

Universe Alpha-7: The New Frontier

by
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Author's Note:

For those of you following the events in the **CSU**, Universe Alpha-7 refers to one of the seven universes that fell away from the main "Prime" universe during the fight with Axon.

For those of you who haven't been following... never mind. It doesn't matter.

Really!

From this point forward, **NOTHING** that happens in any other story or universe will have anything to do with this one. This is a totally alternate universe.

Universe Alpha-7 stands alone.

This story starts at chapter 30, following chapter 29 of Frontier. The two stories branch in different directions from that point and events in one story have absolutely nothing to do with the other one.

I hope that's not too confusing. Enjoy. -MM

Chapter 30

There was a long moment of silence as the group of boys stared in disbelief.

"What does it mean?" Tyber finally whispered.

"Nothing." Oscar answered in an uncertain voice.

Vincent shook himself out of his stupor and glanced around the group as he said, "After all that build up, this was a real let down."

"But why would they bring us in here just to open an empty box?" Tyber asked in confusion.

"I really don't think they knew it was empty." Lehman said quietly.

"Well JonJon, I guess you called that one." Vincent said with a teasing smile at his friend.

"Android intuition." JonJon said with false bravado.

Vincent giggled at the statement, then said, "Let's go tell the Holy Ones that it was empty so maybe I can get back to the Yorktown in time to have some breakfast before I have to go to work."

"I'm hoping I can get some more sleep." Lehman said, honestly.

JonJon hugged Lehman to his side and guided him to start walking.

As the five boys approached the door, Vincent noticed a strange tingle coursing through his body.

He considered the feeling as he followed the rest of the group out into the hall.

As soon as they were through the door, the feeling seemed to go away.

As the boys walked into the hallway, they stopped as a group to stare at the nearly seven foot tall Gorn who appeared to be waiting for them.

"Where are the Holy Ones?" Oscar asked in his growling and hissing language.

The large reptilian guard growled something in response that none of the other boys understood.

Oscar nodded and asked, "Did they leave instructions on what we were to do next?"

The guard growled something as he looked over the collection of boys, then turned to lead them.

Oscar looked at the group behind him and said, "The Holy Ones are this way."

"Where are we going?" Vincent asked carefully.

As the group followed the guard, Oscar said, "The Lounging Hall. It is a place where our crew can come to relax while off duty."

"Oh, we have a recreation hall like that. Right now they show movies there." Vincent said with a smile.

"Movies? Oh, I understand. Video entertainment programs. We are able to watch such things in our private quarters. The Lounging Hall is a place of serenity and such a thing would be considered disruptive and inappropriate." Oscar said seriously.

"We have places on my ship like observation lounges and the hydroponics garden that are quiet places like that." Vincent said in thought.

"We are here." Oscar said as the guard stopped at double doors.

When the doors opened, Oscar stepped in with Vincent following a step behind.

Vincent looked around the brightly lit room and immediately noticed the higher humidity.

"The rest of the crew have vacated the area so we may speak." J'Laad said from on top of a large platform at the center of the room.

Oscar continued to lead the way to the platform, then around the side to reveal a ramp that led up to the Holy Ones.

It was warmer and the light was even brighter on top of the platform. Vincent felt like he was back in Florida in the summertime.

"What was in the box?" Tyce asked from J'Laad's side.

"Nothing." Tyber said frankly.

"Nothing at all?" Tyce asked with concern.

"That's right. It was just an empty box." Lehman said with a nod.

"Perhaps it was too soon." J'Laad said in a considering voice.

"I'm sorry Holy One. All the signs pointed to this being the right time and place." Tyce said quietly.

"I agree. That is why we needed the box. It is good to know that you are looking out for the signs." J'Laad said seriously.

"I suppose we should be on our way now." Tyce said absently.

"Yes. I will walk you to your shuttle. Perhaps on the journey to Okuda, we can share a meal and catch up on events and the situations of some of our mutual acquaintances." J'Laad said as he gestured toward the ramp leading off the platform.

"I would like that." Tyce said as he stood.

Lehman noticed that there was another black box sitting behind the Holy Ones and wondered what it might contain.

"Well, the trip wasn't a complete waste. Now we can say that we've actually been on a Gorn ship. I don't think I know anyone else who can say that." Vincent said, trying to sound cheerful.

"That is true young mammal. Few of those who have had the privilege have lived to tell of it." J'Laad said with a grin.

Vincent gulped and just began to realize what a dangerous situation they were in.

As the group walked down the hallway, Vincent turned to Oscar and said, "It was nice to meet you Oscar. If you're ever in Federation space, come and see me."

"It is highly unlikely that I will be in Federation space. But if by some chance I find myself in that circumstance, I will remember your offer." Oscar said formally.

"Your shuttle is over here." J'Laad said as they walked through the shuttle bay door.

"Thank you for your patience Holy One." Tyce said reverently.

"Do not be discouraged J'Layiah, watch for the signs and one day we will be rewarded." J'Laad said seriously.

"I pray that it will be so." Tyce said formally.

"I will contact you once we are underway so we may share a meal." J'Laad said in a more gentle voice.

"I will be sure to have my comm ready to accept a direct communication." Tyce said as he broke into a smile.

"That was quick. Is everything okay?" Commander M'Butu asked with concern.

"Everything is fine, Commander. Would you take Tyber and me to the Mangeon so we can continue our journey? The Gorn fleet and the Okudai ships should be ready to depart once we are aboard." Tyce said seriously.

"Is there anything I need to do as far as protocol before leaving the ship?" Commander M'Butu asked carefully.

"Just use their automated system. When you have cleared the ship, you will be in control of the shuttle. Do not contact them by voice or use sensors." Tyce said as he relaxed back into his chair.

Commander M'Butu nodded, then went to the front of the shuttle to get them underway.

"Do you think we'll see each other again?" Vincent asked with concern.

Tyce smiled and said, "Yes Vincent, you are my friend and I plan to keep in touch. When our governmental situation has stabilized, I will request that the Yorktown be our primary contact with the Federation."

"I'm going to miss you. Both of you... And Audge too." Lehman said quietly.

"I will miss you as well. But I will keep in contact with all of you. Perhaps the prohibitions against outside contact will be relaxed sometime soon so we may have frequent communication." Tyce said gently.

"Thank you Holy One. You and Tyber and Audge are all my friends now and I want to be sure that you're all okay." Lehman said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"We will keep each other up-to-date on events until we can all meet again face to face." Tyce said with a smile.

Commander M'Butu's voice on the intercom called, "We will be docking with the Mangeon in approximately one minute."

"What about your stuff? Don't you need to get your things off the Yorktown?" JonJon asked in a worried tone.

"No. Oluf would have taken care of that while we were aboard the Gorn ship. There's no putting off what has to be done. It's time." Tyce said, as the shuttle jarred slightly.

Commander M'Butu walked through the shuttle and pressed some controls at the back before opening the door.

Vincent realized that they didn't go into a shuttle bay but were docked at the side of the ship.

Lehman, JonJon and Vincent each took a turn hugging Tyber and wishing him well before allowing him to walk toward the back of the shuttle.

"Tyce." Vincent said as tears welled in his eyes.

"Come here." Tyce said and pulled Vincent into a hug.

After a moment of hugging, Vincent pulled back and looked into Tyce's eyes.

"Keep your eyes on the future Vincent. You're doing fine." Tyce said quietly.

"Thanks Tyce. If you ever need me for anything at all, I'm only a subspace call away."

Tyce smiled at the statement and said, "That is true for me as well. Call if there is anything I can do to be of assistance."

Vincent nodded that he heard.

"Ready?" Tyce asked Tyber who had been waiting for him.

Tyber glanced back into the shuttle where all his new friends were watching.

Reluctantly, Tyber nodded.

"Let's see what new adventures the universe has in store for us." Tyce said with a smile as he put an arm around Tyber and guided him off the shuttle.

Vincent was sitting silently, looking out the view port of the shuttle when all the Gorn and Okudai ships began to move in unison.

He watched as the entire fleet went into warp in one synchronized burst.

"I feel like I'm losing my family again." Lehman said as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Me too." JonJon whispered as he pulled Lehman into a hug.

Vincent absently nodded as he watched the empty space where the Okudai and Gorn ships had been just a moment before.

A sob drew Vincent's attention across the aisle. He turned to see JonJon holding Lehman tightly to his chest and both boys were crying.

After a moment, Vincent released his seat belt and moved across the aisle so he could hug Lehman and JonJon.

As Commander M'Butu walked through the shuttle, he noticed the group of boys huddled together.

He proceeded to the door at the side of the shuttle and quietly said, "Since we were aboard an alien vessel, we'll need to go to sickbay to be checked out."

"Why?" Lehman asked curiously as he pulled out of the three-way hug.

"We haven't had previous contact with the Gorn, there's a slight possibility that they carry some sort of disease that's unfamiliar to us." Commander M'Butu said, then gestured for the boys to precede him off the shuttle.

"It's just standard procedure in a first contact situation. It's nothing to worry about." Vincent said reassuringly as he led the way down the aisle.

Commander M'Butu saw Lehman's expression of concern and said, "Crewman Winters is right. I've had to do this about a dozen times since I entered Starfleet and they've never found anything wrong. It only takes a few minutes and it would be foolish not to check."

Lehman considered the words, then gave a small smile to the commander that he understood.

"Gentlemen, I've been expecting you. Who wants to go first?" Dr. Perry asked with a cheery smile.

"Why don't we let Lehman and JonJon do it so they can get on with their day?" Commander M'Butu asked as he glanced at Vincent.

Vincent nodded his agreement.

"Very well, would you two get on the biobeds? This should just take a minute. In fact, I'm glad to have the chance to check you over again Lehman. How are you feeling this morning?" Dr. Perry asked as she moved to the head of his biobed.

"I'm fine except for feeling a little bit sleepy." Lehman said honestly.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm feeling a little bit sleepy myself. I normally wouldn't be on duty for another three hours. But there are certain duties I believe the Chief Medical Officer should attend to personally." Dr. Perry said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Lehman smiled and watched as she examined the scan results.

"Everything looks just fine here. I'm going to recommend that you go get something to eat, then get some more sleep." Dr. Perry said with a gentle smile.

Lehman broke into a big grin and said, "Well, if I have to."

Dr. Perry chuckled, then moved to JonJon's bed to check over his readings.

Lehman got down off the biobed and moved to Vincent's side.

Commander M'Butu put a hand on Vincent's shoulder to get his attention, then motioned toward the biobed that Lehman had just vacated.

"Well JonJon, you seem to be in excellent biological health and all your Android systems are functioning at or above specifications. But..." Dr. Perry trailed off ominously.

JonJon looked at her with sudden concern.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist that you also have a good meal." Dr. Perry said as she broke into a smile.

"Thank you Doctor." JonJon said with a relieved giggle as he got down off the biobed.

Dr. Perry turned to see Vincent in place on the other biobed, then glanced over at Lehman with a grin.

"It's really me." Vincent said when he noticed her speculative look.

"I believe you. But I'm just beginning to realize the potential for mischief having you two looking so identical." Dr. Perry said as she ran her scans.

"Really? We wouldn't ever do anything like that." Vincent said as he looked up at her with big, puppy dog eyes.

Dr. Perry broke into a laugh and said, "If Starfleet doesn't work out for you, you might consider selling used cars. That expression was almost believable."

Vincent feigned confusion at the statement, but finally gave it up and broke into a smile.

"Crewman Winters. I don't like what I'm seeing here at all." Dr. Perry said as her mood turned completely serious.

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked as his smile fell away.

"You're in pain right now aren't you?" Dr. Perry asked as she looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Well, yeah. But it's not too bad. My joints are just a little bit achy." Vincent said quietly.

Dr. Perry shook her head and said, "With work, school and now this growth spurt, you're under too much stress. You need to take some time off."

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I can ask Daddy Joe... I mean, Lieutenant Bowers about getting a day or two off on the next schedule."

"You aren't understanding me Crewman. That wasn't a suggestion. That was an order. I'm declaring you unfit for duty. I want you to relax and get lots of rest. You are not to do any school work and I'm going to limit your computer access to no more than one hour per day." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"For how long?" Vincent asked with astonishment.

"Until further notice. When you come back in and your stress indicators have returned to an acceptable level, I'll let you return to duty." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"Okay. Thank you Doctor." Vincent said with resignation.

"This isn't a punishment Vincent. It's a break from work. Take the time to relax and do the things you enjoy. That will be the quickest way to get you back on duty." Dr. Perry said as she pressed a hypo-spray to Vincent's neck.

"Okay. I will." Vincent said quietly.

"Now just stay there for a few minutes while I run some detailed medical scans that have been requested in your personnel file." Dr. Perry said as she began to key instructions into the head of the biobed.

Vincent rested back and closed his eyes, knowing that there wasn't much more he could do.

"And now Commander, how are you doing today?" Dr. Perry asked as she turned to the other biobed.

"Vincent?" Lehman asked in a whisper.

Vincent opened his eyes and looked at Lehman with question.

"Would you like to go to breakfast with us?" Lehman asked hopefully.

Vincent smiled and said, "Sure. It looks like I have the time."

"If you'll wait here when you're finished, I'm going to go get Fizgig." JonJon said hesitantly.

"Yeah. That sounds great. This probably won't take too long. Dr. Perry doesn't have to go over these scans or anything, it's a test that another doctor ordered." Vincent said gently.

JonJon nodded that he heard, then hurried out of the room.

"Can I ask you something?" Lehman asked Vincent quietly.

"Sure, you can ask me anything." Vincent said as he looked into Lehman's worried eyes.

"I get the feeling that Tyce and Tyber leaving really hurt JonJon." Lehman said with concern.

"I know. I get that feeling too." Vincent said as he held Lehman's gaze.

"Do you know what's wrong with him?" Lehman asked more quietly.

"Well. I think it's because he just lost his family a few weeks ago. He's been trying to hide his feelings but I know it's been bothering him a lot. Even though Tyce and Tyber are just going back to their own planet, I think them leaving so suddenly reopened the wound that was just starting to heal." Vincent said in distant thought.

Lehman considered the words for a moment, then said, "Yeah. Even though it's been over a year since my parents died, it brought the feeling back to me a little bit."

"It did for me too. But everyone handles stuff differently and I think that it's a whole lot worse for JonJon." Vincent said quietly.

"So what can we do for him?" Lehman asked with concern.

Vincent considered for a moment, then said, "Nothing really. Until he's ready to talk about it, all we can do is be there and try to keep him from getting lost in it."

Lehman nodded and said, "Yeah. I really like JonJon. I just wish I could do more to help."

Vincent smiled and said, "Well, that's good because you're the one who can help him most."

Lehman looked at Vincent with surprise.

"Benny is in school all day and has homework and stuff to do, I have my work, school and T'Lani. You're the only one who can be there and take care of JonJon whenever he needs you." Vincent said frankly.

Lehman's expression slowly mirrored Vincent's as he said, "Yeah. I can do that. Thanks for talking with me."

"I'll always have time to talk with you." Vincent said, then turned to look at the sickbay doors opening.

"Report Commander." Captain Byrne said in a professional voice as he entered the room.

"I was asked to remain on the shuttle when we arrived. I believe Crewman Winters will have to file this report." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

Captain Byrne turned to Vincent and said, "Is there anything you would care to report Crewman?"

"I think there was some kind of prophecy or something so the Holy One asked us to go into this room and open a box. The box was empty so we came back." Vincent said seriously.

"Did you have any interaction with the Gorn? Is there anything you can tell me about them?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

"No sir. Not really. We met their Holy One, his name was J'Laad and he introduced us to this Gorn kid who had a name that I couldn't pronounce. I called him Oscar. They didn't really say much to us." Vincent said as he considered all that had happened on the Gorn ship.

"I'll expect a detailed report of your time on their ship. We know almost nothing about the Gorn." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"If Dr. Perry will let me, I can get that report for you right away." Vincent said as he glanced at Dr. Perry with question.

"What do you say Doctor?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

"I've declared Crewman Winters unfit for duty. If he can complete his report in a reasonable amount of time, I'll allow it." Dr. Perry said firmly.

"I really don't have much to tell. I could probably have it done in less than half an hour." Vincent said as he considered.

"After you've had your breakfast. You need to eat." Dr. Perry said firmly.

Vincent looked at Captain Byrne with question.

"I think that sounds like a reasonable arrangement. I'll look forward to your report Crewman." Captain Byrne said professionally.

"Yes sir." Vincent said in a formal tone, feeling distinctly unprofessional laying down in the captain's presence.

Captain Byrne nodded, then left the room.

Vincent looked around and noticed that JonJon had come into the room and was standing with Fizgig just inside the door.

"Your scan is complete Crewman Winters. You're free to go." Dr. Perry said as she glanced at the readings on the biobed.

After the boys had made their food selections and settled in at a table, Vincent asked, "So what are you and Cyril going to be working on today?"

"Well, the way I understand it, when the Yorktown started beaming us up from the Kimber colony, someone got all the safety deposit boxes together and had them beamed up to the cargo bay. Cyril and I are going through the boxes and identifying who they belong to, then finding out where those people are." JonJon said, then took a large bite of his scrambled eggs.

"Are you finding anything interesting?" Vincent asked casually between bites.

"No. We don't open them, we just find out who they belong to. It's really boring." JonJon said honestly.

"What are you planning to do Lehman?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I just want to go to bed and sleep until I can't sleep anymore. I think the doctor was right. All that healing made me really tired." Lehman said honestly.

"No one should be in the observation lounge at this time of day. If you want, I can take you up there before I go to work and you should be able to sleep as long as you want without anyone bothering you." JonJon said seriously.

"That sounds nice." Lehman said with a smile.

"Since I won't be working today, maybe I could stop by around lunch time and if you've slept enough, we could go do something." Vincent said before taking a bite of toast.

"Yeah. I should probably be rested by then." Lehman said, then took a sip of his hot chocolate.

"Maybe you could have lunch with us JonJon?" Vincent asked hopefully.

JonJon considered for a moment, then said, "I probably could. No one is waiting on us to get the safety deposit boxes sorted so I should be able to take a lunch whenever you stop by."

Vincent looked down at his plate and was surprised to find that he had already finished everything.

"Well, I guess I'd better go write my report for the captain. This one's going to be a real snore." Vincent said as he stood and gathered his empty dishes.

"We should go too so I can show Lehman around the Dorsal Lounge." JonJon said as he also stood.

"It sounds like a plan." Vincent said with a smile.

"Stay Fizgig. I'll be right back." JonJon said firmly.

Fizgig obediently sat down and watched as JonJon took his tray of dishes to the window.

Lehman divided his attention between gathering his dishes and watching Fizgig's alert eyes following JonJon's every move.

"I'll be right back too." Lehman said to Fizgig quietly, then started toward the drop-off window.

"How are you doing Vincent?" Joe asked with concern as Vincent walked into Deflector Control.

"I'm fine. Dr. Perry already told you, huh?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"That's right. So you can change out of that uniform and start relaxing. We're just about to go to breakfast if you'd like to join us." Joe said with a gentle smile.

"I just had breakfast with Lehman and JonJon. Besides, I have to do a report for the captain about what it was like on the Gorn ship." Vincent said as he signed on at auxiliary station two.

"What was it like?" Darin asked curiously as he stepped out of the supply room, fastening his uniform jacket.

"To be honest, it was like Florida in the summer. Bright and hot and humid." Vincent said as he retrieved Darin's report template from his personal file.

"Sounds nice." Joe said uncertainly.

"It was kinda scary over there, but I guess they were nice. Nothing really happened, we talked for a minute, opened a box, talked some more, then came back." Vincent said frankly.

"Vincent. As far as I know, no one in the Federation has made peaceful contact with the Gorn before. Wait for that to sink in. Even if you just talked for a few minutes, it's still a major thing." Darin said in an urging tone.

"That is correct Vincent. First steps are sometimes small, but they are necessary if the bigger steps are ever to follow." Thaelan said from the supply room doorway.

Vincent considered the words for a moment, then said in a voice of wonder, "We just did something that no one else has ever done."

After sending his report to the Captain, Vincent stopped to consider what he wanted to do with the rest of his morning.

He thought about writing messages to Lawrence and a few other people, but decided to save his limited computer time until later.

As he emerged from the Supply Room where he had changed into civilian attire, Joe, Darin and Thaelan were all back from breakfast, and appeared to be ready to take their stations.

"Darin?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Yeah?" Darin asked as he walked to Vincent's side.

"If I can't go to work or work on my school stuff... I don't know what to do." Vincent said helplessly.

"What did you used to do back on Earth when you had free time?" Darin asked in a considering voice.

"I mostly studied Starfleet stuff." Vincent said with a shrug.

"Oh. I see..." Darin said slowly, then continued, "Does this mean the other guys are all busy right now?"

"Yeah. Benny's in school, JonJon's at work and Lehman is asleep. I think everyone else I know is working right now." Vincent said quietly.

"Then I guess you need to go out and find something that you can do for fun on your own." Darin said in thought.

"Yeah. I thought maybe you might have an idea of what might be fun to do." Vincent said uncertainly.

After a moment of consideration, Darin asked, "Can you swim?"

"Um, yeah. Sure." Vincent said slowly.

"Why don't you go down to the pool deck and see what's going on down there? Rad and I always enjoy that." Darin said speculatively.

"That sounds like a good idea. I haven't even thought about going swimming since I came on the Yorktown." Vincent said with a smile.

Darin grinned at Vincent's sudden change in mood and said, "The pool deck seems to have such a casual and comfortable atmosphere that you can't help but enjoy yourself just by being there. I bet it would be the perfect place for you to relax."

"Thanks Darin. I'll go down right now and check it out." Vincent said happily as he stood.

"Do you have a swim suit?" Darin asked before Vincent could reach the door.

Vincent stopped in his tracks, then turned to face Darin with a sheepish smile at his oversight.

"Um, yeah. I guess I should get that, huh?" Vincent said shyly.

"It might make the whole pool experience a little more enjoyable." Darin said with a tender smile.

"Thanks Darin. I'll talk to you later." Vincent said in a rush as he ran into the supply room.

"Good call Darin." Joe said from beside Thaelan at the main where he had been looking busy and pretending not to listen.

"Thanks. I think he'll enjoy it." Darin said, then noticed movement out of the corner of his eye.

He turned in time to see Vincent rush from the supply room to the door, carrying his gym bag.

"I think I need to thank Dr. Perry for recognizing that Vincent needed a break. I'm so used to seeing him in Deflector Control that I didn't consider that he hasn't had a full day off since he came aboard. He should have said something..." Joe trailed off with concern.

"He's fine Joe. He loves working in Deflector Control and from what I've seen, he almost becomes consumed by his school lessons. He's never once said anything about being tired or wanting time off." Darin said honestly.

"I agree." Thaelan said from the main.

"Whatever Vincent does, he devotes himself to it fully and with a positive attitude. I believe it will be up to us to teach him to recognize the signs that he is focusing too much on one aspect of his life and neglecting the others." Thaelan said in a considering voice.

Joe nodded and said, "Thanks guys. I think both of you are right. The three of us together can work with Vincent so we can be sure that he doesn't reach this point again."

As Vincent walked into the pool area, he was surprised that it was calm and quiet.

There were more than a dozen people relaxing around the pool, but all of them seemed to be enjoying quiet conversation or just resting back under the artificial sunlight.

A few young children were gathered around a woman at the edge of the pool, but they were quiet and paying her their full attention.

Vincent went to the changing room off the pool and quickly changed into his swimming trunks.

When he came out of the changing room, he walked to the edge of the pool and slowly lowered himself into the water.

Normally, he would have jumped in, maybe even cannonballed, but it just seemed wrong to disrupt the peaceful atmosphere.

After swimming the length of the pool a few times, Vincent went to the edge of the pool to look at the gathering of people.

There were some familiar faces, mostly colonists, but no one that he could really say that he *knew*.

"Crewman Winters, right?" A man's voice asked from behind him.

Vincent turned and smiled when he saw who it was.

"Hi Roger. Please call me Vincent. I didn't see you come in." Vincent said happily.

"You were swimming when I got here. What's going on?" Roger asked casually.

"Dr. Perry says that I need to take a day off. How about you?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Cyril told me that I need to take a day or two for myself." Roger said as he lazily floated in the water.

"This is the first time that I've had time off without any of my friends to hang around with. I really don't know what to do." Vincent admitted shyly.

Roger chuckled and said, "Well, it's the same for me. I've been rushing around since we came on the ship trying to make sure all the colonists are taken care of. Now everyone is settled in on the Yorktown and Cyril suggested that I take a break before I start working on the housing plan for the new colony."

"Housing plan?" Vincent asked with interest.

"Yes. We're going to talk to the people going to the new colony and determine our minimum needs, the preferred number of dwellings and things like that. I'm a city planner by trade and once we know what's available to us at the new colony, I'll have my work cut out for me." Roger said casually.

"Wow. It sounds like you're going to be really busy."

"That's why Cyril wants me to take some time off now. I may not get another chance for quite a while." Roger said honestly.

"So is your job as a city planner how you met Cyril?" Vincent asked with interest.

"Yes. When we established the Kimber colony I had to do quite a bit of work with Cyril to get everyone settled. We would see each other several times a day and after a few weeks... we started talking." Roger said with a fond smile.

"So doing this is going to be kind of like it was when you first met." Vincent said speculatively.

"It will in a way. He's so passionate about his work that I can't help but admire him and enjoy his company when we work together." Roger said distantly.

"I think I know how you feel. I feel something like that when T'Lani and I talk about what happened at work each day. The big stuff just doesn't seem as big and scary when I've got T'Lani to share it with." Vincent said in a considering voice.

Roger chuckled and said, "That's so true. I would probably feel overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of what we're about to do if it weren't for Cyril. But knowing that he's going to be there when I need him makes the prospect of getting nearly a thousand people settled into a place we've never seen an adventure that I'm looking forward to."

"I hope the new colony is nice. Have you heard any more about it from the Soleen-Avalla since they offered you their colony?" Vincent asked curiously.

"The Federation has been in contact with them, but we haven't had any direct contact yet. According to what Cyril heard from his father, they are currently doing a detailed scan of the colony and will be sending us the information as soon as they're done. Apparently, they haven't visited the colony for decades." Roger said frankly.

"I wonder what it's going to be like."

"We're all wondering that Vincent. Are you ready to do some swimming?" Roger asked with a smile.

"Sure. But remember that I'm a lot smaller than you. Don't go too fast."

"It's a deal." Roger said as he pushed off from the side of the pool.

"Vincent?" A voice asked with surprise.

Vincent turned to see Benny standing at the edge of the pool.

"Hi Benny. What's going on?" Vincent asked as he swam closer to Benny.

"You know all that school work I was doing last night?" Benny asked as he squatted down.

"Yeah. History."

"Right. A really big report on the Ottoman Empire. So anyway, when the teacher picked up our reports, I was the only one who did it right. Everyone else either didn't do it or did a really bad job. So Mrs. De Luca said that I could have the rest of the day off while everyone else worked on their reports." Benny said frankly.

"That's great. Since you've got time off do you want to swim with me?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Benny smiled and said, "Yeah. I just thought I'd stop by first to see what was going on before I went up to get my swim trunks."

"Kewl. Roger has been swimming with me for a while, but I think I wore him out." Vincent said as he glanced across the pool where Roger was sitting on the edge.

"I'll be back in a few minutes." Benny said happily and hurried away.

Vincent swam across the pool to Roger's side and asked, "Is it okay if Benny joins us when he gets back?"

"You two will have to go on without me. I didn't realize I was so out of shape." Roger said with a tired chuckle.

"What are you planning to do this afternoon?" Vincent asked curiously.

Roger considered for a moment, then shrugged and said, "Nothing."

"Well, I've got a kind of sneaky idea. And if you'd be willing to help me we might both be able to have some fun." Vincent said with a crafty smile.

"Go ahead. You've got my attention." Roger said as he leaned closer.

"Since Benny is out of school for the rest of the day, I was thinking it would be really nice if JonJon could have the rest of the day off too." Vincent said in a slow, considering voice.

"I'm sure Cyril would be happy to let JonJon have the afternoon off if he asked." Roger said speculatively.

"Probably. But JonJon wouldn't be happy taking time off while Cyril was still working. But if you were able to talk Cyril into taking the afternoon off so you two could spend some time together, then Benny and I could convince JonJon to take the afternoon off so he could hang around with us." Vincent finished with a smile.

Roger considered for a moment, then said, "I like the sound of it. And I think Cyril could use a break from the routine. I'll go up now and see if I can talk him into it."

"Great. Benny and I will be down here for a while. If you need me to do anything, just page me." Vincent said happily.

"I don't think it will take much to convince Cyril that this is a good idea. But if he gives me any trouble, I'll use JonJon as an excuse." Roger said with a grin as he stood.

"Sounds like a plan." Vincent said happily.

Roger nodded his agreement as he walked to the changing room.

As Benny walked toward the pool, Vincent blinked with surprise.

In the weeks that they had known each other, Vincent had seen Benny in various stages of undress, just for the fact that they both slept in the supply room of Deflector Control.

But Vincent never really paid attention to Benny's body before.

Watching Benny walk from the changing room, Vincent noticed just how lean and toned Benny's body was and how his natural coloring made him look like he had a healthy tan.

He looked away from Benny for a moment and considered what he was feeling.

Attraction?

After a moment to analyze the feelings, Vincent finally concluded that what he was feeling was a sort of admiration or appreciation.

It was something like what you would feel when looking at a beautiful painting.

"Is something wrong?" Benny asked with concern at Vincent's pensive expression.

Vincent slowly shook his head and said, "No. Not wrong."

"Then what is it?" Benny asked curiously as he swam to Vincent's side.

"If I told you, you'd probably think I was really weird." Vincent said honestly.

"Try me." Benny said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"I was just thinking that you look really good." Vincent said hesitantly.

Benny looked at Vincent cautiously, uncertain of how to respond.

"I told you you'd think I was weird." Vincent said more quietly.

"No... Well, yeah, but that's nothing new. What do you mean?" Benny asked cautiously.

"I see you all the time and I never really noticed that you're a good looking guy. But when you came out of the changing room... I noticed." Vincent finished uncomfortably.

"Oh. Okay, I get it. Thanks Vincent." Benny said with a smile.

"Is there some way I can tell you that you look good that doesn't sound totally gay?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yeah. I think if you say something like 'looking good', it sounds more like a compliment than a come on." Benny said in thought.

"Okay. Thanks Benny, I'll remember that." Vincent said with a smile.

"I'm always glad to help. Now let's swim." Benny said happily as he turned to swim away.

Vincent pushed off from the side of the pool to keep up with him.

"Hey JonJon, are you about ready for lunch?" Vincent asked from the doorway with Benny at his side.

"Almost. We're only working half a day today... But I have a feeling that you already know that..." JonJon said as he looked up from his computer screen accusingly.

"Yeah. Well I bumped into Roger down at the pool and we got to talking about stuff..." Vincent said shyly.

JonJon giggled at Vincent's expression and said, "I think it'll be nice for us to have the afternoon off. But how did you get Benny out of school?"

"I didn't. Benny did his homework like he was supposed to so his teacher gave him the rest of the day off." Vincent said happily.

JonJon looked at Benny with question.

"I'm the only one that did it." Benny added shyly.

JonJon nodded, then looked back at his terminal.

"If you're going to be working on that for a couple more minutes, I could go get Lehman and see if he wants to go to lunch with us." Vincent said hesitantly.

"Sure. I just want to close out these files. I should be done before you get back." JonJon said seriously.

"I'll wait with JonJon." Benny said at Vincent's questioning look.

"Okay, I'll be right back."

Vincent walked into the Observation Lounge to find Lehman looking out the window at the stars passing them by.

"It's beautiful isn't it?" Vincent asked as he walked to Lehman's side.

"Yeah. When I was on Gartain's ship, I didn't think so. Every star that I saw passing by the window was just a sign of me getting further from my home." Lehman said distantly.

"Oh. I never thought of it like that." Vincent said quietly.

Lehman turned to face Vincent and smiled as he said, "Now each star we pass is taking me closer to my new home."

Vincent smiled in return and said, "Yeah. I just came down here to see if you felt like having lunch with us. Benny and JonJon are both going to be off for the rest of the day."

"Yeah. That sounds like a good idea. I'm starving." Lehman said with a smile.

"Did you bring any other clothes with you?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

"No. Why?" Lehman asked curiously.

"Because you look like you've been sleeping in those. If you wanted, we could go down to deflector control so you can change." Vincent said with a smile.

"Do you, um... have some clothes like the ones you're wearing?" Lehman asked cautiously.

Vincent looked down at what he was wearing, then said, "Yeah. I think so. Do you want us to have lunch as identical twins?"

"It's okay if you don't want to. I just thought it'd be like, you know, having a brother." Lehman said, barely hiding a tone of need in his voice.

"Come here." Vincent said as he walked to Lehman and took hold of his hand.

"What?" Lehman asked with surprise as he instinctively tried to pull away.

"Read me. I want you to go into my mind right now and feel *exactly* how I feel about you." Vincent said as he pulled Lehman's hand to the side of his face.

Lehman closed his eyes and concentrated on the information he was looking for.

Vincent could feel Lehman in his mind and, thanks to his frequent mind melds with T'Lani, knew how to guide Lehman to what he wanted him to see.

//This is what I feel for you.// Vincent said firmly as he indicated a hazy collection of swirling emotions.

Lehman moved closer to the emotions and began to recognize what they were.

Respect.

Admiration.

Protectiveness.

Family.

Lehman withdrew from Vincent's mind and was silent for a moment.

Finally he whispered, "Thanks."

"No prob. Now let's go get changed so we can freak some people out." Vincent said happily.

After a quick visit in Deflector Control so Lehman could change, the two identical boys went to Cyril's where JonJon and Benny were waiting for them.

"Did we miss anything?" Vincent asked as he led the way into the room.

"No, but if you'd taken any longer you might have." Benny said with a teasing smile.

Vincent noticed that Cyril was unlocking a large metal box that was sitting in front of JonJon on the desk.

As Vincent was about to open his mouth, Lehman asked, "What's going on?"

"This was my father's safety deposit box. I found it this morning and Cyril is unlocking it for me." JonJon said as he looked at the box anxiously.

