

Heritance

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Chapter 1

"Would you repeat that?"

"Your cousin is going to be staying with us for a while. You need to clear out some space in your dresser and your closet for him."

"Which cousin? Matthias? Did Aunt Margy and Uncle Rance finally decide to get a divorce?"

"No. I mean, yes, Margy and Rance are getting divorced, but Matthias is going to be staying with your Grandma Keller until they get things settled. We're going to be hosting your cousin Bitru."

"I have a cousin named Beetroot?"

"Brandton Lee Keller! We raised you better than that! I'm sure Bitru is going to feel very out of place here, so you need to be nice to him."

"But MOM! I don't even know him and I'm going to have to share my room with him? I've never even heard of a cousin 'bee-true'." Brandton urged her to understand.

"Well, to be honest, I haven't either. He's from your father's side of the family. But when Bitru's parents' lawyer contacted us, he explained that Bitru's family has been moving all over the world as part of their jobs since long before Bitru was born. It seems that they've recently become concerned that Bitru has never had what you would call a normal life or a home. He's never had the chance to form lasting friendships or even attend an actual school. He's been taught by local tutors, wherever they happened to be living at the time."

"How old is he?" Brandton asked cautiously.

"Bitru is eleven years old. Since you're a year older than he is, I expect you to watch after him. He hasn't had a chance to be around other children before, he might need your help fitting in."

"When is he coming?" Brandton asked resignedly.

"We'll be leaving for the airport to pick him up in about two hours."

"Two hours? Why didn't you tell me about this before? I don't have anyplace to put all the crap I've got, now I have to make room for some cousin that I've never heard of before and share a room with him?" Brandton whined.

"Brandton, I don't want you using that language in front of your cousin. Do you hear me? You were raised in the church and you know better than to talk like an unwashed heathen."

"Sorry. I know." Brandton said grudgingly.

"Now get to work, we still need to put fresh sheets on the top bunk... I wonder if he's going to need the rubber sheets?"

"Ewww! Mom!"

"Get to work."

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"Go get your mother. At the rate we're going, we're going to be late."

"Me? When was the last time she EVER listened to a thing that I said?" Brandton asked seriously.

"Probably the last time you used inappropriate language."

"Yeah. Thanks for reminding me, Dad." Brandton said grudgingly.

"What are you doing just standing around? We need to be going." Brandton's mother said in a rush as she hurried out of the kitchen.

Brandton and his father shared a look. But before they could make a move toward the door, there was a knock.

"Oh, that's just perfect. This would only happen when we're already running late... Probably those damned Jehovah's Witnesses again." Brandton's mother muttered as she stalked past the men-folk to answer the front door.

Brandton and his father shared another look, then waited to see what was going to happen.

As Brandton's mother opened the door, there was a sudden, gust of cold wind that sent a chill right up Brandton's spine.

"Hello. Mrs. Keller?" A young boy asked timidly.

The boy was small and frail looking. He had dark, almost black, wavy hair, and fair skin that seemed a shade or two lighter than it should be.

The weather looked to be dark and foreboding, but there was no evidence that it had been raining. However the boy was dripping with fresh rain, with small droplets falling from the curls of his dark bangs.

"Yes. That's right." Brandon's mom said cautiously.

"My name is Bitru Rechin. I believe that I am supposed to be here." The boy said cautiously. He had a slight middle European accent, although it was so vague that it wasn't possible for Brandon to distinguish exactly which country it might be from.

"Oh, yes! I'm Liz Anne, please call me Aunt Liz. We were just on our way to get you. Did your flight arrive early?" She asked with concern.

"I don't believe so." Bitru said simply.

Brandon felt like he couldn't get warm. He half expected to be able to see his breath as he stood, watching the events unfold.

"Please, come in out of the cold." Liz Anne hurried to say as she stood out of the way.

Bitru picked up his suitcase and walked into the entry hall, where Brandon and his dad were waiting.

"You must be Mr. Keller." Bitru said quietly. He didn't sound exactly sad, but his voice was flat, devoid of any real emotion.

"Yes, but you can call me Uncle Warren while you're staying with us." Brandon's father said in a fairly credible warm and inviting tone.

Bitru nodded once, then looked at Brandon curiously.

"I'm Brandon."

"A pleasure to meet you." Bitru said simply, but the look in his dark eyes was nothing short of frozen control. Another shiver went up Brandon's spine and, at that moment, he wasn't sure if it had anything to do with the temperature in the entry hall.

"Well, I suppose that since you're here, I'd better get to work on dinner. Brandon, why don't you take Bitru to your room and show him where to put his things?" Liz Anne said abruptly in an overly cheerful voice.

That snapped Brandon out of his mental wandering. Besides, he very much wanted to go to his room, if for no other reason than to put on a sweater or a jacket.

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"This will be our room. I emptied two drawers and about half the closet for you." Brandon said as he led the way into the bedroom.

"That's far more space than I will need." Bitru said as he stopped just inside the door and looked around.

"Is the top bunk okay with you?" Brandon asked as he walked to the closet to get himself a jacket.

Bitru stared at the bed for a moment, then quietly said, "I'm sure it will be fine."

"Just let me know if you don't like it or have a problem or something." Brandon rambled as he pulled on his fleece hoodie and huddled into himself for warmth.

Bitru gave a single nod, then walked to the dresser and placed his suitcase on top.

Brandon couldn't resist the urge to follow and see what Bitru had brought with him.

When the suitcase was opened, Brandon was amazed by the level of organization that had been used to pack the suitcase. Everything was so tightly and efficiently packed that there probably wouldn't be room for a slip of tissue paper.

"Which drawer is for me?" Bitru asked as he stopped all movement.

"The bottom two, if that's okay." Brandon stammered.

"One will be more than enough." Bitru said as he relocated his suitcase to the floor beside the dresser.

Brandton had a thought and quietly asked, "Do you have more stuff coming? You know, like toys or a bike or stuff like that?"

"No." Bitru said simply as he began to take items, one at a time, from his suitcase and refold them before putting them neatly into the drawer.

"Well, if you don't have any stuff of your own, I've got tons of stuff, so I guess you can share mine if you want." Brandton said carefully.

"I don't believe that will be necessary, but thank you for the offer." Bitru said as he maintained his focus on putting his clothes away.

A moment of silence fell between them as Brandton watched him work.

The clothes were of a slightly different style than Brandton was used to seeing and all of them appeared to be brand new.

Although Brandton probably had five times as many clothes, he had the feeling that nothing he owned could compare in style and quality to anything that Bitru had brought with him.

"Where would you like for me to put my hanging clothes?" Bitru asked as he stood.

"Over here. I cleared out the left side of the closet for you." Brandton said as he walked to the closet door and opened it.

Bitru closed the lid of his suitcase and lifted it to the top of the dresser before reopening it.

"I left you some hangers, but if you need more I can ask Mom." Brandton said quickly.

"Thank you, no. I have my own." Bitru said simply.

Brandton watched curiously as Bitru took a small pouch out of his suitcase, then extracted something that looked like a series of thin silver tubes with chains running through them. They looked vaguely like something a ninja might use. With a few well practiced moves, Bitru assembled the tubes and chain into a clothes hanger.

Once the hanger was assembled, Bitru then unfolded a carefully packed pair of pants and hung them on the crossbar. After that, he hung a cream colored shirt on the top.

Brandton was amazed at Bitru's efficiency. He thought that if he would do the same thing with his clothes, he could cut his closet space in half, or at least use half the number of hangers.

Suddenly, Brandton heard eerie organ music playing. Although he was used to hearing organ music in his parents' church, this seemed to be more like something that would be played at a demented, dark carnival.

"Excuse me." Bitru said as he fished a phone out of his pocket.

Brandton noted that it was probably the biggest cell phone that he had ever seen. It was wafer thin, but the screen was enormous. If it were any bigger, it would be considered a tablet computer.

"Yes. I have arrived." Bitru said in his quiet, icily controlled voice.

"No. I found it easily."

"I need to finish unpacking and dinner is being prepared. I must go." Bitru said seriously, then terminated the call.

"Was that your parents?" Brandton asked curiously.

"I believe it was the concierge at the hotel where my parents are staying, although I may be mistaken." Bitru said as he went back to work, hanging his clothes.

Brandton was disturbed by the answer, but felt that it was none of his business, so he didn't question further.

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"There's some room at the back of the closet against the wall, if you want to put your suitcase there." Brandton said when he realized that Bitru had finished unpacking.

"Thank you." Bitru said as he closed the suitcase and put it away.

"If you want, I can set you up on my computer with your own account. It'll just take a couple minutes." Brandton said quickly.

"I can do most things on my phone. But I may ask you to do so later, if I find that there is a need." Bitru said carefully.

"Yeah. It's probably better that way, my parents have this really harsh Internet parental lockout thing set up on my computer, so I can't look at

porn and stuff. But the way it works, I can't find about half of whatever I'm looking for even if it's just stuff for school." Brandon said regretfully.

Bitru didn't respond, and Brandon didn't really know how to strike up a conversation with a complete stranger.

Finally, one question came to mind and no matter how inappropriate it seemed, Brandon felt that he had to ask.

"You don't wet the bed, do you?" Brandon asked cautiously.

"No. I've never really had that problem." Bitru said simply.

There was no trace of embarrassment or annoyance in his voice.

"Good, I just wanted to be sure because... well, I'm on the bottom bunk." Brandon said nervously.

Bitru gave a single nod which seemed to indicate that he understood and approved of Brandon's reason for asking the question.

"It'll probably still be a few minutes before dinner is ready. Do you want to do something?" Brandon asked hesitantly.

"Would there be a convenient place where I can charge my phone at night?" Bitru asked curiously.

"Yeah. You can plug into my USB or you can plug into the power strip behind the monitor." Brandon answered immediately.

"Is there an outlet nearer the bed? I would like to have the phone within reach should my parents attempt to contact me during the night. Given the different time zones and the fact that they have to relocate so frequently, they could conceivably call at any time of the day or night." Bitru said quietly.

"Um, I don't know. I don't think I ever looked for a plug over there. We can look now, if you want." Brandon finished with a smile.

Bitru seemed uncertain for a moment, then walked to the bed with Brandon and they both started looking along the wall for an outlet.

"Here's one, at the head of the bed." Brandon said in triumph.

"That will suit my needs." Bitru said simply.

Bitru then went to the closet and took out his suitcase again. From a zippered compartment on the outside, Bitru took out a phone charger cord and a small pouch.

Brandton watched curiously as Bitru rifled through the pouch until he found the electrical connector that he was looking for. From what Brandton could see, Bitru had about a dozen different connectors.

"What's it like to live in different places all over the world?" Brandton asked curiously.

"The inside of one hotel room is much like another. Although there are some differences, there is enough sameness to allow the entire experience to become one all-encompassing blur." Bitru said very precisely. There was no hint of sadness or longing in either his words or expression. He was simply stating the facts as he saw them.

"Boys! Dinner's almost ready!" Liz Anne called down the hallway.

"Good! I'm starving!" Brandton said with a smile.

"Where can I go to wash up?" Bitru asked quietly.

"Oh, yeah. Come on, I'll show you." Brandton said as he led the way out of the room.

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"Everyone, sit down in the dining room. It'll be just another minute." Liz Anne said quickly when she spotted the boys.

Brandton changed direction and led Bitru into the next room down the hall.

"We usually eat at the kitchen table. The only time we eat in here is holidays." Brandton said as he took his seat.

Bitru took the seat opposite him.

Warren walked into the dining room and took his seat at the head of the table.

"Bitru, I noticed that you didn't bring much with you. Let us know if you need anything and we'll be happy to get it for you." Warren said seriously.

"I believe I have all that I need. But I will let you know." Bitru said simply.

Brandton huddled into his fleece jacket a little tighter and noticed that his father was also reacting to the chill.

As Warren got up to check the thermostat, Liz Anne rushed into the dining room carrying a large bowl of salad.

"Bitru, I should have asked earlier, are there any foods that you're allergic to, or that you especially don't like." Liz Anne asked curiously.

"I will normally eat whatever is set before me. However, I typically do not care for offals." Bitru said simply.

Although Liz Anne seemed to be confused by the response, it was Brandton who asked, "Offals? What's that?"

"Entrails and organs." Bitru said simply.

"Don't worry. Mom doesn't cook a lot of entrails." Brandton said with a smile.

□ Liz Anne ran out of the room without comment as everyone waited.

"So, Bitru, how are you liking Pennsylvania so far?" Warren asked casually.

"It reminds me very much of Ljubljana, although a bit more... rustic." Bitru said consideringly.

Brandton was completely baffled by the answer.

"I'm sorry, I don't know where that is." Warren finally admitted.

"In Slovenia." Bitru clarified.

After a moment, Warren finally shook his head to indicate that he didn't know where that was either.

"North of Croatia..." Bitru said slowly, then stopped at the befuddled look in Warren's eyes.

"South of Austria..." Bitru ventured, but to no avail.

"Northeast of Italy." Bitru said cautiously, and was rewarded with a reaction from his uncle.

"Okay. I think I know where that is. I suppose that when we talk to you about the places that you've visited, we'll probably need to have a map handy." Warren chuckled.

"Although I have visited more places than I can count, I remember very few individual details. One place is much like another to me. The overall topography of this place simply reminded me of Ljubljana." Bitru said seriously.

"Here we go." Liz Anne said as she placed the main course in the center of the table.

"Since Bitru is our guest of honor, I think it would be good if he led us in blessing the food." Warren said with a smile at his guest.

"I have to admit that I'm unfamiliar with this practice, but I have heard of it and did some research to prepare, just in case." Bitru explained quietly.

"That's fine. We'll understand if you don't know what to say." Liz Anne assured him.

"No. Although I'm not sure about your religious denomination, I believe that since this is a quote directly from your bible that it should be acceptable. In fact, from what I saw on the Internet, this was the Thanksgiving prayer from the Catholic Church for the President." Bitru said seriously.

"That sounds like it should be just fine." Warren said warmly.

"This is from the Psalm 109:8" Bitru said carefully, before reciting from memory,

"Let his days be few; and let another take his office.

Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow.

Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg:

let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places.

Let the extortioner catch all that he hath;

and let the strangers spoil his labor.

Let there be none to extend mercy unto him:

neither let there be any to favor his fatherless children.

Let his posterity be cut off;

and in the generation following let their name be blotted out."

□

A long moment of silence followed, then Warren quietly said a tentative, "Amen."

There was another hesitant moment, then Liz Anne took the salad bowl and started passing it around the table.

"If I'm going to be asked to pronounce a blessing frequently, I will need to do further research. I have only memorized this one." Bitru explained carefully before accepting the basket of warmed rolls from Warren.

"Please don't go to the trouble, Bitru. I only asked you this once because it's a special occasion, but from here on out, I'll be saying the blessing." Warren said carefully while Bitru split and buttered his roll.

"Thank you. Since I'm unfamiliar with your denomination and orthodoxy, it's difficult for me to know which tenets of christianity you hold with. I look forward to attending your church so I can witness your religious customs in person." Bitru said diplomatically.

"I'm glad that you're looking forward to going with us. Considering how hard Brandton tries to weasel out of going, I was afraid that you might not be interested." Warren said honestly.

Brandton flashed his dad a sour look at the statement.

"There is no need for you to worry about that. I have been fascinated by primitive belief systems and ancient mythologies for quite some time." Bitru said simply.

Warren and Liz Anne both seemed like they wanted to say something in response, but both held themselves back.

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"Excuse me, but what is this that we're eating?" Bitru asked curiously.

"Lasagne. How do you like it?" Liz Anne asked hopefully.

"Did it come from a can?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"It's a frozen entree, don't you like it?" Liz Anne asked with a slight whine under her words.

"I'm not sure. I have experienced cuisine from all over the world, but I don't recall ever eating anything that tasted quite like this before." Bitru said seriously before taking another small bite.

"You'll get used to it." Warren said to Bitru sympathetically.

Liz Anne flashed a warning glare at her husband and he immediately turned his attention back to his plate of food.

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"I hope everyone saved room for dessert." Liz Anne said as she dashed out of the living room.

"I wish to extend my apologies if I offended you with my questions." Bitru said quietly.

"Don't worry about it, Bitru. I can understand that if you're used to 'real' cooking, factory food must be quite a shock to the system." Warren said sympathetically.

"No. Not a shock. Quite the opposite. The absence of any real flavor and the fleshy texture of the... pasta, I suppose, were unlike anything that I have experienced before. I have never in my life tasted anything with such unyielding blandness." Bitru tried to explain.

"Like I said before, you'll get used to it." Warren said with a sigh.

"Raspberry cheesecake!" Liz Anne crowed as she entered the room with several already plated desserts.

Bitru looked at her with slight interest, then his gaze fell on what she was carrying.

"Did these also come from the freezer?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"Yes, but they've been thawing in the fridge since yesterday. They should be *just* right." Liz Anne said as she placed a perfectly factory formed wedge of cheesecake before Bitru.

"Go ahead. Give it a try." Warren encouraged.

Bitru cautiously cut himself a small bite, then noticed that everyone was watching him.

Warren nodded in his direction, encouraging him to eat it.

Bitru put the small piece of cheesecake into his mouth and slowly began to chew.

Thanks to his years of eating the specialties from different cultures all over the world, Bitru was able to resist the urge to spit it out. However, it took quite a bit of work for him to force himself to swallow the perfumy pasty wad of cloying sweetness.

"How do you like it?" Liz Anne asked hopefully.

"I don't have words to express how much I am enjoying this." Bitru said carefully.

Liz Anne seemed to be happy with the answer.

As the others around the table scarfed down their desserts, Bitru tried to force himself to take another bite.

As he was working up his courage, he felt something bump against his leg.

It took a moment for Bitru to realize that Brandon was trying to get his attention.

Bitru looked at him curiously.

Brandon mimicked putting something into his paper napkin, then putting the napkin in his lap.

Bitru gave a slight, single nod, then waited until Liz Anne wasn't looking before hiding the rest of his cheesecake in the paper napkin.

When he glanced to his other side, he saw that Warren had been watching, but only gave a slight smile and a hint of a nod before pretending that his attention had been drawn elsewhere.

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"Most places I have lived, they use the stove for cooking, not the freezer." Bitru said to Brandon as they walked toward the bedroom, away from the dining room.

"Yeah. Mom doesn't cook much. The closest thing she does to cooking is when she opens a can of something and heats it on the stove." Brandon said frankly.

"Is this typical here?" Bitru asked curiously as they walked into the bedroom.

"As far as I know, there is no typical. Every family is different." Brandon said as he walked to his bed and sat down.

"I fear that living here may take more of an adjustment than I had first anticipated."

"Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help you." Brandon said simply.

After a long moment of silence, Bitru quietly asked, "Tell me, what do you know of our family... your father's side of the family?"

"Nothing. I mean, I know about dad and Grandma Keller. But that's about it." Brandon said cautiously.

"So you know nothing of our more distant relations?" Bitru asked seriously.

"No. I don't think anyone's ever told me anything about them." Brandon said as he clutched his fleece hoodie tighter around him.

Bitru nodded thoughtfully, then started to climb up to the top bunk.

"Can you tell me?" Brandon asked curiously.

Bitru looked down at Brandon as if he had no clue what he was talking about.

"About our family." Brandon clarified.

"Not before time." Bitru said before turning his attention to the screen of his phone.

Brandon puzzled over what that might mean, but soon became distracted by the bone chilling cold and went to his closet to exchange his hoodie for a full-fledged coat.

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"I can turn on the TV if you have any shows that you like to watch." Brandon said into the silence that had fallen between them.

"No. Thank you." Bitru responded absently.

"If you don't watch TV, then what do you do for fun?" Brandon asked curiously.

"I have become adept at keeping myself entertained. Typically, I read." Bitru said simply, without turning his attention from his phone.

"I don't read much. I can never find the time. But if you want to, we can go to the library sometime." Brandon quickly offered.

"That won't be necessary. I have an extensive library on my phone." Bitru said simply.

"Aren't you cold? I'm freezing!" Brandon asked as he huddled into himself.

"No. But changes in temperature usually don't affect me much. I'm used to adapting." Bitru said carefully.

"It looks like I may need to learn how to do that, too." Brandon said as he finally gave in to the urge and climbed into bed.

"We have a cousin who lives locally, do we not?" Bitru asked curiously.

"You mean Matthias?" Brandon asked as he huddled under his blanket.

"Yes. Do you have frequent contact with him?" Bitru asked seriously.

"Usually just when there's a holiday or something. It's not like we're close or anything. He's fourteen, so he doesn't really have much to do with me." Brandon said honestly.

"I hope that you won't have similar inclinations toward me, since I am younger than you are." Bitru said frankly.

"I can't promise you that we're going to become good friends, but I won't *not* like you just because of your age." Brandon said honestly.

"Thank you for your candor." Bitru said simply.

Brandon didn't know exactly what that meant and decided that having a dictionary close at hand might not be a bad idea if he were going to be holding conversations with his recently discovered cousin.

"You should be aware that I have not had any friends before. If there is some specific behavior or activity that one normally engages in to initiate friendship, I am unaware of it." Bitru said quietly.

"Well, I'm probably not the best person to talk to about stuff like that. There's lots of people at school that I think of as my friends, but I'm not really close to any of them. I'm usually pretty happy to just hang back and do my own thing." Brandton said thoughtfully.

"Are you speaking of masturbation?" Bitru asked curiously.

"What? No! I'm talking about being quiet and watching people! Why would you even... how do you know about that?" Brandton asked in surprise.

"My apologies. I did not mean to offend. I was told of certain cultural customs before I left for America in an attempt to prepare me. I was warned that some of what I was being told was based on hearsay and not necessarily on established facts." Bitru carefully explained.

"It's okay, Bitru. I'm not mad. And from what I've heard, some of the other guys at school do that stuff all the time, I just... don't... yet." Brandton said as he felt a blush rising up his cheeks.

