

The Well of Hurt

Hurt & Comfort - IV

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The Well of Hurt

[Chapter 1: Q-pid and Strife]

Kathryn Janeway was asleep in her quarters when she felt a presence next to her.

"Lights." She commanded and looked over to see the reclining figure of 'Q' beside her in the bed.

"Intruder Alert!" She barked into the air, but there was no response from the computer.

"I couldn't allow us to be interrupted Kathy. I am here to offer you a once in a lifetime opportunity." Q said proudly.

"I decline." Kathryn said without hesitation as she got out of the bed and pulled on her robe.

"Hear me out. I'm about to offer you the unique opportunity to be the mother of my child." Q said with great flourish.

Kathryn wasn't sure if she was suppressing a chuckle or her gag reflex, but she was finally able to say, "As nice an offer as I'm sure that is, I'm not..."

"Kathy! Any lesser being should be honored to even be considered for such a privilege." Q said haughtily.

"Despite your sweet talking, I'm afraid I must decline your offer." She said, trying to keep a serious look.

"But just think what it could mean to you, to your crew, to have one of the Q in your corner, so to speak." Q said and gestured to the viewport over the bed.

Kathryn gasped as she saw the earth outside her window.

She stood, looking in wonder at her home planet. She was actually considering his offer for a moment when she realized that space station McKinley should be visible. And the starfleet space dock structure should be half-visible since it maintained a geosyncrynous orbit. Her thoughts were interrupted.

"You know that it is in my power to grant certain favors." Q said with a sly grin.

[And his favors would be as false as this implied promise... to take us back to a home that wasn't really home.] She thought with disappointment.

Q put his hand under her chin and turned her to face him.

::INTRUDER ALERT:: Sounded over the intercom.

Q looked away and began to look around the room with worry.

Kathryn was intrigued by his reaction, but before she could ask, Q absently said, "This wasn't supposed to happen."

Then he turned his attention back to her and said with false bravado, "Start as you mean to go on, as they say. This would be one of the perils of a relationship with a superior being. I have to go."

"What's bothered you Q?" Kathryn asked, interested in what could be so dire as to rattle Q so deeply.

"Nothing to concern your pretty little head Kathy. I will return... eventually. Consider my proposal." Q said and vanished with little more than a spark of his usual glamour.

* * * * *

Captain Janeway walked from the turbolift, still fastening the collar of her uniform as she called "Report." to the room in general.

"The computer detected two intruders in the sickbay area. The doctor reports that they are both severely wounded and near death and pose no threat. I have sent security to the sickbay in case he is mistaken." Tuvok said in a moderate tone.

"Sickbay to bridge." came the Doctor's voice.

"Go ahead Doctor." Janeway answered.

"I need Mr. Paris down here and I need security to back off so I can work. They're in my way." The Doctor said with irritation.

"Understood. Mr. Paris will be with you shortly." She said and nodded to Tuvok, knowing that he would make it so.

"I will be down in a moment and assess the need for security for myself. Janeway out." She said and was already half-way back to the turbolift.

* * * * *

"Report Doctor." Captain Janeway commanded as she walked into the sickbay.

"Two men, apparently human, both on full life support. Currently stable." The doctor said and motioned for her to come into the sickbay.

She noticed the four security officers standing at attention and motioned for three of them to leave.

"Thank you Captain. This one appears to be approximately twenty years old. A cursory examination leads me to believe that he was in an explosion. He has received rudimentary medical treatment but was near death when he arrived. I will need to clone a kidney, liver and stomach to restore him to normal functioning and a lower leg to restore him to full mobility. Various other organs have sustained significant damage and will need to be healed. My prognosis, it will take approximately two weeks to complete the cloning process and replace the organs. And an additional three days to repair the last of the non-vital damage and cosmetic injuries." The Doctor said and walked to the other man.

"This one appears to be approximately sixteen years old. He suffered a massive stroke. It must have happened immediately before or during his transport into the sickbay, because I was able to see his life signs drop from normal to nothing. He retains approximately twenty-two percent brain function. While neural reconstruction is possible, it would not be of any benefit in this case. I'm afraid there is nothing I can do for him but maintain his body." The Doctor said with detachment.

"Recommendations?" Kathryn asked, feeling a twinge in her heart for the sweet looking teenage boy who was basically brain-dead.

The Doctor knew that she was asking whether they should allow the younger one to die, and was just being tactful in the way she asked.

"I have had five minutes to assess the conditions of, and to stabilize both men... alone. If I am given adequate help and time I should be able to give you a more thorough report at the morning briefing."

He would never let her forget that she turned off the emergency medical channel of the comm system during their morning briefing last week. Kathryn fought the impulse to roll her eyes and simply nodded in acceptance.

"Proceed, Mr. Paris should be here shortly." She said as she left the sickbay.

* * * * *

"Good morning Captain." Tom Paris said as he exited the turbolift.

"Good morning Lieutenant Paris, I trust you are on your way to assist the Doctor." She said as she paused in the doorway to the turbolift.

"Yes... what kind of a mood is he in?" Tom asked cautiously.

"Mood Lieutenant? He is a holographic program, any mood that he has is simply a behavioral subroutine in his holomatrix." The Captain said in an instructive tone, knowing very well that the Doctor was as moody as any other member of the crew... maybe more so.

"Of course Captain." Lieutenant Paris said militarily then in a less formal tone said, "That bad, huh?"

"He's still got his matrix in a bunch about getting turned off during the morning briefing last week. But right now he honestly could use some help, he has two severely injured patients." She said and turned to leave.

"You know where to find me if you need me." Tom said offhandedly and turned to leave.

"Don't worry, Baytart will be able to cover your shift at the helm today." Kathryn said with a smile before the turbolift doors closed.

[It's going to take that long? These guys must really be messed up.] Tom thought to himself as he made his way to the sickbay.

* * * * *

Kathryn braced herself before turning on the Medical Holographic Channel on the comm system.

"Doctor, do you have a report ready for me?" Kathryn asked as everyone in the meeting focused on the Doctor's image.

"Yes Captain. And I must say that I have found some surprising things that I don't know how to explain." The Doctor said with an expression that might be worry.

"Go ahead."

"Starting with the younger of the two who I will call patient one. He has several scars on his body. Apparently he has been cut by a sword, stabbed with a dagger and been burned on several separate occasions. He suffered from malnutrition during his youth, which has stunted his growth, and I suspect given him the appearance of being younger than he actually is. I now believe him to also be approximately twenty years old." The Doctor said professionally.

The Doctor paused for a moment, for dramatic effect then continued. "Patient two, the one who appears older, shows signs that he is a trained fighter. His body has obviously been conditioned over a period of years in a manner suggesting combat training. He has recent scars on both his arms that appear to be self inflicted."

"I don't find anything particularly shocking in any of this Doctor. What else." The Captain said dryly.

"Neither of these men come from this universe. Nor do they come from the same universe as each other. They each have distinctive quantum signatures, definitely not our own." The Doctor said with an 'is that surprising enough for you?' expression on his face.

"Okay Doctor, that one is a surprise, but it might help to explain how they arrived here when there were no other ships in the area." Kathryn speculated outloud.

"They also both show evidence of genetic mutation... extreme genetic mutation." The Doctor said and waited for a reaction.

"Humans? Mutated? Doctor, can you explain further?" Kathryn asked with interest, the scientist in her screaming for more information.

"They each have a genetic sequence that is not found in any human that I have examined or read about. I can only speculate how the mutated sequence would effect the overall organism... the possibilities are staggering." The Doctor said with his own scientist showing through.

"Is that everything?" Kathryn asked, hoping that it was.

"Yes, that is all the relevant information. The rest will be included in my report." The Doctor said, pulling himself back to the proper attitude for a morning briefing.

"And do you have a recommendation for me regarding the younger man?" Kathryn asked, needing to make some sort of decision.

"Yes, I recommend that we keep him on life support until patient two has regained consciousness and can give us more answers. I believe they are a romantic couple... he might appreciate the opportunity to say goodbye." The Doctor said with a note of sadness in his voice.

"How could you possibly know they were a couple?" B'Elana asked incredulously.

The Doctor looked toward her indignantly and said, "The trace of semen in patient two's rectum was my first clue, since it came from patient one. There was no evidence of any force being used and there are still traces of lubrication on both of them."

"I guess that could be a clue." Harry said weakly.

Chakotay nodded with wide eyes.

"Very well Doctor, I will consider your recommendation and get back to you. When patient two is recovered enough to achieve consciousness, I want to be notified immediately. There are still too many unknowns about this." Kathryn said as she thought to herself, [And how does this relate to Q's odd behavior?]

* * * * *

"EMH to Captain Janeway." The Doctor said into the comm panel.

"Go ahead." The Captain's voice responded.

"Captain, you wanted to be notified when patient two was able to be brought to consciousness." The Doctor said professionally.

"About time, it's been three days... I'm on my way. Janeway out." She said and severed the link.

A few moments later Captain Janeway entered the sickbay accompanied by a second security officer.

At the Doctor's look of question she said, "You said that he was a trained fighter. I just wanted to be prepared."

"Captain, the man has one leg and no stomach. Ms. Wildman could defeat him in unarmed combat." the Doctor said icily as he pressed the hypospray to the patient's neck.

"Watch that attitude Doctor, you're treading the line." the Captain said with acid.

"Understood, would you like some privacy?" the Doctor asked with artificial patience.

"Yes, please." the Captain responded with equally insincere politeness.

The Doctor walked away to leave the Captain alone with his patient.

* * * * *

He could hear a woman's voice talking to him. It was too low to be Orroro or Emma, he couldn't quite make out the words she was saying.

He tried to reach for his glasses but couldn't seem to move his arm.

"What do you need, I'll get it for you." Kathryn said as she noticed the man struggling to reach for something.

"My glasses." He rasped, surprised by the gravelly sound of his voice.

"They aren't here. Can you tell me what you remember?" She asked quietly.

"Who are you?" Alan asked the woman, now sure that he didn't know her.

"My name is Kathryn Janeway, what is your name?" She asked with practiced diplomacy.

"Sc... Alan. Alan Summers." He said, his mind still in a fog.

"Alan, can you tell me your friend's name?" Kathryn asked quietly.

"I can't see. What friend? Where am I?" Alan asked with a wave of panic washing through him.

"Calm down. Doctor, he says he can't see." Kathryn called.

"No, I can see, but I can't open my eyes." Alan explained, trying to put together the pieces... and nothing would fit.

"Let me see if I can help." The Doctor said and took Alan's face into his hands.

"NO! You don't understand. If I open my eyes, I will burn a hole through something... or someone." Alan said with renewed panic as he recognized the feeling of being restrained.

"Am I to understand that your mutation manifests itself into an optic discharge of energy?" the Doctor asked, fascinated.

From the tone of the Doctor's voice, Alan decided that he wasn't a 'Friends of Humanity' doctor sent to butcher him, so he relaxed a little.

"Yeah. My glasses are made of ruby quartz, they are able to withstand my optic blasts since they are strictly in the red and

infra-red range of light. They also allow me to see by filtering the other colors of light through to me." Alan said tiredly.

"I'll see if I can't make something for you so you can see." The Doctor said and moved to the replicator.

"How did you get here?" Kathryn asked, trying to keep her impatience out of her voice.

"I don't know where here is. The last thing I remember was... I was in an explosion... then I woke up here." Alan said cautiously, not knowing if these people were the authorities gathering evidence against him for the destruction of the data-warehouse.

"Try this." The Doctor said, putting a pair of glasses on Alan.

"Where is a place that I can look that won't cause too much damage if this doesn't work?" Alan asked cautiously.

"Turn your head to the left, it is a cargo bay." The Captain answered.

Alan turned his head, then experimentally opened one eye, just a slit. When nothing happened, he opened both eyes and looked around the room.

He saw Andrew laying on the next table and jerked against the restraint field trying to get to him.

"Just relax. Can you tell me your friend's name now?" Captain Janeway asked quietly.

Alan thought about all he was seeing and decided to take control of the situation.

"I may have told you too much already." Alan said and noticed the two security guards with their weapons drawn.

"We're not going to harm you. Your injuries are being healed, we just want to know some basic facts, like who you are, where you're from and how you got here." The Captain said reasonably.

"No disrespect, but your saying it doesn't make it so. I'm sorry Ms. Janeway, but until I'm more aware of my situation, I'm not going

to answer any more questions. Why don't you answer a question for me?" Alan said with calm dignity.

"Ask what you like." Kathryn said with a smile that hid her displeasure.

"If you were in my situation, what would you do?" Alan said and laid his head back on the pillow.

"We'll talk again later Mr. Summers. Try to get some rest, you still have a lot of healing to do." She said and walked out of the room.

"Doctor?" Alan asked in as calm a voice as he could manage.

"Yes, can I get you something?" the Doctor asked pleasantly.

"My friend, can you tell me how he's doing?" Alan asked with pleading.

"I'm afraid your friend suffered a massive stroke. There is very little of his brain functioning and he is being kept alive by artificial means." The Doctor said quietly, wanting to be honest but not unnecessarily harsh.

Alan said nothing and lay back on the pillow again. [This time I did wake up in hell. Oh Andy, you can't leave me. We only just got together.]

Tears ran silently down his face until he drifted into an exhausted sleep.

[Chapter 2: Consolation and Loss]

Tom Paris noticed that patient two was awake and trying to move himself to get a better view of patient one.

"Here, let me help you." Tom said and adjusted the bed into a different position to afford him a better view.

"Thanks." Alan said sadly.

"My name is Tom. What's yours?" Tom asked in a friendly tone.

"Alan. You work here?" Alan asked, really feeling the need to talk to someone.

"Yeah, I help out the Doctor sometimes. What do you do?" Tom said and pulled a chair over beside the bed.

"I fight." Alan said tiredly and looked again at Andrew.

"I don't think I'd like that. I mean, I can fight if I need to, but I'd rather talk my way out of trouble." Tom said with a rakish grin.

"Yeah, well I've fought for years to protect our way of life... but our way of life became fighting." Alan said, now staring steadily at Andrew.

"Do you think the fight will ever end?" Tom asked casually. He could tell that this man just needed to get some things off his chest.

"It did. There's no more fighting on my world." Alan said and looked back to Tom.

"Who won?" Tom asked quietly.

"Nobody won. Everyone is dead... everyone on the planet was killed by a plague." Alan said and rested his head back on the pillow.

After a long moment of silence Alan turned to look at Andrew and asked, "What's going to happen to him Tom?"

"I don't know. I just help out around here, they don't tell me a lot of things." Tom said, underplaying his own importance.

"The things I tell you, are you going to tell that Janeway woman?" Alan asked carefully, looking into Tom's eyes to gauge his truthfulness.

"Depends on what you tell me. If you tell me your favorite color is blue, I won't tell her. If you tell me you're going to try and take over the ship, then yeah, I'd tell her." Tom said and finished with a shrug.

"Fair enough but, ship?" Alan asked cautiously.

"Yeah, you mean no one told you that you're on a star ship?" Tom asked in wonder.

Alan shook his head.

"Yeah. We're trying to get back to Earth. We've been stranded out here for nearly four years." Tom said with his own pained look.

"Where is here?" Alan asked curiously.

"The Delta quadrant." Tom said and got up from his chair.

"What's that?" Alan asked in confusion.

"First, you take the galaxy and cut it up like a pie. Then label each slice of the pie with a Greek letter. The Earth is in the Alpha Quadrant, we're in the Delta Quadrant." Tom said and opened the viewport.

Alan looked in wonder at the stars streaking by outside.

"What year is this?" Alan thought to ask.

"Oh man... if you have to ask... let me take a shortcut here. Computer, what is the current month, day and year as measured on the Earth Gregorian calendar?" Tom said, having a feeling he knew what the reaction would be.

"The current date is August, twenty-sixth, twenty-three eighty-six." the Computer said in a feminine voice.

Alan sat stunned. "Four hundred years." he whispered. Then he started to put together pieces from the earlier conversations with the current state of Andrew. Finally he felt he understood.

"Thank you Tom. Now I feel like I'm aware enough of my current situation to talk to Janeway again." Alan said quietly.

"I thought you'd be a little more freaked out by this." Tom said honestly.

"Before I met Andrew I would have been." Alan said and smiled fondly at Andrew.

"Andrew?... It suits him." Tom said after a considering look.

"Yeah. He's the best thing that ever happened to me." Alan said with a smile.

"I'll go get Captain Janeway. Try not to be up too late, you're scheduled for another surgery tomorrow." Tom said and walked away.

"Tom!" Alan called out.

"Yeah?" Tom said, poking his head around the corner.

"Surgery for what?" Alan asked quietly.

"We're cloning you a new stomach. It'll be ready tomorrow." Tom said and left the room again.

After a few moments he returned and sat back in his chair.

"She'll be down in a few minutes. I get the feeling you've got some questions for me." Tom said, looking at the worried expression on Alan's face.

"Yeah, I'm just wondering about what's going to happen to me." Alan said, surprised that he hadn't thought about his own condition until now. He looked down and noticed the burned skin on his arms and that he was missing four of his fingers.

"You've already got a new liver, the stomach will be put in tomorrow and you'll have a new kidney next week. After that you're getting a new leg." Tom said calmly.

Alan could only nod as he assimilated the information.

"If you can do all this for me, why can't you help Andrew?" Alan asked quietly.

"Because our technology can only do so much. I'm not a doctor, but to me it looked like most of the blood vessels in his brain exploded. There just isn't any way we can repair that kind of damage..." Tom trailed off seeing that his words were only hurting Alan.

After long minutes of silence Tom finally said, "I'm going to leave you two alone for a few minutes. The Captain will be here soon."

"Thanks Tom." Alan said and turned his tearful gaze back to Andrew.

* * * * *

"Mr. Paris said that you wanted to talk to me." Kathryn said carefully.

"Yes Captain. I'm sorry I was so cautious earlier but I didn't want to reveal too much until I understood my situation better." Alan said with a professional tone.

"Perfectly understandable. So how about answering my questions now... who are you and your friend?" She asked with equal professionalism.

"My name is Alan Summers, my partner's name is Andrew Wells. We are currently members of a group who are trying to get mutants and non-mutants to coexist peacefully." Alan said and spared a glance at Andrew.

"From the look of your condition I'm guessing the non-mutants were against the idea." Janeway said wryly.

"You could say that. A group of scientists and government officials conspired to create a virus specifically engineered to seek out the X gene that is common to all mutants... and kill the mutants in the most horrible way imaginable." Alan said and turned his head to look at Andrew, feeling soothed by his presence.

"Biological research for the purpose of creating a weapon has been forbidden by the federation for hundreds of years... even the thought is..." Kathryn trailed off, not able to find a word horrific enough to describe the sensation.

"They did it. They released the virus on my world." Alan said quietly.

"How did you survive?" Kathryn asked with increasing interest.

"Andrew has the ability to create doorways into different dimensions. He found me near death from..." Alan stopped and looked down at his scars.

"I understand." Kathryn said, not needing for him to spell it out.

"While I was recovering, they released the virus in my world. The virus mutated. It killed everyone." Alan said in a pained voice.

"Then how did you come to be here?" Kathryn asked, more out of curiosity than official business.

"The world that Andrew and I were living on... they were about to do the same thing... release the virus. We were trying to stop it. While I was destroying a research data warehouse I triggered an explosion." Alan said and looked back toward Kathryn.

The Captain nodded for him to continue.

"I can only guess at what happened next but, I'm sure it goes something like this: Andrew found out I was hurt and took me to the doctor and was told that I was beyond help. So Andrew found some way to bring us both here... but the portal he created to get us here took so much of his power that it... left him like that." Alan finished in a whisper and looked back toward Andrew with tears beginning to fall.

"Thank you for talking with me Alan, welcome aboard Voyager. I only wish it could be under happier circumstances." Kathryn said and turned her own pained gaze toward Andrew.

"He's the best thing in my life... What am I going to do now?" Alan asked in a lost voice.

"That's one of those questions only you can answer, but I think I know someone who may be able to help you." She said with a friendly smile and a gentle tone.

"Who?"

"His name is Chakotay. He is my first officer and also serves as the ship's counselor. More importantly, he will be able to relate to some of your experiences. He should be able to look at your situation and help you to identify your options." Kathryn said, then got to her feet.

"Captain?" Alan called in a small voice.

"Yes?"

"What's going to happen to Andrew?" Alan asked, knowing that whatever it was would be her ultimate decision.

"Ask me again when you're healed and able to walk on your own. I won't do anything before that time." Kathryn said and walked toward the door.

"Thank you for that Captain." Alan said with relief.

"I'm not your Captain, you can call me Kathryn." She said as she left the room.

* * * * *

Tom entered the sickbay and went directly to Alan's bed.

"Do you mind if I talk to you for a while?" Tom asked quietly, trying not to notice the tears falling down Alan's face.

"Sure Tom, in my current condition, that's about all I'm good for." Alan said with irritation.

"I talked to the Doctor about that, he said that after tomorrow's surgery we'll do some regeneration work on your kidney. As soon as that's done, you should be able to be released from the restraint field." Tom said and took his chair.

Alan nodded to indicate that he heard.

"I wanted to ask you about your relationship with Andrew... I don't know how it is with two guys and I just wondered..." Tom stopped, not knowing how to voice his question.

"Before Andrew I could have told you what you wanted to know, but now... he took everything I thought I knew about love and turned it on its ear." Alan said fondly.

"How so?" Tom asked and leaned forward in his chair.

"He loves me completely. There aren't any words to describe what I feel for him. He brings me peace, joy, comfort, pleasure, confidence, beauty... basically all the good things in life. Because of him, I know what it is to love and to be loved." Alan said with an expression of joy crossing his face.

"I don't understand." Tom said in quiet awe at the transformation that came over Alan as he talked about Andrew.

"And I don't know if I can describe it. Andrew is my best friend. He is also my lover. Physically, emotionally, even spiritually he connects with me to bring me joy and pleasure. He's my teacher, telling me the things that no one else would dare. He's my protector, otherwise we wouldn't be here. And the best thing of all is that I can say without a doubt that I am all those things to him too. I'm a better person than I was before I met him and even if I lose him... I will continue to be a better person because I have known him." Alan said with confidence.

"I can't imagine that feeling. I mean, I've been with several women here on Voyager since we came to the Delta, but I didn't really have a relationship with any of them... just sex." Tom said sadly.

"I wish I could honestly say that it will happen for you, but I have the feeling that the love that Andrew and I have for each other is rare. Few people find it, most just settle for someone to hold them close at night to keep them from being alone and afraid." Alan said and noticed Tom flinch.

Tom looked away, that last comment hit a little too close to home for his comfort. "So did you two ever talk about having kids or anything?" Tom said, trying to change the subject.

"We're both men... there isn't any way we could have our own. But no, we never discussed it." Alan said, understanding the change of subject.

"Oh I forgot, four hundred years. Now two men can have a baby as easily as a man and a woman." Tom said offhandedly.

"Really? How? I mean, I can foresee some... plumbing problems with that." Alan said curiously.

"An artificial womb. It implants in the abdomen and works almost like a woman's womb. It's a simple procedure and poses much less risk than natural childbirth since the unit doesn't require the alteration of hormones or body chemistry. Almost as many women choose to use the artificial unit as the natural way for that reason." Tom said, obviously knowledgeable on the subject.

"What about the birth? I mean there isn't a..."

"...birth canal? The baby is delivered by the doctor when he removes the implant. But if you wanted a birth canal, it is possible... it requires some rearranging of the internal organs in the abdominal cavity and is a fairly invasive procedure. I wouldn't recommend it." Tom said seriously.

"If I wanted to have a baby... what would I have to do? I mean, I assume that the doctor wouldn't just pop one in because I asked." Alan said in a considering voice.

"It would be up to the captain. Honestly, in your present condition, I'd bet she'll want you to talk to Chakotay before she decides anything."

Alan noticed the inflection Tom placed on Chakotay's name and remembered that his original question had been about two guys. "I'm supposed to meet with Chakotay anyway, I might as well talk it over with him before I bother the captain. Could you tell me about him? I want to know what to expect." Alan asked, hoping to pick up some more of Tom's feelings toward the Commander.

* * * * *

Alan awoke to find a stranger sitting by his bed.

"Good morning Alan. My name is Chakotay, the Captain asked me to come down and talk to you." Chakotay said gently.

Alan gave the commander a slight smile before saying, "Good, I've been wanting to talk to you too."

Chakotay was surprised by Alan's response. Most people went out of their way to avoid him.

"What would you like to talk about first?" Chakotay finally asked.

"Honor, promises, duty, I want to know how you feel about such things." Alan said bluntly, hoping to catch Chakotay off guard enough to get the truth.

"I value those qualities very much... they are among the most important things in my life. They are core to my beliefs." Chakotay said, surprised at the bluntness of this troubled man.

"If you were in debt to someone, how important would it be to honor that debt?" Alan asked seriously.

"It would be the next priority behind my duty to the ship. Why do you ask?" Chakotay questioned, confused.

"Because the only person who's sat down and talked with me since I came on board is Tom Paris. I asked him to tell me about you and some of what he said seemed to be contradictory, so I wanted to ask you about it." Alan said honestly.

"What contradiction?" Chakotay asked with irritation at hearing the name Tom Paris.

"Let's see. He risked his own life to save yours. And what have you done to honor that debt?" Alan asked, curious by the immediate irritation exhibited by Chakotay.

"My tribe does not believe that you owe your life to another person when they save yours." Chakotay said in a practiced tone.

"I'm not talking about the letter of the law, I'm talking about personal honor. He risked his life to save yours, that creates a debt. You dishonor yourself and him as long as you refuse to honor that debt." Alan said with a little anger creeping into his voice at the pigheadedness of the Commander.

"He doesn't care about honor." Chakotay said dismissively.

"Are you blind? I've known him one day and I can see how much he values honor. I don't know about his past, but I can guess that he had to live with disgrace and dishonor at some point to value

it so highly now. I don't know if he is consciously aware of it, but he feels dishonored by your dealings with him."

"I have dealt with him fairly despite our past." Chakotay said defensively.

"Professionally you have been fair. That's not what I'm talking about. Do you want me to just tell you what I'm leading up to?" Alan said with exasperation.

"Please." Chakotay said with a little relief at the offer.

"Tom needs a friend. He needs you to be his friend." Alan said and watched Chakotay's reaction carefully.

There was a flash of surprise and a spark of hope before disbelief took over Chakotay's features.

"Tom has plenty of friends. He doesn't need me." Chakotay said sourly.

"He has one friend, Harry. The rest are acquaintances. And from the way he describes Harry, they are friends in an almost adolescent way. I can almost see the two of them having a sleep-over, building a fort out of blankets and chairs, then sitting up half the night reading comic books with the flashlight." Alan said with a smile.

Chakotay easily formed that image of Tom and Harry. He couldn't help but laugh.

"He needs an adult friend Chakotay. I can tell that he has become disenchanted with the random sex partners, the adolescent pranks, the empty day-to-day routine... he needs someone to show him how to relate to people as an adult." Alan said and glanced at Andrew.

"Why me?" Chakotay couldn't help but ask.

"Why not? From his point of view, your refusal to even try to be his friend after saving your life made him feel worthless. Anytime he made an overture of friendship, it was met with disapproval by you."

"When did he ever try to be my friend?" Chakotay asked with disbelief.

"Remember that he has been operating with an adolescent mentality. How does an adolescent get someone to notice them?..." Alan asked, leading Chakotay to figure it out.

"Teasing, pranks... All that time he was trying to get my attention? I thought he was trying to make fun of me." Chakotay said with wonder.

"Yeah, you have to understand, he doesn't know any better. He's never had a positive role model to show him how to behave as an adult. He may be a few years behind, but he's finally ready. Now he needs you to help him. And you owe him." Alan threw in, to clinch the deal.

"I guess I do. It's my duty as ships counselor and my personal duty to do this for him." Chakotay said, resigned to his fate.

"If you approach it as strictly duty, you may hurt Tom more than help him. Just be honest and give him a chance. Don't say anything you don't mean and don't do anything you don't want to." Alan said with caring in his voice.

"Did you ever think of becoming a counselor?" Chakotay asked, realizing that he had just been thoroughly counseled.

"No, that's Andrew's department. I'm just standing in for him while he's out of action." Alan said with a fond smile.

"You know he's not going to get better." Chakotay said quietly.

"I know. But I'm not ready to let go. Everyone says there's no reason to hope, but Andrew is always surprising me. I'm going to hang on for a little while longer before I give up." Alan said with tenderness directed at Andrew.

"I can't fault you for that. Everyone deals with things in their own way, and I'll be here to help you." Chakotay said, surprised at how much he had come to like this man during their short acquaintance.

"Actually, that's something else I wanted to talk to you about." Alan said nervously.

Chakotay prompted him to continue with a raised eyebrow.

"I want to have a baby... Andrew's baby." Alan said quietly.

"Why?" Chakotay asked carefully.

"So some part of Andrew will survive. So I can honor his memory by raising our child to know him as I do. It just seems the right thing to do." Alan said with a look of peace falling over his face.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Chakotay asked with caution.

"What I want is for Andrew to be alive and well, so no, this isn't what I want, but it's what I can have. Tom said that if I asked the Captain, she would have me talk to you about it before making a decision. So I decided to talk to you about it first. What do you think?" Alan asked with some trepidation.