"It explicitly stated in Mr. Daniels' will that in the event of his death, the safety deposit box was to be given to JonJon." Cyril said informatively, then continued, "There you go, it's unlocked. I'll leave you alone to examine the contents."

"That's okay Cyril. I don't mind if you stay." JonJon said honestly.

"Well, since Roger is going to meet me here, I'll stay if you're sure you don't mind." Cyril said frankly.

"Of course I don't mind." JonJon said quietly as he reached for the lid.

Vincent and Lehman moved to either side of JonJon and gave him identical hugs.

"We sure do spend a lot of time opening boxes, don't we?" Lehman asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah. We do." Vincent said with a smile.

"Wish me luck." JonJon said with nervousness in his voice.

Vincent and Lehman both whispered, "Good luck." as JonJon opened the box.

"What is it?" Benny asked as he looked at the strange device in the safety deposit box.

"It's a memory storage module." JonJon said cautiously.

"It doesn't look like any kind of memory storage that I've seen before." Vincent said as he looked at the device curiously.

"It's for positronic memories. You see that cable? It plugs into my data port so I can access it." JonJon said as he uncoiled the cable from the back of the device.

"So what's in it?" Lehman asked quietly.

"I have no idea. I've never seen it before and my father never mentioned having it." JonJon said with a dark look.

"Do you want to plug it in now or save it for later?" Vincent asked cautiously.

JonJon thought for a moment, then said, "Waiting won't make it any easier. Besides, time moves a little differently inside my head. I could have a vision that lasts for days and it would only be a minute or two in real life."

"Do you need to be sitting down or anything?" Cyril asked with concern.

"It would probably be a good idea if I sat down since I don't know what this is. I might be disoriented when I come back." JonJon said carefully.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Lehman asked quietly as JonJon sat behind Cyril's desk.

"No. Just wait for a minute and I should be right back." JonJon said as he took the cord around to the back of his head to plug it in.

"You're sure this is safe?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Actually... no." JonJon said, then plugged it in.

JonJon looked around the black infinity that surrounded him and waited for the interactive memory to initiate.

"Hello Johnny, I'm sure you have many questions now. I'm here to help you." A voice said in the distance.

"Who are you?" JonJon asked as he turned and tried to determine where the voice was coming from.

"I'm a neural image of your first father." The man's voice said from just behind him.

JonJon turned quickly to see an elderly man with very kind eyes.

"I know you don't remember me, but I'm here to offer you some help. You can call me Jeffery."

"It's nice to meet you Jeffery." JonJon said uncertainly.

"If you're here with me, it means your loved one has recently passed away." Jeffery said sadly.

JonJon reluctantly nodded.

"I don't know how things are in the world now, but at the time I made this image of myself, androids were beginning to self terminate when their loved ones died." Jeffery said with a distant look in his gentle, soulful eyes.

JonJon whispered, "Yeah. There aren't many of us left. I haven't seen another M.A.R.C. in... at least five years."

"You are my beloved eternal child and I couldn't leave you to that fate. So I found an android designer who was willing to create this storage unit for me. It's my best attempt to create an alternative to suicide for you if you ever reach that point... I hope it can bring you some sort of peace. Come over here." Jeffery said as he hobbled over to a desk that hadn't been there a moment before.

"I'm sure you know that erasing long term memories from a positronic brain is nearly impossible. Something like that usually ends up being an all or nothing proposition. What I came up with is an alter-

native. I have a tapeworm program that can follow linking memories and block your access to them. It will be much like a human having amnesia, but the beautiful, wonderful person that you are won't be lost in the process." The elderly man said as he put his hand on two thick books laying on the desk.

"These are the memory files that are suppressed within you right now. If you open one of these books, those suppressed memories will be immediately restored." Jeffery said firmly, then he turned and put his hand on another book on the opposite side of the desk.

"This one is empty and waiting for you to fill it. If the pain of losing your loved one is too much for you to bear, leave your memories here with me where they'll be safe." Jeffery said quietly.

JonJon considered for a moment, then quietly asked, "You mean that if I open that book then I'll forget that my parents and my brother died?"

"That's right. But you'll also forget that they lived. Only use this if the painful memories are beyond your ability to endure. You will lose access to the good as well as the bad memories." Jeffery said with a melancholy smile.

"I can't do this now. I need to tell my friends about what's going to happen so they won't be worried." JonJon said in concentration.

"Then you are free to leave as you are and return whenever you wish. I will be here when you need me." Jeffery said somberly.

"Is it wrong to do this?" JonJon asked in a whisper.

"I can't answer that question. You are a creature of free will and you are the only one who can make that decision." Jeffery said gently.

"Thank you for doing this. I've tried to ignore the pain but... it's too much." JonJon said regretfully.

"You filled the last years of my life with so much love... I just want you to be happy." The elderly man said as he faded from sight.

JonJon made the conscious effort to open his physical eyes so he could come out of the computer generated dream.

"Is everything okay?" Lehman asked curiously as JonJon's eyes opened.

"You're probably not going to think so." JonJon said quietly.

"What's wrong?" Benny asked as he moved to JonJon's side and put a hand on his shoulder.

"The memory module... it contains a program..." JonJon said with difficulty.

"What kind of program?" Cyril asked hesitantly, concerned by JonJon's quiet tone.

"Basically, if I run the program it will hide my memories from me so I can start over without having to remember that my parents and my brother died." JonJon said as tears welled up in his eyes.

Silence fell over the room as everyone absorbed the statement.

Benny was the first to get past the shock and said, "You're not going to do it are you?"

JonJon looked up at him with regret and slowly nodded.

Benny leaned in to give JonJon a hug and said, "You don't have to do this. You've got me and Vincent and Lehman to help you."

"Benny, you don't understand. I'm an android. I was constructed to be a companion. It's my primary purpose. But my companion, my brother Jeremy, is dead. Nothing you or anyone else can do will take that pain away from me." JonJon said as tears freely fell down his face.

"You should have told me. I could have helped you deal with it." Benny said gently.

"You don't get it! There is no dealing with it! They're all dead and my reason to keep living died with them. I've been here with you going through the motions of living but I'm dying inside. If I were to continue on like I am, what would I do? How would I live? How long could I survive without a reason for being?" JonJon finished in an imploring whisper.

"You're talking about committing suicide. You're going to stop the pain by ending your life." Benny said as he backed away.

"I'll still be alive. I'll still be me. I just won't remember." JonJon said, not sounding entirely confident in his words.

"That's a lie and you know it! If you do this you'll be killing my best friend... and I'll never forgive you." Benny said firmly, then walked out the office door.

Everyone stood in shocked silence and thought about Benny's words.

Finally JonJon asked, "What about you Vincent? Will you hate me too?"

After a moment to consider his words, Vincent said, "I could never hate you JonJon. I would really rather you didn't do it. But if you do, I'll still be your friend."

"Thanks." JonJon whispered.

Cyril walked to JonJon's side and put a hand on his shoulder as he said, "If you decide that you need to do this, I'll stand with you."

"What's going on?" Roger asked as he walked into the open office door.

"I'll tell you in a minute." Cyril said quietly.

"I'm sorry Lehman. I know that I promised to be your family... I thought I could be strong like Vincent but..." JonJon trailed off as fresh tears began to fall.

"What will you be like after you do this?" Lehman asked quietly.

"I really don't know. I guess I'll still be me, I just won't remember any of you." JonJon said uncertainly.

"But what about your purpose? Your reason for being?" Lehman asked firmly.

"I really don't know how it works. I don't remember how it happened the last time I was activated. I woke up and I just... knew." JonJon said distantly.

"What are you planning to do?" Roger asked with concern.

"I'm going to run a program that will erase my memories so I won't remember my family dying." JonJon said as he looked up at Roger with watery eyes.

Roger stood silently for a moment, then absently said, "I know a few people who would gladly give up everything they own to be able to do that."

JonJon reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"I said that no matter what he decides, we'll stand with him to support him." Cyril said quietly.

Roger leaned in and gave Cyril a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Lehman, would you do something for me?" JonJon asked in a shaking voice.

"What?" Lehman asked as his own eyes started to fill with tears.

"Will you take care of Fizgig for me? I don't know if I'll remember what to do for him." JonJon said in a voice of despair.

"I will. I promise." Lehman said before losing the last of his self control and openly crying.

Vincent moved to Lehman's side and pulled him into a firm hug.

"I guess that's everything." JonJon said as he picked up the cable again.

"You're going to do it now?" Cyril asked with surprise.

"I'm pretty sure that waiting isn't going to make it easier." JonJon said as he reached around to attach the cable to his data port.

"I love you JonJon." Vincent said in a whisper.

As JonJon's eyes closed he whispered, "I love you too."

Chapter 31

Everyone in the room held their breath as JonJon's eyes closed.

"Is he doing the right thing?" Lehman asked in a trembling voice as his tears continued to fall.

"I think that he's doing the right thing for him. I don't know that much about Androids, but I've heard some stories about the unusual steps they sometimes take to destroy themselves when their loved ones die." Roger said quietly.

"Yeah. Connie told me and Benny about an Android like JonJon who killed himself like that." Vincent said quietly.

"I don't know if it's a flaw in Android design, or maybe it's just a fact of life. When you love anyone that much, losing them is too much to bear. If you look around at some of the colonists on this ship, you can see the same pain that JonJon's been carrying in their eyes." Roger said with concern.

JonJon's eyes opened and everyone in the room stared at what they saw.

The usually peaceful and loving eyes of JonJon were dull and lifeless.

There was no expression on his face and when he spoke, the tone of his voice was only one step removed from a computer generated voice.

"This is the END-USER LICENSE AGREEMENT FOR THE 'M.A.R.C. Memory Modification Program- Version 3.012'. LISTEN CAREFULLY: This End-User License Agreement is a legal agreement between you (either an individual or a single entity) and the creator of this software, Lorenzo Hoffmann for the purpose of memory storage modification for the Android unit identified above. The SOFTWARE PRODUCT may only be used in conjunction with an unmodified M.A.R.C. unit. By accessing the memory module or otherwise using the SOFTWARE PRODUCT, you agree to be bound by the terms..."

Vincent stared in disbelief for a moment, then said, "I can't believe it, JonJon has a EULA!"

Everyone listened as JonJon continued to speak in a flat, emotionless voice.

Finally Lehman nudged Vincent and quietly asked, "Does that mean he's really a girl android?"

Vincent blinked with surprise at the question, then cautiously said, "No Lehman, EULA means End User's License Agreement. It's just a software legal thing, it's nothing to worry about."

Then he leaned over to whisper in Lehman's ear, "And I'm pretty sure JonJon is really a boy."

"Do you accept the terms of this agreement?" JonJon's monotone voice asked without any expression, then waited.

"Yes." Vincent said seriously.

Lehman looked at Vincent with concern at his immediate agreement.

"You always say 'yes' to a EULA or it won't let you go on." Vincent said frankly.

"Before restart, would you like to modify base parameters?" JonJon's toneless voice asked.

"What does that mean?" Lehman asked curiously.

"You have the opportunity to change the unit's Personal Information, Designated Companion, Sexual Orientation, and Self-Awareness."

"We need to change the companion." Vincent said immediately.

Cyril nodded his agreement.

"Current designated companion is listed as 'Munroe Daniels', a secondary companion was later added, listed as 'Jeremy Daniels'. Do you wish to alter the designated companion listing?" JonJon's voice asked in an eerie, lifeless tone.

"Yes." Vincent said firmly.

"State the name of the new designated companion."

Vincent looked around at the others with question.

After a long moment of silence, Lehman said, "The new companion's name is Lehman."

JonJon's vacant eyes blinked once, then he asked, "New designated companion is listed as 'Lehman', is this correct?"

"Yes." Lehman said seriously.

"Modification complete. Would you like to modify other base parameters or continue with unit restart?"

"What were the parameters again?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Personal Information, Designated Companion, Sexual Orientation, and Self-Awareness."

"What's self-awareness?" Lehman asked curiously.

JonJon's eyes blinked once, then he said, "This toggle parameter will designate whether the M.A.R.C. unit will believe himself to be Human or Android upon awakening. Current setting is: Android awareness."

"Yeah. Let's leave that like it is." Vincent said quietly.

"No modification was performed. Would you like to modify other base parameters or continue with unit restart?"

"Should we go through the personal information to make sure there isn't anything that's going to bother him later?" Vincent asked as he looked around at the others.

"Null default settings are also available for Personal information."

"What does that mean?" Vincent asked cautiously.

JonJon's eyes blinked once, then he said, "The null settings will allow the M.A.R.C. unit to discover his personal information rather than having the parameters specified in advance."

"That sounds good, let's do that." Vincent said as he looked at the others with question.

"Is that everything?" Cyril asked the group.

"I think we should see what the sexual orientation setting is." Vincent said shyly.

"Current sexual orientation setting is: Bisexual. Would you like to modify this setting or continue with restart?"

"What are the choices?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"The Sexual Orientation parameters can be set as: Heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or non-sexual."

"I don't want to have to decide something like that for JonJon." Vincent said in a pained voice.

"Let's just leave him as bisexual. That seems to be the least likely to limit his choices in the future." Cyril said carefully.

"Yeah, okay." Vincent said uneasily, then said to JonJon, "Don't make any change."

"No modification was performed. Would you like to modify other base parameters or continue with unit restart?"

"That's it isn't it?" Lehman asked as he looked around the group.

"Yes. Go ahead." Cyril said quietly.

"Restart." Lehman said in a whisper.

"The M.A.R.C. Memory Modification Program- Version 3.012 includes a memory restoration feature. Should the effects of the memory modification yield unexpected or undesired results, instruct the M.A.R.C. unit to connect with the memory storage module that contains this program and select the memory restoration option. The memory storage unit currently holds... three... sets of archived memories. System restart in 3... 2... 1..."

JonJon looked around the room curiously, then smiled a warm happy smile when he looked at Lehman.

"What happened Lehman? I don't remember what I'm doing here." JonJon asked curiously.

"You've just been reactivated and you've lost your memory." Cyril said honestly.

"How did that happen? Was I damaged?" JonJon asked with confusion.

"No. At least not physically. You had some memories that were causing you difficulty, so you chose to forget them." Cyril said frankly.

"I don't know where I am or who any of you are... except Lehman." JonJon said quietly.

"Well, I'm Vincent and you're on the Federation Starship Yorktown. You and Lehman are on your way to a new colony where you'll be living." Vincent said seriously.

"Just the two of us? Alone?" JonJon asked with concern.

"No JonJon. The two of you will be living with Cyril and I." Roger said seriously.

Cyril looked at Roger with surprise at the statement.

"They need us." Roger said simply.

Cyril's look became tender as he nodded his agreement.

"Is my name JonJon?"

"That's your nickname." Vincent said quietly.

"What's my real name?" JonJon asked curiously.

"Cyril, can I talk to you outside for a moment?" Roger asked seriously.

"Certainly." Cyril said hesitantly.

"Boys, hold off on telling JonJon his full name for a minute. Okay?" Roger asked from the doorway.

"Sure. Whatever you say Roger." Vincent said slowly.

Roger nodded, then led Cyril out into the hall.

"Is something wrong? Why don't they want me to know my name?" JonJon asked in confusion as he looked around the office.

"I think they just don't want to tell you the wrong thing. Give them a minute to discuss things." Lehman said gently.

"You're nice. I like you." JonJon said with a loving smile at Lehman.

"I like you too JonJon." Lehman said as he moved in to give JonJon a hug.

Cyril and Roger walked into the room a moment later, both wearing serious expressions.

"Boys, Roger and I have decided something, but it's not something we have the right to decide by ourselves." Cyril said seriously.

"I bet I can guess." Vincent said with a smile.

Roger glanced at Vincent and slightly nodded.

"Lehman, I don't think JonJon is sufficiently aware of his situation to make this decision so I'm going to ask you to make this decision for both of you." Roger said as he looked into Lehman's eyes.

"Okay." Lehman said reluctantly.

"If you would agree to it, Roger and I would like to adopt you and JonJon into our family. The two of you would be our sons." Roger said seriously.

"But I'm an Android." JonJon said cautiously.

"We know that JonJon. All that means is that we'll have one Human son and one Android son." Roger said tenderly.

"I just look Human, I'm really a Chameloid." Lehman said quietly.

"I think I remember Cyril mentioning something about that, but I don't really know anything about your people." Roger said frankly.

"It doesn't matter. One of our sons will be an Android and the other will be a Chameloid. We wouldn't treat you one bit different if you were both Human." Cyril said honestly.

"Is adopting them going to be any problem for you? I mean, since Lehman isn't a Federation citizen?" Vincent asked carefully.

"Let me worry about that. I may have to call in a few favors and do some things that, shall we say, may venture into the gray areas of the law. But I believe that I will be able to make those arrangements." Cyril said speculatively.

"If you need any help from Clan Short just let me know. Since I'm a member I can do the Safe Haven Act thing if you need me to." Vincent said seriously.

Cyril smiled and said, "Thank you Vincent. I'll keep that in mind."

"What about my name?" JonJon asked quietly.

"Well, it may take a while for me to get everything done officially, but as far as I'm concerned it's settled. From now on your name is going to be Jonathan Byrne." Cyril said seriously.

"And me?" Lehman asked in a timid whisper.

"And you are Lehman Byrne." Roger said gently.

"Wow! So I get to have a last name like everyone else?" Lehman asked with excitement as he ran to Roger to pull him into a hug.

"That's right Lehman." Roger said as his expression filled with ultimate peace.

Cyril walked to JonJon's side and opened his arms.

JonJon stood and reluctantly moved into Cyril's arms.

"You're my son now JonJon. Everything is going to be fine." Cyril said gently.

"Will it be okay if I call you dad?" JonJon asked in a whisper.

"I would like that very much." Cyril said, then shared a loving look with Roger.

The sound of Vincent's stomach growling broke the tender scene and everyone started laughing.

"Why don't you boys go get yourselves something to eat while I start making my calls?" Cyril said gently.

"Anything you say, Dad." JonJon said with a joyful smile.

"Be sure to watch after your brother." Roger said happily.

"I will... Other Dad." JonJon finished uncertainly.

"That'll do." Roger said with a chuckle.

Vincent's stomach growled again, gaining everyone's attention.

"We'd better get him to the cafeteria before it attacks someone." Lehman said with a chuckle.

"We'll be right here when you're finished." Cyril said from behind his desk.

Lehman and JonJon both nodded that they heard, then hurried out the door with Vincent following a step behind.

"There's Benny." Lehman said as soon as they walked into the Engineer's Mess Hall.

"Who's that?" JonJon asked curiously.

"That's kind of hard to explain." Lehman said with a helpless expression directed at Vincent.

"Go on and get your food, I'm going to talk to him." Vincent said seriously.

"Okay. But let me know if we need to leave or anything. I don't want JonJon to have to deal with anything too bad today." Lehman said with concern.

"Trust me." Vincent said with an assuring smile, then walked to Benny's table.

"Can I sit with you?" Vincent asked quietly.

Benny looked up from his untouched plate of food, then glanced over his shoulder at the serving line and spotted JonJon and Lehman.

"Just me." Vincent added quietly.

"I guess so." Benny said reluctantly.

Vincent sat down, then quietly asked, "Are we still friends?"

"Do you still want to be?" Benny asked as he finally forced himself to look into Vincent's eyes.

"Are you going to try to make me choose between you and JonJon?" Vincent asked seriously.

Benny was surprised by the blunt question and averted his gaze again before saying, "No. I won't make you choose."

"Good. Then as far as I'm concerned, we're still friends just like before." Vincent said with a small smile.

Benny nodded that he heard.

"I've got the feeling that you really don't want to talk about JonJon now. Is that about right?" Vincent asked curiously.

Benny nodded again.

"Okay..." Vincent said, then stopped to think.

After a moment to consider, Vincent finally asked, "Then what do you want to talk about?"

Benny thought for a moment, then quietly said, "There is one thing I've been kind of wondering about, but I didn't want to upset you by asking."

"What's that?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"Well, after what you said to me at the pool this morning it got me to thinking... are you turning gay?" Benny asked cautiously.

Vincent smiled and said, "No I'm not. But I can understand why you might think I was."

"Really?" Benny asked with surprise.

"Yeah. It's a really big long story and some of its stuff that I really don't feel like talking about. But I'll tell you the main things so maybe you'll understand what I'm trying to do." Vincent said seriously.

Benny continued to look at Vincent with surprise as he reluctantly nodded.

"Okay. I'm straight. If you're ever not sure about that, just ask T'Lani, she'll tell you." Vincent said seriously.

"I guess she would know." Benny said hesitantly.

Vincent smiled and nodded, then continued, "I guess what it's really about is that sometimes I have feelings that may be a little gay. Or maybe they're just normal feelings and I was taught to think that they're gay... whatever. The thing I figured out is that if I think you look good in your swim trunks, I should just go ahead and tell you. That way I know what I'm feeling, you know what I'm feeling and that's it. If I pretended not to notice how you looked and felt guilty about thinking things like that, then I might end up being like my dad."

"Like your dad?" Benny prompted.

"He went nuts and killed people. But that's not what I'm talking about. From the stuff that Daddy Joe told me, my dad had these gay feelings but hated gays so much that he just kind of kept them bottled up inside him and hated himself for feeling that way. He used to scream at my brother a lot and hit him. Daddy Joe says it's because my dad was really turned on by Lawrence."

"That's sick." Benny said quietly.

"Yeah. But I can sort of understand it... when I was in school on Earth, if there was someone I liked, I wouldn't tell them. I was... I guess I was kinda mean to them." Vincent finished in a mumble.

"Yeah. Okay, I get that," Benny said with concern.

"So I understand what my dad was feeling, at least a little bit, and that really scares me," Vincent said frankly.

"Okay. I can understand that too," Benny said with assurance.

"Good. I'm sorry if that was weird at the pool. I'm still figuring this stuff out and I'm not too good at it yet," Vincent said, shyly.

"It's fine Vincent. Just keep on doing what you're doing and if someone doesn't understand, then just explain it to them... or if that's too weird, send them to me and I'll explain it," Benny said seriously.

"Really? You'd do that?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"I wouldn't want to do it every day, but if you needed me to, yeah. I'd do that," Benny answered, gently.

Vincent nodded, then gave Benny an apologetic look and asked, "Can we talk about JonJon yet?"

Benny considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah, okay."

"Let me go get some food first. I'm starving." Vincent said quickly.

"I'll go with you. I wasn't feeling very hungry on my first trip through the serving line, so I hardly got anything." Benny said as he stood.

"You look really worried, is something bad about to happen?" JonJon asked Lehman as they stood at the back of a short line of people.

"I'm not sure." Lehman said with concern.

"If it's bothering you, maybe you should talk about it." JonJon said cautiously.

Lehman smiled at JonJon and said, "I'll tell you what. We'll give Vincent a chance to talk to Benny, then we'll tell you about it when he gets back."

JonJon looked at Lehman with confusion.

"Do you know what you're going to want?" Lehman asked as they picked up their trays, then continued, "I think Benny needs time to figure out some things. If I say anything before he figures those things out, I might end up hurting your feelings or his. So we'll wait."

JonJon nodded his agreement, then started looking at the food selections.

"I wish Vincent was here. I don't know what some of this stuff is." Lehman said as he looked over the various types of meats.

"I think I know what most of it is, I just don't remember if I like it or not." JonJon said quietly.

"This should be an interesting meal... that looks familiar, what's that one called?" Lehman asked as he pointed.

"Roast beef." JonJon said seriously.

"I guess it doesn't matter. I'll just take some and hopefully I'll like it." Lehman said as he put a few thin slices of roast beef onto his plate.

"Me too." JonJon said then looked further down the line.

"Oh, I see now. You pick the meat you want here, then you can pick the bread in the next case, then all the veggies and stuff to make sandwiches." JonJon said as he moved around Lehman to the next section of the serving line.

"You'll have to show me what to do." Lehman said cautiously.

"It's easy. Just put your meat on the bread, then put whatever else you want on top." JonJon said as he selected some lettuce and tomatoes for his sandwich.

"Okay..." Lehman said reluctantly as he followed JonJon's example.

"Now you'll probably want to put something on the bread or the sandwich might be kinda dry." JonJon said then moved to the condiment area.

"Oh, I know what those things are. I'll have catsup." Lehman said happily.

JonJon smiled and put some catsup on his own sandwich.

Vincent noticed that Lehman and JonJon had taken a table the opposite end of the room from Benny's.

"How is he?" Benny asked as they made their way through the line.

"Confused." Vincent said quietly.

"I guess that makes sense." Benny said distantly.

"He's happier than he was." Vincent said absently as he continued to scoot his empty tray down the line.

"Like how?" Benny asked curiously.

"I'm not sure how to describe it, but before, he'd get this look. And I'd know that he was feeling it." Vincent said as he looked at the selection of soups.

"Yeah. I know that look." Benny said quietly.

"Before, when I'd see him with that look, I'd try to do stuff to take his mind off it... Now I guess I don't have to do that." Vincent said frankly.

Benny nodded that he understood.

"I think I'm going to get something from the protein processor. They don't have what I'm hungry for here." Vincent said as he poured himself a glass of water.

"What are you hungry for?" Benny asked curiously.

"Tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich." Vincent said honestly.

"Yeah, tomato soup does sound good." Benny said with a considering nod.

"If you'll take my drink back to the table, I'll bring soup for both of us."

"Sounds like a plan, I'll meet you there." Benny said and accepted Vincent's glass of water.

"So if you don't know about the food, then that probably means you aren't from Earth." JonJon said quietly.

"No. I'm from a planet that's pretty far away. I don't know what the Federation people call it but the translation from my language to yours would be... Frozen Night Sky or Frozen Dark? Something like that... It doesn't matter. I'm a lot better off here." Lehman said frankly.

"Why?" JonJon asked curiously.

"Well, first of all, I've never had so much food before. Your people eat all the time! Back on my world, my family was very poor and we had to be careful not to eat too much because an extra bite of food today might be the bite of food that we would need to keep us alive tomorrow. We barely ate enough to keep us alive and somewhat healthy." Lehman said distantly.

"Why are you here instead of with your family?" JonJon asked with concern.

"There was a plague and my parents died. After that I was put into a foundling home and, well, there were a lot of us and only so much food to go around. I guess the people who took care of us made sure we didn't starve to death or kill each other. But that's about it. That place wasn't anything like a home." Lehman said seriously.

"What are Roger and Cyril like? I mean, do you think we'll be happy with them?" JonJon asked cautiously.

Lehman considered for a moment, then said, "I don't really know much more about them than you do, but they seem to be nice. From what I've overheard, Cyril is one of the leaders of the colony we'll be setting up. So that probably means we won't be sleeping on a cold floor while our stomachs growl."

"I guess you know what that feels like?" JonJon asked quietly.

"Yeah, actually, I do. But that's all over with now. Right now we just have to work to make the best life we can for ourselves." Lehman said happily.

"I'm glad you're my brother. I'd probably be really scared to be doing all this new stuff without you." JonJon said quietly.

"I'm glad too, JonJon. Ever since I first met you, you've been nice to me and treated me like a part of your family. Now that this has happened, it's like we really are family." Lehman said happily.

"Cyril said I chose to forget... do you know why?" JonJon asked quietly.

"I've only known you for one day so I don't really know that much. But I do know the basics." Lehman said seriously.

"Will you tell me?" JonJon asked quietly.

Lehman considered for a moment, then said, "Your companion died. It was hurting you all the time, every day. Forgetting was a way to make that pain go away."

"So it would be like if you died?" JonJon asked in a whisper.

"No. Not exactly. It would be like if I died after you had known me and been my best friend and brother for years." Lehman said frankly.

JonJon thought about the words, then said, "I can understand why I chose to forget then. Even imagining that hurts me."

"Then don't. That was another lifetime. This is a new beginning for both of us. Enjoy it with me." Lehman said hopefully.

JonJon smiled as he looked into Lehman's eyes and said, "I will."

As Vincent sat his tray on the table, he automatically handed one of the bowls of soup to Benny.

"Thanks." Benny whispered.

Vincent took a bite of his grilled cheese sandwich, then looked at Benny carefully.

"You're still mad at him." Vincent said speculatively.

"Yeah. I just don't know how he could throw everything away like it never mattered." Benny said in a whisper.

"Try thinking about it this way. Humans do all kinds of crazy things to help them forget the things that are hurting them. They drink, do drugs and sometimes end up just going completely nuts because they

can't cope. This was JonJon's way of dealing with something that was too big for him." Vincent said frankly.

"I guess I can sort of understand that." Benny said quietly.

"Benny. I can understand some of what JonJon was dealing with because I have a few of the same problems. My parents died less than a month ago and it's like there's this dead place inside me that hurts sometimes. After it happened, I left Earth and I've been working on the Yorktown ever since. I don't really think about my parents that much and when I do... well, I usually don't feel anything. I think I'm a lot like JonJon. But instead of forgetting it, I'm kind of ignoring it." Vincent said quietly.

"I'm sorry Vincent; I didn't know it was hurting you that much," Benny said seriously.

"It isn't right now. But I have a feeling that one of these days it's going to hit me. And when it does, I'll need T'Lani and all my friends because I'll probably be a real mess." Vincent said quietly.

"I'll be there whenever you need me." Benny said sincerely.

"Will you be there for JonJon too?" Vincent asked seriously.

Benny closed his eyes and thought for a second, then said, "Yeah. I will. It just hurt me when he decided that he wanted to forget me, just like that."

"I know that if he could have chosen one person to remember, it would have been you. Lehman and I are his friends, but you're his best friend and you always will be." Vincent said as he looked deeply into Benny's eyes.

"Okay. Then I guess we'd better switch tables before my best friend finishes his lunch and I miss the chance to make up with him." Benny said weakly.

"Yeah. Let's go."

Editor's Notes:

Well, I am so glad that Benny has forgiven Jon-Jon. I also am hoping they can build a new friendship and become even closer. They will have time to build a new life together on the new planet and the new colony. This story is going to become very interesting.

The most amazing part to me is that now there are going to be two versions of events for us to monitor. For those of you that don't know, there is actually another story with similar people in it, well, almost identical people, actually. It is called Frontier, and you can find it on bentandtweisted.us. It is, or was the story of Vincent and his friends and it continues in a different timeline than this one. The split in the timeline took place at the time the boys opened a certain box. I won't go into details here, except to say that in one timeline there was something in the box, and in the other timeline the box was empty. This story follows the boys that found the box to be empty, and it will relate the ongoing activities of everyone and what will happen to them from now on. I do, however, suggest that if you haven't read the first thirty chapters of 'Frontier' that you take the time to do so, as there are important things that have taken place in the earlier chapters and they will still impact the lives of the people that populate

this story.

Those of you who have not read other stories by MultiMapper, you are missing a lot of wonderful reading. I can highly and enthusiastically recommend any story written by him, some a little more than others, but they each have their very good points.

I also would appreciate it if you would take the time to send MultiMapper a message, letting him know that you have read his story or stories, so he knows there are people that read his work. In case it isn't obvious, it is a good idea to do this for any author who's stories you have enjoyed. It really does help us keep our minds on writing and we make fewer mistakes and hopefully, we write better stories. I can assure you that if you have suggestions for the stories, they will be considered, and they might just find their way into a chapter or two.

Darryl AKA The Radio Rancher

Chapter 32

"Is it okay if we eat with you?" Benny asked hesitantly.

Lehman looked at Vincent with question and received an assuring nod.

"Yeah, sure..." Lehman said with a tone of voice that revealed his uncertainty.

Benny sat down between Lehman and JonJon, then waited as Vincent walked around the table to sit across from him.

Vincent and Lehman glanced at each other with concern, feeling uncomfortable and not knowing what they should do or say.

JonJon looked at Benny curiously, but was also at a loss for words.

"I don't know what to say." Benny finally said as he looked at JonJon helplessly.

"You could start by saying that you're sorry." Lehman said frankly.

Benny looked at Lehman with surprise.

"Even if JonJon doesn't know what you said back there, you still said it." Lehman said as he looked Benny in the eyes.

Benny nodded, then turned to face JonJon.

Just as he seemed to be ready to speak, he quickly turned to Lehman and asked, "What is it okay to talk about? I mean, since he forgot stuff, what am I supposed to not say?"

Before Lehman could answer, Vincent said, "I think that as long as you're worried about it, you won't say anything too bad."

Lehman nodded and said, "It's his memories that were hurting him. There's a big difference between being told something and remembering it happening."

Benny slowly nodded, then turned to look at JonJon again.

"I'm sorry JonJon. When you decided to forget your life, I got mad and said some things..." Benny trailed off.

"What things?" JonJon asked in a voice so low that it could barely be heard.

Tears of shame started to well up in Benny's eyes as he fought to say, "I said... I said that by choosing to forget who you are, you'd be killing yourself and..."

"...and that I would never forgive you." Benny finished in a whisper.

"Was I your boyfriend?" JonJon asked as he looked Benny in the eyes.

"Do what?" Benny asked in a gasp.

"Is that why you were so mad at me? Because we were boyfriends and I chose my own life before yours?" JonJon asked with an expression that was free of accusation.

"No. It wasn't anything like that. We were just friends but it really hurt when you decided that you wanted to forget me, it was like our friendship meant nothing to you." Benny said in a rush to explain.

JonJon considered the words for a moment, then stood and walked to Benny's side.

Benny looked up at JonJon with question, not having any idea what he was going to do next.

"I'm sorry Benny." JonJon whispered as he hugged Benny gently.

"I don't know what I was thinking or feeling before or why I chose to do what I did. But I'm really sorry I hurt you. Please forgive me." JonJon said with true regret sounding in his voice.

Slowly, Benny stood and put his arms around JonJon to return the hug.

"Will you just promise me that you won't wipe out your memory again?" Benny asked as he held JonJon firmly in his arms.

After a moment to consider, JonJon pulled out of the hug enough to look Benny in the eyes and said, "Okay. I'll promise that I won't wipe out my memory again..."

Benny smiled and moved in to hug JonJon more firmly.

"...if you'll promise to never die." JonJon continued in a pained voice.

Benny pulled back with surprise as he thought about the words.