"I understand." Bitru assured him, then continued, "And I've been told that masturbation is a perfectly natural expression of one's sexuality, and need not be looked upon with shame. I was only seeking to verify that I understood your meaning."

"I meant that I don't really talk to people much. I just hang back and watch them. Actually, I really don't like it when people talk to me. It makes me nervous." Brandton said reluctantly.

"I will refrain from unnecessary conversation if it makes you uncomfortable." Bitru said simply.

"No. That's not what I mean. You're fine." Brandton quickly assured him, then explained, "But at school, when there's a bunch of people around, I don't like for people to... notice me. I hate being called on in class or when we have to be picked for teams in gym. I don't like it when everyone is looking at me or listening to me."

"I have no such compunction." Bitru said simply.

Brandton once again thought about how useful a dictionary would be.

"Would you mind if I ask you a question?" Bitru asked quietly.

"No. I guess not." Brandon responded slowly.

"I was curious to know if you really believe in the religious teachings that your parents ascribe to?" Bitru asked carefully.

Brandon smiled before answering, "No. I don't."

"Why not?" Bitru asked curiously.

"All you have to do is look around at reality and if you're honest with yourself, you *can't* believe in it. I mean, it's *obviously* made up."

"Then, why do you think that so many people believe it?" Bitru asked curiously.

"I guess because they don't want to admit that when they die, they *really* die. There's nothing else. It's over." Brandon said seriously, then continued, "People get so scared about death that they talk themselves into believing all kinds of crazy impossible things just for the *chance* to continue living in some way... they're willing to say anything, do anything or believe anything to prove to themselves that they have an *immortal* soul... which they don't." Brandon said frankly.

"So, do you believe this to be the basis of religion?" Bitru asked with interest.

"No. I mean, I guess that's why regular people believe in it. But the preachers and priests and people like that use it to control regular people and take their money." Brandon said seriously, then continued, "I mean, what does a preacher *actually* do except threaten you with *eternal* hell or promise you *eternal* peace? Nothing. They bully and seduce you until you'll do whatever they say."

"How is it that you attend church yet still have such beliefs?" Bitru asked curiously.

"When I was about six or seven, I was in Sunday school and they were talking about something, I don't remember what it was, now. All I remember is that it was *wrong*. Maybe it was the talking snake in the garden of eden or something like that. I guess it doesn't matter. But that was when I realized that the church people were telling fairy tales to us like they were the truth. You know, like with Santa Claus or the tooth fairy. After that, I just listened to what they were saying and compared it

to *reality*." Brandon said frankly, then continued more quietly, "If you read some of the stories in the bible knowing that there's no such thing as magic, then you realize that it's all just a bunch of crazy people telling made up stories."

After a long moment of silence, Bitru quietly said, "I can imagine that you would get along well with my father. He is also very grounded in reality. And, I should add, that I admire you for being able to see past the falsehoods that were being taught to you as facts. Most do not have the courage to think independently."

"Well, I don't know about courage. I mean, I still go to church and pretend to believe, just to try and keep my mom off my back about it." Brandon said quietly.

"What about your father? What does he believe?" Bitru asked curiously.

"I don't know. I think he goes to church because Mom makes him go. But we've never talked about it. I don't know what he really believes, or if he believes in anything at all." Brandon said honestly.

"Yes. I've noticed that there are people who choose to simply not deal with such questions. I haven't decided if they're fools or if they have great wisdom for choosing not to ponder philosophical matters." Bitru said thoughtfully.

"Ignoring things doesn't make them go away. If I take the time to figure out what I *do* believe, then when something happens, I don't have to stress out about it. I already know how I feel about it and I can keep going." Brandon said seriously.

"How do you mean?" Bitru asked curiously.

"Like, if someone dies, I don't have to talk myself into believing anything to make me feel better about it or struggle with the fantasy problem of what's going on with their soul. I'll just be sad that they're gone and I know that I'll miss them. That's it. There's no candles or prayers or... magic." Brandon said frankly.

"I'm curious to know, what would you do if you found out that you were wrong?" Bitru asked slowly.

"Like, how?"

"What would happen if you found undeniable proof that some of the things that you believed were magical or imaginary turned out to be real?" Bitru asked carefully.

After a moment, Brandon thoughtfully said, "I guess that if I *knew* it was real and wasn't a trick of some kind, then I'd just have to go ahead and accept it."

There was a long moment of silence, then Brandon cautiously asked, "What do *you* believe, Bitru?"

"I believe in reality, just as you do. However, my perception of reality may be a bit different than yours." Bitru said seriously.

"How?" Brandon asked curiously.

"If you wouldn't mind terribly, could we postpone the rest of this talk until later? I'm quite tired from travelling and from the change of time zones." Bitru asked hopefully.

"Sure. We can talk about it some other time." Brandon quickly agreed, then had a sudden thought and quietly asked, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"I may choose not to answer, but you are free to ask." Bitru said simply.

"Why are you *really* here?" Brandon asked cautiously.

There was a long moment of silence, then Bitru quietly responded, "To find my family."

Although Brandon wanted to delve deeper into Bitru's motivations, he had another commitment that was starting to weigh heavily on his mind. "If I keep laying here I'm going to fall asleep and I've got a ton of homework that I need to get done. Will it bother you if I have the light on for a while?"

"No. That shouldn't be a problem." Bitru said quietly.

With more than a little reluctance, Brandon got out of bed and went to his desk. Although he would liked to have spent more time talking to his cousin, he knew that he was already behind on his homework. No matter what he did at this point, it was going to be a late night for him.

Chapter 2

When Brandon's alarm sounded, he immediately felt a wave of despair wash over him. He had worked on his homework until after midnight and didn't get nearly enough sleep.

As miserable as school normally was for him, it appeared that this day would be that much more so.

No matter how much he might enjoy lounging in bed for a while longer, he knew that the price that he would have to pay was too high.

With more than a little reluctance, Brandon climbed out of his bed and stood.

"Do we typically have to wake so early? I thought that classes didn't begin until eight o'clock." Bitru asked from the top bunk.

"That's right. But we've got to get showered and eat breakfast, then catch the bus. So we've got to get moving, right now." Brandon said wearily.

"You were still working when I fell asleep. How late were you awake?" Bitru asked curiously.

"I went to bed around midnight." Brandon said tiredly as he gathered his clothes for school.

"Do you typically have that much homework to do?" Bitru asked as he climbed down from the top bunk.

"Yeah. It's all just busy work that doesn't usually have anything to do with what we're doing in class, but we get graded on it, just the same, so we have to do it." Brandon said frankly.

When he turned, he was surprised to see that Bitru was stark naked. Just as with his face, Bitru's body was pale, which was in distinct contrast to his dark hair. The boy was slender, but not remarkable in any way. Brandon was surprised to realize that he didn't feel the nervousness that he usually felt when showering in gym class at school.

"I had always assumed that homework was given to supplement the lessons you were trying to learn." Bitru said honestly.

It took a moment for Brandon to get past the shock of seeing Bitru's naked body, but he was finally able to say, "Maybe it's like that at other schools,

but here, I think they give homework as a way to keep the pressure on you, to drive home the point that they can control you, even when you're not in school."

"I have to admit that I never thought to research what American schools were like. I suppose that I blindly accepted the depictions portrayed in the popular media." Bitru said slowly as he, too, began to gather clothes.

"Nobody talks about it, but the way I see it, the people who run the schools must really hate kids. They think that we're all criminals. So all day, every day, they punish us while they're looking for ways to prove that we're doing something wrong. *That's* what we're really doing at school each day. We're trying to get through it without getting caught." Brandon said seriously.

"Caught doing what?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"That's the thing, it keeps changing. What's fine one day will get you arrested the next day. It doesn't matter if you're doing something wrong or not, if they catch you and decide that what you're doing is wrong somehow, then you'll get nailed for it." Brandon said frankly.

"I don't understand what you mean." Bitru said slowly.

"They have these things called 'Zero Tolerance Policies' that let them treat you like a criminal for doing regular everyday things. If you bring nail clippers to school, they'll have you arrested for carrying a weapon. If you have a *picture* of a gun, they'll expel you or call the cops for bringing a weapon to school. But the thing is, just when you think that you understand the rules, they change them again." Brandon said wearily, then thought to add, "You might want to put on some shorts or something before you leave the bedroom."

Bitru looked down at himself, then quietly said, "Yes. I have been cautioned about Americans' puritanical beliefs regarding shame about their bodies."

"Yeah. That sounds about right. It's okay when it's just us, but you'll need to cover up when we're around my parents. they'll probably freak." Brandon said frankly.

While Bitru was pulling on some athletic shorts, Brandon went on to say, "There's another thing that might throw you off. All that stuff they tell you about 'human rights' and 'civil liberties' doesn't have anything to do with kids. In school, you have no rights at all. You're guilty until you're proven innocent... except that they won't let you prove that you're innocent. They

won't listen to you. They believe that you're evil and wicked and that everything you say is a lie."

"It sounds horrible." Bitru said anxiously.

"Yeah. It is. But we don't get a choice. We've got to go." Brandton said simply, then asked, "Do you want to shower first?"

"Yes. But will you come with me and tell me more about your school while I do so? It appears that I am not adequately prepared." Bitru asked quietly.

"Yeah. Come on."

* * * * *

"Go ahead and shower and just leave the water on and I'll jump in when you're done." Brandton said as he placed his clothes by the sink.

"What else do I need to know to be prepared for attending school?" Bitru asked as he stepped out of his shorts.

"Well, there's a few things I can think of, but I don't know what you already know." Brandton said thoughtfully.

"I have very few preconceived notions. Anything you can tell me will be appreciated." Bitru said honestly.

"Okay. Well, when they bring the drug sniffing dogs in, you need to drop your backpack, then get down on the floor and put your hands on the back of your head. Don't move around or talk until they tell you to get up. If you just lay there and don't do anything you'll probably be alright. But if one of the dogs alerts on you... well, I don't know what to tell you. They'll strip search you... and from what I hear, they're not too gentle about it." Brandton said anxiously.

"How often does that happen?" Bitru asked before turning on the water.

"The cops are there all the time. They call them 'enforcement officers'. They bring the dogs in every week or so, but that's usually when we're in class and all we have to do is sit still while they sniff around and check our lockers and backpacks and stuff. The big 'drug raid' thing only happens once or twice a year. That's the only one you really have to worry about. Usually, when they do that, the cops have got their guns out and are just looking for a reason to use them." Brandton said thoughtfully.

"I understand. On a related topic, I was warned about the possibility of being offered drugs while I am here. Is that something that I need to be concerned about?" Bitru asked in a louder voice to be heard over the shower.

"Not really. I mean, I guess if you hang out with a group of people who do drugs, they might try to talk you into something. But most of the time, if someone asks you if you want to try something or buy something, just tell them 'no' and they'll usually leave you alone about it." Brandon said frankly.

"I hope that it's as easy as you say. I have heard horrible things about drug dependency." Bitru said honestly.

Brandon could tell that Bitru was nearly finished and began taking off the sweatpants and tee shirt that he had slept in.

"Yeah. After you've been at school for a couple days, I bet you'll understand why someone would decide to use drugs to help them 'cope'. But if you're worried about drug dependency, that's not the big thing that you have to worry about here." Brandon said seriously.

Bitru stepped out of the shower and Brandon handed him a towel before stepping under the water's spray and continuing, "When you're in class, if the teachers notice you moving around or talking, they might decide that you have ADHD and need to be on drugs. If they do that, then they'll send a note to the parents who'll take you to a psychiatrist and you'll be on drugs before you know what hit you. I've seen it happen lots of times."

"But, if I don't have a psychological impairment, the psychiatrist should recognize that." Bitru said cautiously as he dried himself.

"Yeah. You'd think that. But if he doesn't find anything wrong with you, he doesn't make any money. If he can find a reason to drug you, then you have to keep coming back to get your meds adjusted. Each time they change your meds, you become more and more of a zombie, and each time he'll just keep prescribing more and more drugs until you O.D., kill yourself, or turn eighteen." Brandon said as he quickly washed himself.

"I will be sure to remain quiet and still during class." Bitru said as he started to pull on his clothes.

"Another thing is, don't ask questions. If the teacher says something that you know is wrong, or if you want to understand 'why' something was done

the way it was, don't ask. They'll drug you up for that faster than if you're sitting there fidgeting all day." Brandon said as he turned off the water.

"I thought the purpose of going to school was to learn. How can you learn if you don't ask questions?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"The only thing we're expected to 'learn' is how to take tests and how to do what we're told without thinking about it." Brandon said as he started drying himself.

"I don't think this is what my parents intended when they sent me here. It sounds much like the operant conditioning of Skinnerian behaviorism." Bitru said anxiously.

"Um, yeah. Whatever you say. But, you're here now and there's no getting out of it. Just keep your head down and your mouth shut and do your best to get through it. I'll help you as much as I can." Brandon said as he began to dress himself.

"Thank you. Any assistance you can offer will be appreciated." Bitru said quietly.

"Okay. There's one other thing I can think of right now that you need to know." Brandon said seriously, then asked, "What's one plus one?"

"Two." Bitru answered cautiously.

"Yeah. That's what I used to think, too. But if you gave that answer in school, they'd probably tell you that you were wrong, then give you all kinds of hell about it."

"What other answer could I possibly give?"

"One plus one is the sum of grouping 'a' added to grouping 'b'." Brandon said mechanically.

After a moment to consider, Bitru cautiously said, "I suppose that while that is technically correct, it doesn't answer the question."

"If the question asks you to express the numerical result of one plus one, then two would be the right answer. But when it asks you what 'is' one plus one, it's asking you to restate it as a formula."

"The reasoning seems to be unnecessarily convoluted."

"Yeah. And don't even get me started on multiplication. But the worst part is that next year the exact same question will probably have a completely different answer. And I guess I should tell you that if you decide that their BS answer is stupid and that the answer is really 'two', then they'll either fail you, drug you, or transfer you to the 'exceptionally motivated' class."

"From the way you say it, I take it that being 'exceptionally motivated' is a bad thing." Bitru said cautiously.

"Yeah. Let me see if I remember this right... a long long time ago, someone who wasn't smart was called 'slow' or 'dumb' or something like that. Then they came out with tests to see how smart people really were and the ones who did the worst on the tests were called 'idiots', 'imbeciles', and 'morons', but someone thought that that sounded too mean, so they started calling them 'mentally retarded', because it sounded nicer. Then, 'retarded' started sounding bad, so they went to 'mentally handicapped', 'mentally disabled', 'mentally challenged'... I don't know, there's a bunch of them. Then, I think the next one was 'a person with an intellectual disability' or something like that. Here, at this school, they call people like that 'Exceptionally Motivated'." Brandton said seriously.

"Have you ever read George Orwell's, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?" Bitru asked slowly.

"No. And if you don't understand why not by the end of the day, ask me again and I'll tell you." Brandton said wearily.

Bitru nodded thoughtfully as he looked in the mirror, then quietly asked, "My clothes don't look like yours. Will they be adequate?"

Brandton took a moment to look him over before saying, "Yeah. They look fine. As long as you aren't flashing any expensive brand name labels, no one should mess with you."

As Bitru picked up his phone and prepared to put it in his pocket, Brandton quickly said, "You'll have to leave your phone here. If you take it with you, they'll take it away from you."

"My parents expect to be able to contact me at any time." Bitru said uncertainly.

"Listen. Some kid, somewhere, took a video of a teacher body slamming a kid in class. Ever since then, no one is allowed to have any phones or iPads or anything like that at school. If they catch you, they'll take it away from you and you won't get it back." Brandton said seriously.

"But it is my personal property." Bitru said slowly.

"From the way the school sees it *you're* 'their' personal property."

* * * * *

"I was just about to come and get you! Your breakfast is on the table. I need to get ready for work." Liz Anne said as she passed them on her way out of the kitchen.

"What is... *this*?" Bitru asked as he looked at the bowl of brightly colored puffs.

"Haven't you ever had cereal before?" Brandon asked with surprise.

"Yes. Of course. But it was nothing like this." Bitru said as he took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Go ahead and give it a try and see if you like it." Brandon said before he took his first bite.

Bitru seemed to brace himself before tentatively taking a spoonful.

Brandon glanced at Bitru in time to see him stop all movement.

The look of horror on Bitru's face told Brandon all that he needed to know.

It was obvious that Bitru was trying to decide if it would be better to spit out the cereal or try to swallow it.

After a moment more, Brandon finally said, "Go ahead and spit it out and I'll make you something better."

As discretely as possible, Bitru spat the mouthful of cereal into a paper napkin.

"Do you like toast?" Brandon asked as he got up from the table.

"Yes. Thank you." Bitru said between deep breaths, then asked, "How can you eat this?"

"It's just like with the lasagne and the cheesecake. After a while, you get used to it." Brandon said frankly as he put two slices of bread into the toaster.

"When I came here, I never imagined that I would have so much difficulty finding edible food." Bitru said honestly.

"If you think this is bad, just wait until you try the cafeteria food at school." Brandon said with a weary chuckle as he opened the refrigerator.

"If that's the case, perhaps I should prepare lunch here and take it with me." Bitru said seriously.

"Nope. They don't let us bring our own food to school." Brandon said simply as he placed an apple and an orange beside Bitru's cereal bowl before taking the bowl away.

"Why wouldn't they allow us to bring with us the food that we enjoy?" Bitru asked curiously.

"The *official* reason is that someday, somewhere, someone might have an allergy to peanuts or something like that and if we brought food from home, then they might *possibly*, somehow get sick from it." Brandon said simply.

The toaster popped and Brandon took the toast out and started buttering it before he continued, "But I think the real reason is for another way to prove that they *own* you while you're there. They control when you eat, what you eat, and how fast you eat. And that reminds me, make sure that you don't drink too much. Another thing they control is when you can go to the bathroom. Some of the teachers get their jollies out of watching kids suffer, trying to hold it until lunch."

"We aren't allowed to go to the toilet between classes?" Bitru asked cautiously.

Brandon set a paper plate with two slices of toast before Bitru as he said, "When the bell rings, you've got four minutes to make it to your next class, and the classes are usually on opposite ends of the building. With every kid in the school being let out into the halls at once, it's all you can do to get to your next class before the bell rings."

"The more you describe your school, the more it sounds like a prison." Bitru said frankly.

"Well, I've never been in prison, so I don't know for sure. But since prisons are filled with adults who still have certain human rights, I think school is probably worse." Brandon said honestly before taking another bite of his cereal.

The sound of the doorbell stopped any further conversation.

Bitru looked at Brandon with question, silently asking if he were going to answer it.

"Mom'll get it. If I go out there, she'll just yell at me for not being in here, eating my breakfast." Brandon explained between bites.

After a moment to consider, Bitru went back to enjoying his breakfast of toast and fruit.

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"Bitru, you have a visitor." Liz Anne said as she led a man in a suit into the kitchen.

"Good morning. I'm Mr. Silverstone. Which of you is Bitru Rechin?" The man asked in a voice devoid of any emotion.

"I am." Bitru said as he stood and offered his hand in greeting.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rechin." Mr. Silverstone said as he shook the offered hand, then continued, "I've been engaged by your father to facilitate your enrollment at the local public school. Given the circumstance of your foreign citizenship and diplomatic status, there may be some matters that need sorting out."

"I understand. Thank you." Bitru said respectfully.

"I've also taken the liberty of securing the school supplies listed for your grade level, which includes your gym gear." Mr. Silverstone said seriously, then added, "You may wish to verify that the clothing selections are of the correct size."

"I will do so, following my meal." Bitru assured him as he returned to his seat.

"Yes. Please excuse my interruption." Mr. Silverstone said quietly.

"That's quite alright. Thank you for your foresight." Bitru said before taking another bite of toast.

Brandon had finished his cereal, so he took his bowl to the sink.

"Brandon, you'd better get a move on, or you're going to be late." Liz Anne said seriously.

"If you wouldn't mind, I can drive him to school, since we will be going there, anyway." Mr. Silverstone said simply.

"Yes. That would be fine. Thank you." Liz Anne said with surprise, then seemed to notice the time and quickly said, "Excuse me. I have to finish getting ready."

Brandton stacked the rinsed cereal bowls in the dishwasher, then turned to find Bitru slowly eating his breakfast.

In that quiet moment, Brandton felt something. He didn't know if it were the beginning of a familial bond forming between them or perhaps it was simply seeing the boy who appeared to be so alone. Whatever it was, Brandton was determined that, as they traveled forward, he would protect Bitru to the best of his ability.

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After a few minutes for Bitru to verify that the gym clothes fit him, they each gathered their things, then followed Mr. Silverstone out to a nondescript black car with diplomatic plates.

The ride to school was nothing short of luxurious, and was a definite contrast to Brandton's usual ride on the city's mass transit buses. Not only was it much more comfortable, it was also quite a bit faster, since they were going *directly* to the school instead of following a bus route that only coincidentally happened to pass by the school.

When they got out of the car, Mr. Silverstone started walking toward the nearest entrance, but Brandton stopped him.

"If you don't have a student ID, you can only go in the front entrance. If you try to go in back here, they'll just send you around to the front to get checked in." Brandton said frankly.

Mr. Silverstone seemed to be slightly annoyed by the announcement, but Brandton didn't get the sense that it was directed at him.

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"You guys go ahead. I'm a little bit early since you gave me a ride." Brandton said as he stepped aside.

Bitru looked around cautiously as they entered the building.

"Empty your pockets and place your personal items in the tub. Go ahead and give me your briefcase." The woman behind the desk said in a bored tone of voice. There was a uniformed 'enforcement officer' standing on the other side of the desk from her, just the other side of the metal detector.

"I need to speak to someone about enrolling young Mr. Rechin into classes. Could you possibly direct me to where I need to go?" Mr. Silverstone asked cautiously.

"Empty your pockets and place your personal items in the tub." The woman said without hesitation.

"Excuse me, did you hear my question?" Mr. Silverstone asked with frustration.

"Empty your pockets. Place your personal items in the tub. Step through the metal detector. Then I'll tell you where to go." The woman said firmly.

