unlocking the door was almost too easy, Evan slowly turned the handle and then carefully began to open the door. If there was another lock on the door, this is the point he would find out about it.

As it turned out, there were no other locks on the door, and it opened fine, revealing the trailer's hall. The first thing he did was to put a finger over his mouth to let his younger brother, who had made his way to Evan's side as soon as he saw the door opening, know to keep quiet. Carefully sticking his head

out of the room, Evan listened carefully for any sounds. Hearing nothing he slowly made his way down the hall into the living room, with Haden following close behind.

The living room was both quiet and empty, and the door leading outside was closed. On the other side of the room near some chairs, Evan spotted their clothes in a heap on the floor. Kneeling down and motioning for his younger brother to do the same, they made their way across the room to their clothes.

'So far, so good,' Evan thought to himself as both he and Haden began to get dressed, 'So far luck seems to be on our side.' Just as Evan had thought this, his heart leaped as he heard the sound of someone talking outside the window. Carefully peaking out the window, he saw the reason why things were so quiet inside. In the yard out front, the old man appeared to be negotiating some prices with an older lady who had driven up to look at some of the garden gnomes that were being sold.

Ducking back down, Evan quickly went back to the process of getting his clothes on. Now it was a race against the clock, as he knew their time would be very limited. As soon as he finished, he reached into his pocket and smiled as his fingers wrapped around his pocket knife. Seeing that Haden had managed to finish getting dressed before him, he started making his way back to the kitchen. As they crawled along, Evan did his best to try to prioritize what he wanted to do in his head.

As they passed the phone, Evan stopped, and quickly cut the cord to it, he would cut the one to the cordless phone's base station in the kitchen as well. He also grabbed all the quarters and other loose change that was in an ashtray on the table. While at the table, he grinned as he spotted a plastic shopping sack. Grabbing the sack, he made his way to the refrigerator where he started to throw whatever food he thought they might need into it, sticking to only things that were unopened. He grabbed a few cans of soup, and other things from the pantry before the two boys made their way out the back door in the kitchen.

The first thing they saw outside was an old green Ford truck, which he assumed belonged to the man. With his pocket knife, he quickly made his way around the truck letting the air out of each of the tires. To finish things off, he opened the driver's side door and pulled out all the fuses he could get his hands on.

Seeing that Haden was right next to him, Evan made his way for the closest wooded area that he could find. Once they were away, and out of sight, he could worry about finding their way then. But for now, his biggest concern was getting him and his little brother as far away from here as possible.

About 10 minutes later, after they had already reached the edge of the sparse tree line, both boys heard a shotgun go off, followed by a man shouting, "Get back here you brats. There is nowhere for you to run."

"Come on," Evan edged Haden on back toward the foothills.

A few minutes later, two more gun shots were heard, followed by a final shout, "Bastards!"

"I think he found out about the truck," Evan grinned as both he and Haden continued to make their way back toward the hills.

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**3:30pm EST - Orlando, Florida**

Two hours later, Teri went to Doc Austin's office to check in on Eric. Seeing that Eric was awake and that Doc had just finished his final set of tests and gave him a clean bill of health, Teri decided to take Eric back to C.I.C. with her since the rest of the clan should be returning from school very soon.

Teri's timing could not have been better, as she and Eric made it to the main entrance of C.I.C. at almost the exact time that the rest of the clan were making their way in for after school snacks.

Seeing Teri and Eric walking toward them, Brent and Lance waited briefly to give them time to catch up.

"Eric is good to go guys. Doc Austin would like to do a real quick check up on him tonight after dinner and right before breakfast in the morning, but unless anything else unexpected comes up, you guys should be good to go." Teri answered their unasked questions.

Brent gave Eric a quick hug and a sigh of relief as he looked up and thanked Teri.

Seeing the overly enthusiastic look on Greg's face, Teri couldn't stop herself from smiling. "Greg, you look like you enjoyed yourself at school today."

"Uh huh!", Greg started bouncing slightly in Lance's arms as he recapped his exciting afternoon, "I got to be in Timmy's group again and we learning stuff on computers and the teacher gave me some headphones and showed me how I could use it without being able to see the screen and after that we used the blocks to learn about division and then we were able to use what we learned about division to separate a bunch of eggs and then we got to learn about how the eggs can turn into baby chickens and then they let us hold some real baby chickens and it was cool because they were all warm and fluffy!"

Lance, Brent, and several of the older kids that were walking in while listening to Greg's bubbling couldn't help but laugh at the young boy's excited antics. "I guess you liked the school there?" Lance gave Greg a squeeze.

Greg's head started bouncing up and down, "Uh huh! Their school is actually fun! We never did any of that in my old school."

"We might have to stay here just for the school." Brent said as he and Eric sat down at one of the tables leaving room in the middle for Lance to sit down with Greg.

Cory placed a few of the books he was carrying down on the table near Eric, "That's actually an option. All of you are more than willing to stay here or over at the camp itself if that is what you really want." Seeing a nod from Brent, Cory walked over to another table where some afternoon snacks were laid out.

Picking up one of the books that Cory laid down, Eric seemed to study it intensely. "Heavy", he carefully said as he lifted it up and down slightly as if weighing it. "Book?" Eric hesitantly asked while glancing toward Lance and Brent as if to ask if he was right.

"That's right. Good job, Eric!" Jamie sat down on the other side of the table.

"We told you that you could do it!" Jacob added as he sat down next to his twin.

Brent and Lance both had confused expressions as Beau sat down between the twins with a plate full of cookies.

Jamie tried to answer their question, "We gave Eric the knowledge of words and language."

"But his head still needs time to sort out and put all those concepts together." Jacob finished.

Beau hesitantly jumped in as well, "And create relations to all of those things like weight and size and color."

"I think I understand." Brent said as he glanced toward Eric and saw him looking toward the half eaten plate of cookies.

Jacob moved the plate closer to Eric to indicate that he could take one. Picking one up, Eric observed it closely. "Cookie", he proclaimed moments before he took his first bite. Moments later, his face lit up as he nearly shouted his reaction, "Yum!" This of course, caused everyone else at the table to giggle.

"Add taste to that list as well." Brent half giggled as he received agreeing nods from the twins.

"Hey guys, how was your day at school?" Teri Short asked as she was drawn over to the table to see what all the laughter was about.

"I think they enjoyed it." Sean answered as he set a few books down near where Cory's were set.

Teri gave a knowing smile.

"Miss Short?" Brent tried to be careful not to interrupt anything else that was going to be said.

Everyone who had been a part of the clan for awhile noticeably flinched as Teri looked toward Brent. "Remember guys, it's okay to just call me Teri or Aunt Teri if you want."

"Sorry," Brent nodded, "Have you seen Neal? I thought he would be here when we got back."

Teri returned a knowing smile, "Since you guys will probably be leaving tomorrow instead of today, Neal and Richard had to leave to take care of a few things. They should be back by dinner."

Greg suddenly perked up, "So we get to spend the night here with Timmy again?"

"That's right, if you think you can put up with him." Teri joked.

"Uh huh! He's my friend now and I think he's cool!" Greg seriously stated as a matter of fact causing Teri and the rest of the kids at the table to giggle once again.

A few minutes later, as the last of the cookies were being consumed, Adam walked up to the table looking toward the twins, "Hey guys, you have a few minutes to help with some intelligence follow-ups?"

Jamie and Jacob looked at Adam, then briefly at each other before they and Beau answered in unison, "Sure."

"What's going on?" Lance asked no one in-particular as Beau and his twin boyfriends got up and walked to the other room.

"I think some of the guys are going to be doing some investigation work on how Darren's mom got shot." Teri answered as all the other kids already left the table, "I'm sure they wouldn't mind if you wanted to watch what they were doing."

Having nothing better to do Brent, along with Lance carrying Greg, headed into the other room as well. Soon, only Eric was left sitting at the table. Hesitantly, he reached over and picked up the empty plate the cookies were on and started to study it intensely.

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Lance looked around the rather large room as they walked in, "I remember this room. This is where we arrived when you guys saved us yesterday."

"That's right," Cory answered as he looked up from reading some papers he was given by one of the other kids, "We call it Command Information Center, pretty cool, huh?"

"Uh huh." Lance answered as he glanced around at all the computers and work stations that were set up around the room, as well as the very large screen monitors that were hanging from the ceiling along one of the walls.

After a few minutes of watching, Lance noticed that Brent seemed to be a bit fidgety. "Okay?"

Brent nodded, "Yeah, I think I'm going to go for a walk, I need some time to think about stuff."

Lance looked a bit concerned, "Want me to come too?"

Brent shook his head, "No, I just need some alone time I think. Lots of stuff has happened so quickly, and I just need to wrap my head around it."

Lance was about to protest, but decided against it and only nodded his head instead. He was rewarded a few moments later as Brent reached around and gave him a loving kiss on the cheeks and made his way for the door. Wishing that he could somehow help Brent, he continued to look toward the door that Brent walked through for several minutes until he noticed something pulling at Greg.

"Hey Greg, you want to help us sort out papers? William says you can use his eyes to look through." Timmy cheerfully asked as he and Ricky stood in front of Lance.

"Are little kids allowed to help?" Greg asked hesitantly.

Ricky giggled, "Of course, we helps out our brudders all the time!"

Seeing Greg nod, Lance set him down, only to have Timmy and Ricky grab each of his hands and quickly drag him to another part of the room where they had a large stack of papers waiting for them.

Noticing that Eric was not there, Lance glanced back toward the dining room and saw that Eric was walking around, lifting up every object he could find, apparently feeling it for its weight. Sighing inwardly, he went back to watching the clan do their work, and thinking about Brent and everything they had been through the last few days.

Greg, along with Timmy, Ricky, and a few of the other younger clan members sat in a circle, and had made a game out of sorting some color coded papers. Each piece of paper had a color coded bar at the top of it and each kid had 4 piles of papers in front of them. Timmy would start by taking the next paper on the pile, and then they would pass the paper around the circle until it got to the kid whose color it was. The objective was to see how quickly they could get the paper around the circle to its right place without messing up the paper.

The 'game' turned out to be a big success as all of the papers got sorted out in no time.

"So, what is everyone working on anyway?" Greg asked as the sorted piles were starting to be neatly stacked on a nearby table.

Timmy thought about the answer for a few moments, "A bad man hurt Darren's mommy and they are doing a bunch of research stuff to find out everything they can about it."

Greg was surprised, "Wow, that's cool. Can they find good people too?"

"Uh huh!" Timmy smiled, "My daddy and poppa can find anyone in the whole world."

"Can they find my friend?" Greg carefully asked.

Timmy tilted his head a little and thought about Greg's question. "Let's go ask," with that, Timmy grabbed Greg's hand and started leading him to the other side of the room where Cory was standing.

"Daddy? Can you help Greg find his friend?" Timmy looked up toward Cory with as much seriousness as a 6 year old could show.

Seeing the look on Timmy's face, Cory reached down and picked up Greg. "I don't know. What friend are you looking for Greg?"

"Doug," Greg answered. "He was my best friend where I used to live and we shared a room together and I could see through him really good, and... and..." Greg lowered his head and his voice became a whisper, "and he got hurt really bad when he tried to save me from the fire."

Cory gave Greg a loving squeeze, "We'll do our best big guy."

"What's his last name?" Noah asked from one of the computer terminals across from Cory.

Greg started to tear up, "I don't know."

"Douglas Booking," Lance answered as he walked up to see what Greg was talking to Cory about, "They took him to a hospital when our home burnt down Sunday night."

"Do you know which one?" Cory asked, still hugging Greg.

Lance shook his head, "No, we ran away the next day when we found out they were going to split all of us up, so I never found out."

"Found him!" Caleb called out from the computer next to Noah's, "Douglas Gerald Booking, 7 year old male, admitted to Blank Children's Hospital at 11:15pm on Sunday, September 19."

"Can you see his status?" Cory asked

Caleb's fingers started to fly across the keyboard, "Give me a second to bypass their security. They are using a pretty old firewall, so shouldn't be a problem."

Calen and CD entered the room with towels draped around their necks, and started to walk toward the small group that was forming around Cory.

"Got it!" Caleb said with excitement, only to have his smile replaced with a frown as he read the screen, "Cory, you need to look at this."

Cory handed Greg back to Lance before he walked to where Caleb was at and read the screen slowly shaking his head as rage began to grow in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Lance asked, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

Instead of answering, Cory glanced around the room briefly before taking out his communicator, "Cory to JJ."

A few moments later, the communicator crackled with JJ's voice, "Yeah Cor?"

"JJ, I need you to put together a team so that we can take a trip to Blank Children's Hospital in Iowa to 'visit' Greg's best friend."

There was a moment of silence before JJ's voice responded, "So I should plan on us bringing home one more than we leave with?"

"Unless they have a damn good reason to explain why almost nothing has been done since he was admitted 4 days ago to treat the massive amount of burns he has, probably."

A few sighs and gasps could be heard around the room as everyone suddenly realized what had Cory upset.

"Understood, give me about 15 minutes to finish up what I'm working on, and I'll be there."

Cory nodded, "Thanks bro. Cory out."

"So Greg, you interested in going to visit your best friend?" Cory asked as he walked back to Lance to place his hand on Greg's shoulder.

"Yes!" Greg nearly bounced out of Lance's arms.

Cory smiled, "Okay, let's get a team together. I think mom should probably come on this one and Jamie and Jacob, if one of you guys could tag along, and has anyone seen Brent?"