JonJon looked up into his eyes, not backing down from his statement.

After a moment to consider, Benny nodded and said, "Fair enough."

JonJon smiled, then released Benny from the hug and went back to his own seat.

"So is everything okay between you two now?" Vincent asked as he looked around the table at his friends.

"I guess so." Benny said in a tone of voice that betrayed his uncertainty.

"What's still wrong?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"JonJon didn't do exactly what he wanted." Lehman said bluntly.

Benny looked at Lehman with surprise and a little bit of hurt.

Lehman noticed and said, "Benny, I like you. I've liked you since I first met you. But when you try to bully JonJon by threatening not to be his friend, you really piss me off."

"Is that what I'm doing?" Benny asked absently as he considered his actions.

"Pretty much." Lehman said seriously.

Vincent looked at Lehman with surprise and question at his drastically different behavior.

"What?" Lehman asked when he noticed.

"What what?" Vincent asked in automatic response.

Lehman rolled his eyes, then said, "It looks like you've got a question. What is it?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. I guess I'm just wondering why you're acting this way all of a sudden."

Lehman considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I guess that's a fair question. I'm acting this way because JonJon promised to love me and be my brother and friend. I'd expect him to do exactly the same thing for me if someone was trying to manipulate me."

"Wait. I wasn't trying to manipulate anyone." Benny sputtered.

"Act the way I want you to. Do as I tell you and I'll be your friend... if that isn't manipulation, what is it?" Lehman asked frankly.

Benny winced at the harsh question and wasn't certain enough of his own motivations to dispute Lehman's words.

"I don't pretend to know what it's like to be Human. But among my people, this is one of the ways that you show your love to the people who are closest to you. You protect them." Lehman said seriously.

"Yeah. Humans do that too... or at least they try to." Vincent said thoughtfully.

After another moment of thought, Benny said, "I didn't realize that I was doing it, but I'll try not to bully JonJon anymore. I guess I'm still just feeling a little bit hurt because I know how it feels to be alone, and if I can deal with it, I don't see why JonJon can't."

JonJon sadly nodded, knowing that Benny had just revealed the true root of his feelings.

After a moment of stunned silence, Lehman sputtered, "You think you know what it feels like to be alone? Benny, you don't have a clue... Why don't I show you what it **really** feels like."

Before Vincent could stop him, Lehman placed a hand on Benny's neck and held it firmly in place.

"Feel what I felt, then see if you have the right to sit in judgment of someone else's pain." Lehman said through gritted teeth.

The smell was the first thing that Benny noticed.

It was a horrid, cloying stench that almost made it impossible to breathe.

As he looked around, he saw that the sky was gray with the smoke of multiple fires.

Unbidden, the knowledge came to him that the smoke was coming from massive pits where the plague infected bodies were being burned.

A pair of yellow eyes caught his attention, then another.

Even though the people didn't say the words, their eyes said more than enough.

The eyes spoke of shame, disgust, revulsion, and even hatred.

They hated the 'filthy animals' who were poor and infected with the plague that would eventually kill off nearly two thirds of the planet's population.

There were even some of the 'upper class' who believed that **all** the poor should be thrown into the pits with the burning bodies to prevent further spread of the plague.

Suddenly Benny realized that he wasn't in control of his body.

Then to his horror, he finally understood.

What he was looking at was a memory, Lehman's memory... and he couldn't help but follow it to its conclusion.

Lehman/Benny continued on past the disgusted people lining the street to make his way to the edge of one of the pits.

He took the scrap of cloth that he had been using to cover his nose and mouth to wipe the tears away from his eyes.

Then with some effort, Benny felt Lehman's body transform, or to be more precise, he felt his eyes transform.

His vision narrowed and seemed to become more acute as he looked down into the pit of burning bodies. It took a few minutes for Benny to realize what Lehman was doing.

Benny's heart sank as Lehman's eyes searched through the sea of burning corpses, focusing on one face then another. One by one, Benny looked at the faces of the dead until he had seen dozens.... maybe hundreds. But since he wasn't in control of the body in this memory, all he could do is continue to look at the sea of bodies. One face after another... trying to find the body of Lehman's father or mother.

All he wanted to do was see them one last time...

...To say goodbye.

//This is what it means to be alone. After this, a bunch of us kids... orphans, we were collected and taken into the city. We were split up into the different orphanages and warehoused like we were objects. But whenever I look back and think about how alone I really was, I always come back to this memory. At this time, on this day, I had no one. Not one person in the world, or in the entire universe, existed who cared for me. *This* is what it means to be alone.// Lehman explained gently.

"Don't hurt him." JonJon said quickly.

Vincent got between JonJon and Lehman and said, "Don't try to pull them apart. You could end up hurting them both."

"But he's going to hurt Benny." JonJon said in frustration.

"Let me handle this." Vincent said firmly, then turned to look at Lehman.

"Lehman, you need to stop this now. I don't want to have to hurt you." Vincent said in an urging tone.

"He needs to understand." Lehman said distantly.

"What you're doing is wrong. It's a violation of his mind. You could be put in jail for doing this." Vincent said seriously.

"I'm done." Lehman said as he slowly took his hand away from Benny's neck.

"Benny? Are you alright?" JonJon asked as he rushed around to Benny's other side.

After a moment of staring sightlessly, Benny blinked, then turned to look at JonJon with question.

"I'm sorry if he hurt you. I didn't want that to happen. Please tell me that you're alright." JonJon said as tears filled his eyes.

"I'm fine JonJon. Really." Benny said quietly.

"Lehman, you need to promise me that you'll never do that again." Vincent said to Lehman firmly.

"I'm not a Human. Stop trying to make me be one!" Lehman snapped as he returned Vincent's hard gaze.

"I'm not trying to make you be Human. I'm trying to tell you what you need to know to live with Humans. If you go around attacking people telepathically, they'll lock you up. I love you Lehman and I don't want you to get into trouble... I just want you to be happy." Vincent finished softly.

Lehman closed his eyes and took in a slow, cleansing breath before saying, "Okay. I'm sorry Vincent... I'm not usually like this. It's just... I don't know. Maybe hearing Cyril and Roger say that they'd make me their son and that JonJon would be my brother... It kind of brought it all back. I'm going to have a family again and I want to protect them."

Benny stood from his chair and walked to Lehman's side.

"Thanks for sharing that with me." Benny said and raised his arms, then put them down again, not sure if Lehman would welcome a hug from him.

Lehman smiled at the abortive movement then pulled Benny into a firm hug.

"So you don't hate me?" Benny asked cautiously.

"If I hated you would I go through all that and risk JonJon beating me up and Vincent throwing me in jail?" Lehman asked with a chuckle.

"I guess not." Benny said with relief.

"Is there room for one more?" Vincent asked from Benny's side.

"Nope. Two more." Lehman said as he put out his arm to invite JonJon into the hug too.

"Everyone is watching." JonJon said as he looked around the Engineer's mess hall.

Vincent glanced around the room briefly, then said, "Yeah, they're just jealous."

JonJon smiled at the response, then moved into the four-way hug.

A week had passed without incident.

Even though Roger and Cyril had invited the boys to share their cabin, JonJon and Lehman decided to continue to stay in Deflector Control so they could spend as much time as possible with Benny and Vincent.

All the boys were aware that the time was drawing near, but none of them wanted to discuss what was going to happen when they reached the new colony site.

"Crewman Winters, report to conference room one." Debbie's voice said firmly over the Deflector Control's comm system.

Vincent looked up from station two, where he had been working, in time to see both Joe and Darin's concerned looks at him.

"One of these days, the captain is going to have to pick on one of you guys instead." Vincent said as he logged off his workstation.

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about." Joe said quietly, obviously not believing it.

"Well, at least this time we aren't in a space battle." Vincent said with resignation, as he patted his pants pocket to be sure that he had some couplers, then he walked to the door.

"Call if you need us for anything." Joe said with concern.

"Sure thing. I've got seven." Vincent said as he clipped a communicator to his belt, then walked out the door.

As Vincent walked into the conference room, he was surprised to see that Captain Byrne, Commander M'Butu, Lieutenant Simms and Cyril Byrne were all present and seemed to be waiting for him.

Vincent came to attention and said, "Crewman Winters, reporting as ordered, Sir."

"At ease Crewman." Captain Byrne said automatically, then turned to face the entire group and continued, "As I'm sure you all know, we are scheduled to arrive at the SA-14 colony site in approximately eighteen hours."

Vincent nodded that he was aware and there were similar reactions from the others.

"What is not common knowledge is that we are scheduled to have a meeting with a Soleen-Avalla ship in advance of our arrival at the colony." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Even though we have been in contact with the Soleen-Avalla for a number of years via subspace, this will, in fact, be the first time our people have actually met face to face. That being the case, this will be regarded as a 'first contact' situation." Captain Byrne said as he looked over the group before him.

"We literally know nothing of the Soleen-Avalla civilization. They seem almost xenophobic in their actions, refusing all requests for information. The fact that they offered us their colony was shocking

enough, but now they have also agreed to meet with us in person and conduct us to the new colony." Captain Byrne said professionally.

"We will be at the rendezvous coordinates shortly. Report to the bridge in one quarter of an hour, dress is formal. You are dismissed." Captain Byrne said firmly.

The others turned to leave as Vincent continued to stand.

"You had a question Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked simply.

"Yes sir. I understand why everyone else is going on this mission, but I want to be sure I understand why I'm going, so I'll be able to do what I'm expected to." Vincent said carefully.

Captain Byrne smiled at Vincent and said, "It was very conscientious of you to ask. In the interest of furthering your studies in the mentoring program, Commander M'Butu and I feel that a practical demonstration of the first contact protocols that you have been learning about in your officer's training may provide an invaluable lesson. I would think that seeing the process first hand would be of more benefit in your education than reading any amount of material on the subject." Captain Byrne finished with a smile.

"Thank you sir, I understand. Is there anything special I should do, since I don't have a dress uniform?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Just change into a fresh uniform and make sure your boots and rank insignia are sufficiently shined." Captain Byrne said consideringly.

"Yes Sir." Vincent said formally.

"If there is nothing else, you are dismissed." Captain Byrne said in a semi-formal tone.

"Yes Sir. Thank you Sir." Vincent said, then turned to leave.

"What's up Champ?" Joe asked as Vincent walked into Deflector Control.

"Away detail." Vincent said, as he turned and walked into the supply room.

Joe shared a curious look with Darin, then tilted his head in the direction of the supply room to encourage Darin to go.

Darin nodded and hurried to the supply room doorway.

"An away detail to where? We're kind of in the middle of nowhere." Darin asked curiously as he watched Vincent taking off his boots.

"We're supposed to meet with a Soleen-Avalla ship in a little while and I'm going to be part of the delegation that meets them." Vincent said shyly.

"Why you?" Darin asked curiously.

"The captain said it would be good for me to learn about 'first contact' by doing it... even though I guess this will kinda be my second one." Vincent said as he pulled a shining cloth out of his storage crate and worked to bring his boots up to full luster.

Darin shook his head and chuckled as he said, "Only my little brother..."

"I don't have much time. Could you help me?" Vincent asked as he kept his focus on his boots.

"Sure, what can I do?" Darin asked as he stepped into the supply room.

"Would you get my new uniform out of my storage crate and make sure that it isn't wrinkled and that the rank insignia is shiny? I want to be sure that I look okay." Vincent said in concentration.

Darin immediately went to the storage container that Vincent had been using as a locker and pulled out the neatly folded jumpsuit.

He carefully unfolded it and looked it over to see that it was presentable.

"It looks fine." Darin announced as he turned to look at Vincent.

"Thanks. I've only got a few minutes." Vincent said quickly as he set his boots aside then threw the shining cloth into the crate.

"I'll get it ready for you." Darin said as he began to open the front of the new jumpsuit.

"Here." Vincent said as he handed Darin his wallet and two couplers.

Darin smiled as he placed the items into the new uniform.

"What about the communicator?" Darin asked as he gestured toward the communicator still hanging on Vincent's belt.

"Would you mind putting it up for me? I'm pretty sure that no matter what happens, I won't be needing it." Vincent said as he handed the communicator to Darin.

"No problem." Darin said gently as he clipped the communicator onto his own belt.

Vincent quickly opened the front of the jumpsuit uniform he was wearing and stepped out of it.

Darin handed him the new uniform and said, "Just leave the other one and I'll take care of it."

"Thanks." Vincent said as he pulled the new jumpsuit on.

"Would you like some gel for your hair? It might look a little more formal." Darin asked consideringly.

"Yeah." Vincent said as he bent down to pull on his boots.

Darin hurried to his own storage crate and returned with a dab of styling gel in his hand.

"Just hold still for a second." Darin said as he rubbed his hands together.

As soon as Vincent had finished pulling on his boots, he stood before Darin and waited for him to apply the gel.

Darin smoothed his hands over Vincent's slightly shaggy hair a few times to get the styling gel evenly distributed.

"Now, just comb your hair and you'll be ready." Darin said as he took a step back to look.

Vincent reached into his crate and pulled out a comb, then quickly pulled it through his hair.

"How's that?" Vincent asked as he looked at Darin expectantly.

"It looks great. You should think about using gel all the time." Darin said with a smile.

"Okay. I've got to go now." Vincent said quickly.

"Go on." Darin said and held out his hand for the comb.

Vincent handed the comb to Darin, then hurried out of the supply room.

As Vincent stepped onto the main bridge, he noticed that Captain Byrne was the only one of their group present.

The last time he had seen the captain in a formal uniform was when the Holy One was welcomed aboard.

"Captain, I'm detecting a vessel entering this sector... it's just dropped out of high warp." Lieutenant Clark said cautiously.

"On screen." Captain Byrne said immediately.

After a moment, Lieutenant Clark said, "I'm sorry sir, this is the best I can do at this distance. It's still at the far side of the sector."

As the somewhat blurry image of the alien ship filled the screen, Vincent's eyes went wide.

"It's Gorn." Debbie gasped from her communications console.

"No." Lieutenant Clark said hesitantly.

All attention turned to Lieutenant Clark as he examined the readings on his console.

"There are similarities in design, but this ship is more advanced than the Gorn ships... A lot more." Lieutenant Clark said in concentration.

"Be that as it may, it's best to err on the side of caution. This may be an indication that the Soleen-Avalla may have similar customs to the Gorn. Discontinue all invasive scans and make no attempt at communication. Use tactical scanners only and be prepared to discontinue the tactical scans as soon as the ship enters visual range."

"Yes sir. But they've stopped moving." Lieutenant Clark said slowly.

"Captain, we're being hailed." Debbie said cautiously.

"On screen." Captain Byrne said seriously and turned to face the main view screen.

Vincent noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see that Commander M'Butu, Lieutenant Simms and Cyril had joined them.

"Federation Starship Yorktown, are you prepared to receive our representative?" A man's cold, professional voice asked.

Vincent looked at the view screen to find the image of a middle aged man. His appearance was human and his expression was nothing short of completely professional.

The captain stood a little straighter and said, "Yes. We will be honored to receive your representative. If you will send us rendezvous coordinates...."

The captain was interrupted by the appearance of a fountain of multi-colored sparkles that seemed to erupt from nowhere. Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the sparkles vanished leaving a fourteen or fifteen year old girl standing before them.

Vincent stared in wonder at the beautiful girl. She was small with delicate features and had large soulful eyes. Her long brown hair nearly reached her waist and she was wearing a thin shimmering robe that loosely draped over her slender frame.

"But they're all the way on the other side of the sector." Lieutenant Clark said in wonder as he looked at his console again.

"I am Jenn. I am the representative of the Soleen-Avalla sent to conduct you to the colony." The young girl said seriously.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Jenn. I am Captain Leland Byrne. May I introduce my first officer, Commander Oliver M'Butu, my Chief of Security, Lieutenant Wayland Simms, my son, Cyril Byrne, who also happens to be one of the leaders of the colony and Crewman Vincent Winters, son of Clan Short of the house of Surak of Vulcan." Captain Byrne said as he gestured to indicate each person in turn.

Jenn looked at each person who was introduced and gave a slight nod of acknowledgment, then her gaze fixed on Vincent.

After a moment she hesitantly asked, "Is he the one who entered the reactor?"

Captain Byrne seemed surprised by the question, but quickly answered, "I wasn't aware that you knew of that, but yes."

"We requested an accounting of the events that led to the evacuation of the colony. The report we received made mention of Crewman Winters' heroic act." Jenn said with a gentle smile, then turned to Vincent and said, "It is an honor to meet you Crewman Winters."

Vincent was stunned for a moment, but was somehow able to say, "It's an honor to meet you too."

Jenn smiled warmly at Vincent, then turned her attention back to Captain Byrne.

"I'm sure you've realized that the Soleen-Avalla are a very private people." Jenn said seriously.

"We've noticed." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"It is for that reason that I have been sent to you. My ship will depart and I will conduct you to the new colony. I will be able to answer any questions you might have." Jenn said as she looked the captain in the eyes.

"Oh. I see." Captain Byrne said slowly.

Vincent felt a momentary sensation, like an itch on his chest. He discretely rubbed the spot hoping to soothe the itch without anyone noticing.

"Although I have a multitude of questions, I must admit that they all stem from my personal curiosity. I'm certain that Cyril has many questions of great concern to the colonists." Captain Byrne said, then looked at his son.

Cyril stepped forward and said, "Whenever you're ready, we could go to my office. As my father said, I have quite a few questions for you, and if we can get them answered before we arrive at the colony site, we might just be able to get this done without too much trouble for anyone."

Jenn glanced away from Cyril for a moment, then said, "My ship is leaving. I can go with you now."

"Captain, the Soleen-Avalla ship is leaving the... they're gone." Lieutenant Clark said as he looked over his scanners carefully.

"Please define 'Gone'." Captain Byrne said with concern as he walked to stand behind the lieutenant.

"When they moved out of the system, they dropped into high warp... I mean, really high warp." Lieutenant Clark said as he played his sensor readings back for the captain to see.

"Our ships use a different system of propulsion which allows them to move a bit faster than your Starfleet ships. I believe your people call it trans-warp." Jenn said informatively.

"Transwarp is considered to be a failed technology in the Federation. The theory seemed sound, but we could never get it to work dependably." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"It is only in recent years that the Soleen-Avalla have perfected the process." Jenn said casually.

"Perhaps we will have an opportunity to discuss it later." Captain Byrne said diplomatically, then turned to the helm and said, "Lieutenant Clark, proceed on course to SA-14."

"Aye Captain." Lieutenant Clark said as he worked his controls.

"Jenn, if you would like to rest for a time after your journey to meet us, we can show you to your cabin now." Captain Byrne said respectfully.

"There is no need Captain. If you would have no objection, I would like to get to work answering those questions you mentioned earlier." Jenn said with a gentle smile.

"As you like. But I won't allow my son to monopolize all your time aboard my ship. I would like to invite you to dine with me in the officer's dining room this evening." The captain said smoothly.

"Yes, of course Captain. I will look forward to it." Jenn said gently.

"Then if there is nothing else, you are all dismissed." Captain Byrne said to the group.

Cyril led Jenn to the turbo lift first as Vincent and Commander M'Butu watched them go.

"What a lovely girl. I wonder how one so young was chosen to represent the Soleen-Avalla empire." Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"I can't imagine, but given her self-assurance and gentle demeanor, I find it easy to believe that she is up to the challenge." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

Captain Byrne nodded his agreement, then quickly said, "Oh, and Crewman Winters, you will also be expected to attend tonight's dinner welcoming Jenn aboard."

"Yes sir." Vincent said as he straightened his posture.

Captain Byrne nodded, then turned his attention to someone who approached from his other side.

The turbo lift door opened and Vincent got aboard.

"Deflector Control." He called to the ceiling of the lift as he thought about all that he had seen.

"So Champ, how did it go?" Joe asked happily, obviously relieved to see Vincent return so soon.

"It went pretty well. I want to write some stuff down real quick before I forget it." Vincent said as he hurried to one of the auxiliary stations.

Darin and Joe exchanged a look, then Joe slowly made his way across the room, trying to look casual.

When Vincent noticed Joe standing behind him, he said, "I just wanted to take some notes about how the meeting went. The captain said I was there to learn about First Contact, so I want to be sure that I learned something."

Joe put his hand on Vincent's shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze before saying, "You've done a really great job dealing with your duties and school work. I was thinking that if you're up to it, we might do a little extra work on your officer's training while we're getting the new colony settled."

"Really?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Joe nodded, then said, "But I'm going to need for you to make me a promise before we get started."

"What's that?" Vincent asked as he devoted his full attention to Joe.

"Make sure you don't pass up any chances to spend time with your friends while we're here." Joe said gently.

"What?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"I'm just saying that this is something extra that we can do while you have spare time. Make sure that you spend plenty of time with Benny, JonJon and Lehman before the Yorktown has to leave. I have a feeling that you'll have plenty of time to study on the way back to Earth..." Joe trailed off.

"...without them being here." Vincent said as he nodded.

"So do you promise?" Joe asked seriously.

"Yeah. I promise that I won't pass up any chances to spend time with the guys." Vincent said as he forced a smile onto his face for Joe's benefit.

"The shift is over. What are you doing Champ?" Joe asked as he noticed that Vincent had been sitting motionless for some time.

"Whenever I get really mad or something like that, I've been using my bond with T'Lani to help calm me down. I was just kind of working out how I can do the same thing for myself so I won't have to bother her all the time." Vincent said carefully.

"Do you think she minds helping you control your emotions?" Joe asked as he casually dropped into the chair at auxiliary station one.

"No. I know she doesn't mind. But I still need to learn to do this for myself. I'm a Vulcan citizen, so I should be able to control my own emotions when I need to." Vincent said seriously.

"You may be a Vulcan citizen, but you're still a Human. No one is going to expect you to behave like a Vulcan." Joe said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Maybe not. But that's not what I'm really talking about. It's more like the way I got mad when Tyce kissed me. I could have messed up things between Okuda and the Federation because I couldn't control myself." Vincent said, and Joe began to realize the depth of Vincent's conviction.

"I thought you were seeing a counselor for that." Joe said cautiously.

"Yeah. I am. And that's working pretty good. But what Tony is helping me with is understanding why I feel the way I feel about certain things. This is something else, I'm trying to figure out how to catch it when my emotions get crazy all of a sudden and are trying to get away from me." Vincent said with determination.

Joe considered the words for a moment, then nodded as he said, "I think that's a good plan. I'll let you get back to it."

Vincent looked at the time on the auxiliary station's display, then said, "I need to get cleaned up before dinner. I'm going to have dinner in the officer's dining room."

"Oh? Is this going to become a regular thing for you?" Joe asked with a smile.

Vincent looked at Joe curiously for a moment, then said, "Lehman is the one who went to the last dinner. This will be my first time."

"Oh, right. Well, I hope you have a good time. I'm sure Dennis will be preparing one of his masterpieces for the special occasion." Joe said warmly.

"Wait... Dennis? Are you talking about that guy from the shuttle who wore so much cologne I could taste it?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Joe chuckled, then said, "One and the same."

"Maybe I'll just have the salad." Vincent muttered with a worried look.

"Despite what you may think of him as a person, he really is an excellent chef. The food will be fine, I promise." Joe said, then stood.

Vincent looked at Joe uncertainly, but finally accepted that it was *possible*.

Vincent walked into the storage room to find Darin standing in only his boxer shorts.

"Hot date?" Vincent asked as he waggled his eyebrows at Darin.

"Actually, yes." Darin said with a happy smile.

"I've got to get ready to have dinner in the officer's dining room." Vincent said as he began to change out of his uniform.

"I've been meaning to do that, but I think Rad and I are just so comfortable with the Engineer's mess hall that we haven't really talked about going to the officer's mess." Darin said casually.

"Well, this will be my first time." Vincent said a little bit nervously.

"My dad used to have formal dinners all the time and I learned pretty quick to keep myself entertained while I pretended to pay attention." Darin said casually.

"So can you give me some advice? I don't want to say or do the wrong thing and make Captain Byrne regret that he invited me." Vincent said, letting his full anxiety be clearly heard.

After a moment to think about the question, Darin smiled and said, "Someone very wise once gave me some good advice about what to do in a situation like this."

Vincent devoted his full attention to Darin, hanging on his every word.

"Just think about what Joe would do if he were there instead of you." Darin said with a smile.

Vincent puzzled over the statement for a moment, then broke into a wide grin.

"That's one of the first things that you taught me, little brother, and it's always worked." Darin said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks." Vincent said timidly, then reluctantly continued, "It's almost time, I've got to go."

"Me too. Give me a second to gel my hair, then I'll walk with you to the lift." Darin said as he quickly checked himself to see that he hadn't forgotten anything.

"You look fine." Vincent said with a smile, then asked, "Do I need anymore gel?"

Darin glanced at Vincent, then said, "No, it still looks good. You really should consider using it all the time, I think it makes you look more professional."

Vincent pulled a small hand-held mirror out of his storage crate and looked at himself for a moment before saying, "I don't know. I guess it's okay if I'm going somewhere fancy, but I'd feel like I was acting like I'm someone that I'm not if I wore it all the time."

Darin gestured toward the door of the storage room, indicating that he was ready to go.

As Vincent and Darin stepped into the main room of deflector control, Joe said, "You two look great, I hope you both have a wonderful time tonight."

Both Vincent and Darin could clearly see the pride in Joe's expression as he looked at 'his boys'.

"Thanks, we'll do our best. We've got to go now." Darin said as he turned to go.

"I hope you have a good night too." Vincent said, then walked with Darin out the door.

A moment of silence fell over Deflector Control until it was broken by Connie saying, "I hope Melina and I are as lucky as you when we have kids."

"I hope so too Connie... there's no feeling in the universe that can match this." Joe said distantly.

"Good evening Crewman Winters." Captain Byrne said warmly as he noticed Vincent walking into the dining room.

"Good evening Captain." Vincent said in his 'mature' voice, doing his best to behave as Joe would.

"Since our guest of honor hasn't arrived yet, you may want to have a drink and mingle before we sit down to dinner." Captain Byrne said as he gestured to the other guests in the room.

"Thank you sir, I'd like that." Vincent said calmly and gave the captain a small smile of gratitude for treating him the same as any of the other guests.

"What would you like to drink, Crewman Winters?" a waiter asked from Vincent's side.

"Water, if that wouldn't be too much trouble." Vincent said as he looked up into the waiter's eyes.

"No trouble at all." the waiter said with a smile.

"Well Crewman Winters, how are you doing these days? I haven't heard much from you since we parted company with the Okudai." Lieutenant Simms said casually as he approached.

Vincent smiled and said, "Well, I guess if things are getting boring, I could try to stir something up."

"No no. I wasn't complaining. I was just saying that for a while there I was seeing you more often than some of my own security officers." Lieutenant Simms said with a smile.

A nearby movement drew Vincent's attention and he turned to see the waiter approaching with his drink.

Vincent smiled as he accepted a long stemmed glass of iced water with a slice of lemon in it.

"Thank you." Vincent said to the waiter and received a nod from the waiter before returning his attention back to Lieutenant Simms.

"I haven't seen much of Korrigon since we left the Okudai, do you know how he's doing?" Vincent asked casually before taking a sip of his water.

"He's fine. Actually, I've been keeping him busy." Lieutenant Simms said with a smile.

Vincent gave a Vulcanesque raise of one eyebrow to prompt Lieutenant Simms to continue.

"After Korrigon made the choice to join the colony, he started to think about what he could possibly do for a job once he got there. His skills as a mercenary aren't of much use in polite society." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Yeah. I guess it would be hard to start a new life from nothing." Vincent said speculatively.

"Exactly. So I've been working with Dave to discover his interests and how they might be used to make him a productive member of the colony." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

"Have you come up with anything?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yes. As a matter of fact we have. If everything goes to plan, Dave is going to be opening a pub, possibly even an inn. We'll just have to see what type of buildings they have when we get there." Lieutenant Simms said speculatively.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Yeah. I can see how that would work out for him. I think that if I went into his pub that I'd feel really comfortable."

Lieutenant Simms smiled and said, "That's what I thought too. He has such a genuine 'down to earth' nature that he automatically puts people at ease."

Vincent turned at movement from the front of the dining room and saw a group of people entering.

He had expected Jenn and Cyril to be at the dinner, but was surprised to also see Roger, JonJon and Lehman walking in.

"If you'll excuse me, I have something I need to discuss with Roger." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"Sure. It was nice talking to you." Vincent said with a smile.

"I didn't know you were going to be here." Lehman said as he and JonJon walked up to Vincent.

"Yeah. I think I'm here as part of my officer's training. I need to learn how to act at a formal dinner and stuff like that." Vincent said happily.

"Cyril said that he wanted us to come so he could have his whole family at the dinner tonight. I was afraid that it was going to be really boring." Lehman said frankly.

"I think it's going to be kind of nice. You know, like playing at being grown-up. I wouldn't want to do something like this every night, but it might be fun once in a while." Vincent said with a smile.

"Thank you Vincent. I wasn't sure how I felt about being here, but I think 'playing at being grown-up' will make the dinner a lot more fun." JonJon said quietly.

"It looks like everyone is going to the table. Let's go."

"It will be a few minutes before dinner is served, so everyone please make yourselves comfortable." Captain Byrne said to the table in general, then turned to his side and asked, "Jenn, have you been introduced to everyone?"

After a moment to look around the table, she answered, "Yes. Though I haven't had the opportunity to speak to everyone, I know who everyone is."

"Very well. How are the preparations for the colony going?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

"Cyril and Roger have done an amazing job of preparing. We should have the settlement plan complete well in advance of our arrival." Jenn said with a casual smile.

"Yes. Jenn has a wealth of information about the colony site. So the majority of the work we have left to do is detail work." Cyril said frankly.

"And JonJon has been a great help to us." Roger added timidly.

"Oh really?" Captain Byrne asked with surprise.

"Yes. Jenn has information about the available housing and Roger has a detailed listing of the families in need of accommodations. JonJon has been working to merge the two lists." Cyril said proudly.

"Lehman, I hope you aren't feeling left out of all of this." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"I'm fine Grandpa. I've been taking care of Fizgig." Lehman said seriously, then after a moment of consideration he continued, "And I've been making sure that Dad and Other Dad don't make JonJon work too hard."

Captain Byrne chuckled and said, "Very good. That's a very important job and I'm sure everyone appreciates your efforts."

"We do Father. Lehman is a good brother." Cyril said warmly.

Captain Byrne smiled at his family, then turned to Jenn and asked, "So Jenn, I understand that the colony has stood unmanned for over a hundred years. Do you have any idea as to it's condition?"

"Yes Captain, before I came aboard I contacted the Haventaik AI and received a visual survey of the colony. Although the farmlands at the perimeter of the colony have returned to the wild, the colony itself has been maintained." Jenn said seriously.

"This is the first I'm hearing about an AI system. Are you saying that there is an intelligent computer maintaining the colony?" Commander M'Butu asked curiously.

"Yes Commander. Mycien is the Guardian of Haventaук. He has been keeping the colony maintained until the day arrived that someone chose to return." Jenn said frankly.

"Will the AI unit be willing to accept us? He might see us as aliens." Lehman asked curiously.

"Mycien has been kept up to date on all the information regarding the Kimber colony and is awaiting your arrival." Jenn said with a pleasant smile.

"So is the new colony named Haventaук?" Vincent asked curiously.

"That was the name of the former colony." Jenn said shortly, and it was clear from the tone of her voice that the colony would be getting a new name.

"So what are you going to call the colony now? Kimber V?" Lehman asked as he looked around.

"No. I don't think so. Kimber was the name of the local star where the colony was located and Kimber IV was the fourth planet." Cyril said seriously.

"What do you think it should be called?" Roger asked Lehman gently, not wanting him to feel that Cyril was dismissing his suggestion out of hand.

"I don't know... how do you usually name places?" Lehman asked curiously.

"There are many methods for naming. The colony site is currently designated SA-14 on the star charts, being the 14th star charted in the Soleen-Avalla territory of space." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Of course, some places are named for the people who discovered them. Others are named for great people as a tribute." Cyril said thoughtfully.

Captain Byrne nodded and said, "There is also the tradition of naming a place to recognize what you want it to become, such as New England or New Amsterdam."

Everyone noticed as JonJon leaned in and whispered to Lehman.

After a moment to consider, Lehman nodded and whispered in return.

"Did you have an idea?" Roger asked curiously.

Lehman looked at JonJon with question and waited for him to answer.

Finally, Lehman turned to Roger and said, "JonJon has an idea, but he's afraid that you'll think it's stupid."

"Please don't be concerned JonJon, we are simply discussing possibilities right now. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' suggestions." Captain Byrne said gently as he looked JonJon in the eyes.

"Go on." JonJon whispered to Lehman shyly.

Lehman smiled at his brother and said, "Well, JonJon was thinking that Kimber IV was a colony where everyone was hoping that they could make new lives that were uncomplicated and happy."

Everyone at the table was devoting their full attention to Lehman, genuinely interested in what he had to say.

"Well, JonJon was thinking that since Kimber IV was kind of like everyone's hope, maybe this colony could be known as 'New Hope'." Lehman said as he looked around.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone considered the suggestion.

"I like it." Vincent said honestly.

JonJon looked at Vincent timidly, then smiled.

"I think that is a very good suggestion. When the council meets, I'll be sure to offer your suggestion to them." Cyril said firmly.

JonJon beamed at Cyril's words, then turned as waiters arrived with plates of salad for everyone.

"The last time I had dinner in here, the Okudai thought we were vegetarians because we had salad first." Lehman chuckled.

Captain Byrne smiled at the memory, then turned to his side and said, "I hadn't thought to ask about your diet Jenn. Are there any foods that your people cannot eat or that are offensive to you?"

Jenn smiled and said, "The Avalla are herbivorous. Their bodies have difficulty processing meat. The Soleen are omnivorous, like your people."

"Then the Soleen and the Avalla are two distinct species?" Commander M'Butu asked with interest.

"Yes. But my people would prefer that I not expound on that subject... perhaps at a later time." Jenn said gently.

"As you say, but can you tell us, are you Soleen or Avalla?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

"Neither, or perhaps both. I am Soleen-Avalla." Jenn said seriously.

Vincent giggled, drawing everyone's attention.