From her tone of voice, Brandon was fairly sure that she wasn't talking about directing him to the administrative office.

"We've got enough time, I can take you to the office when you're ready." Brandon quickly offered.

"Thank you." Mr. Silverstone said to Brandon sincerely, then began to empty his pockets into the filthy gray tub.

When he was nearly finished, Brandon gestured to Bitru to step forward, then told him, "Put your backpack on the counter and empty your pockets into the next tub, then step through the metal detector. When they're finished going through your stuff, they'll give it back to you on the other side."

"Do I need to remove my shoes and belt, as I did with the airport security?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"Only if they have metal." Brandon answered simply, then thought to add, "Sometimes they decide not to give you back your belt. They say it's because you might be able to use it as a weapon. But that just depends on who's working the desk that day."

When Mr. Silverstone had finally stepped through the metal detector, Bitru started to empty his pockets.

"You'll need to move faster. We're getting a line." The woman behind the desk said impatiently.

Brandton scooted in beside Bitru and started going through the familiar routine of emptying his pockets.

As soon as Bitru was through the metal detector, Brandton immediately followed.

"You do this every day?" Mr. Silverstone asked Brandton cautiously.

"What's my other choice?" Brandton asked rhetorically as he received his tub and put his wallet and keys back into his pockets.

"Excuse me, Sir. What business do you have here, today?" The 'enforcement officer' asked Mr. Silverstone in a reasonably respectful tone of voice.

"I've been engaged to facilitate young Mr. Rechin's entry to this institution." Mr. Silverstone said seriously.

The puzzled look on the officer's face said more loudly than words that he didn't have a clue what Mr. Silverstone was talking about.

"He's here to enroll Bitru." Brandton translated, then quickly added, "I can take them to the admin office, if you want."

"Yeah. Do that." The 'enforcement officer' said shortly.

"Come on." Brandton said urgently.

* * * * *

"Is that the library?" Bitru asked as they walked down the hallway, toward a door with a small nameplate affixed beneath the darkened window.

"Yeah. I think it's just for the preps. You can only go in there if you're scheduled for it. I've never been in there. But if you want to go to the library sometime, I'll take you to the public library in town." Brandton said as they passed by.

"Mr. Rechin, I hope you won't think it too forward of me, but I intend to have a discussion with your father about this... institution." Mr. Silverstone said gravely.

"Once my father has made a decision, he rarely revisits it. But you may discuss the matter with him if you wish." Bitru said simply.

"Here it is." Brandon said as they approached another door.

There was a sudden buzzing sound, then Brandon pulled the door open.

"How did they know that we were here?" Bitru asked as he looked up and down the hallway.

"There's cameras everywhere. But someone at the desk probably called and told them that you were coming." Brandon said simply.

Bitru looked more carefully and finally spotted one of the cameras in the hallway.

"If I don't see you again before the end of the day, I'll meet you in front of the main building after classes." Brandon said as he held the door open.

"Won't you come in with us?" Bitru asked with a touch of anxiety under the question.

"I have to get to class. Remember, if things get too bad, just fake being sick and ask to go home. If it's after lunch, you probably won't even have to fake it." Brandon finished with a sympathetic smile, wishing that there were more that he could do.

"I will meet you in front of the school." Bitru said with renewed strength.

"I'll see you then." Brandon said, then reluctantly released the door.

* * * * *

Brandon arrived in his first period class a few minutes early and went directly to his assigned seat.

The teacher was standing outside her classroom, stone faced, staring at nothing, as students filed past her into the room.

Brandon took off his coat and draped it over the back of his chair, then went through his backpack and took out one of many folders which held his homework for his various classes. Once he had located his Spanish homework, Brandon placed his classbook on his desk and waited for class to begin.

The desks were packed so tightly into the classroom that Brandon had to duck out of the way more than once as other students walked past his desk, to avoid being hit by their backpacks.

As soon as the eight o'clock bell rang, the teacher seemed to 'switch on' and asked everyone to pass their homework to the front while marking her attendance sheet.

Brandton took the stack of papers that was handed to him from behind, then added his own to the stack before handing them to the person in front of him.

Once all the papers had been collected, the teacher then proceeded to review the material that they had been working on the previous day.

The lesson was an overview of the rules governing the conjugation of verbs in Spanish, but what puzzled Brandton was that they were *just* learning the rules. So far, since the beginning of the school year, they hadn't uttered a single *word* of Spanish in the entire class.

Since Brandon had heard the whole thing the previous day, he felt his lack of sleep catching up to him.

As the time was nearing eight-thirty, the teacher seemed to be on the verge of encroaching on new, not previously discussed material. The door opened and Brandton felt a cold gust of air rush in, which raised gooseflesh on his arms.

When he turned to look at the door, Brandton was only slightly surprised when Bitru walked in, accompanied by one of the women from the administration office. Due to Bitru's younger age, Brandton had expected him to be assigned to the sixth grade.

The woman from the administration office walked across the front of the room to the teacher and talked with her quietly for a moment as Bitru looked around the room curiously.

The size of the class made Bitru's task of finding Brandton more difficult than one might expect, but finally Bitru spotted him and gave a slight smile of relief.

The woman from the administration office finished her conversation with the Spanish teacher, then quietly said something to Bitru before leaving the room.

"If you'll take the seat at the end of this row, it will be your assigned seat for the remainder of the year. I'll get you a classbook when I assign today's homework." The teacher said seriously.

"Thank you, Ma'am." Bitru said before walking down the indicated row.

The teacher looked at him with surprise at the unexpected courtesy.

Within a minute, Brandton was once again trying to wrap his brain around the rules of grammar related to conjugating verbs in Spanish without knowing what any of the verbs were.

The teacher continued talking for about five more minutes, then stopped so that she could hand out that night's homework assignment, which had to do with the rules for punctuation in Spanish.

While the papers were being handed out, the teacher found a classbook and gave it to Bitru.

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Brandton had his coat back on and everything in its place and was ready to go when the classbell rang.

He moved to the front of the room and waited for Bitru by the door.

"In all the chaos, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to find you." Bitru said with relief as he approached.

"What's your next class?" Brandton quickly asked.

"Algebra. Mr. Silverstone was very firm in his insistence that I be placed in all your classes." Bitru said cautiously, somewhat concerned by Brandton's rushed question.

"We need to hurry. Stick close to me." Brandton said urgently.

Before Bitru could question further, Brandton was out the door and into the fray.

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Bitru was astonished by the sight of the hallway, which minutes before had been completely empty. Now the hallway was packed with hundreds of students, each frantically scrambling to get to their own destination.

There were a few times when Bitru nearly lost track of Brandton. But finally, they rushed into a classroom which was being guarded by a stern-faced man, standing at the doorway with his arms crossed.

"Is it always like that?" Bitru asked as he fought to catch his breath.

"Sometimes it's worse. Just wait until gym, we have to go all the way across the school for our next class after that." Brandton said frankly.

The classbell rang and the man by the door walked inside and closed it behind him.

"Get in your seats and pass up your homework." The man barked as he walked to his desk.

"Excuse me, Sir. I've been assigned to this class." Bitru said as he followed.

Brandton walked to his desk, then dug into his backpack to take out the homework that he had done the night before.

"There aren't enough desks for everyone. You'll have to drag a chair over and sit at the table at the back of the room." The teacher said sourly, then asked, "Do you have your class schedule?"

Bitru handed the teacher a sheet of paper.

The teacher jotted Bitru's name on his attendance sheet, then handed the paper back as he said, "Get in your seat. We've got a lot to do today."

Bitru struggled to get through the desks, packed so tightly that he had to turn sideways to get between them, but he finally made his way to the back of the room.

The teacher collected the homework from the people at the front of each row, then said, "Now that Thanksgiving's over, we'll be getting back to our regular routine. I'm listing the questions and the page numbers for Friday's test on the whiteboard. The answers are in the back of the book."

Brandton quickly looked to the back of the room to find Bitru sitting almost at the table. There were already four other people sitting in a space that would normally accommodate two.

The teacher approached the table and thrust a book in Bitru's direction as he said, "We test on Fridays. If you can solve the problems, that's fine. If you can memorize the answers, it'll be good enough."

Before Bitru could respond, the teacher went back to the front of the room and took his seat.

Brandton quickly wrote down the information from the whiteboard, then started to go through the questions. Since class hadn't been in session the previous Friday, he had been through the same set of questions once before and didn't have to push himself to solve them or memorize the answers.

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The teacher didn't speak to them for the remainder of the class.

A few minutes before the bell, he got up from his desk and wrote on the board, "Homework-2.3 quiz, odd."

Brandton quickly wrote it down on a sheet of paper, then stuffed it into his 'Algebra' homework folder.

When the bell rang, Brandton once again went to the door and waited for Bitru to make his way to the front of the classroom.

"You okay?" Brandton asked as Bitru approached.

"I'm not sure." Bitru answered honestly.

"Close enough. Our next class is in a portable building outside. We need to run." Brandton said before leading the way out of the classroom.

* * * * *

When they arrived in their next classroom, Brandton asked, "Is it anything like what you expected?"

"No. Not at all." Bitru answered honestly as he fought to catch his breath.

"Any questions?"

"Is it always like this?" Bitru asked as he looked around.

"So far, today's been a good day. It can be a whole lot worse than this." Brandton said frankly.

The rush of students hurrying into the room made it impossible for them to say any more, so Brandton went to his assigned seat.

As soon as the bell rang, the teacher stalked into the room and went directly to her desk.

"I've been enrolled in this class." Bitru said quickly.

"Schedule." The teacher demanded without looking at him.

Bitru quickly handed his class schedule to her.

"Fine." She said as she quickly penciled in his name on her class roster, then continued, "We're out of desks. Take a seat at the back. We're out of books, too. You'll have to share." The teacher said without once making eye contact with Bitru.

"Yes, Ma'am." Bitru said before walking away.

"Homework! Pass it up!" The teacher barked to the rest of the class.

Brandton took out his homework, then glanced to the back of the room where Bitru was sitting with six other people in a row along the wall.

"Those of you with books, turn to page forty-three and read the short story. When you're done, loan your book to someone who needs it, then do the analysis questions on the board. If you don't have a book to refer back to, then you don't have to give exact quotes for explanatory textual evidence. Just paraphrase." The teacher said wearily.

When Brandton quickly looked to the back of the room, he could see that none of the six people sitting with Bitru appeared to have a textbook.

* * * * *

As quickly as he could, Brandton read the short story, then got up and hurried to the back of the room to give his book to Bitru.

"You can give it back to me later." Brandton whispered before hurrying back to his desk.

Answering the questions turned out to be a lot more difficult without the book to refer back to. The exercise was basically to dissect the short story into its component parts, putting a label on each. As he worked, it occurred to Brandton that none of the questions had anything to do with what the story *said*. The message, if there were one, was irrelevant. The writing was to be viewed as a collection of meaningless parts. In the light of meeting Bitru, the realization seemed to have some significance, although what it might be was currently beyond him.

* * * * *

As the end of class approached, Brandon looked to the back of the room and found Bitru and the six others who didn't have desks, gathered around, all trying to get their assignment done while using the same book.

"Hand them up!" The teacher barked as she stood from her desk.

After a moment of waiting, Brandon added his classwork to the pile, then passed it forward.

Once all the classwork had been collected, the teacher walked from row to row, handing out stacks of paper as she bellowed, "Pass them back!"

It took a few minutes, but when a small stack of papers finally made its way back to Brandon, he saw that it was the homework assignment, having to do with identifying parts of speech.

Brandon dutifully put the paper in his 'English-homework' folder, then got everything put away so that he would be ready for the next bell.

* * * * *

"Is our next class far from here?" Bitru asked as he approached Brandon at the door.

"It's not too bad. Come on." Brandon said before hurrying outside.

* * * * *

Bitru was astonished when they walked through the wide open double doors.

He took his class schedule out to verify what he already knew before cautiously saying, "My schedule says that my next class is supposed to be Social Studies."

"Yeah. That's right. On Tuesdays, we have class in the gym." Brandon said as he led the way along the edge of a basketball court and into an area that was partitioned off by hanging gray sheets of canvas suspended on metal frames.

"With the number of students, it seems as though they should build an additional school." Bitru said frankly.

"They just closed two schools down and sent all the students here. As far as I know, those buildings are just sitting there, standing empty, while we're

all being crammed into this one." Brandon said as he led the way into their 'classroom'.

"Why..." Bitru began to ask, but the classbell interrupted him.

"Ask me after school. It could take a minute to explain." Brandon said simply, then went to his assigned desk.

When Bitru saw the teacher, he went to him and said, "I'm new here. I've been assigned to your class."

The teacher let out a long sigh, then asked, "May I see your schedule?"

"Yes. Of course." Bitru said quickly, then handed his schedule to the thoroughly exhausted looking teacher.

"You're in the right place. Hold on for just a minute and I'll get you a desk." The teacher said wearily, then said to the class more loudly, "Everyone, hand in your homework, pass it to the front."

Brandon hurried to get his 'Social Studies' homework folder out of his backpack and was ready when the stack of papers from behind him made it's way forward.

Once that was done, Brandon watched as Bitru stood at the side of the 'room' and waited.

After collecting the last of the homework, the teacher then announced, "If any of you chose to read ahead in the book, good for you, but unfortunately, all the information about Yugoslavia is completely out of date. Since I don't have any state approved information to hand out that is current, we're going to skip a couple chapters ahead to the cultural study of the aborigines people native to Australia."

The sound of a police style whistle sounded, then a man's voice could be heard yelling from outside the 'room'.

"If you'll take out your books and begin reading chapter six, the test on Thursday will be over the odd numbered questions at the end of the chapter. The answers are in the back." The teacher said more loudly to be heard over the sound of a bellowing gym teacher.

Once he was assured that his message had been received, the teacher slipped between two sheets of canvas and returned a moment later with a desk for Bitru.

"This is going to be your assigned seat. If the desks are out of order, just remember that you're behind him." The teacher said as he placed the desk behind that of another student.

As soon as the teacher was back at the front of the room, the boy in front of Bitru turned and said, "He doesn't know any of our names. I'm Chris, by the way."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Chris. I am Bitru."

Another whistle sound interrupted them, then the unmistakable sound of basketballs filled their ears.

"Here you go. Chapter six." The teacher said as he returned with a textbook.

"Thank you!" Bitru said in response, but wasn't sure if the teacher could hear him over the escalating sound of basketballs being bounced.

* * * * *

The teacher didn't even attempt to address the class while the gym class was playing basketball.

Several times during class, basketballs impacted the canvas 'walls' followed by the gym teacher going off on one or another of his students. It wasn't possible from inside the 'classroom' to determine if the basketballs were intentionally being thrown at them or if they had been honest accidents. Regardless, it made staying focused on the incredibly boring and outdated reading material that much more difficult.

A shrill whistle sounded, like so many times before, but this time, after a bit of yelling from the coach, the 'room' became quiet as the basketball players left the court to go to the locker rooms.

"Here's your homework assignment for tonight." The teacher said as he started handing stacks of papers to the front of each row of desks.

Brandton took one and handed the rest back, then looked at the assignment. He let out a sigh of resignation when he saw that the assignment was a map of the Ottoman Empire with blanks needing to be filled in for several of the physical features of the region.

Brandton suddenly broke out of his thoughts and tucked his homework into its assigned folder before putting everything away. Without a watch or a clock in the room, he needed to be prepared.

As soon as the classbell rang, Brandton was out of his seat and across the room.

"Come on, we need to hurry." Brandton called as he approached.

"I thought that we had lunch next..." Bitru began to say.

"If you want to eat, come on!" Brandton said firmly, then ducked through the canvas and hurried toward the door without looking back to see if Bitru were following or not.

Chapter 3

It wasn't until they reached the cafeteria and were standing in the serving line that Bitru was able to say, "Before we get our food, I need to go to the toilet."

"Just hold it for a few more minutes, then you'll be able to go." Brandon said seriously.

"I will do as you say, but I don't understand why." Bitru said honestly.

"Okay. Today we're lucky because our last class before lunch was right around the corner from the cafeteria. Some days, we're all the way on the other side of the school. You have to get here as fast as you can and get into line. If you end up too far back in line, sometimes you'll still be standing in line when the bell rings and you won't get to eat at all." Brandon said frankly.

"You can talk later! Keep it moving!" A man screamed. Bitru looked at him with surprise, then realized that the man wasn't speaking to him specifically but rather to the entire line of students.

Brandon turned his attention forward since they were nearly to the front of the line.

"Did you bring any money with you, today?" Brandon asked as he was handed a tray.

"Yes. But I was told that I could pay for my meal with the food card we purchased in the office." Bitru said as he, too, accepted a styrofoam tray of food.

Bitru was surprised when Brandon put a handful of condiment packets on his tray.

"Don't get the milk." Brandon said to Bitru as he moved forward in line and presented his card to pay for his food. When he was done, he stood aside as Bitru did the same. As soon as Bitru had his card in hand, Brandon ushered him to an empty table.

"The reason I asked you about money is because they're serving crap today, so we're going to need to get something from the vending machines to make up the difference or we're going to be starving before the last class." Brandon said frankly.

"This doesn't look *too* bad." Bitru said consideringly.

"If you can't handle Mom's frozen lasagne, I doubt that you'll be able to stomach the mystery meat burger." Brandon said frankly.

Bitru cautiously lifted the top bun. At first he thought that it was toasted, but on closer inspection, he deduced that it was stale. Beneath it, he found a grotesquely wilted piece of nearly transparent lettuce, which he promptly removed to reveal an equally transparent, paper thin pink shaving of tomato which was stuck like an applique to a glossy orange piece of something shaped to resemble cheese. When Bitru looked beneath the 'cheese', he couldn't help but ask, "What is it?"

"I don't know." Brandon said honestly, then explained, "I think that this is one of those things that's 'technically' or 'legally' considered to be meat without 'actually' being meat."

Bitru looked beneath the grey slimy patty to find a solitary pickle chip, pressed into the gluey, grease soaked bottom bun.

"If you put enough catchup and mustard on it, you might be able to choke it down." Brandon said as he suited actions to words.

Bitru looked at the rest of his 'food'. The seven tater tots on his tray were cold, but didn't appear to be otherwise objectionable. The 'vegetables', however, consisted of three individual green beans and four carrot 'coins'. From the 'crinkle cut' of the carrots and the general 'washed out' appearance, Bitru was certain that they had come from a can. There was a slight aroma coming from the vegetables which made Bitru think of a sterile adhesive bandage.

"Whatever you're going to do, you need to do it. We don't have a lot of time." Brandon said before taking the first bite of his 'burger' which was dripping mustard and catchup.

Bitru leaned closer to his plate and sniffed the 'burger' once before shaking his head.

"We'll hit the vending machines when we're done here. Seriously, you need to hurry!" Brandon urged him.

After one or two attempts, Bitru gave up trying to use the disposable plastic 'spork' and picked up one of the tater tots with his fingers. The flavor of the tater tot wasn't bad and the texture was relatively pleasant. If it hadn't been stone cold, it might have actually been somewhat palatable.

As Bitru reached for a second tater tot, the harsh voice of one of the lunchroom monitors barking at the students caused Bitru to flinch. The screaming voice was telling the people in line to stop talking and move faster.

"Do you mind if I sit here?"

"Sure. Go ahead." Brandton said easily.

Bitru turned and was surprised to see that it was the one and only person that he had met the entire day.

"Hello, Chris." Bitru said with an honest smile.

"Brandon, did you hear that Greg and Melissa got suspended?" Chris asked quickly as he moved at lightening speed to drown his 'burger' in condiments.

"No. What did they do?" Brandton asked curiously.

"PDA." Chris said before taking a huge bite of his dripping 'burger'.

"Personal Data Assistant?" Bitru asked with confusion.

"Public Display of Affection." Brandton explained.

Chris quickly wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, then said, "Yeah. Melissa was crying because she got bitched out in front of the entire class for something and after class, Greg hugged her and someone saw it."

Two more people sat down at the table without invitation and began to eat.

"Dusty and Collin, this is my cousin, Bitru." Brandton said down the table.

"Hey." One of the boys said before devoting his full attention to his food.

"How long are they suspended?" Brandton asked Chris curiously.

"One week. In school." Chris answered quickly as he virtually inhaled the last of his food.

"Bitru, if you're finished, we need to go." Brandton said seriously.

Bitru looked at Brandon's tray and was surprised to find that he had eaten everything. As for Bitru, he had only eaten four of his tater tots, but couldn't force himself to eat more, so he picked up his tray and stood.

"We'll see you guys out in the yard." Brandon said as he picked up his tray and led the way to the nearest garbage can.

"What are we doing now?" Bitru asked as he followed.

"Bathroom. Vending machine. Then we get to go outside for a few minutes before the next class starts." Brandon said seriously.

Another bout of barking from the cafeteria monitors drew Bitru's attention as they hurried toward the door.

* * * * *

They had to wait in line for a few minutes to make it to the urinals, but both Bitru and Brandon had the opportunity to relieve themselves.

From there they hurried to the vending machines and, again, had to stand in line.

"Make sure you know what you want and have your money ready before you get to the front of the line. If you take too long, someone will throw you out of the way." Brandon said seriously.

"Once we've purchased our snacks, then we are going outside?" Bitru asked to confirm.

"Yeah. When we're out there, make sure that you're not with a group of more than six people and don't stand too close to the fence. There will be 'enforcement officers' out there, but as long as you don't do anything to draw attention to yourself, they'll usually leave you alone." Brandon said as he watched the person in front of him make their vending machine selection.

* * * * *

As they were walking away from the vending machines, Bitru quietly said, "I'm quite thirsty. I know that you've said that we should monitor our fluid intake, but I need something to drink."

"Yeah. There's a water fountain on the way to 'the yard'. I need a drink, too. Just be sure not to drink too much. Not only do we have four more

classes before school lets out, but then we have to ride the bus for an hour to get home... you have a school ID now, don't you?"

"Yes." Bitru answered cautiously, then asked, "Can't we use the bathroom before we leave school?"