"We saw him at the pool before we came here," CD answered. "He looked like he was sad about something."

Lance looked toward Cory, "If you tell me where the pool is at, I can go get him."

Cory glanced toward Sean as the two seemed to wordlessly talk to each other, "That's okay. I think I need to have a quick chat with Brent anyway."

Lance nodded.

"Everyone that's going be ready to go when I get back." Cory called out as he grabbed another communicator from the table, and headed out the door.

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After leaving C.I.C., Brent spent some time wandering around lost in thought. The size of the clan's compound continued to amaze him, but then, most of what he knew about the clan amazed him. It didn't take long for Brent to find his way to the large Olympic sized indoor swimming pool.

Brent sat at the edge of the pool just dangling his feet in the water, and thinking. Things had been so hectic the last few days that he never really had a chance to stop and catch his breath. He was really starting to wonder if running away was the right choice. He found an uncle that he didn't know he had, which was cool. But then, he was being chased by someone with a phaser and before he knew it was being thrown head first into the center of Clan Short.

The indoor pool itself was not what impressed Brent. What he thought was really cool was how the entire floor above the pool was filled with apartments, and how at any time during the year, day or night, you could always run down stairs and take a quick swim. As if to prove his point, Brent saw a few of the kids that lived upstairs run downstairs and go swimming for a bit. They even invited Brent to join them, but he really was not that interested in swimming and the kids didn't stay in the pool long, so soon things became quiet again so he could continue his thinking.

Thinking that he heard a sound behind him, Brent turned around but found no-one. What he did see, however, was a cookie sitting on one of the tables behind him. Thinking that it was odd that someone would leave a cookie lying around, he got up to investigate. An oatmeal raisin cookie was lying on a napkin with 'for Brent' scribbled in the corner of it.

"Add thoughtful to the list," Brent mumbled to himself as he took the cookie and went back to where he was sitting on the side of the pool to eat it. One of the kids that asked him about going swimming must have left it for him, thinking that it might cheer him up or something. Brent realized that just sit-

ting on the edge of the pool must have made him look like he was sad about something, when really he just needed some time to think. One thing was for sure, that cookie was really yummy. In fact, he was starting to wish that whoever left it, would have left 2.

A few minutes later, Brent heard another sound behind him. This time he decided not to turn around right away, expecting that it might be the cookie fairy again. It didn't take long for someone else to sit down next to him.

"Cory!" Looking at who was sitting next to him, Brent was somewhat surprised, "I guess you're not the cookie fairy."

Cory got a confused look on his face, "Cookie fairy?"

Brent was about to explain about the mysterious cookie that someone had left for him but as he thought about it, it just seemed like something silly. Surely, Cory had much better things to worry about. So instead, Brent simply sighed shaking his head. "Never mind."

Although still curious about what Brent was talking about, Cory decided to let it go for now. "Actually, I just wanted to check to see if everything was okay. A few of the guys had mentioned you were just sitting here next to the pool."

Brent nodded, "I guess I just needed somewhere quiet to think for a bit. So much has happened over the last few days, I am still trying to get my head wrapped around it."

Cory took his sneakers off and let his feet dangle in the pool as well, "Yeah, I guess you're kind of right. Things can get really crazy around here sometimes. I think the problem is a bunch of us have gotten used to the insanity, so it's easy to forget that the new guys aren't as use to it."

Brent smiled as he nodded his head in agreement.

As Cory and Brent sat there enjoying each other's company a noise behind them made them turn. There, where the first cookie had been, two more were lying...

...And the only hint to their appearance was a silvery laugh, the rustle of silken wings and a sense that all was right with the world for at least that one moment...

"I think I see what you mean about a cookie fairy." Cory put the last bite of the oatmeal raisin cookie in his mouth.

"Does stuff like that happen around here often?" Brent asked as he finished his cookie as well.

Cory shrugged, "Around here almost anything is possible."

Brent smiled. He wasn't sure why, but he was feeling a bit better, "What if I can't do it?"

"Do what?" Cory turned toward Brent, giving him his full attention.

Brent thought for a moment, "What if I can't be the leader you are expecting me to be? I don't know if I can go out and rescue kids like you do, and build large homes like you have."

Cory couldn't stop himself from smiling, "Is that what you think I am looking for; someone that can go out and find more kids?"

Brent shrugged, "That seems to be what you do a lot."

Cory nodded, "I guess I can see how it might look that way. But very few of the guys you see around here are here because we went out actively looking for them. Maybe it's luck, or coincidence, or that older brother of mine that calls himself a Saint, but for whatever reason, things just seem to happen and work out. Kind of like when we got Jamie and Jacob. We were just going to eat dinner, and we ran into them at the restaurant."

Brent smiled slightly when Cory made his joke about Saint Mikey.

Cory continued, "As far as building stuff. There is very little around here that we actually built. A lot of it was built by Starfleet for us. I hear Neal has a pretty sweet house that you guys will be able to live in, but if it ever gets to the point that you need an addition, or something else built, just let me know and I'll do my best to make it happen for you."

"To be honest Brent, if you had come here with the idea that you would go and try to rescue every kid you found, I would be really hesitant in putting you in charge of the Nevada group. Do you want to know the real reason I think you would make a good leader?" Cory asked his question while waiting a few moments for what he said to sink in.

Brent nodded.

"A couple of reasons actually," Cory began to answer, "First, because you work well under pressure. That can be important under tight situations. Second, because each of your guys looks up toward you and respects you. You can't have a leader no one is willing to follow; most importantly, because you care about all of your guys and because you are always willing to be there for them. Too many people think that because they are a leader, everyone should serve them, when most of the time it's the opposite, the leader is there for his guys."

Brent was shocked and not really sure how to respond. "How can you say all that about me? We haven't really been here that long; at least not long enough for you to be able to tell all of that."

Cory grinned as he could tell he was starting to get to Brent, "Actually, you have. Every time something has happened to Greg or Eric, you were right there with them. Last night, you were the one who was thinking ahead and came up with an idea so Lance didn't have to feel embarrassed about his sleepwalking. When you made the choice to run away so that you, Lance and Greg wouldn't be split up, they were the ones that followed you. When you chose to go with Neal, they followed you. When you started getting shot at, you were the one that led everyone else to a safe place to hide before you could be rescued."

Brent was now even more shocked, "How can you know all that?"



Cory tapped the side of his head with his finger. "Did I happen to mention that we have some really good telepaths in the clan?"

"Oh yeah," Brent sighed while taking a few moments to digest everything that was said, "I think I understand what you're saying. I just never really looked at myself like that."

Cory wrapped his arm around Brent, "Maybe you should."

Brent nodded, "I guess the main thing is that I'm scared I might mess up and you will be mad at me."

Cory tightened his arm around Brent slightly, "If you mess up, you mess up; you learn from it and move on. Everyone makes a mistake from time to time. I'd never be mad at anyone for making a mistake. Besides, if you're ever not sure of anything, you can always get in contact with either me or one of the other guys pretty easily."

"With the communications terminal?" Brent asked.

"Nope, with this..." Smiling, Cory let go of Brent and reached into his pocket and pulled out a Starfleet communicator.

Taking the offered communicator, Brent examined it closely, "Seriously?"

Cory nodded, "How else are we going to be able to stay in constant contact with each other? You didn't think you would have to sit in front of the communications terminal all the time, did you?"

Brent finally allowed himself to smile, "No, I guess not. But I don't know how to use it."

"Oh, that's not a problem. I'll show you how when we go to help Greg rescue his friend Doug from the hospital in a few minutes." Cory stood up, and after shaking his feet off, started to put his sneakers back on.

It took a few seconds for what Cory had just said to fully register, "Huh? Doug... hospital.... rescue?"

"See, I told ya that you worked well under pressure! Now come on, David should have everyone else ready to go by now." Cory grinned as he waved toward Brent, and headed out the door.

"Wait!" Brent yelled as he quickly stood up and threw on his sneakers, not bothering to dry his feet off, so he could try to catch up with Cory.

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As Brent and Cory walked into the main C.I.C. area, Teri had just finished getting an update on how the investigation work for Darren was going.

"Hi mom," Cory called out getting her attention, "Okay, everyone going on the field trip to Iowa, gather around."

Lance walked over carrying Greg and gave Brent a kiss on his cheek. "What was that for?" Brent asked curiously.

Lance smiled, "No reason, just felt like giving you a kiss."

Just as Teri and Jacob were walking over to the group, Gabe entered the room walking toward Cory as well. "Hey Cory, JJ is going to be... umm... tied up a bit longer than he was expecting with Adam, so he asked me to go as security instead."

Cory nodded, "Is there a problem that I should know about?"

"Nah, things are going a bit... umm... slower than planned over at camp, nothing to worry about." Gabe gave Cory a look that told him he would tell him more later.

Cory shrugged, "Fine with me. I don't really think there is going to be a problem, but it's best to have at least one person with security training with us just in case."

"Thanks," Brent finally answered Lance and brought Lance and Greg into a quick hug, "Both of you are awesome. Now, let's go find Doug."

"Brent, would you like to do the honors?" Cory asked, causing Brent to break his 3-way hug.

"Huh?" Brent wasn't sure what honors Cory was referring to.

Cory grinned, "Well, now that you have your communicator, there is no reason you shouldn't start using it. So how about contacting Terra Main and getting us transported to Blank Children's Hospital?"

"Umm," Brent stuttered, "I'm not sure what to do."

"Do you remember what I did when I brought you guys here the other day?" Cory asked.

Brent nodded.

"Just do the same thing. If you miss anything, I'll be right here to help out." Cory finished.

"Okay. Umm... Lance, could you set Greg down next to you, since I don't think we can be touching in a transport." Brent looked toward Cory.

Cory nodded, "It's safer and easier if no one is touching. But in an emergency situation, it's not a problem, just makes the transport a bit more complicated on the tech side."

Lance set Greg down so he was standing next to him, but not touching. "I'll be right here next to you," Lance whispered which got a nod from Greg.

Seeing that everyone else was ready and in position, Brent took out the communicator, and fumbled with it for a few seconds, trying to figure out how to flip it open. After it was clear that he was not having much success, Gabe, being closest to him, leaned over and showed him the right place to push to get it to flip up.

"Thanks," Brent blushed slightly, and then cleared his throat as he pressed the active button, "Brent Knocks of Clan Short to Terra Main."

A few moments later, a voice answered, "This is Terra Main, how may we be of service Mr. Knocks?"

Using as professional of a voice as possible, Brent answered, "Terra Main, we are requesting 7 to be transported from my location to the main entrance of the Blank Children's Hospital in Iowa." Brent held his breath hoping that he had said that right.

A few seconds later, the voice answered, "Stand by Clan Short."

'Stand By?' Brent thought to himself. He couldn't remember Cory being told to stand by. What if he said something wrong? What if they figured out he was just a kid and got mad at him? Nah, that didn't make sense, because Cory was a kid as well.

Another few seconds went by until the communicator came back to life with a new voice, causing Brent to jump slightly, "Clan Short, This is Terra Main transport control. Confirming request to transport 7 from your location to the Blank Children's Hospital in Des Moines, Iowa. You are second in line."

"Confirmed Terra Main," Brent answered and thought for a brief second before adding, "and thank you."

Cory, Gabe, and Jacob smiled toward Brent.

About 15 seconds later, the voice from the communicator returned, "Clan short, you are now first in line. Ready to transport on your signal."

"Energize!" Brent's voice was filled with relief and excitement. He had done it!

In less than 2 seconds, Brent found himself surrounded by shimmering light. A few seconds after that, the light went away, and he found himself about 30 meters away from the main hospital entrance. As Lance reached down to pick Greg back up, Cory walked over and gave Brent a hug. "Great job Brent, you did that perfectly."

Closing his communicator and returning it to his pocket, Brent seemed a bit confused, "Why did they transfer me? That didn't happen when you took us to Orlando."

Cory smiled, "When you sent your first message, you just asked for Terra Main, so you got someone from their main communication center. There is nothing wrong with what you did, but by putting the transport request in as part of your first communication, your request can be immediately forwarded to transporter control, bypassing the initial communication officer."

Brent smiled, "Okay, I think I understand now. That was actually pretty easy."

"Told ya it would be," Cory grinned, "Okay guys; let's get Doug before Greg bounces out of Lance's arms."

Teri lead the way as the group entered the hospital lobby. Lance was somewhat surprised at the contemporary look and feel of the inside. It did not look at all like what you would normally expect inside a hospital. There were lots of bright colors and bold patterns used, while at the same time not looking too 'child-like'.

Teri stopped and stood at the desk until she saw that she had the nurse's attention, "We are here to see Douglas Booking."

The front desk nurse looked somewhat surprised at the large number of kids in Teri's group, "These are all family?"

Teri smiled as she pulled out her Federation I.D. "Actually, Brent, Lance, and Greg are family. Ensign Short and Ensign Michaels are Starfleet officers escorting me, and Jacob is with me as Federation Youth Services liaison."

The nurse appeared as if she was about to argue with Teri for a moment, before she noticed that Cory and Gabe had their Starfleet I.D.'s out along with Vulcan I.D.'s, and that Jacob was showing a Vulcan I.D. as well. Deciding that it would be best to not argue, she started writing up the visitor passes.

"Man, your mom doesn't mess around, does she?" Lance asked a few minutes later as the group was walking toward the elevators.