"Sorry." Vincent said shyly, then continued, "I just like the way she answered your question. It was kind of like watching someone steal a base in baseball."

Captain Byrne smiled at the strange analogy, then began to explain, "Baseball is a game..."

"Excuse me captain. " Jenn interrupted gently, then continued, "We have been monitoring Federation broadcasts for some years and I am familiar with the sport. In fact, I have a special fondness for the Detroit Tigers."

"Oh. I see." Captain Byrne said with surprise.

"You really like the Detroit Tigers?" Vincent asked curiously.

Jenn smiled at Vincent and said, "Yes. I do not think that they will win, but I like them."

Vincent chuckled and said, "As long as you're not counting on them to win, then I guess they're alright."

The waiters returned to the dining room and began to clear away the salad plates.

"Why did they give us catsup?" Vincent asked when he noticed that he and Lehman were the only ones at the table with catsup by their plates.

"Oh, I guess I never did tell you about that." Lehman said with a chuckle.

"I remember hearing Thaelan mention something about catsup, but I didn't get the whole story. Will you tell me later?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Lehman nodded, then started to eat his dinner.

Commander M'Butu smiled at the exchange, then turned to Captain Byrne and asked, "Since the colony has been maintained, there isn't any reason that our initial landing party shouldn't include Cyril and Roger, is there?"

"I was just thinking the same thing. What do you think Cyril? Will you be ready to survey the colony when we arrive in the morning?" Captain Byrne asked with interest.

"Yes. I believe so. And if you have no objection, I would like for Crewman Winters to be included on the team." Cyril said consideringly.

"May I ask why?" Captain Byrne asked with interest

Vincent listened intently as he slowly cut himself a bite of meat.

"Crewman Winters has been declared our first citizen. Though it may be a symbolic gesture, I believe it will hold some meaning for the colonists. In effect, it would be a way of saying that the colonization has begun because the 'first' of us has arrived." Cyril said carefully.

"As you like." Captain Byrne said simply, then glanced at Vincent to be sure that he didn't have any objection.

Vincent smiled and nodded his agreement, then took a bite of the meat and slowly chewed.

His mind drifted away from the conversation as he considered the flavor of the meat.

It just seemed to be wrong... flat... not really bad, but something was definitely missing.

"Catsup helps." Lehman whispered at his side, snapping him out of his thoughts.

Vincent cut another, smaller piece of meat, then spooned a little dab of catsup on it.

"Here, I'll share." Lehman said to his other side as he scooted his bowl of catsup between his and Jon-Jon's plates.

Vincent took a bite of the meat, then considered the flavor with the catsup added.

"It's better, isn't it?" Lehman asked seriously.

"Yeah. Thanks." Vincent said happily.

"Crewman Winters, if I recall correctly, you haven't been trained in the use of side arms. Is that right?" Lieutenant Simms asked casually.

Vincent swallowed his bite of food, then took a sip of water before answering, "Yes. That's right."

"Well, with the Captain's permission, I would like to give you some basic instruction after dinner. I believe that it would be appropriate for you to wear a side arm when we visit the colony tomorrow." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Yeah." Vincent said quickly, then restrained his enthusiasm and asked, "Captain?"

"Yes. The general orders do insist that the members of the initial survey party be armed. Although I doubt that you will need to use your phaser on this mission, it won't hurt for you to have the instruction." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Thank you Captain." Vincent said, barely containing his excitement.

As Vincent continued to eat, he was only half aware of his surroundings. He was enjoying his meal but his mind kept drifting back to the fact that he was going to receive phaser training.

He had never really thought too much about taking the training because other things always seemed to be more important. But this was different. The head of security and the captain both felt that he was ready for this training... he wasn't too young... they trusted him.

"Wow." Lehman said, breaking Vincent out of his thoughts.

Just as he was about to ask Lehman what had surprised him, movement from Vincent's side drew his attention and he watched a waiter place a flamboyant and decorative dessert in front of him.

It was huge.

Puff pastry, vanilla ice cream, another wafer thin pastry, chocolate ice cream, more pastry, strawberry ice cream, and one final layer of pastry that had been sprinkled with powdered sugar and drizzled with chocolate sauce.

"My people have never created a food such as this." Jenn said in amazement.

"Our chef has really outdone himself with this creation." Captain Byrne said with appreciation.

Vincent slowly worked to get some ice cream along with a piece of the flaky delicate pastry.

The slight crunch was the perfect contrast to the smooth creamy ice cream.

"This has to be the best dessert I've ever had in my life." Vincent said before slowly taking another bite.

"Me too." Lehman said with a delighted smile.

The captain gestured to summon one of the waiters, then said, "Please convey our sincere appreciation to the chef."

The waiter smiled as he nodded, then quickly withdrew to the kitchen.

"Cyril, can you give us some sort of a hint about what we'll be finding when we arrive at the colony site?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

"Yes. It appears that the colony is three to four times the size that we need. That is allowing us the opportunity to provide for generational growth in our plans for the initial settlement." Cyril said seriously.

"We're setting it up so parents and kids and their grandkids can all have houses and live in the same place if they want to." JonJon explained to Lehman at his side.

"That really sounds nice." Lehman said with a speculative smile.

Vincent nodded his agreement to the statement.

"Of course, our plans might change once we've visited the colony site. No amount of speculation will completely prepare us for the reality." Roger quickly amended.

"Yes. We will do as much as possible before we arrive, then adapt our plans to the colony that we find." Cyril said frankly.

"That being said, perhaps we should excuse ourselves and get back to work. There's still quite a lot to do before we arrive." Roger said cautiously.

Cyril looked at his father with question at the suggestion.

"Perhaps Jenn would enjoy a tour of the ship and an opportunity to relax before resuming her work." Captain Byrne said carefully.

Cyril nodded his acceptance of his father's statement.

"Captain, if you are asking my preference, I would really like to return to the preparations for our arrival. I have had little to do but rest until your ship arrived." Jenn said frankly.

"As you wish. But please keep in mind that the Yorktown will remain for as long as we are needed. There is no need to work yourself to exhaustion." Captain Byrne said with concern.

"Thank you Captain. I too will remain for as long as I can be of benefit. I am certain that we will have many opportunities to speak once the colonization efforts are underway." Jenn said seriously.

"Then we should be going." Cyril said, then looked to his father to be sure that he wasn't being rude by suggesting that they leave.

"Yes. I believe we all have duties that we could be performing." Captain Byrne said as he stood.

The rest of the guests followed the captain's lead.

"While you're working, I'm going down to play with Fizgig for a while so he won't feel lonely." Lehman said to JonJon with a smile.

"Thank you. I am so lucky to have a brother like you. I wouldn't have known what to do to take care of Fizgig if it weren't for you." JonJon said as he pulled Lehman into a hug.

"Crewman Winters. If you have no other duties now, we could begin your side arm training." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

Vincent turned and said, "No. I don't have anything else planned tonight."

"That's good, because this could take a few hours." Lieutenant Simms said, then looked at Vincent with question, obviously giving him one last chance to back out.

"Sounds great. I'm ready when you are." Vincent said with a smile.

Editor's Notes: What a difference a universe makes! It is interesting to compare the two situations. I am really looking forward to seeing what will happen in this new universe. Did anyone notice what Jenn was saying in her answer to the question as to her species?

For those of you who may not have been following Frontier, you may have missed something. Let me just say that when it comes to MultiMapper's stories, when something seems to be different than what you were expecting to see, you should pay close attention, because there will be a short quiz at the end of the semester. Don't worry, I won't give you any spoilers, but I have warned you to pay close attention to details.

I am ready and waiting for the next chapter.

Darryl AKA The Radio Rancher

Chapter 32

"Is it okay if we eat with you?" Benny asked hesitantly.

Lehman looked at Vincent with question and received an assuring nod.

"Yeah, sure..." Lehman said with a tone of voice that revealed his uncertainty.

Benny sat down between Lehman and JonJon, then waited as Vincent walked around the table to sit across from him.

Vincent and Lehman glanced at each other with concern, feeling uncomfortable and not knowing what they should do or say.

JonJon looked at Benny curiously, but was also at a loss for words.

"I don't know what to say." Benny finally said as he looked at JonJon helplessly.

"You could start by saying that you're sorry." Lehman said frankly.

Benny looked at Lehman with surprise.

"Even if JonJon doesn't know what you said back there, you still said it." Lehman said as he looked Benny in the eyes.

Benny nodded, then turned to face JonJon.

Just as he seemed to be ready to speak, he quickly turned to Lehman and asked, "What is it okay to talk about? I mean, since he forgot stuff, what am I supposed to not say?"

Before Lehman could answer, Vincent said, "I think that as long as you're worried about it, you won't say anything too bad."

Lehman nodded and said, "It's his memories that were hurting him. There's a big difference between being told something and remembering it happening."

Benny slowly nodded, then turned to look at JonJon again.

"I'm sorry JonJon. When you decided to forget your life, I got mad and said some things..." Benny trailed off.

"What things?" JonJon asked in a voice so low that it could barely be heard.

Tears of shame started to well up in Benny's eyes as he fought to say, "I said... I said that by choosing to forget who you are, you'd be killing yourself and..."

"...and that I would never forgive you." Benny finished in a whisper.

"Was I your boyfriend?" JonJon asked as he looked Benny in the eyes.

"Do what?" Benny asked in a gasp.

"Is that why you were so mad at me? Because we were boyfriends and I chose my own life before yours?" JonJon asked with an expression that was free of accusation.

"No. It wasn't anything like that. We were just friends but it really hurt when you decided that you wanted to forget me, it was like our friendship meant nothing to you." Benny said in a rush to explain.

JonJon considered the words for a moment, then stood and walked to Benny's side.

Benny looked up at JonJon with question, not having any idea what he was going to do next.

"I'm sorry Benny." JonJon whispered as he hugged Benny gently.

"I don't know what I was thinking or feeling before or why I chose to do what I did. But I'm really sorry I hurt you. Please forgive me." JonJon said with true regret sounding in his voice.

Slowly, Benny stood and put his arms around JonJon to return the hug.

"Will you just promise me that you won't wipe out your memory again?" Benny asked as he held JonJon firmly in his arms.

After a moment to consider, JonJon pulled out of the hug enough to look Benny in the eyes and said, "Okay. I'll promise that I won't wipe out my memory again..."

Benny smiled and moved in to hug JonJon more firmly.

"...if you'll promise to never die." JonJon continued in a pained voice.

Benny pulled back with surprise as he thought about the words.

JonJon looked up into his eyes, not backing down from his statement.

After a moment to consider, Benny nodded and said, "Fair enough."

JonJon smiled, then released Benny from the hug and went back to his own seat.

"So is everything okay between you two now?" Vincent asked as he looked around the table at his friends.

"I guess so." Benny said in a tone of voice that betrayed his uncertainty.

"What's still wrong?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"JonJon didn't do exactly what he wanted." Lehman said bluntly.

Benny looked at Lehman with surprise and a little bit of hurt.

Lehman noticed and said, "Benny, I like you. I've liked you since I first met you. But when you try to bully JonJon by threatening not to be his friend, you really piss me off."

"Is that what I'm doing?" Benny asked absently as he considered his actions.

"Pretty much." Lehman said seriously.

Vincent looked at Lehman with surprise and question at his drastically different behavior.

"What?" Lehman asked when he noticed.

"What what?" Vincent asked in automatic response.

Lehman rolled his eyes, then said, "It looks like you've got a question. What is it?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. I guess I'm just wondering why you're acting this way all of a sudden."

Lehman considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I guess that's a fair question. I'm acting this way because JonJon promised to love me and be my brother and friend. I'd expect him to do exactly the same thing for me if someone was trying to manipulate me."

"Wait. I wasn't trying to manipulate anyone." Benny sputtered.

"Act the way I want you to. Do as I tell you and I'll be your friend... if that isn't manipulation, what is it?" Lehman asked frankly.

Benny winced at the harsh question and wasn't certain enough of his own motivations to dispute Lehman's words.

"I don't pretend to know what it's like to be Human. But among my people, this is one of the ways that you show your love to the people who are closest to you. You protect them." Lehman said seriously.

"Yeah. Humans do that too... or at least they try to." Vincent said thoughtfully.

After another moment of thought, Benny said, "I didn't realize that I was doing it, but I'll try not to bully JonJon anymore. I guess I'm still just feeling a little bit hurt because I know how it feels to be alone, and if I can deal with it, I don't see why JonJon can't."

JonJon sadly nodded, knowing that Benny had just revealed the true root of his feelings.

After a moment of stunned silence, Lehman sputtered, "You think you know what it feels like to be alone? Benny, you don't have a clue... Why don't I show you what it *really* feels like."

Before Vincent could stop him, Lehman placed a hand on Benny's neck and held it firmly in place.

"Feel what I felt, then see if you have the right to sit in judgment of someone else's pain." Lehman said through gritted teeth.

The smell was the first thing that Benny noticed.

It was a horrid, cloying stench that almost made it impossible to breathe.

As he looked around, he saw that the sky was gray with the smoke of multiple fires.

Unbidden, the knowledge came to him that the smoke was coming from massive pits where the plague infected bodies were being burned.

A pair of yellow eyes caught his attention, then another.

Even though the people didn't say the words, their eyes said more than enough.

The eyes spoke of shame, disgust, revulsion, and even hatred.

They hated the 'filthy animals' who were poor and infected with the plague that would eventually kill off nearly two thirds of the planet's population.

There were even some of the 'upper class' who believed that *all* the poor should be thrown into the pits with the burning bodies to prevent further spread of the plague.

Suddenly Benny realized that he wasn't in control of his body.

Then to his horror, he finally understood.

What he was looking at was a memory, Lehman's memory... and he couldn't help but follow it to its conclusion.

Lehman/Benny continued on past the disgusted people lining the street to make his way to the edge of one of the pits.

He took the scrap of cloth that he had been using to cover his nose and mouth to wipe the tears away from his eyes.

Then with some effort, Benny felt Lehman's body transform, or to be more precise, he felt his eyes transform.

His vision narrowed and seemed to become more acute as he looked down into the pit of burning bodies. It took a few minutes for Benny to realize what Lehman was doing.

Benny's heart sank as Lehman's eyes searched through the sea of burning corpses, focusing on one face then another. One by one, Benny looked at the faces of the dead until he had seen dozens.... maybe hundreds. But since he wasn't in control of the body in this memory, all he could do is continue to look at the sea of bodies. One face after another... trying to find the body of Lehman's father or mother.

All he wanted to do was see them one last time...

...To say goodbye.

//This is what it means to be alone. After this, a bunch of us kids... orphans, we were collected and taken into the city. We were split up into the different orphanages and warehoused like we were objects. But whenever I look back and think about how alone I really was, I always come back to this memory. At this time, on this day, I had no one. Not one person in the world, or in the entire universe, existed who cared for me. *This* is what it means to be alone.// Lehman explained gently.

"Don't hurt him." JonJon said quickly.

Vincent got between JonJon and Lehman and said, "Don't try to pull them apart. You could end up hurting them both."

"But he's going to hurt Benny." JonJon said in frustration.

"Let me handle this." Vincent said firmly, then turned to look at Lehman.

"Lehman, you need to stop this now. I don't want to have to hurt you." Vincent said in an urging tone.

"He needs to understand." Lehman said distantly.

"What you're doing is wrong. It's a violation of his mind. You could be put in jail for doing this." Vincent said seriously.

"I'm done." Lehman said as he slowly took his hand away from Benny's neck.

"Benny? Are you alright?" JonJon asked as he rushed around to Benny's other side.

After a moment of staring sightlessly, Benny blinked, then turned to look at JonJon with question.

"I'm sorry if he hurt you. I didn't want that to happen. Please tell me that you're alright." JonJon said as tears filled his eyes.

"I'm fine JonJon. Really." Benny said quietly.

"Lehman, you need to promise me that you'll never do that again." Vincent said to Lehman firmly.

"I'm not a Human. Stop trying to make me be one!" Lehman snapped as he returned Vincent's hard gaze.

"I'm not trying to make you be Human. I'm trying to tell you what you need to know to live with Humans. If you go around attacking people telepathically, they'll lock you up. I love you Lehman and I don't want you to get into trouble... I just want you to be happy." Vincent finished softly.

Lehman closed his eyes and took in a slow, cleansing breath before saying, "Okay. I'm sorry Vincent... I'm not usually like this. It's just... I don't know. Maybe hearing Cyril and Roger say that they'd make me their son and that JonJon would be my brother... It kind of brought it all back. I'm going to have a family again and I want to protect them."

Benny stood from his chair and walked to Lehman's side.

"Thanks for sharing that with me." Benny said and raised his arms, then put them down again, not sure if Lehman would welcome a hug from him.

Lehman smiled at the abortive movement then pulled Benny into a firm hug.

"So you don't hate me?" Benny asked cautiously.

"If I hated you would I go through all that and risk JonJon beating me up and Vincent throwing me in jail?" Lehman asked with a chuckle.

"I guess not." Benny said with relief.

"Is there room for one more?" Vincent asked from Benny's side.

"Nope. Two more." Lehman said as he put out his arm to invite JonJon into the hug too.

"Everyone is watching." JonJon said as he looked around the Engineer's mess hall.

Vincent glanced around the room briefly, then said, "Yeah, they're just jealous."

JonJon smiled at the response, then moved into the four-way hug.

A week had passed without incident.

Even though Roger and Cyril had invited the boys to share their cabin, JonJon and Lehman decided to continue to stay in Deflector Control so they could spend as much time as possible with Benny and Vincent.

All the boys were aware that the time was drawing near, but none of them wanted to discuss what was going to happen when they reached the new colony site.

"Crewman Winters, report to conference room one." Debbie's voice said firmly over the Deflector Control's comm system.

Vincent looked up from station two, where he had been working, in time to see both Joe and Darin's concerned looks at him.

"One of these days, the captain is going to have to pick on one of you guys instead." Vincent said as he logged off his workstation.

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about." Joe said quietly, obviously not believing it.

"Well, at least this time we aren't in a space battle." Vincent said with resignation, as he patted his pants pocket to be sure that he had some couplers, then he walked to the door.

"Call if you need us for anything." Joe said with concern.

"Sure thing. I've got seven." Vincent said as he clipped a communicator to his belt, then walked out the door.

As Vincent walked into the conference room, he was surprised to see that Captain Byrne, Commander M'Butu, Lieutenant Simms and Cyril Byrne were all present and seemed to be waiting for him.

Vincent came to attention and said, "Crewman Winters, reporting as ordered, Sir."

"At ease Crewman." Captain Byrne said automatically, then turned to face the entire group and continued, "As I'm sure you all know, we are scheduled to arrive at the SA-14 colony site in approximately eighteen hours."

Vincent nodded that he was aware and there were similar reactions from the others.

"What is not common knowledge is that we are scheduled to have a meeting with a Soleen-Avalla ship in advance of our arrival at the colony." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"Even though we have been in contact with the Soleen-Avalla for a number of years via subspace, this will, in fact, be the first time our people have actually met face to face. That being the case, this will be regarded as a 'first contact' situation." Captain Byrne said as he looked over the group before him.

"We literally know nothing of the Soleen-Avalla civilization. They seem almost xenophobic in their actions, refusing all requests for information. The fact that they offered us their colony was shocking enough, but now they have also agreed to meet with us in person and conduct us to the new colony." Captain Byrne said professionally.

"We will be at the rendezvous coordinates shortly. Report to the bridge in one quarter of an hour, dress is formal. You are dismissed." Captain Byrne said firmly.

The others turned to leave as Vincent continued to stand.

"You had a question Crewman Winters?" Captain Byrne asked simply.

"Yes sir. I understand why everyone else is going on this mission, but I want to be sure I understand why I'm going, so I'll be able to do what I'm expected to." Vincent said carefully.

Captain Byrne smiled at Vincent and said, "It was very conscientious of you to ask. In the interest of furthering your studies in the mentoring program, Commander M'Butu and I feel that a practical demonstration of the first contact protocols that you have been learning about in your officer's training may provide an invaluable lesson. I would think that seeing the process first hand would be of more benefit in your education than reading any amount of material on the subject." Captain Byrne finished with a smile.

"Thank you sir, I understand. Is there anything special I should do, since I don't have a dress uniform?" Vincent asked seriously.

"Just change into a fresh uniform and make sure your boots and rank insignia are sufficiently shined." Captain Byrne said consideringly.

"Yes Sir." Vincent said formally.

"If there is nothing else, you are dismissed." Captain Byrne said in a semi-formal tone.

"Yes Sir. Thank you Sir." Vincent said, then turned to leave.

"What's up Champ?" Joe asked as Vincent walked into Deflector Control.

"Away detail." Vincent said, as he turned and walked into the supply room.

Joe shared a curious look with Darin, then tilted his head in the direction of the supply room to encourage Darin to go.

Darin nodded and hurried to the supply room doorway.

"An away detail to where? We're kind of in the middle of nowhere." Darin asked curiously as he watched Vincent taking off his boots.

"We're supposed to meet with a Soleen-Avalla ship in a little while and I'm going to be part of the delegation that meets them." Vincent said shyly.

"Why you?" Darin asked curiously.

"The captain said it would be good for me to learn about 'first contact' by doing it... even though I guess this will kinda be my second one." Vincent said as he pulled a shining cloth out of his storage crate and worked to bring his boots up to full luster.

Darin shook his head and chuckled as he said, "Only my little brother..."

"I don't have much time. Could you help me?" Vincent asked as he kept his focus on his boots.

"Sure, what can I do?" Darin asked as he stepped into the supply room.

"Would you get my new uniform out of my storage crate and make sure that it isn't wrinkled and that the rank insignia is shiny? I want to be sure that I look okay." Vincent said in concentration.

Darin immediately went to the storage container that Vincent had been using as a locker and pulled out the neatly folded jumpsuit.

He carefully unfolded it and looked it over to see that it was presentable.

"It looks fine." Darin announced as he turned to look at Vincent.

"Thanks. I've only got a few minutes." Vincent said quickly as he set his boots aside then threw the shining cloth into the crate.

"I'll get it ready for you." Darin said as he began to open the front of the new jumpsuit.

"Here." Vincent said as he handed Darin his wallet and two couplers.

Darin smiled as he placed the items into the new uniform.

"What about the communicator?" Darin asked as he gestured toward the communicator still hanging on Vincent's belt.

"Would you mind putting it up for me? I'm pretty sure that no matter what happens, I won't be needing it." Vincent said as he handed the communicator to Darin.

"No problem." Darin said gently as he clipped the communicator onto his own belt.

Vincent quickly opened the front of the jumpsuit uniform he was wearing and stepped out of it.

Darin handed him the new uniform and said, "Just leave the other one and I'll take care of it."

"Thanks." Vincent said as he pulled the new jumpsuit on.

"Would you like some gel for your hair? It might look a little more formal." Darin asked consideringly.

"Yeah." Vincent said as he bent down to pull on his boots.

Darin hurried to his own storage crate and returned with a dab of styling gel in his hand.

"Just hold still for a second." Darin said as he rubbed his hands together.

As soon as Vincent had finished pulling on his boots, he stood before Darin and waited for him to apply the gel.

Darin smoothed his hands over Vincent's slightly shaggy hair a few times to get the styling gel evenly distributed.

"Now, just comb your hair and you'll be ready." Darin said as he took a step back to look.

Vincent reached into his crate and pulled out a comb, then quickly pulled it through his hair.

"How's that?" Vincent asked as he looked at Darin expectantly.

"It looks great. You should think about using gel all the time." Darin said with a smile.

"Okay. I've got to go now." Vincent said quickly.

"Go on." Darin said and held out his hand for the comb.

Vincent handed the comb to Darin, then hurried out of the supply room.

As Vincent stepped onto the main bridge, he noticed that Captain Byrne was the only one of their group present.

The last time he had seen the captain in a formal uniform was when the Holy One was welcomed aboard.

"Captain, I'm detecting a vessel entering this sector... it's just dropped out of high warp." Lieutenant Clark said cautiously.

"On screen." Captain Byrne said immediately.

After a moment, Lieutenant Clark said, "I'm sorry sir, this is the best I can do at this distance. It's still at the far side of the sector."

As the somewhat blurry image of the alien ship filled the screen, Vincent's eyes went wide.

"It's Gorn." Debbie gasped from her communications console.

"No." Lieutenant Clark said hesitantly.

All attention turned to Lieutenant Clark as he examined the readings on his console.

"There are similarities in design, but this ship is more advanced than the Gorn ships... A lot more." Lieutenant Clark said in concentration.

"Be that as it may, it's best to err on the side of caution. This may be an indication that the Soleen-Avalla may have similar customs to the Gorn. Discontinue all invasive scans and make no attempt at communication. Use tactical scanners only and be prepared to discontinue the tactical scans as soon as the ship enters visual range."

"Yes sir. But they've stopped moving." Lieutenant Clark said slowly.

"Captain, we're being hailed." Debbie said cautiously.

"On screen." Captain Byrne said seriously and turned to face the main view screen.

Vincent noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see that Commander M'Butu, Lieutenant Simms and Cyril had joined them.

"Federation Starship Yorktown, are you prepared to receive our representative?" A man's cold, professional voice asked.

Vincent looked at the view screen to find the image of a middle aged man. His appearance was human and his expression was nothing short of completely professional.

The captain stood a little straighter and said, "Yes. We will be honored to receive your representative. If you will send us rendezvous coordinates...."

The captain was interrupted by the appearance of a fountain of multi-colored sparkles that seemed to erupt from nowhere. Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the sparkles vanished leaving a fourteen or fifteen year old girl standing before them.

Vincent stared in wonder at the beautiful girl. She was small with delicate features and had large soulful eyes. Her long brown hair nearly reached her waist and she was wearing a thin shimmering robe that loosely draped over her slender frame.

"But they're all the way on the other side of the sector." Lieutenant Clark said in wonder as he looked at his console again.

"I am Jenn. I am the representative of the Soleen-Avalla sent to conduct you to the colony." The young girl said seriously.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Jenn. I am Captain Leland Byrne. May I introduce my first officer, Commander Oliver M'Butu, my Chief of Security, Lieutenant Wayland Simms, my son, Cyril Byrne, who also happens to be one of the leaders of the colony and Crewman Vincent Winters, son of Clan Short of the house of Surak of Vulcan." Captain Byrne said as he gestured to indicate each person in turn.

Jenn looked at each person who was introduced and gave a slight nod of acknowledgment, then her gaze fixed on Vincent.

After a moment she hesitantly asked, "Is he the one who entered the reactor?"

Captain Byrne seemed surprised by the question, but quickly answered, "I wasn't aware that you knew of that, but yes."

"We requested an accounting of the events that led to the evacuation of the colony. The report we received made mention of Crewman Winters' heroic act." Jenn said with a gentle smile, then turned to Vincent and said, "It is an honor to meet you Crewman Winters."

Vincent was stunned for a moment, but was somehow able to say, "It's an honor to meet you too."

Jenn smiled warmly at Vincent, then turned her attention back to Captain Byrne.

"I'm sure you've realized that the Soleen-Avalla are a very private people." Jenn said seriously.

"We've noticed." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"It is for that reason that I have been sent to you. My ship will depart and I will conduct you to the new colony. I will be able to answer any questions you might have." Jenn said as she looked the captain in the eyes.

"Oh. I see." Captain Byrne said slowly.

Vincent felt a momentary sensation, like an itch on his chest. He discretely rubbed the spot hoping to soothe the itch without anyone noticing.

"Although I have a multitude of questions, I must admit that they all stem from my personal curiosity. I'm certain that Cyril has many questions of great concern to the colonists." Captain Byrne said, then looked at his son.

Cyril stepped forward and said, "Whenever you're ready, we could go to my office. As my father said, I have quite a few questions for you, and if we can get them answered before we arrive at the colony site, we might just be able to get this done without too much trouble for anyone."

Jenn glanced away from Cyril for a moment, then said, "My ship is leaving. I can go with you now."

"Captain, the Soleen-Avalla ship is leaving the... they're gone." Lieutenant Clark said as he looked over his scanners carefully.

"Please define 'Gone'." Captain Byrne said with concern as he walked to stand behind the lieutenant.

"When they moved out of the system, they dropped into high warp... I mean, really high warp." Lieutenant Clark said as he played his sensor readings back for the captain to see.

"Our ships use a different system of propulsion which allows them to move a bit faster than your Starfleet ships. I believe your people call it trans-warp." Jenn said informatively.

"Transwarp is considered to be a failed technology in the Federation. The theory seemed sound, but we could never get it to work dependably." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"It is only in recent years that the Soleen-Avalla have perfected the process." Jenn said casually.

"Perhaps we will have an opportunity to discuss it later." Captain Byrne said diplomatically, then turned to the helm and said, "Lieutenant Clark, proceed on course to SA-14."

"Aye Captain." Lieutenant Clark said as he worked his controls.

"Jenn, if you would like to rest for a time after your journey to meet us, we can show you to your cabin now." Captain Byrne said respectfully.

"There is no need Captain. If you would have no objection, I would like to get to work answering those questions you mentioned earlier." Jenn said with a gentle smile.

"As you like. But I won't allow my son to monopolize all your time aboard my ship. I would like to invite you to dine with me in the officer's dining room this evening." The captain said smoothly.

"Yes, of course Captain. I will look forward to it." Jenn said gently.

"Then if there is nothing else, you are all dismissed." Captain Byrne said to the group.

Cyril led Jenn to the turbo lift first as Vincent and Commander M'Butu watched them go.

"What a lovely girl. I wonder how one so young was chosen to represent the Soleen-Avalla empire." Captain Byrne said speculatively.

"I can't imagine, but given her self-assurance and gentle demeanor, I find it easy to believe that she is up to the challenge." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

Captain Byrne nodded his agreement, then quickly said, "Oh, and Crewman Winters, you will also be expected to attend tonight's dinner welcoming Jenn aboard."

"Yes sir." Vincent said as he straightened his posture.

Captain Byrne nodded, then turned his attention to someone who approached from his other side.

The turbo lift door opened and Vincent got aboard.

"Deflector Control." He called to the ceiling of the lift as he thought about all that he had seen.

"So Champ, how did it go?" Joe asked happily, obviously relieved to see Vincent return so soon.

"It went pretty well. I want to write some stuff down real quick before I forget it." Vincent said as he hurried to one of the auxiliary stations.

Darin and Joe exchanged a look, then Joe slowly made his way across the room, trying to look casual.

When Vincent noticed Joe standing behind him, he said, "I just wanted to take some notes about how the meeting went. The captain said I was there to learn about First Contact, so I want to be sure that I learned something."

Joe put his hand on Vincent's shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze before saying, "You've done a really great job dealing with your duties and school work. I was thinking that if you're up to it, we might do a little extra work on your officer's training while we're getting the new colony settled."

"Really?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Joe nodded, then said, "But I'm going to need for you to make me a promise before we get started."

"What's that?" Vincent asked as he devoted his full attention to Joe.

"Make sure you don't pass up any chances to spend time with your friends while we're here." Joe said gently.

"What?" Vincent asked in confusion.

"I'm just saying that this is something extra that we can do while you have spare time. Make sure that you spend plenty of time with Benny, JonJon and Lehman before the Yorktown has to leave. I have a feeling that you'll have plenty of time to study on the way back to Earth..." Joe trailed off.

"...without them being here." Vincent said as he nodded.

"So do you promise?" Joe asked seriously.

"Yeah. I promise that I won't pass up any chances to spend time with the guys." Vincent said as he forced a smile onto his face for Joe's benefit.

"The shift is over. What are you doing Champ?" Joe asked as he noticed that Vincent had been sitting motionless for some time.

"Whenever I get really mad or something like that, I've been using my bond with T'Lani to help calm me down. I was just kind of working out how I can do the same thing for myself so I won't have to bother her all the time." Vincent said carefully.

"Do you think she minds helping you control your emotions?" Joe asked as he casually dropped into the chair at auxiliary station one.

"No. I know she doesn't mind. But I still need to learn to do this for myself. I'm a Vulcan citizen, so I should be able to control my own emotions when I need to." Vincent said seriously.

"You may be a Vulcan citizen, but you're still a Human. No one is going to expect you to behave like a Vulcan." Joe said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Maybe not. But that's not what I'm really talking about. It's more like the way I got mad when Tyce kissed me. I could have messed up things between Okuda and the Federation because I couldn't control myself." Vincent said, and Joe began to realize the depth of Vincent's conviction.

"I thought you were seeing a counselor for that." Joe said cautiously.

"Yeah. I am. And that's working pretty good. But what Tony is helping me with is understanding why I feel the way I feel about certain things. This is something else, I'm trying to figure out how to catch it

when my emotions get crazy all of a sudden and are trying to get away from me." Vincent said with determination.

Joe considered the words for a moment, then nodded as he said, "I think that's a good plan. I'll let you get back to it."

Vincent looked at the time on the auxiliary station's display, then said, "I need to get cleaned up before dinner. I'm going to have dinner in the officer's dining room."

"Oh? Is this going to become a regular thing for you?" Joe asked with a smile.

Vincent looked at Joe curiously for a moment, then said, "Lehman is the one who went to the last dinner. This will be my first time."

"Oh, right. Well, I hope you have a good time. I'm sure Dennis will be preparing one of his masterpieces for the special occasion." Joe said warmly.

"Wait... Dennis? Are you talking about that guy from the shuttle who wore so much cologne I could taste it?" Vincent asked cautiously.

Joe chuckled, then said, "One and the same."

"Maybe I'll just have the salad." Vincent muttered with a worried look.

"Despite what you may think of him as a person, he really is an excellent chef. The food will be fine, I promise." Joe said, then stood.

Vincent looked at Joe uncertainly, but finally accepted that it was *possible*.

Vincent walked into the storage room to find Darin standing in only his boxer shorts.

"Hot date?" Vincent asked as he wagged his eyebrows at Darin.

"Actually, yes." Darin said with a happy smile.

"I've got to get ready to have dinner in the officer's dining room." Vincent said as he began to change out of his uniform.

"I've been meaning to do that, but I think Rad and I are just so comfortable with the Engineer's mess hall that we haven't really talked about going to the officer's mess." Darin said casually.

"Well, this will be my first time." Vincent said a little bit nervously.