"I think I've heard much worse reasons for having a child. But I have to ask you about the scars on your arms first. You've tried to take your own life. What are the chances that after Andrew is gone, you'll try to do that again?" Chakotay asked bluntly.

Alan cast a fond look at Andrew and said, "Thanks to Andrew, that's never going to happen again. When I cut myself, it was because I didn't know how to deal with what I had lost. Now I'm a different person, a better person. I may be unhappy for a while, but I'll survive with the support of friends like you and Tom... and eventually I'll honor Andrew by living my life the way he would want me to. By letting go and moving on."

"I will ask the Captain about the baby for you. If it helps you to know, I'm going to recommend that she allow you to have the baby. And you are correct about having the support of friends. I will be there whenever you need me as I am sure that Tom will. And I promise that over time, you will find even more friends on Voyager. There are some very good people here." Chakotay said with pride.

"Thank you Chakotay. I don't know if I can. I mean, I had a group of friends on my home planet... and now they're all dead, my best friend died a few weeks ago and I saw my next closest friend die about five days ago. I made more friends on the world where

Andrew and I live. I don't know if they're alive or dead. I just don't know how many more times I can go through this."

Chakotay thought for a moment and finally decided to try something. "What would Andrew want you to do?"

"Low one." Alan said with an insincere sneer, then smiled and said, "Of course he'd want me to make new friends and be happy."

Chakotay got up from his chair and said, "I'm going to talk with the Captain now. As soon as she makes a decision about the baby, I'll let you know."

"Thanks Chakotay, and what are you going to do about Tom?" Alan asked carefully.

"I'll think about what you've said. There's so much baggage between us, I don't know if we'll be able to put it all behind us." Chakotay said sadly.

"Just let him know that your interested in being his friend and I bet he'll be ready to put the past behind you." Alan said with confidence.

"I hope your right." Chakotay said with a smile and left the sickbay.

* * * * *

"Good morning Mr. Summers." The Doctor said cheerily.

"Good morning Doctor. I hear we're going to have a surgery today." Alan said, watching the Doctor move hurriedly around the room.

"Yes, later this morning. I have one other thing to do first." the Doctor said as the door to sickbay opened.

"Good morning Doctor, you require my assistance?" A tall blonde woman said in a monotone.

"Yes, good morning. Seven of Nine, this is Alan Summers. I was hoping that we could adapt a version of your ocular implant for him so that he wouldn't need to wear the glasses to control his optical discharges of energy." The Doctor said with excitement.

"Explain." Seven said with her version of curiosity.

"Here is his medical file, you see how his genetic mutation has changed his optic nerves to allow the passage of a great deal of energy to be discharged through the eyes?" the Doctor said, pointing at the panel.

"Intriguing." Seven said flatly, her version of giddy histrionics.

Finally Alan couldn't take it anymore and said, "What are you planning to do to me Doctor?"

"Nothing without your permission, I assure you. But if Seven confirms my suspicion, we may be able to adapt her ocular implant to make it so you won't have to wear the glasses anymore." the Doctor said calmly.

"Does that mean I'll have one of those metal things on my face like she does?" Alan asked, not thinking he would like that idea.

"You would have an ocular implant similar to hers, but yours would be subcutaneous... under the skin, since you won't have need of the implant's scanning abilities. It will simply be a control mechanism to allow you to restrict and focus your optical energy." The Doctor said patiently.

"How long would that take, I mean, would it mean I have to stay in this bed for another week?" Alan asked carefully.

"No, the process would be performed by Borg nano-probes and wouldn't place any restriction on your activities." Seven said as she looked at the medical file, checking a few things.

"You kind of lost me after 'No' but that's okay. As long as I'm not confined to this bed any longer, I'm fine with it. Will there be any risks?" Alan asked carefully.

Seven looked up from the panel and considered for a moment before answering.

"No, the worst that will happen is the procedure won't work and you'll be no worse off than when you started." she said confidently, then returned her attention to the panel.

"I concur, that is why I suggested this treatment. The possibility to remove your dependence on the glasses while introducing no risk to you was too much to pass up." The Doctor said proudly while watching Seven's journey through Alan's medical data.

"Okay, then my next question is when?" Alan asked, he had never considered being able to give up his glasses.

"It will take approximately two hours to program the nano-probes to perform the necessary task. The actual construction of the device will take approximately three hours." Seven said and looked curiously at Andrew.

"Thank you Seven." Alan said and followed her gaze to Andrew.

"What is the status of this man?" she asked flatly.

"He is on full life support." the Doctor said absently, looking over Alan's medical file again.

"When is he expected to recover?" Seven asked, not seeing any signs of treatment being administered.

"He isn't. His brain is damaged beyond our ability to repair." The Doctor said, sparing a glance at Alan.

"Then the unit will be terminated?" Seven asked with actual surprise in her voice.

"Eventually yes. His name is Andrew, he is Alan's partner..." the Doctor began, then remembered to whom he was talking and continued, "He's one of two, Alan is two of two, without his counterpart Alan's performance will be decreased."

"Is there no replacement available?" Seven asked, glancing at Alan.

Alan wasn't sure why she talked that way but decided to go along with it to aid in her understanding. "No. It will take a great deal of time to find one...even then it won't be the same."

"May I look at his medical file?" She asked in a no nonsense tone.

"Of course." The Doctor said with a trace of excitement.

After a few long minutes she finally said, " Normally a drone with this much damage would be disconnected from the collective and terminated. But there have been occasions when a replacement wasn't readily available and repair of the unit was the only viable option."

"Is there something you can do for him?" Alan asked with hope.

"I believe I just said that." Seven said in a flat tone that might either be teasing or chastising.

[Chapter 3: In Preparation for Renewal]

"How can we heal him? I mean with that level of damage, I don't see what can be done." The Doctor said to Seven, wanting to hope.

"We will begin neural regeneration to replace the neural tissue that has died. Nano-probes will be able to detect the residual electro-magnetic signatures of the previous neural pathways and reconstruct them as they were before the damage occurred. The chemical bonds will be re-established to reconstruct long-term memory storage and finally the blood vessels will be reconstructed and re-enforced to prevent a repeat of the damage from occurring." Seven said while she worked on the medical panel.

"Of course... it's so simple." the Doctor said.

Alan's eyebrows went up at that statement before he finally found his voice and asked, "How long will the procedure take?"

"It will take approximately four hours to program the nano-probes to perform the necessary tasks. The completion of all three stages of reconstruction will take approximately eight hours." Seven said calmly.

"Can we do it now Doctor?" Alan asked with excitement.

"I will need the Captain's permission before engaging in what is essentially an experimental procedure. Assuming she gives permission, yes we will proceed immediately. Seven, will you extract the necessary amount of nano-probes and begin the programming while I contact the Captain?" the Doctor asked with a smile.

"Right away Doctor." She said and walked to another part of the room to work.

"Doctor? Would you ask Tom or Chakotay to come here?" Alan asked with a tremor in his voice.

"What do you need Mr. Summers?" the Doctor asked with concern.

"I'm so excited, I feel like I want to run around the room screaming joyfully, but I'm tied to this bed... I need someone to

talk to... to go through this with me." Alan said with pleading in his voice.

"You *could* talk to me." the Doctor said plaintively.

"I didn't mean for it to sound like that Doctor, you have things to do to make Andrew better, I would rather sit silently for the next twelve hours than keep you from healing him one minute sooner." Alan said sheepishly.

"Understood. And I will see that someone is here to sit with you." the Doctor said with a friendly smile before walking to join Seven.

* * * * *

Tom came into the sickbay at a run.

"The Doctor said they found a way to cure Andrew." Tom said excitedly.

"Yeah. Isn't it great! You're going to love him Tom. I can't wait for you to get to know him." Alan said joyfully.

"I know I will. Anyone who could inspire such love has to be a great person." Tom said, too nervous to sit.

"So how are things with you?" Alan asked, hoping that Chakotay had taken his advice and made some sort of a move toward friendship with Tom.

"I really don't know. Commander Chakotay asked me to meet with him in Sandrine's after our duty shift today. I don't know what he wants to talk to me about... I mean, I haven't done anything wrong in weeks." Tom said with worry.

"Maybe he just wants to talk?" Alan suggested.

"I don't think so. I can think of about a hundred and thirty-five other people on this ship he would rather talk to before me." Tom said quietly.

"That isn't exactly correct Lieutenant." Chakotay's voice said from the doorway.

Tom looked up surprised as Chakotay walked into the room.

"I would rather talk with you than Mr. Chell any day." Chakotay said with a smile.

Tom was stunned and just nodded in acceptance at Chakotay's statement.

"The Doctor gave me the good news and I thought I would come down and help you get through the wait." Chakotay said to Alan.

"Thanks Chakotay. Tom is here to do the same. Why don't you both pull up some chairs and we'll talk for a while?" Alan asked, trying to figure out how to break the ice between these two.

Silence filled the room as all three thought their own thoughts.

"What did you want to talk to me about? I mean, can we discuss it here?" Tom finally asked Chakotay.

"Nothing in particular. I wanted to have a few drinks and just talk." Chakotay said shyly, glancing at Alan.

Alan could see that these two weren't going to make any progress without his help and decided to change the subject, hoping that his problems would give them some common ground to start with.

"Did you have a chance to talk to the Captain about my request, about the baby?" Alan asked Chakotay.

"Yes, she is considering your request. Don't worry, I don't see any reason for her to deny it." Chakotay said with a small smile.

"I guess you'll get to talk to Andrew about it now, how do you think he'll react?" Tom asked.

"I think he'll love the idea. He'll probably want to carry the baby himself. Even though there is little risk, he'll want to take that risk to keep me from having to." Alan said fondly.

"Will you let him?" Tom asked, relaxing into the conversation.

"Not this time. We are equals in our relationship, he's done so much for us, it's my turn. Besides, it just feels right to me. As

long as he knows that I really want this, he won't try to stop me." Alan said with a tender smile.

"Have you given any thought as to what you want to do when you are both healed?" Chakotay asked with interest.

"Not really. I don't know what kinds of jobs you have for someone four-hundred years out of date. I guess we'll have to figure something out." Alan said, surprised that he hadn't considered his future.

"I think you both should take some time learning about how things work, then after you feel comfortable on the ship, look at what you want to do. I mean, not everything is as high tech as the sickbay. Our mess hall is probably a few years behind your kitchen at home." Tom said seriously.

"That's good to know. But cooking isn't something that Andrew or I are familiar with. I'd probably blow up half the ship if I tried to boil water." Alan said with a resigned frown.

"It was just an example Alan. I just wanted you to know that not everything is so foreign to your home. You two will find a niche. I can see how it might seem overwhelming from your point of view." Tom said, trying to make Alan understand.

"Tom's right. There are several jobs that don't require technical expertise. Even though our technology has advanced over the centuries, some things never change. A community of humanoids will have certain basic needs, and not all of them will be met by technology." Chakotay said carefully.

A look of surprise fell over Tom's face when Chakotay said that he was right... he couldn't recall that happening before.

Alan noticed Tom's surprise and decided to capitalize on the opening.

"I suppose so... Andrew and I are going to need to make some friends here. I'm not sure how to do that in this century. Chakotay, if you were interested in pursuing a friendship with someone, how would you go about it?" Alan asked, hoping he wasn't being too forward.

Chakotay gave him a momentary exasperated look before saying, "I would try to spend time with that person. Find reasons to be in the same place and establish a dialogue."

"But how would they know that you were interested and not just being polite?" Alan asked, watching Tom's reaction.

"Honestly, I may not be the best person to ask. The former maquis look at me as their captain, the starfleet crew look at me as their commander, I don't really have any friends among the crew." Chakotay admitted quietly.

Alan thought about how sad that was and decided to turn to Tom. "So Tom, how would you let someone know that you were interested in being their friend?"

"I don't know. Harry and I kind of fell together at Deep Space Nine, since then I haven't really made any friends. The maquis look at me like I'm a traitor to the cause and the starfleet think of me as an ex-con maquis. I'm friendly with a few people, but it's hard to call them friends when I know I couldn't sit down and share my thoughts and feelings with them... just my bed." Tom said and turned his face away from the men.

"Mr. Summers, Mr. Paris, we are ready to begin the surgery. Nothing more can be done for Mr. Wells until Seven of Nine has completed her reprogramming of the nano-probes." The Doctor said as he entered the room.

"Thank you doctor." Alan said, thinking that the Doctor's timing was perfect. After what had just been said, the two men needed time to consider each other's situations before talking again.

"I'm going to return to the bridge. Doctor, will you comm me when Alan is out of surgery?" Chakotay asked as he got up from his chair.

"Of course. And thank you for coming Commander." the Doctor said and reclined the bed.

Chakotay nodded and left the room.

* * * * *

Tom sat by the bed, waiting for Alan to come out of the anesthetic.

Chakotay entered the room and paused, looking at the caring, worried expression on Tom's face.

After a moment he came fully into the room and pulled up a chair beside Tom.

"How did it go?" Chakotay asked quietly.

"Just fine. The new stomach is operating normally and the damaged kidney has been repaired. We were also able to replace his missing fingers and finish healing the damage to his arms. After the surgery, I stimulated hair growth to replace what had been singed off. He isn't functioning at one-hundred percent yet but he can survive without life support and shouldn't have any pain." Tom said professionally as he looked at Alan.

"He's really a good person, isn't he?" Chakotay asked as he too looked at Alan.

"Yeah. What impresses me most is his loyalty to Andrew. I've never felt what he feels and I'm a little jealous of it." Tom admitted shyly.

"Me too." Chakotay whispered.

"Really? I mean, I always got the sense that you didn't need anyone... that you liked being left alone." Tom said and turned to face Chakotay.

"Really. I do like my privacy, but I also want to share my life with someone. I've been in a few failed relationships, but I've never connected to anyone on the level that Alan and Andrew have. I mean, when it's all said and done, what is the point of the journey if you don't have someone to share it with?" Chakotay said, now looking off in the distance.

"I don't like to be alone... I guess my time at Auckland made me realize that I like to be around people. But I've been so busy running around, being the pilot, medic, holo-programmer... basically doing anything to keep me from having to stop and look at my life and what's missing." Tom said, looking back at Alan.

"What is that?" Chakotay asked quietly.

"Someone to share it with." Tom answered, using Chakotay's own words.

"What about Harry? I mean, I know that he's your best friend." Chakotay asked, focusing on Tom again.

"Harry is great. And if I needed help, I know Harry would be there to do whatever he could but... I can't talk to him about the important stuff. He's so young, he doesn't get it. He sees the surface and accepts that things are always as they seem." Tom said, frustrated because he couldn't explain it better.

"So you can share the image of the experience but not the flavor because he doesn't have the depth to understand?" Chakotay asked hesitantly.

"It makes him sound shallow, and he really isn't like that. He has feelings, deep feelings, but we aren't the kind of friends who can talk about those things comfortably." Tom said sadly.

Chakotay noticed that Tom was admitting that his friendship with Harry wasn't enough and said, "And that's okay. Not every friendship has to be on the same level. I'm sure that Harry provides you an outlet for your less emotional interests."

Tom smiled at that statement and said, "Yeah, I hadn't thought of it that way. Harry and I do share quite a few common interests, and even if we can't talk about the tough stuff, it is good to have someone who will enjoy doing things with me. Hanging around with Harry is like a vacation from the seriousness of the day-to-day."

Chakotay thought about the statement and hesitantly ventured, "What if you could have both?"

"Both what?" Tom asked, confused.

"Harry to share in your lighthearted adventures and someone else to talk to about the tough stuff?" Chakotay said carefully.

Tom considered for a moment, then answered, "I think that I would consider myself very lucky if I could have the best of both worlds."

"Alan talked with me this morning about you and made me realize a few things..." Chakotay began, then trailed off.

"Like what?" Tom prompted.

"I've been avoiding this. Sitting down with you and talking like an equal. You're a good person Tom, and I liked you from the first day I met you but I tried not to see it because I didn't want to get hurt by you." Chakotay said, bracing himself for rejection.

"You thought I would hurt you?" Tom asked, never having considered that the Commander... no, that Chakotay could feel that way.

"Yeah, I was afraid that if I approached you as a friend, you would use me... or make fun of me... I guess I didn't bother to look deeper to see that there is a good person inside who wouldn't do that." Chakotay said ashamed.

"Actually, four years ago if you looked deep inside me you would have found a hurt, frightened kid who was just as afraid of being used and made fun of as you were. And he probably would have hurt you before you had the chance to hurt him." Tom said honestly.

"Then I'm glad that we're getting to it now. We *are* finally getting around to being friends, aren't we?" Chakotay asked carefully.

"Yeah, that's what we're doing." Tom said with a smile.

* * * * *

Alan lay quietly, listening to the two men come to an understanding. These two men were good for each other, Tom had a youthful joy of life and Chakotay had a mature stability. They were a perfect compliment for each other.

"I'm awake." Alan said, when he noticed that he couldn't feel his glasses on his face.

"Your glasses are beside the bed on your right. You aren't restrained anymore." Tom said, wanting to see Alan be able to move from the position he had held for days.

Alan fumbled for the glasses and carefully put them on.

"Thanks Tom. How are you two doing?" Alan asked as if he didn't know.

"We're good. It looks like your plan to get us to become friends worked." Chakotay said with a gentle smile.

"My plan?" Alan asked with the most innocent look he could manage.

Chakotay and Tom both laughed at the innocent expression and Tom finally said, "Yeah, you tried to get us to talk and realize that we could be friends."

"Okay. You caught me. You aren't mad are you?" Alan asked them both.

"Not at all." Chakotay said with a smile.

"I'm just worried that if you can change our lives so much in two days, what's it going to be like when Andrew is awake too?" Tom said plaintively.

"Once Andrew and I are completely healed, we'll be focusing our attention on each other more than anyone else... you'll be safe." Alan said calmly and moved to the edge of the bed.

With a little effort, Alan made his way into a sitting position with his one leg hanging over the side of the bed.

"How are *you* feeling?" Tom asked, happy to see Alan able to move so freely.

"Pretty good... hungry." Alan said, just noticing the very empty feeling in his new stomach.

"I'll check with the Doctor, and if he says it's okay, we can take you to the mess hall to get something to eat." Tom said as he got up from his chair.

"Tom! Wait. Don't do that. I don't want to leave Andrew here alone." Alan said and looked at Andrew laying silently.

Tom stopped in his tracks and looked back to see Alan looking at Andrew. A feeling of pity washed over him at the sight. Even

though he knew Andrew would be awake in about nine hours, the scene before him broke his heart anew.

"Yeah, you and Andrew can experience your first visit to the mess hall together... you'll need all the support you can get when you taste leola root." Tom said as he tried to discretely choke back his tears.

Chakotay nodded in agreement then added, "We may all need new stomachs before Neelix is finished with us."

Tom let out a chuckle and walked to a computer panel in the wall. "What kind of food do you like? The computer can make just about anything."

"Does it have Beanie Weenies?" Alan asked, though he had never eaten them before he met Andrew, they were now one of his favorite foods.

"I've never heard of that, but I'll see if the computer has." Tom said and turned back to the computer.

"Here it is..." Tom said with surprise and created the meal.

A moment later Tom took the plate to Alan and sat back down in his chair.

"Mmm... good." Alan said as he finished his first bite.

Tom smiled at Alan's enjoyment and caught a duplicate of his smile on Chakotay's face.

"Seven could be ready to begin at any time, so it's best that we stay here anyway." Tom said quietly.

"Thanks for staying with me guys... I'd be a wreck if I had to lay here alone and worry about Andrew by myself." Alan admitted reluctantly.

"If it was me in that bed instead of you, where would you be?" Tom asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah, I'd be sitting in that chair. It's just hard for me to believe that I didn't know you guys two days ago." Alan said in wonder.

Silence filled the room as the three men thought about the nature of friendship.

"We are ready to begin the procedure." Seven of Nine said as she walked over to Andrew's side.

All three men watched as she injected Andrew with a hypospray.

"What now?" Alan asked as Seven began scanning Andrew.

"Now we wait. The process will take eight hours to complete. It is fully automated and will cause no outward manifestation." Seven said and walked out of the room.

"Could you guys help me over to Andrew? I want to be beside him when he wakes up." Alan asked with pleading in his voice.

"You plan to wait by him for the whole eight hours?" Tom asked in confirmation.

"Yeah. Tom, I can't explain... I just need to." Alan said helplessly.

"No. I will help you over to him and let you talk to him for a few minutes. But then you're going back to bed. And I *will* sedate you if you refuse. I will check with Seven and the Doctor and find out when is the earliest that he could possibly wake up. I promise that you'll be awake and by his side before that time." Tom said firmly.

"I agree with Tom. You are not recovered enough to sit an eight hour vigil with Andrew." Chakotay said with worry evident in his voice.

Alan thought about what they said and finally nodded. "Okay guys, you win. After all I've tried to do for you two, and you gang up on me." He said with a teasing smile.

"Good, hop off that bed and I'll help you over to Andrew." Tom said and stood to offer Alan support.

Alan did as instructed and with both Tom and Chakotay's help, made it over to Andrew's bedside.

"Could you guys give me a few minutes alone with him? I just need to say some things." Alan said shyly.

"Of course. We'll be in the next room when you need us."
Chakotay said tenderly.

"And I'll be back with a hypospray for you if you're not done within half an hour." Tom said with authority.

"This won't take long. Thanks again guys." Alan said and stood on his one leg to look down into Andrew's face.

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"Andy, I don't know how much of what's been going on you can hear or understand, but just in case you're frightened I wanted to let you know what's going on." Alan said, then moved in and gave Andrew a gentle, tender kiss.

"We're working on healing you right now. It shouldn't be much longer, just eight hours. You know that I love you and I don't have to keep repeating it for you, but I have to say it for myself... I love you Andy, come back to me." Alan said and moved in to hug him gently.

"I've been right here with you since we arrived, but I was only just let out of my bed or I would have been here by your side the whole time. If I could stay here for the next eight hours, you know I would do it but the guys... Chakotay and Tom... they won't let me. They're worried that my being out of bed for so long will aggravate my injuries." Alan said quietly, then quickly said, "Don't worry, I'm healing up just fine, I'm not in any pain. They just want to make sure that I get enough rest so I can be at full strength when you're all better."

"I'm going to go back to my bed now Andy. And as soon as you're better, we're going to leave this sickbay and I'm going to remind you just how much I love you." Alan said and a tear fell from beneath his glasses onto Andrew's face.

"I love you" He said again and sat back in his chair.

"Okay guys. You can come in." He said louder, so Tom and Chakotay could hear.

"Say everything you needed to?" Tom asked as he went to Alan's side.

"Not even close, but the rest can wait till Andrew can talk back." Alan said as he made his way back to his bed.

"I've got some good news for you." Tom said happily.

"Let me?" Chakotay asked quietly.

Tom nodded for Chakotay to continue.

"Seven of Nine is reconfiguring some nano-probes as we speak. You should be able to look at Andrew without your glasses when he wakes up." Chakotay said excitedly.

"That's great. I hate to ask for more favors after all you two have done but, is there any way Andrew and I could have a room for some privacy after he's all healed up? We need some private time in the worst way." Alan said with a blush creeping up his face.

"Already taken care of." Chakotay said with pride.

Tom looked at Chakotay surprised.

"I'm the one who assigns crew quarters. I took the liberty of signing out a cabin for the two of you while you were in surgery." Chakotay said with a big smile.

"Thanks... it isn't going to be any problem is it? I mean us being a same-sex couple." Alan asked timidly.

"No, same-sex couples aren't unusual. There aren't many aboard Voyager, but no one will think anything of it." Tom said with reassurance.

"Good, people aren't very tolerant of such things on my world. We were just lucky enough to find ourselves at the mansion where people are very accepting." Alan said and laid back.

"You look like you could use some rest. Chakotay and I will be in the next room if you need us." Tom said with concern.

"Yeah, I could use some sleep." Alan said, giving into the tired feeling.

* * * * *

Andrew awoke to a metallic taste in his mouth. He tried to move only to find that he couldn't. He heard muffled voices in the distance and wanted to call out to them but didn't seem to be able to.

A bubble of fear rose up in him and he would have screamed if he were able. Then he caught a familiar scent... Alan.

He felt lips pressed to his and could hear the soothing tone of Alan's voice, though he couldn't understand the words.

A caress, no a hug.

Then he felt wetness on his cheek. [Alan is crying for me... I made Alan cry...] He thought with pain. He fought and pulled but his body wouldn't obey his commands. He stopped his internal struggle and calmed himself. After a few moments he thought, [Alan is here with me, watching over me... I'm safe.] Finally exhaustion claimed him and he fell into a peaceful sleep.

* * * * *

Alan awoke to find a bandage across his face.

"What?" he asked and tried to remove it.

"Don't. Alan, Seven of Nine warned us that you will need to control the ocular implant consciously. We didn't want you to make the mistake of opening your eyes before you learned how to control it." Chakotay said with concern.

"Okay. I've been conditioned for years not to open my eyes when I wake up, so it wouldn't have been a problem. It's just weird to feel something over my face as I'm coming awake." Alan said and sat up.

"Just a precaution." Tom said quietly.

"How long till Andrew is awake?" Alan asked with a note of panic.

"According to the Doctor, it should still be another hour at the least and as long as four more hours." Chakotay said calmly.

"Seven of Nine is going to be back in a few minutes to instruct you how to use the implant, then we'll remove the bandages and try it out." Tom said happily.

"What's on my leg?" Alan asked as he tried to sit on the edge of the bed.

"A prosthetic leg. It should get you by until the cloned leg is ready. You'll probably need a cane to walk around until you get used to it, but you won't need for us to help you every time you need to walk." Tom said, relieved to see the smile come across Alan's face.

"You guys are the best. I don't know how I can ever thank you for all that you've done for us." Alan said with gratitude.

"We could say the same to you." Tom said and glanced over to see Chakotay's look of agreement.

"If Mr. Summers is awake, I will begin training him to use the ocular implant device." Seven said as she walked into the room.

"Ready when you are Seven." Alan said with a smile.

* * * * *

Half an hour later all three men watched as Seven left the room.

"She expects immediate success doesn't she?" Tom asked in stunned disbelief.

"She might consider a position at Starfleet Academy when we get back to Earth... as a drill instructor." Chakotay said, equally stunned.

"I thought she was going to hit me when I couldn't figure out how to close the secondary appiture." Alan said, staring in wonder at the room.

"What is it Alan?" Chakotay asked at Alan's expression of awe.

"I haven't seen colors like this since I was eleven years old. It's almost intoxicating, how beautiful and colorful everything is." He said and his gaze fell on Andrew.

Alan went silent and inched his way off the bed. "Oh my God. He's the most beautiful... I never even imagined..." Alan said and tears started flowing.

Chakotay and Tom shared a smile, realizing that they were witness to a very special moment.

"How much longer till he's awake?" Alan asked, not taking his gaze off Andrew for an instant.

"Go ahead and take your place by his side. We'll be right here with you." Tom said and pulled his chair over by Alan's at Andrew's bedside.

[Chapter 4: Through the Looking Glass]

Andrew opened his eyes and looked around the room. Immediately Alan was at his side.

"Oh Andy, oh God I've missed you. How are you?" Alan said and gave Andrew a kiss.

"I'm... confused? What happened Alan?" Andrew asked as he tried to turn in the bed.

"Tom, can you turn this bed off? He doesn't need it now." Alan said without turning away from Andrew.

"Your glasses? What? What happened to your glasses?" Andrew asked as he stared in wonder at the beautiful brown eyes looking back at him.

"It's a long story Andy. First, tell me how you're feeling. Do you need anything?" Alan asked with concern.

"Yeah, just give me a minute... I'm so confused." Andrew said as he felt the force restraining him evaporate.

A moment later the shell that was covering his midsection retracted into the bed.

Andrew looked at Alan and the four other people with him, three men and a woman.

"Where are we?" Andrew asked timidly, feeling that he was the center of attention.

"Another long story. Let me introduce you to everyone. This is Tom Paris and his friend Chakotay." Alan said and motioned for the two to approach.

"It's nice to finally meet you." Tom said with a warm smile.

"Yes. Alan's told us a lot about you." Chakotay said kindly.

"Pleased to meet you." Andrew said shyly.

"Commander Chakotay, Lieutenant Paris come to the bridge." Captain Janeway's voice called.

"Sorry, duty calls." Tom said as he followed Chakotay out of the room.

"Andrew, this is the Doctor and Seven of Nine." Alan said, as he looked back at Andrew with undisguised love.

"A pleasure to meet you." The Doctor said as Seven inclined her head in greeting.

"Nice to meet you both." Andrew said pleasantly.

"Is it alright if I take Andrew to our room now?" Alan asked anxiously.

"Just a moment for one last scan, then you may leave." The Doctor said and moved a tricorder over Andrew's prone form.

A moment later the Doctor nodded and Alan put out his hand to help Andrew off the bed.

When Andrew was standing, Alan thought to ask, "Do either of you know where our cabin is? Chakotay assigned it to us, but I have no idea how to find it."

"Computer. Where are the quarters assigned to Andrew Wells?" the Doctor asked into the air.

"Andrew Wells' quarters are on deck six section four room eleven." the computer generated female voice said.