Cory allowed himself to giggle a little. "Let's just say, we have a bit of experience dealing with hospitals."

"Where to?" Gabe asked once they were all in the elevator.

"Third floor, room 309," Teri answered.

Once the elevator doors opened, the group piled out and made their way down the hall, around the corner, and past the nurses' station. Only a single, middle aged, blond haired nurse was sitting at the station as they past. Cory and Gabe were partially expecting her to try to say something as their large group passed. As such, they were pleasantly surprised when the lady simply nodded and smiled.

The pleasant feelings ended as soon as they made it to room 309 and saw the state that the small 7 year old boy laying in the bed was in.

"What's wrong?" Greg asked sensing the silence and uneasy tension, "Did we find him? Did we find Doug?"

Before anything could be said in response, Teri turned and left the room.

"We found him," Lance whispered to Greg as he hugged him tighter. What he didn't tell him was the state that they had found him in and the fact that, even though he had been here for several days, it didn't look like much of anything had been done. Sure, he had clean bandages over most of his body, but it

was also clear that not much had been done under those bandages, especially with the pained expression on the boys face.

Swallowing hard in knowing that the boy was conscious, Cory took a few steps toward the bed and did his best to hide his disgust from his voice. "Doug?" he asked softly, "Doug Booking?"

"Hu?" The boy moaned.

"Excuse me," a rather loud woman's voice called out from behind them, "You lot will need to leave, this patient is not allowed to have visitors."

The boys turned around to see a tall, Asian looking, woman making her way into the room.

Before the woman had a chance to say anything else, Cory already had his Starfleet ID out, "Actually ma'am, as of now Doug Booking is no longer a patient of this hospital and is under the protection of Clan Short and Federation Youth Services on the grounds of gross neglect."

"I don't really care who you are," The lady shot back, "This patient is not allowed to have visitors and you will all leave now before I call security and have you escorted out."

Cory grinned, "That sounds like a great idea. Go ahead and call them, maybe they will be able to help you understand what 'no longer under your care' means."

"Listen, you little brats..." The lady's voice started to fill with anger before she was cut off with by another voice.

"Melinda!" The voice called out as everyone looked toward the door to see the blond haired nurse standing next to Teri, "I think you were saying you were about to go on break?"

The Asian nurse, Melinda, glared at the blond nurse, "We can't just let these kids come in here and start pushing us around."

"This is a bit larger than us," the other nurse replied, "Besides, you already know how little we have been able to do to help the kid with all the insurance restrictions. These people will be able to give him the help he really needs."

Melinda looked at the kids and then back toward the other nurse, until she finally huffed and made her way past the kids, and the other two women, who had already made their way into the room, and then out the door.

"You will have to excuse Melinda," The blond haired nurse said as she walked over to check on Doug, "She's been under a lot of pressure lately. We all have actually."

"That's no reason to be rude," Gabe shot back.

The nurse nodded as she began to disconnect the wires that were hooked up to Doug, "Your right, it's not. We've all read the memos and have heard about some of the things you guys have been doing. I can't really give you guys a valid excuse for her actions."

"That's okay," Cory paused for a moment before catching a glance at the nurses name tag, "Mrs. Campbell, we all have our good days and our bad days."

"Thanks," The nurse smiled toward Cory as she placed some of the wires on the table next to the bed, "But please, call me Gina."

Cory grinned and nodded, "You got it, Gina."

"Excuse me," Brent interrupted getting the attention of everyone else, "Earlier you mentioned something about insurance restrictions, what did you mean by that?"

Nurse Gina started on the last set of wires as she explained, "In short, Doug's insurance had him classified incorrectly, as a result of that, given his injuries, he was bracketed as a low survival probability and as such, the type of treatments that the insurance companies are willing to pay for is very limited. He's clearly a healthy young boy, or at least was before the accident, and we have been going through the process of getting his classification fixed, but in the mean time, any actions we would have taken above and beyond those absolutely necessary to stabilize him would have made anyone involved, including the hospital, financially liable."

Even though she had finished what she was doing, Gina stayed at the side of the bed, looking down at Doug, "The whole process takes about a week, in a day or two, the approvals would have gone through and we would have been able to start to give this little guy the treatments he needed to really start healing. In the mean time... well... it's hard for us."

"It's a struggle for her, and the other nurses," Jacob commented softly, "whenever this type of situation comes up, to keep their professional demeanor, while at the same time dealing with the hurt and grief for the kids that are stuck in limbo and the hatred toward the amount of red tape they have to go through."

Cory nodded in agreement. Although he appreciated Jacob's insight, and caught on to both what he was saying and not saying, he didn't need a telepath to know what Gina was going through. With that in mind, he reached in his pocket and handed the nurse a card.

"What's this?" Nurse Gina asked looking at the card Cory handed her.

"It's my business card," Cory replied with a serious expression on his face, "That has all the information you need to get a hold of us. If you guys ever have any situations like that happen in the future where the needed treatments for any kid are being refused or delayed because of bureaucratic B.S., then I want you to call us. Please excuse my language, but it's this kind of crap that we won't stand for."

After casting a doubtful look toward the young teen standing in front of her, Gina glanced up toward Teri.

Teri, for her part, sent a reassuring smile toward the nurse, "What he's telling you is the truth. You mentioned reading memos about Clan Short. Well, I can assure you that you were only getting a part of what these guys are capable of. These kids don't know the meaning of 'no' and don't know what limits are. I can't count the number of times I've seen them accomplish in hours what it would take adults like us weeks or months to pull off. They also have the power and authority not only from Starfleet, but also

from Vulcan to cut through any type of red tape that may exist, when the safety and well being of a child is at stake."

Nurse Gina nodded and looked back toward Cory, "I'm sorry for doubting you. Even after having read about you guys, I'm still in a bit of a shock to think that you guys would show up here and that you would be offering to help us out like this, even when things didn't really get off to a good start."

Cory grinned, "Actually, this was pretty mild compared to some of the other fun we have had at other hospitals. And to be honest, because of our bad past experiences, we were all prepared for another major fight here. In fact, one of the reasons I don't have any problems helping you guys out in any way that we can, is that you have reminded me that there still are a lot of good people in the medical profession. And, not every bad situation has to mean a bad nurse or doctor is behind it."

"Your very wise and perceptive for someone so young," Gina nodded, "I can see why your Clan is doing so well."

Cory blushed slightly.

Not intending to have embarrassed the teen, Gina quickly moved on, "Anyway, Doug is all yours. Actually, he's a bit over-due for his next dose of pain medication, which I can give him real quick before you leave, if you would like."

Cory shook his head, "Thanks, but that won't be necessary. I'm not sure how familiar you are with Starfleet biobeds, but we will transport directly from here to the main Federation Youth Services hospital facilities in Orlando, Florida where we will be using one to help heal him."

The nurse sighed and nodded. "I'm well aware of their capabilities. I've read a lot about them, but as far as I knew, they were still not available to civilian facilities."

Cory was about to answer, before he was cut off by the nurse, "But, like Mrs. Short had said, you guys are good at cutting through red tape, so it's not really a surprise you have them. In that case, I will rest much easier tonight knowing that he will be in very good hands."

After a final smile and handshake with Cory, Gina made her way out of the room. Before walking through the door however, she turned toward Teri, "Oh, I'll make sure that Doug is listed as being transferred to the FYS medical facilities and will let the insurance companies know where they can shove their delays."

"She catches on fast," Gabe commented as everyone else grinned and nodded.

"Can I touch him yet?" Greg asked from Lance's arms.

Lance was clearly torn between what to do. He knew how much Greg had been restraining himself and how impatient he was to feel his best friend, but he also knew how bad Doug was hurt and how important it was to get him back to Orlando. Finally, his internal debate was resolved after getting a nod from Cory.

"Just for a moment," Lance answered as he moved himself and Greg to the side of Doug's bed, "But he's still hurt pretty bad and we need to get him back to Camp Little Eagle's hospital so they can help him." After he said this, he bent himself down enough so that he could place Greg's hand on Doug's unburned hand.

"Doug?" Greg said excitedly as he held onto his friend's arm.

At the same time that Jacob felt a small burst of undirected mental energy come from both Greg and Doug, Doug opened his eyes completely and tried his best to turn his head toward Greg. "Greg? Is that really you?" the slightly older boy asked as he gripped Greg's hand.

"Uh huh, it is," Greg answered as he bounced slightly in Lance's arms, "I have so much to tell you. I missed you so much."

Doug smiled and looked like he was about to say something before his head tilted and his eyes rolled back before closing, while at the same time his arm went limp.

"Greg, you need to stop," Jacob nervously called out, "He can't handle that much pulling right now."

Lance quickly separated Greg from Doug and took a few steps back, while Cory looked toward Jacob, waiting for him to explain more.

"Cory, we need to get Doug to a biobed. Now!" Was the only thing Jacob said.

That was enough, however, to put Cory in action as he had his communicator out and opened in what looked like a single move, "Cory Short of Clan Short to Terra Main, Requesting emergency medical transport for a party of 8 from my location to the Federation Youth Services Hospital in Orlando, Florida."

"What happened?" Greg's voice was full of fear and concern as Lance held on to him tight.

Cory's communicator crackled to life, as the calm voice of a young man responded, "Emergency medical transport to FYS Orlando for 8 from your location acknowledged, Clan Short. You have been moved to the front of the queue, and are next in line. Stand by."

Seeing that Cory was busy, Lance looked over to Gabe, "Do I need to put Greg down before we..."

Before Lance had a chance to finish his question, he could already feel the light tingling sensation and see the telltale shimmering sparkle effect associated with transports that he had been getting more and more familiar with over the last several days.

Within seconds, room 309 was completely empty.

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Having been given a heads up a few seconds earlier from Terra Main, Dr. Anderson had just enough time to grab a stretcher, along with his two assistants, and make it to the transport receiving area. Moments after he arrived, blueish-white sparkles, which signified an inbound transport, became visible.



By the time the transport was complete; Dr. Anderson had his tricorder out and was moving toward the only boy lying on the ground. "Status?" he asked calmly as he began to scan his patient.

Cory was the first to speak and give his report, apparently having had some experience at this in the past, "Doug Booking, age 7, was involved in a structure fire Sunday night, the hospital that he is being transferred from did only the absolute minimum to keep him stable. He appeared stable when we first saw him, and their nurse was preparing him for transport, but then something happened which caused him to pass out. Jacob might be able to provide more insight there."

Dr. Anderson nodded and took a step back to let his assistants carefully transfer Doug onto the stretcher.

"I'm not sure how much I can add," the small telepath stated, "Greg and Doug are best friends, and have been for a while. This is the first time Greg was around Doug since the fire. When they touched, I felt some type of energy emanate from them. After that I got the impression that Greg was trying to mentally pull on Doug, and that's when we saw him pass out, and I asked Greg to stop."

"Take him to Critical Care 5," The doctor informed his assistants who had just finished getting Doug in place. As soon as they started to leave, he turned back to Cory, "Well, you weren't kidding about doing the absolute minimum to keep the kid stable. He's literally right on the edge. I'm not sure what Jamie, or is it Jacob?"

Jacob grinned, "It's Jacob."

Dr. Anderson nodded, "I'm not sure what Jacob was explaining. And, to be honest, I don't really understand the whole telepath thing that well. But, I can tell you that almost any type of additional strain mentally, physically, or otherwise would probably have been enough to push him over the edge."

"Can you help him?" Greg asked from Lance's arms.

"Greg?" the man asked questionably.

Lance and a few others nodded. At the same time, Teri's communicator went off, causing her to quickly step to the side to answer it.

"I'm pretty sure we can, Greg," Anderson answered, "But there is something else I need you to do in the mean time."

"What?" Greg asked curiously.

"I need you to not blame yourself, okay? They same thing would probably have happened just from the stress of the transport."

Greg nodded and hugged Lance tighter.

Cory sent a glance toward the direction that Doug was taken, wordlessly asking if they would be allowed to be in the room with them.

Dr Anderson shook his head, "We're going to need to remove most of his bandaging to let the biobed begin the process of healing him. I don't really think that's something you guys are going to want to see.

Greg deflated.

"How long will that take?" Lance asked as he did his best to comfort Greg.

"A lot of that depends on Doug," the doctor answered, "Give me a few hours and check in with me later this evening. I should be able to give you a much better idea then."

"Thanks, Doc," Cory nodded.

Anderson returned the nod, "Now, if you guys will excuse me, I'll go get Doug started."

After Doctor Anderson made his way down the hall, Teri walked back up to the group, "That was one of your rug rats checking up on us. They started dinner a few minutes ago, and Timmy is apparently guarding the meatloaf, not letting anyone get seconds until you get there."

"I raised him well," Cory joked as everyone other than Greg giggled. With that, the group made their way out of the medical center, out of the camp, and across the street to the C.I.C. center where Helen's homemade meatloaf awaited them.

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As Cory and the others entered the dining room area, the scene that they walked into was almost humorous. Apparently, Ricky and several of the younger tribe members decided that Timmy needed help in his efforts to guard his dad's meatloaf from those that were trying to steal it. As such, the younger kids were organized in a half circle around the main serving area, while several of the older kids were making half-hearted attempts to sneak past them. Even the eagles were getting involved, squawking and flapping their wings in an effort to help 'their' kids.

"About time you guys got here," JJ said as he met the group at the door and stole a quick kiss from his boyfriend, "I wasn't sure how much longer we could go without an all out war breaking out."