"My dad used to have formal dinners all the time and I learned pretty quick to keep myself entertained while I pretended to pay attention." Darin said casually.

"So can you give me some advice? I don't want to say or do the wrong thing and make Captain Byrne regret that he invited me." Vincent said, letting his full anxiety be clearly heard.

After a moment to think about the question, Darin smiled and said, "Someone very wise once gave me some good advice about what to do in a situation like this."

Vincent devoted his full attention to Darin, hanging on his every word.

"Just think about what Joe would do if he were there instead of you." Darin said with a smile.

Vincent puzzled over the statement for a moment, then broke into a wide grin.

"That's one of the first things that you taught me, little brother, and it's always worked." Darin said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks." Vincent said timidly, then reluctantly continued, "It's almost time, I've got to go."

"Me too. Give me a second to gel my hair, then I'll walk with you to the lift." Darin said as he quickly checked himself to see that he hadn't forgotten anything.

"You look fine." Vincent said with a smile, then asked, "Do I need anymore gel?"

Darin glanced at Vincent, then said, "No, it still looks good. You really should consider using it all the time, I think it makes you look more professional."

Vincent pulled a small hand-held mirror out of his storage crate and looked at himself for a moment before saying, "I don't know. I guess it's okay if I'm going somewhere fancy, but I'd feel like I was acting like I'm someone that I'm not if I wore it all the time."

Darin gestured toward the door of the storage room, indicating that he was ready to go.

As Vincent and Darin stepped into the main room of deflector control, Joe said, "You two look great, I hope you both have a wonderful time tonight."

Both Vincent and Darin could clearly see the pride in Joe's expression as he looked at 'his boys'.

"Thanks, we'll do our best. We've got to go now." Darin said as he turned to go.

"I hope you have a good night too." Vincent said, then walked with Darin out the door.

A moment of silence fell over Deflector Control until it was broken by Connie saying, "I hope Melina and I are as lucky as you when we have kids."

"I hope so too Connie... there's no feeling in the universe that can match this." Joe said distantly.

"Good evening Crewman Winters." Captain Byrne said warmly as he noticed Vincent walking into the dining room.

"Good evening Captain." Vincent said in his 'mature' voice, doing his best to behave as Joe would.

"Since our guest of honor hasn't arrived yet, you may want to have a drink and mingle before we sit down to dinner." Captain Byrne said as he gestured to the other guests in the room.

"Thank you sir, I'd like that." Vincent said calmly and gave the captain a small smile of gratitude for treating him the same as any of the other guests.

"What would you like to drink, Crewman Winters?" a waiter asked from Vincent's side.

"Water, if that wouldn't be too much trouble." Vincent said as he looked up into the waiter's eyes.

"No trouble at all." the waiter said with a smile.

"Well Crewman Winters, how are you doing these days? I haven't heard much from you since we parted company with the Okudai." Lieutenant Simms said casually as he approached.

Vincent smiled and said, "Well, I guess if things are getting boring, I could try to stir something up."

"No no. I wasn't complaining. I was just saying that for a while there I was seeing you more often than some of my own security officers." Lieutenant Simms said with a smile.

A nearby movement drew Vincent's attention and he turned to see the waiter approaching with his drink.

Vincent smiled as he accepted a long stemmed glass of iced water with a slice of lemon in it.

"Thank you." Vincent said to the waiter and received a nod from the waiter before returning his attention back to Lieutenant Simms.

"I haven't seen much of Korrigon since we left the Okudai, do you know how he's doing?" Vincent asked casually before taking a sip of his water.

"He's fine. Actually, I've been keeping him busy." Lieutenant Simms said with a smile.

Vincent gave a Vulcanesque raise of one eyebrow to prompt Lieutenant Simms to continue.

"After Korrigon made the choice to join the colony, he started to think about what he could possibly do for a job once he got there. His skills as a mercenary aren't of much use in polite society." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Yeah. I guess it would be hard to start a new life from nothing." Vincent said speculatively.

"Exactly. So I've been working with Dave to discover his interests and how they might be used to make him a productive member of the colony." Lieutenant Simms said frankly.

"Have you come up with anything?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Yes. As a matter of fact we have. If everything goes to plan, Dave is going to be opening a pub, possibly even an inn. We'll just have to see what type of buildings they have when we get there." Lieutenant Simms said speculatively.

Vincent thought about it for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Yeah. I can see how that would work out for him. I think that if I went into his pub that I'd feel really comfortable."

Lieutenant Simms smiled and said, "That's what I thought too. He has such a genuine 'down to earth' nature that he automatically puts people at ease."

Vincent turned at movement from the front of the dining room and saw a group of people entering.

He had expected Jenn and Cyril to be at the dinner, but was surprised to also see Roger, JonJon and Lehman walking in.

"If you'll excuse me, I have something I need to discuss with Roger." Lieutenant Simms said quietly.

"Sure. It was nice talking to you." Vincent said with a smile.

"I didn't know you were going to be here." Lehman said as he and JonJon walked up to Vincent.

"Yeah. I think I'm here as part of my officer's training. I need to learn how to act at a formal dinner and stuff like that." Vincent said happily.

"Cyril said that he wanted us to come so he could have his whole family at the dinner tonight. I was afraid that it was going to be really boring." Lehman said frankly.

"I think it's going to be kind of nice. You know, like playing at being grown-up. I wouldn't want to do something like this every night, but it might be fun once in a while." Vincent said with a smile.

"Thank you Vincent. I wasn't sure how I felt about being here, but I think 'playing at being grown-up' will make the dinner a lot more fun." JonJon said quietly.

"It looks like everyone is going to the table. Let's go."

"It will be a few minutes before dinner is served, so everyone please make yourselves comfortable." Captain Byrne said to the table in general, then turned to his side and asked, "Jenn, have you been introduced to everyone?"

After a moment to look around the table, she answered, "Yes. Though I haven't had the opportunity to speak to everyone, I know who everyone is."

"Very well. How are the preparations for the colony going?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

"Cyril and Roger have done an amazing job of preparing. We should have the settlement plan complete well in advance of our arrival." Jenn said with a casual smile.

"Yes. Jenn has a wealth of information about the colony site. So the majority of the work we have left to do is detail work." Cyril said frankly.

"And JonJon has been a great help to us." Roger added timidly.

"Oh really?" Captain Byrne asked with surprise.

"Yes. Jenn has information about the available housing and Roger has a detailed listing of the families in need of accommodations. JonJon has been working to merge the two lists." Cyril said proudly.

"Lehman, I hope you aren't feeling left out of all of this." Captain Byrne said seriously.

"I'm fine Grandpa. I've been taking care of Fizgig." Lehman said seriously, then after a moment of consideration he continued, "And I've been making sure that Dad and Other Dad don't make JonJon work too hard."

Captain Byrne chuckled and said, "Very good. That's a very important job and I'm sure everyone appreciates your efforts."

"We do Father. Lehman is a good brother." Cyril said warmly.

Captain Byrne smiled at his family, then turned to Jenn and asked, "So Jenn, I understand that the colony has stood unmanned for over a hundred years. Do you have any idea as to it's condition?"

"Yes Captain, before I came aboard I contacted the Haventauk AI and received a visual survey of the colony. Although the farmlands at the perimeter of the colony have returned to the wild, the colony itself has been maintained." Jenn said seriously.

"This is the first I'm hearing about an AI system. Are you saying that there is an intelligent computer maintaining the colony?" Commander M'Butu asked curiously.

"Yes Commander. Mycien is the Guardian of Haventauk. He has been keeping the colony maintained until the day arrived that someone chose to return." Jenn said frankly.

"Will the AI unit be willing to accept us? He might see us as aliens." Lehman asked curiously.

"Mycien has been kept up to date on all the information regarding the Kimber colony and is awaiting your arrival." Jenn said with a pleasant smile.

"So is the new colony named Haventauk?" Vincent asked curiously.

"That was the name of the former colony." Jenn said shortly, and it was clear from the tone of her voice that the colony would be getting a new name.

"So what are you going to call the colony now? Kimber V?" Lehman asked as he looked around.

"No. I don't think so. Kimber was the name of the local star where the colony was located and Kimber IV was the fourth planet." Cyril said seriously.

"What do you think it should be called?" Roger asked Lehman gently, not wanting him to feel that Cyril was dismissing his suggestion out of hand.

"I don't know... how do you usually name places?" Lehman asked curiously.

"There are many methods for naming. The colony site is currently designated SA-14 on the star charts, being the 14th star charted in the Soleen-Avalla territory of space." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Of course, some places are named for the people who discovered them. Others are named for great people as a tribute." Cyril said thoughtfully.

Captain Byrne nodded and said, "There is also the tradition of naming a place to recognize what you want it to become, such as New England or New Amsterdam."

Everyone noticed as JonJon leaned in and whispered to Lehman.

After a moment to consider, Lehman nodded and whispered in return.

"Did you have an idea?" Roger asked curiously.

Lehman looked at JonJon with question and waited for him to answer.

Finally, Lehman turned to Roger and said, "JonJon has an idea, but he's afraid that you'll think it's stupid."

"Please don't be concerned JonJon, we are simply discussing possibilities right now. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' suggestions." Captain Byrne said gently as he looked JonJon in the eyes.

"Go on." JonJon whispered to Lehman shyly.

Lehman smiled at his brother and said, "Well, JonJon was thinking that Kimber IV was a colony where everyone was hoping that they could make new lives that were uncomplicated and happy."

Everyone at the table was devoting their full attention to Lehman, genuinely interested in what he had to say.

"Well, JonJon was thinking that since Kimber IV was kind of like everyone's hope, maybe this colony could be known as 'New Hope'." Lehman said as he looked around.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone considered the suggestion.

"I like it." Vincent said honestly.

JonJon looked at Vincent timidly, then smiled.

"I think that is a very good suggestion. When the council meets, I'll be sure to offer your suggestion to them." Cyril said firmly.

JonJon beamed at Cyril's words, then turned as waiters arrived with plates of salad for everyone.

"The last time I had dinner in here, the Okudai thought we were vegetarians because we had salad first." Lehman chuckled.

Captain Byrne smiled at the memory, then turned to his side and said, "I hadn't thought to ask about your diet Jenn. Are there any foods that your people cannot eat or that are offensive to you?"

Jenn smiled and said, "The Avalla are herbivorous. Their bodies have difficulty processing meat. The Soleen are omnivorous, like your people."

"Then the Soleen and the Avalla are two distinct species?" Commander M'Butu asked with interest.

"Yes. But my people would prefer that I not expound on that subject... perhaps at a later time." Jenn said gently.

"As you say, but can you tell us, are you Soleen or Avalla?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

"Neither, or perhaps both. I am Soleen-Avalla." Jenn said seriously.

Vincent giggled, drawing everyone's attention.

"Sorry." Vincent said shyly, then continued, "I just like the way she answered your question. It was kind of like watching someone steal a base in baseball."

Captain Byrne smiled at the strange analogy, then began to explain, "Baseball is a game..."

"Excuse me captain. " Jenn interrupted gently, then continued, "We have been monitoring Federation broadcasts for some years and I am familiar with the sport. In fact, I have a special fondness for the Detroit Tigers."

"Oh. I see." Captain Byrne said with surprise.

"You really like the Detroit Tigers?" Vincent asked curiously.

Jenn smiled at Vincent and said, "Yes. I do not think that they will win, but I like them."

Vincent chuckled and said, "As long as you're not counting on them to win, then I guess they're alright."

The waiters returned to the dining room and began to clear away the salad plates.

"Why did they give us catsup?" Vincent asked when he noticed that he and Lehman were the only ones at the table with catsup by their plates.

"Oh, I guess I never did tell you about that." Lehman said with a chuckle.

"I remember hearing Thaelan mention something about catsup, but I didn't get the whole story. Will you tell me later?" Vincent asked with a smile.

Lehman nodded, then started to eat his dinner.

Commander M'Butu smiled at the exchange, then turned to Captain Byrne and asked, "Since the colony has been maintained, there isn't any reason that our initial landing party shouldn't include Cyril and Roger, is there?"

"I was just thinking the same thing. What do you think Cyril? Will you be ready to survey the colony when we arrive in the morning?" Captain Byrne asked with interest.

"Yes. I believe so. And if you have no objection, I would like for Crewman Winters to be included on the team." Cyril said consideringly.

"May I ask why?" Captain Byrne asked with interest

Vincent listened intently as he slowly cut himself a bite of meat.

"Crewman Winters has been declared our first citizen. Though it may be a symbolic gesture, I believe it will hold some meaning for the colonists. In effect, it would be a way of saying that the colonization has begun because the 'first' of us has arrived." Cyril said carefully.

"As you like." Captain Byrne said simply, then glanced at Vincent to be sure that he didn't have any objection.

Vincent smiled and nodded his agreement, then took a bite of the meat and slowly chewed.

His mind drifted away from the conversation as he considered the flavor of the meat.

It just seemed to be wrong... flat... not really bad, but something was definitely missing.

"Catsup helps." Lehman whispered at his side, snapping him out of his thoughts.

Vincent cut another, smaller piece of meat, then spooned a little dab of catsup on it.

"Here, I'll share." Lehman said to his other side as he scooted his bowl of catsup between his and Jon-Jon's plates.

Vincent took a bite of the meat, then considered the flavor with the catsup added.

"It's better, isn't it?" Lehman asked seriously.

"Yeah. Thanks." Vincent said happily.

"Crewman Winters, if I recall correctly, you haven't been trained in the use of side arms. Is that right?" Lieutenant Simms asked casually.

Vincent swallowed his bite of food, then took a sip of water before answering, "Yes. That's right."

"Well, with the Captain's permission, I would like to give you some basic instruction after dinner. I believe that it would be appropriate for you to wear a side arm when we visit the colony tomorrow." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Yeah." Vincent said quickly, then restrained his enthusiasm and asked, "Captain?"

"Yes. The general orders do insist that the members of the initial survey party be armed. Although I doubt that you will need to use your phaser on this mission, it won't hurt for you to have the instruction." Captain Byrne said frankly.

"Thank you Captain." Vincent said, barely containing his excitement.

As Vincent continued to eat, he was only half aware of his surroundings. He was enjoying his meal but his mind kept drifting back to the fact that he was going to receive phaser training.

He had never really thought too much about taking the training because other things always seemed to be more important. But this was different. The head of security and the captain both felt that he was ready for this training... he wasn't too young... they trusted him.

"Wow." Lehman said, breaking Vincent out of his thoughts.

Just as he was about to ask Lehman what had surprised him, movement from Vincent's side drew his attention and he watched a waiter place a flamboyant and decorative dessert in front of him.

It was huge.

Puff pastry, vanilla ice cream, another wafer thin pastry, chocolate ice cream, more pastry, strawberry ice cream, and one final layer of pastry that had been sprinkled with powdered sugar and drizzled with chocolate sauce.

"My people have never created a food such as this." Jenn said in amazement.

"Our chef has really outdone himself with this creation." Captain Byrne said with appreciation.

Vincent slowly worked to get some ice cream along with a piece of the flaky delicate pastry.

The slight crunch was the perfect contrast to the smooth creamy ice cream.

"This has to be the best dessert I've ever had in my life." Vincent said before slowly taking another bite.

"Me too." Lehman said with a delighted smile.

The captain gestured to summon one of the waiters, then said, "Please convey our sincere appreciation to the chef."

The waiter smiled as he nodded, then quickly withdrew to the kitchen.

"Cyril, can you give us some sort of a hint about what we'll be finding when we arrive at the colony site?" Captain Byrne asked curiously.

"Yes. It appears that the colony is three to four times the size that we need. That is allowing us the opportunity to provide for generational growth in our plans for the initial settlement." Cyril said seriously.

"We're setting it up so parents and kids and their grandkids can all have houses and live in the same place if they want to." JonJon explained to Lehman at his side.

"That really sounds nice." Lehman said with a speculative smile.

Vincent nodded his agreement to the statement.

"Of course, our plans might change once we've visited the colony site. No amount of speculation will completely prepare us for the reality." Roger quickly amended.

"Yes. We will do as much as possible before we arrive, then adapt our plans to the colony that we find." Cyril said frankly.

"That being said, perhaps we should excuse ourselves and get back to work. There's still quite a lot to do before we arrive." Roger said cautiously.

Cyril looked at his father with question at the suggestion.

"Perhaps Jenn would enjoy a tour of the ship and an opportunity to relax before resuming her work." Captain Byrne said carefully.

Cyril nodded his acceptance of his father's statement.

"Captain, if you are asking my preference, I would really like to return to the preparations for our arrival. I have had little to do but rest until your ship arrived." Jenn said frankly.

"As you wish. But please keep in mind that the Yorktown will remain for as long as we are needed. There is no need to work yourself to exhaustion." Captain Byrne said with concern.

"Thank you Captain. I too will remain for as long as I can be of benefit. I am certain that we will have many opportunities to speak once the colonization efforts are underway." Jenn said seriously.

"Then we should be going." Cyril said, then looked to his father to be sure that he wasn't being rude by suggesting that they leave.

"Yes. I believe we all have duties that we could be performing." Captain Byrne said as he stood.

The rest of the guests followed the captain's lead.

"While you're working, I'm going down to play with Fizgig for a while so he won't feel lonely." Lehman said to JonJon with a smile.

"Thank you. I am so lucky to have a brother like you. I wouldn't have known what to do to take care of Fizgig if it weren't for you." JonJon said as he pulled Lehman into a hug.

"Crewman Winters. If you have no other duties now, we could begin your side arm training." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

Vincent turned and said, "No. I don't have anything else planned tonight."

"That's good, because this could take a few hours." Lieutenant Simms said, then looked at Vincent with question, obviously giving him one last chance to back out.

"Sounds great. I'm ready when you are." Vincent said with a smile.

Editor's Notes: What a difference a universe makes! It is interesting to compare the two situations. I am really looking forward to seeing what will happen in this new universe. Did anyone notice what Jenn was saying in her answer to the question as to her species?

For those of you who may not have been following Frontier, you may have missed something. Let me just say that when it comes to MultiMapper's stories, when something seems to be different than what you were expecting to see, you should pay close attention, because there will be a short quiz at the end of the semester. Don't worry, I won't give you any spoilers, but I have warned you to pay close attention to details.

I am ready and waiting for the next chapter.

Darryl AKA The Radio Rancher

Chapter 33

Vincent woke with a smile on his face.

The first thought on his mind was that he was being included on the initial team to survey the colony. he was almost giddy with excitement.

No matter the reason for the decision, it was a great honor and a sign of trust and respect for him to be included.

It was sort of an unwritten Starfleet law that 'first contact' and initial survey situations were limited to only the senior officers and most essential support personnel.

Vincent knew that he was neither, and yet, he had still been included in the 'first contact' meeting with Jenn and now he was going to be on the very first team to visit the new colony. He could hardly believe it.

He didn't have words to describe the emotions that he was feeling, but he couldn't imagine any other circumstances where he would feel anything that would compare.

Vincent slipped on his uniform and picked up his gym bag before quietly tip-toeing out of the supply room.

"Good morning Vincent, you're up awfully early." Lou said pleasantly.

"Yeah. It's going to be kind of a big day for me, so I was too excited to sleep much." Vincent said happily.

"Big day? I know we're going to arrive at the colony, but that actually has very little to do with our department. Did you have something else planned?" Judy asked as she approached Lou's side.

"Sort of, I'm going on the away mission to explore the colony as soon as we arrive." Vincent said, and it was obvious that he was bubbling over with excitement.

"Really? How did that happen?" Lou asked with surprise.

"Cyril said that since I was named 'first citizen', that it would be good if I could be one of the first people to visit the colony." Vincent said frankly.

"Well, it sounds like you do have an exciting day planned. I guess from that gym bag you're carrying, that you're going to go down to try and work off some of that excitement before we reach the colony." Lou said with an entertained smile.

"Yeah. If Thaelan wakes up before I get back, would you let him know where I am?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Of course. Go on," Lou said with a chuckle at Vincent's mounting excitement.

Thaelan walked into the gymnasium to find exactly what he had expected.

Vincent was diligently working his way through the stances, totally oblivious to Thaelan's presence in the room.

Thaelan opened his mouth, ready to utter his standard greeting, but then he decided to stop for a moment longer and just watch as Vincent continued to practice.

They had been working together for a relatively short time, and the stances that Thaelan had given Vincent to practice were the foundation to all that he would eventually learn.

But as Thaelan watched Vincent move from one stance to each of the others, it became clear to him that through sheer tenacity and dedication, Vincent had mastered the fundamental routines.

Every one of Vincent's movements were precise and he was maintaining the proper rhythm throughout.

Fluid.

Controlled.

No movement was wasted.

Finally Thaelan decided that he had seen enough and said, "Good morning Vincent."

Vincent moved fluidly into his next pose and held it before responding, "Good morning Thaelan."

"You seem to be doing well in your practice. Would you like to try something a bit different today?" Thaelan asked carefully.

Vincent smiled with amusement at the question and said, "Of course. I'm always ready to learn something new."

"Good. That is a very productive attitude." Thaelan said seriously as he moved closer.

Vincent broke out of his stance and waited for Thaelan's instruction.

"When I introduced you to each of the fighting stances, I told you of the associated counter stances. Today I will demonstrate those counter-stances and we will move through the sequence together." Thaelan said seriously.

"So we'll be fighting?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"No. Not precisely." Thaelan said slowly, then continued, "You will move through your stances as you have been, but at the same time, I will be moving through the counter-stances. In the beginning we will go slowly so you can adjust to the rhythm."

"So it will be like dancing?" Vincent asked speculatively.

Thaelan considered for a moment, then said, "Yes. Our moves are choreographed and, if all goes well, we will be moving in synchronization. The only difference is the absence of music."

"What's the purpose of this exercise?" Vincent asked seriously.

Thaelan smiled at the question, happy to know that Vincent wasn't willing to blindly accept what he was being told.

"If all goes as it should, this will prepare you for the next step, which is to recognize and use the proper counter moves when in actual combat." Thaelan said professionally.

Vincent nodded thoughtfully, then asked, "What do I need to do?"

"Begin your stance routine as you normally would. As you progress through the routine, I will go through the counter-stances. Work to become familiar and comfortable with the symmetry of our combined movements." Thaelan said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Okay. I think I'm ready." Vincent said slowly.

"Then begin."

Vincent raised his hands and began to move into his first stance.

Thaelan automatically moved into the counter-stance which would effectively block Vincent's attack if they were actually fighting.

Even though Vincent intellectually expected the move, encountering resistance as Thaelan's wrist blocked his own made the familiar movement feel different.

"Disregard what I am doing for now and concentrate on your stances." Thaelan said as he slowly moved into his next counter-stance.

Vincent continued his movements, trying to focus only on what he was doing.

"Keep the rhythm." Thaelan said, even more quietly.

Vincent's mind focused on keeping the movements fluid and regular despite the unfamiliar sensations of Thaelan blocking him.

After a few minutes of going through the stances, Thaelan said, "Yes. Very good. Now increase to your normal speed."

Vincent hadn't realized that he was moving slower than usual, but at Thaelan's prompting, began to increase his speed.

"Maintain control." Thaelan said as he matched Vincent's pace.

Suddenly, the familiar movements and pace that Vincent had been practicing for weeks began to flow effortlessly.

Thaelan matched him move for move as their pace increased to a speed that was comfortable for both of them.

"Good. Very good." Thaelan said in a low voice as he watched Vincent's movements carefully.

Time became nonexistent to Vincent as he fell into 'the zone' and became consumed by the experience of the graceful repetition.

Thaelan admired how quickly Vincent was able to be at ease with this stage of their training.

He remembered that it took his father many weeks of patient instruction to finally get him to become comfortable and accept the inclusion of the counter-stances.

Vincent was lost in the experience as his mind seemed to be set free.

He achieved a level of peace and clarity in his mind that made him feel like he could do anything.

No problem was too big, no question was too complex.

In this place and time, everything made sense.

"It is time for us to finish." Thaelan said as he continued to counter Vincent's moves.

After a moment, Vincent reluctantly asked, "Already?"

Thaelan smiled and said, "We have been training for nearly an hour and a half. If you wish to have breakfast before our shift, we need to stop now."

Vincent moved into his next stance, then took one step back, falling into his primary defensive posture.

Thaelan looked with surprise at the move, then said, "Very good. That is the proper way to disengage from this exercise... though I don't recall demonstrating that move to you."

Vincent moved out of his defensive posture and started his cool down stretches before saying, "I've done some research on the basic forms of Andorian free fighting. I just wanted to be ready for when you wanted to teach me something new."

"I am pleased to see that you are taking this training so seriously. If you are as diligent in your school studies, you must be doing quite well." Thaelan said as he also began to cool down.

"Well, I'm not at the same level as most Vulcan kids my age, but I got a late start. I think I'm doing pretty good. My last assessment was 'acceptable'." Vincent said casually.

"As I understand it, that is high praise from the Vulcan Academy of Science." Thaelan said frankly.

"I guess it is by Human standards. From a Vulcan point of view, it's just what's expected. There's no reason to get all puffed up about it." Vincent said as he stood, indicating that he was done cooling down.

"I believe some amount of pride in your achievements would be appropriate in this circumstance." Thaelan said as he stood and walked to Vincent's side.

As they began to walk toward the locker room, Vincent said, "Okay, but not until I've finished the third standard course of study. Once I've done that, I'll feel like I really accomplished something."

Thaelan smiled at the response as they went their separate ways to shower.

"You were up awfully early this morning." Joe said as Vincent and Thaelan carried their trays from the serving line.

"Yeah. I was really excited about getting to go on an away mission this morning and I just couldn't sleep any longer." Vincent said happily.

"Your orders were waiting for me when I woke up. How did you manage to get invited on a survey mission?" Joe asked casually.

Vincent thought about it as he took a sip of his coffee, then said, "Cyril asked if I could be included... but I think maybe I was just in the right place at the right time. If I hadn't been at the dinner last night, I probably wouldn't have been invited."

"I was there too and I wasn't invited." Lehman said from the next table where he and Benny were having breakfast with Crewman Channing.

Vincent smiled and said, "Maybe not, but from the way Jenn was talking, you'll probably be able to go down to check it out really soon."

"What did she say?" Darin asked curiously.

"Jenn was telling us that there's this AI that has been taking care of the colony for the past hundred years. And from the way she said it, it sounds like the place is just about ready to move into." Vincent said frankly.

"Really? When I heard that the colony had been standing unmanned for over one hundred years, I thought we would probably end up repairing one half of the colony and replacing the other half before we could even think about moving anyone in." Joe said thoughtfully.

"We haven't seen it yet, so it still might be something like that. I guess we'll know more in a little while." Vincent said before taking a large bite of his breakfast.

"How long will it be before we arrive?" Channing asked curiously.

"Anytime now. Probably just after 08:00." Joe said speculatively.

"Did my orders say if I was supposed to go to the transporter room or the conference room?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No. I was just informed that you would be called for the away detail when we arrived. I'm sure they'll tell you where you need to go. But don't get in too much of a rush, they'll probably need to do quite a few things before they'll be ready for you to go down to the planet." Joe said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then noticed that Lehman, Benny and Channing were whispering.

Lehman glanced over in time to see Vincent's speculative gaze.

"We were just talking about, when we're allowed to go down to the colony, maybe Channing could kind of go with me and Benny. I don't think they'll let us go by ourselves and Dad and Other Dad and JonJon probably won't have time to be with us." Lehman said shyly.

"That sounds like a good idea. I hope it works out that you can do that." Vincent said with a smile.

"Well, I hate to break this up. But we'd better get to work. It won't hurt to be early and we should be arriving any minute." Joe said as he stood.

Vincent quickly drained the last of his coffee, then gathered his dishes onto his tray.

"Did you get to do your phaser training thing last night?" Lehman asked as he fell into step at Vincent's side.

"Yeah. Lieutenant Simms took me through the whole basic training course. I'm thinking that when everything is settled down, I'm going to try to put in some time on the phaser range." Vincent said happily.

"Are you thinking of branching out into security?" Joe asked curiously.

Vincent giggled as he sat his food tray in the drop off window and said, "No. I don't think there's any chance of that. But I just thought that it might be fun to do some target practice. Besides, you never know when it might come in handy."

"I enjoyed it back at the academy. Maybe we could go together?" Darin asked casually.

"Yeah. Let's plan on doing that. I bet it'd be a lot more fun together." Vincent said happily.

"Where is Rad this morning?" Joe asked, just noticing that Darin was having breakfast on his own.

"Transporter control is preparing for a big day, so their Alpha shift went in early to do a complete systems diagnostic." Darin said unenthusiastically.

"How was the date?" Vincent asked with a waggle of his eyebrows.

As they stepped onto the lift, Darin smiled and said, "Perfect."

As the group walked into Deflector Control, both Lou and Judy looked at them curiously, knowing that they were more than a little early for their shift.

Joe noticed their curious looks and smiled at them.

"We should arrive at the colony any minute now. Since most of you are new to the Yorktown, you probably don't know what to expect. The standard procedure for our department in this situation is to do a full systems check, then maintain a skeleton crew while we are in orbit. I was thinking that Thaelan and I could split the shift, each taking four hours. Darin and Vincent would take communicators and be 'on call' for their regular duty shifts. Of course, today Vincent has other plans, so Darin will be our backup coverage." Joe said frankly.

"Why?" Darin asked in a puzzled tone.

"Because while the ship is in orbit of a peaceful planet, someone just has to be here manning the station, in case something unexpected comes up. The rest of the team is on call if they're needed for anything, but realistically, after the systems have all been checked, there's nothing left for us to do. We'd be stuck staring at each other, shift after shift, until we're ready to leave orbit." Joe said to the group.

"And we will likely be in orbit of the new colony for weeks." Thaelan added with a nod of approval at the plan.

"Right. There's still the possibility that we might be needed to do something to help get the colony settled, but realistically, we can't predict if and when our services will be needed. We just have to wait until someone calls on us." Joe said frankly.

"It sounds like you've been through a situation like this before." Darin said speculatively.

Joe smiled as he said, "Rarely is there a mission that requires the services of every department on the ship. It would be a colossal waste of man power to have everyone on every shift sitting around with nothing to do. So when we have some down time like this, we take the opportunity to enjoy a little time off."

"That being said, let's take our stations, do our system checks, then if nothing needs to be done, Darin will be on call for the rest of the day and Vincent will be free to prepare for his away mission." Joe said with a smile.

Everyone seemed to be happy with the arrangement and moved to their stations.

"Lou and Judy, why don't you go get some rest. Once we have some idea of what's going on with the colony, I'll arrange for you two to get a few days of shore leave." Joe said gently.

"Thanks Joe. You guys have a good day." Lou said as she relinquished the main to Thaelan.

After a quick glance at station three, Vincent moved to station two to do a full systems diagnostic.

"Crewman Winters, please report to transporter room one." Debbie's voice said over the intercom.

"I guess it's time." Vincent said as he checked to see that he had spare couplers in his pocket.

"If you want to grab a communicator now, I'll log it in." Joe said quietly.

"Okay. I've got number seven," Vincent said as he walked to the rack by the door.

Joe smiled at the fact that Vincent had sort of adopted his 'own' communicator as he logged it under Vincent's name.

"Let me know how it went when you get back." Joe said quietly, smiling broadly.

"Yeah. I promise." Vincent said then checked himself over one last time to see that everything was in order before leaving deflector control.

Vincent walked briskly into the transporter room and stood at attention.

"At ease Crewman. Get your side arm and let's be on our way." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Vincent nodded and walked over to join Lieutenant Simms by the phaser storage cabinet that was in every transporter room.

"Here you go Crewman." Lieutenant Simms said as he handed the holstered weapon to Vincent.

"Thank you sir." Vincent said with a barely restrained smile, then put the holster onto his belt.

Lieutenant Simms had let Vincent try a smaller hand phaser, in deference to Vincent's smaller size, but it turned out that he was actually more comfortable with the standard pistol style unit.

The door opened again to admit Cyril, Roger and Jenn.

"I believe that's all of us. Are we ready to go?" Commander M'Butu asked from the step up to the transporter chamber. Everyone nodded their assent.

"Then let's be on our way." Commander M'Butu said and moved to one of the forward transporter pads.

Vincent quickly looked around the group and tried to determine where in the 'pecking order' he would fit.

Although the captain and crew of the Yorktown didn't follow the more subtle nuances of etiquette in their day to day operations, Vincent still thought it was important to know his proper place, so he could behave correctly when it was necessary to do so.

As Vincent stood on the transporter pad beside Roger at the back of the group, he heard Commander M'Butu say, "Energize." then felt the slight electrical tickle of the transporter wash over him.

Once the materialization was complete, Vincent looked around curiously.

"Magnificent." Roger gasped as he looked down the city street.

While Vincent didn't have the same enthusiasm that Roger did for architectural design, he could appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the buildings.

But Vincent's appreciation slowly gave way to caution as he looked around with concern.

He felt a chill run up his spine as he became aware of the absolute silence surrounding them.

"Before we begin, I would like to see the central complex you were telling us about." Cyril said, apparently unbothered by being in this 'ghost town'.

"It's right this way." Jenn replied as she gestured toward one of the buildings.

"If you want to investigate the central complex, Crewman Winters and I will explore some of these buildings and assess their suitability as homes for the colonists." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"The buildings in this area are primarily designed for the distribution of goods and services. If you follow this street, you will find standard dwellings after three intersections." Jenn said professionally, as she pointed in the appropriate direction.

"Thank you Jenn." Commander M'Butu said as he looked down the long, empty street.

Lieutenant Simms took two steps to join Cyril and Roger's loosely formed group.

"Let's get moving. We have a whole ship full of people waiting on our report." Commander M'Butu said as he started walking.

Vincent looked at the odd construction of the buildings, noticing that they all seemed to be hexagonal and that the sides of every building seemed to be open to the elements.

"What's your first impression?" Commander M'Butu asked Vincent as they walked.

"It's creepy." Vincent said, before he could think better of it.

Commander M'Butu chuckled and said, "I would have to agree, but I was thinking more along the lines of it's usefulness for the colonists."

Vincent looked around again, then said, "It looks like it could be a great place to live. All the buildings look like they're almost new. If they look as good on the inside, I don't see any reason that the colonists couldn't move in right away."