"That doesn't really tell me much." Alan said helplessly.

"Follow me." Seven of Nine said and led the way out of the sickbay.

Alan grabbed his cane and hurried to follow Seven.

* * * * *

Andrew and Alan stepped inside their cabin, went to the couch just inside the door, and both collapsed on it with an exhausted 'oof'.

"I don't know how she can walk so fast in those high heels. I'd still have trouble keeping up with her if I had two legs." Alan said tiredly.

Andrew nodded then scooted over so he could lay his head against Alan's shoulder.

Tears began to fill Alan's eyes and he said, "Oh God Andy, I've missed you."

They simultaneously pulled each other into a bruising hug that lasted long desperate minutes. Finally Andrew asked, "Can you tell me now?"

Alan guided Andrew back to his shoulder and asked, "What do you want to know first? There's quite a bit to tell."

"Where are we?"

"On a starship seventy thousand something light-years from earth... and four hundred years in the future... and in a different dimension, I think." Alan said carefully.

"Wow. When I saw the Sickbay, it had so many computers and advanced stuff that I thought it would help you... I had no idea I'd be taking us so far away." Andrew said in wonder.

"Yeah, I'd still like to know how you did that." Alan said with curiosity.

"All I did was find an open portal and jump us through it. It was outside earth's atmosphere and almost beyond my maximum range using as many multiple portals as I could make, but I was able to get us through." Andrew said and snuggled against Alan's chest.

"You nearly killed yourself this time Andy. You suffered a massive stroke that damaged seventy-eight percent of your brain. Until this morning, we didn't think you were ever going to wake up again." Alan said sadly and pressed a kiss into Andrew's hair.

"How were you able to heal me?" Andrew asked in wonder.

"Seven of Nine. She withdrew nano-probes from herself and programmed them to fix you." Alan said still feeling like this wasn't entirely real, like he might wake up at any moment. Alone, and probably restrained.

"So she gave of herself to make me better?" Andrew asked in confirmation.

"Yes, and she did the same thing for me on a lesser scale to make it so I could see without the glasses."

Andrew nodded then pulled himself up to give Alan a long, deep kiss.

After the kiss broke, both lay silently for a wondrous moment.

"Alan, would you just sit here and hold me for a while?" Andrew asked quietly.

"I can't think of anything I'd rather do." Alan said with a smile and snuggled closer.

* * * * *

Alan heard the door chime and went to answer it.

"Hi Tom, you can't come in right now, Andrew is sleeping." Alan said and stepped out into the hall.

"That's okay, I wanted to talk to you anyway. How is he?" Tom said, beginning to pace.

"He's a little quiet. I guess this whole experience has bothered him. As soon as he's ready to talk about it, I'll be there to help him through whatever he's having a problem with." Alan said with concern.

"Do you want to come to the mess hall with me to get something to eat?" Tom asked hesitantly.

"Sure, but I probably won't be able to find my way back to my cabin." Alan said and stumbled a little, wishing he had brought his cane.

Tom automatically caught Alan when he stumbled, then said, "Fine, let's go. That way we can get something to eat and talk. And I'll make sure you get back home safely."

"Thanks Tom." Alan said as he followed.

* * * * *

Tom and Alan walked into the mess hall and were confronted by a foul stench.

"Leola Casserole today." Tom said as he made his way to the serving line.

"It smells like dirty feet." Alan whispered as he followed Tom.

"I wish I could tell you that you'll get used to it but... no one has." Tom said with a shrug and dished some food onto his plate.

"I don't know what I'm looking at here." Alan said as he looked at the alien food selections.

"The purple stuff is pretty good, the green is okay, but if you eat the yellow lumpy stuff you won't be able to get the taste out of your mouth for days." Tom said quietly.

Alan mimicked Tom's selections, avoiding the yellow stuff completely.

"Good morning!" A speckled furry man said as he barreled out of the kitchen.

"Neelix, I'd like you to meet Alan, our visitor from the past. Alan, this is our chef, guide and ambassador to the delta quadrant, Neelix." Tom said with practiced diplomacy.

"Nice to meet you Neelix." Alan said quietly.

"I have a special treat for our guest. A fresh mojoba berry pie, it will be out of the oven in a few minutes. I'll bring it to you when it's ready." Neelix said with pride.

"Thank you Neelix." Tom said as he took Alan by the arm to guide him to a seat.

"That was kind of rude... he was still talking." Alan said as he followed obediently.

"If you waited for Neelix to stop talking before leaving, you'd never leave the mess hall." Tom said as he took a seat.

Silence fell between the two as they started to eat.

Finally Tom said, "Is Andrew really okay?"

"I honestly don't know. He's so quiet, he won't talk to me." Alan said in a considering voice.

"You know him best. Is there anything we can do to help him snap out of it?" Tom asked before he took a bite of the green stuff.

"Just give him some time to work it out. If I think of anything, I'll let you know." Alan said tiredly.

"Remember that Chakotay and I are here for you if you need anything, even just to talk." Tom said seriously.

"I don't think it's a problem, but if it turns out to be, it's good to know I don't have to face it alone." Alan said with concern.

"Just remember all you've done for us. This friendship thing works both ways. If I needed you, I know you'd be there for me." Tom said with certainty.

"Absolutely. And I know you'll be able to count Andrew in on that too when he's feeling like himself again." Alan said and went back to eating.

"So you're just going to wait him out?" Tom asked as he went back to his own meal.

"Yeah, there's nothing else to do until he's ready to talk about it." Alan said and pushed his empty plate away.

"Then let's try not to worry. Who knows, maybe he's having trouble adjusting to the whole four-hundred year, Delta quadrant thing." Tom said with a shrug.

"Maybe. Whatever it is, I'll get him through it." Alan said with assurance.

Tom nodded as he finished the last of his food.

"Mojaba berry pie! Fresh out of the oven." Neelix said gleefully as he approached the table with a serving tray.

[Chapter 5: Watch Out What You Ask For]

The door of the cabin opened and Andrew could hear Alan saying, "Are you sure you don't want to come in for a while?"

"No, I want to check in with Chakotay. Maybe we'll come by to visit later." Tom said and walked away.

Alan walked in to find Andrew sitting on the couch.

"You been awake long?" Alan asked as he seated himself beside Andrew.

"Just a few minutes. Did you have a good visit with Tom?" Andrew asked quietly, not wanting to pry but curious about what the men had been talking about.

"Yeah. He just wanted to talk. We stopped by the mess hall... it happens to be named appropriately." Alan said as he pulled Andrew in for a kiss.

"I'm glad you've been able to make friends here." Andrew said quietly.

"Would you like something to eat? We have a replicator that can make just about anything." Alan asked with worry.

"I'm not really hungry. Would you hold me?" Andrew asked tentatively.

Alan immediately pulled him into a tight embrace. "Andy, I can tell that something is bothering you. Do you feel like talking about it?" Alan asked with calm assurance.

"No... I love you." Andrew said as he took a moment to just experience the comfort of Alan's embrace.

"I love you too." Alan said and kissed the top of Andrew's head.

"While I was... asleep... in the Sickbay, I could feel you near me." Andrew said, soaking in the comfort.

"Really? What did you feel?" Alan asked curiously.

"You were talking to me, but I couldn't understand the words. Then you kissed me. You gave me a hug... and then I felt a tear drop on my cheek." Andrew said from distant memory.

"I was just telling you that everything was going to be okay. I didn't want you to be afraid if you were able to understand what was going on." Alan said soothingly.

"I was scared for a minute, but I knew you were watching out for me and everything was going to be okay." Andrew said with a smile.

"I protect you just like you protect me." Alan said, remembering his conversation about love with Tom.

"Forever." Andrew said in a whisper.

Alan held him close and felt the concern growing deep within his heart.

"Love?" Andrew asked in a whisper.

"Hmmm?"

"I'm going to talk to the Doctor in the morning... would you do me a favor and wait for me here?" Andrew asked in a shaky tone.

"If that's what you want, I'll stay right here." Alan said, feeling hurt that Andrew didn't want him there.

"Thanks love... I was worried about asking you. Thank you for not making a fuss... I love you." Andrew said and pulled Alan tighter.

"Can I tell you something?" Alan asked tentatively.

"Anything." Andrew said and relaxed his grip.

"I'm worried. I know something is bothering you and you're not talking to me about it. I'm not trying to guilt you into telling me but, I want you to know what I'm feeling." Alan said, letting his concern show through his voice.

"I know you're worried, and I promise that after I talk to the Doctor, I'll tell you what it is. Right now I need to handle this my own way." Andrew said and buried his face in Alan's shoulder.

"Thanks for that. I trust you to do what is right, so I'll try not to be worried." Alan said with love.

"I think I'm ready to eat something. What can you make with that thing?" Andrew asked, glancing over at the replicator.

"Wait right here." Alan said happily.

A few minutes later Alan appeared with a steaming plate.

"Dinner is served." Alan said with pride.

"Beanie Weenies?" Andrew asked with disbelief.

"Just like home." Alan said and sat next to Andrew.

"I guess you do love me." Andrew said with a smile.

"Never doubt it." Alan said and watched Andrew eat.

* * * * *

"Doctor, do you have a minute?" Andrew asked from the doorway of the Doctor's office.

"Yes Mr. Wells, how may I help you?" the Doctor replied, setting down a padd.

"Something's... wrong. With me. I don't feel right." Andrew said with difficulty.

"How so?" the Doctor asked as a look of concern crossed his face.

"I don't *feel* right. It's like my emotions are... muffled." Andrew said, searching for the right words.

"You have just undergone extensive neural reconstruction, some disorientation is to be expected." the Doctor said in a practiced tone.

"It's more than that Doctor. I don't feel like me. Something you did changed me. After twenty-three years, I finally like me and I don't want to be different. I don't want to be like this. I like the way I was." Andrew said with pain in his voice.

"I assure you that I did nothing to alter you in any way, but since you are concerned, get on a biobed and I will run a comparative analysis against the readings from when you first arrived." the Doctor said, leading Andrew into the examination room.

Andrew did so and the Doctor activated the biobed's shell.

After a few minutes the Doctor said, "Curious."

"What is it Doctor?" Andrew asked with worry.

"I'm not sure." the Doctor said then pressed a button on the workstation and said, "Seven of Nine to the Sickbay."

* * * * *

"Tom? Are you busy right now?" Alan asked into the comm unit.

"I'm working a half shift today, so I have a few minutes. What's up?" Tom asked.

"Nothing much, I'm just about to crawl out of my skin with worry. Andrew went down to talk to the Doctor and asked me to stay here."

"Why would he do that?" Tom asked with concern.

"I have no idea. But I'm going crazy with worry down here." Alan said helplessly.

"I have to go to work soon, but I think I know someone who can keep you company until Andrew gets back. Just open the door in a few minutes when it chimes." Tom said and signed off the comm.

* * * * *

"You require my assistance Doctor?" Seven asked as she entered the Sickbay.

"Can you explain the presence of nano-probes in Mr. Wells' thyroid and pancreas?" the Doctor asked with challenge in his voice.

"I detected systemic damage from a congenital defect which was aggravated by prolonged malnutrition. Therefore I corrected the damage." Seven said without emotion.

"What did she do Doctor?" Andrew asked with worry.

"She repaired systemic damage which had the effect of altering your brain chemistry. The damage would have made you prone to mood swings, emotionalism and occasional erratic behavior." the Doctor explained.

"Fix it." Andrew demanded.

"It is irrational to damage a unit that is operating at optimum efficiency." Seven said flatly.

"Doctor, you are a computer program, right?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yes, a bit of an understatement, but essentially correct." the Doctor said.

"If someone thought you would operate more efficiently without your emotions, even some of them, wouldn't you try to stop them from changing you?" Andrew asked with pleading in his voice.

After a moment of silence the Doctor finally said, "Point taken."

"I do not understand." Seven said looking from Andrew to the Doctor.

"Seven, as individuals, humans have differences and variations, that is part of their strength. While one person may be debilitated by the systemic damage that Mr. Wells had, others adapt to it and integrate it into their life. Mr. Wells' is apparently a person who has learned to live with the mood swings and erratic behavior brought on by the abnormal brain chemistry. It has become part of who he is and he feels the loss of that part of himself." the Doctor explained.

"I still do not understand. But understanding is not required. Do you wish me to damage the organs to recreate the original conditions?" Seven asked and looked at the computer's readout.

The Doctor thought about what Seven was asking and said, "No Seven. I will need to do some research and find another way to deal with this. I know Mr. Wells wants to be restored to his original condition but damaging healthy organs should be a last resort. My ethical subroutines are jumping at the thought of it."

"So what are you going to do Doctor?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Rest assured that I will correct the problem Mr. Wells. Please allow me the time to find what options are available to you." the Doctor said calmly.

"As long as you promise to fix me, I can wait for a little while." Andrew said, resigned.

"I promise." the Doctor said in a solemn voice.

* * * * *

Andrew opened the door to his cabin to be confronted by a stranger in his living room talking to Alan.

"Andrew, this is Harry Kim. Harry, this is my partner, Andrew Wells." Alan said with a smile.

"Nice to meet you Harry." Andrew said a bit unsurely. He had been rehearsing what he was going to say to Alan in his mind, and hadn't considered that they might not be alone.

"I guess I'm going to go now. You two probably need to talk." Harry said and turned to leave.

"You don't have to..." Andrew began.

"Yes he does." Alan said with a smile at Harry.

"I was just here to keep him company till you got back. He was going crazy with worry for you." Harry said with a sly grin before walking out the door.

"He could have stayed." Andrew said helplessly.

"Harry knows that you were in Sickbay and that I'm about to go nuts wanting to find out what's wrong. Can you tell me now?" Alan asked with a helpless tone.

"Yeah." Andrew answered in a small voice.

Alan motioned for Andrew to 'come here' and took him into an embrace.

"When Seven fixed me, she did something to my brain chemistry." Andrew said shakily.

"What did she do? Are you alright?" Alan asked with worry.

"Whatever she did made it so I don't feel things the same as before. It's like everything I feel has had the volume turned down." Andrew said with difficulty.

"Do you still love me?" Alan asked in a scared voice.

"Yeah, but it's not the same as it was before..." Andrew trailed off and walked into the bedroom.

"Love?" Alan said, worried at the abrupt movement.

Andrew returned with Alan's red glasses. "Put these on." Andrew demanded.

Alan took the glasses and put them on.

"What does the world look like to you now?" Andrew asked in a desperate voice.

"Everything is red... shades of red." Alan said, not knowing why Andrew was asking.

"What if I told you that you couldn't ever take those glasses off again. You'll only ever see the world like this... how would you feel?" Andrew asked, hoping he could make Alan understand.

"I would hate it. Now that I've seen the world of color, I wouldn't want to go back to seeing the world in shades of red." Alan said absolutely.

"That's how I feel. When Seven changed me, she put the glasses on my emotions. Love isn't bright blue, it's just another shade of red. Anger isn't burning yellow, just another shade of red... I had to find out what was wrong with me before I told you. I didn't want you to think that my feelings had changed toward you..." Andrew said helplessly.

"Can the Doctor do anything to make you better?" Alan asked, near tears now that he understood.

"He's going to try. He said he would call me when he could give me some options." Andrew said and moved into Alan's arms.

"Oh Andy. I don't know what to do for you, but if you need anything, just let me know and you've got it." Alan said helplessly.

"Just hold me." Andrew whispered.

* * * * *

"Sickbay to Mr. Wells." sounded from the comm unit.

"Go ahead Doctor." Andrew said with desperation.

"Will you come to Sickbay so I can give you the list of options?" the Doctor asked professionally.

"We'll be right there Doctor." Andrew said quickly and pulled Alan up from the couch.

After a moment of thought, Andrew motioned to an empty wall and a portal formed.

"You sure you want to do that?" Alan asked hesitantly.

"I don't want to be like this any longer than I have to." Andrew said desperately and pulled Alan into the portal.

* * * * *

They stepped out of the portal into the hallway outside Sickbay.

As they entered, the Doctor gave a surprised look. "Were you waiting outside the door?"

"I didn't want you to think I wasn't serious about this. What do you have for me?" Andrew asked impatiently.

"After some investigation I realized that we can simulate your condition. Rather than damage perfectly healthy organs, which will cause them to fail sooner than they should, I could implant a device to mimic the symptoms of your original condition. It would behave much like an old Earth treatment you may be familiar with... a pacemaker. But rather than stimulate the heart to beat regularly, it would stimulate the pancreas and thyroid into overproduction." the Doctor said instructively.

"Will it make me feel like myself again?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Yes, I will program it to mimic the original levels that your condition maintained. And with the continued help of Seven of Nine's nano-probes, the increased production will not cause damage to the organs." the Doctor said confidently.

"When can we do it. I don't want to be like this any longer than I have to." Andrew said with pleading in his voice.

"Tomorrow. I will have to replicate the devices and then program each to produce the desired effect."

"Good. I'll be back then... thank you for understanding Doctor." Andrew said plaintively.

"You're very welcome." the Doctor said and went back to his work.

* * * * *

The next morning came and Andrew was in the Sickbay before most of the gamma shift had been relieved.

"Good morning Mr. Wells. It is technically morning, but only just." the Doctor said with a teasing smile.

"Can we do it now?" Andrew asked with pleading.

"Yes, get on a biobed and I will begin... Mr. Summers, if you'll get on a biobed, I'll be to you as soon as I can." the Doctor said and began gathering things.

"Me?" Alan asked in surprise.

"Yes, while I have you both here I might as well take advantage." the Doctor said and pressed a button on the workstation. "Lieutenant Paris to Sickbay." he said and went back to work.

"After I implant your 'pacemakers' your body will need time to adjust to the chemistry and I may need to make some adjustments. While we wait, I thought I could give Mr. Summers his new kidney." the Doctor said happily.

"But I feel fine." Alan said tentatively.

"And to keep you feeling fine, you'll be receiving this kidney." the Doctor said and motioned to a box on his workstation.

"You called Doctor?" Tom asked as he walked into Sickbay.

"Yes Lieutenant. I have a pair of patients who need to be prepared for surgery and am in need of an extra pair of hands." the Doctor said and gestured to the two men on the biobeds.

"Hey guys. It's a little early for surgery, isn't it?" Tom asked and yawned.

"If Mr. Wells had his way, we would have had surgery as soon as these implants were out of the replicator last night." the Doctor said as he moved said implants to Andrew's bedside.

"Relax guys. I'm going to give you something to put you to sleep now. I'll be here when you wake up." Tom said with a reassuring smile and injected Andrew with a hypospray.

* * * * *

Andrew awoke to see the Doctor and Tom Paris standing over Alan.

"How is he?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Just fine Mr. Wells. And how are you feeling?" the Doctor asked without looking.

"Okay, a little sleepy." Andrew answered.

"Good, it may take a while for your brain chemistry to adjust to the new insulin and hormone levels. Don't worry if you don't feel *just* like yourself right away." the Doctor said and continued to work.

"I understand Doctor. When will I be able to go?" Andrew asked, feeling strange.

"Whenever you wish. I'll be finished with Mr. Summers momentarily, I assume you'll want to wait for him."

"Of course Doctor. Thank you for doing this for us." Andrew said with emotion showing through his voice.

"Only doing my job Mr. Wells." the Doctor said and turned to face him.

"Are you done?" Andrew asked with a little concern.

"Yes, he should be awake within a half an hour, when he is, you two are free to go. I will want you both back here tomorrow for a follow-up." the Doctor said and left the room.

"How is he Tom?" Andrew asked as he got off his bed.

"He's just fine. The operation was a complete success. The kidney is functioning normally and we've just begun cloning the new leg, it should be ready in a few days." Tom said with a smile.

"Thanks for taking care of him Tom." Andrew said seriously.

"Just doing my job." Tom said in a mimic of the Doctor's tone.

Andrew chuckled at Tom's 'Doctor' imitation and said, "Not just for that, but for talking with him when he was worried... I'm glad he has someone who'll listen."

"No problem. Alan's a good guy. I'm a little jealous of you two." Tom said honestly.

"Really? Two banged up mutants, four hundred years from home? What's to be jealous of?" Andrew asked honestly.

"You're together. All the rest doesn't matter. You have each other." Tom said with a bittersweet smile.

Andrew felt a tear fall down his cheek and said with a chuckle, "This must be one of those mood swings the Doctor was talking about."

"Yeah, sure."

* * * * *

Alan and Andrew made their way back to their cabin the old fashioned way, via turbolift and hallways.

Once inside Alan asked, "How you feeling Andy?"

"I don't know yet. Better I guess." Andrew said and sat on the couch.

Alan sat down next to him and pulled him into an embrace.

The hug lasted long minutes and as they finally separated Alan noticed tears in Andrew's eyes.

"Anything the matter love?" Alan asked carefully.

"No. Everything is just perfect. While you were still sleeping Tom talked with me and made me realize how lucky I am." Andrew said joyfully radiating from his eyes.

"Oh Andy. It's good to have you back." Alan said with relief and pulled him close again.

"It's good to be back. I never want to have to go through that again." Andrew said and held on tighter.

"Andy, I need to ask you a couple things. Could you sit up so I can talk to you?" Alan said with a serious tone in his voice.

Andrew sat up and looked at Alan.

"I know we decided to wait a year before making it official but... technically that was four hundred years ago. Would you consider having the commitment ceremony with me now?" Alan asked with a tone of desperation.

"Now as in this minute?" Andrew asked, wanting to be sure of what he was about to agree to.

"Now as in later this week. Not eleven months from now." Alan said, not changing his expression a bit.

"Yes. I didn't have a doubt about my feelings before, but I wanted to know that you were sure of your own... now I don't have any doubt about your feelings either." Andrew said peacefully.

"Good. That leads me to my next question. It is possible for two men to have a child in this time... I want to have our child. How do you feel about that?" Alan asked carefully, watching for any hint of a problem.

A glorious smile came across Andrew's face before he said, "I think it is a wonderful idea. But you've been hurt so much, I should be the one to carry the baby." Andrew said with concern for Alan's health.

"I'll be fully healed in less than a week. And I *really* want this Andy." Alan said in a careful, serious tone.

Andrew looked carefully at Alan's expression and finally nodded before asking, "When?"

"Immediately following the commitment ceremony. I want to have our child as soon as possible." Alan said happily.

"Good. You're going to be a great father" Andrew said joyfully.

"So will you. God, I love you. I can't wait till we can get this all done." Alan said with excitement.

* * * * *

Half an hour later...

"What's wrong Andy?" Alan asked.

"What's wrong? That's a real good question. Let's see. I'm four-hundred years from home, across the galaxy *and* in another dimension. What the hell do you think is wrong?" Andrew screamed.

"I don't understand why you're angry. Please calm down and talk to me." Alan asked in a calming tone.

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!" Andrew screamed.

"I'm not..." Alan began.

"Why don't you get *Tom Paris* or *Harry Kim* to come over and *talk* to you?" Andrew said, accenting the words with cruelty and innuendo.

"Love, they're just friends." Alan said, confused.

"Creo Ignum Corvus." Andrew said with fury in his eyes and created a flaming bird.

"Andy love, please don't..." Alan said as Andrew released the bird.

Alan hit the wall and slid down.

"Oh Gods! What did I do?" Andrew said and ran over to Alan.

He patted out the flames on Alan's chest and pulled Alan's arm around his shoulder.

With a little grunt of effort he brought Alan to almost standing and took one step which relocated them to Sickbay.

"Doctor? Where are you. We need your help." Andrew called with panic.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." The Doctor said and resolved into being.

"Get him to a biobed. I'll help you." the Doctor said and took Alan's other arm.

"Oh Gods, I hurt him. Doctor, I hurt him." Andrew said with tears streaming down his face.

"What did you use? A flame-thrower?" the Doctor asked as he pulled the burned material away from Alan's chest.

"I hurt him. I couldn't stop it." Andrew mumbled and began to shake.

"Lieutenant Paris to Sickbay for a medical emergency." the Doctor called and activated the biobed.

"Sit down here Mr. Wells. If you want me to help Mr. Summers, you will have to sit down here." the Doctor said and moved Andrew to a biobed.

"What's up Doctor?" Tom asked as he ran into the room.

"I need for you to use the dermal regenerator on Mr. Summer's chest while I assess the condition of Mr. Wells." the Doctor said.

"What happened?" Tom asked as he grabbed the dermal regenerator and went to work.

"Give me a moment to find out." the Doctor said and ran a tricorder over Andrew's shaking body.

Tom worked to repair the burn damage to Alan's skin, then looked at the biobed's readout. "Do you want me to do anything about his concussion?" Tom asked with worry for his friend.

"Yes Lieutenant Paris, If you would be so kind." the Doctor said and grabbed a hypospray.

"What are you giving me? Why aren't you helping Alan?" Andrew asked with panic.

"Lieutenant Paris is taking care of him and I'm giving you a mild sedative to calm you down." the Doctor said and injected Andrew's neck.

There was a long moment of silence before Alan could be heard saying, "Andy?"

"I'm right here. I'm sorry. Oh Gods, I'm so sorry."

Alan got up off the biobed and walked to Andrew's side.

"What happened? I don't even know why you were angry." Alan asked helplessly.

"I may be able to explain that." the Doctor said to both.

"What is it? Did the implants not work right?" Andrew asked with hope.

"No, the implants are working perfectly. Your body needs to get used to the altered chemistry again before the mood swings smooth out a bit." the Doctor said with assurance.

"That was a mood swing?" Alan asked with disbelief.

"Oh Gods Alan, I'm so sorry. I never even thought this could happen... Doctor, if the implants are going to make me do this, I don't want them." Andrew said quickly.

"No Andy, you can't." Alan said with worry.

"I'd rather feel nothing than take the chance of hurting you again. Oh Gods..." Andrew said as he broke down into uncontrolled sobbing.

"Doctor, isn't there something you can do for him?" Alan asked with concern.

"No, any treatment I could give would only prolong his adjustment to the altered brain chemistry. He must endure this to become the way he was before." the Doctor said with confidence.

"Take... them out." Andrew said between sobs.

"No Andy, you just have to go through this and I can have you back just like before." Alan said with pleading in his voice.

"Won't hurt you again. Would rather die." Andrew said despondently.

"Andy, don't say that. Don't EVER say that." Alan said with panic.

"Lieutenant Paris, help me get Mr. Wells into a reclined position." the Doctor instructed.

"You aren't going to do it? Are you Doctor? Please don't take out the implants." Alan begged.

After a tense moment, the Doctor looked up and said, "I have just restrained Mr. Wells for his own protection."

Tom and Alan looked at Andrew with sympathy.

"Mr. Wells, am I to understand that you want to have the implants removed to protect Mr. Summers from you?" the Doctor asked professionally.

"Please don't...." Alan whispered.

The Doctor raised his hand to stop Alan and watched Andrew carefully, obviously waiting for a response.

"Yes. Please take out the implants. If they make me hurt Alan, I don't want them anymore." Andrew said with certainty.

"Might I suggest that instead, you remain here in the restraint field until your brain chemistry has stabilized. That way you won't be able to harm Mr. Summers... or yourself... and there won't be a need to undo all my hard work." the Doctor said reasonably.

Andrew thought about it for a moment then said, "Yeah, that makes sense."

"Good. Lieutenant Paris, would you bring a chair in for Mr. Summers, I assume he won't be leaving Sickbay in the foreseeable future." the Doctor said with a note of triumph in his voice.

"Right away Doctor." Tom said and got the chair.

[Chapter 6: Truth and Consequences]

"Alan, you awake?" Andrew asked in a whisper.

"Yeah Andy, what do you need?" Alan asked immediately.

"I think I understand something." Andrew said in an introspective tone.

"What's that?" Alan asked and got more comfortable in his chair.

"My father... I think I know why he was... that way. And why he left." Andrew said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Alan asked, matching Andrew's quiet tone.

"When Seven was explaining what she did, she said she fixed a congenital defect. I think it's something that I inherited from my dad, and it's what makes him violent sometimes."

"I guess it could be." Alan said thoughtfully.

"If we ever get back home, I need to see him. To tell him that I understand... and that I don't hate him." Andrew said with tears in his eyes.

"Love, you know that I don't blame you... right?" Alan asked carefully.

"I know. But I still blame myself. It may take me a while to deal with it. I mean, I *hurt* you. I could have *killed* you. I didn't have any thought, any control, just pure blind rage." Andrew said with a tremulous voice.

"I know love. As soon as we get through this, I want to act like it never happened. Let's never talk about it again." Alan said seriously.

"You don't learn anything by forgetting." Andrew said in a whisper and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Chakotay walked into the Sickbay and went to Andrew's bed.

"Tom told me some of what happened... I wondered if you feel like talking about it?" Chakotay asked Andrew quietly.

"I guess I should." Andrew said hesitantly, glancing at Alan.

"I can leave you two alone to talk, if that would be better." Alan offered.

"No love, I think I'd like it better if you were here. Is that okay Chakotay?" Andrew asked.

"Whatever you want... Tom explained that you're undergoing a treatment to alter your brain chemistry. I don't understand about that." Chakotay said and pulled up a chair.

"We're trying to make me like I was before I came here. When I was healed, they changed me and made me different." Andrew said calmly.

"Why would they do that?" Chakotay asked in confusion.