Cory grinned, "You know you were enjoying it."

"Daddy!" Timmy called out across the room, having spotted Cory, "You need to come get your dinner quick, we've been protecting it for you."

Seeing Helen and a few of the other kitchen helpers standing and smiling at the kitchen door, Cory made his way across the dining room, and lifting Timmy into his arms. "Thanks Fireball," he said as he gave his son a quick hug, and then moved him back so Timmy could see his face and know that he wasn't mad at him with what he said next, "But you know, Helen always has enough food so we not only get to eat as much as we want for dinner, but can usually have some for lunch the next day."

Timmy looked toward the 1/4 pan of meatloaf that was left out of the 4 pans lying on the serving table, and then looked back to Cory. "But Dad, there is only a little left. That's not enough."

"I was about to bring out a few more pans," Helen called out from the kitchen doorway, "But I didn't want to get caught in the cross fire."

Timmy looked at Helen and then back to Cory and scrunched his face, "Oh. Sorry Daddy."

"It's okay, I'm not mad at you," Cory smiled and made sure his son knew he was telling the truth, "In fact, I'm honored that you and the rest of the tribe would stick up for me like that."

Seeing Timmy smile back in reply, Cory let him down. "Okay guys, everyone back up and let Helen bring out meatloaf for round 2, and then everyone can dig in."

Cheering was heard throughout the dining room as a very large path was opened up for Helen to wheel the cart with the meatloaf through.

After being let down, and taking a few seconds to whisper something into Ricky's ear, Timmy ran over to where Lance was holding Greg. "Hey Greg, you wanna come eat with us? We saved you a spot."

Greg shook his head in Lance's chest, not bothering to look up which caused Timmy's expression to change to one of concern.

Seeing this, Lance did his best to try to calm Timmy down, "We just rescued Greg's best friend Doug. But he's hurt pretty bad and is over at the Camp Little Eagle Hospital. Greg's a bit worried about him."

Timmy looked strangely at Lance for a few moments, and then smiled, "Oh, okay. Duke says Doug will be fine and you can go visit him after we're done with soccer. Oh, and I need to go get seconds before they're gone. Just in case Helen didn't make enough."

As Timmy ran off, Lance blinked, "I'm not sure if I'm ever going to be able to get use to this."

"Don't worry," Brent answered, "I'm sure this is only the beginning."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Lance replied.

"You guys have no idea," Beau sniggered as he and the twins walked by with full plates of their own.

"Hey Brent. Hey Lance," Eric called from where he and Kyle were sitting.

Glad to see Eric up and apparently okay, Brent quickly made his way over to the table, with Lance and Greg close behind. "Hey Eric," Brent smiled before looking with concern toward Kyle, "Is anything wrong Kyle?"

Kyle grinned as he got up from the table, "Nah, I was just keeping Eric company while we were waiting for you guys to get back. We had a few things to talk about, and I helped arrange things in his head a bit better."

"Wow, Thanks Kyle," Lance replied as he stood next to Brent.

Kyle smiled, and then made his way to another table.

Thinking nothing more of it, Lance sat Greg down next to Eric, "Sit here next to Eric, I'm going to go get us some food, okay?"

Greg nodded.

A few moments later, Eric looked down at Greg, as he tried to think of something to say. He wasn't sure what he wanted to say; only that he felt that he should say something. "I'm glad you found Doug."

"Thanks," Greg answered.

Moments later, Greg heard Kyle's voice in his head, *'Do you trust me?'*

*'Yes,'* Greg thought back.

*'Good. I did some checking in your head, and in Doug's. First, you need to know that Doug was really weak when you guys found him. Not even the doctors and nurses who were watching him had any way to know how bad off he was in his head and how much that was affecting him physically.'* Kyle sent.

*'Will he be okay?'* Greg thought back, starting to get concerned.

*'Now that you guys found him and he knows he hasn't lost you, he will be. I wanted you to know that, so you would not feel bad about yourself when I tell you the next part. When your minds touched, it was too much for him. Not because you did something wrong, but because of how weak he already was.'* Kyle continued.

*'Why did my mind do that? Is it the same reason I gave some of the telepaths headaches yesterday?'* Greg's thoughts became more concerned.

*'Something similar, but still different. I don't know for sure exactly what it means yet, but I can tell you that very soon, I think your head is going to learn some cool tricks that you will like.'* Kyle carefully answered.

*'Will I be a telepath like you guys?'* Greg asked.

*'No, your mind isn't organizing itself like the other telepaths in the clan, so I don't think it's that. You'll know it when it happens and if you want to tell others about it, you can, or if you want to keep it to yourself you can. It's your choice. The only thing you need to do is have faith in yourself, okay?'* Kyle replied.

*'Okay, I'll try'* Greg answered just as Brent and Lance were sitting down with plates of food.

*'Thanks. I know you will.'* Kyle said as his voice slowly faded away from Greg's head.

With the majority of the excitement apparently having occurred before they got there, the remainder of dinner was relatively uneventful. Everyone seemed to be lost in their own thoughts.

A few minutes after they started eating, Teri walked into the dining room with Neal at her side. As soon as he saw them, Neal made his way over to where Brent, Lance and the others were sitting. When Lance asked about Rick, Neal informed them that Rick decided to stay back at their house tonight so he could work on getting their rooms ready for when they arrived at their new home tomorrow.

A few minutes after this, Cory stood up and made a few announcements, as he seemed to normally do at meals. Among the more important things that he said, he stated that since everyone seemed to have so much extra energy, that they would be organizing some soccer games in the large field starting as soon as dinner was cleaned up, and everyone made it outside. He also let everyone know that for anyone who wanted to, they would be making a nest in the C.I.C. overnight room. Although he made sure to make it clear that it was completely optional, they did not see anyone who didn't seem to be planning on being there.

Since most of the kids were starting their seconds when they arrived, Brent and the others were among the last people to leave the dining room, and make their way to the field. By the time they got there, several teams were already being formed between the clan kids, and a number of other kids from Camp Little Eagle that came over.

Brent was the first person to be snatched up by a team. However, it wasn't that long before several of the kids were calling for Lance to join them as well. At first, Lance tried to get out of not playing by saying he was going to stay there with Greg. However, when Eric, who had already decided he wanted to watch a few games before he tried to play, removed Lance's excuse by saying he would stay with Greg, Lance too was dragged into a team. The younger kids that made up the tribe even tried to get Greg to join them, but he was too lost in his own thoughts about Doug, and about what Kyle had told him, to have much interest in the game.

Although the kids seemed to be willing to give Greg his space, Duke, Timmy's spirit eagle, had other plans. Duke had shared his sight with Greg before, and decided to do so again. At first, he sat on a tree branch that wasn't that far from one of the goals, showing Greg that he would have a good view of the field. However, as time went on, and Greg continued to sit next to Eric, Duke began to fly circles around the field, and then began to fly circles around one of the goal posts until Greg got so dizzy that he fell backward, even though he was sitting on the ground.

"Duke!" Greg called out as he tried rubbing his eyes.

With time called in their game, Timmy looked toward his eagle, and then walked over to Greg, "Duke says that he'll stop flying in circles if you play soccer with us."

At first, Greg's expression was one of anger, but then it quickly melted, "I can't play good."

"That's okay," Timmy smiled, "Most of us can't play good either, but it's still fun."

Greg was about to say something else, until Duke focused on the goal post again. Not wanting to deal with any more circles, Greg reluctantly agreed. To Greg's surprise, once he got out on the field and started running around with the other tribe members, he actually started to enjoy himself.

Although the older kids controlled the ball a good amount of the time, the smaller guys were having fun just running around and trying to get into the right positions. At the same time, the older kids were

very careful in making sure that the younger kids got the ball sometimes as well, so that everyone felt like they were part of the game.

Although Greg had a little practice at walking around using the sight he got from Duke's point of view, there were several slips and falls involved, especially the first few times he tried to kick at the ball as it got near him. However, as time went on, he started to get the hang of things better. Near the end of the game, he was actually able to make things fairly difficult for players. Since part of the game was keeping track of your opponent, and watching where they were looking to get an idea of where they would be sending the ball, with the way Greg was getting his point of view, and the fact that he didn't offer any such body signals, he honestly pulled off a few good fake outs.

As the sun had almost completely disappeared behind the horizon, Greg was starting to really enjoy himself, so much that he was a little sad when the games were finally called and it was time for everyone to head back inside. His sadness did not last long, however, since on their way in, Justy walked up to them and informed them that he just got a call from the hospital over at Camp Little Eagle and if they wanted to, they could go visit Doug for a little bit before bed.

Justy didn't have to ask them twice, since by the time he looked up to see what their answer was, they were already on their way heading in the direction that would take them out of the compound and over to Camp Little Eagle.

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Evan waited patiently at the top of a small hill for Haden to catch up with him. He wanted to go ahead a little to get to the next hill to see if that would give him any better clues as to where they were at. Unfortunately, it didn't. Despite not really knowing where they were at, Evan figured they were making fairly good time. He had kept himself and his little brother going for a good hour after they made their escape earlier in the day. Only when he was sure they were a good distance away from the old man did he dare stop to grab some lunch.

They ate as much as they could for lunch, since he wasn't sure how well the food was going to keep in the hot sun, especially the stuff from the refrigerator, something he failed to account for when he was grabbing food. But then, at the time, his main thoughts were on getting Haden and himself out of there alive and not on being picky about food. In all, they took about an hour break.

Since then, they had been on the move for a good 3 hours and had made some good progress. He was hoping to get to the lower foothills of the mountains ahead of them before they had to stop for the day, but somehow he didn't feel they would make it. About an hour after lunch, Evan first started noticing it, Haden's demeanor changed slightly. He figured there was something wrong, but it wasn't really bad enough yet for him to say anything about it. Knowing his little brother enough to know it would be useless to ask him, they continued on. But for the last hour, Haden's pace was gradually getting slower.

Now, watching Haden as he made his way toward him, Evan could definitely see a slight ting of pain in his eyes. "You okay, bro?" he asked as Haden came to a stop a few feet away from him.

Haden shook his head, "I don't feel so good."

"What's wrong?" Evan asked.

Haden shrugged his shoulders as he took another sip from his half-empty bottled water.

Evan felt Haden's forehead. Even as he did so, he knew that it was meaningless out in the hot sun, but he had cared for his little brother for so many years, checking for a temperature was one of the first things on his list. Evan was at a loss for what the problem could be. Already having suspected something was wrong awhile ago gave him a bit of time to think of possible causes. He had already eliminated lunch, since he was very careful to have only grabbed unopened food that couldn't have been tampered with and he had eaten the same meats that Haden had.

The only thing he could think of was that Haden was just getting worn out. They had probably spent more time outside over the last three days than Haden had spent over his entire life. Physically, his little brother was just not cut out for this. The more that Evan thought about this, the more it seemed to make sense, because even he was starting to get worn out.

Something inside him continued to edge him forward. If only they can go a little further, then somehow he would get his brother somewhere that he would be safe. The further he went, however, the harder it was to believe that voice, since things seemed to be getting worse for them as they went, instead of better. Where exactly could he take Haden and really know he would be safe? If he couldn't trust adults anymore, then who was left? More and more over the course of the day, he found himself wanting to give up and admit defeat. Every time he did, however, he would look back at Haden and realize that this was easily ten times worse for him, and he was still holding strong. If his little brother could stay strong, then so could he. If not for himself, then at least for Haden.

"You want to stop for a while?" Evan asked, as he caught himself lost in thought.

Haden shook his head.

Evan sighed, "Okay, we will go a little further. I think there will be some better shelter for us over the next ridge, so we can probably stop there for the night." As he said this, an idea came to him on how to better figure out where they were, but he would have to wait until it got dark, and it would be better if they were in a higher place.

After taking another sip of his water, they continued onward. Unfortunately, they had only made it another 20 minutes or so before Haden groaned and collapsed.

"Haden!" Evan nearly screamed as he ran to his little brother fearing the worst.

"My stomach hurts," Haden said as he lifted his head up to look at his older brother.

"Like you're going to hurl?" Evan asked with concern.

Haden shook his head, "Just hurts."

Evan nodded and took a quick glance around. "Okay, I think we've gone enough for the day, we'll make camp here for the night."

Haden shook his head, "I'll be okay."

"No you won't bro," Evan replied forcefully. "We're going to find you somewhere comfortable to lie down, and I'm going to get a fire going, and maybe we can warm up a can of soup for dinner."

Haden nodded.

Evan went to work and 30 minutes later he had a strong fire going, had a can of soup heated up for Haden and a can of stew for himself. Haden seemed to eat dinner fine, which Evan thought was a good sign. Shortly after dinner, Haden decided to go to sleep. Evan kept a close eye on his younger brother's breathing and pulse to make sure he really was just going to sleep and that it wasn't something worse.

As Evan sat in front of the fire, keeping an eye on Haden he really hoped that it was just a case that his little brother was completely wore out and not something worse. But deep inside of him, there was a growing fear that it was something worse, even though there were no other signs of it.

A few times during the early evening, he wanted to do some scouting around their area, but that was not really that productive, as he also didn't want to be away from Haden for more than 5 minutes at a time.