"We'll need to check out a few more things before we can recommend that step. That looks like one of the individual family homes up ahead, let's go check it out and see if our people could be comfortable there." Commander M'Butu said as he pointed ahead of them to a different style building, barely visible in the distance.

After another moment of walking, Vincent quietly said, "Thank you for bringing me along with you."

"Actually, I've been trying to find an opportunity where we could talk. But what with the colonists, and then the Okudai... there always seemed to be something else demanding my attention." Commander M'Butu said as they walked at a casual pace.

"What were you wanting to talk to me about?" Vincent asked curiously, not at all intimidated by the commander.

"I just wanted to ask how things are going with you. You know, find out how you're adjusting to life on a starship. How your studies are going... things like that." Commander M'Butu said honestly.

"It took me a while to figure out just how i was going to handle work, school and everything else without getting stressed out. But once I got into a routine, everything is fine." Vincent said frankly.

"I'm very glad to hear it." Commander M'Butu said seriously, then continued, "The Captain and I talked for a bit after the dinner last night and together we came up with an idea."

Vincent glanced up at Commander M'Butu with question.

"Once the colonists are settled in and we can be on our way back to Earth, the Captain and I were thinking that together, we might be able to contribute to your officer's training." Commander M'Butu said seriously as he stopped to look Vincent in the eyes.

"You and the captain?" Vincent asked with surprise.

"Yes, and by the time we reach Earth, it may also end up being most, if not all, of the command staff." Commander M'Butu said frankly, then in a lower voice he continued, "Starfleet sent you to us as part of the mentoring program. Now that we've seen that you can handle the responsibility and do the work

that's been asked of you, we're ready to make a commitment to you. If you're willing to accept our instruction, we would like to give you every advantage that we possibly can."

Vincent was about to bark a response, but somewhere deep inside, a spark of memory ignited. Just in time, he recognized the sudden swell of emotions for what it was and remembered not to allow himself to be overwhelmed by it.

After a moment to calm himself and seriously consider what the Commander was offering, Vincent carefully said, "Thank you very much, Commander M'Butu. If the command staff are willing to take the time to teach me, I would really like to learn as much as I can."

Commander M'Butu smiled at the thoughtful response and said, "Very well. Once we're on our way back to Earth, I'll see to it that everything is arranged and get back to you with the details."

"Thank you sir." Vincent said respectfully.

"Right then. I suppose we'd better get back to the matter at hand, hadn't we?" Commander M'Butu said as he gestured toward the house just ahead of them.

Vincent smiled and started looking around curiously.

"I'm glad you're getting the opportunity to get some 'hands on' training, Crewman. This is another one of the advantages of being in the mentoring program." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

"Yes sir. I just know that there are a lot of people on the Yorktown who are better qualified to be on this mission than I am. I really appreciate that I'm being given this chance." Vincent said seriously.

Commander M'Butu smiled and said, "The best way to show your appreciation will be for you to take full advantage of the opportunities being presented to you."

"I'll do my best sir." Vincent said as he followed Commander M'Butu to the front of the house.

"Look at this." Commander M'Butu said as he approached what appeared to be the entrance.

Vincent walked to his side and looked curiously at the strange lattice on both sides of the door.

Some of the honeycombs were empty while others housed figurines and other small objects.

"What do you suppose that's for?" Commander M'Butu asked curiously.

"If it was built in squares instead of hexagons, I'd say that it's like a bookcase. You know, like in the living room or entry hall of your home." Vincent said, as he carefully looked at the various items.

Commander M'Butu considered the statement, then noticed something a few feet away.

Vincent followed along and looked curiously at the strange way the next side of the house was built.

"You know, it looks sort of like a kitchen." Commander M'Butu said speculatively.

Vincent looked over the layout with Commander M'Butu's words in mind, then walked to a panel in the wall and pulled on it experimentally.

"What have you found there?" Commander M'Butu asked carefully.

"It's a stasis freezer." Vincent said as he reached inside the cold drawer and took out a wrapped package.

"With food still inside." Commander M'Butu said cautiously.

Vincent dropped the package back into the drawer and closed it firmly.

"Come on, let's look inside." Commander M'Butu said in a low voice as he led the way around the corner to the front of the house again.

Vincent followed as yet another chill ran up his spine.

After a moment for their eyes to adjust to the dimmer light inside, Vincent and Commander M'Butu began to look around.

"This is wrong." Vincent said in a whisper.

"I know." Commander M'Butu said as he walked to a chair which had a blanket draped over the back and two more in a crumpled heap just in front.

"It looks like whoever lived here might have just left a few minutes ago, maybe to go check the mailbox." Vincent said as he walked to a door at the far end of the room.

"Jenn never did say why the former colony failed." Commander M'Butu said as he followed.

Vincent found himself in a small central room that had six doors.

He looked into one of the open doors and found what could only be described as a bedroom.

It was perfectly clean and in other circumstances, might even be seen as cheerful.

He turned at the sound of one of the doors being opened.

Commander M'Butu pulled the accordion style door aside and cautiously walked into the room.

Vincent stopped in the doorway as he saw a bed at the far end of the room. The main difference between this room and the other one was that this bed was piled with rumpled blankets and appeared to have been slept in the previous night.

One of the walls of the room contained a honeycomb like the one outside the front door, and in some of the cells of the honeycomb, there were clothes.

"Come on. We need to talk to Jenn." Commander M'Butu said firmly as he turned to walk out of the room.

Vincent couldn't think of anything to say as he followed, frowning slightly.

"What do you think happened?" Vincent finally asked as they walked back toward the center of town.

"I don't know Crewman, but I can't imagine it being something good." Commander M'Butu said as he increased his pace.

Vincent remained silent as their pace became even faster and he was on the verge of running to keep up with the Commander.

"Uncle Oliver? What's wrong?" Cyril asked with concern.

"Jenn, what happened here?" Commander M'Butu asked firmly as he looked her in the eyes.

"My people would rather not discuss that if you don't mind." Jenn said carefully.

"I'm afraid I do mind." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

Jenn looked at the commander with surprise.

After a moment to calm himself, Commander M'Butu said, "Crewman Winters and I visited one of the houses and it looks as if the previous occupant might have left it this morning. I need to know what would make them leave so suddenly that they would leave food in their kitchens and not even take the time to pack their clothes."

Jenn closed her eyes and took in a slow inhale of breath.

After a long, silent moment, she said, "Commander, What I am going to tell you is a very personal and guarded secret of the Soleen-Avalla empire. Please respect the information and try not to make it public."

Commander M'Butu watched her carefully, not entirely sure if he would be able to determine her truthfulness from her expression.

"We have every intention of giving you this colony with a minimum number of conditions or restrictions, but the release of this information would bring shame to the Soleen-Avalla, it could conceivably damage relations between our people if it were revealed."

"I wouldn't want your people to be embarrassed, but I need to be sure that I won't be putting the colonists in danger by letting them take control of the colony without knowing the full history." Commander M'Butu said seriously, then glanced around the group before saying, "We can speak privately if you like."

"No. I understand your concerns and I agree that you should know how things came to be as they are." Jenn said seriously. "If the situation were reversed, I would want to know what had happened."

The group gathered closer to hear the history that Jenn was so reluctant to reveal.

"The Haventauck colony was designed to be a home for the Avalla people. The Soleen forcefully relocated them from our world to this place to be rid of them." Jenn said in a low voice.

Looks of surprise and shock went around the group at the statement.

"Every effort was made by the Soleen, to make this place hospitable to the Avalla... but it wasn't their home and it wasn't suited to their needs." Jenn continued with regret.

"So this was like a prison?" Vincent finally ventured.

"Yes." Jenn reluctantly admitted.

After a long silent moment, Commander M'Butu asked, "So at some point, the Soleen realized that this was wrong and invited the Avalla back to your world?"

Jenn took a long slow breath, then whispered, "Yes."

"And when the Avalla were finally welcomed back, they just abandoned their homes?" Commander M'Butu asked cautiously.

Jenn nodded, then said, "The spirits of the Avalla people had been broken by enduring the climate here, that was too cold and too dry for their comfort. Many believed that they were being taken away from here to face mass execution... and they actually welcomed it."

"What happened to the Avalla?" Vincent asked with concern.

"They were welcomed back to their home world. The Soleen made every effort to prove to the Avalla that they were accepted." Jenn said quietly.

"That couldn't have been easy." Cyril said distantly.

"No, it wasn't. The Avalla were understandably suspicious and couldn't accept that the Soleen were sincere. Some fled into the hill country of Soleena to hide, not trusting that the Soleen's motives were benevolent. Those that remained in the cities were cautious and reluctant to trust, as of course might be expected." Jenn said with regret.

"But now your people are known as the Soleen-Avalla. They are seen as equals?" Cyril asked cautiously.

"Yes. The elders of our people are of both Soleen and Avalla. The children are educated together and taught that all sentient beings have the same fundamental rights. It has been a struggle, but our people are finally united." Jenn said confidently.

"Perhaps you could tell us now, are you Soleen or Avalla?" Roger asked with interest.

Jenn smiled at the question and said, "I prefer to think of myself as Soleen-Avalla. Although it was the Soleen who created me, both Soleen and Avalla scientists worked to make me who I am."

Looks of surprise went around the room at her unusual statement.

"I am an Android." Jenn said quietly, apparently unsure of what their reactions would be.

The rest of the group stood in silence as they absorbed the new information.

"I was created for the sole purpose of representing our people among the people of the Federation."

"An Android?" Vincent finally asked, just wanting to confirm that he had heard right.

"Yes. When the Soleen became aware of the Federation and recognized that the member worlds were primarily mammals, I was constructed to be an intermediary that they could relate to. It was believed that the Soleen and Avalla would be seen as significantly 'alien' to the Federation to breed suspicion and distrust." Jenn said frankly.

"Judging by the style of your ship, I would guess that the Soleen are Gorn." Commander M'Butu said as he looked Jenn in the eyes.

"Yes. That is correct. Long ago, the Soleen were part of the Gorn Empire. The Avalla were the indigenous people of the world we now know as Soleena." Jenn said quietly.

After a long moment of silence, Commander M'Butu reluctantly said, "When the Federation encountered the Gorn at Cestus III, it did not go well at all. I can't say that their being Saurian contributed to that, but I do think that the Federation might have been reluctant to establish relations with the Soleen-Avalla and accept this colony if it weren't for you acting as intermediary."

Jenn smiled and said, "Thank you Commander. It pleases me very much to know that you approve of my purpose."

Commander M'Butu looked around the group and said, "Now that we know why the colony was abandoned, the way it was, I can't see any reason that we shouldn't proceed as planned. Does everyone agree?"

"I do have a concern." Cyril said immediately.

At Commander M'Butu's questioning look, Cyril continued, "Why would the Soleen-Avalla agree to allow a Federation colony on their border when they continue to keep themselves hidden within their own space and use you as a buffer between our people?"

Jenn smiled at the blunt question, obviously expecting it.

"The people of Soleena have been monitoring Federation broadcasts for some time, and have come to admire the people of the Federation. Although the Soleen-Avalla have no desire to join the Federation, our ultimate goal would be to exist along side the Federation in an atmosphere of mutual respect. The unfortunate incident at the Kimber IV colony seemed to be the perfect opportunity for my people to promote good will between us." Jenn said carefully.

Commander M'Butu slowly nodded his acceptance of the words, then said, "Jenn, it may be necessary for me to reveal some of what you have told me to my superiors in Starfleet, simply to ease their concerns."

"Yes. I can see that." Jenn said quietly.

"However, I will be sure to let my superiors know that the subject is extremely sensitive and that your people do not want the details of their history to become common knowledge." Commander M'Butu assured her.

"Thank you Commander. That is all that we ask." Jenn said gently.

"Well, if there are no other concerns, what do you say we get back to evaluating the colony so we can get started?" Commander M'Butu asked as he looked around the group.

After a moment to see if anyone else had any questions, Cyril said, "I believe that I have seen enough to address some of our primary concerns."

"What have you seen?" Commander M'Butu asked with interest.

"According to the AI assessment, the power, water, and sewage treatment systems are in perfect working order. Although there may be some minor issues with individual dwellings, the colony as a whole seems to be perfectly habitable." Cyril said frankly.

"What do you think Roger?" Commander M'Butu asked as he considered Cyril's words.

"The colony design is as good as any I've seen. This central city is designed to be a seat of commerce, yet isn't so large that overcrowding would be a concern for at least three generations. As you move out from the central city, there are smaller town centers that are designed for the distribution of goods and services to smaller, local communities. With a minimal amount of organization, we should be able to settle our people evenly throughout the colony." Roger said professionally.

"What concerns do we have to address?" Commander M'Butu asked as he looked around the group.

"Food." Roger said frankly.

Commander M'Butu nodded, obviously expecting the answer.

"As Jenn mentioned at the dinner last night, the farm lands at the perimeter of the colony have returned to the wild. It will take time for us to make them ready for use." Roger said seriously.

"Commander, my people have anticipated this and are prepared to offer food to sustain the colonists and a supply of seeds and starter plants for when the fields are ready to plant. We only await your acceptance of our offer." Jenn said quietly.

"Please don't think me ungrateful for asking, but what would your people want in exchange for this food?" Commander M'Butu asked carefully.

"We ask for nothing more than we asked previously." Jenn said as she looked Commander M'Butu in the eyes.

"Which is?" Commander M'Butu prompted.

"Which is that the Federation respect our sovereignty and our borders." Jenn said seriously.

"Of course." Commander M'Butu said respectfully.

"Then please accept the offer of supplies as a token of our wish that we become 'good neighbors'." Jenn said diplomatically.

Commander M'Butu smiled and said, "I'm sure the Federation would like that very much. You can let your people know that we will gratefully accept their offer."

Jenn slowly nodded, then said, "You can expect the first delivery of supplies in approximately eleven hours."

Commander M'Butu's eyes went wide with surprise.

Jenn smiled at his reaction then shyly said, "I am in constant contact with my people."

"I wasn't aware of that, but I suppose it is convenient." Commander M'Butu finished consideringly.

Jenn giggled, then said, "It just allows me to fulfill my purpose as efficiently as possible."

"I can't imagine how you could have done it any better." Cyril said frankly.

Commander M'Butu nodded his agreement, then looked around the group and said, "Well, the supplies are on their way. We had better finish our survey so we can get on with the business of settling this place."

"I want to take a look at the transit system." Roger said immediately.

"Yes, while you're doing that, Jenn and I can go to one of the farms to see firsthand what has to be done." Cyril said seriously.

Before Lieutenant Simms could ask, Commander M'Butu looked at him and said, "Go with Roger. Until we're more familiar with the colony, I don't want anyone going off on their own."

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Simms said seriously.

"Crewman Winters, let's go back and take another look at that house with this new information in mind." Commander M'Butu said with a smile.

"Yes sir." Vincent said automatically as he walked to Commander M'Butu's side.

Commander M'Butu and Vincent walked quietly down the street, each thinking their own thoughts until Vincent finally asked, "Do you believe her?"

"Yes, I think I do." Commander M'Butu said slowly, then continued, "But the fact of the matter is that it doesn't really matter what I believe."

"Why not?" Vincent asked curiously.

"From a diplomatic standpoint, we've been invited to establish relations with a previously uncooperative civilization. Refusing their generous offer would make us seem ungrateful and might be seen as an insult." Commander M'Butu said professionally.

"From a political standpoint, establishing this colony provides the Federation a physical presence in an area of space that, up to now, we've only charted from a distance. In essence, this one colony establishes our claim to this area of space all the way to the border of the Soleen-Avalla system."

"From a security standpoint, this action doesn't compromise us to any appreciable degree. And if the Soleen-Avalla are as friendly as they appear, we might even be able to depend on them to defend the colony, should the need arise."

"But what if the Soleen-Avalla attack the colony?" Vincent asked with concern.

"What could they possibly gain by doing that?" Commander M'Butu asked seriously.

"I don't know." Vincent said in a mumble.

"No. I wasn't dismissing your question, I was asking your opinion. What could the Soleen-Avalla possibly gain by luring us out here and tricking us into taking over their colony?" Commander M'Butu asked as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Um, I don't know. Maybe they would want to use the colonists as slaves?" Vincent asked reluctantly.

"Alright, that is a reasonable postulate. Let's think that through. We've seen that their warp technology is superior to ours. This colony has an AI unit in place, and Jenn has told us that she's an Android. I think that it would be reasonable to assume that the Soleen-Avalla are technologically advanced to the point where they could accomplish their goals by the use of computers and robotics, which would seem to negate any need for slaves." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

Vincent nodded his agreement to the reasoning.

"We could go on with other examples, but I think you understand what I was trying to say. Starfleet has gone to great lengths to analyze as many of the possibilities as they can and they have determined that this is a worthy undertaking. Of course there is an element of risk, but if we weren't willing to take risks, we never would have left Earth." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

"Thank you Commander. I understand what you're saying. But I don't know if I'd be able to think like that, analyzing all the different angles and possibilities." Vincent said slowly.

"It takes practice, it's an entire system of thought. But it can be of great help in some situations," Commander M'Butu said casually.

"Do you think you could teach me how to do it?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"Remind me when we're on our way back to Earth and I'll find all the study materials that you'll need." Commander M'Butu said with a smile.

Vincent looked around and suddenly realized that they had been standing in front of the house for a few minutes.

"Let's go in and investigate."

"I think I understand the design." Vincent said, as they stepped up to the front door.

"What is that, Crewman?" Commander M'Butu asked curiously.

"This, where we're standing now, this is like an entry hall, except that it's outside. Over there is the kitchen. I bet if we walk around the house, we'll find more rooms that we'd find inside the house if we were on Earth." Vincent said as he looked around.

"Let's go check it out." Commander M'Butu said as they walked toward the kitchen area.

The kitchen was just as they had left it.

Next they found what was obviously a dining room.

As they turned the corner to the next side of the house, both Vincent and Commander M'Butu froze in wonder at the lush well kept garden and beautiful pond of water in the back yard.

"This is incredible." Commander M'Butu said as he walked closer to the foliage and began to scan it with his tricorder.

"Shouldn't it be overgrown? I mean, the walking path is completely clear and the pond isn't scummy or anything. It looks like someone's been taking very good care of the place." Vincent said cautiously.

"Jenn said that the AI system has been taking care of things, but I didn't consider that would include gardening." Commander M'Butu said, as he looked around.

"Maintenance Bots were adapted to attend to the private garden areas of the homes." A voice said, seemingly from all around them.

"Are you the AI?" Commander M'Butu asked into the air.

"That is correct, I am Mycien, the guardian of this place." The voice said reasonably.

"Then why didn't you take care of the farm lands outside of town?" Vincent asked, before he could think better of it.

"To what purpose? Without inhabitants here, to eat the food, what would be the purpose of maintaining the farms?" Mycien asked reasonably.

"What's the purpose of keeping up this garden without people to use it?" Vincent asked in return.

"The maintenance and care of the colony is among my primary purposes. Maintaining this garden falls into that purview. The farmlands outside the colony, however, do not." Mycien said flatly.

"Thank you Mycien, that makes perfect sense to me." Commander M'Butu said with a nod.

Vincent looked at the Commander with question since it sounded like a matter of interpretation to him.

"Even though Mycien is sentient, he is, at his core, a computer. As such, he follows his programming. In this instance it makes perfect sense for him to maintain the homes and their associated gardens because they are within the boundaries of the colony that is his responsibility. The farmlands are outside that boundary, and while he *could* choose to maintain those farmlands, without people inhabiting the colony, it would be wasted effort to maintain something that isn't even part of his job."

"Thank you Commander. It pleases me to know that you understand my purpose and agree with my reasoning. If the colonists can also achieve such understanding, we should be able to work together in harmony." Mycien said thoughtfully.

"You and I can work together, Mycien, to be sure that you and the leaders of the colony understand each other." Commander M'Butu said into the air.

"I have no doubt that, with your assistance, we will achieve mutual understanding." Mycien said in a respectful tone.

"Mycien, can I ask you a question?" Vincent called into the air.

"You just did." Mycien said frankly.

Vincent puzzled over the response for a moment, then broke into a smile.

"Why didn't you talk to us when we were here before?" Vincent asked curiously.

"I had nothing to contribute to your conversation. I would not have revealed the history of the former colony without direct authorization from the Counsel of Elders." Mycien said simply.

"Wait. So you're, like, everywhere in the colony? Watching everything?" Vincent asked thoughtfully.

"That is essentially correct." Mycien said slowly.

"And you report everything you see and hear back to the Counsel of Elders?" Vincent ventured cautiously.

"No. I relay those questions and concerns that I feel are worthy of their notice." Mycien said carefully.

Vincent looked at Commander M'Butu with concern, silently asking him to take over the questioning.

"Mycien, do you understand that the colonists might be uncomfortable knowing that everything they say and do is being observed and possibly relayed back to the Elders?" Commander M'Butu asked quietly.

"Yes, I understand how that might cause some mistrust, however, once the former Kimber IV colonists have formally taken control of this colony, I will cease relaying any information to Soleena. At that time we can discuss any privacy needs and my interactions with the citizens of the colony, to find a balance that will be both comfortable and productive." Mycien said confidently.

Commander M'Butu nodded and smiled, then said, "Thank you Mycien. I think that sounds like a reasonable arrangement."

"Can we go look at one of the other houses?" Vincent asked as he pointed at one of the two other houses that faced the garden.

"Yes. Mycien, do you know if any of these plants are poisonous to mammals?" Commander M'Butu asked as he led the way down the walking path through the garden.

"None of the plant varieties in the home gardens are poisonous to any known species. Many of the plants have edible fruits, leaves or roots. They were planted in these home gardens to provide a constant source of fresh food, which the Avalla believe to be the most nutritionally beneficial." Mycien said carefully.

As they approached the pond, Vincent noticed that there was a walkway that seemed to end halfway across the water.

It seemed so strange that he asked his question without thinking, "Didn't they have time to finish the bridge?"

Commander M'Butu stopped at Vincent's side and looked at the seeming path to nowhere with question.

"That is a platform for sunning oneself. It is a feature favored by the Soleen, but some Avalla accepted it because the humidity of the water of the pool and the warmth of the sun made the climate seem more bearable." Mycien said and sounded like he felt regret for their situation.

"Do I have time to try it?" Vincent asked as he looked at Commander M'Butu with question.

"Just don't go to sleep out there. I'm not going to hold the report to the captain so you can lounge around." Commander M'Butu said playfully.

Vincent smiled, then walked out to the end of the platform.

After giving Vincent a minute to lie down and get comfortable, Commander M'Butu asked, "Do you think the colonists will like it?"

"Oh yeah. It's a little bit warm in this uniform, but if I had my swim trunks on, I think this would feel great." Vincent said as he slowly stood.

Commander M'Butu nodded, then asked into the air, "Mycien, are there any fish in the pond?"

"No Commander. The Avalla do not eat fish, therefore we saw no reason to stock the ponds with animal life. Each pond has a cultivated moss colony which oxygenates and decontaminates the water. So the water is quite suitable for drinking and perfectly safe for bathing." Mycien said professionally.

Commander M'Butu knelt down and put his fingertips in the water.

"It's nice and warm." Commander M'Butu said with surprise.

"Yes. The water of the pond is also used in the, as you might call it, 'solar collection process' that powers the colony, therefore it is kept at a constant temperature." Mycien said informatively.

"An elegant system." Commander M'Butu said as he stood.

Vincent walked to Commander M'Butu's side and waited for him to be ready to go explore the next house.

A glittering of multi-colored sparkles erupted a few feet away, drawing Vincent and Commander M'Butu's attention.

Before the materialization was complete, both Vincent and Commander M'Butu had their phaser's raised and leveled at the unexpected arrivals.

"Surprise." Roger said weakly, then slowly raised his hands in surrender.

Commander M'Butu smiled, then holstered his weapon and asked, "What are you doing, Roger?"

"We were at one of the transit stations and asked the AI if it could take us to wherever you are. Rather than give us a verbal answer, here we are." Roger said timidly.

"I misunderstood the nature of the question. In future, I will require verification before initiating the transportal stream." Mycien said from all around them.

"That's probably a good idea. I'm sure misunderstandings like that are going to happen for a while." Commander M'Butu said without concern.

"They have a public transporter system that will take you instantly to whatever part of the colony you want to visit." Roger said with excitement.

"Normally, transportal traffic is from one station to another, as it is more efficient. But the transportal system is fully capable of transferring personnel to or from any site on the planet." Mycien said informatively.

"Do you happen to know if your transporter system can interface with the transporters on the Yorktown?" Commander M'Butu asked curiously.

"Yes. I am capable of that function." Mycien answered immediately.

Commander M'Butu nodded, then said to the group, "That could make settling the colony even easier. If transporter control can coordinate with Mycien to receive transport coordinates, then we should be able to get people moving directly to where they need to go with little effort."

"Yes. And by using JonJon's list, we should only need the names of those transporting. Everything else could be automated." Roger said in thought.

"Have you heard from Cyril and Jenn?" Commander M'Butu asked seriously.

"No. But from the way it sounds, they probably have quite a bit to survey." Roger said honestly.

"Crewman Winters, do you think we've seen enough to be reasonably sure that the colonists could live here comfortably?" Commander M'Butu asked as he turned his attention to Vincent.

"Yes sir. Now that I understand more about how things are set up, I think this would be a wonderful place to live." Vincent said as he looked around the lush garden.

"I agree. Let's go find Cyril and Jenn and see what they've discovered." Commander M'Butu said happily.

"Commander, I can teleport your group to their location if you would like." Mycien offered politely.

"Yes. Thank you Mycien. We would appreciate that," Commander M'Butu said, and before the words were completely out of his mouth, the group were enveloped in a fountain of sparkles.

"Uncle Oliver? Is something wrong?" Cyril asked as he stepped out of a field of dense underbrush.

"No. In fact, things are actually better than we could have anticipated." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

"How so?" Cyril asked with interest.

"The colony's AI, Mycien, has been kind enough to answer some questions for us. Based on his answers and our observations, it looks like this place is perfectly habitable. Unless any of you have any concerns that I should be aware of, I'm going to recommend that we send down the second survey team to begin the technical survey." Commander M'Butu said seriously.

At Vincent's confused look, Lieutenant Simms leaned down and whispered, "They'll test the quality of the air and water and check for the presence of harmful substances in the environment like lead or mercury."

Vincent nodded that he understood, then devoted his full attention to Commander M'Butu again.

"My only concern is the farm lands. Over a hundred years of unrestrained growth has occurred. It will take over a month to receive the equipment that we would need to clear the land and I can't imagine us completing the job in less than another month, more likely two." Cyril said with regret.

"So we're looking at sustaining about six hundred people for a minimum of two months." Commander M'Butu said slowly.

"More realistically, five to six months. Once the fields are cleared, we will need to plant them and wait for them to begin to produce a quantity of food sufficient to sustain us. Of course, we will be receiving supply ships in the interim, but given our distance from Earth, these first few months could be quite a concern." Cyril said honestly.

"I believe we can significantly reduce the time required." Jenn said thoughtfully.

"How is that?" Cyril asked with interest.

"Mycien could reconfigure his maintenance bots to clear the fields. You would not have to wait for equipment to arrive and the bots can work tirelessly until the job is complete. They should be able to clear the fields relatively quickly, although they are not well suited to the more intricate task of planting." Jenn said distantly.

"Well then, as Mycien finishes clearing each field, we colonists could go to work planting them. I'm sure all of us would enjoy getting our hands dirty for such a worthwhile cause." Cyril said frankly.

"It sounds like we've got a plan then. If no one has any other concerns, let's return to the ship and make our report." Commander M'Butu said as he looked around.

"Hey Champ, did you just get back?" Joe asked happily as Vincent walked into the room.

"Not exactly. We had to go to sickbay to get checked out, then we made our report to the captain. So I've been back on the ship for a little while." Vincent said as he walked to stand beside Joe at the main.

"So what do you think of the colony? Did the captain say how many weeks he thinks it will be before the colonists can start settling?" Joe asked curiously.

"Well, if the second survey team finishes all their checks and says that everything is good, the first colonists might be able to go down to the planet tonight." Vincent said cautiously.

"Tonight? It took nearly a month before they were allowed to go down to Kimber IV. The colony must be in perfect condition." Joe said with wide eyed wonder.

"Pretty much. The AI has maintenance robots that have been repairing anything that broke for the last hundred years. The air is clean, the water is clean, everything works the way it's supposed to. The only big problem is feeding everyone, and I think we've just about got that worked out." Vincent said frankly.

"I can hardly wait to go down and see it for myself." Joe said as he glanced at the main again.

"I know you'll love it." Vincent said confidently.

"So are you here to work on your report?" Joe asked curiously.

"Yeah. You know the drill. Anytime we get to do something exciting, we have to tell Starfleet all about it." Vincent said as he walked to the auxiliary station to sign in.

"You'd better get used to it, Son. It's part of the life that you've chosen." Joe said with a grin as he turned his full attention back to the main console.

"Crewman Winters. Please report to conference room one." Sounded over the intercom.

"I just came from there." Vincent said, as he signed back off the workstation.

"Maybe they forgot to tell you something. It's probably nothing." Joe said as he turned in his chair.

"If it was nothing, they would have told me on the comm."

Editor's Notes:

I'm afraid I have to agree with Vincent, there is probably more to it than just forgetting something if they actually need him to report back to the conference room.

Let's see, they found out that Jenn is an android, and they have met the resident AI. Mycien seems to be quite friendly. Things seemed to be moving pretty smoothly on the planet's surface. I hope nothing bad is happening that will cause problems. I really want this colony to succeed. Actually I have the feeling that things will work out alright if people can just trust in one another, Let's hope so.

Darryl AKA The Radio Rancher

Chapter 34

"Crewman Winters, reporting as ordered sir." Vincent said as he stood at attention, just inside the conference room door.

He was feeling some apprehension about why the captain might have summoned him, since they had just spoken minutes before.

"At ease, Crewman. Please come in and have a seat." Captain Byrne said seriously.

As Vincent walked to the conference table, he noticed Commander M'Butu, Cyril Byrne, and another man whom he recognized as one of the colony's leaders.

"Crewman Winters, have you been introduced to Mr. Johanson?" Captain Byrne asked casually.

"No sir." Vincent answered in his 'mature' voice.

"Crewman Vincent Winters, this is Torbjørn Johanson. He is the head of the colony's governing counsel." Captain Byrne said formally.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Crewman Winters." Mr. Johanson said with a sincere smile.

"It's nice to meet you too." Vincent said as he looked Mr. Johanson in the eyes, then glanced at the captain with question.

"Crewman Winters, since you have been named 'first citizen' of the colony, Mr. Johanson thought that it would be appropriate for you to be the first to move into your new house." Captain Byrne said carefully.

"It is simply our way of honoring you." Mr. Johanson hurried to explain. "I think that it would also be of significance to the colonists to know that the colonization has officially begun and that you, their hero, are leading the way for them."

"Hero?" Vincent squeaked.

Cyril chuckled at Vincent's expression and said, "Given the hardship and loss of the recent months, the people need something to believe in. I'm sure as time goes on, and they get to know you, that it will be less of an issue. But for now, your reputation among the colonists is a bit larger than life."

"So, Crewman Winters, when the final surveys are concluded, will you be willing to go to the surface and take possession of your home?" Mr. Johanson asked simply.

Vincent was about to accept when a thought came to him.

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to ask T'Lani about it before I answer." Vincent said carefully.

Mr. Johanson looked at Vincent with question, then at Cyril for explanation.

"His wife." Cyril said softly to Mr. Johanson, then turned to his father and asked, "Can Ensign T'Lani join us for this discussion?"

"That's okay. You don't need to call her." Vincent hurried to say before Captain Byrne could answer. "I have a telepathic bond with her and I'm asking her now."

"Let her know that this isn't a requirement; simply an offer." Captain Byrne said seriously.

Vincent nodded that he had heard and that he would pass on the message.

Everyone at the table watched as Vincent seemed to be lost in concentration.

"Yes," Vincent said, as his distant gaze faded.

"You'll accept a house at the colony?" Commander M'Butu asked, to be sure of what Vincent was agreeing to.

"Yes. When the surveys are finished and everything else is ready, T'Lani and I will go down and move into our home." Vincent said seriously.

"Very good." Captain Byrne said with a sincere nod of approval.

"Captain. Sensors are detecting an energy weapon being discharged on the planet's surface." Lieutenant Clark said in an anxious voice over the comm.

"Are we under attack?" Captain Byrne asked, as he stood.

After a long silent moment, Lieutenant Clark responded uncertainly, *"I don't think so. The energy weapon seems to be an unusually low yield and isn't directed at us."*

"What is the target?" Captain Byrne asked quickly.

"There is no target that I can identify." Lieutenant Clark said in a bewildered voice.

"Then what is the purpose of discharging the weapon?" Captain Byrne asked in a rhetorical tone.

"Why don't we ask Mycien?" Vincent asked reluctantly, feeling that he might be speaking out of turn.

"That would seem to be the most direct route to finding an answer." Commander M'Butu said in a considering voice.

"Commander, would you like to establish contact, since you have had previous dealings with the AI?" Captain Byrne asked assertively.

"Yes sir." Commander M'Butu said as he stepped to the comm controls, then quickly said, "Lieutenant Patterson, would you establish vocal communication with the colony AI?"

"Right away, sir." Debbie said efficiently.

Vincent felt distinctly out of place, but at the same time, he wanted to know what was happening.

"I have establish contact. I'm putting it through." Debbie said quickly.

"Mycien, we've detected an energy weapon being discharged on the surface. Is that something that you are doing?" Commander M'Butu asked as he was obviously trying to keep a neutral, non-accusatory tone.

"The energy discharge you detected is part of the weather modification system. The ambient temperature of the cloud mass approaching the colony is being raised to adjust the anticipated rainfall to the desired level." Mycien said efficiently.

Commander M'Butu and Captain Byrne exchanged a look of surprise at the answer.

Before the Commander could respond, Mr. Johanson asked, "Are you saying that you have a system in place to control the weather?"

"Not control, as such, but there are safeguards in place to modify the naturally occurring weather patterns to provide the optimum benefit for the colony." Mycien said professionally.