"Because they wanted to make him like everyone else. Andrew feels everything to the extreme... he always has. When he loves, it's with the passion of an exploding star and when he's hurting it's like a knife tearing through his heart." Alan explained.

Andrew smiled and said, "Thanks love. I couldn't have said it half as good."

"So when they healed you, they made it so you felt things like everyone else. And it was like feeling nothing?" Chakotay asked.

"Exactly. I felt like I was the walking dead. Life didn't have any flavor or color, I felt like I wasn't me anymore." Andrew said with pained memory.

"I understand why you did it." Chakotay said honestly.

"And I just want him to be happy." Alan threw in.

"About the incident when you hurt Alan... what can you tell me?" Chakotay asked, not wanting to beat around the bush.

"I was... angry. It was blind rage. I don't remember ever feeling anything like it before. All I wanted to do was hurt Alan..."

physically, emotionally, it didn't matter... and I didn't even have a reason." Andrew said helplessly and his eyes started filling with tears.

"And that's why you're in a restraint field?" Chakotay confirmed.

"He's in a restraint field because he said he would rather die than hurt me again." Alan said with pain.

"I'm not bitching about being in the restraint field because I don't want to hurt Alan." Andrew said, as he was calming.

"And how long do you intend to stay here?" Chakotay asked both men.

"Until my brain chemistry is stable enough that there is no chance of me hurting him again." Andrew said seriously.

"It seems to me that you're doing everything that can be done to see that it never happens again... but we still need to deal with the fact that it did happen." Chakotay said, focusing on Andrew.

"Yeah, that's the tough part." Andrew said with a sad smile.

"Can you tell me how you feel about it?" Chakotay asked.

"Sorry. Ashamed. Angry with myself for not being able to control it... Afraid that it will happen again." Andrew said with increasing helplessness.

"And what if it does happen again?" Chakotay asked.

"Then I'll have the implants removed. I was serious when I said that I'd rather feel nothing than take the chance of ever doing something like that again... Oh Gods, I'm going to be a father, what if I lose it around our son?" Andrew asked with a look of horror.

"Calm down love, by the time the baby is born, you'll have this thing under control." Alan said with reassurance.

"Alan, I need you to promise me that you won't let me hurt you or our son. If I ever start to lose it... blast me. Blast me hard enough that I'll never hurt another person ever." Andrew said with tears in his voice.

"Andy..."

"Promise!" Andrew demanded.

Alan sat silently for a moment then said, "I promise. If you ever lose control and threaten our child, I promise that I'll blast you. It'll kill me to do it, but I will because I know it's what you really want."

"And you. If I ever make a move to hurt you again, I need to know that you'll do this for me. I can't... I can't stay with you if you won't promise." Andrew said with obvious pain at having to say those words.

"Andy, please don't make me..." Alan began.

"Alan, I'm your protector, either you promise or I'll protect you by leaving... I have to know that you'll be safe." Andrew said helplessly.

"I promise." Alan whispered.

Andrew shut his eyes and tears fell down the sides of his face.

"I don't think you two need me here." Chakotay said, taken aback at what he had just witnessed.

"Thanks for talking with us Chakotay." Alan said with sadness in his voice.

"Yeah. Don't worry, I'm usually more fun than this." Andrew said with a forced smile.

"I bet." Chakotay said with a smile and left the room.

* * * * *

The Doctor finished his scans and walked to the workstation.

Alan and Andrew watched with anticipation. It had been two days and after the last scan the Doctor had said that Andrew was nearly ready to be released.

"Gentlemen, as nice as it has been to have your constant company for the past two days, I'm afraid the time has come to send you on your way." the Doctor said with a smile.

"Really?" Andrew asked with excitement.

"Yes, really Mr. Wells." the Doctor said and released the restraint field on the bed.

"Your brain chemistry has stabilized to the state you arrived in. I need to give you this before you go." the Doctor said and handed a padd to Andrew.

"A diet?" Andrew asked in confusion.

"More like a list of guidelines for daily nutrition." the Doctor said.

"Big difference." Alan said sarcastically.

"The guidelines I have given you will help you maintain your current biological state. The foods you ingest can impact your system and effect your behavior." the Doctor said as he walked with the men toward the door.

"It says I can have one piece of chocolate cake, once a day, only after I've eaten a balanced meal. What will happen if I just sit down and eat a piece of chocolate cake for lunch?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"There is no way to predict what will happen. Maybe nothing, you might become tired and fall asleep, you might become hyperactive and spend the next several hours engaged in some activity to burn off the excess sugar, you might become depressed, irritable, or even violent." the Doctor said as he reached the door.

Andrew paled at the thought of becoming violent again and made a personal vow to follow the Doctor's guidelines to the letter.

"How long does he have to stay on this diet?" Alan asked.

"It is not a diet. He is not restricted from eating or drinking anything he likes, it will just be necessary for him to modify his eating habits to minimize the impact of certain foods that will aggravate his condition." the Doctor said.

"For how long?" Alan repeated.

"For the rest of his life. I would be giving him the same advice if I were just meeting him for the first time today and he had never been treated by Seven of Nine or myself. This is the treatment for your condition whether it is natural or simulated." the Doctor said seriously.

"Thank you for all you've done Doctor." Alan said and walked out of the Sickbay, followed by Andrew.

* * * * *

Alan and Andrew walked into the cabin silently.

Once inside Alan stopped near the sofa and gave Andrew a desperate look then opened his arms in invitation.

Andrew walked into the embrace and began crying.

"What's the matter Andy? What are you feeling right now, I can't tell." Alan asked hesitantly.

"I feel unworthy of you. After... what I did... I don't deserve you. I don't know how you can stand to look at me." Andrew said in a pained voice.

"Oh love... do you remember when you used to feel ugly and unloved?" Alan asked carefully.

"Yeah." Andrew said and held Alan closer.

"I only know of one cure for your insecurity." Alan said and pulled back to look Andrew in the eyes.

"You're going to make love to me tonight?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Why wait till tonight?" Alan asked and guided Andrew toward the bedroom.

"Really?" Andrew asked joyfully.

"I've wanted to make love to you ever since you woke up in Sickbay but you weren't ready... now I think you are." Alan said with a serene smile.

"Ready, willing and able." Andrew said and pulled Alan to the bed.

"I think it's time to remind you how much I love you." Alan said joyfully.

* * * * *

Andrew took off his clothes in record time then laid on the bed and enjoyed watching Alan taking off his clothes at a more leisurely pace. Finally the last of the clothes were off and Alan was about to remove the prosthetic leg when he thought to ask, "Would you rather I leave it on?"

"Whatever makes you most comfortable love." Andrew said with an honest smile.

Alan returned the smile and removed the device.

"It really is uncomfortable after a while. It's been rubbing me raw." Alan said and showed Andrew the red patches of skin where the prosthetic had rubbed him.

"Let me kiss it and make it better." Andrew whispered and moved down to the stump just below Alan's knee.

"You don't have to..." Alan began, then trailed off as Andrew administered loving attention to the damaged skin.

"I know I don't have to love, but if you're hurting, I want to make it feel better." Andrew said and kissed around the sore spots then started a gentle massage above the knee.

"Oh love, how did you know that my muscles were sore?" Alan asked breathily.

"You're using your leg in a different way than you're used to. It makes sense that you'd be sore." Andrew said as he increased the intensity of the massage.

"Oh love, you do that too good. Don't put me to sleep, there's still a lot I want to do." Alan said with his eyes closed in ecstasy.

"Don't worry about it. For all that I have planned... we'll need rest breaks." Andrew said with a smile and pushed Alan, encouraging him to roll over onto his stomach.

Andrew took Alan's foot and began to massage with gentle intensity.

He carefully worked his way up the calf and to the thigh. Kneading gently all the way, taking care not to be too rough.

Andrew listened for a moment and recognized the sound of Alan's breathing. Andrew inched up the bed and saw him fast asleep.

"Oh love, get the rest while you can. You're going to need it." Andrew said as a vow and laid his head beside Alan's to get some sleep.

* * * * *

Andrew awoke to the sound of the door chime.

He hurriedly pulled on some clothes and noticed that Alan was doing the same.

"Take your time love. I'll go see who it is and you can join me when you're ready." Andrew said and walked out of the room.

Andrew opened the door to find Chakotay and Tom Paris.

"Hey guys, what's going on?" Andrew asked happily.

"We were talking in the mess hall and decided to come by for a visit to see how you two are doing." Tom said happily.

"We're fine. We actually fell asleep right after we got out of Sickbay." Andrew said with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry if we woke you." Tom hurried to say.

"That's fine. It's time for us to be awake anyway. Come in and sit down. Alan will be out in a minute." Andrew said and motioned to the sofa.

"If you're sure we're not keeping you from sleep." Chakotay asked with worry.

"It's not a problem guys, I promise. Give me a second to let Alan know you're here." Andrew said and walked into the bedroom.

Alan was nearly dressed as Andrew said, "Chakotay and Tom came by for a visit."

"Tell them I'll be right out." Alan said and started fastening his shirt.

"Will do." Andrew said and left the room.

Andrew walked back to the living room and said, "He's almost ready. Can I get you guys anything?"

"No, we just came from the mess hall, so we're fine." Tom said for both.

Andrew sat on the loveseat and asked, "So what's going on?"

Alan walked into the room and sat quietly beside Andrew, waiting for the answer.

"Not much. We're in a fairly boring part of space at the moment. We've just been making the rounds... Harry is trying to teach Chell how to play the clarinet, B'Elana can't leave her warp engines, so you guys were next on the list." Tom said matter-of-factly.

"And you don't know how much it means to us to be on that list." Andrew said honestly.

Alan leaned over to Andrew and whispered, "Are you ready for me to make the announcement?"

Andrew's face radiated joy as he nodded.

"Guys, we have an announcement to make." Alan said to Chakotay and Tom.

The men silenced and turned their attention to Alan.

"We've decided to have a commitment ceremony to make our partnership official." Alan said joyfully.

"You mean your getting married?" Tom asked in confirmation.

"Yes and no." Alan said and looked to Andrew.

"A marriage is a religious act based in Christianity. In our time most Christian establishments don't recognize same-sex partnerships as being marriage. Some condemn the union so strongly as to call it blasphemy. For that reason, we decided that our joining will be a formal recognition of our commitment to each other to be witnessed by our friends. We aren't asking for the blessing of any deity. We are just avowing our love and fidelity to each other." Andrew said to the men.

"You mean you're getting married?" Tom asked again.

"Yeah, if you want to call it that." Alan said with a smile.

"Congratulations guys!" Tom said with excitement.

"I thought you were already in a committed relationship." Chakotay said honestly.

"We were in a way, we just haven't taken the final step. We've been engaged." Alan said happily.

"Did you ask him about...?" Tom asked Alan impatiently.

"Yeah, we're going to become pregnant right after the ceremony." Alan said joyfully.

"I think this calls for a celebration... everyone up for it?" Tom asked the group.

Everyone nodded.

"Good, let's go then." Tom said and led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

Alan and Andrew walked into their cabin, amazed that they had found the way back.

"That was fun. God Andy, I never laughed so hard in my life. Tom and Harry together are a riot." Alan said tiredly.

"Yeah, and I thought everyone in the room was going to pass out with shock when Chakotay asked Tom to dance." Andrew said with a chuckle, then said, "Did you see B'Elana choke on her beer?"

"When I get my leg replaced, I want to go back there and dance with you." Alan said seriously.

"You did pretty good at the slow dancing as I recall." Andrew said with love in his voice.

"Yeah. That was wonderful." Alan said and pulled Andrew close.

"What do you have planned for tomorrow?" Andrew asked quietly.

"The morning in sickbay. The Doctor has about a dozen minor things he wants to do. Then in the afternoon I'll be talking to the Captain to ask her to perform the ceremony and to give her permission for the womb implant. If I have time after that I want to talk to Tom about a reception following the ceremony. What about you?" Alan asked tiredly.

"Not much really. I was kind of hoping to tag along with you and see what comes up." Andrew said in a sleepy voice.

"As much as I want to make mad passionate love to you right now, I'm afraid that I'm just too tired." Alan said apologetically.

"Good. I didn't know how to tell you, but I am too. Let's go to bed." Andrew said and got up.

"Okay. You know I love you, right?" Alan asked as he took Andrew's offered hand and got off the couch.

"Yeah. And I love you too." Andrew said with a smile as he put an arm around Alan and walked with him into the bedroom.

"I've got an idea... tell me what you think." Alan said as the bedroom door closed.

* * * * *

Tom found himself outside Chakotay's quarters, trying to think of a believable excuse before pressing the door chime.

The door opened and he found himself looking into the eyes of Chakotay.

"Hi Tom, I was just on my way to see you." Chakotay said timidly.

"Me too... but you... I mean... you know what I mean. God! It's like being a teenager all over again. I haven't been this tongue-tied around anyone in years." Tom said in disgust with himself.

"Why don't you come inside, maybe a cup of tea will help." Chakotay said and stepped back into the cabin.

Tom walked in and took a seat on the couch.

Chakotay came back with a cup of tea for each of them.

"Thanks." Tom said with a grateful smile and accepted the tea.

"What's got you so wound up?" Chakotay asked, sure that he knew.

"That dance..." Tom said and sat the tea on the coffee table.

"Was I moving too fast?" Chakotay asked with concern.

"No, you dance just fine." Tom said quickly.

"Not that, I mean, was it too soon in our relationship for me to ask you to dance?" Chakotay asked seriously.

Tom sat in silence for a moment, considering the words before he answered, "Yeah, I didn't even know we had a relationship. I mean, we're friends, but I never considered us being anything more than that and then we're dancing in front of half the crew."

"I'm sorry Tom, I just got caught up in the moment. I didn't mean to embarrass you." Chakotay said quietly.

"Chakotay, it's not that I'm embarrassed, not really. It's just that it was like you were announcing to the crew that we're a couple... and I didn't know." Tom said, pleading for Chakotay to understand.

"I really messed this up. I'm not good at stuff like this. What can I do to make it up to you?" Chakotay asked honestly.

"Chakotay, you don't have to make it up to me, just talk to me. You're my friend and I care about you but... the boyfriend thing... I've never even thought about it." Tom said quietly.

"But you're not against the idea? Like you might be ready for it one day?" Chakotay asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I think I will. I like you but I don't want to mess this up by moving too fast. How do you see our relationship progressing? I mean, what's the next step, the way you see it?" Tom asked carefully and took a sip of his tea.

Chakotay sat and thought about it for a moment.

Finally he said, "I guess the next step that I'd like for us to take is to kiss, hold hands... boyfriend stuff."

Tom thought about that and finally said, "I still feel like we skipped a stage by jumping from friends directly to boyfriends. There wasn't any... courting. It makes me feel like you don't respect me because you automatically assume that since I like you as a friend I will automatically be your boyfriend and we'll be having sex before the end of the night."

"Tom I didn't..." Chakotay began, then caught himself.

Tom watched silently as Chakotay figured it out.

"You're right. I was moving too fast. And it was disrespectful to you. I'm sorry." Chakotay finally said as he understood Tom's misgivings.

"So what do you want to do now? I mean, all this came from differing expectations. If we talk it through and both understand how each other feel, we'll have... ground rules, I guess. So I don't feel pressured and you don't feel like I'm not interested." Tom said seriously.

"Do you still want to be courted?" Chakotay asked timidly.

"Since the crew already think we're a couple, I guess we can skip it and go right to the boyfriend thing. But you're going to need to take it slow. Communicate." Tom said in warning.

"Okay. I can respect that. Can I kiss you?" Chakotay asked quietly.

"This is our first date. You don't get a kiss till the third. Remember, slowly." Tom said and got off the couch.

"Will you go out with me tomorrow night?" Chakotay asked carefully.

"I don't know. Ask me again tomorrow." Tom said and walked to the door.

Chakotay followed and reached Tom as the door opened automatically.

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" Chakotay asked with a smile.

"Nope, just ask me again tomorrow. I have a feeling I'll probably say yes." Tom said with a smile and left the room.

[Chapter 7: Ancient Customs]

The duty shift had been long and uneventful. Tom couldn't keep his mind off the events of the night before and Chakotay's steamroller technique of romance. Finally the shift ended and Tom nearly ran to his cabin.

Tom had been in his cabin less than a minute when his door chime rang.

[If that's Chakotay we're going to have to have a discussion about 'smothering' too.] Tom thought and called, "Come in."

Alan walked into the room and gave Tom a big smile. "Hi Tom, I think I'm finally figuring out how to get around the ship. You mind if I come in and talk with you for a minute?"

"Actually, I was just on my way to the mess hall, care to join me?" Tom asked as he walked out of the living area and into the bedroom.

"That's why I wanted to catch you right after your duty shift. I wanted to invite you to a dinner party in our cabin tonight." Alan asked loudly so Tom could hear him in the next room.

A few moments later Tom walked out of the bedroom, dressed in more comfortable clothes and said, "Sure, when do you want me there?"

"Eighteen hundred hours, dress is casual to semi-formal. I wish I could stay and talk but I still have to invite the other guests." Alan said and turned to leave.

"Why don't you just use the comm?" Tom asked carefully. He didn't want to make Alan feel bad if he didn't know how to use it.

"Because I want the guests to show up. It's too easy to make excuses when you don't have to look someone in the eye and explain why you can't come." Alan said seriously.

Tom laughed and said, "I can see your point. Who are you going to invite next?"

"Chakotay. Then the Doctor and Seven of Nine." Alan said quickly.

"I'll invite Chakotay, if you don't mind... as my date." Tom said with a smile.

"Perfect. That will help me out a lot. Then I'm off to sickbay to talk with the Doctor. I just spent half the day with him, you'd think I would have had enough by now." Alan said cheerfully.

"Tell me about it. Sickbay shifts can be some of the longest days ever... depending on the patients of course." Tom said with a smile.

"Of course." Alan said with a slight incline of his head to indicate thanks for the implied compliment. "Well, I've got to go if I'm going to get everyone invited in time."

"Good luck." Tom said to Alan's retreating form.

* * * * *

Andrew was watching in fond amusement as Alan was hurrying around the cabin putting the finishing touches on their dinner party.

"Can I help with anything?" Andrew asked carefully.

"No, it's under control. Just answer the door when our guests arrive." Alan said and pulled another dish from the replicator.

"You're making enough food to feed an army, how many people did you invite?" Andrew asked in amazement at the number of dishes lined up on the desk.

"It's not the number of people that's the challenge, it's the people themselves. I've invited an omnivore, a vegetarian, a hologram and an organic/mechanical woman who doesn't eat food." Alan said with frustration.

"Wouldn't that make for less food, since two of our guests don't eat?" Andrew asked in confusion.

"You would think so..." Alan answered.

The door chime rang and Andrew performed his duty as host and ushered the Doctor and Seven of Nine into the room. Seven was

dressed in an elegant gown and the Doctor was dressed in a gray suit that was appropriate for a dinner party.

"Seven, you look great." Andrew said with surprise.

"Mr. Summers said this would be an appropriate costume for this occasion." Seven said and walked into the room.

"He was right. And Doctor, it's good to see you in something besides the Starfleet uniform for a change. You look... comfortable." Andrew said, trying to find the right word.

"When Mr. Summers approached me with the idea of attending a dinner party, I researched the historical archive to find the appropriate attire. I chose this because it was formal enough to be appropriate for the occasion and informal enough to give the appearance of comfort." The Doctor explained.

"Good, I was worried that you were going to show up in a tuxedo with tails." Alan said from the dining area.

"That was my second choice." the Doctor said, not giving a hint if he was joking or not.

Alan walked to the Doctor and Seven and offered each a drink.

"What? This drink is holographic? How?" The Doctor said as he picked it up.

"Seven of Nine helped me to accommodate the special needs of our holographic guest." Alan said to the room as he went back to the dining area.

"Thank you Seven, that was very considerate." The Doctor said with gratitude.

"Mr. Summers explained that we would be conspicuous if we did not drink at this function and enlisted my aid to facilitate an acceptable substitute." Seven said and made a cheers motion with her glass.

The door chimed and Andrew turned his attention away from Seven and the Doctor.

"Tom, Chakotay, come in." Andrew said with a welcoming smile.

"Sorry we're late. Apparently Chakotay never had to dress for a dinner party before." Tom said and abruptly shut up as he realized he might embarrass Chakotay.

"We didn't have this type of occasion on my home world." Chakotay said shyly.

"Really? Did you have some type of occasion where friends gathered informally to just share each other's company?" Andrew asked with interest as he guided the men into the room.

"Sure, we would make a special meal and invite friends over to share in it." Chakotay said fondly.

"Same thing here, you just get to dress funny too." Andrew said and led the men to Seven and the Doctor.

Andrew looked up to see Alan approaching with a tray of glasses.

"Here you go. I hope you like the drinks I've selected for you." Alan said and handed each man his drink.

Tom looked curiously at his brown, sludgy looking drink before taking a tentative sip. A big smile came over his face and he took a bigger drink.

Chakotay watched Tom's reaction before tasting his own drink. His eyes got wide as he experienced the interesting flavor.

"Okay Alan, what did you give them? I can't even guess from their reactions." Andrew asked in amusement.

"I noticed last night that Tom has a fondness for chocolate. I checked the replicator file and found it had the ancient Earth drink 'Yoo-hoo'." Alan said happily.

"Yoo-hoo?" Tom asked incredulously.

"Yeah, a silly name but a good drink." Alan said with a shrug.

"So what did you give Chakotay?" Andrew asked, noticing that Chakotay was sniffing the mixture.

"Sassafras tea. It's an infusion made from tree bark and served with honey over ice. I noticed that Chakotay liked tea and sassafras is one of the few teas that I like." Alan said in triumph.

"It's... I don't even know how to describe the flavor." Chakotay said hesitantly.

"Do you like it?" Alan asked quietly.

"Yes, I think so, it's so different from anything I'm used to. My tea is usually a blend of several herbs, this is just one flavor and something else, just a hint of another flavor." Chakotay said and took another sip.

"That second flavor would be the honey, I found a variety of honeys in the replicator file and chose blackberry honey to go with the sassafras." Alan explained.

"It's interesting." Chakotay said and took another drink.

Alan walked over to the dining area and looked around before saying, "If you'll take your seats, dinner is ready."

Everyone took a chair. Seven of Nine was confused by Andrew pulling out her chair.

"An old Earth custom, I believe it relates to the elaborate way that women were expected to dress. The gentleman holds the chair for the lady to facilitate her sitting at the table. As the style of women's clothing became less elaborate, it became less of a necessity and more of a custom." The Doctor informed the table.

"I never thought about it. It was always just the polite thing to do." Andrew said as he took his own seat.

Alan began by placing a bowl of soup before Seven of Nine.

"I do not ingest nourishment in this way." Seven said seriously.

"I know, you aren't the only one I asked for help today. Doctor?" Alan said as he prepared the next bowl.

"This soup was specifically chosen to be tolerated by your digestive system. This is miso and tofu soup. The seasoning is

nearly nonexistent. It was chosen to be inoffensive in both flavor and texture." The Doctor said instructionally.

"Well said Doctor." Alan said as he placed a bowl of holographic soup before the doctor.

"What is this?" the Doctor asked.

"Seven?" Alan asked with a smile.

"This soup was specifically chosen to provide the maximum stimulation to your holographic senses. This is a holographic representation of traditional Italian minestrone. It has a variety of textures for you to experience since you don't have an actual sense of taste." Seven said with a hint of triumph in her voice.

Chakotay looked at his soup then cast a questioning look at Alan.

"Vegetarian Gumbo." Alan said quietly and turned automatically to Tom and said, "Non-vegetarian Gumbo."

"So how do you like your soup Doctor?" Alan asked after a few moments.

"It is very good. I never considered enjoying food by using the texture as a substitute for taste." the Doctor answered before taking another spoon of his soup and savoring the feel of the varying textures.

"How about you Seven?" Alan asked carefully.

"The sensation is unusual... but not unpleasant." Seven said and took another spoon of soup.

Finally the soup course was finished. Andrew cleared the soup bowls, afraid for a moment that he would have to wrestle the Doctor to get his away.

Alan followed behind and replaced each bowl with a plate of food.

"What is it?" The Doctor asked looking at his holographic plate of food.

"Macaroni and cheese, pork chops, applesauce and steamed peas and carrots." Alan said and placed Seven's plate before her.

Before he could be asked he said, "Tofu, boiled vegetables, and rice cakes."

"How did you get the replicator to boil vegetables like that? I mean they're really overcooked." Tom asked as he looked at Seven's food.

"They're overcooked for your taste. But Seven isn't accustomed to food, so anything with too much flavor would be offensive to her. The vegetables were boiled by Neelix so they would have as little flavor as possible." Alan said and sat Tom's plate before him.

"You mean he does that on purpose?" Tom asked the table.

Alan gave an aggravated look at Tom and said, "Yes Tom, he purposely overcooks the vegetables he serves in the mess hall because he thinks that's the way people like them. He's not human and doesn't know what flavors and textures the human palette finds pleasing."

"Oh." Tom said, knowing that he had been chastised.

"I volunteered to help him in the kitchen for a while after our commitment ceremony. I don't know the first thing about cooking, but I have a lifetime of experience at eating. I'm going to taste his recipes and let him know how he might adjust them to make them more pleasing." Alan said and placed a plate of food before Chakotay.

"You mean we've suffered for four years and all we would have had to do is tell him that the vegetables are overcooked and the breads are undercooked?" Chakotay said in wonder.

"I guess so. I just talked to him honestly and he was happy to help." Alan said and took his seat.

"Um, what?" Chakotay asked as he looked at the food before him..

"Red beans and rice with wild onion and tortilla chips." Alan said gently.

"Thank you." Chakotay said and took a bite.

Alan then looked at Tom and said "Beanie Weenies."

Tom nodded, remembering Alan having this same thing as his first meal with the new stomach.

Everyone enjoyed their meals and when they were finished, Andrew announced, "Let's move to the living room. We'll have coffee and desert in a little while."

Alan took a moment to clear the dishes then joined the rest of the group.

"We had another reason for asking you all here." Andrew said to the group and picked up a box from beneath the coffee table.

"We've discussed it and decided that we would like for all of you to attend our commitment ceremony as our witnesses." Alan said with a smile.

"It is traditional to give each of the witnesses a gift of appreciation for what they have contributed to the relationship. Seven, will you attend?" Andrew asked seriously.

"I do not understand my function in the ceremony should I agree." Seven said plainly.

"You will witness the vows that we exchange. If there should ever be a time that we seem to forget them, you will remind us." Alan said carefully.

"I will attend." Seven said and was handed a gift.

She opened the gift carefully and looked up in question.

"It's a turtle." Alan said with a smile.

"I do not understand the purpose of this ceramic representation of an earth reptile." Seven said flatly.

"When we were on our own world, there was a time when we were both recovering from injuries." Andrew said with a distant look.

"We seem to spend a lot of time doing that." Alan threw in.

"Two very special women decided that we needed to know that people cared about us and threw a party for us." Andrew continued.

"A little boy named Artie gave me a ceramic turtle as a gift. It was the only thing he had ever created from clay that survived the firing process... that made it very special to him. He gave it to me as a gift in hopes that it would make me feel better." Alan said fondly.

"Since then, it has become a symbol to us of someone who gives of themselves to help another. We want you to have this turtle as a representation of that sentiment. Seven, you used your nano-probes and knowledge to help Andrew and I. There isn't anything we could give you that could adequately repay you for what you've done, so we're giving you this as a token of our esteem." Alan said with a smile toward Seven.

Seven didn't know how to respond to that, so she gave a nod and looked back into the box.

The door chimed and Andrew ran to the door.

"Great, you have perfect timing... is it ready?" Andrew asked in the hallway.

"Yes, I don't understand why you want it but... here it is." a female voice said.

"Come in and I'll explain to everyone at once." Andrew said and led B'Elana into the room.

"Doctor, will you attend our commitment ceremony?" Andrew asked seriously.

"It would be my pleasure to attend." the Doctor said with a smile.

"This gift is for you." Andrew said happily and handed the piece of hardware to the Doctor.

"It is a miniature holo-imaging projector... I don't understand." the Doctor said and looked up at Andrew.

"You have to turn it on." Andrew said with exasperation.

The doctor turned on the device. It flickered and resolved into the form of a puppy.

"A hologram of a puppy?" the Doctor asked in confusion.

Andrew clapped his hands and said, "Come here boy."

The puppy jumped off the Doctor's lap and scampered to Andrew's feet.

"How? It's too complex to... how did you?..." the Doctor asked in wonder.

"The behavioral subroutines aren't that complicated when you don't have to deal with higher brain functions. It took some work, but I was able to integrate the basic patterns into the holo-unit. I used your mobile emitter as a guide. It's not much different from your mobile emitter, just on a smaller scale." B'Elana said, underplaying her achievement.

"It's wonderful, but why?" the Doctor asked.

"Alan and I talked about all you've done for us, healing us, seeing not only to our physical well-being but our comfort while we were in Sickbay. But the one thing he told me that stood out above all the rest was when he told me how you offered to sit and talk to him to keep him company while I was being healed. That meant a lot to him at the time and it means a lot to me to know that you cared enough to do that for him. It occurred to me that you could probably use some company in Sickbay when there aren't any exploded or brain-hemorrhaged patients around for you to take care of. So I thought you might like a puppy to keep you company, and since you have a mobile emitter, your puppy should have one too. Just as Seven's gift represents self-sacrifice, yours represents companionship." Andrew finished with a shrug.