Finally, as the darkness of night set in and the fire slowly burnt itself out, Evan looked up to the sky for what he was hoping to see. When he found what he was looking for, his heart sank. Last night, he remembered looking up in the sky, and seeing the glow created by all the lights in Las Vegas. He had hoped to use them tonight to make sure they were going in the right direction and to get a better idea of how much further they had to go. When he looked at them, however, not only were they dimmer than they were the night before, but he quickly realized that they had been going in the wrong direction all day. They were going deeper into the desert.

Hearing his little brother tossing in his sleep, Evan walked over and laid down next to him, draping a protective arm over him. "I'm sorry Haden," Evan whispered softly, "I don't think I can save us," With that, a single tear rolled down Evan's face.

About 30 minutes later, after the final embers of the fire had gone out and Evan was about to drift off to sleep himself, he did something he had not done in years. He folded his hands, looked up at the stars and said a simple prayer, something he had not done since it became clear that God was not going to save his little brother from the constant beatings and abuse from their father.

"Please God, I know your probably really busy and maybe haven't had time to listen to me in the past, but if you are ever going to hear my prayers, please hear them now. Please God, find a way for my little brother to be safe. I tried my hardest, I really did. I tried to be strong for him, but unless you can help him," Evan's eyes began to tear up as he whispered his prayer, "Please God, I pray that you find some way to save Haden. Thanks."

After a few more minutes, and a few more tears, Evan drifted to sleep.

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After giving them a quick idea what to expect, Dr. Anderson lead Brent, Lance, Greg, and Eric into the Critical Care 5 room. In the center of the room was a biobed. Lying on the bed, wearing only a light pair of underwear, was a small 7 year old boy with dark blond hair. Although the scorched and bliste-



red skin that was there previously was now gone, the skin that was there was still 'bubbly' and had a look to it that it could easily fall off if one was not careful.

"Doc? Is that you?" Doug's voice sounded coarse, and broken, "Is Greg with you?"

"I'm here," Greg called out from Lance's arms, as Lance walked closer to the biobed.

Although Doug's body was being held down by a force field, his head, neck, and good arm was not, so he struggled a little to lift his head up far enough to see where the voice was coming from. As soon as he saw that it really was Greg he smiled and let his head fall back onto the bed.

"I missed you Doug, I really did," Greg said when Lance stopped next to the biobed.

Doug reached up with his good arm, and took hold of Greg's hand, "I did too."

As soon as the two boys touched, a small beep sounded from one of the consoles on the side of the room. Looking slightly concerned, Dr. Anderson walked over to investigate.

"What's wrong?" Brent asked as he followed a few steps behind the doctor.

"I'm not sure," the man said as he pressed a few buttons and looked at the display, "Okay, this is odd. There was some type of brief bio-electrical energy spike that the biobed registered a few moments ago."

Looking back toward Lance, Brent couldn't stop himself from smiling when he saw the huge smile on Greg's face as he looked at himself through Doug's eyes.

"Out of curiosity," Brent asked a bit softer so only Dr. Anderson could hear him, "How come Doug's skin still looks messed up a little?"

Dr. Anderson checked a few more displays before he finally turned toward Brent, "Well, like I told you earlier, Doug's body was in pretty rough shape and was very close to having been pushed too far. I had the biobed repair his body as much as I thought possible without stressing his body too much. Even though the biobed is repairing, that repairing still puts some strain on the body."

"So he's going to have to heal the rest of the way on his own?" Brent asked with concern.

Dr. Anderson shook his head, "Oh no. After getting a good night's sleep, and having the bio-bed push a good amount of nutrients into his system, tomorrow we should be able to push the healing further. If things go according to plan, by Friday, he should be as good as new, and ready to go home."

"Cool!" Brent said, sounding a lot more relieved.

"Keep in mind," Dr. Anderson reminded, "That is the best case scenario. If any unexpected complications come up, that time could get pushed back to either Saturday or Sunday."

"What's going on?" Lance asked as he walked up to Brent.

Seeing Lance with empty arms, Brent looked up to see that Greg was sitting on the side of the biobed chatting away with Doug, "Is that going to mess anything up?"

Dr. Anderson glanced over and shook his head, "Nah, he should be fine. Looks like you have him positioned far enough away from the retainer fields, so he shouldn't accidentally bump into them."

Brent nodded and then did his best to answer Lance's question, "We were just talking about Doug's treatment plan. Dr. Anderson said that he might be released as early as Friday, or it might take as long as Sunday."

Lance nodded, "Cool, I'm sure that will make Greg really happy."

Brent agreed, "It's been awhile since I think either of them has really been happy."

Dr. Anderson frowned and shook his head.

"Is there a problem?" Lance asked with concern.

"Huh?" Dr. Anderson replied, "Oh. No, there is no problem. I was just looking at some of the partial diagnostics data that the biobed was reporting from Greg sitting on it. How long has he been that way?"

Lance sighed, "As far as we know, it's a genetic defect, and he was born that way. Not even the biobed's are able to fix it."

Dr. Anderson nodded.

The three of them, Brent, Lance and Dr. Anderson stood there for several minutes and watched as Greg and Doug continued to catch up with each other. Eric had stayed near Greg just in case he needed anything.

A few moments later, after checking another display, Dr. Anderson sighed, "I hate to have to do this, but Doug is getting a bit too over-stressed for comfort."

Lance nodded, understanding what the doc meant, and made his way back toward Greg, "Sorry kiddo, we are going to need to leave soon."

"Leave? Why?" Greg said, not bothering to change where he was looking, but instead held Doug's hand tighter.

"Because if you want Doug to be able to come home Friday, he's going to need to get his sleep and get his energy built back up."

"Friday?" Both Greg and Doug asked excitedly.

The doctor smiled, "If everything works out well, yes."

"Cool!" Greg replied, "There are so many new friends I met, you're going to love meeting them all."

Doug smiled.

Greg did his best to try to look in the direction where he thought Dr. Anderson might be standing, "Is it okay if I stay until he goes to sleep?"

Anderson thought for a few moments, "I don't think there will be any danger of you sitting there, so it will really be up to Doug. But just so you know, I'll be having the biobed put him to sleep so he gets as restful of a sleep as possible, so he will fall asleep very quickly."

"I'd like it if Greg could stay," Doug answered.

Anderson nodded, "Okay. In that case, go ahead and say your good nights."

"Good night Doug," Greg said turning back to his best friend, "Hurry up and get better so you can come home with us."

"I'll try," Doug smiled, "Good night, Greg, I'm glad I didn't lose you."

"I'm glad I didn't lose you too," Greg smiled back.

A few moments later, Doctor Anderson pressed a few buttons at his desk terminal and, almost instantly, Greg could see the image that he was getting from Doug starting to go dark. After a few brief seconds, the image was gone completely, while Doug's arm and the rest of his body went limp.

Once Greg carefully lowered Doug's hand until he felt it touch the bed, Lance picked the smaller boy back up, "I know you didn't really have to do this, so thank you doctor."

Doctor Anderson nodded and smiled, "Are you kidding? After seeing how happy this made both boys, that was a treatment far better than the biobed could ever have provided."

"You'll let us know if there are any new developments?" Brent asked as they got ready to leave.

"You bet, although I am not really expecting any," the man answered.

With that, the four boys made their way out of the hospital, and back toward C.I.C., following a path that was beginning to become very familiar to them.

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By the time the boys made it back to C.I.C., the nest had already been setup in the overnight room and many of the kids were already finding spots and settling down for the night. After taking a few minutes to say goodnight to Neal, who was in the dining room talking with some of the other adults, the boys made their way into the overnight room as well.

As soon as they had entered the room, Timmy and Ricky, who were already dressed in the proper clan sleepwear, made a bee-line toward them.

"Hey Greg," Timmy called out, "You wanna sleep over where we're at? We saved a spot for you."

Feeling Greg squirm slightly in his arms, Lance gently lowered him to the ground, at which point Timmy and Ricky each took one of Greg's hands, and began leading him over to where the rest of the tribe was at.

"Timmy said you got to meet your best friend tonight, is that true?" They heard Ricky ask as the kids got further away.

"Uh huh!" Greg said cheerfully.

After finding an open spot in the nest, both Brent and Lance began stripping off their clothes as well.

"Hey guys," Cory called over from a few places away after he saw that both Brent and Lance had taken everything off, "You guys remember that none of us will mind if you two want to sleep in boxers, right?"

Brent looked toward Lance and then nodded toward Cory, "We know. Actually, we talked it over today, and basically, since we've been here over the last few days, we are really starting to feel like a part of the clan. I guess what I'm trying to say, is both of us are fine with it."

Cory smiled, "Okay, whatever you two feel comfortable with."

A few moments later, Brent spotted Eric sitting on one of the blankets not far from him, looking back and forth between Brent and Timmy. "Eric, you okay?"

Eric padded over in his official clan sleepwear toward Brent, "I'm not sure what to do."

"Not sure what to do about what?" Lance asked as he joined the conversation.

"Well," Eric answered as he glanced back toward where the tribe was sleeping, "The last two nights I had been sleeping with Greg and the tribe and tonight they invited me to sleep over there with them again."

"I don't see a problem with that," Brent commented.

"But," Eric looked down toward the sheets, "I'm bigger than they are. I'm older."

Suddenly, both Brent and Lance realized what the problem was. Over the last few days Eric's mind had been organizing and re-arranging itself a lot. As a result, Eric had been growing in maturity rather quickly. Initially, his level of maturity was closer to that of the younger tribe members, so him hanging around them made sense. But now, Eric was getting to the point that he was starting to realize he was older than them and starting to question if he should still be hanging around them or not.

"Eric, you are allowed to do which ever you feel more comfortable doing. It doesn't matter how big or old you look. Timmy and the rest of the tribe like you and they have invited you to sleep with them. So, if it's something you want to do, no one will say anything. Or, if you want, you can sleep over here with us. It's your choice."

Eric spent a few moments considering his options, until he finally looked seriously toward Brent, "If you don't mind, I think I would like to sleep over here with you, Lance, and the other older kids."

"Of course we don't mind," Lance smiled as both he and Brent moved over a little to make room for Eric.

A few minutes later, the lights in the overnight room were turned out. A few minutes after that, the few people that were still awake were able to here the soft rhythmic breathing of all those who had already fallen asleep.

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"Mmm," Brent softly moaned as consciousness slowly filled his mind while a warm gentle hand rubbed circles on his chest, "That feels good."

"I can see that," Lance giggled as he gave Brent a kiss on the cheek.

"Hey!" Brent sat up, now wide awake, and quickly began to turn red as he realized exactly what Lance was referring to. Looking around the room he saw several of the other boys already awake and starting to move around, "Lance."

Lance's smile quickly disappeared as he saw the hurt and embarrassed expression on Brent's still red face, "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it Brent," JJ stated seriously as he and Gabe were walking by on their way to hit the shower, "That's nothing to be embarrassed or upset about dude. It's something that happens to all of us whenever we've been asleep for awhile. Other than some of the little guys checking you out, and in Timmy and Ricky's case, taking notes, no one is going to tease you or say anything about it."

Gabe gave his boyfriend a squeeze, "Now if your boyfriend will do something about it or not is another story."

JJ play swatted Gabe on the head, "Hey, be nice."

Gabe giggled, "Seriously though guys, JJ is right. We're all guys, and most of us are gay, so no one is going to say anything. Besides, you should have seen Lance when he woke up a few minutes before you."

Now it was Lances turn to turn red, which caused Brent to smile.

Grinning at each other, JJ and Gabe continued on to the showers.

After they left, Lance looked back toward Brent, "I'm sorry about that, I didn't mean to hurt you."

Brent nodded, "It's okay. I was more surprised than anything. I think that's the first time anyone has ever woke me up like that. Besides what JJ and Gabe said made sense. Looking around, I've already seen two other guys sporting their wood, so..."

Lance reached over and wrapped Brent in a hug as he whispered into Brent's ear, "Love you."

"Love you too," Brent replied as he squeezed a little harder.

As the hug broke, both boys noticed that just about everyone was awake now and starting to make their way to the showers. They decided that it would probably be a good thing to get their sheets folded up and to do the same.

As they were finishing up, Cory knelt down between them, "Hey guys, it looks like you two have things worked out already, but I just wanted to make sure you both knew that JJ and Gabe were speaking for all of us. No one will make fun or tease either of you just because of a little morning wood. Although, I should probably warn you that the little guys will sometimes make the best of it by using that as an excuse to practice their sword fighting skills."

Neither Brent nor Lance could prevent themselves from giggling at the images that suddenly popped into their heads.

Seeing that his comment had its desired effect, Cory continued, "Seriously though. I don't know if anyone has had a chance to mention this, but with all the couples we have here, between all of us, we've had to work through a lot of different experiences, so if you ever have any questions about anything, you can ask one of us. If we don't know the answer, we'll at least know who will and I promise, no one will make fun of you."

Brent smiled, "Thanks Cory, that makes me feel a bit better."

"No problem," Cory grinned as he patted Brent on the back. "By the way, if you two don't mind, try and sit up front with Sean and me at breakfast. I think some of the guys are going to want to say good-bye to you before they head off to school."

Before Brent had a chance to say anything in response, Cory was already up and heading toward the showers with Sean. When he looked toward Lance for an answer, the only thing he got as a reply was a shrug.

Putting Cory's cryptic message aside, they both decided that now would be a good time to follow the others to the showers.

Twenty minutes later, a freshly clean and fully dressed Brent and Lance made their way to the C.I.C. dining room for breakfast.