"So does that mean that, if a dangerous storm were approaching, you could cause it to dissipate before reaching the colony?" Mr. Johanson asked carefully.

"Yes, in certain circumstances. In other circumstances, the approaching storm might be adjusted to stabilize it until it passed beyond the colony." Mycien answered simply.

After a long, silent moment, Commander M'Butu said, "Thank you Mycien. Your explanation was very helpful."

"Please feel free to call upon me if you have any other concerns regarding the colony." Mycien said in a friendly tone, then disconnected the transmission.

"After what the colonists went through at Kimber, knowing that we have the technology in place to manipulate approaching weather should provide some much needed comfort." Cyril said speculatively.

"Yes. I should think so." Captain Byrne said thoughtfully.

Cyril glanced at Vincent and gave him a ghost of a smile before saying, "Crewman Winters, if you'll come with me to my office, I could show you where your home will be located."

Vincent looked at the Captain with question.

"Yes. That does sound like a good idea." Captain Byrne said in a considering voice, then looked at Vincent and said, "You are dismissed."

"Thank you, sir." Vincent said, then glanced at Cyril to indicate that he was ready to go.

"Recreation deck." Cyril said to the ceiling of the lift when they were both aboard.

Cyril glanced down and noticed a curious, speculative look in Vincent's eyes.

"You had a question?" Cyril asked casually.

"Yeah. I just... I kinda thought that you were the leader of the colony." Vincent said timidly.

Cyril smiled, then said, "I am one of the leaders. My primary duty is to represent the colony when dealing with Starfleet and the Federation. Torbjorn is our leader and basically coordinates with the rest of us to be sure that we're all working in the same direction, toward the same goals."

"Oh. That makes sense." Vincent said thoughtfully. "I guess your dad being a Starfleet captain must have helped you a lot."

"Yes, in a sense." Cyril said gently. "Due to the variety of people I became acquainted with as a consequence of my father's work, I was well placed to accept the position with the colony when it came available."

As the lift doors opened, Cyril noticed a disturbed look in Vincent's eyes.

"How are you doing, Vincent?" Cyril asked with concern as he stopped just outside the lift.

"I'm fine." Vincent answered automatically.

"You seem to be unusually quiet, like something is bothering you." Cyril said with evident concern.

Vincent looked up at him for a moment, then quietly said, "It's like a lot of things are ending and beginning right now. Nothing is really wrong, but... I don't know... everything's changing."

Cyril nodded as he thought about what he knew of Vincent's situation.

"Vincent, occasionally it will seem that everything in your life is in upheaval. I believe that it happens to everyone at one time or another. It is important, at times like this, to embrace those things in your life that are stable and most important to you. They will act as your foundation." Cyril said slowly then made a casual gesture to indicate for them to start walking again.

"What kind of things?" Vincent asked curiously.

"You would have to be the one to answer that. For me, it is my family. I know that no matter what happens in the rest of my life, they will be there to support me through the difficult times." Cyril said seriously.

Vincent nodded, then absently said, "I haven't talked to Cory in a while. I should probably check in with him. That would probably make me feel better."

Cyril paused outside the door of his office and said, "From what I know of your Clan, I can imagine that they will be an excellent source of support. I should also think that spending some time with your wife might be of benefit."

"Yeah. But she's been pulling extra long shifts lately to get ready for setting up the medical stuff at the colony. Between her duties and mine, it's hard for us to find the time to even be in the same room." Vincent said frankly.

"Perhaps now that we have arrived at the colony, things will begin to settle for the two of you." Cyril said, then gestured toward the door, indicating for Vincent to precede him into his office.

"How are the preparations coming along?" Cyril asked as he walked up behind JonJon at the terminal.

"The first stage settlement plan is complete. JonJon is reviewing the town center occupation plan to be certain that all the providers of goods and services have adequate facilities to serve their needs." Jenn said happily.

"You've made significant progress." Cyril said in an impressed voice.

"Roger's generational distribution pattern simplified the entire process of settling the colonists. That left us extra time to do this." JonJon said absently as he worked.

"We've just come down to see if you've made the housing arrangements for our first citizen." Cyril said with a glance at Vincent.

"Yes. Let me show you." JonJon said quickly as he brought up a map on the terminal screen.

Vincent stepped closer so he could look over JonJon's shoulder.

"Do you see that one, right there?" JonJon asked as he pointed at the map. "That will be the Winters estate."

"Estate?" Vincent asked with surprise.

JonJon chuckled at Vincent's expression, then explained, "That's what we're calling it. To keep from having 3/4 of the colony standing vacant, Roger decided to assign each family one of the six-sided parcels of land. Most of them contain three buildings."

"You can think of the extra houses as guest cottages, if you like." Roger said frankly.

"Or a place for your kids to live someday." JonJon said with an impish grin.

"Okay." Vincent said with some excitement, even though what he was seeing wasn't much more than a dot on the terminal screen.

"This one next to yours is mine and that one is Benny's." JonJon said shyly.

"So our three houses are facing each other?" Vincent asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I talked to Benny about it and he thought that the three of us should sort of stick together." JonJon said quietly.

"I think it's going to be great having you guys as neighbors." Vincent said with a joyous smile.

"I think so too." JonJon said gently, then went back to work on the settlement plan.

"But I thought you and Lehman were going to be living with Cyril and Roger." Vincent said suddenly.

"Oh, we are. At least, at first. But Roger said that it probably wouldn't be too long before Lehman and I are going to want to be on our own, so we each got our own estate. Dad's and Lehman's are right here by mine." JonJon said with excitement as he pointed to more little dots on the map.

"I can't wait to see it. What do I need to do next?" Vincent asked as he looked at Cyril with question.

"Wait for the final survey to be completed." Cyril said simply.

"Yes." Roger said with a nod. "As soon as we've received approval to begin the colonization, you'll be the first to transport to the surface."

"You and your wife." Cyril amended quietly.

"That's right." Roger said with a smile at Cyril, then continued, "After that, we will begin the full colonization effort."

"So how long is the colonization going to take?" Vincent asked curiously.

"The way we're planning to do this, that may be impossible to predict." Roger said frankly.

Cyril nodded his agreement and said, "We've decided to let the people go at their own pace and in their own time. It may end up being a bit slower than a strict timetable, but it should be quite a bit more comfortable for the colonists. By referencing the colonization plan, all a person need do is identify themselves to the transporter operator and they will be transported directly to their new homes."

"It isn't a perfect plan. I'm sure there will be times when some will have to await their turn to transport, but there aren't so many of us that it should cause undue hardship to anyone." Roger said frankly.

"Hi dads!" Lehman said as he walked into the office with Fizgig in his arms and Benny at his side.

"How are you doing Son?" Roger asked as he immediately gave Lehman a hug.

"We're good. Fizgig was just missing JonJon so we thought we'd bring him down to visit." Lehman said happily.

"Thank you." JonJon said as he accepted Fizgig from Lehman.

"I can work on the business distribution plan if you would like to give Fizgig some attention." Jenn said quietly.

"Thank you Jenn." JonJon said as he stood from his chair before the terminal.

Jenn took his place and began working.

"How long now?" Lehman asked with excitement.

"Any time. We're just waiting on the call from your grandfather." Cyril said with a loving smile at Lehman.

"Do you think I'll be able to sleep in our new house tonight?" Lehman asked hopefully.

"I can't really say. There may be quite a lot for Cyril and I to do." Roger said and noticed the crestfallen expression in Lehman's eyes.

"I bet Crewman Channing would be willing to go down with them if you can't get away." Vincent said quickly, remembering the discussion at breakfast.

"Crewman Channing, you say?" Roger asked curiously, then looked at Cyril with question.

"From the amount of time the two of you... excuse me Fizgig, the three of you have spent with Crewman Channing, I have no doubt that he would enjoy accompanying you to the surface." Cyril said with a tender look at Lehman, then continued, "Once we've received clearance from father, I'll make some inquiries."

"I'd better get back to deflector control before Daddy Joe gets too worried about me." Vincent said then reluctantly added, "And I still have a report to write about our trip down to the colony."

"Hopefully we'll be calling you soon." Cyril said with a smile.

Vincent nodded, then left the room.

"What's going on?" Darin asked immediately as Vincent walked into Deflector Control.

"Oh, it wasn't anything bad after all. They just asked me if I wanted to be the first one to move into a house when we're allowed to move into the colony."

"So you're going to have a house here?" Darin asked with mild surprise.

"Yeah. I didn't really think about it before, but I think it'll be good for me and T'Lani to have a real home, I mean, like down on a planet." Vincent said honestly.

"Yeah. That does sound nice." Darin said with a distant smile.

"Well, they have lots of houses down there. Do you think you and Rad might like to do something like that?" Vincent asked curiously.

Darin blinked with surprise at the question, then quickly said, "No. It's too soon... waaaaaay too soon for us to be thinking about owning a permanent home together."

Vincent nodded that he understood what Darin was saying.

"So when are you and T'Lani going to move into your new home?" Darin asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

"When the survey team finishes. But I have some stuff to do before then; I need to get started." Vincent said as he walked to one of the auxiliary stations.

"Is it anything I can help with? I really don't have anything to do until Rad finishes his shift." Darin said frankly.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "I just have a report to write. I've kinda gotta do that myself, but you can keep me company if you want."

"That sounds good."

The report writing was a lot easier than Vincent expected. Apparently, all the practice he had received recently was paying off.

"You done?" Darin asked as Vincent transmitted his report.

"Yeah." Vincent said as he turned in his chair. "It was a pretty simple one, today."

"Do you think that maybe you should pack or something so you can move into your new house when it's time?" Darin asked seriously.

After a moment to consider, Vincent shook his head and said, "I'm going to need all my stuff here when we leave. I don't really have anything that I'm going to want to leave behind."

"You should probably take *something* with you." Darin said slowly, "I mean, the new house won't feel like it's really yours if you don't have anything of yours in it."

Vincent considered for a moment, then finally nodded his agreement.

"Hey, why don't we go up to the ship's store and I'll get you a house warming gift?" Darin said with a quick, cheerful smile.

"You don't have to do that. But I have an idea." Vincent said seriously.

"What's that?" Darin asked with interest.

"Well, there is one thing that's kind of special to me that I'd like to take down with me, a picture. Maybe you could help me pick out a frame for it?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Sure, little brother. Go get it. We probably don't have a lot of time." Darin said happily.

Vincent signed off the auxiliary terminal then hurried into the supply room.

"I think that, in time, this will prove to be a very good thing for him." Thaelan said from the main.

Darin looked at him with question.

"To have the knowledge that he has a home to return to should provide him a foundation that he has been lacking." Thaelan said introspectively.

After a moment to consider the words, Darin nodded and said, "So when we're out on a long-haul mission, he'll have something to work toward; a goal."

"Yes." Thaelan said with a slight nod. "It is something that I have been lacking in my own life and have recently felt the absence of it."

"Yeah. Me too." Darin said casually, then added, "But I know it's going to happen for me when I'm ready for it. It's not time yet."

Thaelan considered the words, then slightly nodded, conveying that he shared the sentiment.

"Okay, I've got it." Vincent said happily as he returned, holding a small book.

Darin looked at him curiously.

"I put the picture in here to keep it flat and so it wouldn't get banged up." Vincent explained as he waited by the door expectantly.

"Let's go then." Darin said with a smile, then turned to Thaelan and said, "I've still got my communicator if you need me for anything."

"I will call, should the need arise." Thaelan said with a gentle smile toward the pair at the door.

"Crewman Winters, please report to transporter room one." Debbie's voice said over the intercom.

Vincent shared a look with Darin, then accepted his Starfleet ID back from the clerk in the ship's store.

"You timed that just right." Darin said with a smile as he waited by the doorway.

"I wish you were coming with me." Vincent said nervously as he walked to Darin's side.

"They need one of us to be on call. But don't worry, little brother, I know you'll be fine." Darin said as he walked with Vincent toward the turbolift at a casual pace.

"Yeah. And hopefully T'Lani will be going down with me. It'll be nice to spend some time with her." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Hmm. Since you and your wife are going to be visiting your new home for the first time, I think it's probably a good thing that I'm staying behind." Darin said with a grin.

Vincent looked up at him curiously, then got a sense of what he was saying.

"I'm nine years old. I don't think we'll be doing anything that I'd be ashamed for you to see." Vincent said frankly.

"Transporter room one." Darin said upward as they entered the lift, then looked down to say, "Maybe not, but I still think that this is going to be... like a milestone, a first in your lives together that you'll be able to look back on many years from now. It should be just for the two of you."

As the door to the lift opened, Darin stepped out, but Vincent seemed to be too lost in thought to notice that they had arrived.

"Vincent?" Darin prompted, jogging Vincent out of his contemplation.

After a moment, Vincent looked up with question.

"We're here." Darin said, gesturing to the hallway beside him.

"Oh. Yeah." Vincent said absently as he walked off the lift, but stopped again just outside.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Darin asked quietly, just beginning to realize the depth of Vincent's distraction.

"It's just... T'Lani's my wife..." Vincent said with difficulty.

"I knew that." Darin said slowly, encouraging Vincent to continue.

"Well, a husband is supposed to, you know, *do stuff* for his wife." Vincent said as he looked up at Darin with desperation.

"If you're interested, I happen to have some advice about that." Darin said quietly.

"Interested? I've been worried about it since we got married!" Vincent said indignantly.

"Then you should have asked sooner." Darin said with a grin.

"They're waiting on me. Tell me what you figured out." Vincent said in an impatient tone.

Darin put a hand on Vincent's shoulder and looked him in the eyes before saying, "Forget about your ages. Forget about what you're *supposed* to do. When you and your wife are together, the two of you make the rules and whatever you do or don't do is no one else's business. Be honest. Tell her what you're thinking and feeling then listen to whatever she has to say about it and you two can decide what you want to do from there."

"But what if..." Vincent began to say.

Darin shook his head before Vincent could ask the question and said, "Talk to your wife."

Vincent began to chew on his lower lip, as he sometimes did when he was nervous, and Darin noticed.

"You don't need to worry about anything, little brother. Just love your wife. Talk to her. Listen to her. Honor her by trusting what she says and I know that everything will end up being perfect."

"Really?" Vincent asked uncertainly.

"Definitely." Darin said, then gestured down the hallway that would take them to transporter room one.

All eyes in the transporter room turned toward him as he entered with Darin at his side.

"Sorry. I was, um... shopping when you called." Vincent said quietly as he held up his picture frame as evidence, then walked to stand beside T'Lani.

"Crewman Winters." Mr. Johanson said in a formal tone and Vincent noticed that someone at the side of the room was pointing a handheld video camera at them. "In recognition of your heroic act that saved the lives of so many people, we have named you as our first citizen. It is only right that our first citizen be the first of us to move into his new home."

"The moment that you arrive on the surface will be logged as the official time that we took possession of the colony. So without further adieu, I welcome you and your wife to the colony which shall hereafter be named 'New Hope'."

"Thank you." Vincent said quietly. He felt like he was in a dream, just watching the goings on around him. After a moment, he realized that he felt T'Lani guiding him toward the transporter chamber and followed willingly.

Vincent glanced down to see that he was in his proper place on the transporter pad, then looked at the transporter operator to indicate that he was ready.

A movement drew his attention from the doorway and he saw Darin and Joe standing side by side, watching him with matching looks of love and pride.

The sparkles of the transporter obscured his vision as he gave them a grateful smile.

Vincent and T'Lani found themselves standing before a large house.

"Welcome home." Vincent said quietly.

T'Lani gave a cursory inspection of her surroundings, and her gaze fixed on the building in front of them.

"Come on, I'll show you around." Vincent said as he took gentle hold of her hand and stepped forward.

T'Lani followed along silently, absorbing all the details of their foreign surroundings.

"Commander M'Butu and I figured out that the Soleen-Avalla make their homes with about half the rooms on the outside. So this is kind of like the entry hall, except that it's outside." Vincent babbled, then guided T'Lani to walk to the right.

"This is the kitchen, which I guess is pretty good because it's like being able to have a cookout all the time." Vincent said as he indicated the small, but efficient work area.

"Husband." T'Lani said quietly, but the words drew his attention more effectively than a scream.

Vincent turned and looked at her expectantly as he whispered, "Wife."

"I understand the significance of this to the colonists, but is this what you want?" T'Lani asked as she looked him in the eyes.

Vincent smiled as he said, "I want for us to have a home together that is ours. I don't really care if it's here or on Vulcan or on Earth."

T'Lani nodded either her comprehension or acceptance of the words.

"Let's go inside, there's something I want to talk to you about." Vincent said decisively as he guided her to walk with him back to the entryway.

"Crewman Channing, reporting as ordered." Channing said nervously as he came to attention just inside the captain's office.

"At ease, Crewman." Captain Byrne said professionally.

Crewman Channing immediately fell into a textbook 'at ease' stance.

"I have something of a personal request to make of you. Please understand that you are free to decline if you wish." Captain Byrne said in prelude.

"Yes sir." Channing said respectfully.

"My grandsons, Lehman and JonJon, wish to go down to the new colony where they will eventually be living, but Cyril and Roger both have duties that require their full attention. It has been suggested that you might be willing to accompany them to the surface." Captain Byrne said carefully, appearing not to be used to asking for personal favors from anyone.

"Yes sir. I would like that." Channing said honestly.

"Good." Captain Byrne said, then quickly keyed something on his terminal. "I have just arranged for you to be off duty for the next two days. That should allow the boys time to explore their new home."

Channing nodded his agreement to the statement.

"Thank you for doing this." Captain Byrne said sincerely as he met Channing's gaze.

"I love those boys." Channing said frankly, then added. "And Fizgig too."

Captain Byrne smiled as he said, "Yes, I've learned that we mustn't ever forget Fizgig."

Crewman Channing nodded.

"I hope that you and my grandsons have a good time on the planet." Captain Byrne said sincerely.

"I think we will." Channing said with a smile, then added, "Thank you, sir."

Captain Byrne nodded as he watched Channing leave his office.

Vincent set his book and picture frame on a narrow table just inside the door, then guided T'Lani to walk with him to a long, well-cushioned sofa.

T'Lani's expectant gaze directed at him prompted him to begin.

"I know that when we've talked about, um... you know, sex and stuff, that we've always talked about it like it's going to happen *someday*." Vincent said with difficulty.

T'Lani nodded that she understood what he was saying.

"Well, I think that maybe it's time for us to decide when *someday* is." Vincent said weakly, wishing that Vulcans weren't quite so good at suppressing their emotions.

But just a moment later, T'Lani surprised him by saying, "I have considered that as well."

"So what do you think?" Vincent asked nervously.

"My research on the subject of Human male sexual development suggests that there are typically stages of discovery that occur as one matures." T'Lani said without any emotion showing through.

"Which means?" Vincent asked cautiously.

"I believe your willingness to broach the subject indicates that you have achieved the developmental state where we can begin the exploration of the first of those stages." T'Lani said clinically.

"Stages?" Vincent inquired curiously, forgetting his nervousness for a moment.

In an almost Human manner of speech, T'Lani quietly said, "As with most things in our lives, our sexuality is something that we grow into a little at a time. It is my intention to explore each phase with you as you come to it."

"Um, okay." Vincent said quietly, with his nervousness back full force.

"Would you like to show me the rest of our home now?" T'Lani asked gently, allowing Vincent a reprieve from the path they were on.

After an uncertain moment, Vincent shyly said, "Just the bedroom."

Although T'Lani had the ability to suppress her emotions, she allowed herself the indulgence of a smile at her husband as she took his hand and allowed him to draw her up from the couch.

"This won't take long. Neither one of us has much stuff." Lehman said as he led JonJon and Channing into Deflector Control.

"Are you guys getting ready to go down to the colony?" Darin asked from the second auxiliary station.

"Yeah. Grandpa arranged it so Channing could go down with us." Lehman said happily, then added, "JonJon wanted to stay and help, but they said that I needed him more than they did."

"Do you?" Darin asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yep." Lehman said as he hugged JonJon's side. "I always need my big brother."

"Do you guys mind if I come with you?" Benny asked from the supply room doorway.

"That'd be great!" Lehman said with unrestrained glee.

JonJon smiled at his adoptive brother's enthusiasm, then noticed Benny looking at him expectantly.

It took a moment for him to understand what Benny's expression might mean, but he realized that Benny was uncertain if JonJon wanted him to go with them.

"I'd like it if you'd join us." JonJon said shyly.

Benny smiled a grand smile, then hurried back into the supply room.

Before the rest of the group could follow, Darin asked, "Did you guys get to see the video of Vincent and T'Lani before they went down?"

"Yeah. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights." JonJon said with a chuckle.

"What's a deer?" Lehman asked curiously.

"I'll explain it later. Let's go get our stuff." JonJon said as he pulled Lehman into a quick hug and encouraged him to go into the supply room.

"Those two make me wish that I'd grown up with a brother." Darin said with a gentle smile at the doorway.

"I know what you mean." Channing said wistfully, then continued, "But being able to share in their lives is almost as good. And besides, not all brothers get along as well as they do."

Darin nodded, then motioned for Channing to join him at the auxiliary console.

"What do you think of this as a house warming gift for Vincent?" Darin asked as he indicated the screen.

"A Vulcan tapestry?" Channing asked uncertainly.

"I thought it was something that would make T'Lani feel more at home and Vincent feel like it was 'their' home." Darin said cautiously.

After a moment, Channing slowly nodded and said, "Yeah. I think you're right. And from what I know of them, I doubt that either one would think of getting anything 'decorative'."

Darin nodded and said, "At least until they're settled in."

"How long is it going to take to get it?" Channing asked curiously.

"Probably a month or so." Darin said with a shrug.

At Channing's look of surprise, Darin continued, "It doesn't really matter. Since I can't get it here before we leave the colony, a week is the same as a month because they won't be here to see it when it arrives anyway."

"I guess so." Channing said slowly.

"But it'll be nice for them to have a gift waiting on them when they do get back home." Darin said warmly.

"Do you think anyone would mind if we take some of the sleeping bags?" Lehman asked from the supply room doorway.

"Are you planning to sleep down there tonight?" Darin asked with a smile.

"Yeah." Lehman said with a big grin.

"I'm sure no one will mind." Darin said gently, then shared a smile with Channing.

"If they're taking the sleeping bags, they're probably going to need help to carry it all." Channing said as he started walking toward the doorway.

"Let me finalize this order, then I'll help you." Darin said quickly.

"Wow! It's pretty here." Lehman said with amazement.

"This is where we'll be living." JonJon said with a loving smile at his brother, then placed Fizzgig down on the grass so he could run free.

"What about Benny? Where's he going to live?" Lehman asked suddenly.

"One block from here, over there." JonJon said as he pointed.

"I thought he was going to live next door to us." Lehman said in a slightly less energetic voice, sounding a little disappointed.

"Well, he is, in a way." JonJon said seriously. "This house that we're standing in front of belongs to our dads. We've pretty much decided that we'll be living with them, at least for a while. But that house across the street, in fact, that entire block belongs to you." JonJon said to Lehman with a smile.

"The whole block?" Lehman asked with surprise.

"Yep. And all three houses." JonJon said with a grin, then motioned to the third block that shared the three-way intersection and said, "That's mine."

"Wow!" Lehman said with wonder.

"If you look up this street, you can see Benny's." JonJon said as he indicated the proper street.

"What about Vincent?" Lehman asked quickly.

"If we walked to Benny's house, we could see Vincent's house from there. Or we could walk across my block to get there." JonJon said with a smile, enjoying Lehman's excitement.

"So, you and Benny and Vincent each have a block of property facing each other?" Lehman confirmed.

"Yes. We've been calling them estates. Your estate shares one intersection with Benny and me and another one with me and the dads." JonJon said quietly.

"So who has that one behind us?" Lehman asked as he pointed at the property at the other end of their street.

"No one yet. We had more property than colonists, so we left a few available for new people when they arrive." JonJon said, then looked down at the carry-all container and sleeping bag that had transported down with them. "Do you want to go in and put our stuff away before we go exploring?"

"Yeah!" Lehman said happily.

Benny and Channing were both smiling at his reaction and were obviously going to go along with the plan.

"So let me get this straight." Lehman said in prelude. "Me, the Chameloid kid whose parents couldn't even afford to buy enough food so we could eat every day, now owns THREE houses?"

"Yeah." JonJon said with a chuckle as the group walked down the street with Fizgig following behind, taking the opportunity to explore when it occurred to him.

"What am I going to do with three houses?" Lehman asked suddenly.

"Whatever you want." Channing answered immediately.

"It can be a place for your friends to stay when they visit you, or for your kids to live someday." JonJon said frankly.

"My kids..." Lehman said with an overwhelmed shake of his head.

"How about you not worry about it now, and just enjoy it?" Benny asked seriously.

"Okay!" Lehman said immediately as he turned again to look at 'his' estate.

"So that's my house?" Benny asked as they approached the next intersection.

"If you want it to be." JonJon said uncertainly.

"What's my other choice?" Benny asked curiously.

"Well, this is your estate. The one over there is your parents'. Each one has three houses, so you have six places where you can put your stuff." JonJon said quietly.

Benny looked at his estate, then his parent's before asking, "So I guess this means that I get to pick my neighbors?"

"Yeah. This house faces one of Lehman's, the next one faces one of Vincent's and the third one faces another vacant block." JonJon said thoughtfully.

Benny seemed not to even have to think about it before saying, "I think I'll take this one, across from Lehman's."

"Mine is going to be that one, right there." JonJon said as he pointed to the house across the street that they had just passed.

"Nice." Benny said happily.

"So if it's decided, are we ready to put your stuff away?" Channing asked hopefully.

The sleeping bag he was carrying wasn't heavy at all, but it was awkward and uncomfortably warm.

"Yeah." Benny said as he started walking with purpose.

"Maybe he didn't choose this house." Benny said hesitantly.

"Maybe. But this is the one that he would have been transported to. So it makes sense to check here first." JonJon said seriously.

"Knock louder. Maybe he just didn't hear you." Lehman suggested quickly.

"Guys, let's try back later. He's spending time with his wife, we don't want to interrupt anything." Channing said with concern.

"Come on Channing, he's my age. What are we going to interrupt?" Lehman asked with a roll of his eyes.

The accordion style door opening prevented Channing from giving a response.

"Yeah?" Vincent asked as he stood just inside the doorway.

Vincent was bare chested, wearing his crewman's jumpsuit uniform only up as far as his waist. He stood with his hands on his hips, either as a declaration of his agitation or possibly to keep his jumpsuit from falling around his ankles. His face was flushed and his expression screamed out his impatience.

"Sorry to interrupt your..." Channing trailed off, not knowing what his next word would have been anyway. "We just wanted to let you know that the guys were allowed to transport down and have moved in."

"Okay." Vincent said hesitantly.

"You see that house there." Benny said as he pointed directly across the street.

"That's one of mine, if you'll follow this street, the next one on this block is where we'll be when you're finished..." Benny trailed off, also at a loss for words.

"When you're finished." Channing said simply.

Benny nodded.

"Right." Vincent said shortly, then added, "We'll probably see you guys in an hour or so."

"An hour?" Channing said with surprise, then shook his head and said, "Fine. See you then."

Vincent nodded, then closed the door.

"Come on guys. I think we have plenty of time for all of you to get unpacked before Vincent and T'Lani will be joining us." Channing said carefully.

"Looks like it." Benny said with another look at the door before he turned to walk away.

"If Vincent's doing... um, that. Does that mean I should be doing that too?" Lehman asked uncertainly as they walked.

"No Lehman. Please trust me when I tell you that Vincent seems to be the exception to quite a few rules. He's probably the last person you should be comparing yourself to." Channing said honestly.

"Yeah. Just think about it." Benny said as he draped an arm around Lehman's shoulders. "He's saved hundreds of lives, gotten married, and become a close personal friend of the religious leader of an entire planetary system... all in the past month. No one I've ever met could live up to his achievements."

Lehman put an arm around Benny's waist to return the hug, then said, "Yeah. I guess you're right."

"And besides that." Channing said as they walked, "When it comes to love, it happens when it's supposed to. Some people, like Vincent, find it early. Some people have to wait."

"Like with you and Chance?" Benny asked with a teasing smile as he opened the door to his new home.

"We're just friends, Benny." Channing said seriously as he walked inside. "Best friends, but that's all we'll ever be."

"Why?" Benny asked curiously.

"Because I'm straight." Channing said simply.

"Really? I mean, you sound so sure." Benny said as he led the way into the living room and gestured for everyone to have a seat.

"I am." Channing said as he met Benny's curious gaze. "I love Chance. But I'm not sexually attracted to him, or any man. It's just that simple."

"Oh." Benny said as he looked away.

"Some people think that who you're attracted to is a choice, but if that were true... I think I'd probably be gay." Channing said with a pained expression.

"For Chance?" JonJon asked curiously at the unusual comment.

Channing nodded, then said in a resigned tone, "But I'm not gay, and it wouldn't be fair to either of us for me to pretend to be something that I'm not."

"You love him that much?" JonJon asked quietly.

Channing nodded again and seemed to be lost in thought.

"JonJon is bisexual." Lehman said into the ensuing silence.

"He is?" Channing asked with surprise.

"I am?" JonJon asked in exactly the same tone.

"Uh huh. When you were restarted, the program asked us what sexual orientation you should have, so we picked that. That way you could love whoever you wanted to." Lehman said frankly.

"Oh." JonJon said as he cast a surreptitious glance in Benny's direction.

"That was alright, wasn't it?" Lehman asked with confusion at JonJon's reaction.

"Yes. I just... I didn't know." JonJon said quietly.

"I kinda wish I had something like that." Benny said absently.

"What do you mean?" Channing asked curiously.

Benny looked up, just realizing that he had spoken that thought aloud, then shook his head and said, "Nothing."

"Are you unsure of your orientation?" JonJon asked with concern.

After a moment, Benny reluctantly said, "I guess so. At least, now I am."

"Does that mean that you thought you knew before and now you don't?" Lehman asked curiously.

Benny looked at Lehman with surprise at the question.

"My people don't have to worry about this stuff, but now that I'm almost like a Human, I figure that sooner or later I'm gonna need to figure this stuff out for me. I'd kinda like to know what to expect." Lehman said frankly.

"You don't hold anything back, do you? You're just like Vincent." Benny said with a shake of his head and a chuckle.

"Thanks." Lehman said happily, then asked, "So are you gay or straight or what?"

Benny fought to keep from looking at anyone as he muttered, "I'm not sure."

"Lehman, this is a very personal thing that most people don't feel comfortable talking about." Channing said gently.

"Well, it doesn't bother me." Lehman said frankly.

"Just like Vincent." JonJon said teasingly to Benny at his side.

"As you get older, it probably will bother you. Especially if you aren't sure about what you're feeling." Channing said quietly.

"Okay." Lehman said without concern, then asked, "But when you figure it out, and you find someone that you like and you wanna... you know, do stuff with. How do you let them know?"

Channing chuckled, then said, "If I knew, I promise that I'd tell you."

Lehman looked at Channing with surprise.

"I'm probably the last person you should ask about it. But when I finally do meet a woman that I'm interested in like that, I'm hoping that I'll figure it out." Channing said honestly.

"It seems like there should be an easier way, you know, so you don't waste a lot of time." Lehman said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. It does seem that way." Channing said regretfully, then looked around the group and said, "Speaking of wasting time..."

"Yeah. We've got unpacking to do." JonJon said as he stood.

"One whole box each... it'll take FOREVER!" Lehman said dramatically, then broke into a giggle at JonJon's incredulous stare.

"Channing, could you stay and help me?" Benny asked suddenly.

"Sure." Channing said with surprise, then asked, "You guys don't need me do you?"

"No, but if we do, it's just one block away." Lehman said frankly.

Channing nodded, then looked at Benny expectantly.

As soon as Lehman and JonJon were gone, Channing asked, "What do we need to do first?"

"I love JonJon." Benny said bluntly.

"Okay..." Channing said slowly, then added, "I don't know how much help I can be with that."

"I've been feeling it since I almost lost him, when he got rebooted." Benny said with frustration.

"Tell me about it." Channing said, then gestured to the carry-all container by the living room door.

Benny took a moment to look through the container, then picked it up and gestured with his head for Channing to follow.

Benny started putting his clothes into the honeycomb shelving by his bed, finally he said, "It's starting to be a problem."

"How's that?" Channing asked with concern as he leaned on the door facing.

"When I'm around him, all I want to do is touch him. When I'm not around him, all I do is think about him. Instead of sleeping, I've been sitting up, watching him in the sleeping bag next to me, just watching him and imagining what it would be like..."

"Does he know how you feel?" Channing asked quietly.

Benny shook his head.

"Why not?" Channing asked simply.

"Because, what if he said 'no'? I'd lose him... I couldn't do that." Benny said desperately.

"And if you say nothing, you might lose him anyway." Channing said simply.

Benny looked at Channing with surprise.

"If you haven't got the courage to tell him how you feel, then someone else, who may not even love him as much as you do, may come along and say the words that you should have said." Channing said frankly.

Benny slowly nodded that he had heard.

"It might even be Lehman." Channing added quietly.

Benny looked up suddenly at the words.

"He loves JonJon completely. And considering that he and Vincent are so much alike... well, it wouldn't surprise me if his libido awakened suddenly." Channing said with a shrug.

"Do you think he loves JonJon like that?" Benny asked anxiously.

"No. I don't." Channing said reassuringly, then added, "But what would happen if Lehman started feeling sexual urges and turned to the closest person in his life? I mean, if he talked to JonJon about it and JonJon felt like no one else was interested in him? What do you think the chances are that he might just go for it?"

"Do you really think that's going to happen?" Benny asked quietly.

"I don't know, but it doesn't seem to be very hard to imagine it working out that way." Channing said honestly.

Benny nodded, either to show that he agreed or at least comprehended what Channing was saying.

"It looks like you could use some time to think. Captain Byrne is trusting me to keep an eye on Lehman and JonJon, so I'd better get over there. We'll probably be back over here before you know it." Channing said quietly.

Benny nodded that he had heard, then quietly said, "Thanks."

"Hey JonJon, what are you doing out here?" Channing asked as he approached Cyril and Roger's house.