"While you're in an area of the ship with holo-emitters you can download the puppy's program and he can run around in that area, outside those areas, he can be downloaded into his mobile emitter to go with you." B'Elana said with triumph.

Andrew walked over and handed the puppy back to the Doctor.

"What's his name?" the Doctor asked while looking at the puppy.

"That's up to you. Right now he responds to the name Puppy, but when you decide on a new name for him, start calling him by his name and he will eventually recognize it as his own." B'Elana said, smiling at the scene of the Doctor holding the puppy.

"Please sit down and join us B'Elana. You are going to be invited to the commitment ceremony too." Andrew said and indicated an empty spot on the couch beside the Doctor.

B'Elana had a surprised expression but said nothing as she took a seat.

Alan stood and said, "Chakotay? Will you attend?"

"Of course." Chakotay said with a smile, still focused on the Doctor and puppy.

Andrew handed a box to Chakotay. He took it and opened it carefully.

Chakotay's eyes got wide as he saw what was inside.

"A blue bear?" Chakotay asked and looked up in question.

"Yeah. We picked it especially for you." Andrew said quietly.

"A blue bear?" Chakotay asked again, then cast a look at Tom trying to hide his laughter.

"There aren't too many things I remember about my childhood. I guess there was a lot of bad stuff I didn't want to remember. But one of my happy memories is of a blue teddy bear like this one. When I was scared, it helped me to feel safe. It brought me comfort when not much else in my life did." Andrew admitted shyly.

"That's why we wanted you to have this. It represents what you brought to us. By caring and spending time with us when we were hurting, you brought comfort." Alan said with a serene smile.

Chakotay looked at the bear with this new information in mind and reverently picked it up and held it close. "Thanks." he said with appreciation.

"Tom, will you attend?" Andrew asked with a smile.

"Yeah, try and stop me." Tom said with his old flyboy grin.

Alan presented a box to Tom and sat back.

Tom opened the box with excitement and stared in wonder at the contents.

After a long moment of silence B'Elana finally said, "Well, what is it flyboy?"

"It's a bird." Tom said in wonder and carefully lifted the delicate glass figure out of the box.

"It's beautiful." B'Elana said with a gasp.

Alan then said, "It's a dove. We thought long and hard about what to give you to represent friendship. The dove represents peace, and since you once told me you'd rather talk than fight... it seemed right."

"And since you are a pilot, a bird seemed appropriate." Andrew added.

"And besides all that... we just thought you'd like it." Alan finished.

"Guys... it's beautiful. Thanks." Tom said quietly and continued to examine the crystal dove with its wings extended.

"Now we need to complete our guest list. B'Elana, will you attend our commitment ceremony?" Andrew asked sincerely.

"I don't understand why you're asking me. I just met you two in Sandrine's last night, I haven't even been introduced to Alan yet." B'Elana said to Andrew seriously.

"B'Elana, this is my intended, Alan. Alan, this is Chief Engineer B'Elana Torres." Andrew said with the appropriate gestures.

"Nice to meet you." Alan said shyly.

"As to why you? You and Harry are as much a part of this group as if you'd been in Sickbay along side us. The two of you will be invited because any celebration with this group wouldn't be complete without you. As to why you're being invited now..."

you're here. The rest are going to serve as witnesses, you and Harry are going to be guests." Andrew said gently.

"So it will just be the six of us attending your ceremony?" B'Elana asked in confirmation.

"Yes, unless anyone wants to bring a guest. The ceremony is going to be a private affair but the reception afterward will be open to anyone who wants to attend. Neelix will be seeing to that." Alan replied.

After a quiet moment of thought B'Elana said, "I'll attend, thank you for inviting me."

Andrew nodded, then glanced at Alan.

"I'm going to get the dessert now. Would anyone like coffee?" Alan said and went to the replicator.

"Yeah, thanks." Tom said.

"Can you make that sassafras tea hot?" Chakotay asked.

"Sure can." Alan said and replicated the drinks for the two men.

Alan pressed two buttons on the base of the Doctor's glass and it changed into a cup of coffee.

"Andrew, can you take the drinks in while I get the dessert?" Alan said as he removed the cover from a dish.

"Sure, who gets what?" Andrew asked a moment later.

Alan told him and followed him into the living room carrying a plate.

"Seven." he said and handed her a plate.

An actual emotional expression crossed her face as she looked at the transparent green gelatinous mass sitting on her plate.

"It's called Jell-O and I had it diluted so the flavor wouldn't bother you." Alan said and returned to the dining area.

Seven poked the Jell-O with her spoon and after a few attempts, was able to get a small piece. She slowly took it to her mouth and braced herself to taste it.

After a moment of staring, she finally said, "I find this substance to be pleasing. May I have the ingredient listing that I may replicate it at a later date?"

"Sure Seven, I'll send you the recipe tomorrow." Alan said happily as he presented B'Elana with a plate.

"What in the name of K'Haless is this?" B'Elana asked in confusion at the pastry filled with black slime.

"Taste it and tell me what you think." Alan said and retreated to get another dish.

B'Elana didn't realize it but she did almost move for move what Seven had done with her first taste of Jell-O.

When B'Elana finally tasted the dessert she was amazed by the flavor.

"What is this? It's delicious." B'Elana said in wonder.

"Raisin Pie." Alan said as he presented the doctor with his dessert.

"I usually find human food to be too bland for my taste but this... and it's in the replicator log?" B'Elana asked before taking another bite.

"Yeah. Most people are put off by the name and the appearance but it really is good." Alan said and took Tom his dessert.

"Mmmm." the Doctor said as he took a bite.

"I thought you would like the sensations of hot cherry cobbler and ice cream." Alan said happily. "Hot, cold, smooth, rough."

"It's hard to believe I never considered enjoying holographic food before. The sensation is quite satisfying." The Doctor said before taking another bite.

"How did you make holographic food?" B'Elana asked before taking another bite of pie.

"Seven made three miniature holo-imagers, like what you would use for a family album." Alan said and looked to Seven.

"I adapted the holo-imagers to interact with the Doctor's holo-matrix so when he comes in contact with them, his mobile emitter maintains the projection seamlessly. And he can experience the textures of those projections. The most difficult part was to give the holo-imagers the appearance of a plate, bowl and glass while providing access to the controls." Seven said before taking another bite of her Jell-O.

"Alan?" Tom asked.

"Flan." Alan said and handed Andrew his dessert, then sat down with his own.

"What?" Tom asked with confusion at Alan's response.

"That dessert, it's called flan, give it a try." Alan said and took a bite of his chocolate cake.

Tom tried it and shrugged. "Can I have some of yours?" he asked Chakotay.

"Sure." Chakotay happily responded and shifted his plate to share.

Alan was about to get up and get Tom his own plate when he felt a hand on his knee. He turned to see Andrew shaking his head.

"Delicious." Tom said as he took a bite of Chakotay's mixed berries and ice cream.

Alan looked around the room and saw everyone happily enjoying their desserts. He relaxed a little and took another bite of his cake.

Andrew finished his dessert before Alan so he stood to get the attention of the others in the room.

"On to the next part of the evening. As soon as the ceremony is finished Alan is going to become pregnant with our child. We

decided that since you are all here, we would ask you to collectively be our baby's godparents." Andrew said to the group.

"I do not understand." Seven said.

"In the event that Andrew and Alan are unable to attend to their child whether by death, infirmity or whatever reason, it is the responsibility of the godparents to step in and provide material and emotional support for the child until the parents are able to take over again or until the child is an adult." The Doctor said to the group.

"Thank you Doctor. I couldn't have explained it better. Our child will be raised to know you all as part of his family. You'll be referred to as his aunts and uncles... what do you say?" Andrew asked the group with a hint of worry.

Tom looked to Chakotay and saw his nod of agreement. "Chakotay and I will do it." He said with a fond look toward Alan.

"I would be honored." the Doctor said.

"As would I." said Seven.

Everyone turned to look at B'Elana. "Yeah, of course." she said and rolled her eyes.

"Good, that concludes the planned portion of the evening, from here on out, we're open to suggestions. Anyone need anything?" Alan said to the group.

"I could use another piece of that pie." B'Elana said.

"And some more tea." Chakotay said quickly as Alan got up.

[Chapter 8: Small Talk and Various Other Forms of Torture]

After a few minutes of general chatter Tom finally said, "Andrew, Alan has mentioned your mutant ability, but I don't really understand."

The room fell silent in anticipation of Andrew's answer.

"Sure. Doctor, you'll need to hold on to Puppy while I do this. I don't want him to become disoriented. Everyone, remain seated and just watch." Andrew said and closed his eyes.

He opened his eyes and cast a golden glow on the room and things began shifting to a different reality.

"You are causing a dimensional phase shift." Seven said in warning.

"Don't worry Seven, we aren't going to phase completely in, they won't be able to see us." Alan said quietly.

The room watched as Neelix and Kes were hugging. She reached up and stroked his hair and said, "I don't understand why you want us to leave the ship."

"I can't explain Sweeting, I wish that I could. I just know deep in my bones that things are about to turn badly and we need to be away from here." Neelix said desperately.

"But they're our friends, if it weren't for them I would be dead. We can't just leave them if they're going to be in danger." Kes said desperately.

"We are the ones who will be in danger... from them. Come Sweeting, gather the things that mean the most to you and we'll leave on my ship. We're running out of time." Neelix said with panic.

Kes looked around and finally said, "They're just things, let's go."

"Right behind you." Neelix said and they both ran out of the room.

Andrew closed his eyes and the room faded back to normal.

"Kes is alive?" Tom asked in shock.

"In that reality, yes. This is Andrew's special ability. He can open doorways to other places." Alan said to the room of shocked people.

"So this is how you came to be on our ship?" Seven asked.

"In a way, we were brought here by Andrew's special ability but we didn't phase in, we traveled through a portal." Alan explained.

Andrew took this to be a cue. He stood and opened a portal in the wall of the room.

"Where does it lead?" Chakotay asked.

"To Sickbay... I really don't know the ship well enough to target much more than there." Andrew said timidly.

"Anyone want to give it a try?" Alan said and walked to the portal.

No one got up from their chairs so Alan walked through the portal alone. A moment later he walked back through the portal and handed the Doctor a medical tricorder.

Andrew dissipated the portal and sat back in his chair.

"That is an intriguing ability. The possibilities are phenomenal." the Doctor said, stroking Puppy's fur.

"It's not actually that unusual on my world. There are mutants with much more spectacular abilities than mine. And much more dangerous... Alan?" Andrew said, not wanting to be the only one to show off.

Alan cast a look at Andrew before turning his gaze on a dessert plate. He remembered how Seven had told him to control the primary and secondary appiture then eased them open just a little to release a pinpoint beam.

A small beam of light hit the plate and the plate exploded a second later.

"That was the lowest my power could be focused. If I let it loose, I could blow a hole through the side of the ship." Alan said to the group.

"When you said optic blasts... I don't know, I thought it would be more like an intense light that would burn through if you left it focused in one spot long enough." Tom said, amazed by the display of power.

"Now you know why the people on my home world feared us so much. If we were to organize, we could be a powerful force. Even one mutant can be a challenge to stop." Alan said as he sat again.

"Yeah, and that's why we joined the X-men. They work to help mutants and non-mutants live together in peace." Andrew added.

"They train mutant children to control their gifts to use them for the benefit of all humanity." Alan said to the group.

"Wow, you really do come from a different world." Tom said in wonder.

"Yeah, and as crazy as it is, I miss it." Andrew said sadly.

Silence filled the room.

Finally B'Elana said, "I have a question."

Everyone turned their attention to her.

"How did you know that I would like raisin pie? It can't be a coincidence." B'Elana asked in accusation.

"And the Yoo-hoo, an ancient Earth drink that I turned out to love? And Chakotay's tea?" Tom asked curiously.

"Busted." Alan said to Andrew, then turned back to the group.

"I did some homework. I don't want to offend you by generalizing B'Elana, but Klingons tend to like sweeter, more strongly flavored foods than humans according to my research. That's why I selected raisin pie, because I thought you might like it. As far as the Yoo-hoo, it may be from ancient Earth... but so am I. After

seeing what kinds of drinks you ordered last night at Sandrine's, I just thought you'd like it. And I already told you about Chakotay's tea, it's something that I also enjoy." Alan said with a shrug.

"You really put a lot of thought and work into this. How did you pull it all together so well?" B'Elana asked, understanding the lengths Alan had gone to.

"I had originally planned to invite you and Harry to the dinner, but there just wasn't any way to make it work. I would have needed more chairs, a larger table, and more work area. There was just no way I could have done all that and had everything else done on time." Alan said with a tone of apology.

"When did you decide to have this dinner party?" Chakotay asked.

"The idea came to me last night. After I talked it over with Andrew, I started to plan. While I was in Sickbay this morning receiving some treatments from the Doctor I asked him about Seven of Nine's food limitations. I went and talked to Andrew about gifts before my meeting with the Captain. Then I went to Seven of Nine about the holographic food while Andrew went to B'Elana about Puppy, then we spent some time at the replicator." Alan said with a smile.

"You have a real talent for organizing if you could do all this so quickly." Tom said in appreciation.

"I had a lot of help. Seven, the Doctor, Andrew, B'Elana and even the Captain... she suggested a bird for Tom. I couldn't have done it without everyone." Alan said with humility.

"And none of it would have happened without you, love." Andrew said with pride.

A moment of silence fell which was broken by the Doctor asking, "Have you thought about a name for the baby yet?"

"We haven't discussed it yet. The only thing I'm sure of is the baby's last name will be Summers." Andrew said with certainty.

"Why is that? I mean, you could choose the last name Wells just as easily." Chakotay asked the pair.

"Two reasons, after the commitment ceremony, I'm going to have my last name changed to Summers. It may be a silly old Earth tradition but it means something to me... like another symbol of our commitment. And if we ever find a way to get back to our home world, the baby is going to have an Uncle Alex, Uncle Scott and Aunt Dawn Summers that I want him to know without a doubt are his family." Andrew said solidly.

"I notice that you refer to the baby in the masculine, am I to infer that you have chosen to father a male child?" Seven asked.

"Yes Seven, we both want a son. And if we decide to have a second child later it will be a girl." Andrew said with a smile.

"I do not understand the instinct to procreate. Perhaps later in my development, it will assert itself." Seven said casually.

"To tell you the truth, we probably wouldn't be having a baby this early in our relationship except that our lives seem to move so quickly that we may not have the opportunity later." Alan said seriously.

"I do not understand." Seven said with interest.

"Let's see. Two months ago I was living on my home world in Sunnydale, California. My closest friends were dead and I was about to face a battle with demons, in which I expected to die." Andrew said with pain in his voice.

"Last month I was in our world in upstate New York, I was recovering from a stroke and worried sick about my friend Scott who had just come out of a coma."

"This month I'm here, seventy thousand something light-years from Earth, four-hundred years in the future and in a parallel dimension, I've just been revived from brain death using modified nano-probes and found out that we have access to the technology that allows two men to have a baby."

"Anyone want to take a guess where I'll be next month?" Andrew said with a tone of voice that said he really wanted an answer.

Alan leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek before saying, "Two months ago I was on my homeworld, we had just retrieved two of my friends who had been captured and mutilated by the

'friends of humanity.' One of them had his wings cut off, the other had his eyes cut out, both were castrated."

"One month ago I was recovering in the Mansion's MedLab from a failed suicide attempt after my boyfriend of five years had been murdered. I was just about to meet my brother Scott and his boyfriend Andrew." Alan said with a smile.

"You moved in on your brother's boyfriend?" Tom asked with wide eyes.

"No, my boyfriend Scott dumped me when his ex-girlfriend came back from the dead. He dropped me like I was on fire." Andrew said shaking his head.

"And I had been developing feelings for Andrew the whole time I knew him. When Scott dumped him, he was hurt really bad, so I told him how I felt." Alan said peacefully.

"So did Scott and his ex get back together?" Chakotay asked.

"No, she dumped him almost as fast as he dumped me." Andrew said, trying to hold back a smile.

"Scott and Andrew made up after that and are still friends." Alan said proudly.

"Then why does Andrew have that smile when he talks about Scott getting dumped?" B'Elana accused.

"Because there is so little justice in my life, I have to enjoy what little comes to me. Alan's right, we're good friends now, even Jean, the ex, is a friend to all of us." Andrew said happily.

"You said you have a sister Dawn and a brother Alex. Whose dimension do they come from?" Tom asked the pair.

"Dawn comes from my dimension... sort of. Alex comes from the dimension we both call home." Andrew said carefully.

"Sort of?" the Doctor asked.

"Dawn is an interdimensional key made into human form." Andrew said, looking for everyone's reactions.

"That seems a bit far-fetched." the Doctor said cautiously.

"Says the sentient hologram holding his holographic puppy." Andrew said in return.

"Anyway, Scott and Alex Summers are brothers. I am the Scott Summers from the parallel dimension next to theirs. Dawn is my... second cousin in an interdimensional sort of a way, and is from Andrew's dimension." Alan said, trying to take the focus off the Doctor and Andrew.

"You two seem to be adjusting to our time fairly well. Has the adjustment been difficult?" Chakotay asked.

"Not really. The technology was a little challenge at first, but once I got used to the LCARS interface, it got much easier. I guess since I'm a student and a teacher's assistant at the school where we lived, I'm kinda used to learning new things. Beside that, it's the people that make a place good or bad to stay in. If you took all the technology away, I'd still like it here." Andrew said seriously.

"So when is the ceremony?" B'Elana asked the men.

"I've still got one or two things to iron out, but it looks like three days from today. I want to be able to stand with Andrew on my own two feet at the ceremony." Alan said happily.

A moment of silence fell over the room to be interrupted by Chakotay saying, "Is it really that late? I'd better get going."

"Me too. Thanks for the great dinner and the gift guys. I can't wait for the wedding." Tom said and followed Chakotay to the door.

"Yes, thank you for your hospitality, I too must leave. It is nearing time for my regeneration cycle." Seven said and rose, taking her gift with her.

"I suppose it's time for us to leave too. Come on Doctor, you need to walk your dog." B'Elana said and rose.

"You don't mean you programmed him to..." the Doctor was saying as he walked out the door.

Andrew pulled Alan close and said, "I'm so proud of you. You did a great job tonight. Everything was wonderful and everyone had a great time."

"I thought I blew it when Tom didn't like the dessert, but he enjoyed sharing Chakotay's so much that I'll call it a success." Alan said and leaned his head on Andrew's shoulder.

"We have to clean up. Tomorrow's going to be a big day, we have a wedding to plan." Andrew said and got up.

"Do I have to?" Alan whined.

"No love. You've done so much today, I can clean up if you're too tired." Andrew said and went to work.

A moment later Alan was by his side.

"As long as you're in here, it won't seem like work anyway." Alan said with a smile as he began handing Andrew dirty dishes.

[Chapter 9: Tasks, Trials and Trusts]

"Captain, I've detected a wormhole, newly formed, approximately 300 kilometers to port." Harry said with excitement.

"On screen." Janeway said with her own excitement.

"It's small, Voyager won't be able to fit through it." Harry said with disappointment.

"Captain, I believe we should take a shuttle and investigate." Chakotay said with enthusiasm.

"To what purpose?" Janeway asked as her hopes crashed.

"Exploration, the possibility of finding something useful... curiosity." Chakotay ended with a shrug, knowing that he had her at 'exploration'.

"Very well. Assemble a team and investigate." Janeway said and sat back in her chair.

"Paris, Kim. You're with me." He said and got up from his chair, then speaking into the air he said, "Seven of Nine, Chief Engineer Torres, report to shuttlebay one for away mission."

"Both of them?" Captain Janeway questioned.

"Playing a hunch." Chakotay said with a twinkle in his eye before holding up two fingers in Tuvok's direction to indicate the need for two security officers to accompany the away mission.

* * * * *

"What's the matter Andy?" Alan asked as Andrew sat silently on the couch with a frown.

"I was trying to follow Chakotay and Tom, but they're too far away... I can't keep my focus through the wormhole." Andrew said with frustration.

"Do you think Chakotay is a capable commander?" Alan asked in a leading tone.

"Yes. Of course." Andrew said immediately.

"Then we have to trust in Chakotay to do his job. We have no other choice. If we get in the habit of second guessing him and trying to bail him out every time he leaves the ship to do his job, it will only lead to problems later on." Alan said confidently.

"But..."

"Andrew, stop looking. If you're going to trust him, then trust him. Come back to me and I'll wait with you." Alan said, stroking the back of Andrew's hand.

Andrew opened his eyes and asked, "How'd you get to be so smart?"

"The company I keep." Alan answered with a smile.

"What do you want to do now?"

"I need to go to the sickbay for some pre-surgery thing for the new leg. You want to come with me?" Alan asked with hope.

"Yeah, I'll play with Puppy while you two do what you need to." Andrew said and got off the couch.

As they reached the door, Andrew took hold of Alan's shoulder and turned him.

"I love you more each day." He said with a joyful smile.

"Same here." Alan said with a grin and fell into a tight embrace.

* * * * *

A while later Andrew came out of the Doctor's office where he had been playing with Puppy and asked, "Doctor? Do you recognize this pattern?" And handed him a padd.

"Yes, it is a modified water molecule... I seem to remember seeing something like that in the medical database... why do you ask?"

"It's what's wrong with the alternate Voyager crew... the one we saw at the dinner party when we phased in for a peek. Their Doctor is making an antidote right now. I just thought it might be

a good idea if we were prepared, just in case..." Andrew trailed off.

"A wise precaution. I am involved in Mr. Summers preparation for surgery right now. Check the medical database and see if you can find the antidote while I finish up here." the Doctor asked.

"I don't have access to those files." Andrew said shyly.

"Computer, grant level four access to Starfleet Medical Database to Andrew Wells, authorization Alpha Omega Beta Omicron Zed." The Doctor said into the air.

"Access Granted." Was the computer's response.

"Thank you Doctor." Andrew said and went back to the office.

"He really is something, isn't he?" Alan asked from the table.

"Hold still Mr. Summers or the surgery tomorrow is going to be more of a challenge than need be." the Doctor said with a harsh tone, then in a more gentle tone he said, "Yes, he is quite special."

* * * * *

The Delta Flyer emerged from the wormhole and immediately hailed the ship.

"Delta Flyer to Voyager, we have a medical emergency." the voice of B'Elana Torres came over the comm.

"Doctor, prepare for emergency transport. Report B'Elana." Captain Janeway said with anxiety.

"It was a Borg cube, heavily damaged with most of the Borg dead. The only survivors were a group of children." B'Elana said in a rambling tone.

"What injuries have you sustained?" the Captain called.

"Lieutenant Paris was captured, they tried to assimilate him and removed one of his hands. Ensign Kim was slammed into a bulkhead and hasn't regained consciousness. Commander

Chakotay and Ensign Charles were hit by a Hirogen style disrupter and remain unconscious." B'Elana said with worry.

"They're in transporter range." Ayala said from the ops console.

"Transport the injured directly to sickbay." Janeway commanded.

"I'm detecting thirteen life signs aboard the Delta Flyer." Ayala said with worry.

"Did you bring some passengers, Ms. Torres?" Janeway questioned.

"Yes Captain. Commander Chakotay ordered us to subdue the Borg children and bring them back with us." B'Elana answered.

"Why would he do that?" Janeway asked no one in particular.

"You'll have to ask him Captain... Delta Flyer on approach for landing in shuttle bay one." B'Elana said with Starfleet efficiency.

Janeway glanced toward Ayala who nodded in response.

"We've got you Lieutenant, sit back and enjoy the ride." Janeway said and got up from her seat.

"I'll be in Sickbay. Tuvok, send security to the shuttle bay. You have the bridge." Janeway said as she walked toward the turbolift.

"Yes Captain." Tuvok responded.

* * * * *

"Doctor, report." Janeway said as she entered Sickbay.

"None of the injuries are life threatening. Lieutenant Paris has regained consciousness. Commander Chakotay and Ensign Charles will need significant dermal regeneration and repair to some internal organs but will make a full recovery. Due to the nature of Ensign Kim's injuries, I recommend that he be allowed to heal naturally. No treatment I could give would significantly effect his recovery." the Doctor said as he moved the dermal regenerator over Commander Chakotay's stomach.

"Can Commander Chakotay be brought to consciousness?" Janeway asked while watching the Doctor work.

"Yes, briefly." the Doctor said, understanding the Captain's need for more information.

"Proceed." the Captain said forcefully.

"May I request the assistance of Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers while you speak with the Commander?" the Doctor asked as he retrieved a hypospray.

"To what purpose?" the Captain asked, not being able to imagine what assistance two people who were four-hundred years out of date could offer the doctor.

"They have become friends with Commander Chakotay and Lieutenant Paris. I believe it would benefit both to have someone here to help them emotionally during the regeneration process and since Lieutenant Paris is my medical assistant, I could use the extra hands... er... you know what I mean." the Doctor said as he injected the Commander with a stimulant.

"Go ahead Doctor. I'll trust your judgment in this matter." Janeway said with a tone of voice that said 'we're done now... leave.'

The Doctor nodded and stopped at his workstation on the way to Ensign Charles and said, "Mr. Wells, Mr. Summers, report to Sickbay immediately."

* * * * *

Andrew and Alan had been back in their own cabin for less than ten minutes when they received the call from the Doctor.

"Love, will you port us there?" Alan asked as he got off the couch.

"Yeah, one step and we're there." Andrew said and motioned to the wall where a portal formed.

"What did you need Doctor?" Andrew asked as he walked through the portal.

"Mr. Wells, would you take this dermal regenerator and move it thusly over Ensign Charles wound while I attend to Lieutenant Paris?" the Doctor asked in a hurried tone as he handed the regenerator to Andrew.

"Of course Doctor." Andrew said and took the regenerator.

"Mr. Summers, I need for you to do the same for Lieutenant Paris while I attend to his hand... or lack thereof." the Doctor said and turned on the regenerator before handing it to Alan.

"Yes Doctor." Alan said and began to run the dermal regenerator over Tom's wounds.

"Alan?" Tom asked in a daze.

"Yeah Tom, it's me. How's this for a turnabout?" Alan said with a smile as he carefully directed the beam of the regenerator at Tom's injuries.

"You handle that thing like an expert." Tom said with a pained smile.

"I've had lots of experience with it on the receiving end... just hold still and I'll take care of you." Alan said and moved to Tom's neck.

* * * * *

"Commander Chakotay, I would like to understand your reasoning for bringing six Borg drones aboard my ship." the Captain asked in a quiet but firm tone.

"They're children. And they're separated from the collective... It was the right thing to do." Chakotay said honestly.

Kathryn was surprised by his answer but snapped out of it and said in a gentler tone, "After the way you opposed my decision to include Seven of Nine in the crew, I find it difficult to believe that you feel that way."

"Thanks to Andrew and Alan, I've had the chance to spend some time with Seven of Nine outside of duty. I was wrong to oppose you. Not only has she proved to be a valuable member of the crew, but also a good person... Now that I know a drone can be disconnected from the collective and become a person again, there really wasn't any other choice. These children deserve a chance at a life and we can give them that." Chakotay said with emotion.

"I know how difficult it is for you to admit when you're wrong, so you must feel very strongly about this. I'll abide by your decision and we'll try to incorporate them into the crew if it is at all possible. What else can you tell me about the other side of the wormhole?" Kathryn asked, getting back to business.

"According to navigational records, it is some two years distant on our current heading. The Borg cube was in a decaying orbit near a collapsing star. The cube was damaged beyond any possibility of repair. Seven of Nine determined that it was infected with some sort of virus that caused the Borg to disconnect from the collective and act independently and had the side effect of opening the maturation chambers prematurely." Chakotay said with eyes half closed.

"Two years? If only there were a way to get us through there..." she trailed off, noticing that Chakotay was fighting to remain conscious.

"Get some rest Commander. I'll expect a full report when you're recovered." She said gently and patted him on the hand.

"Aye Captain." he said in little more than a whisper and gave into sleep.

* * * * *

::Seven of Nine to the Doctor:: came over the comm channel.

"Go ahead Seven." the Doctor said as he moved from working on Tom to Chakotay.

"I have six Borg drones in need of maintenance, when may I bring them to you?" She asked flatly.

"Do they have any immediate need of medical attention?" the Doctor asked and motioned for Andrew to come over to Chakotay.

"No. They simply need some of their Borg hardware removed and some cosmetic alterations to facilitate their incorporation into the general population." Seven said in an informative tone.

"Then I will be able to attend to them in half an hour. May I suggest you assess their individual needs to facilitate their

treatment when they arrive." the Doctor asked and motioned for Andrew to begin regeneration on Chakotay's chest and abdomen.

"Yes Doctor, Seven of Nine out." Seven said as she terminated her transmission.

The sound of Tom's laughter filled the room.

"Doctor, can you come here?" Alan asked with worry.

"What is it Mr. Summers?"

"I don't know, he's sweating and started acting like he's... drunk?" Alan asked in confusion.

"Hand me that medical tricorder." the Doctor said abruptly.

Alan handed it to the Doctor and watched.