"Have you seen Eric this morning?" Brent asked as they were walking.

"Not since we left for the showers. I thought he was right behind us," Lance looked behind him as if expecting Eric to be standing there. "And for that matter, have you seen Greg?"

Brent thought for a moment, "Now that you mention it, I don't think I have since he got dragged off by the tribe last night."

As if on cue, when Lance turned around, he found Ricky standing in front of him, looking up at him with a concerned expression. "Hey Ricky, you okay?"

Ricky nodded, looked behind him and then back toward Lance, "Greg needs you."

Lance and Brent shared a concerned look with each other, before Lance glanced back toward Ricky, "Where is he?"

"This way," Ricky answered as he turned and lead them down the hall.

The two boys followed Ricky down the hall and into the main dining room area. He was leading them toward the front where a bunch of kids were already starting to gather around the serving area.

"Now!" they heard a high pitch voice call out as they were about half way across the room. Lance stopped and glanced in the direction that the voice came from, only to see a Greg rapidly flying toward him.

Fortunately, Lance had fairly good reflexes and managed to catch Greg in mid-air before he had a chance to hurt himself, "Whoa!"

"I did it!" Greg squealed in delight as both Timmy and Ricky ran up to stand in front of him and Lance.

"Did what?" Lance asked, now even more confused.

"Pounce. Timmy and Ricky were teaching me to pounce." Greg giggled as he settled down into Lance's arms.

"It's an official tribe rule. Everyone in the tribe needs to know how to pounce before they are allowed to go home." Timmy stated as a matter of fact.

Ricky nodded, "And he did a really good pounce too."

Lance gave Greg a squeeze, "Good job. But what do you say we pounce some breakfast before it's all gone?"

"Yeah!" Greg giggled as they finished making their way toward the front.

A few minutes later, Lance was setting down two plates of eggs, bacon, and toast, one for himself and one for Greg. He was slightly surprised to see Eric already sitting down and eating. "How did you get here before us?"

Eric shrugged, "I just took a shower, got dressed, and came here."

"I see you found Eric?" Brent stated as he sat down with his own breakfast.

Lance grinned, "Actually, he found us."

"Morning boys," Neal said as he sat down, "Sleep well?"

"Morning Neal," Brent, Lance, Greg, and Eric said almost in unison.

"It was cool, I got to sleep with all my new friends and tell them about Doug and how much better he was getting and that he might get to go home on Friday. Then this morning, Timmy and Ricky taught me how to pounce," Greg bubbled.

"Um, that sounds good." Neal commented which caused the others to giggle.

"Do we still get to fly home today?" Lance asked.

Neal nodded, "Yup, if you guys still feel up to it."

Four heads started nodding very quickly.

For the most part breakfast was relatively uneventful, including getting seconds and for some of the kids, thirds. Near the end of breakfast, Cory stood up to make his announcements, as he typically seemed to do at meals. What happened next, however, greatly surprised all of the guys.

"Hey guys," Cory started and waited for the noise to quiet down a little, "I know everyone is eager to get across the street and get started on school stuff, so I'll try to be brief."

Expecting to hear a bunch of groans, Lance was mildly surprised to see a bunch of heads nodding and kids who really were interested in getting over to school. But then again, having actually attended some of the classes yesterday, he could kind of understand why.

"This morning after breakfast, while we are heading over to school, some of our newest clan mates will be heading home to start their new life," Cory continued after a small amount of cheering and table banging, "Guys, before you go, there are a few things we would like you to have."

After Cory said this, Timmy walked up behind Greg, Justy walked up behind Eric, Sean stood behind Brent, and Gabe stood behind Lance. At the same time, each boy placed a gold herringbone necklace around the neck of the person they were standing behind.

Once each boy had their necklace on and saw the necklaces that were being put on around the necks of the others, Cory continued, "When Aaron first had these made for us; it was at a point of time that our clan was going to be split up for awhile. What he told us then still holds true now. Distance means nothing. We are clan, but more importantly we are family. Any of us are just a call away and visiting each other is just a transport away. These necklaces are a physical symbol of that. They are a constant reminder of what you are a part of. If you ever have any doubts that any of this is true, just reach up and feel your necklace."

As Brent got up and walked up toward him, Cory added one more thought, "Aaron was also nice enough to get us lots of extras. So when Doug gets better, we have one for him. Plus, anyone else that might become part of the clan with you guys, we will have one for them as well."

Brent stood next to Cory for a few moments, with a single tear slowly making its way down his cheek, "I wanted to come up with something really cool to say," Brent began, "but the only thing I can think of is to say thanks. Thanks Cory, for everything." With that, Brent gave Cory a strong hug.



When the hug broke, all 4 boys suddenly found themselves getting hugs from nearly everyone else in the clan, as everyone said goodbye to them in their own way.

"You'll call us?" Timmy asked after the tribe got done giving hugs to Greg.

"Uh huh," Greg nodded, "As often as they will let me."

One by one the clan made their way out of the dining room, until finally; it was just Brent, Lance, Greg, Eric, and Neal along with Teri and Dan who were going to take them to the air field.

"You guys ready?" Neal asked.

After getting nods from each boy, they made their way out of C.I.C. and toward Dan's waiting car.

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It took less than 10 minutes to drive from the compound to the air field. Before the boys knew it, they were pulling up to the fence, where only a short distance away, a Cessna Citation CJ4 personal jet had already been wheeled out and was being prepared for takeoff.

"Are we going to fly in that?" Brent asked excitedly as the car came to a stop.

"That's right," Neal answered.

Moments after the car stopped, Lance grabbed Greg and all four boys made their way toward the waiting plane. The three adults, who didn't seem to be in as much of a rush as the boys were, took a bit longer to get out.

"Well," Neal commented as he looked over to see the boys carefully inspecting the outside of the plane, "Here goes nothing."

Teri smiled as she took Neal's hand, "Don't worry Neal, you'll do great. Remember, if you ever have any questions or problems, I'm just a phone call away, no matter what time it is."

"Thanks, Teri," He said as he gave her a hug goodbye.

"Which reminds me," Teri said as the hug broke, "I should have all the paperwork back for Doug by the time he's ready to be released. I've also prepared a few extra sets of paperwork for any other kids you might decide to adopt on the way home."

Neal grinned, "Thanks, but I don't think I'll be adding any more any time soon."

Teri only smiled and nodded.

"Don't forget, you can call me whenever you would like to setup those psych appointments." Dan said seriously as Neal moved to him next.

"Psych appointments?" Neal asked curiously.

Dan nodded, "Yeah, to help you deal with all the additional kids you will be getting."

Neal groaned.

"Take care, Neal," Dan said seriously as the two men shared a goodbye hug with each other.

With a final nod, Neal turned and made his way for the plane, "Come on you guys, let's get everyone on board and buckled up." As they were making their way on board, Neal gave the attendant that was exiting the plane a generous tip.

With most of the preparation work having already been done for them, it didn't take long to get everyone inside, buckled up and for Neal to complete the pre-flight checklist before they were rolling down the runway to prepare for takeoff.

Although the flight from Central Florida to Southern Nevada took a little under 3 hours, all the boys were enjoying themselves so much with looking out the windows and pointing things out to each other, that the time seemed to pass unusually quickly. Even Greg seemed to be enjoying himself as everyone else took turns telling him about all the different things they were seeing. While at the same time, part of Greg's thoughts seemed to be elsewhere.

Near the end of the flight, as things were starting to settle down and Lance was taking his turn sitting in the co-pilot seat up front with Neal, Brent took some time to reflect on the events of the last few days as he looked out his window, watching the passing mountain ranges. It had been an interesting last 3 days. Actually, it had been an interesting last 2 weeks. So much had happened, they had met so many people and have seen so many amazing things, how would their life go now?

In a way, Brent was glad that they were moving out west, since things would probably not be as crazy. But in another, he was kind of sad that he would be leaving behind all the adventure. As crazy as the last few days were, it had probably been the best few days of his life.

What would the future bring? What other new friends would he make? How will living with Neal and Rick end up working out? There were so many questions and so few answers. The only real answer he could come up with was that now that he was a part of Clan Short, life was going to be different. Whether that would be a good different or a bad different, only time would tell.

As he continued to look out the window, in the distance ahead of them, something caught his eye. Sitting up straighter, he blinked and looked again to make sure his eyes were not playing tricks with him. When he was sure, he quickly unstrapped himself and made his way up front.

"Hey guys," Brent called out as he pointed ahead and to the side of them, "Is that someone waving a bag or something over his head?"

Both Lance and Neal looked in the direction Brent was pointing. Sure enough, they saw the shadow of someone waving something in their direction. Neal made a small change to their course so that they would almost fly over whoever it was. As they quickly approached the person, they were able to see that it almost looked like two people. One was lying down next to the one standing up.

"It looks like they need help," Lance commented.

Neal nodded and made a note of the coordinates, "They are a good 10 miles out from the city, so yeah, they probably do. Everyone get buckled in, we'll be landing in a few minutes."

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Evan woke up with the heat of the sunlight beating down on his cheek. Seeing that Haden was still asleep, he decided to go ahead and start getting something together for them to eat for breakfast. A good 15 minutes later, he made his way back to where Haden was sleeping to wake him up.

"Haden," Evan spoke softly as he lightly shook his younger brother's shoulder.

After a few moments went by with no reaction from Haden he tried again, this time shaking him a little harder, "Haden, time to wake up bro."

'Something is wrong,' Evan thought to himself as he began to panic.

"Haden, wake up," Evan said louder.

After still getting no response, Evan quickly checked for a pulse which he found. He also checked and saw that Haden was still breathing.

"Haden, wake up please!" Evan half shouted and half cried as he shook his brother rather hard.

A few moments later, Haden's eyes fluttered and opened slightly, "Huh?" the small boy moaned.

"Haden!" Evan said as he gave his younger brother a hug, "You really scared me bro."

After getting no response, Evan looked back and noticed that Haden's eyes were closed again.

"Fuck!" Evan cried as he grabbed the food sack with what little food was still in it, then picked up Haden and began to head toward the small hill that he wanted to make camp at last night.

'Why, God? Why?' Evan thought to himself as he slowly made his way forward. Why did things have to go so incredibly wrong? How could he have ever thought that he could have gotten his younger brother to safety? The only thing that has happened over the last three days is that he made one mistake after another. And now, in all likelihood, the one person who he cared about the most in the world was probably going to end up dying as a result of his fuck-ups.

As he walked forward, he continued to question everything, including why he was even bothering to try to take Haden anywhere. What did he hope to accomplish? Maybe this was just a way to make things even worse? Was it possible for him to do anything worse than be the cause of his little brother's death? And, more importantly, would he be able to live with himself if Haden died?

After walking for about 10 minutes, he had nearly reached the top of the small hill that he was shooting for. Already, his arms were feeling really worn out, which in itself was odd for him, as he was use to holding Haden for hours at a time.

"Don't die on me, please Haden?" Evan half cried as he laid his brother down and slumped down next to him.

Evan was near the end of his ideas and he knew it. They had traveled a day in the wrong direction, now something was really wrong with Haden and he was getting overly wore out himself. Normally, he was really good at coming up with ideas to keep him and his brother safe. Right now he couldn't think of anything.

As he sat moping something in the distance caught his eye. 'Could it be?' he asked himself. As the object got closer, he was sure of it. Some type of airplane was flying toward them. Not only that, but it seemed to be flying unusually close to the ground.

Quickly dumping out the rest of the food in the plastic sack, Evan stood up and started vigorously waving it over his head. In all likelihood, they would never see him, as far away as they were and as small as he would be. But with no other ideas, he had to do everything he could.

Evan's heart leaped as it looked like the plane had turned slightly in his direction. Maybe there was hope? Maybe they would see? He continued to wave the sack over his head.

For a long while, it looked like he might be in luck. But as the plane got closer, he saw that it wasn't actually going to pass over him, but instead pass a good ways off to his side. In addition to that, as the plane very quickly flew past him, it gave no sign that anyone had seen him.

After the plane flew by, Evan stopped waving the sack around. As the plane disappeared from sight, he slumped down to the ground next to his brother and landed so that his head was on Haden's chest. "I'm sorry Haden. I failed you."

Evan wasn't sure how long he was lying on the chest of his younger brother. He just knew it felt like awhile. There was really no reason to do anything else. In all likelihood, by the end of the day, they would both be dead; another casualty of the desert.

Regardless of how long he had been there, at first he didn't hear the sound of the approaching vehicle. In fact, he might even have fallen asleep for a short time. But as it got closer, he woke up and saw the approaching jeep. 'A dream?' he asked himself as it got closer.

As the jeep came to a stop, a light brown haired thirteen year old was the first to jump out, followed shortly by a ten year old, followed a brown haired twelve year old who was carrying a six year old. Finally, the driver, an older man, possibly in his early thirties joined them.

"Over here!" the oldest boy called out, "Are you guys okay?"

"No," Evan cried, not really sure what to say, "You need to help him; I can't get him to wake up."

Brent took out his tricorder, and then closed it almost as soon as he looked at it and instead took out his communicator.

"How bad?" Lance asked.

"Bad," Brent replied as he opened the communicator, "Brent Knocks of Clan Short requesting emergency medical transport for seven from my location to Federation Youth Services, Orlando Florida."

"You need to help him, please don't let him die." Evan continued to cry out.

"We are," Lance tried to reassure him.

Moments after Lance answered, everyone there was engulfed in blue sparkling energy and a few seconds later were gone.