"They lock all the bathrooms except for the one in the front hallway on the first floor before classes let out for the day. They're all freaked out that someone might smoke or do drugs or something if they can have one minute of privacy. Besides, if you go to the bathroom after classes, you'll miss the bus home and have to wait for another half an hour." Brandon said seriously, then gestured toward the line at the water fountain.

"I believe it might be worth waiting an extra half hour so we won't be as rushed." Bitru said as he got into line ahead of Brandon.

"This school doesn't have 'yellow' buses. That's why I asked you if you got a student ID. That's your ticket to ride the public transportation. If you catch the bus when school lets out, it's not too bad, but if you take the next one, then there's a lot of people who are getting off work at the same time and it's really miserable." Brandon said frankly, then gestured for Bitru to step forward in line.

"Having witnessed what I have today, I have no desire to experience what you consider to be 'miserable'." Bitru said honestly.

Brandon smirked at the comment, then gestured for Bitru to step forward again.

* * * * *

As they stepped outside into the chilly midday sunlight, Bitru noticed that 'the yard' seemed to be a large paved area surrounded by chain link fence. There were two basketball hoops at the far end, but nothing else, other than a few garbage cans by the entry doors.

Small groups of people were standing around, talking. But as Brandon had said earlier, none of the groups had more than six people. Two 'enforcement officers' were conspicuous as they stood, grimly watching the students, on alert for any prohibited behaviors.

"The primary reason I was sent here was so that I could learn to socialize with a group of peers. However, I haven't had the opportunity to say more than a few words to anyone." Bitru said honestly.

Brandon opened the bag of chips that he had purchased from the vending machine and motioned for Bitru to do the same. Although the 'multigrain' chips weren't something that he would normally eat, they seemed to be the least offensive of the available options. The phrase 'better than nothing' came to Bitru's mind, although that remained to be seen.

"Socialization, huh? Let me see... First, remember that we're grouped by age. If someone asks 'what' you are, you're 'seventh grade'. That's your identity, here. That means that everyone who's older than us hates us and that we're supposed to hate everyone who's younger. It's called the 'pecking order'."

Bitru looked at Brandon with surprise at his evaluation of the social hierarchy of the school.

"Once you've got that, then there's the cliques. Jocks, cheerleaders, preps, band, stoners... there's a bunch. If you're one of them, great! You've got your social group. If you're not, then they all look down on you and think that you're scum. The rest of us just do what we can to fit in wherever we can and try to get through each day." Brandon said thoughtfully.

"Hey, Bitru! There you are!" Chris said as he approached.

"Hello, again, Chris." Bitru said with a smile in the boy's direction.

"I noticed that you didn't like the lunch. Pretty gross, huh?" Chris asked with a smile.

"Yes. Quite disgusting." Bitru agreed.

Chris laughed, presumably at Bitru's accent and formal response.

"Well, if the rumors are true, next year we might be getting a pizza or chicken franchise in here. We probably won't be able to use our food cards anymore, but if you've got cash, then you'll be able to get some *real* food at lunch." Chris said happily.

"Yeah. But only if you have enough money and if you're at the front of the line." Brandon interjected.

"Yeah. I didn't get to eat yesterday. I had Geometry before lunch." Chris said gravely.

"We've got that tomorrow." Brandon said with an apologetic look at Bitru.

"I don't understand the connection between Geometry and not being able to eat lunch." Bitru said honestly.

"Geometry and World History are in a portable building all the way across the parking lot on the other side of the school. By the time you make it to the cafeteria, the line is already out the door and halfway to the staircase. Most of the time you don't even make it to the front of the line before the bell rings for you to go to your next class." Brandton explained.

"Either that, or they run out of food and you end up getting a cheese sandwich and applesauce." Chris added.

"You're the new guy, aren't you?" A girl asked as she joined their group, followed by another.

"Tina and Emily, this is my cousin, Bitru." Brandton said in a reasonably formal tone.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both." Bitru said courteously.

"Wow. I love your accent. Where are you from?" Emily asked with a giggle.

"I have never lived one place long enough to be 'from' anywhere." Bitru said thoughtfully.

"You kids need to break it up." One of the 'enforcement officers' said sternly as he approached.

Brandton looked Bitru in the eyes and tilted his head in the direction of the building.

Following his lead, Bitru walked away without exchanging farewells with the people he had just met.

Brandton and Bitru threw their empty chip bags in the trash before stepping through the door.

* * * * *

Once they were back inside, Brandton quietly said, "I should have told you before, when an 'enforcement officer' tells you something, just do it. Don't say anything, not even 'yes, sir', or he'll find a reason to arrest you."

"You know, in other countries, America is touted as being 'The Land of the Free'." Bitru said frankly.

"Yeah. Well, that doesn't apply to kids." Brandon said wearily, then thought to ask, "Did they assign you a locker?"

"Yes. However, I haven't been there, yet. I'm carrying everything in my backpack." Bitru said honestly.

"I don't use mine either. We don't have time right now, but you're going to need to check your locker out sometime and make sure that no one has put anything in there. Even if you don't use it, you're still responsible for anything found in it." Brandon said seriously, then his attention was drawn by the sounds of a scuffle down the side hallway they were passing.

It appeared that a boy was backed into a corner with two or three other boys closing in on him, taunting him.

"Come on. We can't be here." Brandon said as he abruptly changed direction and led Bitru away.

"Shouldn't we at least tell someone?" Bitru asked anxiously as he looked back over his shoulder.

Brandon felt a chill wash over him as he responded, "There's cameras everywhere and they're always watching, so they probably already know."

"But what if they don't?" Bitru asked with concern.

Brandon stopped and looked Bitru in the eyes as he said, "Listen. The people in the office or the 'enforcement officers' probably already know about it. Most likely, they're waiting to see what happens or maybe they're even placing bets on how it turns out. I don't know. But what I *do* know is that if we went to the office and told anyone, they'd either find a way to turn it around so that we were the ones fighting, or they'd find some other way to punish us for getting involved. The first rule around here is to keep your head down and your mouth shut."

"So the administration may choose to ignore serious infractions of the rules, such as violence against a student, but they will harshly penalize something as benign as a hug of comfort between friends?" Bitru asked to clarify.

"Yeah. If you were looking for 'fair', you came to the wrong place." Brandon confirmed, then added, "We need to get moving, the bell's about to ring and our next class is all the way on the other side of the building."

* * * * *

The classbell rang as they were on their way across the school grounds, which meant that the four minute countdown had begun.

Even so, Brandon and Bitru were among the first to arrive in the classroom.

"I have been looking forward to American History class. Although I've done quite a bit of research on the subject, I'm sure that there is much that I still don't know." Bitru said honestly.

"Yeah? Well, don't expect to learn it here. Mr. Sawyer reads to us straight from the textbook in class and the only thing he tests on is the dates. If you can memorize a list of dates, that's all you'll need to know for the whole year." Brandon said simply.

"So you don't have to know anything about what factors contributed to the American Revolutionary War or the details of the significant battles?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"Nope. Only when they happened." Brandon confirmed.

Bitru was going to question further but noticed that the classroom was unusually cold. As he looked around, he saw that all the other students were still wearing their coats as they settled into their desks.

"I don't know, maybe if you listen while he's reading, you'll get something out of it." Brandon said quietly, then hurried to his seat.

When the final bell rang, Mr. Sawyer walked into the room and went directly to his desk.

"For those of you who don't have desks, I've put in another request and been told that we should have desks for you soon. Until then, just sit on the floor and try not to block the aisles." Mr. Sawyer said firmly.

"Excuse me, Sir. I've just been enrolled in this class." Bitru said as he held out his class schedule.

Mr. Sawyer accepted the schedule without comment and wrote Bitru's information on his class roster. As he handed the piece of paper back to Bitru, he said, "Just find a place to sit along the wall, over there."

Bitru took the next available space along the wall, next to a girl who was huddled and shivering.

"Pass up your homework." Mr. Sawyer said wearily, then began to work on his attendance sheet.

A growing stack of papers made its way up the wall to where Bitru was sitting.

Although Bitru wasn't usually affected by changes in temperature, he was surprised to find that the cold was distracting him.

After a few more minutes of marking his attendance sheet, Mr. Sawyer opened a textbook and said, "I want us to get through the American Revolution before we leave for the winter break, so we're going to have to pick up the pace. We left off with September nineteenth, seventeen seventy-seven, the Battle of Freeman's Farm..."

* * * * *

Since the beginning of the school year, they had never been able to get the furnace in this particular portable building working properly. Brandon was one of the few students who was thankful for the cold. It was the only thing that kept him awake through the long and incredibly boring monotone reading. Not only did Mr. Sawyer not seem to have any enthusiasm for what he was reading, he didn't even seem to comprehend it. The words were just spilling out of his mouth exactly as they appeared on the page of the textbook.

"Answer your homework on a separate sheet of paper. You're going to turn it in when we meet on Friday and it will count as half your test grade." Mr. Sawyer said as he passed out stacks of papers.

When Brandon received his homework, he let out a sigh at yet another blank map, this one being of New England.

"Excuse me, Sir. Will I get a textbook?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"There aren't any more and they're out of print. Just... borrow someone's before Friday." Mr. Sawyer said with annoyance.

The sound of the bell caught Brandon off guard and he rushed to get his homework put away. By the time he had his backpack zipped up, Bitru was waiting for him by the door.

"Do we need to hurry?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But not too bad. The next class is art and it's about three trailers down from this one." Brandon said as he walked past Bitru and led the way.

"I assumed that you wouldn't mind if I borrowed your American History book at some point tonight. That's alright, isn't it?" Bitru asked as he followed.

"Yeah. Of course it is. I figured that we'd be working together on most of this, since we have the same homework to do." Brandon said honestly.

Before Bitru could respond, Brandon led the way into another of the portable classrooms.

* * * * *

Bitru noticed that unlike most of the teachers in the other classrooms, this one didn't wear an expression of vacant disinterest or bone-deep weariness. She instead wore an expression of nothing less than absolute contempt for every student that dared to walk into her classroom.

Seeing that she had noticed him, Bitru quietly said, "I've been enrolled in this class."

"Schedule." She snapped, not bothering to affect a facade of courtesy.

Bitru cautiously handed his schedule to her, having the feeling that she might actually be inclined to bite him if he approached her too aggressively.

After a moment of writing on her class roster, she looked around the room, then handed his schedule back to him and said, "Sit on the bench, by the door."

There were already four people sitting on the bench, all of them girls, but they were kind enough to squeeze in and make a place for him when he approached. So long as they all didn't take a deep breath at the same time, they could fit.

The room was silent as the teacher was apparently taking roll.

Bitru looked around the room, trying to find any indication that it was an 'Art' classroom. With the exception of the round tables, instead of desks, he couldn't see how it was in any way different from any of the other classrooms. There were no examples of art of any kind, nor were there any of the 'tools of the trade', so to speak.

"Hand in your homework. We're going to pick up where we left off yesterday, with the art of the Inupiat. Follow along in your books because you're going to need to be able to identify the different artistic styles by tribe." The teacher said firmly.

As she was about to continue, she noticed Bitru's raised hand.

Rather than call on him, she walked to a cabinet at the side of the room and took out a book, then walked across the room and handed it to him.

"Thank you." Bitru said quietly.

"Page one-twelve." She absently responded, then continued to the entire class, "Notice the illustration showing that the tools that the Inupiat use to create art could themselves be considered works of art..."

When Bitru had found that he was taking an art class, he had envisioned that he would be drawing, painting or sculpting something so that he could learn how to develop any talent that he might inherently have. It hadn't occurred to him that he would instead be learning a seemingly random and obscure collection of absolutely useless facts.

"Attention: All personnel. We are in lockdown. Attention: All personnel. We are in lockdown. All students please report immediately to the nearest classroom or office." Sounded over the intercom system.

The teacher calmly got up from her desk, then walked to the door.

She opened the door and glanced around outside, then closed the door and locked it.

"Everyone, move to the inside wall and sit quietly." She said in a firm voice that was devoid of any real emotion.

As Bitru got up from his seat by the door, he saw Brandon motioning for him to join him. That brought Bitru some small measure of relief since he didn't really understand what was going on.

The drop in temperature was noticeable as Bitru approached.

"Everything's alright. We're just going to sit and wait until it's over." Brandon said as he guided him to the wall to take a place sitting on the floor.

After pulling the shades down on all the windows, the teacher turned and said, "Everyone sit down and be quiet. If any of you have cell phones, please turn them off now."

Bitru looked down the row of students sitting on the floor. They all *were* sitting down. They all *were* being quiet. And none of them had an electronic device. The teacher was obviously following some sort of script that had been written before personal electronics had been prohibited in the school.

Suddenly, the teacher began calling out names from her class roster, to which each student would respond 'here'.

Bitru was very aware that she had taken attendance at the beginning of the class. From his position, sitting right next to the only door in the classroom, he was also quite aware of the fact that no one had entered or left the classroom since class had started. He was reasonably sure that the teacher was aware of the very same thing. But still, they continued on with the theater, following the script, no matter how pointless it was.

When the teacher finally called his name, Bitru dutifully answered, "Here."

After the roll call, they all sat in silence until the phone beside the door rang.

The teacher answered it and talked for a moment before hanging it up.

As the time dragged on, Bitru realized that his new classmates not only weren't worried about the lockdown, they appeared to be completely numb to it. In fact, the majority of them seemed to be fighting to stay awake.

* * * * *

"***This Lockdown drill is now over.***" was finally announced over the intercom.

"Well, so much for *this* class." The teacher muttered wearily, then added, "Everyone, pick up a homework sheet before you leave."

Brandton and Bitru were relatively close to the desk, so they were among the first to pick up the assignment sheet.

As Bitru stepped away from the desk, he puzzled over the assignment, which seemed to be to identify the different types of traditional dresses worn by different dolls pictured on the handout.

In the end, Bitru was forced to revise his earlier judgement about the artistic styles of indigenous Alaskan people being the most random and obscure collection of absolutely useless facts it was possible to be forced to learn.

The bell ringing snapped him out of his thoughts and he automatically followed Brandon out the door.

* * * * *

"Is there anything I need to know before the next class?" Bitru asked cautiously as they hurried into the building.

"Not really. It's gym. There's not much you can do but just roll with it." Brandon said frankly.

"I have to admit that this is one of the classes that I was most worried about." Bitru said honestly.

"The coach might scream at you. He screams at everybody. Just try not to let it get to you." Brandon said simply as they entered the gymnasium.

* * * * *

As the other students were walking across the gym, Brandon was leading him in a different direction.

"Coach Lyons. This is my cousin Bitru. He's enrolled in this class." Brandon said seriously.

"Got a schedule?" The coach grunted.

"Yes, Sir." Bitru said as he handed his schedule to the coach.

"Got gym clothes?" The coach asked as he wrote Bitru's information on his clipboard.

"Yes, Sir." Bitru responded immediately.

The coach handed his class schedule back to him, then said, "Go suit up!"

"Yes, Sir." Bitru said, then followed Brandon to the locker room.

* * * * *

As they walked into the locker room, everyone there was already in various stages of changing.

Bitru felt nervous and was on guard, but the others didn't seem to take any notice of him.

Brandton noticed the drop in temperature as they walked in, but disregarded it as he said, "We need to hurry."

That snapped Bitru out of his anxiety and he noticed that Brandton had taken his gym clothes out of his backpack and was beginning to undress.

"We don't get lockers. The lockers in here are saved for the jocks who play team sports. Just stack your clothes on top of your backpack." Brandton said seriously.

Bitru took a deep cleansing breath, then began to change.

* * * * *

As the students assembled at the edge of the basketball court, Bitru reluctantly glanced over at the canvas 'classroom' that he had been in earlier.

"Line up! We're going to have five stations today! Count 'em off!" Coach Lyons bellowed to the class.

The first boy in line called out, "One!" and the next called, "Two!"

When it came around to Brandton, he called "Four!" and Bitru followed with, "Five!"

After the last student sounded off, Coach Lyons said as he walked, "Group one, over here. Give me twenty sit-ups. Group two, in this corner. Twenty push-ups. Group three, line up at the bar. Ten pull-ups. Group four, line up in front of the bleachers. Thirty lunges. Group five, over here by the door. Twenty squats. When I call 'rotate!' everyone move to the next station. Let's get to it! We ain't got all day! Get to your stations!"

Bitru moved with the other 'fives' to the area by the doors, then watched for a moment until he understood what was expected of him.

Brandton did his best to keep an eye on Bitru, but before long determined that Bitru seemed to be doing as well as any other member of their class.

"Move your fat ass you worthless little puke!" Coach Lyons screamed, drawing Bitru's attention to the other side of the gym.

"If you didn't eat so many Twinkies you wouldn't have a fat ass and you'd be able to do sit-ups, like a normal person!" Coach Lyons bellowed.

Bitru felt sincerely sorry for the target of Coach Lyons humiliation, but followed Brandon's advice to keep his head down and his mouth shut.

* * * * *

The litany of abuse, directed at the overweight student, continued throughout the class as the students moved from one station to the next.

Fortunately, Bitru was able to do the exercises, although he did need help from his classmates to reach the pull-up bar.

When the coach finally called the class to an end, they all retreated to the locker rooms to shower and change back into their regular clothes.

"Miserable, huh?" Brandon asked as he walked to Bitru's side.

"I am not a mean spirited person. But I believe that if I were to see Coach Lyons suffering, it would cause me to feel satisfaction." Bitru said simply.

"You haven't seen the worst. Not even close." Brandon said, then began to undress.

Bitru looked around the locker room for the boy who had been the primary target of the Coach's bullying and intimidation, but didn't spot him.

* * * * *

Although Bitru had been in communal bathing situations before, usually with his father, the environment that he presently found himself in made him more than a little apprehensive as he walked naked into the shower room.

"How are you doing?" Brandon asked with concern as he quickly washed himself.

"Was there some point to what we just endured?" Bitru asked as he turned on his shower.

"It's just a class we have to take. Even though it's something that could be a lot of fun, they found a way to make it absolutely miserable." Brandon said frankly.

"Yes. That does seem to be the point to all of this, doesn't it?" Bitru asked thoughtfully.

"You'd better hurry. We've got to be dressed and ready to go when the bell rings and our next class is all the way on the other side of the school." Brandon said seriously.

"You're new here, right?" A boy asked from Bitru's other side.

"Yes. Today is my first day." Bitru answered hesitantly.

"I'm Nate. I just started here two weeks ago. It's a real hellhole, isn't it?" Nate asked with a smile.

"It's nice to meet you, Nate. My name is Bitru. And yes, it is indeed a hellhole." Bitru said honestly.

"Hurry." Brandon whispered from Bitru's side, then walked back into the locker room.

"Excuse me, I have to hurry. It appears that my next class is on the other side of the school." Bitru said as he stepped away from the shower. It was only then that he realized that he didn't have a towel.

"Here." Brandon said as he appeared in the doorway, holding a towel out to him.

"Thank you." Bitru said gratefully as he accepted the towel, then followed Brandon back into the locker room.

* * * * *

While Bitru was drying off, Nate walked into the locker room, with a towel draped around him, and asked, "Are you ready for the big test?"

"Which test is that?" Bitru asked as he began to get dressed.

"The next one. That's the thing that I've figured out since I've been here. All we ever do is prep for the next test. You don't have to learn anything or get better at doing anything. You just have to pass the next test. Then,

when that's done, you can forget everything and get ready for the next one after that." Nate said frankly as he towed himself dry.

"Yeah. Pretty much." Brandon agreed.

"Nate, do you know my cousin, Brandon?" Bitru asked curiously.

"No. I don't really know much of anyone, yet." Nate said to Bitru, then turned to Brandon and said, "Hi, I'm Nate."

"It's nice to meet you, Nate." Brandon automatically responded, then thought to add, "And I think you're right about the school."

"The last school I went to was a lot better than this one. It wasn't great, but at least I didn't hate going every single day." Nate said frankly.

"Yeah." Brandon quietly agreed, then noticed the clock and quickly added, "Two minutes!"

"I hate going out in the cold with wet hair." Nate grumbled as he rushed to dress.

"Are you about ready?" Brandon asked Bitru as he picked up his backpack.

"Yes. I believe so." Bitru said as he quickly took stock of himself.

"What's your next class, Nate?" Brandon asked as he waited for Bitru to gather his backpack.

"French." Nate said sourly.

"Do you ever actually get to speak French in there?" Brandon asked curiously.

"No! We're learning about the evolution of Germanic languages or some shit like that!" Nate exclaimed indignantly.

"Yeah. In Spanish we're learning about conjugating verbs without learning any *actual* verbs." Brandon said sympathetically.

Nate was nearly ready to go, so Brandon and Bitru waited a moment, then the three left the locker room together.

* * * * *

At the sound of the bell, Brandton and Bitru made a mad dash across the school grounds and arrived at their next class just in the nick of time.

Brandton went immediately to his assigned seat at one of the lab stations and was sitting down just as the bell rang.

When the teacher walked into the room, Bitru quietly said, "I'm enrolled in your class."

"Of course you are." The teacher said wearily, then asked, "May I see your schedule?"

Bitru handed the schedule to him and waited.

After copying down Bitru's information, the teacher looked around the room and finally said, "See if you can squeeze in here at the first lab station."

Bitru looked to where the teacher indicated and found four other people clustered around an area that had been designed for two, at most.

There was a long moment of silence as the teacher filled out his attendance sheet, then there was another moment as the teacher seemed to be bracing himself for something unpleasant.

"Everyone. Hand your homework forward." He finally said unenthusiastically.

Brandton took his homework out of his backpack and was ready when the stack made it to him from the back of the room.

Once the teacher had the stacks of papers, he set them aside, then picked up a book and said, "By state law, those who object to learning about heredity, genetics and the theory of evolution, can report to the office and be assigned to other class activities, without academic penalty. Those of you who wish to opt out, may leave now. And remember that you have to stop by here every day. If you aren't marked as being present it will be viewed as an unexcused absence."