"Mr. Wells, were you able to retrieve the information from the medical database?" the Doctor asked as he moved to his workstation.

"Yeah, it's on a padd in your office." Andrew said as he continued Chakotay's regeneration.

"Thanks to your insight, you may have averted a serious situation." the Doctor said and went to his office. A moment later he returned and stood silently while looking over the data.

After a decisive nod of his head he went back to the workstation and pressed a few buttons.

"Computer initiate blue alert. Lock out all command functions. Initiate level nine quarantine. Close emergency bulkheads, disable all transporters and initiate isolation fields." the Doctor said with force and walked to each of the biobeds in the room and initiated the restraint fields.

"What is it Doctor?" Alan asked with panic in his voice.

"Mr. Paris has a condition that is similar to a virus. I believe that anyone on the away mission or who has had contact with them is potentially infected." the Doctor said and began to scan Alan.

Alan watched the Doctor, then asked fearfully, "Do I have it?"

"No Mr. Summers, somehow you avoided the infection. To remain uninfected, you must refrain from any physical contact with any infected individual." the Doctor said and moved to scan Andrew.

There was a long moment that would have been silence but for Tom's insane laughter.

"Well?" Andrew asked.

"You are infected Mr. Wells. Please get on a biobed so that I may restrain you. This infection will effect your judgment and..." the Doctor began.

"...enough said, Doctor." Andrew said calmly and moved to the nearest unoccupied bed.

::Janeway to Sickbay:: Sounded over the comm.

"Go ahead captain." The Doctor said as he began to replicate the antidote that Andrew had found earlier in the day.

"I am stuck in a turbolift and when I tried to get it going again the computer informed me that it was on your orders. Care to explain?" the Captain said in an even, low tone that was absolutely frightening.

"I have detected an infection brought on board by the away team. It is highly contagious, fast acting, and effects the judgment of those infected. I have initiated a blue alert condition and full isolation protocols. As soon as I have cleared the bridge crew as fit for duty, I will release you from the turbolift and assess your condition." the Doctor said while simultaneously working on the antidote.

There was silence from the comm for a moment, then the Captain said, "Good work Doctor. Though I would appreciate it if you could get me out of the turbolift as soon as possible."

"As soon as the bridge crew are cleared, you are my next priority." the Doctor said and signed off the comm.

"Doctor?" Andrew asked from his bed.

"Yes Mr. Wells?" the Doctor responded without looking up from his work.

"I could open a portal for her and bring her here if you like."
Andrew offered quietly.

"I'm sure she would appreciate that." the Doctor said and walked to the medical replicator.

"Where is she in the ship and I'll get her." Andrew asked, trying to remain calm.

"Computer, where is Captain Janeway?" the Doctor asked as he inserted his antidote into a hypospray.

"Captain Janeway is in turbolift four." the computer responded.

"That was thoroughly unhelpful... Computer, what is Captain Janeway's location in relation to the Sickbay?" the Doctor asked in a patronizing tone.

"Captain Janeway is in the central turbolift shaft two decks above and one section forward from Sickbay." the computer responded.

"That way, about forty meters." the Doctor said pointing.

Andrew nodded and focused his inner sight. A moment later Andrew said, "Got her." and a portal formed in the wall of the Sickbay.

Captain Janeway cautiously walked through the portal and into Sickbay with a surprised look on her face.

"Explain." was all she could think to say.

"Mr. Wells volunteered to release you from your confinement. If you'll wait just a moment, I'm about to test the antidote." the Doctor said and injected Tom with the hypospray.

Within a minute Tom stopped laughing and looked inquisitively around the Sickbay.

"What happened?" Tom asked seriously.

"How do you feel Lieutenant Paris?" the Doctor asked.

"Fine. Whatever you just gave me woke me right up." Tom said and noticed the Captain standing nearby.

"Good." the Doctor said as he scanned Tom.

After a long moment the Doctor gave a nod.

"Captain, if you wouldn't mind?" the Doctor asked and held up the hypospray.

The Captain rolled her eyes and turned her head to expose her neck.

After injecting the Captain, he walked to each patient in the Sickbay and administered the antidote.

"Give me a moment to replicate more antidote and we will clear the bridge crew for duty." the Doctor said from his workstation.

"With the Captain's permission, I can accompany her to the bridge to administer the antidote." Andrew said.

The Doctor cast a questioning look at the Captain who nodded in assent.

"Very well Mr. Wells." the Doctor said as he released the restraint field then walked to the medical replicator.

"Here you go. It might be easier for you to travel your way rather than try to circumvent all the quarantine measures I have instituted." the Doctor said to Andrew.

"Of course." Andrew said and easily found the bridge.

With a sweep of his hand Andrew created a vortex and said, "After you Captain."

* * * * *

As the Captain stepped onto the bridge she was confronted by Tuvok and Ayala holding phasers pointed at her.

"At ease gentlemen." she said and walked to take her chair.

"We appear to have brought back some sort of bug from a Borg cube. Mr. Wells is here to administer the antidote." the Captain said and pressed her computer screen to find it frozen.

"Captain to EMH." she called.

"Yes Captain?" the Doctor responded immediately.

"Could you possibly give me back control of my ship?" she asked with insincere pleasantness.

"It would be my pleasure." the Doctor responded and cut off the link.

A moment later the bridge stations came to life again. The air filled with beeps and chirps as the bridge crew assessed their situation.

"Command staff, we will have a briefing in my ready room in half an hour." Janeway said as she noticed Andrew walking from one person to the next, administering the antidote. When he finished he discretely opened a portal and left the bridge.

"Intriguing." Tuvok said as he witnessed the action.

* * * * *

Tom walked into the ready room, cradling the stump of his absent hand. After he was seated the Captain pressed a button to engage the Emergency Medical Holographic channel of the comm system.

"Doctor, Report." Captain Janeway said as those members of the command staff fit for duty looked on.

"The infection was first noted by the Enterprise commanded by James Kirk and the antidote created by Dr. Leonard McCoy. It nearly caused the destruction of that ship. More recently the malady resurfaced on the Enterprise-D commanded by Jean Luc Picard and a variation of the antidote was found by Dr. Beverly Crusher. That instance claimed the crew and ship of the Federation science vessel Tsielkofsky and nearly caused the destruction of the Enterprise-D. It is a water molecule that has been effected by the gravitational forces found near collapsing stars. Transmission is by touch and the onset of symptoms is less than one hour. It is difficult to detect unless you are looking for it and is not automatically filtered out by the transporters since it registers as water to the biofilters." the Doctor said professionally.

"Good work on detecting it so quickly Doctor. From what I saw of Lieutenant Paris, it could have effectively debilitated the crew." the Captain said.

"I cannot take credit for the early detection. This morning Mr. Wells had already brought it to my attention that we might encounter the modified water molecule. He researched the malady and had the formula for the antidote waiting for me on my desk when I detected it in Lieutenant Paris." the Doctor said with a slight smile.

"Be that as it may, you took decisive action and contained the infection expertly. I am going to place a commendation in the ships log for the outstanding way you've handled this situation." the Captain said to the surprise of the command staff.

"Thank you Captain." the Doctor said with his own surprise.

"That leads me to my next topic. Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers seem to have become valuable members of the crew during their short stay onboard. I am considering making their positions official, comments?" Janeway asked those assembled.

"Given their unique abilities, I believe they would both be assets to the crew compliment." Tuvok said in a considering tone.

"Even though Andrew is four-hundred years out of date, he seems to have an instinctive knowledge of computers. He's already comfortable with the LCARS interface and understands the basics of holo-imaging." B'Elana added.

"Mr. Summers seems to have a talent for organizing and delegation. Both desirable traits." Seven said calmly.

Janeway registered surprise at the Borg style compliment given by Seven of Nine.

"Very well. Since crew rostering is one of Commander Chakotay's functions, I will wait for him to return to duty before making it official, but at that time, Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers will be invited to officially join the crew." Janeway said to the group.

There was an air of collective agreement as Captain Janeway said, "Now to the status and recommendations regarding the Borg children Commander Chakotay brought to us."

All attention turned to Seven of Nine.

"The children are currently in the shuttlebay and will be taken to Sickbay for assessment by the Doctor at the conclusion of this meeting. They are disconnected from the collective and maintain an acceptable level of health. I recommend that their nonessential hardware be removed and appearances be altered to facilitate their inclusion into Voyager's community." Seven said smoothly.

"What about their state of mind?" Janeway asked, impressed by Seven of Nine's humanitarian recommendation.

"During our attempt to subdue the children it was necessary to terminate their leader. They have accepted me as an authority figure and follow my instructions." Seven said without a hint of emotion.

"Good, that will be helpful. Comments or questions?" the Captain asked as she looked around the table.

"I just want to verify Seven of Nine's comment about the... termination of the Borg children's leader being necessary. Given the decaying orbit of the cube and injuries sustained by the team, it was the only course of action that was practical." B'Elana said to the group.

Everyone was stunned at B'Elana's statement, even Tuvok registered surprise, since it was well known that B'Elana opposed Seven's inclusion in the crew and was often against her proposed 'Borg style' modifications to the ship.

"Thank you Lieutenant Torres. Any other comments?" Janeway prompted.

"I agree with Seven of Nine that the children should be included in Voyager's community. And I would like to suggest that she be given primary responsibility for their... assimilation... into the crew." Tom said helplessly, not being able to think of another word to convey the meaning.

"Thank you Lieutenant Paris. I will give your recommendation due consideration. Any further comments?" Janeway asked.

After a moment of silence she said, "I would like to investigate the possibility of expanding this wormhole to get us to the other side. I'm not willing to give up a two-year jump without investigating every possibility... Comments?"

"I would need to study the phenomenon before I could make any suggestion. My responsibilities to the children may preclude me from that study." Seven said as a statement of fact.

"I may be able to offer some help with that." the Doctor said from the viewscreen.

"Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers lived in a school in their own time. They should be able to attend to the children until Seven of Nine's duties permit her to take over." the Doctor suggested.

"Does anyone have any other suggestions?" the Captain asked the group before turning back to the viewscreen and saying, "Ask them if they would mind doing this. They are under no obligation to do so, it is simply a request."

"I will ask them now and be back with their answer in a moment." the Doctor said and the screen went blank.

"B'Elana, do you have any insights about how we might widen the wormhole?" Captain Janeway asked casually.

"Actually, I'd like to go with Seven of Nine to find out all we can before answering. Hopefully between us, we'll be able to come up with something." B'Elana said professionally.

Janeway gave a nod of acceptance that hid her shock at B'Elana Torres *volunteering* to work on a project with Seven of Nine.

"Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers were happy to volunteer to watch the children." the Doctor said.

"Anyone have anything else?" Janeway asked the room.

"Only that Commander Chakotay and Ensign Charles will both be released from Sickbay in the morning and, barring complications, will be fit for duty the following day. Mr. Paris is fit for duty now within the limitations of his injury, I will begin cloning a new hand for him tomorrow and he should be back to his original state by the end of the week." the Doctor said professionally.

"And Ensign Kim?" the Captain asked.

"Given the nature of his injuries, I cannot predict the date of his return to duty. I am hopeful that it will be in no more than four days, but I cannot be sure." the Doctor said with a look that might be apology.

"Thank you Doctor... Anyone else?" Janeway asked, and after a moment continued, "Then let's find a way through that wormhole."

[Chapter 10: By the Numbers]

"Remain here and comply with the instructions of the Doctor, Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers." Seven of Nine said as she handed the Doctor a padd.

When it was apparent that the children weren't going to ask for clarification of her instructions, Seven turned and left the Sickbay.

"Hi, I'm Andrew. What's your name?" Andrew asked of the oldest.

The children stared as if they hadn't heard the question.

"Mr. Wells is requesting your designation." the Doctor said over his shoulder as he worked on Chakotay.

"Two of Seven." the oldest said

Andrew looked at the group of children, then at Alan in confusion.

"No love, you're not going crazy, there are only six of them." Alan said with a smile.

"If you are Two of Seven, where is One of Seven?" Andrew asked.

"One of Seven resisted relocation and was terminated." the teenage Borg said without emotion.

"Oh." Andrew said with a small voice.

"I'll see the children over here, send me one." the Doctor said from beside an empty bed.

"One was terminated. Would you like Two?" Alan asked helpfully.

"Yes, please." the Doctor said, recognizing that Alan was being playfully obtuse.

"Two of Seven, the Doctor is ready to see you." Alan said and gestured toward the vacant bed.

"The Doctor can see me quite well from here." Two of Seven said as a statement of fact.

"He's got you there Doctor." Andrew said, jumping into the verbal game.

"Mr. Wells, Mr. Summers. For what reason are you delaying this examination?" the Doctor asked in exasperation.

"Four? Who is Four?" Alan asked, looking over the children.

A boy stepped forward from the group.

"Four? Are you delaying the Doctor's examination? Doctor did you want Four?" Alan asked the Doctor and pointed at the boy.

"No, no, I wanted to examine Two." the Doctor said.

"Two examine Two? I think he wants you to examine yourself, Two." Andrew said with a playful look.

The youngest of the children, a little girl, giggled.

"I'm guessing you're Seven." Alan said with a smile.

The little girl nodded shyly.

"I guess Seven is a typical girls name among the Borg." Alan said and looked back to Andrew.

"I guess so... what's your na... designation?" Andrew asked the boy after Four in line.

"I am Five of Seven." the boy said almost sadly.

"Alan, Four of Seven and Five of Seven are identical twins... like you and Scott." Andrew said happily.

"Explain." Two asked with an inquisitive look.

"Four and Five are physically identical just like Alan and his twin Scott." Andrew said in explanation.

Two looked at the boys before saying, "Four is .06 centimeters taller than Five."

Andrew looked down the line of children and said, "You're in order by height. I thought it was age. What happens if one of you has a growth spurt?"

The children all looked at Andrew, obviously not understanding the question.

"Gentlemen? I'm waiting." the Doctor said impatiently.

"Two, follow me." Andrew said and led Two over to the Doctor.

"What is going to happen to us?" Seven of Seven asked.

Alan looked at her timid, questioning face and thought back to how the Doctor had first introduced him to Seven of Nine. Then he said, "I really don't know Seven. Andrew is one of two, I am two of two, we just arrived two weeks ago. We were hurt and the Doctor made us better. Once the Doctor has finished with you, then I guess we'll all find out together."

Seven of Seven nodded in acceptance.

Six of Seven then asked with a tone of fear, "Did the Doctor remove your appendage?"

Alan noticed that the young boy had an ocular implant and was focused on his prosthetic leg.

"No, the Doctor is going to replace this with a real leg tomorrow." Alan said with an encouraging smile.

"Can I watch?" Six asked with wide eyes.

"We'll see." Alan said and looked back toward the Doctor.

Six of Seven nodded and went silent.

Alan looked at the group of children standing at attention and asked the Doctor, "Do you think I should bring Puppy out to play with them?"

The Doctor looked at the children for a moment then said, "I think these children would more likely enjoy a targ."

"What's a targ?" Alan, Andrew and Six of Seven asked at once.

"It's a beast from the Klingon home world... it doesn't matter, I don't think the children are at the emotional level where they would enjoy Puppy. Perhaps Kal-toe." the Doctor said as he pressed a hypospray against Two's neck.

"What's Kal-toe?" Alan, Andrew and Six of Seven chorused.

"It's a Vulcan game of... Gentlemen, you are supposed to be helping me tend to the children, not teaming up with them against me." the Doctor said in realization.

"Doctor, you have altered my epidermis... explain." Two demanded in a frightened tone.

"I simply changed your coloring back to what it was before you were assimilated." the Doctor said carefully.

Two nodded in acceptance and laid back on the table.

"Doctor, do you mind if I take Four and Five down to my cabin for a few minutes?" Alan asked.

"To what purpose?" the Doctor asked as he removed the outer plating of Two's ocular implant.

"I just want to take a walk, and I thought we could get them some clothes while we're out... I don't think I could deal with all the kids at once but these guys are okay... it's a twin thing, you wouldn't understand." Alan said with a smile.

"Actually that sounds like a good idea. Doctor, can you watch after Three, I'm going to take Six and Seven and get them some new clothes too." Andrew said.

"Fine, do what you will." the Doctor said and began removing a mechanism from Two's arm.

Alan, Four and Five walked out of the Sickbay. A moment later Andrew said in a mock whisper, "Let's take a shortcut."

He opened a portal and motioned for Six and Seven to follow.

"This is the cabin I share with Alan. The replicator is over here, let's get started on making you some clothes before they get here." Andrew said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

As it turned out, having children with the ability to make precise measurements by sight was very helpful in making clothes. By the

time Alan and the twins had arrived, Andrew was making a second set of clothes for Seven and ready to begin on clothes for Six.

As the door to the cabin opened Andrew asked, "What took you guys so long?"

"We met some people along the way... including a pair of twins. The guys here just *had* to spend a little time talking with the Delaney sisters." Alan said with a sly grin.

"You guys have been on the ship less than a day and you're already picking up women? Way to go!" Andrew said as he looked through the clothing selection of the replicator with Six.

"We merely wish to verify the claims Two of Two made about being a... twin." Five said in a flat tone.

"What have you been telling them?" Andrew asked and nodded at Six's choice of clothing.

"I told them that being a twin makes you extra special because you always have someone with you who can understand you. Even though you both get to have your own friends and own lives, the part of your life you share with your twin is the same and is something for just the two of you." Alan said happily.

"I miss Scott too." Andrew said with a smile and took the completed outfit from the replicator.

Six took a blue shirt from Andrew and began to put it on.

"No Six, I already told you. No one gets to wear their new clothes until after they have visited the Doctor." Andrew said seriously.

"Speaking of which, he's probably about ready for the next two kids." Alan said.

"We're going to make one more outfit for Six, then we can go while you make the guys some things... and love, don't make *all* their clothes identical." Andrew said with a pleading tone.

"Curses, foiled again." Alan muttered then smiled. "No, more like the identical style of clothes but with opposite colors... that's if the guys like the same style of clothes at all."

"Good point. Six has a great sense of style and Seven... is a girl. I think it's in their blood or something to know what looks good. So if you guys run out of inspiration down here while we're up in Sickbay, just give a call and I'll bring whoever isn't being worked on down to help." Andrew said and opened a portal in the wall.

"He just caused a spatial rift." Five said in surprise.

"Yes, he has that ability. You guys ready to get some new clothes?"

Both nodded and Alan began to go through the replicator clothing file.

* * * * *

Andrew, Six and Seven walked through the portal and into Sickbay.

"Mr. Wells, I was just about to call for you. Two and Three are finished. I am ready for the next child." the Doctor said and motioned to the empty bed.

Andrew looked at Six and Seven and noticed a look of apprehension on Six's face.

"Two, did anything the Doctor did cause you pain or discomfort?" Andrew asked, watching for Six's reaction.

"No, I am uninjured. The changes he made were cosmetic and caused no discomfort." Two said seriously.

"Good. Six, why don't you go first so Seven can see for herself that it doesn't hurt?" Andrew asked.

Six looked at Two then Andrew before walking to the bed and awkwardly climbing up.

"Seven, will you be alright to stay with the Doctor while I take Two and Three for some new clothes?" Andrew asked, looking her in the eyes to gauge her truthfulness.

Seven glanced at Two then gave a confident nod.

"Okay. Two and Three, follow me and we'll get you some new clothes." Andrew said and led the way out of the Sickbay.

"You are not going to manifest a spatial disruption to take us there?" Three asked in a hollow tone that might be disappointment.

Andrew was surprised by the almost emotional request and said, "I didn't think about it... it would be faster. Come on guys." Then motioned to a wall that resolved into a swirling vortex.

* * * * *

Alan and the twins were completing their selection at the replicator when a vortex opened.

"Two? You look great. I think having hair makes you look older." Alan said with a smile.

Two didn't give any outward acknowledgment of the comment but Andrew got the sense that he warmed to the compliment.

"Two and Three just finished, I left Six and Seven with the Doctor... are you guys about done?" Andrew asked.

"Just about. Four seems to have a dark side... if he were on our world I think he would be a Goth club kid. Five's tastes remind me of Bobby, clean, neat, maybe a little preppie." Alan said as he held up some clothes.

"Light and Dark? It works. You want to take the portal or walk up?" Andrew asked as he motioned to the portal.

"I think we'll walk. Maybe we'll run into Meghan and Jenny on the way up." Alan said and cast a fond smile at the boys.

"Good thinking." Andrew said as he withdrew his power from the portal.

"You have an ocular implant." Two said as a statement of fact, but everyone present took it to be a question.

"Yes, the ocular implant controls my ability to discharge energy from my eyes." Alan said with some difficulty, trying to use terms the children would be comfortable with.

"Do all individuals on this vessel have that ability?" Three asked carefully.

"No Three, that is part of what makes us individuals, we each have our own ability. One of the men who was recovering in Sickbay... Harry. His ability is to create music using a reed instrument." Alan said with a note of triumph at finding a way to describe it that the children would understand.

"Music?" Three and Four questioned at once.

"It's sound... computer, play music 'Kenny G' random selection." Alan said into the air.

The soft lilting music began to fill the air. Four's face scrunched up as Three got a look of discomfort. Two and Five listened intently.

Andrew noticed the reactions and said, "Let me try love, Computer, stop playback, play music 'Nine Inch Nails' Hurt."

As the music played, all the children listened intently. Four seemed to be swept away by the music and Three seemed to be in a daze.

When the music completed, Two asked, "What is the function of music?"

"It's an expression of creativity. As individuals, some of us have the desire to create things like music, some create paintings or sculpture. You should look at some art and maybe try to create something so that you'll understand better." Alan explained.

"And some express creativity by creating more advanced computer programs or working to solve problems that seem unsolvable." Andrew threw in, thinking Two might carry the 'computer nerd' mentality somewhere deep inside.

"I fail to see how this... music... benefits the collective." Two said and quirked his head in inquiry.

"And that's fine. Not everyone enjoys music. It's another aspect of being an individual, not everyone will enjoy the same thing. It serves the community by allowing people to share in that creative expression." Alan said, not knowing how to explain it better.

"It's no different than if you created a program on the computer to calculate a difficult problem. Others who used your program would benefit from your creativity. Same thing, different medium." Andrew said with a smile.

::Sickbay to Mr. Summers:: sounded over the comm.

"We're on our way Doctor." Alan called into the air and glanced at Andrew.

"Yeah, I'll port you there and you can look for Delaneys some other time." Andrew said with a smile and opened the portal.

"Thanks love." Alan said and walked over for a quick kiss.

"Come on guys, it's our turn to visit the Doctor." Alan said and led the way through the vortex.

* * * * *

Two watched silently for a moment as Andrew went through clothing selections with Three.

Finally he asked, "What was the purpose of the action Two of Two took toward you?"

Andrew looked up from the replicator in confusion for a moment then realized that he was talking about the kiss.

"It was an expression of affection. Alan... Two of Two is my mate." Andrew said, hoping that would be enough of an explanation, he didn't want to have to explain the birds and the bees to Two.

"As I understand the dynamics of mating, opposing genders are a requirement." Two said as Andrew found what he was looking for in the replicator file.

"Three, are there any of these clothes you would like?" Andrew asked carefully as he considered how to answer Two.

Three pointed at a pair of blue jeans, then at a red T-shirt.

"Good choice. Enter your measurements here and we'll have them in a minute." Andrew said and looked back to Two.

Two was waiting patiently for an answer.

"In our society the process of selecting a mate is a matter of emotional attachment more than logic. Opposing genders is most common but not a requirement. I don't know if I can explain it in a way that you will understand." Andrew said honestly.

"Continue." Two said flatly, but Andrew had the sense that this teenage boy was almost desperate to understand.

"Physical attraction is usually the first criteria. It causes the couple to seek each others company because we tend to gravitate toward what we find pleasing." Andrew said carefully.

Two watched without comment or hint of emotion.

"Next the couple begin to communicate and try to determine if they have compatible personalities. Sometimes that means shared interests, other times that means one has an understanding of something the other lacks and wishes to have." Andrew continued.

"This is where it becomes emotional. If both determine that they are compatible, they may seek to cause their relationship to become more... physical." Andrew said hesitantly.

"For the purposes of procreation?" Two asked.

"Not necessarily. Sometimes the physical contact is for the purpose of giving comfort or pleasure. Procreation generally doesn't happen until the couple have progressed to the next stage of their relationship which is commitment." Andrew said carefully.

"I do not understand." Two said with a hint of emotion.

"Commitment in a relationship is when both agree that they will not seek physical pleasure or comfort from another. They reserve their intimate physical contact for each other exclusively and intend for it to remain so indefinitely." Andrew said with difficulty.

"To what purpose?" Two asked.

"By being exclusive, the couple provide comfort, pleasure and emotional support among other things for each other. By instituting a commitment, there is no need for either to expend unnecessary energy on trying to attain those things from someone outside the relationship. Both are assured of having support when they are together." Andrew explained and noticed that Three had replicated another set of clothes. A pair of khaki pants and a bright yellow shirt.

"I believe I understand." Two said.

"Good. Three has finished. It's time for you to make your selections." Andrew said with relief.

"Do you have a commitment with Two of Two?" Two asked as he programmed his measurements into the replicator.

"We have an informal commitment, which means that we have promised each other that we won't seek intimate physical contact outside our relationship. We will be making our formal commitment in two days." Andrew said joyfully.

"Explain." Two said as he looked away from the replicator.

"It is a ceremony that lets others know we are committed to each other. The witnesses will be there so everyone will know that we are not available to become partners with anyone else." Andrew said and pointed to the replicator controls.

"I do not know what to pick." Two said with a slight note of helplessness.

"I think you'd look good in this." Andrew said, pointing to a pair of black jeans and a plain white T-shirt.

Two was about to initiate replication when Andrew stopped him.

"This style of clothing is most comfortable when you get it slightly larger than you need. Increase to the next larger size before you replicate." Andrew said seriously.

"I do not understand." Two said and waited before making the alteration.

"Okay, we're all guys here so I'll tell you. You're a teenage boy. I don't know if or when it will become a problem, but I suspect that you will be most comfortable in clothes that are a bit looser when you get... an erection. It isn't a voluntary action and looser clothing can provide comfort as well as conceal what might be a noticeable lump in your pants." Andrew said as he blushed.

"I do not understand." Two said in confusion.

"And you don't have to. Just replicate the clothing slightly larger and at some point in the future you may be glad that you did." Andrew said and motioned to the replicator again.

Two nodded in acceptance and replicated the clothing.

* * * * *

"Captain, may I speak with you for a moment?" Neelix asked as he walked onto the bridge.

"Of course Mr. Neelix." the Captain answered as she looked up from her computer screen.

"I am in charge of replicator rationing and wanted to bring you a concern." Neelix said nervously.

"What is it Mr. Neelix?" the Captain asked, giving her full attention.

"Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers are guests, so they have been receiving unlimited rations since their arrival. I just noticed a large drain on the replicator energy pool and traced it to their account." Neelix said with concern.

"What are they replicating?" the Captain asked curiously.

"I don't know Captain. I feel that it would be a violation of their privacy to look at their usage logs in detail. I'm just concerned that if this continues, I may need to limit their account and I wanted your approval to do so since they are both guests." Neelix asked timidly.

"Give me a moment." Janeway said and pulled up the replicator usage logs on her chair console. After a moment she said, "Not to worry Mr. Neelix, it appears that Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers have

taken it upon themselves to clothe the newest additions to our crew." Janeway said with a smile.

"Good. Good." Neelix said happily.

"However, in the next few days Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers will be asked to officially join the crew. When Commander Chakotay makes that official, perhaps you could let them know about replicator rationing?" Janeway asked.

"It would be my pleasure Captain." Neelix said with a smile.

"Is that all?" Janeway asked.

"Yes Captain, thank you for your time." Neelix said and made his way hurriedly off the bridge.

"Dismissed." Janeway said with a smile toward his retreating form.

* * * * *

Andrew turned to see the lean naked form of Two standing before him.

He turned away quickly and said, "Two, would you please go into the other room to change?"

Two complied and returned a few minutes later dressed in black jeans and a white T-shirt.

"Do you find my appearance displeasing?" Two asked in confusion.

"No Two, you remember what I was telling you about my commitment? Not only am I not seeking physical intimacy with another. I do not look at the unclothed body of someone else, since it might be taken as a sign of interest and cause a misunderstanding with my mate." Andrew said steadily.

"Then you do *not* find my appearance displeasing?" Two asked again.

"No Two, you look just fine. You are quite attractive. And I suppose I should tell you both about modesty before we return to Sickbay." Andrew said and took a seat.

Both boys remained standing at attention.

"You can sit down if you'd like." Andrew said.

Both boys remained standing.

"Do you understand about why we wear clothing?" Andrew questioned.

"To prevent physical damage and maintain body temperature." Two said flatly.

"Yes, and there is one other purpose. In polite society, you wear clothing to conceal certain areas of your body from public view. It goes back to what I was telling you about relationships. You are reserving those areas of your body for your future mate. There are circumstances when you may wear less clothing, but certain things will always be covered in a public area." Andrew said seriously.

"Continue." Three said with interest.

"Under certain circumstances it is acceptable to undress in front of others of your same gender... for the purposes of changing clothes or showering as a group." Andrew said slowly.