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Brent, Lance, Greg, Eric and Neal were sitting in chairs that were setup in the hallway of the FYS Hospital as they waited patiently for any word on the two boys that they had just rescued. Other than the older boy mentioning that his name was Evan and his little brother was Haden, they were not able to learn anything else about them before they were taken to critical care rooms. Dr. Anderson informed them that he would give them more information as soon as he had it, but that was almost 20 minutes ago.

The boys had come up with many possible reasons to explain why they would find two kids nearly dead ten miles away from the city. Eric stated that perhaps they were bored and wanted to go for a really long walk. Lance suggested that their parents might not have wanted them anymore and drove them out there, then threw them out of the car. Greg, on the other hand, thought that it might have been an army of monsters that took them out of their house and out into the desert. Although the other boys didn't give much credit to Greg's theory being accurate, they simply didn't have enough information to go on. The only thing they all agreed on was that they were getting bored of waiting.

After they had sat there another ten minutes, Brent could here footsteps walking toward them. Expecting to see Dr. Anderson as he looked up he was mildly surprised to see a small eight year old with shoulder length brown hair instead.

"Hey guys," Kyle grinned as he got the attention of the rest of the group, "You just can't seem to get enough of this place, can ya?"

Brent did his best to try to smile back but his concern over the current situation made that difficult, "Hey Kyle. Actually, we found two kids in the desert when we were flying home. When we landed, Neal drove us out to where we saw them, and well, the younger kid looked like he was nearly dead, so I called for an emergency transport here," Brent paused for a few moments, "I hope I didn't overstep my bounds or anything."

Kyle shook his head grinning, "You saw something that needed to be done and took action to do it. That's what being part of the clan means."

Brent sighed with relief and smiled toward the younger boy in front of him, "Thanks."

"So what brings you here Kyle?" Lance asked.

Kyle's smile instantly changed to an impish grin, "Nothing much. I just figured Neal would like to meet his two newest sons."

Neal nearly choked as he looked at surprise toward Kyle.

"What?" Kyle asked as he tried to do his best angel impression, "You have been thinking so loud since you've gotten here that if their parents abandoned them, or if they were in trouble, you would gladly let them stay with you and the boys, so I went ahead and got the ball rolling for you. Aunt Teri should be over in a bit."

Neal only shook his head and muttered something about telepaths. However, his slight blush told everyone else that Kyle had been right.

"Come on guys," Kyle waved for everyone to get up, "Let's go check on your new brothers."

"Dr. Anderson asked us to wait out here until he had more information for us," Brent replied.

Kyle's grin only got larger, "It'll be fine, come on."

With that all the boys and Neal followed Kyle down the hall, through the large double doors, then down the critical care hall. Finally, he stopped outside of room eight and glanced toward the rest of the group, "Three seconds."

Brent was just about to ask what Kyle meant by that when, about three seconds later, the door to the room opened and a surprised looking Doctor Anderson looked down at them.

"How did you... I was just going to..." The doctor tried to figure out what to say until his eyes fell on the small eight year old that was in front of the group, "Ah, Kyle, I should have known."

Kyle put his best innocent expression on as he waved up toward the doctor.

"Forget it, the whole innocent look isn't going to work," Anderson smiled, "Since I was just going to come get you guys anyway, you might as well come in."

The group followed Anderson into the room, which looked surprisingly similar to the room they visited Doug in the night before. Sitting on the biobed they saw a nicely tanned, short brown haired boy who looked to be either eleven or twelve, finishing the process of putting his shirt on. As the group entered, the boy watched them very carefully.

"Hi Evan," Kyle said as he led the group to stop next to the bed.

Evan looked at the kid that was about the same size as his younger brother. "Do I know you?" He asked cautiously.

Kyle shook his head, "Nope, not yet. I'm Kyle and you and your brother are safe now."

Evan looked at the doctor, then toward Neal, and back to Kyle, "Right."

Kyle followed Evan's gaze and looked at the doctor as well, then back to Evan.

"Well, I need to go check on Haden," Doctor Anderson announced, "Neal, would you care to join me? I'm sure the boys will be fine here for a few minutes."

"Sure," Neal agreed as he followed the doctor out of the room.

After the two adults left the room Kyle looked back toward Evan, who already seemed less nervous, "We can do this one of two ways. I can explain this the short way, which might leave you with a headache, or I can explain this the long way, which will take a bit longer and may or may not leave you with a headache."

Evan blinked as he had no clue what to think about the younger boy in front of him, "I'd really like to be able to go check on my little bro, and since you claim that both options might lead to headaches, I'd rather get whatever it is you plan to do to me done and over with, so let's go for the short way."

"Okay," Kyle smiled and took a deep breath, "First, I know about you and your brother because I'm a telepath. Right now, I probably know more about you than you know about yourself. But don't worry, other than Cory, who's the head of our clan and possibly Brent, who's the brownish-blond guy standing next to me, I won't be sharing anything personal that I might learn about you or your brother with anyone else. Oh, and to answer the questions your thinking right now; Yes, I'm for real. No, this is not a dream. No, you didn't die in the desert. Yes, I know things like you living at 6532 Brook Cottage Lane and the number you just thought of is eight."

Kyle watched Evan gasp in surprise, but before the other boy had a chance to say anything, he continued, "Second, I know about your mom and your father, what your father has done to your brother and why you felt you needed to run away. Even if you might not feel this way right now, you need to know that you've done the right thing. I know you don't trust me yet, but you and your brother are safe now and I can pretty much assure you that what has happened in the past will never happen again."

Evan looked like he was about to argue, but again, Kyle did not give him the chance, "Third, I know you haven't heard of us yet, or at least don't remember hearing about us, but me and all the other guys you see here are part of Clan Short of the family of Sarek of the planet Vulcan. That means, instead of being restricted by earth laws, we fall under Vulcan law. In short, not only do we know how to get things done, but we have the power to do it. You and your brother are now under our protection. Neither your father, the Las Vegas police that he thinks he's friends with nor any other agency on earth can touch either of you. And, assuming you agree to it, before you guys leave here today, you'll be members as well."

Being as shocked as he was, Evan didn't even bother trying to say anything, so Kyle was able to get another deep breath in before he continued, "Forth, I know you really don't trust adults that much. A lot of us in the clan have had similar experiences. But the adults that are part of the clan are not like the other adults you have met. They are what other adults should be like, supporting, loving, and caring of kids. Every adult that we allow to get anywhere close to the clan has been scanned by myself and several of the other telepaths, so we know for a fact that they won't do anything to hurt you. It's going to be hard to accept at first, so the only thing I'll ask is that you give some of them a chance before you judge them."

"Fifth..." Kyle started to say before he stopped, and his face paled, "Okay, I wasn't expecting that." Kyle tilted his head slightly, and remained silent for a few moments before he continued, "Fifth, the slime ball you guys ran into this morning will be dealt with but I think we are going to need your brother's help with that, so I think that's good for now."

The room was silent for nearly thirty seconds as Evan sat there, still trying to take in everything that Kyle had told him. Finally, he rubbed his forehead as he looked toward Kyle, "Okay, you're right, that does give you a headache. Um, would you mind repeating all that again?"

Kyle got a panicked look on his face, "Huh?"

"Just kidding," Evan answered causing Kyle to grin as well, "To be honest, I'm not really sure what to say. That's a lot of stuff to take in. Can we go see Haden now? I'll think about everything you said, okay?"

Kyle nodded, "Sounds like a great idea. Common."

Evan jumped off the bed and followed Kyle out of the room with the rest of the group close behind. They didn't have to walk that far, only one door down to critical care room ten. "Seven seconds," Kyle said with a grin.

As Evan tried to figure out what Kyle meant, the other kids giggled. Sure enough, about seven seconds later, the door opened. At first, it appeared that Dr. Anderson was in the process of explaining something to Neal. However, as soon as they saw the group of boys standing there, both men jumped back in surprise.

"Kyle?" Anderson sighed, "Should I plan on you being behind every door I open now?"

Kyle grinned.

"Haden!" Evan nearly shouted as he pushed his way past the two men and made his way toward the biobed where his nine year old brother was laying with nothing on other than a pair of boxer shorts. "Haden, are you okay?" He called out, as he lightly shook Haden's shoulder.

Getting no response, Evan turned to the two adults, "What did you do to him?"

"Evan, it's okay," Kyle said calmly as he walked into the room, followed by the rest of the kids, "The biobed is keeping him asleep right now."

"Why?" Evan glared.

"That's how the biobed works," Kyle replied, "It puts a person to sleep while it's healing them. Well, that's mostly true. The biobeds can heal people that are awake, but that is a longer, slower process. By having it put people through a sleep cycle while its repairing them, that's fastest and bestest way."

Evan looked back toward his brother, whose face seemed very peaceful and content. "He looks fine."



"He does now, because the biobed healed him. But how do you think he would have reacted if he woke up in a strange place, with a strange man hovering over him?" Kyle asked.

"He would have freaked," Evan agreed, "So when can we wake him up?"

Doctor Anderson walked over to his desk and pressed a few buttons on the console, "Right now. I just turned off the biobeds forced sleep mode so you should be able to wake him up normally."

"Let's give them some room guys," Kyle said to the others, as he backed everyone up to the wall where Dr. Anderson and Neal were standing.

Evan turned back toward his brother, "Haden? Time to wake up, bro."

After a few moments, Haden's eyes began to flutter and then open. He scanned the ceiling of the room for a few moments and then sprang up with a panicked look on his face.

"It's okay Haden, I'm right here." Eric soothed.

"Evan?" Haden looked at his older brother with eyes full of concern, "Where are we?"

"We're..." Evan looked around the room as if that would give him some type of clue, "Actually, I don't know where we are, but these people saved us."

"From outside?" Haden asked questionably.

Evan nodded, "Yeah. Are you feeling okay?"

Haden felt his chest with his hand and nodded, "My stomach isn't all in knots anymore. And... and I feel a lot better."

For the first time since he woke up here, Evan smiled, "Cool."

"Hello Haden," Kyle smiled as he walked up and stood next to Evan.

Haden looked the small boy brown haired boy over carefully, "Who are you?"

"I'm Kyle," Kyle answered as he held up a set of clothes to Haden, "And I think these are yours."

Haden blushed as he took the offered clothes and quickly started to put them on, "Why does everyone keep trying to take my clothes off?"

If Brent and the others had not sensed how much tension there was in the air and how scared the smaller boy seemed, they might have laughed at the statement. As it turned out, they all managed to remain silent.

"The doctor had to take them off so that the biobed could heal you." Kyle replied.

"Oh," Haden slid off the side of the biobed so that he could properly pull up his pants.

"What was wrong with him?" Evan asked Kyle.

"I think a better question would be: what wasn't wrong with him?" Doctor Anderson answered as he pulled up a report on his screen, "His electrolytes were dangerously low, the rest of his bio chemistry was way out of whack, he was severely dehydrated, there were practically no nutrients in his body, his muscles were significantly overworked, there were multiple signs of past physical trauma and untreated internal injuries, and finally, trace elements of Midazolam."

"What's Midazolam?" Brent asked.

"It's a type of drug used for its fast acting sedation properties," Anderson answered.

"Oh," Evan got everyone else's attention, "That old guy. He drugged us or something and... well... I don't know what he did to us, but when we woke up, our clothes were gone. I was in such a hurry to get Haden and me away from there; I forgot to look where the address was at."

Kyle nodded, "Haden didn't forget, did you?"

Haden looked at the boy that was nearly the same height as him with surprise, nodded as he reached into his pocket, pulled out a scrunched up envelope and handed it to Evan, "I took it when you were getting food."

Evan looked at the envelope, "It looks like an electric bill, for a Mr. Doubly Schwinger?" Evan handed it to Kyle.

"You did a good job in grabbing this Haden," Kyle grinned as he put the envelope in his pocket, "I can promise you guys this much, before today's over, that scum bag will never hurt another kid again."

At the mention of his name, Haden quickly took up a position behind his older brother.

"Lance?" Greg asked from Lance's arms, "Before we go, do you think I can visit Doug again?"

Doctor Anderson looked toward Greg, "If he's going to be well enough to go home tomorrow, I need to keep Doug asleep right now, so the biobed can heal him."

"That's okay," Greg replied, "I just want to let him know that I'm here and that he needs to get better so he can come home soon."

"I'll take him," Kyle offered, "That way I can also let him use my eyes so he can see Doug."

Looking at Greg and seeing him nodding his head, Lance let him down.

"Come on Greg," Kyle said as he took the six year old's hand so he could lead him out of the room, "While we are visiting Doug, I can also tell you about your new brothers."

"You're serious about that new brothers thing, aren't you?" Lance tried to ask, but Kyle and Greg were already out the door.

"I'm pretty sure he was serious," Brent offered.

"What do you guys mean by brothers?" Evan asked.

As Brent and Lance tried to figure out how to answer Evan's question, Teri Short walked into the room, "Okay, where is that little leech?"

"He left with Greg to visit Doug about fifteen seconds before you arrived," Eric offered.

"Why does that not surprise me?" Teri asked before she turned toward Neal. "I'm guessing Kyle didn't fill you in on any of this?"

Neal shook his head, "Other than telling me that we were going to meet my two newest sons, not really."

Teri sighed, "Well, believe it or not, you do have a choice in this matter."