"I needed a few minutes away. Lehman is... happy. Really happy." JonJon said reluctantly.

Channing chuckled as he nodded his understanding.

"How are you doing? You seem kind of down." Channing said honestly.

"I think I have a problem." JonJon said quietly as he petted the dog in his arms.

"Oh? What kind of problem is that?" Channing asked curiously.

"I'm not sure, but I think Benny likes me." JonJon said carefully.

"I think so too. But why is that a problem?" Channing asked slowly.

"Because, so does Jenn."

Editor's Notes: Well, it sure is nice to see another chapter of this extremely interesting alternate Frontier.

I guess my only question concerning JonJon is how does he feel about Jenn and how does he feel about Benny? There are so many possibilities, available to everyone. I guess only time will tell what will happen. I just hope that somehow things will work out so everyone is happy.

Thank you MM for another fascinating look into the lives of all these people.

As I am sure you know, a lot of things are different here in this version, after the box was opened, a fork took place. It will be interesting to see just what part of Vincent and the others will shine through and bring about things either the same or differently than what happens in the main line story. Will this Vincent get to meet Ship, Treep etc. ? I'm not even sure if Multimapper knows the answer to that yet. I know that I can hardly wait. I do know a few things that are supposed to happen, as to whether they will or not is not certain. The people in the stories seem to have a way of taking the stories in

completely different directions than were ever planned.

We will just have to wait and see what happens.

Darryl AKA The Radio Rancher

Chapter 35

"I don't know what to do." JonJon said quietly.

"Tell me this. If you were to decide that you wanted to pursue a relationship with Jenn, do you think that Benny would be any less of your friend?" Channing asked seriously.

"I don't know." JonJon mumbled.

"If he did stop being your friend, then how much of a friend was he to begin with?" Channing asked seriously. "I mean, is it really friendship if you always do things just to please him and make things be the way he wants them... including yourself."

"But that's kind of what it means to be a companion android." JonJon said as he looked up at Channing helplessly.

Channing shook his head and said, "You're a sentient being. The moment that happened, no one had the right to command your thoughts and feelings. Besides that, you're Lehman's companion. What you feel for Benny or Jenn is entirely up to you."

JonJon slowly nodded as he considered Channing's words, then quietly said, "But I don't know what I feel."

"Then give yourself some time to sort through your emotions. There's no reason that you have to decide this now." Channing said gently.

JonJon slowly nodded.

"We'd better go check on your brother, now. As excited as he's been, I can't imagine that him being this quiet could be a good thing." Channing said with a smile.

"You're right. I can't hear him." JonJon said as he stood.

Vincent glanced up at T'Lani before knocking on the door.

"Come on in." Benny said cheerfully.

"Thanks." Vincent said quietly, then followed Benny into the house.

"I'm glad you got here when you did. JonJon and Jenn are going to have to leave soon, and I wanted for all of us to have some time to hang out together." Benny said cheerfully as he led the way through the central room and into a well appointed living room.

"Yeah. Thanks for inviting us." Vincent said shyly, then noticed that Fizgig was jumping pawing at his leg, his sign that he wanted to be picked up.

"Hi Fizgig. It's nice to see you, too." Vincent said as he picked up the dog and petted him gently.

"I'm sorry that we don't have any snacks or music to make it a real party, but at least we have the most important thing, good friends." Benny said happily.

"Do you want music?" Vincent asked casually.

"Yeah. But I don't want to spend money on a sound system. There's a lot more important things that I'm going to need to do to get this place ready for my family when they arrive." Benny said frankly.

Vincent looked upward and said, "Mycien, would you play a random selection of Earth pop music at a moderate volume?"

"Yes, Vincent." Mycien said quietly, then lively music started playing.

"What? Who was that?" Benny asked as he looked around.

"That was the colony AI, his name is Mycien." Vincent said frankly.

Benny looked at JonJon and Jenn and asked, "You knew about this?"

Both nodded, their matching expressions saying the same thing, 'Of course. You didn't?'

"If you have any questions or problems, all you have to do is ask Mycien and he'll help you find the answers. He knows the inventory of what's available to use, he has bots that can help you do things... I bet he'll be all kinds of help getting this place ready for your parents." Vincent said seriously.

"I'm guessing he doesn't have any storerooms of pizza anywhere." Benny said with a grin.

Before Vincent could respond, Mycien said, "There are three varieties of fruit bearing plants in your garden that are currently producing edible fruit. It is not pizza, but it might be an enjoyable snack for you and your guests."

"I wouldn't know which fruits were edible and which weren't." Benny said frankly.

A holographic image of three pieces of fruit appeared in the air before Benny.

"The coloring indicates ripeness in all three fruits. There is also a difference in firmness." Mycien said frankly.

"Thank you." Benny said in a slightly startled tone.

"The kitchen is outside, to the left. You'll be able to get water there if anyone is thirsty." Vincent added helpfully.

"There are also flowering plants in the garden that can be used to make an infusion that should serve as tea, should that be desirable as a beverage." Mycien said informatively as the hologram of a small yellow flower appeared before them.

Benny chuckled, then said, "Thanks, I guess this really is going to be a party."

Vincent smiled then noticed that Channing was looking at him with concern in his eyes.

"You should probably mingle or something. I need to talk to Channing about something." Vincent said seriously.

"Yeah. Thanks again." Benny said happily.

Vincent nodded, then started walking across the room.

"What's wrong, Channing?" Vincent asked as seriously.

Channing looked around, and seemed conflicted.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Vincent asked casually.

"Yeah." Channing said with relief.

Vincent tilted his head toward the door, then waited for Channing to start walking with him.

"You look worried. What's wrong?" Vincent asked as they walked outside.

"It's about you and T'Lani." Channing said quietly.

"What about us?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Vincent, you're nine years old. She's an adult. Even though you two are married, it still seems wrong that you're... you know, having sex." Channing said with difficulty.

After a moment to consider, Vincent slowly nodded, then said, "Well, thanks for being worried about me, but what my wife and I do in the privacy of our own home isn't anyone else's business."

The words weren't said angrily, but more as a statement of fact.

Channing slowly nodded his acceptance of the statement.

"But I can see that it bothers you, and I'm glad that you're talking to me about it instead of running to the captain or something like that." Vincent said frankly.

"I wouldn't do that, Vincent." Channing said honestly.

"Yeah. But still, thanks." Vincent said with a smile.

Channing watched as Vincent seemed to come to a decision.

After a moment to consider his words, Vincent quietly said, "T'Lani and I talked about all of this before we ever did anything. Kids who are going through puberty go through some different stages, you know, discovering things and figuring out how it all works."

Channing gave a slight smile and nodded that he understood.

"T'Lani knows about that stuff. She's done all kinds of research and besides that, we have our marriage bond. She doesn't have to guess at what I'm thinking or feeling, she can just look." Vincent said seriously.

Channing nodded again, indicating that he was following what Vincent was saying.

"So I'll end up learning about the same things that everyone else does when I'm ready to. The only differences are that I'll learn it with my wife and I'll learn it without having to hide or be ashamed." Vincent said as he looked Channing in the eyes.

"When you put it like that, I kind of wish that I had a wife to help me go through puberty." Channing said gently.

Vincent chuckled and said, "Yeah. I don't know if puberty is ever easy for anyone. But I can't think of another way I'd want to do it."

Channing smiled at the statement and Vincent noticed that the troubled look in his eyes seemed to be gone.

"While we're out here, do you want to help me pick some fruit for the party?" Vincent asked casually.

"Sure." Channing said with a smile as he walked around the side of the house with Vincent.

"We brought snacks and drinks!" Vincent said as they walked into the living room, Channing with a bowl of fruit and Vincent with a cannister of freshly brewed tea.

"Thanks!" Benny said happily as he cleared off a place on the table.

"How are things going in here?" Vincent asked as he looked around.

He noticed that Jenn and T'Lani were talking quietly together and considered asking through their bond about what they were talking about, but decided that T'Lani would tell him if she wanted him to know.

"Lehman was just telling us about how he wants to fix up one of his houses to be like a house on his homeworld." Benny said frankly.

"Are you missing your home?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Not really." Lehman said simply. "But I was thinking that it might be nice if I had a place that was kind of just mine. You know, a special place where I can go to be alone and think about stuff. And since I have three houses, I thought that I could make one of them be a place like that."

"That does sound nice." Vincent said gently, then noticed that JonJon seemed to be distracted, stealing glances at Jenn.

"What's up with you, JonJon?" Vincent asked casually.

"I'm fine." JonJon said, a little bit too quickly.

'Sure you are.' Vincent's inner voice said sarcastically.

"Glurrah!" Lehman said happily when he noticed the fruit that was in the bowls.

"What's that?" Benny asked curiously.

"Come on. I want to show you." Lehman said happily and drew Benny away.

Vincent gave a quick look to Channing and it seemed that they were on the same wavelength. Channing gave a nod, and slowly walked to join Lehman and Benny.

"What's wrong, JonJon?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Nothing." JonJon said quietly, but the expression of worry in his eyes betrayed the lie.

"I can't help if you won't tell me." Vincent said seriously, letting it be known with his tone that he wouldn't be dissuaded easily.

"I think Benny and Jenn both like me." JonJon said anxiously.

After a moment to consider, Vincent slowly nodded and said, "Yeah. Probably."

"I don't know what to do. I like them both and I don't want to hurt either of them." JonJon said as he looked Vincent in the eyes.

"Then just be honest with them." Vincent said frankly.

"If I could just choose one or the other, then being honest wouldn't be that bad. But I don't know how I feel about them." JonJon said in turmoil.

"Then you're not ready to choose." Vincent said simply. At JonJon's worried expression, he continued, "If you like them both, then spend time with both of them. Don't make a choice until you know, deep in your heart, that you really believe in it."

JonJon considered for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"And remember, you don't just have two choices." Vincent added seriously.

JonJon looked at him curiously.

"It's not just one or the other. Both and neither are also valid choices." Vincent said honestly.

"Both?" JonJon asked as his eyes went wide.

Vincent smiled at the reaction, then said, "Yeah. I don't know if you could make it work, but you might end up being able to have it all."

JonJon slowly nodded, but now seemed to be lost in thought rather than anxiety.

Vincent watched him for a moment, then wandered away to allow him time to think.

"So, how did you like the party?" Vincent asked as he and T'Lani walked into their home.

"Typically, I find social functions of that sort to be an inefficient use of time and energy. However, I found Jenn to be interesting and learned much about Soleen-Avalla medical technology." T'Lani said seriously.

"That's good. You should probably make a report on what you learned if there's anything that Starfleet Medical would want to know about." Vincent said as he walked into the living room.

"I will do so when we return to the ship." T'Lani said simply.

Vincent's eyes fell on the book and picture frame he had brought from the Yorktown.

"When I told Darin that we were coming down, he said that I should bring something that I could leave here to make it really *our* home." Vincent said as he opened the book and took out the picture.

"I fail to see how the presence of personal artifacts makes the dwelling any more or less *ours*." T'Lani said frankly.

Vincent smiled as he worked to fit the picture into the frame as he said, "I don't know if there's any logical reason for it, but I think he was right. If I leave something of mine here, then it's like I've staked my claim or marked my territory."

T'Lani slowly quirked an eyebrow at him.

Vincent chuckled at the expression, then said, "Yeah. I know."

As Vincent placed the picture on a narrow table against the wall, T'Lani walked to his side.

"Are these other members of your family?" T'Lani asked curiously.

"Yes and no." Vincent said as he looked at the picture. "That guy who looks like me, his name is Vince. The people with him are the people he lives with at Camp Little Eagle."

"So this is one of the alternate versions of yourself that you met while travelling in time." T'Lani said slowly.

"Yeah. He gave me this picture when we left. I don't know exactly why, but it's special to me." Vincent said thoughtfully. "I guess it's like, it shows me that no matter how things change or seem to go wrong, things still have a way of working out alright."

"It is late." T'Lani said as she turned to look at her husband.

"Yeah." Vincent said as he looked up into her eyes. "Let's go to bed."

When Vincent awoke, it was to a warm glow of sunlight filling the room and a slightly chilly breeze.

He looked at the windows and realized that they seemed to be upside down from what he was used to. They opened down.

But laying in bed, he appreciated that the windows were open about eight inches, near the ceiling. So reflected sunlight was coming into the room, but it wasn't so bright that it was bothersome.

T'Lani was still asleep, so he quietly made his way out of the room and to the bathroom.

The Soleen-Avalla 'facilities' were a bit different than what he was used to, but he hadn't decided if it was enough of a difference that he would go to the trouble of buying and installing a new toilet.

Once he was dressed, he walked outside to the kitchen area and took a bowl out of one of the cupboards.

Slowly and casually, he walked around the side of the house to the garden to gather some fruit for breakfast.

"Husband." T'Lani said gently as she approached.

"My wife." Vincent said warmly as he looked back at her.

She walked to him and placed a hand to the side of his face and caressed his cheek with her thumb.

After a moment, he took her by the hand and guided her through the garden to the pond.

"No place such as this would be allowed on Vulcan. Land that could be used to produce food would not contain family dwellings." T'Lani said as she looked around.

"The pond is used as part of the solar collection process, the moss in the pond cleans the water. The garden not only produces food, but also cleans the air." Vincent said quietly. "This place isn't abusing nature, it's in harmony with it."

T'Lani looked around for a moment, then said, "It is."

"Here, I gathered some fruit for breakfast. Let's sit down and eat." Vincent said as he offered her the bowl.

T'Lani carefully sat down on the bank of the pond then set the bowl of fruit between them.

"We have three houses on our property. I thought that, after we finished breakfast, we could go explore the other houses." Vincent said casually, before taking one of the pieces of fruit and taking a bite.

"Yes. I would like to know what accommodations are available if either of us should have visitors from off planet." T'Lani said frankly as she also took a piece of fruit.

"Yeah. I guess I hadn't thought about it that way, but it would be nice if I had a place for Daddy Joe or Darin to stay if they were visiting." Vincent said thoughtfully between bites of his food.

"Yes. And I believe that separate dwellings would be preferable should the members of my family choose to visit." T'Lani said slowly.

T'Lani had never discussed her family with him and he was interested to know about them, but from the closed off look on her face, he guessed that she wouldn't be receptive to having the discussion right then.

They sat for a while longer, both eating their breakfast and enjoying the serenity of their surroundings.

As they stepped out of the front of their third house, Vincent noticed that there were people further down the street.

"I guess that the colonization is really getting underway now." Vincent said casually.

"Vincent!" A voice called and a man started running toward them.

It took a moment, but Vincent finally realized who it was.

"Hi Korrigon!" Vincent called in return.

"Hey! Is this your house?" Korrigon asked as he slowed his approach.

"One of them. We were just looking all of them over. Korrigon, I don't remember if you've met my wife, this is T'Lani." Vincent said cheerfully.

"Yes. We met in sickbay." Korrigon said quietly, then added, "It's nice to see you again."

T'Lani inclined her head in greeting.

"Hey, I was just about to go into town to pick out a place to use as an inn. Would you two like to come along?" Korrigon asked hopefully.

Vincent glanced at T'Lani with question.

Both of them were scheduled to have the day off, so there was no reason to refuse, but Vincent didn't want to make the decision for her.

"That would be acceptable," T'Lani said calmly.

Vincent smiled at her answer, then nodded his agreement to Korrigon.

"There's a transporter station about two blocks over that way." Korrigon said as he pointed.

"Transporter station?" Vincent asked curiously as they started to walk.

"Yeah. They're kind of like bus stops, except that when you get there, you just tell it where you want to go and it transports you there. It's great!" Korrigon said happily.

Vincent nodded as he remembered when he had visited the planet with Commander M'Butu the day before and Mycien had explained how the teleportal system worked.

The exploration of the town buildings had turned out to be very relaxing and interesting.

Vincent, T'Lani and Korrigon walked through three buildings and discussed the merits of each before Korrigon finally made his decision and started planning how he was going to get his inn up and running.

When Lieutenant Simms arrived, Vincent announced that they were going back to their house.

He didn't want to come out and say it, but he was hungry.

When they arrived back at their house, Vincent and T'Lani had a simple meal of fruit, then walked out into the garden and sat by the pond to enjoy a little relaxation before they would both have to return to work the next day.

As was natural for them when relaxing, they joined into a mind meld and entered a meditative state.

Suddenly, Vincent felt something begin inside him. It was a grinding sensation, as though his mind were being shredded.

T'Lani felt it too and strengthened her bond to anchor him through the experience.

Vincent couldn't really call the sensation 'pain' as such, but the feeling was certainly not a pleasant one.

Vincent and T'Lani, in their combined state, felt as though their minds were being pulled out of shape and reformed into an unfamiliar configuration.

They lost any sense of time as the world seemed to blur around them.

"Husband." T'Lani said aloud.

Vincent blinked and realized that they were no longer in their mind meld.

"What happened?" Vincent asked as he looked around the garden.

Although he couldn't put his finger on it, he had the feeling that something had changed.

"Unknown." T'Lani said thoughtfully.

Vincent could tell from her expression that she was feeling just as disoriented as he was.

"Everything is different." Vincent said slowly, although his senses were telling him that nothing around him had changed.

"All that was familiar yesterday, now seems like a dream." T'Lani said distantly.

"Yeah. It's like everything is new." Vincent said with difficulty. "Even history... is new. Like it was just now made up, and the ink isn't even dry."

"According to law of parsimony, the simplest explanation is most likely the correct one," T'Lani said frankly. "That would mean that what we have just experienced is some sort of mental aberration that afflicted us during the mind meld, and that the world has not changed, but only our perception of it."

"I guess if that's true, it'll be easy enough to prove. I can remember things that happened yesterday but at the same time, I *know* that they didn't." Vincent said frankly.

T'Lani thought for a moment, then said, "I distinctly remember that yesterday I treated Crewman Monahan for an injury to her ankle."

"But you *know* that she didn't have an injury?" Vincent asked curiously.

"Not precisely." T'Lani said slowly. "What I *know* is that there is no crewman named Monahan on the Yorktown, nor has there been since my arrival."

"But she's the one who made my uniforms after my growth spurt." Vincent said thoughtfully, then quietly added, "Except that I also know that a Crewman Duckworth made them... I just don't know who that is."

"I believe there is sufficient cause for concern. We should report this incident immediately." T'Lani said decisively as she stood.

"Yeah. My communicator is in the house." Vincent said quickly as he thought about his travels with Dr. Xon and the time split that he had warned about.

"Yorktown transporter control, this is Crewman Winters, I have two to beam up." Vincent said seriously.

"I'm sorry. We've suffered a transporter malfunction. All transporter traffic has been halted until the entire system has been checked." The transporter technician said seriously.

"Are there any shuttles on the surface yet? We really need to get back." Vincent said as he started chewing on his lower lip.

He glanced up at T'Lani with concern to find her looking back at him with a hint of worry.

"Vincent?" Mycien interrupted.

"Yes?" Vincent responded, then noticed the framed picture on the table.

"My transporter capabilities are not impaired. I could transport you aboard the Yorktown if there is a need." Mycien said seriously.

Vincent felt a boost of assurance that no matter how strange things seemed to be, they might turn out to be alright.

"Yes. Please." Vincent said with newfound serenity, then gave T'Lani an encouraging smile.

Before he was aware that it had happened, they were standing in transporter room three.

"Captain Byrne?" Vincent asked from the captain's office doorway with T'Lani at his side.

"Crewman Winters, may I assume that you've just experienced something a bit out of the ordinary?" Captain Byrne asked seriously as he looked up from his desk.

"Yes, sir. You could say that." Vincent said anxiously.

"Please go to conference room one. You will be briefed shortly. And you are not to discuss this matter with anyone outside of the conference room, including me." Captain Byrne said in a tone that conveyed the severity of the matter.

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir." Vincent said immediately, then walked away with T'Lani at his side.

"Commander M'Butu, do you know what's going on?" Vincent asked as he entered the conference room.

"If you've been sent here, then I suppose you know as much as I do." Commander M'Butu said evasively.

The door of the turbo lift opened and Chief Morgan, Lieutenant Simms and Debbie stepped out.

"Crewman Winters, why am I not surprised to see you here?" Chief Morgan asked with a chuckle under his words.

"I don't know, sir. But it does seem right, doesn't it?" Vincent asked with a cheeky grin.

The doors of the turbo lift opened again and discharged Dr. Perry and Nurse Stepanov.

"We have quite the gathering, here." Dr. Perry said frankly. "I see some old, familiar faces."

"And some new ones." Chief Morgan said as he glanced at Vincent.

Before Vincent could decide what questions he wanted to ask first, the view screen at the front of the room filled with the Starfleet logo.

After a moment the logo was replaced by a Starfleet admiral who Vincent somewhat recognized, but couldn't seem to place.

"By the order of Starfleet command, all information that is about to be disclosed is to be considered classified. The dissemination of this information in any form will constitute an act of high treason." the admiral said firmly.

"Who the hell is that?" Chief Morgan asked curiously.

"Admiral Kincaid... but I'm sure I never heard of him before today." Commander M'Butu said frankly.

When Vincent heard the name, he knew that it was right, but he also knew that, like the commander, he hadn't ever heard of him before that day.

"As many of you are aware, an unexpected 'event' has occurred. We still don't know how or why, but what we do know is that anyone who has ever traveled in through time or across dimensions has been effected." the admiral said firmly, then added in a slightly less formal tone, "I understand that even

though I remember most of you, that to you I am a stranger. So I will allow Captain Spock to continue with this briefing, since he has a better understanding of what you are going through."

The screen switched over to show Captain Spock in a conference room that was nearly identical to the room that they were in.

"Greetings. It appears that by some method that we do not understand, our history has undergone a significant change. It also appears that only those who have traveled through time are aware of the changes, though we can only speculate as to why that is." Captain Spock said seriously. "It happens that nearly the entire crew of the Enterprise have recently traveled through time, so it seems reasonable for us to lead the investigation into this matter."

"We have little information as to how or why, but we can share with you 'what' has happened. I believe that this might best be illustrated with an example. My brother, Commander Dodds, came away from the experience this afternoon with the knowledge that his first husband is alive and as a consequence, he never became involved with his second husband." Captain Spock said without inflection.

Vincent's eyes went wide as he distinctly remembered his 'Uncle Josh', but also knew in his mind that his 'Uncle Ben' was his uncle Chip's husband and that he was a good and caring man.

"Be aware that all of us are likely to encounter variations in this new reality. Starfleet's orders are to make note of any and all changes that you recognize, and submit your reports directly to Captain Kirk or myself. Also be aware that Admiral Kincaid will be in charge of this investigation at Starfleet and will be kept abreast of any new developments."

Vincent's mind began to race. He couldn't be sure that anything he remembered was still the way he remembered it. His family, his friends, his clan. Any or all of it could have changed.

"The most asked question of the past hour has been in regard to Admiral Morrow. It appears that in this reality, Captain Morrow never increased in rank. He currently serves as captain of the Ptolemy class vessel, USS Masada." Captain Spock said frankly.

Vincent instinctively reached out to T'Lani with his mind as he put an arm around her. The universe felt like it was slipping out from under him and he needed to feel her presence to be assured that there was 'something' he could depend on.

"No mention of this event is to be made in official reports or with those not involved. Relevant information will be disseminated periodically." Captain Spock said formally, then a look of compassion seemed to come into his expression as he said, "We are only at the beginning. Allow us the time for discovery. And most importantly, remember, none of you are alone in this. We will endure... together."

A moment later, the Starfleet logo filled the screen.

Vincent looked around the room, making a careful mental note of who was there so he would know who he could talk with if he should need to.

When Commander M'Butu approached, Vincent said, "I guess this means that I didn't need to be so secretive about it when I time traveled. You must have time traveled, too."

Commander M'Butu smiled at the statement, then said, "Yes, I have. And that's as much as I can ever say on that subject, Crewman Winters."

Vincent thought about his statement, then chuckled as he said, "Yeah, same here."

"T'Lani, have you noticed any variances in your personal history?" Nurse Stepanov asked as he approached.

"Not as yet." T'Lani said simply.

He chuckled, then said, "You are lucky. Apparently, in this time... or reality, or whatever it is that we're in, I was working as a nurse at a hospital in Rysyevo, back on Earth."

"What are you going to do?" Vincent asked curiously, wondering if he was supposed to be where he was.

"What *can* I do?" Nurse Stepanov asked frankly.

Vincent gave him a worried look.

"Please Vincent, do not be concerned. The life that I remember in this... dimension... is not the type of life that I want to have. I was in a job with no future. Dr. Perry has already said that we will arrange things with Starfleet to fix it so that I am 'officially' here." He said with a smile.

"Well, I'm glad things worked out for you, Vlad." Vincent said honestly, then noticed that everyone was leaving the conference room.

"Husband. While we are aboard the Yorktown, I would like to avail myself of the opportunity to file a report about what I have learned about Soleen-Avalla medical techniques." T'Lani said quietly.

"Yeah. I'd like to check in at Deflector Control, too." Vincent said seriously, not wanting to admit that he wanted to see if any of his friends were gone or had changed. "I'll meet you on the planet."

"It's your day off, Vincent. What are you doing here?" Joe asked curiously.

"We had to come up to the ship to do some stuff. You know, reports and stuff. How are things around here?" Vincent asked casually.

"We had a control circuit failure on the bridge. While you're here, you should see this." Joe said as he led Vincent to station three.

Vincent followed along and watched as Joe brought up the log file from earlier.

"See that?" Joe said as he pointed to the display.

Vincent looked where Joe was pointing and puzzled over the information.

"That doesn't make any sense. According to this, there was a power surge and a power outage at exactly the same time." Vincent said slowly.

"When the unit failed, it started giving false readings." Joe said frankly. "You're going to need to be on the lookout for things like this."

"You have it offline now, does that mean that the redundant system failed too?" Vincent asked curiously.

"No. The control circuit refused our commands and wouldn't allow us to switch over." Joe said with a concerned look.

"But that shouldn't be possible." Vincent said thoughtfully.

"Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't be." Joe said simply.

"So is this something that Hargrove Industries did, or is it something that happened because of us undoing what they did?" Vincent asked curiously.

Joe smiled with pride at Vincent, then said, "A little of both, actually. It seems that when they reworked the control circuits at Hargrove Industries, they disabled the switching mechanisms on some of them. Their work-around on the diagnostic used a simple program to mimic that function, but when we removed the reworked diagnostic systems, we also removed the ability to remotely switch."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Vincent asked with concern.

"Normally, no. Right now... possibly." Joe said hesitantly. "From what I've been hearing, it seems that the control circuit failures are becoming more common. Usually we would replace a failing circuit before it ever got to that point, but we're running out of spare parts and all the spare parts that we do have are worn out and should have been destroyed long ago." Joe said frankly.

"Is it possible to 'make' control circuits? I mean, from other stuff, not using any of the old worn out parts?" Vincent asked slowly.

"Theoretically, yes. Realistically, no." Joe said carefully. "We could make them, but we'd be back to Earth by the time we were finished with the first one."

Vincent nodded at the answer.

"You don't need to worry about this, now. I just wanted you to be aware of what to look for when you start your shift in the morning." Joe said with a smile.

"Okay, is it okay if I use the second auxilliary station to write a report?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"No, that's fine. Go ahead." Joe said gently.

Vincent walked to the station as he considered how many things he would need to include. Of course, there would be the obvious differences in the two universes that he had noticed, but there was also the warning that Dr. Xon had given him about an impending time split.

Of course, Admiral Morrow had been made aware of all of that, but now 'Captain' Morrow probably wouldn't recognize him if they were in the same room. So he felt that he should make a report in case the information would help Captain Kirk and Captain Spock make sense of what had happened to them.

After a longer than usual session of report writing, Vincent felt the need to get away for a bit and transported down to the planet.

"Hi Vincent." Benny said as he opened his door wide, inviting Vincent inside. "I stopped by your house a little while ago, but you weren't there."

"Yeah. T'Lani and I had to go back up to the ship to do a few things." Vincent said dismissively as they walked toward the central room.

"Who's here?" A girl's voice called from the central room.

"It's Vincent." Benny called back, then rolled his eyes.

A little girl looked in through the door at the end of the room, then ducked back out of sight.

"You could at least say 'hi' to him." Benny said with aggravation.

"Hi Vincent!" she called out in an obligatory sing-song voice.

It took a moment for Vincent to find her name in his new memories, but finally he responded, "Hi Hailey."

"You know, by the time Mom and Dad and Callie get here, I'm going to be an old man from watching after her." Benny said frankly.

Vincent chuckled, then said, "This is what big brothers do."

"I guess you would think so, since you're a *little* brother." Benny said as he led them into the living room.

Vincent considered for a moment, then nodded his agreement, then thought to ask, "How are JonJon and Lehman doing?"

"As far as I know, JonJon and Jenn are both on the ship, basically directing traffic. Lehman and Channing are going through all of Cyril and Roger's houses, all of JonJon's houses and all of Lehman's houses." Benny said with a smile.

"It sounds like Channing is going to need some days off to recover from his shore leave." Vincent said with a grin.

"Yeah. Sounds like." Benny agreed.

"Do you like this one?" Hailey asked as she held a yellow dress in front of her, then covered it with a blue one and asked, "Or this one?"

"I think you look just fine in your coveralls." Vincent said simply.

Hailey gave him an aggravated look, then turned her expectant gaze on her brother.

"Yellow. Definitely." Benny said seriously.

She held out the dress in front of her, then muttered, "I like the blue one better."

"Then wear the blue one. This isn't a state dinner, we're just going over to Roger and Cyril's house." Benny said wearily.

"But Lehman's going to be there!" She said emphatically, then turned and walked out of the room.

"Do you think that Lehman is the least bit interested in her?" Vincent asked curiously.

"He'd better not be." Benny said frankly.

Vincent looked at Benny with surprise.

"That's my sister and I've seen him naked." Benny said simply.

Vincent chuckled, then nodded that he understood what Benny was saying.

"Besides, she's nine years old. She should still be having tea parties with her dollies." Benny said with a worried look at the door.

"And what should I be doing?" Vincent asked with the arch of an eyebrow.

"You're the exception that makes the rule." Benny said frankly.

Vincent laughed outright at the statement, then finally said, "It's good to know my place in the grand scheme of things."

A beeping drew Vincent's attention to his communicator.

"Crewman Winters." Vincent said seriously.

"Vincent. The captain is having us recall all the ship personnel." Joe said in a low voice.

"Is something wrong?" Vincent asked quickly.

"We've been recalled to Earth." Joe said frankly. "The Soleen-Avalla have promised to watch after the colonists and a Federation vessel with supplies has already been dispatched."

"But what's wrong? Why have we been recalled?" Vincent asked curiously.

"It's the equipment failures. They're afraid that if we don't leave soon, we may not be able to make it home under our own power." Joe said frankly.

"Do I have time to say goodbye to JonJon and Lehman?" Vincent asked hopefully.

"Yes. But don't take too long. As soon as everyone is in their right place, we'll be leaving." Joe said quietly.

"I won't be long." Vincent said seriously, then looked at Benny with concern.

"Where's Channing?" Vincent asked as Lehman guided them into Cyril and Roger's house.

"He got called back to the ship." Lehman said frankly.

"Then where's JonJon?" Vincent asked as they walked into the living room.

"He's still working. I got a message that him and Dad and Other Dad would all be here soon." Lehman said quietly.

"You should have come over to my house. There's no reason that you should have to be alone." Benny said with concern.

"I wasn't alone. Fizgig is here." Lehman said as he looked lovingly at the little dog, then added, "Besides, I'm not helpless. I can take care of myself."

Vincent remembered all that Lehman had been though and couldn't deny that he deserved to be allowed independence if that's what he wanted.

After a moment, Vincent reluctantly said, "I got called back to the ship too. I just wanted to come over here and say goodbye before I left."

Lehman seemed to be expecting the words, but even so, Vincent could see the emotional impact.

"I'm going to miss you, Vincent." Lehman said as he hugged Vincent firmly.

"Whenever you want to talk to me, I'm always going to be as close as the nearest terminal." Vincent said as he held Lehman in his arms.

"It's not the same." Lehman whimpered.

"I know." Vincent whispered and held him even tighter.

"I'm going to be living the other future that you wanted for yourself. So I'm going to do my best to do like you would do and make it great." Lehman said as a vow.

"Don't worry about what I would do. Just be happy." Vincent said sincerely.

"Benny and JonJon will help me with that." Lehman said quietly.

"You forgot about Hailey." Vincent said with a grin.

Lehman glanced at the girl on the other side of the room, whispering to her brother, then said, "No. I didn't."

Vincent chuckled, then released Lehman from the hug.

"Tell JonJon that I'm sorry that I didn't get to say goodbye to him in person. And that I'll call in the next day or so." Vincent said as he reluctantly backed away.

"You'd better, or we're going to get Jenn to lend us a ship and we'll come after you." Lehman teased.

"It might be worth it just so I could see all of you again." Vincent said as tears filled his eyes.

"You have a home here, Vincent." Benny said as he approached. "So we know that you'll be back."

"Yeah. I will. Every chance I get." Vincent said with a watery smile at Benny.

"Take care of yourself, Crewman Winters." Benny said gently.

"I will if you will, Mr. Summers." Vincent said as his tears finally began to fall.

"I guess..." Vincent began to say as he pulled out of the hug, but his voice caught.

He looked around at his friends, then quietly said, "Mycien, would you transport me to the Yorktown?"

Benny, Lehman and Hailey watched as a fountain of multi-colored sparkles erupted around Vincent, then subsided, leaving nothing in their wake.

The End of Book 1

Editor's Notes:

I certainly am glad to see a new chapter in this wonderfully different story about Vincent, and his friends and family.

It was interesting to see what happened when the universe split happened. I see that a few new faces have appeared, and it is good that we have all traveled through time, so we will know what changes

have taken place. In fact, if we have been paying attention, I think we know a lot more than Vincent, or anyone else in this story does.

As I think I might have already mentioned, it is going to be extremely interesting to see the subtle and not so subtle differences between what happens in this universe, compared to the one in "Frontier."

One thing is certain, it will be interesting and very much fun to read the two different stories and see where things differ.

Darryl AKA The Radio Rancher