"Then why did you ask me to leave the room to change clothing?" Two asked seriously.

"Because I am same gender oriented, the sight of your body might cause an involuntary reaction that could be taken as interest. And if my mate were to find that I was looking at the naked body of another man, he might misunderstand and think I was interested in someone outside our relationship and was breaking my promise of fidelity to him." Andrew said with calmness on the outside and nervousness on the inside.

"I believe I understand. If you were not same gender oriented, then you would not have asked me to leave the room while changing clothes." Two asked in confirmation.

"Yes Two. I also have to add that it is inappropriate for males to unclothe before females except within the boundaries of a relationship. It is considered impolite and offensive to expose

your genitalia without invitation." Andrew said and felt himself blush again, not knowing that he had stopped.

"Is it the same for females?" Three asked.

"Yes, and their breasts are included in the areas that should not be displayed in public." Andrew said, feeling more comfortable with this turn in the conversation.

"I understand." Two said.

"Good, let's get back to Sickbay. I can't wait to see how the others look." Andrew said and opened a portal.

* * * * *

"How do you have this ability?" Two asked.

"I was born with it. Just like you have brown eyes and brown hair." Andrew said as they entered the room.

Alan smiled as he saw all the children looking mostly human and dressed in regular clothes.

"What do you think love? Aren't they a handsome group?" Alan asked with pride.

"Sure are. Two, Three, why don't you go stand with the others... Doctor? Do you have a camera?" Andrew asked as an afterthought.

"As a matter of fact, I happen to have quite an interest in photography. If you'll stand by the Children, I'll be right back." the Doctor said with a hint of excitement.

Andrew and Alan stood behind the stair-stepped row of children as the Doctor returned to the room.

"I think the picture will look better if we move you around." the Doctor said.

"Doctor, will you take a picture like this? Then you can position us how you want." Alan suggested.

The Doctor snapped a picture then began moving children around, getting Two to kneel down and Andrew to put his arm

around Alan. Finally he said, "Much better." and snapped another picture.

"Thank you Doctor." Alan said and relaxed against Andrew.

::Seven of Nine to Mr. Wells:: came from the comm panel.

"Yes Seven?" Andrew called into the air.

"Could you come to Astrometrics for a moment?" Seven asked in a commanding tone.

"May I bring Two of Seven and Six of Seven with me?" Andrew asked, thinking this might be good for Two.

"That would be acceptable." Seven said and closed the link.

"I'll be back as soon as I can love." Andrew said and gave Alan a kiss.

"We'll be fine, hurry back." Alan said with a smile.

Andrew, Two and Six left the room.

[Chapter 11: The Mouth of the Beast]

"What can I do for you?" Andrew asked as he looked at the vortex on the huge viewscreen.

"We have been trying to find a way to expand the wormhole so Voyager can travel to the other side." B'Elana said.

"I noticed that the wormhole shares certain properties with the spatial disruptions that you cause and was curious to know if you could effect it." Seven said in question.

Andrew looked again at the screen, then turned away looking toward an empty wall and slightly downward.

"What is he looking at?" B'Elana asked.

"He is looking at the wormhole, not the projection on the screen." Seven speculated.

There was a long minute of silence which was interrupted by a beeping from the workstation.

"The entry point of the wormhole has increased by eight percent." Seven said to the group in an informative tone.

Andrew closed his eyes then turned back to the group.

"That's about as much as I can do... it's just too far away for me to be able to push anymore power into it." Andrew said in apology.

"If we were closer, do you think you could effect it more?" B'Elana asked.

"Yeah, probably." Andrew said.

"I think we should take you out in a shuttlecraft to get up close and personal with the wormhole." B'Elana said in speculation.

"It would seem the most reasonable next step." Seven of Nine interjected.

"What do you think guys?" Andrew asked Two and Six who had been watching silently.

"I agree with Seven." Two said immediately.

"Can I come?" Six asked with hope.

"What do you say Seven? Can Six come with me?" Andrew asked.

"I will ask permission from the Captain to take a shuttlecraft for the purpose of testing our hypothesis. I will include your request in my query." Seven said to the group.

"Thank you Seven. I think we should get back to the others." Andrew said.

Seven nodded as Andrew, Two and Six left the room.

"Can we travel to Sickbay by spatial disruption?" Six asked with hope once they entered the hallway.

"Which way would you prefer to travel to Sickbay, Two?" Andrew asked as the group stopped outside Astrometrics.

"I do not understand why you are asking me. You will do what you think best." Two asked in confusion.

"Yes, I will do what I think best. To determine what I think is best, I need to know the opinions of those around me. If you have the desire to see more of the ship and would prefer to walk to our destination, then I will consider that before deciding what to do... if you would rather return immediately to Sickbay, then I will consider that." Andrew said and waited.

"I would like to see more of the ship." Two said reasonably.

"Six, what would you like to do?" Andrew asked.

"I would like to return to Sickbay by spatial disruption." Six said honestly.

"Then here you are." Andrew said and opened a portal.

"You go on ahead and we'll join you in a few minutes. Please tell Alan what's going on." Andrew said.

Six walked through the portal and it closed immediately behind him.

"Good. I was hoping to get a chance to talk with you privately, Two." Andrew said as he began walking.

Two followed, determining that the statement did not require a response.

"Since you are the oldest of the children, you are going to be their leader." Andrew began.

"Seven of Nine has assumed that role." Two said without emotion.

"Seven of Nine is an adult. She will most likely be in charge of the children and be your... interface... with the command structure of the ship." Andrew said, trying to find words that Two would understand.

"I think it will be most efficient if you take on the role of interface between Seven of Nine and the rest of the children." Andrew said hesitantly.

"To what purpose?" Two asked with genuine interest.

"By taking responsibility for the children, you will be making it easier for Seven of Nine to do her job and help you most effectively. If she can tell you that something needs to be done, and knows that you will see to it, then she won't have to go to each child and repeat her instructions." Andrew said, more easily.

"I understand. It will optimize efficiency by instituting a hierarchy of command." Two said plainly.

"Yes, but it goes beyond that. Certain decisions can be made by you so that Seven of Nine isn't forced to make every decision concerning every child. There may be needs that you can provide so she won't have to take time from her duties to provide them." Andrew said in speculation.

"In what way?" Two asked in genuine curiosity.

"Let's say you're with the children and Seven of Seven has... gastric discomfort. What would you do? Call Seven of Nine to receive instructions or take her to Sickbay?" Andrew asked, relieved that he found a technical term for 'tummy ache'.

"I would call Seven of Nine for instructions." Two answered immediately.

"And can you speculate what she would do?" Andrew led.

"After assessing the situation, she would take Seven of Seven to the Sickbay for treatment." Two said without emotion.

"And to do that, she would have to leave her duty station to assess the situation and then accompany Seven of Seven to Sickbay." Andrew said.

"What would you propose I do?" Two asked as they walked into the turbolift.

"Sickbay." Andrew said to the ceiling of the lift. Then turned to Two and said, "Since it is most likely that Seven of Nine would take Seven of Seven to Sickbay anyway, you could take her there yourself, then inform Seven of Nine of Seven of Seven's condition and the action you took. It has the benefit of dealing with the problem while keeping Seven of Nine informed and not taking her away from her duty." Andrew said as the turbolift came to a stop.

"I see the increase in efficiency in your proposal, but I will not know what Seven of Nine's wishes would be in every circumstance." Two said as he walked with Andrew out of the turbolift.

"You can speculate what Seven of Nine's probable reaction will be, and consider options. If you are not sure which is the best option, then contact her with the list of options rather than just calling her with the problem." Andrew said as they turned the corner to Sickbay.

"That is most efficient. I will endeavor to be the leader." Two said confidently.

"I think that will be a great help to Seven of Nine and to the children. If you have any doubt about what is the right thing to do in a given situation, you can call on me at any time to help you." Andrew said seriously as they walked through the Sickbay door.

* * * * *

"Mr. Wells, Six of Seven was just telling us that the two of you are going to go out in a shuttlecraft to try and expand the wormhole." the Doctor said dubiously.

"With the Captain's permission, yes." Andrew said.

"What would Six of Seven's purpose be?" Three of Seven asked.

"Observation." Andrew said seriously.

"That is not sufficient purpose." Seven of Seven said.

"In my home world it is a profession called 'journalism'. The journalist finds something he believes will be of interest to others and observes it. Afterward, he summarizes his experience and relays it to others so they can share in it without having to actually participate in it." Alan said, hoping that was close to Andrew's reasoning for taking Six along.

Andrew gave a fond smile toward Alan, then said, "As a side effect of his profession, the reporter gets to experience many things that others don't and learns a great deal about a variety of things rather than specializing in one discipline."

After a long moment of silence Seven of Seven said, "That is sufficient purpose."

::Mr. Wells, Six of Seven, report to shuttlebay one for away mission:: came over the comm system.

"We've got to go. Two, why don't you tell the children about what we talked about... I mean about leadership." Andrew asked as he walked toward the door.

"I will Andrew." Two said.

Andrew was taken aback for a moment by Two using his name, but pulled himself together and, making sure Six was following, left for the Shuttlebay.

* * * * *

"B'Elana, do you have an extra padd around here anywhere?" Andrew asked after they cleared the shuttlebay doors.

"In that compartment to your left." B'Elana said, only glancing in his general direction.

"Six, this is a data padd. It is for storing information." Andrew began.

"I am capable of storing information quite efficiently." Six said with certainty.

"I'm sure you are... in fact, let's test your memory. Close your eyes and tell me about the clothes you're wearing.

"The shirt is blue, it is 124..." Six began to say when Andrew interrupted.

"Why is it blue?" Andrew asked.

"It *is* blue." Six said in a slightly insulting tone.

"Why did you choose a blue shirt rather than a green or yellow one?"

"It was the preferable selection of those available." Six said with frustration creeping into his voice.

"What made it preferable? If your memory is so efficient, then why can't you tell me what it was about this shirt that made it better than another?" Andrew insisted.

"It is like the night sky of my world. I remember looking outside at night and it was this color of blue." Six said with an almost desperate tone to his voice.

"That is what people want when they read your experiences. You can show them a picture and the technical data about this wormhole and they will come away knowing some facts, but not understand what it was like to stand at the mouth of this giant beast and look down it's throat." Andrew said plainly.

"I believe I understand. By relating the experience to things from my past I can invoke an emotional response to simulate the experience I have had for those who are reading my report." Six said with difficulty.

"Exactly. And with practice, it becomes easier to relate your present experience with your past experiences because you get used to expressing yourself that way." Andrew said happily.

"I believe I understand. We are approaching the wormhole. I will begin recording my observations." Six said and turned on the padd.

* * * * *

Andrew got up from beside Six and moved between Seven and B'Elana in the pilot's chairs.

"I fail to see the purpose of including Six of Seven on this voyage." Seven of Nine said.

"He is a representative of the children. He is their eyes and ears on this voyage. He will observe and report back to the children what he has experienced." Andrew said.

"I do not see any benefit to this action." Seven said flatly.

"I noticed that Six is inquisitive. He asks questions and takes risks... more than any of the other children. I thought this would serve the purpose of satisfying his curiosity and give him a unique purpose among the children. If he can be included in activities that the others can't or won't be a part of, he can relate his thoughts and feelings back to the rest. Six gains the benefit of having a unique purpose and the rest of the children can gain experience vicariously from reading his accounts." Andrew said, hoping Seven would understand.

"But the children are Borg, they are the same." Seven said defensively.

"No, they might have started the same but they are becoming individuals. Two is becoming a leader and will be a great help to you in taking care of the children. Three is defiant, not willing to accept anything at face value. Four is quiet and brooding, Five is happy, sad... actually he's all over the place emotionally, but definitely a feeling child. And Seven is a typical little girl full of playfulness and mischief." Andrew said.

"How did you figure them out so quickly?" B'Elana asked in wonder.

"Because I've been living at a school for gifted children for nearly two months, I guess. I'm used to seeing something in a child and encouraging it. Like with Six, this experience may or may not make a major formative contribution to his life, but since I recognized the possibility, I wanted him to have the opportunity." Andrew said and looked at the wormhole filling the sky before them.

"Are you ready to attempt to adjust the opening of the wormhole?" Seven asked quietly.

"I will be as soon as Six comes up here. I don't want to do this without him." Andrew said steadily.

"Six of Seven, come forward so we may begin." Seven of Nine called.

Six promptly came forward and looked with wide eyes at the swirling vortex of energy.

"I'm going to start expanding the opening... you'll have to tell me how close I am to having it opened wide enough." Andrew said with concentration.

"The opening is expanding." B'Elana said in a professional tone.

There was a moment of silence as Andrew concentrated and the opening continued to expand.

"The opening has increased by fifty percent, it is nearly large enough for the ship to enter." Seven said.

"But it's just the opening, the wormhole itself isn't expanding." B'Elana said with disappointment.

"How close am I now?" Andrew asked with a little strain in his voice.

"Almost... almost... you got it. The ship could enter the wormhole right now." B'Elana said with triumph.

"But couldn't go through the wormhole." Seven interjected flatly.

"Six, tell me what you think." Andrew asked, sounding less strained.

"When a sheleiszar... I don't know the word. Reptile, has no legs..." Six said in frustration.

"Snake?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, when a snake eats an egg, the snake expands only where the egg is in his body. Can we make an egg around the ship and put it into the mouth of this giant beast?" Six asked and looked to each adult.

"We just might." B'Elana said and began to take readings.

For a moment B'Elana was working furiously then abruptly she said, "I think we can do it. Andrew, do you think that if I move the shuttlecraft, you can make the wormhole expand like an egg around us?"

"Let's try it." Andrew said and maintained his focus.

"Shuttle Aristotle calling Voyager." Seven of Nine called.

"Go ahead Aristotle, good work on expanding the opening." Janeway's voice said.

"We would like to attempt moving through the wormhole with the expansion around us." Seven of Nine said emotionlessly.

"Proceed." Janeway said with interest in her voice.

"Aristotle out." Seven of Nine said and closed the channel.

"Are you ready Andrew?" B'Elana asked.

"Yeah, let's get going... I can't hold this forever." Andrew said as sweat started beading on his face.

"Entering wormhole.... now. B'Elana said.

"How long is this going to take?" Andrew asked with effort.

"Two hours, twenty-two point four minutes at our current speed." Seven said.

"No way. There is no way I can hold this for that long, can we speed up?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Yes, I'm going to begin increasing speed gradually. Let me know if I need to slow down or stop the increase." B'Elana said.

Long minutes passed until B'Elana said, "We are at point nine seven impulse. It's about as fast as we can go without going to warp."

"How long will it take at this speed?" Andrew asked, the sweat now flowing down his face.

"Three point two five minutes." Seven of Nine said with a note of concern.

"How long would the entire trip have taken if we started at this speed?" Andrew asked with difficulty.

"Eleven point four minutes." Seven of Nine answered.

"How long have we been traveling?" Andrew asked in a whisper.

"Thirteen point three minutes."

"Are we almost there?" Andrew spat out.

"Less than a minute." B'Elana said.

"Three... Two... One..."

And the shuttle emerged on the other side of the wormhole with the expanded bubble around them.

Andrew slumped and walked to the back of the shuttle.

Six followed and went to the replicator.

"Would you like a beverage?" Six asked in a small voice.

"Yes Six, a glass of water would be wonderful." Andrew said, panting on the cushioned chair.

"Let's turn around and get this data back to Voyager. I think Andrew just gave us a two year leap." B'Elana said with excitement.

* * * * *

Everyone on Voyager was buzzing with excitement about the possibility of taking two years off their voyage. Andrew had been back in his cabin for an hour, resting from the experience when the door chime rang.

"Come." Andrew said tiredly from the couch.

Six poked his head in the door, unsure of his welcome.

"Come in Six. Tell me how you're doing." Andrew said with a genuine smile.

"I have written my account of the experience of traveling through the wormhole. I thought you might like to read it before I show the others." Six said bravely and held out the padd.

"Thanks Six." Andrew said as he looked over the writing.

He looked up from the padd with wide eyes and said, "Six, this is really good. May I have a copy of it for myself?"

A look of actual joy crossed Six's face and he pressed a few buttons on the padd.

"You may have this one. I have just uploaded a copy to the cargo bay where we will regenerate." Six said happily.

"Thank you Six. You did an excellent job." Andrew said with a smile.

Six bounced up and ran for the door. "I'm going to give it to the other children now." he said happily.

[I hope they can understand.] Andrew thought as a furrow of worry creased his brow.

* * * * *

::Two of Seven to Andrew:: sounded over the comm.

"Go ahead." Andrew said, sitting up straighter.

"You stated that you could give me advice when I was unsure of an appropriate action regarding the children. Six of Seven just submitted a report to me that is inadequate and asked that I

distribute it to the rest of the children." Two said with uncertainty.

"Have you discussed this with Six?" Andrew asked, hoping he hadn't.

"No. I've just completed reading the report and am unsure of the proper response." Two replied.

"Could you come to my cabin. I think I may be able to help." Andrew said with relief.

"On my way. Two out."

"Andrew to Seven of Nine." Andrew said as he walked to his computer.

"Yes Mr. Wells, may I be of assistance?" Seven answered promptly.

"Yes Seven, could you please upload your report on our trip through the wormhole with all the technical data." Andrew asked hopefully.

"Of course... you should have it now." Seven said immediately.

"Thank you Seven, I have it. Andrew out."

A moment later there was a chime at the door.

"Come." Andrew said and walked back into the living area.

Two walked in with a look of concern.

"I'd like for you to read something before we discuss Six's report." Andrew said and motioned to the computer.

Two walked to the computer and read intently for a few minutes before saying, "This report is precise and complete."

"And how do you think Seven of Nine felt as we entered the wormhole?" Andrew asked.

"I do not understand." Two said in confusion.

"After reading her report, how do you think Seven of Nine felt as we took the shuttlecraft into the wormhole?" Andrew asked calmly.

"I do not know. There were no references to feelings, therefore I must conclude that they were extraneous and not worthy of note." Two answered efficiently.

"And how do you think Six felt as we entered the wormhole?" Andrew asked, hoping Two would get it right.

"He was afraid, and worried for you." Two said immediately.

"How do you know?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"His report spoke of his anxiety and feeling of concern." Two said with confusion.

"What I'm trying to get you to see is that Six's report is an accounting of his *experience* during the trip, not a collection of data compiled during the trip. The purpose of Six's report was not informative as much as inspirational. By reading his report, you should have a better understanding of what it was like to be there and actually fly through a wormhole." Andrew said with a note of desperation.

"So his report is not inadequate. His report fulfilled the purpose for which it was intended, not the purpose I intended." Two said in realization.

"Yes. This was the reason I wanted Six to be included on the mission. It would be impractical to take all six of you on that mission, but by taking Six, he could relay his observations and you could share the experience." Andrew said with relief.

"I believe I understand. I will return to the Sickbay and reread the report with this new information in mind." Two said seriously.

"I have a copy right here. I'd like to hear what you think as you read it... if you don't mind?" Andrew asked.

Two accepted the padd from Andrew and began to read.

"He was frightened because the shuttlecraft was so small, and when the wormhole began to expand... 'it was like a mouth

opening in preparation of ingesting nourishment... us'." Two read in a voice of wonder.

"Go on." Andrew said with a happy smile.

"He speaks of a feeling 'like the vibration of a misaligned occipital implant', but in his stomach." Two said and nodded, then continued, "That is the fluttering of fear."

"Yes, he wasn't the only one feeling that." Andrew said, feeling that something wonderful was happening right before him.

"Upon successful completion of the mission, the feeling was like having the electrolytes replenished in his system after days of inadequate regeneration." Two said in wonder.

"Yeah, it was a relief to me too." Andrew said and laid his head back on the couch.

"I will distribute this to the others... after I explain its purpose to them." Two said decisively.

"Good. And make sure that you tell Six what you think of his writing. It is important for a journalist to receive feedback if he is to improve." Andrew said and sat back up in his seat.

"Yes, thank you Andrew. You have been most helpful." Two said and walked to the door.

"I'm glad to help Two." Andrew said with a smile.

"Oh yes... You were right about the need for looser clothing." Two said and quickly walked out the door.

Andrew sat stunned for a moment before breaking up into uncontrollable laughter.

[Chapter 12: The Belly of the Beast]

Andrew walked into sickbay the old fashioned way... through the door.

"Hi love, did you get all the rest you needed?" Alan asked and walked over to hug Andrew.

"Yeah, that took a lot out of me. How are you doing?" Andrew asked with interest.

"Well, Seven of Seven found a playmate... she and Naomi Wildman are in the Doctor's office with Puppy right now. The rest of the kids are in a huddle over there about something that Six wrote.

Andrew gave a big smile and said, "I'm so proud of him. He really expressed himself in that story."

"Do you have a copy? They wouldn't show me." Alan said with hurt.

"Yeah, I've got one at home. Gods Alan, I can't wait for us to have our own baby. These kids make me want him that much more." Andrew said with overflowing love.

"I know what you mean. I've actually been wanting to ask you how you'd feel about us... having twins." Alan asked hesitantly.

"Would that cause any extra risk to your health?" Andrew asked immediately.

"No, since the artificial womb does all the work. The only difference is that I'll be carrying a little more weight. Love, I want to do this... Four and Five are so special, I want a us to have a pair of our own." Alan said in a pleading voice.

"Love, I think it's a great idea. Just think of it... two sons. Our little boys." Andrew said joyfully and held Alan close.

"Then I'm going to tell the Doctor now. He's going to insert the artificial womb tomorrow when he replaces the leg. Then after the ceremony, he'll just pop the babies in." Alan said with a smile.

"Um, love, when do we have to provide the... baby juice?" Andrew asked hesitantly.

Alan gave a deep full laugh. Finally when he calmed he said, "I thought we could make 'baby juice' after the ceremony, day after tomorrow. The doctor says the procedure will only take a few minutes."

Andrew nodded and smiled.

"And, you can't make anymore 'baby juice' until the ceremony, because we want a good sample to work with." Alan said .

"You mean no???"

"That's right love, at least nothing below the waist." Alan said.

"Why are you smiling, you're not getting any either." Andrew said sourly.

"Because I'm going to be a daddy. With two little boys of my own." Alan said happily.

Andrew watched Alan for a moment before giving in and smiling.

"Okay, you win. I'm happy too. When is Seven going to pick up the kids? We'd better get to bed early, we have a big day tomorrow. You have to get a new leg and a womb and I have to drag this ship through a two year long wormhole." Andrew said dramatically.

"She'll be here any time. She and B'Elana were finishing their report for the Captain." Alan said and looked to the children.

"One of Two?" Three asked from the group of children.

"Yes Three?" Andrew answered.

"How did you feel when you were half way through the wormhole?" Three asked with excitement.

"Like I had a misaligned occipital implant in my stomach." Andrew answered.

"I told you." could be heard from Six.

"Children, follow me for regeneration." Seven of Nine's voice came from the doorway.

The children immediately straightened and formed a line, then walked out the door in an orderly fashion.

Alan ran to the Doctor's office.

A moment later Seven of Seven came running out of the office, past Andrew, and out the door.

Alan walked into the room at a more leisurely pace and said, "I guess our work here is done."

"Love you." Andrew whispered and put an arm around Alan as they walked out the Sickbay door.

* * * * *

"Good morning gentlemen." the Doctor said as Andrew and Alan entered Sickbay.

"Good morning Doctor. I'm here bright and early as ordered." Alan said with a gentle smile.

"I have something to show you in my office before we begin." the Doctor said with a note of impatience.

Andrew and Alan followed without comment and stopped just inside the doorway of the office.

"Sit." the Doctor said firmly to Puppy and Puppy remained standing, looking at Andrew and Alan.

"Sit" the Doctor repeated, this time with more force. And Puppy remained standing.

"Puppy, sit." the Doctor finally said and Puppy looked at him and sat down.

"Very good Doctor. You'll have him fetching your slippers in no time." Alan said with a fond smile.

"He was responding immediately earlier, having others in the room must distract him." the Doctor said in a considering tone.

"Very likely. Puppies aren't known for a long attention span." Andrew said.

"True, true. Well, on to the business of the day. I believe you know where the gowns are Mr. Summers, if you would be so kind as to change, we will begin." the Doctor said and gave Puppy a ball.

"Yes Doctor." Alan said and left the room.

"Six asked if he could observe the operation... I just don't know, he *is* a child. It may be too graphic for him. What do you think?" Andrew asked with concern.

"I think he is one of the group of children who removed Mr. Paris' hand. It would be beneficial for him to see how difficult it is to reattach an appendage. Maybe he'll think twice before removing another." the Doctor said seriously.

"Thank you Doctor. I'm going to ask Seven of Nine and Two of Seven what they think, if neither object, then I will ask Six to observe the operation." Andrew said with certainty.

"It will take me a few minutes to prepare everything. You can go to Cargo Bay four and ask them if you like, it's just down the hall." the Doctor said as he left the office.

"Fine, I'll be right back... don't start without me." Andrew said and hurried out of Sickbay.

* * * * *

Andrew walked into the Cargo Bay to an eerie sight. All the energetic children from the day before were lined up silently along the wall.

He walked quietly and looked carefully at the apparatus as he approached Seven of Nine's alcove.

Something caught his attention. There was a box affixed to the side of the alcove and it had a small light inside. Andrew walked closer and saw that the box was covered with glass or plastic and it was a display case. Inside the box was the ceramic turtle.

Andrew stepped away from the alcove, feeling that he had just violated Seven of Nine's privacy by seeing that. As he turned to leave he noticed movement from the corner of his eye.

"Were you in need of assistance Andrew?" Two of Seven asked.

Andrew jumped at the sound but quickly calmed himself and said, "Yes Two, I came to ask you and Seven of Nine if you think it would be a good idea for Six of Seven to observe Alan's operation today."

"For the purpose of observation?" Two asked.

"Yes. It is not common for a child to witness an operation. It might disturb him, but it might also inspire him or one of the others to pursue an interest in medicine. He already expressed an interest in observing the operation so I just wanted to ask for Seven of Nine's and your permission before asking him.

Seven of Nine opened her eyes and remained still at the sound of talking in the Cargo Bay.

"My permission? I have been told to comply with your instructions." Two said in confusion.

"Yes Two. I will ask your permission for something that has to do with the well being of the children. I think Seven of Nine is officially their guardian and I believe that she will act in all the children's best interest, but you spend more time with them and will know better what is in each individual child's best interest. I'm asking if you think it is a good idea for Six to observe the operation today." Andrew said quietly.

"Yes, I believe he should observe the operation and write whatever feelings he has about the experience. If you are concerned about how this experience impacts him emotionally, read what he writes and you will know." Two said plainly.

"Thank you Two. That was very helpful. Now I need to ask Seven of Nine for her permission. She is the guardian of you all and it is her ultimate decision." Andrew said and walked back toward Seven's alcove.

"Computer, disengage regeneration sequence for Seven of Nine." Two said as they walked.

Seven of Nine stepped out of her alcove and asked, "Do you require assistance Mr. Wells?"

"I came to ask your permission for Six to observe Alan's surgery today. He asked yesterday if he could watch." Andrew asked with respect.

"For what purpose?" Seven asked flatly.

"Observation." Andrew answered.

"Two, do you feel that Six would benefit from this activity?" Seven asked without emotion.

Both Two and Andrew were surprised by the question, but Two quickly answered, "Yes, it may serve to foster an interest in medicine for Six or one of the other children when he relays his experiences."

"Very well, you are more familiar with his nature, I will trust your judgment." Seven said and walked to Six's alcove.

After pressing a few buttons, the alcove went dark and Six stepped out.

"Six of Seven, Seven of Nine has given permission for you to observe the operation in Sickbay this morning." Andrew said, trying to contain his emotion.

Six didn't betray any emotion, but went efficiently to a box in the cargo bay and retrieved a data padd.

"If you're ready, we'll go now." Andrew said.

Six did not answer, but followed immediately behind Andrew as he left the cargo bay.

* * * * *

"So how are you this morning?" Andrew asked as they walked down the hall.

"I am well. Now that I have had time to process the events of yesterday, I feel that I should thank you." Six said seriously.

"For what?" Andrew asked in puzzlement.

"For listening when I talked. I have little memory of the time before, but I recall frustration at being ignored or patronized. My thoughts were considered unimportant and my feelings were considered *cute*." Six said with an impressive sour inflection on the word 'cute'.

"Of course I listen Six. If I didn't listen to you, why should I expect you to listen to me?" Andrew asked as he stopped outside the Sickbay.

Six smiled and said, "That is why I want to say thank you."

Andrew thought for a second then said respectfully, "Your welcome." And led the way into the Sickbay.

* * * * *

The Doctor began the operation and the room was silent but for the occasional sound of Six making notes on his data padd.

::Torres to Mr. Wells:: sounded over the comm.

"Go ahead." Andrew said into the air without moving his attention from the Doctor.

"We are detecting signs that the wormhole is destabilizing. We need to go now if we are going to make it through before it collapses." B'Elana said with obvious anxiety.

"Okay, where do you need me to go?" Andrew asked with apprehension.

"The most central point in the ship is the Airponics bay. If you'll go there now, Seven of Nine will meet you there." B'Elana said hurriedly.

"On my way." Andrew said and cast a look of desperation toward Alan.