Bitru looked around the room, but no one made a move to leave.

"Now that that's out of the way, please turn to page seventy-six." The teacher said wearily.

Bitru raised his hand and waited to be recognized.

"Yes?" The teacher asked impatiently.

"May I have a book?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"Sure. Why not." The teacher said with an exhausted huff, then walked to a bookcase at the side of the room and took one down.

Bitru stood and accepted the book, then went back to his seat.

"Seventy-six, when two different alleles are present they interact in specific ways..."

* * * * *

Somehow Bitru had thought that being in a classroom lab setting, discussing the intricacies of genetics would somehow be less... boring.

After a few minutes to look around, Bitru concluded that there was no practical way that they could possibly conduct any type of meaningful lab study with the equipment that they had on hand. With twenty people the lab would be too overcrowded for them to work efficiently, but with forty it was simply impossible.

Likewise, with forty people crowded into a room ideally designed for ten, 'discussion' was also not likely to happen. So, as with his other classes, Bitru sat and listened while the teacher read aloud from the textbook, not embellishing or explaining anything.

When the homework assignments were handed out, Bitru was surprised to find that it had to do with the mass, gravity, density and diameter of each planet in the solar system. When Brandon had described their homework assignments as 'busy work', Bitru didn't have a frame of reference to really understand what he had meant.

As Bitru was putting his homework assignment into his backpack, the classbell rang, heralding the end of classes for the day.

As quickly as he could, he made his way to Brandon's side. It did not escape his notice that but for the efforts of Mr. Silverstone, he most certainly would have been placed in different classes and been completely on his own.

"Are you ready? We've got to walk about six blocks to catch the bus." Brandon asked seriously.

Despite how physically and emotionally exhausted he felt, Bitru firmly said, "Yes. Lead the way and I'll do my best to keep up."

Chapter 4

"Are we late?" Bitru asked as he struggled to keep pace with Brandon.

"No. But the bus doesn't always arrive on time. Sometimes it's early." Brandon explained, then stopped at a corner and hit the button for the crosswalk.

As Bitru stopped at his side, he noticed six other students of various ages approaching.

"I'm just kinda curious, after going through eight classes, did you learn anything today?" Brandon asked as he kept careful watch on the crosswalk signal.

Before Bitru could formulate a response, the signal changed and Brandon started walking.

Bitru was nearly overrun by the students rushing to make it through the crosswalk before the light changed back.

* * * * *

"So, did you learn anything?" Brandon asked again, once they were able to walk at a normal pace.

"Yes. I learned to hate school." Bitru said frankly.

Brandon chuckled, then said, "Welcome aboard."

Conversation faltered as they crossed the street at an intersection without a stoplight.

* * * * *

It wasn't until they reached the bus stop that they were able to talk to each other again. There were four people already waiting for the bus to arrive.

"We made it." Brandon said in triumph.

"How long do we have to wait?"

"I don't know. I stopped wearing a watch because it was such a pain to keep having to take it off and put it on at the metal detector."

"Couldn't you just keep it in your pocket?" Bitru asked cautiously. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable suggestion to him.

"Nope. If they can tell that you've got something in your pocket, they'll constantly want to be searching you. And every time you put your hand in your pocket, they think that you're going to be drawing a weapon."

"Before today, I wouldn't have believed such a thing. But now, I can accept your assessment without reservation."

"Yeah, well, just remember that today was a *good* day. We got to all our classes on time, we were able to eat, and we even had a few minutes in the yard to talk to people. Most days are *a lot* worse."

As he was saying the words, the bus pulled up and the people waiting formed a line, preparing to board.

"Get out your school ID, so you won't have to pay."

Bitru hurried to do so and had his ID ready to present as he stepped aboard the bus.

* * * * *

All the seats were taken, but the walkway wasn't too crowded. Brandon and Bitru were able to stand side by side, holding on to the hanging straps as the bus got underway.

"The bus ride takes about an hour, so just try to be comfortable."

"When I mentioned earlier that they should build another school, you said that you would explain later why they wouldn't."

"Oh, yeah. Well, I don't know a lot about it. But they've been doing this thing where they're closing down a bunch of schools, usually in the poor neighborhoods, and then packing those kids into the schools that are left. They have all kinds of excuses for it, saying that they can't afford to pay a bunch of teachers and stuff like that. But the next thing you know, they've turned around and are building this new multi-million dollar administration building."

"So the deplorable conditions at school were engineered to give evidence of the need for more funding. But when the funding was provided, they used that money for other purposes?"

"It looks that way. But I don't know for sure how it all works."

"From what little I've observed, your school seems to be the antithesis of a learning environment."

"*Our* school. And, yeah. I don't know if there's some kind of master plan at work, or if things just turned out this way, but I've noticed that if something happens that you accidentally *learn* something, they hurry to find a way to take it away."

"Another thing that was surprising to me is that there were no computers in any of the classrooms. From all accounts, American schools frequently espouse teaching computer literacy as being one of their primary missions."

"Yeah. From what I hear, we've got a really nice computer lab in a big room off the library. But I've never been in there, so I don't know that for sure."

"You mentioned before that you hadn't been in the school library. Can you tell me why that is?"

"I guess because my parents don't have a lot of money and aren't 'important'."

Bitru's eyes went wide at the blunt answer.

"But as far as not having computers in the rest of the school, everyone's so freaked out about the idea that someone might look at porn or text their friends or something that they pretty much stopped letting us use them at all."

As the bus slowed to a stop, six more people got aboard, causing Brandon and Bitru to have to move further back in the bus and stand more closely together.

Once the bus was underway again, Bitru quietly asked, "Was Nate correct in what he said about us doing nothing but preparing for the next test?"

"Yeah. The schools get graded by how well the students do on the tests. If we don't pass, they either lose funding or get completely shut down. So now, all day, every day, we prepare for the next test, so we can make *them* money." Brandon said with a note of bitterness under his words.

"So, in that sense, we're seen as their slave labor."

"No. Slaves have some value, as property. They don't think *that* highly of us." Brandon said casually as the bus came to a stop.

Bitru looked around curiously as the bus driver opened the door, but no one got aboard.

"We must be a few minutes ahead of schedule, so the driver's having to wait."

"It seems odd to me that several of the teachers read directly from the book, today. I expected to receive more of a 'lecture' in the classroom environment."

"From what I hear, they're not allowed to teach anything that's not approved by the board of education. If they say something that they weren't told to, they can get into trouble for it."

"So it's possible that the teachers are as much victims of the school system as we are."

"Maybe." Brandon conceded, then said, "But I think we've got it worse. I mean, *they* can get other jobs. *We're* required by law to go there."

The bus driver closed the door, then the bus pulled into traffic.

"We have a considerable amount of homework tonight. How do you typically deal with that?"

"Well, first thing I do when I get home is use the bathroom and get something to eat. After that, I'll either turn on the TV or play some video games or something. If I don't sit and relax for a little bit after school, I'll go crazy." Brandon said frankly, then thought to ask, "But now do you see why I wouldn't want to sit down and read a book after school?"

"Yes. The day was both mentally and physically exhausting. The last thing I would want to do is to engage in an activity that required thought and concentration."

"I usually do my homework after my parents get home from work and we've had dinner. And you don't have to worry about thought or concentration on the homework, either. It's all either busy work or memorization. You don't have to *think* about any of it."

"I noticed that the majority of our homework seemed to consist of answering questions to which they have already given us the answers."

"Yeah, that and filling in names on maps." Brandon confirmed, then thought to add, "But since you're new to this, there's one important thing that you need to watch out for."

"What's that?"

"When you're answering the questions, don't dig too deep or spend too much time on one thing. None of the homework is really hard, but there's a lot of it. If you get interested in something and start reading about it, you're going to run out of time."

"Once again, this seems the antithesis of learning."

"Learning is not an option. Just answer the questions and move on."

When the bus pulled to a stop again, a few people got off, but a greater number boarded.

Brandon and Bitru were pressed against each other as more and more people filled the aisle.

"You said that the next bus is worse than this?"

"Yeah. Sometimes the driver even has to tell people to wait for the next bus because they can't fit anymore on."

Bitru determined that it was too crowded for them to be able to carry on a conversation, so he focused his attention and energy on the task of surviving the experience.

* * * * *

"We need to start moving toward the door. This stop coming up is the closest one to the house, but it's a really bad neighborhood. So we're going to get off at the next stop after that, then we'll walk farther, through better neighborhoods, to get home."

Bitru couldn't do much more than follow as Brandon started wedging his way between people and forcing his way toward the exit.

* * * * *

Even though it only took a few minutes, Bitru felt as though he had climbed a mountain by the time they were finally off the bus.

"You do this every day?" Bitru asked as he looked around the nondescript suburban neighborhood.

"Yeah. Sometimes there's crying babies, perverts trying to feel you up, smelly homeless people, someone with a dozen shopping bags or a ghetto punk who looks like he'll slit your throat as soon as look at you. Then, of course, there's the rain, snow, hail... But it's just like with school, we don't have another choice." Brandton said wearily as they walked.

"You said the previous bus stop was nearer to your house."

"Yeah. Don't get off at that stop. People die there."

Bitru went silent as they continued to walk down quiet neighborhood streets.

* * * * *

When Brandton turned to walk up to one of the houses, Bitru was surprised. He wasn't familiar enough with the appearance of Brandton's house to realize that they had arrived.

"We're going to need to get you your own key. If I get detention or get sick or something, you may need to go home on your own." Brandton said as he unlocked the front door.

Anxiety welled within Bitru at the prospect of having to face *any* of the elements of the day without Brandton's support, much less *all* of them.

* * * * *

"Do you need the bathroom first?" Brandton asked as he walked into the house.

"No. I can wait a moment."

Brandton didn't need any further encouragement. He dropped his backpack and hurried through the living room and into the hall.

As Bitru slid off his backpack and was about to walk further into the living room, he looked at Brandton's backpack curiously, then experimentally tried to lift it.

Bitru was surprised that the backpack seemed to weigh fifteen to twenty pounds more than the one that he had been carrying. His back was already

complaining from the increasing weight that he had carried that day. He was afraid that starting off with that full amount of weight and carrying it throughout the day might be more than he could bear.

"Is peanut butter and apples okay with you?" Brandton asked as he walked out of the hallway.

"For what?"

Brandton chuckled, then explained, "For a snack. You're not allergic or anything, are you?"

"No. Although, I don't recall ever having that combination before." Bitru said hesitantly.

"Go use the bathroom if you need to and I'll have this ready in a few minutes." Brandton said before walking into the kitchen.

At Brandton's suggestion, Bitru realized that he very much needed to use the toilet and hurried away.

* * * * *

"I figure that you're probably pretty hungry, so I made some extra." Brandton said as Bitru walked into the kitchen.

"I am. Thank you."

When Brandton set the plate on the table between them, Bitru wasn't entirely sure what he was looking at.

"Come on! At least give it a try before you say that you hate it."

Bitru was about to explain that he was hesitant simply because he couldn't imagine the combination of flavors, but instead picked up one of the apple wedges, which had been coated with peanut butter, then covered with a slice of sharp cheddar cheese.

After taking a bite, it took a moment for the flavors to register in Bitru's mouth. The salty tang of the cheese, the sweet crisp apple and the deep rich peanut butter combined into an astounding blend of flavors and textures that amazed him.

Brandton watched carefully for Bitru's reaction and broke into a smile when he could tell that Bitru was enjoying the snack that he had provided.

"Are you okay with milk?" Brandton asked cautiously.

Bitru appeared to want to answer but kept determinedly chewing.

"Nod if you want some milk." Brandton finally said with a smile.

Bitru quickly nodded.

Brandton walked to the refrigerator and took out the milk, then took down two glasses from the cupboard and poured milk for them both.

As he was walking back to the kitchen table, Bitru was finally able to say, "Thank you, Brandton. This is incredibly good."

"I'm glad you like it. I usually wouldn't make this much, but I know that you've got to be starving."

"I will admit that I was feeling some weakness, but I don't know if it were from being hungry, the degree of physical activity I performed in the gym class or if it were from carrying the increasing weight of my backpack."

"How about all three?" Brandton asked before taking a bite of one of his apple wedges.

"Yes. Perhaps it was the combination. Regardless, I don't recall ever feeling this... weary... before."

"Well, you'd better get used to it, because that's how I feel every single day."

Bitru seemed to be about to respond, but instead picked up another apple wedge and took a large bite out of it.

The lack of response made Brandton want to explain, "I wasn't always like this. I used to play and have fun and... do things. Now, even when I'm not in school, I don't want to do anything but lay around because I know that I'm going to need to save all my energy. I mean, on Sundays, I don't want to go to church because it sucks, but I don't want to do anything else either, because I've got to go back to that life sucking, soul destroying hellhole."

"I thought you didn't believe in souls." Bitru said with an impish grin.

"I was speaking figuratively." Brandton said as he tried to restrain a smile.

"What if you were speaking literally? How do you really feel about going to school?"

"I hate it." Brandton said simply, then thought to add, "Duh!"

Bitru looked at Brandton with confusion for a moment, then cautiously asked, "What about the other local schools? What are they like?"

"The only other school I really know about around here is the one that gave Mac books to their students, then remote activated the web cams so that they could spy on them at home. From what I've heard, that school's better than ours, but it's still pretty bad."

* * * * *

Bitru seemed to be lost in thought as he and Brandton sat at the kitchen table and ate their apple slices.

"What do you want to do to relax before we have to do homework?" Brandton finally asked.

"I believe that I would like to call my father."

"I've never thought of talking to my parents being something relaxing, but whatever works for you."

"I don't know that it will be relaxing, but I believe that I will feel better."

"Take what you can get." Brandton said with a smile at his cousin.

* * * * *

The peanut butter was most likely the main reason that the cousins remained silent while they enjoyed the remainder of their snack. But after the noise and having to hurry all day, the unrushed quiet held it's own appeal.

It wasn't until they were finished, that Brandton and Bitru gathered their backpacks and made their way to the bedroom.

"I'm just going to check my email and veg out online for a few minutes. If you want to talk to your dad in private, I'll stay in here until you're done." Brandton said as he walked to his computer and turned it on.

"I don't believe that I will be saying anything to him that I would be ashamed for you to hear. And there is a chance that he might have questions that I will be unable to answer."

"Okay. I just didn't want you to feel like you had to let me listen in or anything." Brandon said, then turned his attention to his booting computer to watch its progress.

As Brandon was getting his email program opened, he heard Bitru say, "This is Bitru. I apologise for calling so late, but I need to speak with father."

"Physically, I am well. However, circumstances here are not as I had anticipated."

There was a long moment of silence, then Bitru quietly said, "No, Mother. Quite the opposite. Meeting my cousin has been one of the few positive experiences that I have had since my arrival. I would very much like to tell you of my arrival in detail. However, I must speak immediately with father. I do not know what, if anything, he will be able to do to address my concerns, but I am certain that time is not on our side."

Brandon glanced toward Bitru to find an expression of concern on his face.

"Father. Before anything else, I wish to apologise to you. You were right. My insistence on going to a 'regular' school with 'regular' people was a horrible mistake."

"Yes Father, I understand that I must face the consequences of my decisions."

"If that is your final answer, I will remain. But please understand that the consequences you are asking me to endure may include drug addiction, violence or death."

"No. I am not exaggerating. The institution that I attended today is little more than an indoctrination center, producing mindless, compliant workers who have systematically had their wills broken. If you insist that I continue to attend, then you will need to disregard any future plans that you might have held for me."

"Father. They chemically lobotomize people who are spirited or question too much. They publicly demean and humiliate people for little or no reason, to keep the masses timid and fearful, lest they be targeted for such humiliation. They routinely stage events to keep the students in a state of fear. If one were to deliberately concoct a system to demoralize and subjugate a populace, I can't imagine how it would be substantively different."

"Thank you, Father. I know that you do not revisit your decisions easily or often. I appreciate that you are willing to do so, now. I will await your decision with anticipation."

After a minute or two of silence, Brandon chanced a look over his shoulder to find Bitru standing and staring sightlessly at the phone in his hand.

"Are you okay?"

"There is so much more I should have told him... both of them."

"When you needed help, you called your dad. Even if you didn't say the words, I'm pretty sure that he got the message, just from that."

After a moment to consider, Bitru quietly responded, "You have uncommon wisdom."

"You're smart, Bitru. I've got the feeling that you already know more things than I will ever learn."

"Although I have had academic advantages, I am surprised to find myself in a situation in which I do not know how to react."

"You're in a different place, having to deal with stuff that you've never heard of before. So don't beat yourself up if you're afraid and don't know what you're supposed to do."

"Should I be afraid, right now?"

"You feel however you feel. But if you *are* afraid, I can understand why."

After a moment of careful consideration, Bitru quietly asked, "If a person *were* afraid in a circumstance such as this, what would one do to alleviate the feeling?"

Brandon stood from his chair in front of his computer, then slowly walked to Bitru, so as not to spook him.

"I don't know how much logical sense this makes, but it might make you feel better." Brandon said, then pulled Bitru into a firm hug.

It took a moment, but Bitru eventually put his arms around Brandon and started hugging him in return.

They stood like that for a few minutes, until Brandon finally asked, "Are you feeling better?"

"My family doesn't do this. Although I've never heard them say as much, I have the sense that they feel that it is beneath them."

"Well, to be honest, my parents aren't very touchy feely, either. But every now and then, when my dad gets really into something, he might pull me into a hug. When he realizes what he's doing, he pulls back and sometimes even says that he's sorry... I guess I never really thought about it, before."

"Were I to speculate, I would say that it has to do with societal perceptions of masculinity. Your father doesn't wish to cause you harm by exposing you to non-masculine displays of emotionalism."

"He thinks that if he hugs me, it'll make me gay."

"Perhaps. But I don't think it works that way."

"No. Him hugging me won't make me gay. But I think I understand what he's thinking. Showing feelings is a girl thing. Hiding feelings is a boy thing. When he slips up and shows his feelings toward me, he's afraid that he's setting a bad example. Of course, the other way of looking at it is that when he hugs me, it means that he loves me so much that he's breaking his conditioning. So that's kinda cool."

Bitru released Brandton from the hug and slowly started to back away.

"Feeling better?"

"I still have the same concerns weighing on me that I had before. However, the underlying emotion welled within me seems to have been calmed, somewhat. So, yes, I am feeling better."

"Good. And just so you know, I'm not my dad. If you need a hug, I'll give you one... well, except at school."

"Yes. Although it might be worth a week of in school suspension."

"Actually, if they caught two guys hugging, it'd be a whole lot worse than that. They'd probably call the CPS and get us taken away from our parents, then get us drugged up real good and send us off to different schools. They'd never admit to it in public, because it's not politically correct to say it, but they hate gays really bad."

"What is CPS?"

"Child Protective Services. They're supposed to step in when kids are being abused or neglected. But from what I hear on the news, they're not too good at it."

"But, can the school really have children removed from their parents?"

"Sure. They do it all the time. If a kid does something to piss someone off, or even if the parents piss off the wrong person, then they call CPS and find a reason to take the kid away. The parents are threatened with jail if they resist, so that keeps them quiet. And since just about all the CPS kids are drugged outta their minds, there's no big fight there. I guess the judge could stop it if he wanted to, but he probably thinks that he's getting juvenile delinquents off the street, since we're all guilty until proven innocent."

"For as long as I can remember, I would spend many hours a day with a tutor. At some point, I came to realize that other children didn't live as I did. While I was being taught privately, they were in schools, together. I was alone and sought an end to the loneliness. I never for a moment imagined the horror that awaited me outside my sheltered world."

"There's worse schools than ours, but there's a lot better, too. You just ended up near the bottom of the barrel."

"Excuse me. You had said that you wanted to use this time before your parents came home for relaxation. I am interrupting you."

"Talking with you is very relaxing. I can't think of anything else that I'd rather be doing right now."

"Thank you. I enjoy talking with you, too."

They stood in silence for a moment, then Brandon quietly admitted, "I don't have anything to say."

"Nor do I." Bitru admitted with a slight smile.

"Let's go into the living room and watch TV until my mom gets home. I need to turn my brain off for a little while."

"I don't think I've ever turned my brain off, before."

"You're in America, now. *This* is what we're good at." Brandon said with a smile, before leading the way out of the bedroom.

"What are we watching?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"I don't know yet. I'm waiting for the commercials to be over."

"I am not accustomed to watching television. I didn't realize that there were so many commercials."

"Yeah. There's a lot."

A particularly festive commercial started playing, then Bitru looked around the living room before asking, "Does your family celebrate the Christmas holiday?"

"Yeah."

Bitru looked around the room again, not seeing any evidence of decorations.

"We'll probably put the tree up this weekend, when Mom and Dad are both off work. We would have done it last weekend except that after the whole Thanksgiving thing, I don't think anyone was really up to diving into another holiday, right away."

"I would like to have experienced the Thanksgiving holiday. I have heard of it but it wasn't celebrated anywhere that I have lived."

"All we really do is eat too much. We'll be doing exactly the same thing at Christmas, so you haven't missed anything." Brandon said simply, then quickly added, "The show's on."

"What are we watching?"

"I don't know. Some sitcom from twenty or thirty years ago. That's the good thing about these shows. You don't have to know anything or think about it. Just let your mind go blank and laugh when you hear the laugh track."

"They tell you when to laugh?"

"Yep. Just try it."

"My parents always discouraged me from watching such things."

"Yeah. It's like candy. Empty calories for your mind." Brandon said as he kept his gaze fixed on the TV screen.

After a moment more of watching, Bitru quietly muttered, "Not particularly good candy."

* * * * *

Brandton and Bitru both looked toward the entry hall as the front door opened.

"So, Bitru, how was your first day of school?" Liz Anne asked as she hurried into the house.

"Horrendous."

"Just give it some time." Liz Anne said before darting down the hallway.

After a moment to consider, Bitru turned to Brandton and asked, "Why does your mother dismiss my concerns so easily?"