Neal nodded, "I appreciate that, but if Kyle says they're mine, then that's good enough for me. I'll take them."

"Wait, you're going to go with what a kid says?" Evan asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Neal answered flatly, "From the stories that Teri and the others have told me about him over the last few days my husband and I would more than trust Kyle enough that if he said that we, along with our boys, would be the best place for you and your brother to be so you would have the best chance of healing and growing, then we would gladly take you in in an instant. That is, if both of you were willing to have us."

Evan searched Neal's eyes for any signs that he was lying, just like most other adults did, but as hard as he looked, he couldn't find any. "Why would you even want us? You don't know anything about Haden or me."

"It doesn't matter," Neal answered honestly. "From what little I've been able to piece together so far, you both seem to be very nice kids who have been through a pretty rough life. And if you two will have me, and Kyle says that I could help both you the most, then the rest doesn't matter. I can't think of anything that either of you could say to me that would cause me to not want to love you."

A look of longing and hope crossed Evan's face, but went away almost as quickly as it appeared. "But, my brother is..." he looked back at his brother, and then back to Neal, "Different."

"Evan? You know Kyle is a telepath, right?" Teri asked and waited until she got a nod from him.

"Well, I'm pretty sure Kyle has scanned Neal's mind as well and that he never would have recommended him if he thought that Neal would not be able to accept Haden for who he is, no matter what that is."

Evan nodded.

"But the choice is still yours," Teri continued, "If you decide you don't want to live with Neal and Rick and their other boys, then you won't. It's as simple as that. I'll do my best to help you find another family to live with, or you will be able to stay at Camp Little Eagle, where you can meet, live, and grow with a bunch of other kids that have been hurt by people they trusted as well. There are lots of choices that you have now."

Evan's head was swimming. Never before had he met adults who were willing to give him and his brother choices and now he was in a room with several of them. Not only that, but one of them, Neal, seemed to be willing to not only treat kids like they were humans instead of baggage, but to also take the advice of a kid over his own. And that kid... Kyle... there was something about him that Evan couldn't really put his finger on. The possibility that he could be a real telepath was almost unbelievable, but then again, he was answering every question and thought he was thinking without missing a beat. Maybe this Clan Short would be a good thing, maybe it wouldn't. But if there was one thing that the last few days had hammered into Evan's head, it was that he could not take care of and protect Haden on his own, and that sooner or later, he would be forced to accept the help of an adult. From everything that he's seen, the adults here would probably be his best bet.

After taking a few more seconds to think, Evan turned around to face Haden, "I think we should live with them."

Haden began to very quickly shake his head, "I don't want to go with any adults Evan. I want you," the boy pleaded.

"Hade," Evan's eyes teared up a little, "I can't take care of you myself. I nearly killed you. I don't see why you would want me."

"I don't care. You're my brother," Haden sighed, "besides, what if he hurts me like all the others?"

"He will never hurt you Haden, I will promise you that," Teri answered. "But just in case, I'll make sure that you and Evan both have my phone number, so if any adult ever tries to hurt you, you can call me on that number and we will come get you. I don't know if your familiar with how Starfleet transporters work, but it lets us go almost anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds."

Haden looked at Teri and then back to his brother, "But what if he's mean? Adults can be nice sometimes and then be mean. What if that happens?"

"Haden?" Teri asked and waited until she knew she had his attention, "How about this? You and Evan live with Neal and his family for a week or two. If you don't like it, then just give me a call and we will find somewhere else for you and your brother to live."

Haden spent several seconds looking back and forth between Teri, Neal and Evan. Finally, he sighed, and gave a very small nod.

Evan knew exactly what that response meant. To Haden, it meant that he was giving up fighting; he would give Evan the final choice and accept what Evan decided. It was probably the closest thing to a 'yes' that Haden would have been capable of giving. With his prayer seeming to have been answered last night, Evan said another silent prayer, praying that he was able to make the right choice for not just himself, but for Haden as well. Finally, turning toward Neal, Evan nodded, "Haden and I would like to try living with Neal."

Almost instantly, Neal, Brent, Lance, and Eric were next to Evan giving him hugs and welcoming him to their family. While being very careful not to touch Haden, they each gave Haden very big smiles. At one point, through all the fear and concern in his face, it almost looked like Haden smiled back.

"I'll go ahead and get the paperwork going," Teri commented. "Dr. Anderson, is there any follow-up medical information Neal needs to be aware of in regards to either boy?"

Anderson shook his head, "Haden should probably take it easy for the next few days and let his body build its reserves back up. Getting him some of those chewable vitamins would probably not be a bad idea either, but other than that, they should each be fine."

Teri nodded, "Great, then that means we just have to wait for..."

Before she could finish her sentence, the door opened as Kyle and Greg walked in.

"Speak of the devil," Teri commented, which caused Kyle to stick his tongue out at her, which then caused everyone else to giggle.

"Did you get to see Doug?" Lance asked as he picked Greg back up.

Greg nodded his head, "Uh huh. I told him he needed to get lots of sleep so he could come home tomorrow and Kyle said he was having good dreams about me."

Lance gave Greg a warm hug, "I'm glad to hear that."

"Well Neal, you were right. You didn't get more kids after you got home. You managed to find yourself some more kids before you got home," Teri joked.

Neal grinned, not really knowing what else to say.

"Seriously though. I think you guys are just about set for the whole 'getting to your house' thing again. But before you go, there are a few papers they are going to need you to sign first," Teri stated.

"That's fine, lead the way," Neal offered as he and the kids followed Teri out of the room.

Once Critical Care room ten was empty, save for himself, Doctor Anderson smiled. It was reasons like this that he really loved his job.

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As Teri and Neal sat at the front desk, filling out the various paperwork that needed to be completed, all the boys were sitting together, quietly talking amongst themselves, getting to know Evan better and giving Evan a chance to get to know them better as well. Haden stayed glued to Evan's side.

Although everyone was careful to not get too close to Haden and to make sure he had the space he seemed to require, Brent couldn't help but notice how closely Haden was paying attention to everything that was being said. He also had to wonder what could have been so bad to cause a kid as cute as Haden was to be literally scared of everything.

"Well guys," Kyle said as Teri and Neal walked over to the group, "I think it's about time for me to get back to class and for you guys to get to your new home."

Once everyone had a chance to say goodbye to Kyle, he waved and headed out the door.

"Brent?" Teri asked, "You know how to call Terra Main to request a transport, right?"

Brent nodded, "Yeah, I've done it a few times now, but... um... What do I call our destination?"

Teri thought for a moment, "Neal and Rick's house should be listed as the Knocks-Downing residence in Henderson, Nevada."

Brent nodded.

"Oh, and Neal," Teri smiled, "I took the liberty of having your Jeep transported to your house."

"Thanks," Neal smiled back.

"Hey Evan?" Lance asked, "Have you and your brother ever been transported by Starfleet transporters before?"

"No," Evan replied.

Once Teri said her final goodbyes and walked out the door, Lance gave Evan and Haden a quick run-down on where to stand and what to expect, while Brent called Terra Main on his communicator to arrange for the transport.

As soon as Haden first felt the tingling sensation going through his body, he squinted his eyes closed, fearing the worst. A few moments later when the tingling stopped, he still kept his eyes closed. "Are we there yet?" he asked carefully.

"Uh huh," was the only reply that his brother could give.

As he slowly opened his eyes, Haden saw that they were not only outside, but standing on the sidewalk in front of a large two story, white and yellow house which had two large garages attached to it. There was also a fairly good distance between this house and the next house on either side of them.

"Welcome home guys," Neal said cheerfully, "Come on, I'll show you around and you can all pick out your bedrooms."

As Neal made his way to the front door, everyone else followed him. The first thing they saw when they entered was the rather large living room that they had walked into. There was a big screen TV, a nice stereo system, a couch, and several comfortable looking recliners. On the other side of the room, a bunch of the furniture seemed to have been moved out of place to make room for a large looking computer and video conference terminal, which looked exactly like the ones they had seen in Orlando.

As the boys started to look around, Neal began to point things out to them, "Down that hall leads to the bedrooms. There are three bedrooms on this floor and five bedrooms upstairs that you guys can pick

from. Through there is the dining room and kitchen, it's also where the master bedroom is at, which is where Rick and I will be sleeping, and that sliding door leads to the back porch and to the pool."

Just as the boys were beginning to gawk at the pool and how huge the back yard looked, Rick walked in from the dining room, "Hey guys."

"Rick!" Brent, Lance, Greg and Eric called out as they all went to give Rick a hug.

As the hug broke, Rick carefully walked toward Evan and Haden, who were still standing next to the sliding door, "Hello Evan, hello Haden."

At the mention of his name, Haden quickly hid behind his older brother.

Rick knelt down, as Evan glanced behind him and then toward Rick, "Haden gets a little... shy, sometimes."

"That's okay," Rick answered softly, "I know it will take time for Haden to feel that he can trust me. He can take all the time he wants; I won't do anything to force him or you."

"Me?" Evan asked, slightly surprised at being included, since he was not the one that had problems being near strangers.

Rick nodded, "You've been Haden's protector for a pretty long time. You've been hurt by the same adults that have hurt Haden. Maybe not in the same physical way Haden was hurt, but you were still hurt mentally and emotionally. So it's going to take you time before you can start to trust adults as well."

Evan blinked. He had spent so much time worrying about his little brother; he hadn't really given a lot of thought to himself. Now that he thought of it, Rick was right; a lot of his decisions over the last few days have been based on his distrust toward adults. If this Rick guy could not only see that in him, but also be willing to give him his space and respect and wait for him, maybe... just maybe... not all adults are mean and evil.

"Thanks," Evan nodded as he couldn't really think of anything else to say.

"You're welcome," Rick answered as he stood back up.

"Okay guys," Neal jumped in, "How about all of you go pick out which bedrooms you would like. While your doing that, Rick and I will get something put together for lunch."

At the mentioning of food, Rick and Neal very quickly found themselves as the only two people left in the living room.

"I'm glad your back, babe," Rick said as he planted a passionate kiss on his husband's lips.

Neal smiled as he returned the kiss and gave Rick his own version of a passionate kiss.

When the kiss broke, Neal walked over to the large sliding door and looked out at the deck and swimming pool, "Do you think we are doing the right thing?"

Rick walked over and wrapped his arm around Neal, "What do you think?"

Neal thought for a few moments and nodded, "I think we are."

"I think we are too," Rick replied as he gave his lover another kiss. "Come on love, if we don't get that food ready like you promised, this might be a very short relationship."

Neal smiled as he followed Rick into the kitchen, while his mind swirled with questions and thoughts about what the future might bring.

## **TO BE CONTINUED...**

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### **General Notes:**

Please don't mind the broken shells laying around... one of the editors cracked up!

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

Well, here it is... the long awaited chapter 8 of book 1. Please keep in mind that just because I did not end the chapter in a cliff hanger, does not mean that it's the end of the story. Actually, I ended the chapter in the way that I did for a number of reasons.

As some of you may have already read in the story discussion forums, the Eric382 story is in an interesting position. As of the end of chapter 8, Eric382 is on Thursday, Sept 23, 2004, while the rest of the main CSU stories are just starting November, 2004, which puts Eric382 a good 5 weeks behind everyone else.

On one hand, I have a rather large story arc planned out for book one which shows the core issues that each character has, and how, over the course of the next month, they are able to help each other in resolving those issues. On the other hand, due to my not being able to write for over 2 years due to real life issues, the story has fallen way behind everyone else, and in addition to not being able to interact with any of the other stories, there is also a much larger story arc that is planned which would not be able to happen without the growth that each character goes through in book 1.

The way that I've decided to handle this, is to write both sides of the story at the same time. This means that I will be starting to release book 2 chapters without book 1 having been complete. This may seem weird at first, but in effect, they are two separate story arcs that just happen to link together.

Book 1 you can think of as the prequel... It introduces the core characters, and sticks to those specific characters while they learn about Eric, where he came from, and try to help him rescue his other clone



brothers. During this time, Brent and the others, although a part of Clan Short, are not an official division, and pretty much stay in the background in regards to other clan activities.

Book 2 you can think of as the main story... It starts at a major point of transition for Brent, Lance, and the others, and follows the events that happen once they have learned to have confidence in themselves, and are able to take the next step of becoming an official clan Division.

As of right now, I have about 300+ pages of book 2 written, which roughly equates to a good 7 or 8 chapters worth of text. However, due to the fact that Haden and Evan end up being very significant characters in Book 2, before I started posting book 2 chapters, I felt that it was important to at least get chapter 8 of book 1 posted to wrap up a number of 'loose' ends.

In addition to finally rescuing Haden and Evan, and showing how they end up being accepted by Neal, Rick, and the rest of the boys, this also gets us out of Orlando, and to our own area in Nevada. Tomorrow in story time (Friday, September 24, 2004) is when Multimapper's 'One Door Closes' story begins.

So, there we have it. I hope that everyone will continue to enjoy reading book 1 chapters as I'm able to get them written, but I also hope that everyone will enjoy reading the book 2 chapters as well.

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**Editors Note:**

We learn so much about the boys in this chapter. We finally have Evan and Haden escape and get rescued. The interaction with the Clan, finding out who Eric is, saving another young boys life, moving to Nevada and Evan and Haden meeting Rick. Wow. So much happens in this chapter. I loved every moment.

I am looking forward to Book 2. And I think the readers are really going to enjoy where you are taking this story.

Cynaira