"She probably remembers when she went to school and thinks that what you went through today was something like that. Of course, Mom's really good at remembering only the good things and believing what she wants to believe. I think her church taught her that. Anyway... when I tell her that I hate school, she remembers a time when she didn't want to go to school and how she got past it."

Bitru thought for a moment, then said, "Yes. I can understand that."

"Well, to be honest, I might just be telling myself what I want to hear so I won't think that my mom is a callous monster who doesn't care if I'm miserable or not."

"I believe that I prefer your first explanation, as well."

* * * * *

"Bitru, do you like fried chicken?" Liz Anne asked as she walked into the living room.

"While I have had fried chicken in the past, I have always heard good things about American fried chicken. I would like very much to try it." Bitru said with the beginning of a smile.

"Good! I'm going to go get dinner started." Liz Anne said happily as she hurried out of the living room.

"Don't get your hopes up, Bitru. It's from the freezer." Brandton warned.

"How do you know that?"

"Because, as far as I know, that's the only kind of fried chicken she's ever made. I'm not saying that it's bad. But it doesn't taste the same as real food."

"This situation is unfamiliar to me. But I feel that it is wrong for me to sit while your mother prepares the evening meal for us. Shouldn't we offer to help her?"

"You can if you want, but I doubt that there's anything to do. Taking stuff out of the freezer and sticking it in the oven doesn't really take that much work."

"Perhaps she could use some help with the salad."

"Nope. She just rips open a bag and dumps it in a bowl."

"So all the food served here is pre prepared?"

"Yeah. Me cutting up the apples and putting peanut butter on them is probably as close to 'cooking' as you'll get in this house."

"If that's truly the case, then I thank you. The snack was flavorful and enjoyable."

"You're welcome. But try not to think too bad about my mom. She works hard all day, then comes home and fixes a meal for us. I know that she's got to be tired. Even if she had the time, I doubt that she'd have the energy to do much more than what she already does."

Bitru silently considered Brandton's words.

Before he could think of a way to respond, the front door opened and Brandton's father walked in.

"I see that you survived your first day. How was it?" Warren asked as he walked into the living room.

"Miserable beyond my ability to express." Bitru said honestly.

"Must be that kind of day." Warren said as he walked past them and down the hallway.

"Your father had a bad day?" Bitru asked in confusion at the response.

"I guess so. He doesn't talk about it much, but I get the feeling that most of his days are like that."

Bitru thought for a moment, then quietly asked, "Is your family ever 'happy?'"

"Every now and then." Brandton said carefully, then explained, "In the summer, when I'm out of school, both my parents take a vacation from their jobs for a week and we all go and do something. When I was little, I guess they made it all about me and we'd go to a theme park or something like that and all have a good time. This year we didn't go anywhere... we just stayed home and worked on things that needed to be done, here at the house. They said that we couldn't afford to go anywhere."

"So, one week out of the year, all of you are able to do something enjoyable together?"

"Yeah. And then there's Christmas. We're all off for a few days, then. So we get to be together and give each other gifts and eat too much and stuff like that."

"But the rest of the year, you and your parents are all miserable, doing what is required of you?"

"What's our other choice?"

"I don't know." Bitru admitted, then added, "But I feel that there must be one."

"If you figure it out, let me know." Brandton said seriously, then turned his attention back to the decades old sitcom.

* * * * *

"Dinner's almost ready." Liz Anne said from the kitchen doorway.

Bitru looked up with surprise and realized that nearly an hour had passed without his notice.

"Now I understand what you meant about 'turning off' your brain." Bitru said as he got up from the couch.

"Yeah." Brandton said as he also stood, then asked, "Do you remember how bad you were feeling about things before you sat down?"

"Yes." Bitru said absently as he fought to bring his thinking mind back from its brief slumber.

"Even though watching TV didn't make anything better, at least it took your mind off stuff for a little bit, so you didn't feel so worried." Brandton said as he walked into the bathroom.

Bitru slowly nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

After they had both washed their hands, Bitru and Brandton walked into the kitchen, to find the table empty. From there, they walked to the dining room and found dinner laid out for them.

The fried chicken was in a large glass bowl in the middle of the table. Beside it was a cardboard tray of macaroni and cheese. In a small basket, there were the same dinner rolls from the night before, and to round out the meal was a bowl of salad.

Liz Anne took her seat, then looked at Warren expectantly.

"Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive, through Thy bounty through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen." Warren said reverently.

When the prayer was finished, Warren looked to his wife and said, "This looks great. Thank you."

"Just help yourselves. We've got plenty of everything." Liz Anne said happily, taking her husband's gratitude to heart.

Bitru waited for a moment to watch the others before tentatively serving himself.

He selected a drumstick from the bowl of fried chicken, then took a small portion of everything else, just in case there was something that he couldn't force himself to eat.

After a glance around the table, Bitru put down his knife and fork and picked up the chicken leg with his fingers and took his first bite.

He slowly chewed as he waited for the taste to register.

"How do you like it?" Brandton asked cautiously.

Bitru forced himself to swallow before honestly answering, "This is far too salty for my taste."

"Yeah. That's the batter. Just peel it off and the chicken inside should be okay." Brandon said before taking another bite of his food.

Bitru did so and found that Brandon was right.

The chicken was a bit dry, and still a bit too salty. But it wasn't intolerable, so he continued to eat.

When he tried the macaroni and cheese, he was hit first by the intense tang of the cheese. But it was the excessive saltiness that made him unable to take another bite.

While the salad wasn't salty, the variety of bottled dressings to go with it, were. Even though he only used a small amount, the salt was noticeable and off putting.

With the exception of the macaroni and cheese, Bitru was able to finish all the food that he had put on his plate.

As he was putting down his silverware, the sound of a timer going off in the kitchen caught his attention.

"I hope everyone saved room for dessert." Liz Anne said as she got up from the table.

Bitru felt a wave of dread wash over him, still remembering the vile perfumy dessert from the night before.

"Was everything okay?" Brandon asked Bitru quietly.

"Everything tasted too salty to me, but I enjoyed it otherwise." Bitru said carefully.

"We need to let this rest for a minute. Just hold on while I get the ice cream." Liz Anne said as she walked into the room carrying an apple pie, fresh from the oven.

"You like ice cream, don't you, Bitru?" Warren asked curiously.

"Yes. Very much."

Liz Anne walked into the dining room with a cylindrical cardboard tub of ice cream and a scoop.

"Say when." She said as she was putting a scoop on Bitru's dinner plate.

"Excuse me?"

"Let me know when you have enough." Liz Anne said as she dropped another scoop onto his plate.

"This is more than enough." Bitru said quickly, then added a quiet, "Thank you."

Liz Anne went around the table, giving ice cream to everyone else before she took the tub of ice cream back to the kitchen.

Bitru noticed that Warren and Brandton weren't eating their ice cream, yet. So he also waited, unsure of what to do next.

When Liz Anne returned, she had a pie server in hand. She quickly and skillfully cut the pie and started dishing it out around the table.

Bitru looked down at the wedge of pie and two scoops of ice cream on his plate. It was nearly three times what he would expect to be served for dessert with his family.

"Go ahead. Give it a try." Brandton encouraged.

As Bitru had come to expect, the crust of the apple pie tasted too salty to him. In contrast, the apple pie filling tasted far too sweet. Even though the ice cream was smooth and creamy, once again, it was the cloying sweetness that Bitru objected to. But beyond all of that, it was the excessive size of the portion that was most troubling to him.

"Don't you like it?" Liz Anne asked with concern.

"It is good. Just far more than I am used to eating." Bitru said carefully, not wanting to offend.

"I'll be sure to give you a smaller piece next time. Just eat as much as you're comfortable with." Liz Anne said gently.

"Thank you for understanding."

In the end, Bitru was able to eat about half of his dessert.

When the meal was finally finished, Brandton announced, "We'd better get to work on our homework."

"Yes. I suppose that we should." Bitru said regretfully.

"Do you boys have a lot of homework to do?" Warren asked curiously.

"About normal. But Bitru and I are going to have to share books for a few of the assignments, so that might slow things down."

"Would it be easier for you to work in here at the dining room table?" Warren asked curiously.

Brandton thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. That would probably work out best."

"Help your mother clear the table, then you'd better get to work." Warren said as he stood from his chair.

Brandton and Bitru both started gathering dishes and carrying them to the kitchen.

* * * * *

"You have a Spanish book, right?" Brandton asked as he started taking his homework folders out of his backpack.

"Yes. Although, from what I saw of the homework, I can't see how it will be of any use."

"Just look at the quizzes and find where she got the questions from. Most likely, the answers will be listed in the back of the book." Brandton said as he organized his books and folders on the dining room table.

"So, you don't have to read the text to answer the questions?"

"Nope. If you do that, you'll probably run out of time to do everything else. Besides, you don't have to learn the homework stuff. It's all just busy work." Brandton said frankly, then thought to say, "Remember to take your gym clothes out so that they can be washed."

"Should we wash them now?"

"No. We have gym twice a week. The next class is on Friday. Just make sure to put your gym clothes in the laundry tonight." Brandton said seriously.

Silence fell between them for a moment, then Bitru quietly said, "This homework seems pointless."

"The point is to waste your time. I promise, it does *that* very well." Brandton said without looking up from his worksheet.

* * * * *

"Do you have my History book?" Brandton asked as he put a completed assignment into its proper folder.

"Yes. I haven't used it yet. But you may have it if you need it now." Bitru said as he scooted the book in Brandton's direction.

"Are you just about finished with whatever you're working on?"

"Yes. I completed the English homework easily. I was just seeking to find corroborative statements in the textbook to justify my answers."

"Use the answers in the back of the book. If you answer the questions that way you're going to get some of them wrong."

"But I am certain that I have answered the questions correctly."

"I'm sure that you did, too. But that doesn't mean that *the book* answered them right. And the teacher grades from her key. Period."

"Of course."

"I was thinking that if you can leave that for a minute, we could go ahead and fill in the maps together."

"Yes. That sounds like an efficient use of our time." Bitru said as he set his worksheet aside.

Brandton opened the History book and flipped to the proper map before scooting it to where they could both see it easily.

* * * * *

After doing the New England and Ottoman Empire maps, they also worked on the Art homework together. The inferior quality of the photographs of the dolls in the handouts made identifying all the different doll dresses somewhat challenging. But eventually they were able to complete the assignment and each went back to doing his own work.

A knock on the door caused both of them to look up in surprise.

Brandton used the interruption to ask, "How are you doing?"

"I must admit that I am having some difficulty. Answering questions thoughtlessly is a skill that I will need to develop. I keep finding myself wanting to investigate beyond the scope of the questions."

"Yeah. You'd better stop that. If they find out that you're learning stuff, they'll nail you for sure."

"How are *you* doing?"

"Okay. Even though I'm not as smart as you are, there's still some of this stuff that bugs me because I know it's wrong. I'm doing the Science homework and the book still has Pluto listed as a planet." Brandon groused, then added, "I was *three years old* when they decided that it was a dwarf. I mean, come on!"

"In the short time that we have been doing homework, I have spotted two instances in which I believe that the textbooks are incorrect. But, on your suggestion, I have refrained from trying to verify the truth of the matter."

"Yeah. We don't have to like it. We just have to do it."

"Are you guys ready for a break?" Warren asked as he walked into the dining room.

"Sure." Brandon answered for both of them.

There was a movement from behind Warren, then Mr. Silverstone walked into the room and said, "Good evening, gentlemen."

Chapter 5

"Mr. Silverstone, I am pleased to see you again. May I assume that you are here on behalf of my father?" Bitru asked as he stood from his place at the dining room table and offered his hand in greeting.

"It's a pleasure for me, as well, Mr. Rechin. And although I am here with your father's approval, I wouldn't say that I'm necessarily here on his behalf. I see my role as being more of an intermediary." Mr. Silverstone said as he shook Bitru's offered hand.

"I don't think I introduced my cousin to you on your previous visit. Please forgive my oversight and allow me to introduce my cousin, Brandon Keller." Bitru said formally.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Keller." Mr. Silverstone said professionally as he offered his hand to Brandon.

After a moment to register the surprise, Brandon stood from his chair and shook Mr. Silverstone's hand firmly as he said, "You can call me Brandon, if you like."

"Thank you, Sir." Mr. Silverstone said respectfully.

"We were just working on our homework for tomorrow's classes. Would you care to sit with us to discuss your business?" Bitru asked diplomatically.

"Yes. Thank you. This might take some time." Mr. Silverstone said seriously.

Bitru went back to his chair and sat down. Brandon noticed that Mr. Silverstone had remained standing and got the feeling that Mr. Silverstone was waiting for him to be seated, too.

After taking his seat, Brandon watched as Mr. Silverstone placed his briefcase on the dining room table, then took one of the seats across the table from them, sitting directly across from Bitru.

"Has my father spoken to you regarding his decision?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"No. After leaving you this morning, I talked with your father briefly to voice my concerns about the 'institution' that you were attending. Late this afternoon, your father contacted me, and mentioned that he had spoken with you. He voiced his concern that he isn't in a position to adequately evaluate your situation for himself and is unfamiliar with what alternatives might be available to you." Mr. Silverstone said carefully.

"May I assume that you have done some investigation into the alternatives?" Bitru asked seriously.

"I have done some preliminary research on the subject. However, it soon became evident that my efforts might be in vain if I were to make assumptions regarding your needs. Therefore, I came here to discuss the reasoning behind your decision to attend an American public school." Mr. Silverstone said professionally.

After a moment to consider, Bitru quietly said, "My primary reasons are two-fold. First, I sought an end to the isolation that I had experienced as an indirect consequence of my parents' vocations. Second, I wished to meet and possibly form some sort of bond with my cousins, to expand my sense of 'family'."

"How important is it to you to gain the experience of attending a public school?" Mr. Silverstone asked carefully.

Bitru briefly glanced at Brandton before saying, "I believe that I have gained more than enough experience for my liking."

"Very well. So, I take it from your listing of primary objectives that you would not be interested in receiving tutoring, in lieu of a public education." Mr. Silverstone stated, more than asked.

Bitru considered carefully before responding, "If those are the only two choices offered, I would accept tutoring, but not without a great deal of regret."

"If I may ask, what is it that you hope to gain from a more traditional classroom setting?" Mr. Silverstone asked calmly. It seemed to Brandon that Mr. Silverstone was asking the question as a stepping stone to a larger question.

"From an educational perspective, I would like to participate in the process of group problem solving and work amongst a group of peers so that I can gauge my academic progress against the achievements of others." Bitru said carefully, then added more quietly, "From a personal perspective, I believe that I would like to experience what it is like to be 'included'. I would like to feel empowered, knowing that I am part of something bigger than myself."

"From your limited experience today, do you feel that there is any possible way you might be able to achieve those goals in a public school setting?" Mr. Silverstone asked in an almost leading tone.

Bitru considered for a long moment, then carefully answered, "I believe that with more time I might be able to give you a more complete answer. But given limited consideration, the only way that I can see that I might be able to achieve any of those goals in a public school setting might be for me to join a gang. Any other choice would leave me in a situation where I would be powerless and subject to intellectual atrophy."

"After a limited amount of investigation, I have found no evidence to dispute your assertion. Therefore, can we say for the sake of argument that the question of you continuing with public education has been taken off the table?" Mr. Silverstone asked calmly.

"Would my agreement remove the possibility of Brandon being included in our future plans?" Bitru asked carefully.

"No. We are discussing options. I simply wanted to remove the least viable option from consideration before we discussed the merits and flaws of other, more appealing, options." Mr. Silverstone explained patiently.

"On the condition that my acceptance does not exclude Brandon from our future plans, I will agree that we should not consider local public education to be an option." Bitru said consideringly.

"Very well. As I see it, the next, most straightforward alternative would be tutoring. It would be possible for both you and your cousin to receive instruction in a variety of subjects that not only fulfill your educational requirements but would be flexible enough to incorporate whatever interests the two of you might have." Mr. Silverstone said carefully.

"While preferable to public education, it does not adequately address the issues that brought me to America to begin with. We would be sequestered from others with little likelihood that we might be able to form relationships with a variety of people with points of view differing from our own." Bitru said seriously.

"Are you guys deciding something about me?" Brandton asked cautiously, not entirely sure that he was understanding correctly.

"Mr. Rechin is being careful to assure that the options that we will be considering will also be able to include you." Mr. Silverstone explained.

"That's right. Nothing is being decided at this point. Right now we're trying to decide what our choices are... and I wanted to be sure that, if you wanted to, you could be part of whatever we decide to do." Bitru explained.

"Oh, um, thanks." Brandton said timidly.

"The next option open to us would seem to be that of a private school. By all accounts, the educational standards are far higher than the 'institution' you visited earlier today." Mr. Silverstone said carefully.

"I will admit that I had considered that option. But I dismissed the notion when I recalled the few times I had met the products of such institutions. If possible, I would like to avoid being surrounded by people with ingrained pompous snobbery and a sense of entitlement. It would go counter to the values that my parents have worked to instill within me." Bitru said firmly.

"And they probably wouldn't let me into a place like that, anyway." Brandton added quietly.

"I can assure you that if we were to decide on that option, that we would be able to convince the school to accept you." Bitru said with certainty.

"I believe another option worth considering would be to assemble a small group of students and create our own educational environment, specifically tailored to your specifications." Mr. Silverstone said slowly.

Bitru looked at him with surprise, then slowly asked, "How might we be able to undertake such a project?"

"After witnessing the conditions at the 'institution' this morning, I took the initiative to do some investigation into the alternatives. One of the things that I have found is that there are others who share your concerns. While they haven't taken action themselves, they expressed interest in an alternative to the educational programs that are currently being offered." Mr. Silverstone said carefully.

"Um, I don't get it." Brandton said cautiously.

"As a consequence of my work, I have become acquainted with several foreign diplomats. I made a few inquiries of those that I knew had children. Those few who have their children here, have voiced their displeasure with the educational offerings. The remainder have made arrangements for their children to be educated abroad, to assure that they receive a proper education." Mr. Silverstone explained.

"So it's not just our school? I didn't know that." Brandton said honestly.

"From my limited investigation, the failure appears to be systemic. For that reason, the establishment of our own institution of learning might prove to be the better option." Mr. Silverstone said frankly.

"That sounds like something that could take a long time to set up." Brandton said consideringly.

Bitru looked at his cousin with surprise at the statement, then turned to Mr. Silverstone and nodded his agreement.

"There is a structure available for our use, should we decide to proceed with this course of action. I have already received tentative approval, pending our request for its use." Mr. Silverstone said carefully.

"So, you've got an empty school building for us. But we're going to need teachers." Brandton said thoughtfully.

Bitru smiled at his cousin, happy to see that he was willing to be involved in their discussion.

"I have contacted a qualified teacher who is willing to act as a tutor regardless of which greater decision we make. He will be teaching you tomorrow, whether it is here or in a more formal setting." Mr. Silverstone said seriously, then added, "Should we decide to proceed, more teachers will be recruited from around the world to provide you the best education possible."

"Wow!" Brandton said with astonishment.

"Indeed. Wow." Bitru said with a grin.

"May I conclude from your reactions that you are interested in this option?" Mr. Silverstone asked with a smile.

"Yeah! It sounds great!" Brandton said excitedly.

"I fail to see how this is significantly different from Brandton and I being tutored here, in his home." Bitru said thoughtfully.

"I can't say for certain, but I believe that if we were to present this possibility to the parents of a certain number of students, that they might jump at the opportunity to provide their children a better education." Mr. Silverstone said carefully.

"Which students?" Brandton asked cautiously.

"Who, of your classmates, would you like to see given this opportunity?" Mr. Silverstone asked simply.

Brandton's eyes went wide in surprise and he was unable to form an answer.

"Are you suggesting that we recruit a number of students from Brandon's school to populate our new school?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"I thought that Brandon might know who, among his classmates, might be willing to take advantage of an opportunity like this." Mr. Silverstone said honestly.

"Brandon, what do you think about Chris?" Bitru asked curiously.

"Um... He's a good guy. I like him. I think that if he got a chance like this, he'd probably take it and do something great with it." Brandon said thoughtfully.

"Do you know his full name?" Mr. Silverstone asked as he opened his briefcase and took out a legal pad.

"Christopher Belleau." Brandon answered simply.

"What about Nate?" Bitru asked hopefully.

"I don't think I've ever heard his full name." Brandon said apologetically.

"Perhaps, if you can tell me about him, I will be able to discover his identity." Mr. Silverstone suggested helpfully.

"He stated that he began attending the school two weeks ago. His first name is Nate and he is in our gym class. I believe that is all that I know about him." Bitru said uncertainly, then looked at Brandon with question.

"He's also taking French." Brandon offered weakly.

"Allow me to investigate. Perhaps I can locate him. Do you have any other classmates that you would like for me to locate?" Mr. Silverstone asked as he looked up from his notepad.

"There was a boy in our gym class, I never heard his name, the coach only ever referred to him as 'fat ass'. I don't know if he would excel academically if he were given the opportunity, but I feel that leaving him

in that abusive environment would make me just as guilty of abuse as is Coach Lyons." Bitru finished quietly.

"His name is Lawson Fish. He used to get teased enough for that *before* Coach Lyons picked him to be the class punching bag." Brandton said frankly.

"How do you mean?" Mr. Silverstone asked curiously as he jotted down Lawson's name.

"From what I hear, the coach picks one kid out in each class to scream at. All year long he'll ride them and put them down in front of everyone. I guess that's how he gets his jollies. Some of the kids have changed schools over it and I heard that one even committed suicide." Brandton said seriously.

"How can something like that be allowed to continue?" Mr. Silverstone asked with a disbelieving shake of his head.

"His brother's on the school board, so he can do anything he wants. Just ask him, he'll tell you." Brandton said simply.

Mr. Silverstone quickly jotted down another note, then asked, "Can you think of any others that you would like to be invited to join you in your new school?"

"I believe that those are the only people I met today." Bitru said honestly, then looked to Brandton with question.

"Um, yeah. How many did you want?" Brandton asked Mr. Silverstone cautiously.

"As many as you can think of. Who do you think would take advantage of an opportunity like this?" Mr. Silverstone asked in return.

"Well, I don't know if they'll take advantage or not, but I guess my best friends at school are Dusty... I mean, Dustin Porter and Colin Ward. They're both really good guys." Brandton said thoughtfully.

Mr. Silverstone wrote down their names, then nodded for Brandton to continue.

"Does it have to be just guys?" Brandton asked cautiously.

"No. If you know of some girls that might do well in a more favorable environment, then please suggest them." Mr. Silverstone quickly responded.

"Emily... um, hold it. Let me think... Emily Travis? I'm not sure, but it's something like that. And her best friend is Christina Howard, but she goes by Tina." Brandton finished in a rush.

"Were those the girls who spoke to us at lunch?" Bitru asked curiously.

"Yeah. Most of the girls would rather cut off an arm than talk to a boy, but Tina and Emily are friendly to just about everyone." Brandton said with a smile at the thought of the two girls.

After waiting a moment, Mr. Silverstone quietly asked, "Is that all that you can think of?"

"There's one more, but I'm not sure you're going to want him." Brandton said carefully.

"Why is that?" Mr. Silverstone asked curiously.

"Last year, there was this guy in my class and we were kinda friends. I mean, we weren't like best buds or anything, but if we saw each other in the hall, we'd say 'hey' and we might sit together at lunch sometimes. But then, one day he showed up at school and he wasn't 'him' anymore. I don't know if it was the school or his parents, but they put him on some antipsychotics and stimulants and... I don't know all of it. I just know that whatever it was that made him Jack was gone. He was just an empty shell, after that. I don't know what happened to him. I haven't seen him yet this year. But if you can find him, maybe there's a way to get him back." Brandton said as tears welled in his eyes at the thought.

"Do you know his full name?" Mr. Silverstone asked quietly.

"Jackson Clemons." Brandton said as he fought to get his emotions back under control.

"I can't promise anything, but I'll do as much as I can." Mr. Silverstone promised.

"What about the students who were suspended for a PDA." Bitru asked quickly.

"Personal Data Assistant?" Mr. Silverstone asked cautiously.

"Public Display of Affection." Bitru explained with a smile of accomplishment, then turned to Brandton and asked, "Do you happen to know their names?"

Mr. Silverstone nodded as he prepared to write.

"Greg Ballard and Melissa, um... it's a weird name... Chesty... Chesney... Chesaning! That's it!" Brandton finally said with accomplishment.

"Thank you, Brandton. I am glad that you knew their names. I feel that they deserve something since they were punished for showing compassion." Bitru said honestly.

"Wait. So we're doing it? We're starting our own school? When did we decide to do that?" Brandton asked with surprise.

"As you are so fond of saying, 'What was our other choice?'" Bitru said with a smile.

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"I believe that our next course of action should be to gain the permission of your parents to this arrangement." Mr. Silverstone said as he put his legal pad back into his suitcase.

"Don't you have to get a lot of things set up? You know, like the school and the teachers and... stuff?" Brandton asked cautiously.

"I anticipated your decision and have made all the arrangements. Once we have received permission from your parents, I will call my staff and tell them to proceed." Mr. Silverstone said as he stood.

"I guess we don't need to finish doing this homework, then." Brandton said in surprise as he also got out of his chair.

"Not unless your parents refuse." Bitru said frankly.

"Please, allow me to talk to them, first. I believe that I will be able to persuade them." Mr. Silverstone said confidently.

"Do you want us to wait here?" Brandton asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I think that would be best." Mr. Silverstone said honestly.

"Let us know how it turns out." Brandton said before sitting back down.

Mr. Silverstone smiled at the boys, then left the room.

* * * * *

"Do you really think that this is going to be better than going to our regular school?" Brandton asked cautiously.

"I believe that it has the potential to be everything that I had envisioned before coming here." Bitru said honestly.

"I just don't know if your vision is going to be something that I'm going to enjoy." Brandton said nervously.

"It should be *precisely* what you enjoy. If done properly, the education we receive should expose us to a variety of possibilities, then we will be free to pursue those things that most hold our interest." Bitru said seriously.

"If it's really like that, it sounds like it could be great." Brandton said honestly.

"We will *make* it like that. We will *make* it great." Bitru said firmly.

Brandton laughed fondly at Bitru, then said, "I really hope so. I've always dreamed about being able to break away from this... destiny."

"I forgot about Matthias!" Bitru said suddenly.

"What about him?" Brandton asked cautiously.

"He needs to be invited to our school, too." Bitru said seriously.

"Um... why?" Brandton asked hesitantly.

"He is our cousin. I came here not only to get to know you, but him as well." Bitru said urgently.

"I get that you want to get to know him. But it'd probably be better if you met him before you invited him to come to our school. He's kind of a dick." Brandton said frankly.

"He is our *family*. We don't have to like him. But we have a duty to accept him, regardless of how much of a dick that he is." Bitru said firmly.

After a moment to consider, Brandton quietly said, "I don't think we look at family the same way. From the way you talk about it, it means a whole lot more than just having relatives in common."

"Your family is there to support and defend you, even when you're wrong. When you've lost everything, your family is your refuge. And when you've gained everything, your family is there to keep you grounded." Bitru said passionately.

"When you put it that way, I guess having a family sounds pretty nice." Brandton said with a smile.

"Sometimes it is. Sometimes it is a burden that will break your back. But if you have a modicum of dignity or self respect, it is a burden that you will choose to bear." Bitru said firmly.

"You haven't spent a lot of time with *our* family, have you?" Brandton asked cautiously.

"We are direct descendents of the great Ermengarde of Lissus, we are all, in essence, her children." Bitru implored Brandton to understand.

"Should I know who that is?" Brandton asked cautiously.

Bitru was stunned into speechlessness for a moment, then reluctantly said, "Yes. You should."

Brandton gave a small, helpless shrug and Bitru hung his head.

* * * * *

Neither boy was able to do much more than watch the dining room door and wait expectantly.

Finally Mr. Silverstone walked into the room, giving no hint with his expression as to how his talk with Brandton's parents had gone.

"So, what's the plan?" Brandton finally asked hopefully.

"Your parents have agreed that both of you should be given this opportunity." Mr. Silverstone said simply.

"That's it?" Brandton asked dubiously.

"Yes. However, I must tell you, that in the coming days, we will need to make some extra preparations. Once your classmates have been recruited, we will need to get passports for all of you, so that you will be able to go on field trips." Mr. Silverstone said carefully.

"Field trips? To where? Why would we need passports for that?" Brandton asked in confusion.

"It is too soon to outline specific plans. But if, for example, your class were studying something like the deforestation of the Amazon and its effect on

the global climate, you might take a trip to South America to gain firsthand knowledge of the situation." Mr. Silverstone said calmly.

"Really? Seriously?" Brandton asked in amazement.

"That is something that I have not previously been able to do. I have traveled extensively with my parents, but we only went where their jobs took us." Bitru said with a smile, also seeming to be a bit overwhelmed by the prospect.

"You'll need to keep in mind that this is being done with the assistance of more than one foreign consulate. For that reason, it is possible that the children of foreign diplomats from various countries might also be joining your class." Mr. Silverstone warned.

"That reminds me, we had one other name to add to the list of candidate students to be recruited." Bitru said quickly.

Mr. Silverstone opened his briefcase and took out his legal pad before looking at Bitru with question.

"Matthias Keller. He is our cousin." Bitru said simply.

"If you ask my parents, they can give you my grandma Keller's number. He's staying with her." Brandton interjected.

"That will be helpful. I will see to it that he is invited." Mr. Silverstone said seriously.

"He's older than we are. Is that going to be a problem?" Brandton asked cautiously.

"Not at all. I anticipate that you and your classmates will all prove to be performing at different grade levels. Initially, tests will be given to find out what you *do* know. Once those tests have been evaluated, we will endeavour to teach you what you *don't* know." Mr. Silverstone said with a smile.

"Are we going to need to dress up or... pack a lunch... bring gym clothes... or... what?" Brandton asked as his mind started to grasp the idea that he was going to be changing schools.

"Dress comfortably. A car will be sent to collect you in the morning at seven am. You will be provided snacks and a lunch. You might want to bring a notebook, so you can write down questions or take notes. Beyond that, I believe that everything else will be provided." Mr. Silverstone said professionally.

"So, it's just going to be the two of us?" Brandton asked to be sure.

"Yes. So far as I know. However, I have several colleagues awaiting my confirmation to proceed. It is possible that some, or I suppose all, of them might choose to enroll their own children as soon as tomorrow." Mr. Silverstone said thoughtfully.

"I can hardly wait!" Brandton said excitedly.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I will take my leave. I have a number of calls to make." Mr. Silverstone said as he put his legal pad back into his briefcase.

"Thanks for doing all of this for us, Mr. Silverstone. I never even dreamed that... well to be honest, I haven't dreamed about anything for quite a while now. Anyway, thanks for everything." Brandton finished shyly.

Bitru turned to Mr. Silverstone and said, "I share my cousin's gratitude and would like to add to it my promise that we will do our best to take full advantage of the opportunities you are providing for us."

"That's all I ask." Mr. Silverstone said simply, then turned to Brandton and extended his hand as he said, "Mr. Keller."

Brandton shook the hand, then watched as Mr. Silverstone turned to Bitru and said, "Mr. Rechin."

Bitru shook the offered hand as he met Mr. Silverstone's gaze.

Brandton couldn't put his feelings into words as he witnessed the expression of mutual respect.

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"How are you guys doing? Does this mean that you're done with your homework for the night?" Warren asked as he walked into the dining room.

"Yeah. I guess so." Brandton said slowly, still having trouble comprehending all the changes.

"Well, since it looks like we have time, now. Why don't you guys put your coats on?" Warren asked with a smile.

"What? Where are we going?" Brandton asked in confusion.

"We're going to go visit your grandmother." Warren said a bit nervously.

"Will Matthias be there as well?" Bitru asked hopefully.

"Yes. And so will my brother, your Uncle Rance. I'm sure that they're both looking forward to meeting you." Warren said warmly.

"Why are we going over to grandma's house so late? What's going on?" Brandton asked suspiciously.

"Just put your coats on. We need to be going." Warren said before walking out of the dining room.

Brandton suddenly felt the temperature in the dining room beginning to fall.

"Do you think it will be acceptable for me to address Rance as Uncle? If I am not mistaken, he is technically my eighth cousin, once removed." Bitru asked anxiously.

Brandton stepped forward and pulled Bitru into a hug as he said, "Dad just called him your uncle. So, unless you're told to call him something else, I

say go with it."

Bitru was quiet for a moment, but finally said, "Yes. Thank you, Brandon. I have been anticipating meeting my family for such a long time. It is difficult to believe that the time has finally come."

Brandon could feel the temperature in the room returning to normal.

"Are you coming?" Warren asked from the doorway.

"Oh! Yeah. Just a second." Brandon said quickly as he released Bitru from the hug.

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Once they were all in the car and Warren had pulled away from the house, he quietly said, "Bitru. I had a long talk with your father before you arrived here."

"I didn't realize that." Bitru responded uncertainly.

"You're at an age... No. Let me start again. Your father mentioned that you had grown up isolated from other children. He said that you had started asking about going to a regular school. He also said that you concocted some pretty good arguments for reasons to come here." Warren said thoughtfully, as he drove.

"Yes. I suppose that I did." Bitru said quietly.

"The problem is, you're an only child and your father wasn't sure of what was the best way to handle... um, certain things. So while you were bugging your father to let you be around other kids, he located me and we talked and... well, that's how you came to be here." Warren said in a somewhat rambling meter.

"What things?" Brandon asked cautiously.

"I'll tell you about that when we reach your grandmother's house." Warren said evasively.

There was a long moment of silence, then Bitru met his uncle's eyes in the rearview mirror for an instant and quietly asked, "You know, don't you?"

"Yes, Bitru. In fact, that's probably the reason your father allowed you to come here at all. He wanted for you to be in a safe place where you could learn about things and adjust to them around others who are facing the same thing." Warren said frankly.

"You know what? What reason? What 'things'?" Brandton asked with irritation.

Bitru looked at his uncle in the rearview mirror with question, not knowing if he should try to explain.

"For now, let's just say that the members of our family are... different." Warren said carefully.

"Like how?" Brandton asked in confusion.

"You have mentioned being cold in my presence." Bitru said quietly.

"Yeah. I figured out that it happens when you're really nervous or afraid." Brandton said as he turned to look into the back seat and devote his full attention to his cousin.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I thought that I was controlling it better than that." Bitru muttered.

"I don't think anyone else noticed. It's just because I've been around you for just about every minute of the past twenty-four hours." Brandton said with a smile, trying to ease Bitru's discomfort.

"Don't beat yourself up over it, Bitru. That's normal for us." Warren said comfortingly.

"Us?" Brandon asked cautiously.

"Yes. Us." Warren said definitely.

"The members of our bloodline." Bitru said quietly.

"Not *all* the members of our bloodline. About one in four doesn't get it. But that one still carries it and can pass it on to their children." Warren said seriously.

"Bloodline? Pass what on? What do we have?" Brandon asked in confusion.

"I guess it depends on who you ask. Some call it a blessing, others a curse. There have been members of our family that have been burned as witches. Of course, others have risen to positions of great authority within the clergy. Some deny their gifts and others embrace them." Warren said distantly.

"What gifts?" Brandon asked irritably.

"I had actually hoped that I could put this off for a while longer, to give Bitru a chance to settle in with us. But after talking with Mr. Silverstone, I realized that this might actually be the best time to talk to you about it." Warren said as he spared Bitru a glance.

"Hey! Did I suddenly become invisible or something? What gifts?" Brandon demanded.

"Brandon, please calm down. Bitru isn't the only one who can let his power slip out. If you don't calm down you're going to cause a car accident." Warren said seriously.

"Power? What power?" Brandon asked in confusion.

Bitru reached up from the back seat and put a hand on Brandon's shoulder before saying, "I know little more than you do. We will have our answers shortly."

Brandton placed his hand on top of Bitru's and gave it a squeeze as he felt himself calming.

"We're just a few minutes away." Warren said quietly.

"Okay. I get that you won't tell me about... whatever this is. But Grandma Keller, Uncle Rance and Matthias are all going to be there, right? Does that mean that all of them have... whatever it is that we're talking about?" Brandton asked anxiously.

"Yes. And if your Aunt Kelly were here, she'd be included, too. But I think her girls are probably still too young to be brought into it." Warren said thoughtfully.

"Okay. I get that. And I get that you want to wait until we get to Grandma's house before you tell me everything. But, you just said that I was going to make you wreck the car because my power was slipping out. I didn't feel it getting any colder in here. What did you mean?" Brandton asked anxiously.

"I really don't want to tell you too much and take the chance of saying it wrong. Your grandmother has had to do this before and has a better idea of how to explain these things. But, to answer your question, at least a little bit, our abilities are passed down to us from our parents. Because Bitru's bloodline is eight generations distant from ours, his ability is understandably different. The members of a family tend to have either the same or very similar gifts." Warren said carefully.

"Okay. So I don't have what Bitru has. I got that." Brandton said thoughtfully, then asked, "But what *do* I have?"

As Warren brought the car to a stop, he said, "Ask your grandmother. We're here."

Chapter 6

"Bitru, are you nervous or is it just cold out here?" Brandton asked as they walked up to the front door of a cozy little house.

"It's December in Pennsylvania. I don't think we can hang this on Bitru." Warren said fondly as he stepped onto the front porch.

"Okay." Brandton said to his father, then turned to Bitru and quietly said, "But if you get nervous, just let me know and I'll do what I can to help you."

"Although it may not appear so, I can be strong when I need to be." Bitru assured him.

Warren knocked on the door and waited for it to be answered.

"I didn't mean for it to sound like you weren't. I just know that if I were about to meet a bunch of people who were supposed to be my family and I didn't know if they'd accept me or not, that I'd probably be pretty nervous about it." Brandton said frankly.

After a moment, Bitru quietly said, "I wasn't nervous, until you said that."

Brandton slung an arm around Bitru's shoulders and gave him a quick, affectionate hug as the front door opened.

* * * * *

"You need to visit more often." An elderly woman said as she pulled Warren into a firm hug.

"We'll come over this weekend, I promise." Warren told his mother as he returned her hug.

After releasing her son, the woman immediately swooped in and hugged Brandton as she said, "You're growing up so fast, I can hardly believe it."

"Hi, Grandma." Brandton said as he hugged her.

When she released Brandton, she turned to look at Bitru and asked, "And who do we have here?"

"Mom. Don't act like you don't already know. I told you on the phone. This is Bitru Rechin. He's a distant cousin of ours." Warren said impatiently.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ma'am." Bitru said hesitantly.

"Bitru? That's an interesting name." She said before engulfing him in a hug. As she was hugging him she continued, "Don't you even think of being formal with me. You are to call me Grandma, or Grandma Keller. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Ma'am... Grandma." Bitru quickly corrected.

"Now come on in out of the cold. The boys are in the living room, why don't you go join them and I'll be right in with a snack." Grandma Keller said, then dashed away without waiting for a response from them.

"I like her." Bitru said quietly.

"I think she likes you, too." Brandton assured him, then guided Bitru to walk with them.

* * * * *

Bitru was fighting to contain his nervousness as they walked into the living room.

"What's the big emergency?" A man said as he stood from an easy chair.

"Can't a guy just stop in to visit with his mother and his brother?" Warren asked with a teasing grin.

"Not when that guy is you." The man said before stepping forward to pull Warren into an enthusiastic hug.

"That's Matthias." Brandon whispered to Bitru as he pointed at the young teenage boy sitting on the floor by the Christmas tree, who seemed to have all his concentration devoted to the smart phone in his hand.

"He looks older than I expected." Bitru said honestly.

Matthias looked up from his phone with surprise, obviously having heard Bitru's comment.

"This is our cousin, his name is Bitru." Brandon said cautiously.

"Hey." Matthias said simply, then turned his attention back to his phone.

Bitru looked at Brandon with question, confused by Matthias' response.

"He likes you." Brandon said with a smile, then guided Bitru to walk with him to the couch.

* * * * *

After taking off their coats, both Brandon and Bitru took seats on the couch and waited for whatever was going to happen next.

Bitru looked around the moderately sized living room and took note of the amount of Christmas decorations. There was a decorated tree, of course. But there were also ribbons, bows, garlands, streamers and a few other decorations that Bitru didn't have names for. The majority of the decorations seemed to be either red or silver, but there were enough examples of other colors interspersed throughout to keep it from being intimidating.

"So, how are things going with Margy?" Warren asked his brother cautiously.

"Let's just say that I'm not one of her favorite people, right now." Rance said quietly.

"Let me know if there's anything that I can do." Warren said regretfully, knowing that there wasn't.

"How are things going with Liz Anne?" Rance asked in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

Warren smiled, then said, "When I told her that we were coming over here, I suggested that she take the opportunity to pamper herself for a little while. I have no idea what she gets out of soaking in a tub with scented candles set around the room, but if it makes her happy, I'm all for it."

Rance chuckled, then said, "Yeah. I never got that, either."

Bitru glanced across the room at Matthias and found that he was typing on his phone with his thumbs, seemingly oblivious to what was going on around him.

"Warren, clear me a spot on the coffee table." Grandma Keller said as she carried a heavily laden tray into the living room.

Bitru watched carefully, in case there might be something that he could do to help.

"I know that you came over for other reasons, but I couldn't help but look on this as a holiday celebration." Grandma Keller said as she carefully placed the tray on the table.

Once everything was in place, Grandma Keller picked up two mugs and handed one to each of her sons.

"Warren, make sure you take it easy on the eggnog, since you're going to be driving, later." Grandma Keller said firmly.

"Just how much 'nog' are we talking about?" Warren asked cautiously.

"Between the brandy and the rum, I'd say that you've got about a shot in there." Grandma Keller said as she picked up two more mugs and handed them to Brandton and Bitru.

"I added a little fresh vanilla bean, to yours." Grandma Keller said warmly.

"Thank you, Ma'am." Bitru said as he accepted his eggnog.

At her expectant gaze fixed on him, Bitru quickly amended, "Grandma."

She smiled sweetly at him, then turned toward Rance and asked, "Do you think that Matthias is old enough for a 'Grown Up' eggnog?"

Bitru glanced toward Matthias in time to see his head pop up.

Rance gave his son a long appraising look before answering, "Yeah. Let's see how he handles it."

Grandma Keller gave her son a satisfied nod, then carried a mug of eggnog to Matthias before saying, "Don't drink this too quickly."

"Thanks, Grandma." Matthias said with an excited smile.

Grandma Keller then turned and addressed the whole room, "As it turns out, I made a batch of pfeffernüsse this afternoon."

"It wouldn't be Christmas without Grandma's pfeffernüsse." Brandton said as he reached forward to take one.

Bitru smiled and he, too, picked up one of the light brown cookies.

Although he was cautious about getting his hopes up, Bitru carefully took a small bite of the cookie, then waited for the flavor to register.

It turned out to be everything that he had hoped for, and then some. The cookie was fresh and soft. But the thing that made Bitru's tastebuds sing was that while the cookies had a certain amount of sweetness to them, it was just enough to accent the delicate spices and round out the overall flavor.

"They're not real sweet, but they're good anyway." Brandton said happily.

Bitru was slowly chewing, imprinting the exquisite flavor on his mind, happy to finally have found something in his new home that actually tasted

'good'.

The next thing that Bitru knew, Grandma Keller was walking back into the living room, with yet another plate of cookies, these being iced sugar cookies.

"I suppose that we should get to the reason behind your visit, before it gets any later." Grandma Keller said as she took a seat in a large overstuffed chair.

"Well, I guess what brought this all about was a phone call that I received from Bitru's father. I have to admit, looking back at it, that it was a funny conversation." Warren said with a smile.

Bitru looked at Warren with surprise. He could recall his father being called many things, both to his face and behind his back, but 'funny' wasn't one of them.

"He explained that Bitru wanted to come to America and go to a public school, so that he could, I don't know, feel normal, I guess." Warren said with a quick smile at Bitru, then he continued, "But the whole time he was asking these little questions about me and Brandton, asking without really asking about our bloodline."

"It's a difficult thing to bring up in casual conversation." Grandma Keller said with a nod.

Warren chuckled, then said, "After dancing around it for nearly half an hour, we finally got down to it and he told me that they didn't have any family close to where they were. So he asked if it would be possible for Bitru to stay with us so he could be around others who were also coming to grips with... things."

"Dad! Can you just say it, already?" Brandton blurted out.

Warren turned to his brother and quietly asked, "Have you told Matthias, yet?"

Rance shook his head, then said, "But it's past that time."

"Do you want to do it, Mom? You're the one with experience talking about this." Warren asked hopefully.

"Talk is cheap. What we need is a demonstration. Why don't you go ahead and *show* your son what we're talking about?" Grandma Keller asked seriously.

Warren nodded, then looked toward Brandon and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." Brandon said simply, then quickly added, "But I want to know what's going on."

"*This* is what's going on." Warren said seriously.

Brandon felt a sudden wave of dizziness wash over him and his mind fogged over, as though he'd just spent twelve continuous hours studying.

Bitru quickly rushed to catch Brandon as he slumped on the couch.

"How are you feeling now?" Grandma Keller asked seriously.

"Huh?" Brandon asked weakly as he tried to focus on her voice.

"Tell me how you feel." Grandma Keller said firmly.

"Tired. I feel absolutely hammered." Brandon said slowly, having difficulty putting his feelings into words.

"How about now?" Grandma Keller asked with a smile.

Just as suddenly as the fog had overtaken his mind, it cleared away. All of a sudden he felt awake, aware, alive and filled to overflowing with enthusiasm.

"What was that?" Brandon asked in amazement.

"Your father's ability seems to be to sap the mental energy from the people around him and use it to replenish himself." Grandma Keller explained carefully, then added, "Mine is something similar, except that I tend to redistribute the energies in the room so that everyone is relatively the same."

"All of our abilities are like Mom's since we're her kids and grandkids. Well, except for Bitru, since he's from a more distant branch of the family." Warren explained.

"Yes. Would you mind showing us your ability, Bitru?" Grandma Keller asked hopefully.

"I would be honored to do so. But I haven't learned how to make it work when I want it to. It only seems to happen when I don't." Bitru admitted quietly.

"Things get cold when he's worried about something, or afraid." Brandon explained.

"Bitru, would you *try* to use your ability? I might be able to help you with it." Grandma Keller said encouragingly.

After a moment to look around the room, Bitru spotted his eggnog sitting on the edge of the coffee table. "I'm going to try to focus my ability on the eggnog."

"Tell me what you're doing, or what you're trying to do, as you're doing it." Grandma Keller said carefully.

"I have focused on my target and I'm trying to make it become colder... but I don't feel anything, I don't think it's working." Bitru finished regretfully.

"*How* are you trying to make it colder?" Grandma Keller asked slowly.

"I don't know how to explain... I'm trying to force it to become colder, but it isn't cooperating with me." Bitru said with frustration.

"Don't blame my eggnog." Grandma Keller warned playfully, then quietly said, "I get the sense that you're trying to 'push' it to become cold. And if your ability is anything like mine or my kids, then what you should probably be doing is 'pulling' the warmth, instead."

"Yes. Of course. Cold is an absence of heat, not a tangible thing, of it's own." Bitru said in realization.

"Go ahead and try *pulling*." Grandma Keller said encouragingly.

After a moment, Bitru quietly said, "I don't think I can do it."

"Of course you can. You're *hardwired* to do this. All you have to do is figure out how to turn it on and shut it off." Grandma Keller said with absolute conviction.

Bitru focused his attention, as he had done before, but this time he willed himself to *draw* the heat from the eggnog before him.

"Bitru, you're doing it. Although, you may need to work on your aim." Grandma Keller finished with a chuckle.

"I'll throw another log on the fire." Rance said with a smile at Bitru.

As he looked around, Bitru suddenly understood that all those around him were hugging themselves for warmth.

"The good news is, once you get a little more practice at consciously controlling your gift, then it will become far easier for you to recognize when it's getting away from you. You'll get used to how the *flow* of it feels." Grandma Keller said as she wrapped herself in an afghan that had been draped over the back of her chair.

"That was great, Bitru!" Brandon said excitedly, then turned to Grandma Keller and asked, "What's mine?!"

Grandma Keller turned to Warren and raised her eyebrows in question.

"As near as I can tell, your ability is just about the same as mine." Warren said seriously, then added, "When you get anxious or afraid, everyone around you becomes not only mentally weary, but also physically exhausted and hungry."

"Really?" Brandton asked slowly as he tried to think back on instances when that might have happened.

"If you want to give it a try, just focus on me and try to *pull* the energy from me. Don't worry, you won't hurt me." Warren hurried to assure him.

"Okay." Brandton said cautiously, then focused on his father for a moment before closing his eyes and imagining a pool of energy around him, flowing toward him.

"You and Bitru are going to *both* need to learn to aim." Grandma Keller said quietly.

Brandton opened his eyes and, at first, didn't notice any difference. But as he looked from person to person, he could see subtle hints that they all seemed to be *drained*. The looks in their eyes and their slightly wilted postures told him that he had, in fact, been able to drain all of them to some small degree.

"No matter." Grandma Keller said as she looked around the room with a warm, loving smile.

Brandton felt his own energy level reduce slightly and noticed as everyone else in the room seemed to perk up a little bit.

He also noticed that almost everyone present had taken another cookie from the plates on the coffee table.

"When you learn to control your gift, you should be able to draw energy from everyone around you, when you need a boost. Although I have no way of knowing for sure, I think that you'll probably be able to draw energy from plants and animals, as well." Warren said speculatively.

"Why would I want to do that?" Brandton asked cautiously.

"I don't know if you will. I'm just saying that you probably *can*." Warren answered simply.

"Do you want to go next, Matthias?" Rance asked his son curiously.

"What's yours?" Matthias asked his father challengingly.

"I make things slow down." Rance said simply.

"Huh?" Matthias asked dubiously.

Grandma Keller reached into a large bag beside her armchair and took out a ball of yarn. She handed it to her son, then waited.

"Go ahead and roll this toward me." Rance said as he tossed the yarn ball to his son.

Matthias didn't seem to be entirely on board with the demonstration, but dutifully rolled the yarn ball toward his father.

The ball came to a complete stop after about three inches.

"Come on. You can do better than that. Roll it over to *me*." Rance said playfully.

Matthias looked toward his father with aggravation, then rolled the yarn ball hard enough that it should have been able to roll all the way across the room. However, after about five inches, it stopped dead.

"The people in our bloodline all have an ability to absorb energy, from the look of it, my ability is to absorb inertia." Rance said frankly.

"Do you know what mine is?" Matthias asked cautiously.

Rance laughed aloud at the question, then asked, "Don't you remember what happened at school last year? It got so bad that you ended up moving to a different class."

"You mean when the crap computers at school kept going out?" Matthias asked cautiously.

"Son, when you get nervous or afraid, you absorb electrical energy from around you. In a few extreme instances the lights have dimmed. But usually it's the more sensitive electronics that have suffered your wrath." Rance said frankly.

"You mean all those 'Blue Screens' were my fault?" Matthias asked in surprise.

"Most of them. I'm pretty sure a few of them were just crappy programming." Rance said with a smile.

"Do you want to give it a try, Matthias?" Grandma Keller asked him expectantly.

"What do I have to do?" Matthias asked in a small voice, seemingly overwhelmed by all the new information.

"Focus on the lights and see if you can draw them down, absorb some of their energy into yourself. Don't take too much, just *pull* enough power that you can feel satisfied." Grandma Keller said seriously.

"That's right. With your ability, you might be able to take too much. So be careful." Rance warned.

"Okay." Matthias said anxiously, then looked at the wall sconces.

Everyone watched and waited, not wanting to do anything that might distract Matthias from his task.

Ever so slightly, the lights on either side of the fireplace began to dim.

"That's it. You're doing it. But when you've had enough, make sure that you back off." Rance told his son quietly.

After a moment, the lights returned to their full illumination.

"I really did it!" Matthias said in amazement.

"You did exceptionally well, Matthias." Bitru said seriously.

"Yeah! That was GREAT!" Brandton said with a grand smile.

Matthias blinked, then muttered, "Thanks."

"That went better than I expected. I was worried that this would take longer and that the boys might not be well rested for school tomorrow." Grandma Keller said happily.

"Speaking of school. I got the weirdest call tonight." Rance said as he picked up his eggnog from the coffee table.

"Yes. I meant to ask you what that was about." Grandma Keller said seriously.

"Someone called and said that Matthias had been recommended to this international school project... he said it didn't cost anything and if it's for real, it sounds like it could be the chance of a lifetime for him." Rance said frankly.

"It's for real." Brandton said simply.

When he realized that everyone was looking at him, he quietly continued, "Some stuff happened when Bitru went to my school. Let's just say that it was bad enough that they decided to not let him go back there. And, I guess, since there wasn't a really good place to send him instead, they decided that it would be a good idea to set up a school for kids who could probably do great things if they got a decent education."

"Me?" Matthias asked dubiously.

"Well, to be honest, we asked that they include you because you're our cousin." Brandton admitted.

"So, it's for real?" Rance asked to be sure.

"Yeah. It's totally for real. Bitru and I are going to be going to school there, tomorrow. They said that we might be the only two students until they can recruit the others. But they also said that we might have the kids of foreign diplomats and dignitaries from all over the world taking classes with us." Brandton said happily.

"Mr. Silverstone promised that they would recruit the most experienced teachers from all over the world to give us the best possible education." Bitru added quietly.

"I talked to Mr. Silverstone right before we came over here. From what he told me, quite a few people have been unhappy with the offerings not only in our public schools, but also with the private schools in the area. By setting up a school on the grounds of a foreign consulate, the school would, in essence, be on foreign soil and not subject to the state and federal requirements governing education. The boys are actually going to get the opportunity to learn the things that they'll need to know when they're released into the world." Warren said seriously.

"Matthias does okay in school..." Rance said as he looked at his son.

Bitru followed Rance's gaze, then quietly said, "I had hoped that Brandton and I would have our older cousin with us, so that we could go to him if we were having trouble. Since he's almost an adult, he could probably do a lot more than we could."

Matthias looked at Bitru with surprise at the statement.

"I wouldn't want for Matthias to have to leave all his friends." Rance said in a conflicted tone.

"You don't have to worry about that, Dad." Matthias said frankly. "Me and my friends spend all our time texting and tweeting. Even if we were in the same room, we probably wouldn't say two words to each other. Me being at a different school wouldn't change anything."

"So, you want to go?" Bitru asked hopefully.

"Sure. It sounds like it could be good." Matthias said with a shrug.

"I'll call Mr. Erikson and let him know that we're going to accept his offer." Rance said decisively.

"I'm glad. But we probably need to be going. Since the boys are going to be starting a new school in the morning, they'll need their sleep." Warren said as he stood.

"Remember, you said that you're going to be coming over this weekend." Grandma Keller said as she pulled her son into a hug.

"We'll be here." Warren promised.

"And *you*. Make sure you practice with your ability so you aren't making everyone in your new school tired and hungry." Grandma Keller said as she switched to hugging Brandton.

"I'll try my best." Brandton said warmly.

"Bitru, the next time I see you I want to see that you've put on some weight. You're too thin." Grandma Keller said before also engulfing him in a hug.

"If I'm going to be seeing you again this weekend, I don't know that I will be able to fulfill your request. However, if I were to have some more of your pfeffernüsse, I would be more than happy to try." Bitru said shyly.

Grandma Keller gave Bitru a quick kiss on the forehead, then said, "It's a deal."

* * * * *

As Warren, Brandton and Bitru were putting on their coats, Grandma Keller ran up to them with a sealed plastic container.

"Drive safely. If you were to have an accident after drinking my eggnog, I would take it very personally." Grandma Keller said to her son seriously.

"I'll be careful, Mom." Warren assured her.

"Here you go, Bitru. This is all for you. I'll make another batch tomorrow." Grandma Keller said warmly.

Bitru carefully opened the top of the plastic container and was delighted to find that it was completely filled with pfeffernüsse.

"Thank you, Grandma Keller. I promise that not one crumb will go to waste." Bitru said happily.

"Go on. I'll see you this weekend." Grandma Keller said as she made a shooin' motion toward the door.

Warren laughed at the action, then herded the boys to walk with him out of the house.

* * * * *

Once they were in the car and on their way, Brandon quietly said, "I guess from the way you were talking in there that you like Matthias."

Bitru considered the statement for a moment before responding, "I don't know him well enough to say that I *like* him. But I believe I understand at least some of the turmoil that he is feeling."

"How's that?" Brandon asked curiously.

"There have been times, usually just after we had moved to a new area, when people would encounter me and automatically treat me condescendingly, due to my age. They would disregard my thoughts and have the temerity to make decisions on my behalf without consulting me. I believe Matthias is struggling with a similar situation." Bitru said thoughtfully.

"So you want for us to stroke his ego and let him think that he's our leader?" Brandon asked cautiously.

Bitru smiled at Brandon's assessment, then said, "I believe that we should treat him with all the respect due to someone who is our senior. When circumstances allow it, we should encourage him to accept adult

responsibilities and encourage him to succeed."

"Yeah. That sounds nicer." Brandon said quietly.

Suddenly, the deep pitched sound of organ music began to fill the car.

"Excuse me." Bitru said as he took his phone out of his pocket.

Although Brandon didn't feel comfortable listening to Bitru's side of the conversation, he really didn't have any other choice.

"Father." Bitru said in greeting.

"Yes. Mr. Silverstone discussed matters with us and we approve of the arrangements that he suggested." Bitru said carefully.

There was a long moment of silence as Bitru listened, then he said, "It is too early for me to say that I have made 'friends', but I have met some kind people whom I believe I may be able to form that sort of emotional connection with."

"Yes. The matter of our bloodline has been discussed. I thank you for anticipating my need to be with others to discover the permutations." Bitru said carefully.

There was a longer silence, and Brandon looked into the back seat with concern.

"Yes. Should circumstances allow, I would like that very much." Bitru said with a smile.

"I understand. Thank you, Father. Sleep well." Bitru said quietly, then disconnected the call.

"Is everything okay?" Brandon asked cautiously.

"My father has been up all night making arrangements. It is almost morning, there. I have never known him to go to such lengths for anyone." Bitru said

honestly.

"I think that the best way you'll be able to thank him is to do everything that you can to make his arrangements worth it." Brandton said frankly.

"It is such a great responsibility. I don't know if I can." Bitru said quietly.

"Don't worry. I'll help you. And I bet that Matthias will, too... at least, as long as we make him think that he's in charge." Brandton finished with a smile.

"Do you think that the other students will be willing to come to our school?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"I think so. Matthias was going to a private school, so it was different for him. But all the others are going to our school. If their parents care anything about them at all, then they're going to jump at the opportunity to send their kids to an 'international' school to give them chances to succeed that they wouldn't get any other way." Brandton said thoughtfully.

"Yes. From the way Uncle Rance spoke of what he had been told, it sounds as though they're presenting the school as an unprecedented opportunity. I just hope that the school will deliver on the promises that it is making." Bitru said anxiously.

"We'll *make* it deliver. Remember, when you dig all the way down to the root of this thing, it's us. We caused it. Yeah, Mr. Silverstone and your dad did most of it, but if it weren't for us, none of the rest of it would have happened. So, like it or not, we're responsible for what happens next. If things start going the wrong direction, then it's up to us to set it right." Brandton said seriously.

"We will remain diligent to make our school a success." Bitru said calmly, just beginning to sound a little more confident.

"There's just one thing I'm kind of sorry about, leaving my old school." Brandton said thoughtfully.

"What might that be?" Bitru asked curiously.

"You never got to try the cafeteria pizza. I really wanted to see that." Brandton finished with a teasing smile.

"I believe that I have experienced more than enough of the school's cuisine." Bitru said seriously.

"Yeah. But I still think you should've tried it. Cafeteria pizza is classified as a vegetable." Brandton said with a grin.

After a moment for that to register, Bitru quietly said, "Since the 'burger' was classified as food, I do not give much credence to their classification system."

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"Boys, we'll be home in a few minutes and there's something that I need to tell you." Warren said quietly.

"Sure. What?" Brandton asked curiously.

"Liz Anne doesn't know anything about our bloodline. Don't talk about it in front of her and don't use your abilities around her." Warren said seriously.

"Is that just for Mom, or is that everyone? I mean, is there anyone outside our family who knows?" Brandton asked carefully.

"Not that I know of. The few times that I know of when someone has found out, it's gone badly. And it usually resulted in one or more of our deaths." Warren said frankly.

"Is it a gift or a curse?" Brandton asked thoughtfully.

"Both. Neither. I guess that's up to you. Once you've learned a little better control, you can choose never to use it again, if you want." Warren said seriously.

"But we have to walk around every day, keeping this big secret about ourselves." Brandton said slowly.

"Yeah. That's life. You've got no choice but to play the hand you're dealt." Warren said simply.

"Brandton, I believe that Uncle Warren is correct. In the hand that you have been dealt, you have an extraordinary ability. In the hand someone else was dealt, they might have received an inoperable birth defect or a genetic predisposition for cancer. In the long view, I find that I have no reason to despair." Bitru said carefully.

"Yeah. Okay. I'll give you that one." Brandton said with a grin.

"Good. Just try to keep a lid on it around Liz Anne. Let me know if you need to talk to me about it and we'll find an excuse to go and do something together." Warren said seriously.

"Yeah. We'll do that." Brandton agreed.

"Thank you again, Uncle Warren. I cannot adequately express my gratitude for all that you have done for me." Bitru said sincerely.

"Your father is paying us." Warren said simply.

"Excuse me?" Bitru asked in surprise.

"We're living on the edge. There's no way that I could have taken on another mouth to feed with my income. When your father figured out that we shared a bloodline, he offered to pay me to let you live here with us. I mean, if money weren't a concern, I would have been happy to do it, just to help out. But things being as they are... well, I just didn't want you to find out later and think that it was all an act." Warren said seriously.

"So, if I may ask, which things are part of the service you are paid to provide and which are because you care?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"Bitru, it's getting cold in here." Brandton whispered.

"Sorry." Bitru said as he fought to get his ability under control.

"I can't really answer that, Bitru. You're staying with us because your father arranged it. But as far as everything else, you're being included as part of my family, like another son. I don't keep a list of which services are covered and which aren't. I care, alright? I'm sorry I brought it up. I just didn't want for you to get hurt later, if you found out." Warren finished quietly.

After a moment, Bitru slowly said, "Thank you for telling me. And thank you for allowing me to stay here with your family... including me in your family. Whatever my father is paying you can't be enough for what I am receiving."

"Should I ask for a raise?" Warren asked with a grin.

"I would not recommend it." Bitru said with the beginning of a smile.

* * * * *

As Brandton and Bitru walked into their bedroom, Brandton quietly asked, "When we were talking about religion and stuff, were you asking about that because of our... gifts?"

"Yes. On one of the few occasions when my father spoke to me about it, he mentioned that some look upon our gifts as being supernatural in origin." Bitru said carefully.

"Yeah. I guess it's easier to explain things that you don't understand as being 'from God' than to really think about them." Brandton said seriously.

"So, you do not believe that our gifts are mystical in nature?" Bitru asked curiously.

"No. Even if we don't know exactly how they work, I'm sure that there's a scientific explanation. Just because we don't know what it is yet, doesn't mean that we should automatically call it 'magic'." Brandton said seriously.

"I concur. It pleases me to know that you believe as you do." Bitru said warmly, then continued, "Although I could understand it if a person were to jump to that conclusion, at least in the beginning."

"Yeah. I guess." Brandon said thoughtfully, then quietly asked, "How did you get here, yesterday?"

"I flew." Bitru responded cautiously.

"No. I mean, from the airport." Brandon said seriously.

"My father had a car waiting." Bitru said simply.

"Oh. Okay. But what about the rain? When you got here you were all wet." Brandon said thoughtfully.

"When I arrived, I stood in front of your house for... an unspecified amount of time, trying to work up my courage to knock on the door. I believe that there might have been a slight cloudburst during that time." Bitru said quietly.

"Oh. Okay." Brandon said before starting to get undressed.

"You do not have more questions for me?" Bitru asked cautiously.

"Nope. Not right now." Brandon said simply, then quickly added, "But if you have any questions about me, you can go ahead and ask them."

Bitru thought for a moment, then quietly said, "I cannot think of any."

"Okay. Well, I didn't get enough sleep last night, so I'm going to bed." Brandon said as he pulled on his sweatpants and a tee shirt.

"Yes. I still haven't adjusted to this time zone. I should sleep now, too." Bitru said as he started undressing.

As Brandon climbed into bed, he suddenly said, "I thought of another question. When you were younger, did you ever want a brother or sister?"

"Yes. There were many times that I thought that I would enjoy having a sibling." Bitru said honestly, then asked, "And you?"

"Yeah. I always wanted a little brother. I guess it kinda ended up working out that way, didn't it?" Brandon asked thoughtfully.

"I suppose that it did." Bitru said warmly.

"Don't forget to charge your phone." Brandon said with a smile.

"Oh! Yes. Thank you." Bitru said as he retrieved his phone from his pants pocket, then thought to ask, "Do you need for me to turn off the light?"

"No. I can reach it from here. Just let me know when you're ready for it to be off." Brandon said as he relaxed.

"You can turn it off whenever you like." Bitru said from the bed above him.

"Goodnight, Bitru. Sweet dreams." Brandon said as he reached over to the switch cord on his nightstand and turned off the lamp on the desk.

"Yes. Sweet dreams, Brandon. Goodnight."