"Proceed Mr. Wells. There is little more to see here, I am merely reattaching the muscles and tendons." the Doctor said.

"Would you like me to accompany you?" Six asked seriously.

"No Six. Please stay here and watch over Alan for me." Andrew said and left the Sickbay.

* * * * *

Andrew walked into the Airponics bay and was assaulted by the overwhelming fragrance of live plants and the feel of humidity.

He slowed his pace and looked in wonder at the wide variety of plants growing without dirt or water.

"Right this way Mr. Wells, we must begin immediately." Seven of Nine said at the far end of the room.

Andrew took a seat on the floor and nodded to Seven to indicate that he was ready.

"Bridge. We are prepared." Seven said into her comm badge.

"We are moving toward the opening of the wormhole now." Captain Janeway's voice responded.

"You'll have to tell me when the egg is big enough." Andrew said as a reminder.

"Lieutenant Torres will be monitoring your progress and relay that information to us." Seven said efficiently.

Andrew looked around and located the wormhole with his power. He remembered the feel of forcing it open and began to cause the entry to widen.

"That's it Andrew, it's big enough, just hold it there. We are going to increase speed to maximum impulse beginning... now." B'Elana said through the speaker.

"May I help you?" came a voice from the door of Airponics.

"Crewman Geron, we require the use of this space for the next eleven point four minutes." Seven said and returned her attention to her tricorder.

"Just ask if you need anything." Geron said and went to work, tending to the plants.

"We have reached maximum impulse. The decay of the wormhole seems to be accelerating." B'Elana said with worry evident in her voice.

"Will we have sufficient time to traverse the distance?" Seven asked with a tone that might be worry.

"I don't know... it will be a race." B'Elana responded with full worry in her tone.

Silence fell over the Airponics bay as Andrew fought to maintain his concentration.

"We're nearly out. Five... Four..." B'Elana's said with panic in her voice.

There was a crashing sound and a shudder ran through the ship.

Andrew looked around and couldn't see anything. He blinked his eyes, then determined that it was due to the complete absence of light.

"Seven?" Andrew asked quietly.

There was no answer. Andrew felt around and after a moment, found her laying a few feet away from him.

"Seven, please wake up." Andrew said with panic in his voice.

"Mr. Wells?" Seven asked in confusion.

"Yes Seven. Something happened. I don't know what to do next. Are you hurt?" Andrew asked, really hating the dark.

"I believe my ankle has been broken and I have received a concussive injury to my head." Seven said.

Andrew could hear the change in her voice which told him that she had found a sitting position.

"Seven of Nine to bridge." She said and received no response.

Andrew cast his mind out to the sickbay and found it a mess, Six was working furiously on Alan's leg.

"We need to get to Sickbay." Andrew said with worry.

"Could someone help me?" a voice came from the darkness.

Andrew focused his inner sight and found Crewman Geron pinned under a rack of shelving.

"Don't worry Geron, I'll be right there to help you." Andrew said and moved across the room, using his inner sight to help him avoid obstacles.

After a minute of prying, Andrew was able to pull Geron from under the shelves.

"This is going to feel a little funny but I'm going to relocate you to Sickbay... it's like a transporter. Just lay still." Andrew said and moved a portal over Geron's body and relocated him instantly.

"Come on Seven, we're going to Sickbay." Andrew said as he returned to her side.

"No, the first priority is to gain control of the ship. Can you move me to main engineering?" Seven asked without emotion.

"If that's what you want." Andrew said and tried to locate the engineering section.

"You are going to feel a dropping sensation. I am going to open a portal just above a chair, so you won't have to walk." Andrew said.

"Proceed." Seven said with discomfort creeping into her voice.

A moment later Seven dropped into a chair at the main engineering console.

Andrew ported himself to Sickbay and asked, "Six, what's going on?"

"It went dark and then the Doctor was gone. I've been trying to close the wound so Mr. Summers wouldn't lose any blood." Six said desperately.

"Thank you Six. When the Doctor is back online, he will be able to continue the operation. Do you know how to operate the biobeds?" Andrew asked, looking at the controls.

"Yes, they seem to be powered independently, or at least have an alternate source of power." Six said and initiated the biobed's shell.

Andrew looked at the readout and smiled with relief.

"He's fine. Will you check on the other patients while I take care of Crewman Geron?" Andrew asked and moved to Geron's side.

Six moved hurriedly to Chakotay and turned on the biobed.

"Geron, can you stand? I need to get you to a bed." Andrew said as he knelt down.

"I think so... with some help." Geron said quietly.

Andrew took Geron's hand and helped him to stand.

"Just lay down and I'll scan you for injuries. Can you tell me where it hurts?" Andrew asked.

"Cold... I don't know." Geron said as he began shaking.

"Six, see if you can find some blankets. Geron is going into shock." Andrew said without looking away from the biobed's readout.

"It looks like you've broken a bone in your hand. After what just happened to you, that's not too bad." Andrew said with encouragement as Six handed him a blanket.

"Thanks Six. How are the others?" Andrew asked as he covered Geron.

"The one over there has fallen from his bed. The others seem to be well." Six said, looking around helplessly.

"We need more help. Anyone who is injured will be trying to get here soon and this place is going to fill up... Can you get the other children to help?" Andrew asked hopefully.

Six ran to the door to be stopped. It didn't open automatically.

"I cannot open the door." Six said helplessly.

"I'll open a portal for you." Andrew said and a portal formed beside the door.

Six ran through the portal and a moment later he returned.

"One of Two, please come quickly. Five has been injured." Six said with panic.

"Can he be moved?" Andrew asked as he tried to pick Harry up and put him back in bed.

"Yes, yes... we will bring him." Six said and stepped back through the portal.

A moment later Two carried the unmoving form of Five into the room.

"Is everyone here?" Andrew asked as he arranged Harry on the bed.

"Yes, please help. He is not exhibiting life functions." Two said in panic.

Andrew ran to Five and saw that he wasn't breathing.

"What happened?" Andrew asked as he turned on the biobed.

"An electrical discharge." Two said with fear in his voice.

Andrew looked at the readout and said, "His heart has stopped. Two, watch what I'm about to do, I may need for you to take over."

Two silently watched as Andrew alternated between forcing breaths into Five's mouth and forcefully compressing his chest.

After three rounds of chest compressions, Andrew stopped and looked at the readout.

He smiled and saw that the heart had begun to beat. A moment later Five took a deep, desperate breath of air.

Andrew slumped back and noticed that all the children were watching silently.

"We need to get this place ready to attend to wounded. Two, see if you can find some sort of stimulant. We need to revive Chakotay and Ensign Charles. They will be able to help. Three and Seven, start picking up things in here. If it can be used, put it where you think it goes, if it is debris, put it in the Doctor's office and he can sort it out later. Four, you need to stay here with Five. If he stops breathing or his lips begin to turn blue call me immediately. Six, I need for you to stay with Crewman Geron for a minute. Be careful of his hand, it's broken." Andrew said with authority and began to focus his inner sight around the ship.

After a glimpse into Engineering where he could see that Seven of Nine was dealing with things efficiently he cast his mind to the bridge.

He could see smoke filling the air and at least one unconscious form, barely visible in the emergency lighting. He opened a portal that was the size of one entire wall of the Sickbay.

"Captain, are you alright?" Andrew asked with worry.

"Fine, just had the wind knocked out of me. Could you see to Ensign Baytart? His console exploded." Janeway said between deep breaths as she was slumped on the floor.

"I believe this is the stimulant that you were wanting Andrew." Two said and handed him the hypospray.

"Thank you Two. Captain, may Two of Seven come on to the bridge to attend to Ensign Baytart?" Andrew asked as he walked to Chakotay and injected him.

"Yes." Captain Janeway said as she was impressed by the calm that Andrew was keeping in this crisis.

"Two, take a medical tricorder and see if it is safe to move Ensign Baytart. If it is, bring him to a biobed. Geron? Can you move to a chair? We are going to need the beds for the most seriously injured patients." Andrew said and injected Ensign Charles.

"What happened?" Chakotay asked groggily.

"A lot. I think the Captain could use your help on the bridge." Andrew said and looked to see if anyone was in need of immediate help.

Chakotay got off the bed and walked through the portal to the bridge.

"Andrew? Can you tell if anyone is attending to damage in Engineering?" Janeway asked, trying to maintain a facade of calm as she pulled herself into her chair.

"Yes, Seven of Nine went there immediately after the incident. She is working on repairs now." Andrew said, then continued, "Permission to come on the bridge, that man seems to need help."

Janeway followed Andrew's pointing finger to Ayala. "Permission granted. His name is Gregor Ayala." she said with calm dignity.

"Two, would you help me get Mr. Ayala to a bed? He's too big for me to carry by myself." Andrew asked of Two who was putting Baytart into a bed..

Two responded by running to Andrew's side.

"What?" came a voice.

"Ensign Charles, glad to have you back with us. Would you take the ops station?" Janeway asked with a note of concern in her voice.

"Aye Captain." Ensign Charles said and made his way unsteadily through the portal.

"Captain, if you don't have any further need of me, I'm going to start looking around the ship for people in need of medical assistance." Andrew said as he and Two got Ayala onto a bed.

"Greg?" Geron said with panic and stood.

"If you encounter Mr. Paris in your travels, send him to the bridge. If anyone can get the helm working again, it's him." She said with a fond smile.

"Of course Captain." Andrew said and withdrew his power from the portal.

"Prophets protect us. What happened to Greg." Geron cried out in fear.

"Geron, don't worry... Two, would you bring a chair over here for Geron. I get the feeling he's going to be right here for a while." Andrew said.

"One of Two, Five is coming awake." Four said loudly.

"Five, how are you feeling?" Andrew asked and went to his side.

"I hurt. My chest... did something fall on me?" Five asked in a daze.

"Your heart stopped and I used chest compressions to restart it. I may have caused some bruising. Remain in bed until we can get the Doctor online and he can check you out." Andrew said and moved to check the readouts of Baytart and Ayala.

A portal formed in the middle of the room and Andrew said forcefully, "Seven of Nine, I need the Doctor. I have patients who may not survive without treatment."

"Repairs are being instituted. The Sickbay power should be restored within four minutes." Seven said while working on her Engineering station.

"I hope they can last that long. Do you want me to keep the children here or could you use their help?" Andrew asked as an afterthought.

"Three of Seven, are you versed in bioneural interface algorithms?" Seven asked without looking up.

"Yes." Three responded.

"Then I could use your assistance in replacing bioneural gelpacks." Seven said and continued to work.

"Good, go and help Seven." Andrew said and opened the portal to the floor.

Three cast a look toward Five before walking through the portal.

"Two, I'm going to look around the ship for injured personnel. While I'm doing that, I'll need for you to keep the children busy. Give them tasks to perform so they don't have time to think about being scared." Andrew said.

"Yes, will you be back soon?" Two asked with hope.

"I won't actually be leaving the room. Just my mind will be leaving to search the main areas of the ship to identify wounded. If you need me to wake up, just call my name and I'll bring my attention back here." Andrew said and took a seat.

Two understood and watched as Andrew stared and seemed to lose focus.

* * * * *

Andrew cast his mind out and found a group of people in the mess hall. He didn't notice any serious injuries and moved his focus to the holodecks. The holodecks were off-line and empty.

He moved hurriedly from deck to deck finding small groups of people, but no one seriously injured.

Finally he came to an observation lounge. He saw Tom Paris working furiously, trying to help someone.

"Tom, what can I do to help?" Andrew asked as he opened a portal a few feet from Tom.

"We need the Doctor. A shelving structure collapsed on her and crushed her chest." Tom said helplessly.

"The Doctor is off-line. Seven says he should be back in just a minute. Is she able to be moved to Sickbay?" Andrew asked with equal helplessness.

"I don't know, but we might as well... I've got nothing to work with here." Tom said in frustration.

After a brief moment of thought Andrew said, "Move away from her for a second. I'm going to port her directly into a bed."

Tom did so and a moment later she was laying in Sickbay.

Andrew opened his portal wider and Tom ran into the sickbay and to the woman's side.

"Hang on Samantha, the Doctor is going to be up and running any minute." Tom said as he held her hand.

"Mama?" a small voice said from the portal that was still standing open.

"Naomi, your mama can't talk to you right now." Tom said and tried to block her view of Samantha.

Andrew felt his heart lurch at the sight of the little girl worried for her mother.

"Seven of Seven, would you take Naomi into the office and start organizing the things we stacked in there?" Andrew asked, trying to keep his voice even.

Seven responded by walking out of the room, a moment later Naomi followed reluctantly.

"Thanks Andrew. I really didn't want her to see her mom like this." Tom said with a note of relief.

"Captain Janeway needs you on the bridge... I guess the helm blew out and you're the only man for the job." Andrew said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Yeah, I can fix that thing single handed." Tom said and held up his stump.

Andrew smiled when he heard a voice behind him.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency."

* * * * *

"Doctor, we have several wounded. Please check out Samantha first, then Mr. Ayala and Mr. Baytart. I think everyone else is stable for the moment." Andrew said as he turned on the biobed.

"Mr. Wells, could you get my mobile emitter from the office? It would seem a prudent precaution with the power net being unstable." the Doctor said as he looked at Samantha's readings.

The Doctor activated the biobed's shell and moved to Mr. Ayala. Andrew ran back into the room and held out the emitter to the Doctor.

"While I attend to Mr. Ayala's injuries, perhaps you could brief me on our other patients." the Doctor said as he activated the emitter.

"Just a second. Tom, now that the Doctor is back, I'm guessing you need to be going." Andrew said with a smile of relief.

"Yeah. Thanks for helping Sam." Tom said and walked through the portal Andrew had just created.

"Okay... Five was hit with an electrical discharge that stopped his heart. I performed CPR and he is resting over there. Crewman Geron has a broken bone in his hand and is bumped and bruised. Since you said that you would release Ensign Charles and Chakotay this morning, I administered a stimulant to them to free up their beds and so they could help out. Harry was thrown from his bed and I put him back in it, he hasn't regained consciousness." Andrew said as he watched the Doctor work.

"I notice that the incision on Mr. Summers leg has been closed." the Doctor said as he pressed a few buttons on the biobed and moved to Ensign Baytart.

"Yes, Six closed the wound while I was still in Airponics. He said he didn't want Alan to lose any blood." Andrew said with a hitch of fear in his voice.

"Very good. I will be able to complete the surgery once the crisis is past... Mr. Baytart will need significant dermal regeneration. I believe you are familiar with the use of this?" the Doctor asked, holding up the regenerator.

"Yes Doctor." Andrew said and took the regenerator unit.

The Doctor moved back to Samantha Wildman and Andrew thought to say, "All the kids but Three are here. If there is anything they can do to help..."

"What about Greg?" Geron asked in a timid, fearful tone.

"Do not worry Mr. Geron, Lieutenant Ayala's injuries appear worse than they are." the Doctor said. After a pause of consideration, he picked up a hypospray, identified the contents then injected Lieutenant Ayala.

First there was a twitch, then a slight moan before Lieutenant Ayala opened his eyes.

"Greg? Oh, thank the Prophets, I was so scared for you." Geron said through his tears.

"Tem? Shhh, don't worry Tem. I'm fine. Come here and taste the truth." Greg whispered.

Geron moved carefully to Greg and gave a long, slow, lingering kiss. After the kiss he pulled away and said, "You're fine. I'll try not to worry. You scared me Gregor." Tem said honestly.

"It wasn't my idea, but I'll try not to let it happen again." Ayala said with tenderness.

Geron turned to catch the wistful look in Andrew's eyes.

"We're a couple." Geron said shyly.

"It's okay Geron, the man in that bed over there is Alan, we're getting married tomorrow." Andrew said proudly.

"Really?" Geron asked with wide eyes.

"Why are you so surprised? From the way Tom and Chakotay talked, it's no big deal to be a same-sex couple." Andrew asked with confusion.

"It's not that, it's just that there hasn't been a marriage the entire time we've been in the Delta. I haven't seen one couple last for more than a few weeks after they made themselves known. You can call it a silly superstition if you like but I wouldn't let Greg tell anyone we were a couple." Geron said and turned back to Greg.

"Your name is Andrew isn't it? I think I've seen you around." Greg said in a tired voice.

"Yes, I've seen you on the bridge and in Sandrine's." Andrew said as he was carefully running the regenerator over Baytart's left arm.

"That's right." Greg said with a smile.

"Andrew pulled me out from under some shelves that fell on me and brought me to Sickbay." Geron said with admiration in his voice.

"Thank you for helping Geron. He's my world." Greg said and closed his eyes.

"Don't worry Geron, the stimulant is just wearing off. He's going to be fine now that the Doctor's back." Andrew said with confidence.

The door opened and several people made their way into the Sickbay.

Andrew sat the regenerator aside and walked to the group.

"Everyone stay calm. If you don't have a life threatening injury, just take a seat and the Doctor will be with you as soon as possible. And if you're here with someone who is injured, please move to the far side of the room so we can attend to the injured more quickly." Andrew said and noticed Two watching him.

"Two, will you regenerate Mr. Baytart's injuries?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Of course Andrew."

"Six, I have a job for you." Andrew called out.

Six stepped out of a corner, holding his data padd.

"Would you please make a list of each injured person's name, their injury and how they were injured?" Andrew asked seriously.

"This will help?" Six asked in a small voice.

"Yes, the Doctor will be able to look at your list and decide who needs to be treated first." Andrew said and waited for Six to walk to the first person in line.

"Four, how is Five doing?" Andrew asked.

"He is resting. His readings are within normal parameters." Four said efficiently.

"Then could you go to the Doctor's office and check on Seven of Seven and Naomi? The Doctor is here to take care of Five if he needs help." Andrew said.

Four got up without comment and went to the Doctor's office.

More people entered the room and Andrew started assessing their conditions by sight.

"Doctor, we don't have any more beds and we are getting more patients." Andrew said over his shoulder.

"We will need to move those patients not in need of immediate medical attention to a convalescent ward. Mr. Kim, Mr. Summers and Mr. Ayala can be sent there as soon as it can be established." the Doctor said in a rush as he worked on Samantha's wounds.

"Anyone who isn't injured, let's get the cargo bay next door set up as a convalescent ward. We need to free up the biobeds for those most in need." Andrew called to the increasing group of people.

"Seven and Naomi are playing with a holographic projection of a canine." Four stated as he went back to Five's side.

"Good, that's what I had hoped. Stay with Five for now and see to his comfort." Andrew said and looked around the Sickbay to see everyone working productively.

"Doctor, what do you need me to do now?" Andrew asked with a lost tone.

"I need for you to go in my office for no less than fifteen minutes and relax. Thanks to your delegation, there is little to do except for the actual treatment of these patients. If I have need of your services, I will call on you." The Doctor said with a tone that said he meant business.

[Chapter 13: Picking up Pieces]

Naomi came out of the Doctor's office and said, "Andrew fell asleep."

"Good. Two, would you take Andrew to the cargo bay next door and put him to bed... beside Mr. Summers if possible." the Doctor asked while working on one of many minor injuries.

Two left the room as Naomi asked, "How's my mama?"

"Your mother was hurt but will be just fine. She is resting now and you should be able to talk to her in the morning. How would you like to stay with Mr. Neelix tonight?" the Doctor asked as he moved from one patient to the next.

"Neelix is fun. I'll play with Puppy until Neelix comes." Naomi said and left the room.

* * * * *

"Andrew, the Doctor said you are to lay down in the cargo bay. Come with me." Two said gently, trying not to alarm Andrew.

"Thanks Two. I didn't know how tired I was till I sat down for a minute." Andrew said sleepily as he got up.

"I have prepared a bed for you next to Alan." Two said as he walked near to Andrew, in case he fell.

Andrew stopped in the hallway and looked at Two for a second. "Two, you just called Alan by his name. I think you are adapting to life on Voyager pretty well." Andrew said with a smile.

"Earlier, while I was attending to the children in the Cargo bay, I remembered my name before I was assimilated and... I understand how personal it is. When I was called by my name, I was another person. When I became Two of Seven I became this." Two said with a note of disgust.

"You have shown me respect by calling me by my name. If you would let me, I would like to show you the same respect by calling you by yours." Andrew said seriously.

"I am not that person anymore... I will never be him again." Two said with pain.

"Two, you don't have to answer this question now, just think about it and let me know when you decide. Who do you want to be? The name you choose isn't as important as the man the name represents. If you like the name you had as a boy, then honor that memory by using that name for the man you will become. You won't ever be that boy again, but you can be the man that he grew into." Andrew said and started walking again.

"His name was Icheb." Two said quietly.

"A fine name. Tell me when you've decided if you're going to use it. When you are ready, I will be honored to call you by whatever name you choose." Andrew said and walked into the cargo bay.

The room had been hurriedly made into a hospital ward. There were beds placed in nearly even rows and they were beginning to fill with wounded as the Doctor treated more patients.

"Thank you for reserving the bed for Andrew, Seven." Two said to the little girl standing by an empty bed.

"I will go and help Naomi Wildman in the Doctor's office." she said and left the room.

"She helps Naomi by playing with her." Two said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Andrew smiled and said, "Two, you have made so much progress in the past two days. I can't wait to see what you're like a month from now."

Two looked confused at the statement so Andrew continued.

"Yesterday you didn't understand what I meant when I asked you your name. Today you can recognize that Seven is a little girl who wants to play with her friend, but doesn't want to admit that a former drone could want to play."

"I have learned much in the past day, much of it thanks to you. I have a request to make of you but I do not know if it is appropriate." Two asked unsurely.

"Go ahead and ask. If it is inappropriate I promise not to be offended, I will just tell you." Andrew said and sat on his bed.

"I would like to attend your commitment ceremony. As I understand the custom, one attends such an occasion only by invitation." Two said timidly.

"Two, when I invited the guests, I didn't know you. If I had, you would have been invited. So to correct that problem... Two of Seven, would you do me the great honor of attending my commitment ceremony tomorrow?" Andrew asked happily.

"Yes. Thank you Andrew." Two said and moved to leave.

"Two, please stay for a minute. I have to ask you to do me a favor." Andrew said in a low tone.

"What can I do for you?" Two asked and moved back to the side of the bed.

"Two, my life can be complicated. I've learned to live in the moment and not put things off till later because none of us are guaranteed to have a later. Alan and I are going to have the commitment ceremony tomorrow, even if it's just us and the Captain. But... Alan wants to be able to walk on his own two feet at the ceremony, and for him I will postpone it. I don't want you to interrupt the Doctor while he's busy, but please try to find out if he will be able to complete Alan's surgery and implant the womb before the ceremony tomorrow. I really need to know." Andrew said tiredly.

"I will find out for you. Do not worry Andrew. I believe the Doctor will complete the surgery before the night is over." Two said with reassurance.

"Thank you Two. You are a good friend." Andrew said with a sleepy voice.

There was a long moment of silence before Two finally said, "You can call me Icheb." then walked out of the cargo bay.

* * * * *

Andrew laid down on the bed and was nearly asleep when he heard a whisper.

"Andy love? You awake?"

Andrew looked up to see Alan watching him.

Andrew got out of the bed so quickly he nearly fell, then he stumbled over to Alan.

"What happened? Did you piss someone off and get us thrown out of our cabin?" Alan asked in confusion.

"No love, I'm not sure what happened. We were going through the wormhole and I guess it collapsed while we were still inside. The Doctor went off-line and wasn't able to finish your surgery." Andrew said and pulled Alan into a heartfelt hug.

"I have a leg down there, what does he still need to do?" Alan asked as he tried to look at his leg.

"I think he has to attach muscles and tendons. I was there when he connected the nerves and veins so everything is hooked up to keep it alive, you just won't be able to walk on it." Andrew said seriously.

"Okay... why are we in a cargo bay?" Alan asked, looking around at the other people in the room.

"Because this is the overflow for the sickbay. The Doctor is getting people stabilized and sending them in here. After he's sure that everyone will survive, he will do the more in depth healing." Andrew said.

"So what else did I miss?" Alan asked and laid back on his bed.

"Quite a bit. Five got shocked. Naomi's mother was hurt pretty bad... just the usual chaos that follows us around." Andrew said with a shrug.

"And if I know you, you found some good things in all of this." Alan said with a fond smile.

"I met some people... Geron and Greg. Geron works in Airponics and Greg works on the bridge. I'd like to invite them to the ceremony if you wouldn't mind. They're right over there on the other side of Harry." Andrew said pointing a few beds away.

"Invite anyone you want love. The only reason I wanted to keep it small was because we didn't know anyone and I didn't want to feel like we were putting on a theatrical production for the crew." Alan said honestly.

"Thanks love, I just want to invite Greg and Geron... oh and Icheb." Andrew finished with a smile.

"Who?"

"Two of Seven, he remembered his name from before he was assimilated. He asked me to call him by his name." Andrew said with a twinkle in his eye.

"I guess that means you two have gone beyond the teacher/student relationship that you had going on." Alan said reflectively.

"Yeah, he's a good guy. When I first met him I thought we would never find common ground to form lines of communication but... we did. If he were back at the mansion, I'd invite him to move into the boathouse." Andrew said honestly.

"I do not understand." Icheb said from behind Andrew.

"Icheb! I didn't notice you come back in..." Andrew began.

"I wish to understand about the boathouse." Icheb said with desperation.

"Back where we are from, we moved from the main house to a boathouse at the far side of the property. When we moved, we invited our family and closest friends to come with us. Xander, Remy, Alex and Scott. I was just saying that if I knew you back then, you would have been invited to share our house because I think of you as a friend." Andrew said, watching Icheb's eyes, hoping to find understanding.

Icheb stood quietly for a moment, then said, "Thank you Andrew. If I had known you and Alan back then, I would have accepted."

"You called me Alan."

"Yes. It is your name." Icheb said with a small smile that might be teasing.

"What would you like for me to call you?" Alan asked hesitantly.

"You may call me Icheb. I believe Two of Seven has ceased to be." Icheb said with a bigger smile.

"Just don't talk bad about Two of Seven, he was my friend." Andrew said with warning.

"His beginning was unfortunate, but he ended well. I came to tell you that the Doctor will be sending someone for Alan in just a few minutes. He has finished treating new patients and is now working on healing those that he can most quickly so he can send them on their way." Icheb said with an air of happiness.

"Has he released Five yet?" Andrew asked with concern.

"I will be assisting Four to relocate Five to his alcove, so he can receive an unscheduled regeneration cycle. the Doctor believes that it will benefit him." Two said calmly.

"If you would like, I can create a portal for you so you don't have to walk that far." Andrew offered sincerely.

"Thank you Andrew. That would be helpful. I will go to Five now." Icheb said with a smile and left.

"He hardly resembles Two of Seven. He's grown up so much in just one day." Alan said in wonder.

"Yeah, he's really special." Andrew said fondly.

Alan turned when he heard a moan.

"Andrew, it looks like Harry is awake." Alan said, twisting himself to see Harry.

"Harry? How are you doing?" Andrew asked with concern.

"My head hurts... why am I sleeping in a cargo bay? Did Tom do this?" Harry asked in confusion.

Andrew laughed and said, "No, Tom didn't move you into the cargo bay while you were sleeping, but it does sound like something that he would do. This is the overflow from Sickbay,

it's a long story and all you really need to know at the moment is you bumped your head and have been asleep for about a day."

Harry nodded, then winced in pain.

"I'll let the Doctor know you're awake, maybe he can do something about the pain." Andrew said and got up from beside Harry.

The Doctor walked into the room pushing a floating cart.

"Doctor, Harry is awake!" Andrew called.

"Very good." the Doctor said, making his way across the room.

After a moment of scanning the Doctor said, "Mr. Kim, you appear to be in acceptable health. As I had hoped, your extended rest gave you adequate time to heal."

"Can you give me something for my headache... and my shoulder is sore." Harry said in confusion.

"Mr. Wells, if you will help Mr. Summers onto the grav-unit, I will take him to Sickbay to complete his surgery now, Mr. Kim, you may follow and I will give you an analgesic for your pain." The Doctor said and moved the grav-unit into place, then lowered it.

"Come on love." Andrew said and helped scoot Alan from the bed to the grav-unit.

As the group walked away, Andrew stopped and said, "Give me a second, I have to port Icheb, Four and Five."

A moment later Andrew was walking again and trying to catch up to the Doctor and Alan.

* * * * *

"I can perform the remainder of the surgery with a local anesthetic." The Doctor said as he prepared for surgery.

"Good, I had a question about the womb implant." Alan said as he watched the Doctor.

"Continue." the Doctor said as he pressed a hypospray into Alan's thigh.

"Tom said it was possible to add a birth canal, and after the past few days, I'm thinking it might be a good idea." Alan said with a note of concern in his voice.

"For what reason?" the Doctor asked, intrigued.

"You remember how we told you about our lives moving so quickly at the dinner party? What if the next place we move doesn't have adequate medical care to deliver a baby?" Alan asked with concern.

"So this has nothing to do with the desire to experience the wonder of natural childbirth?" the Doctor asked without a hint as to if he was joking.

"Oh God no. My desire is to go to sleep and wake up with my new babies born." Alan said seriously.

"Then there is another option. In some rare cases there has been a need for an alternative to surgical birth and the more natural style birth. I can install... not so much of a birth canal as an escape hatch for the baby, or in this case babies." the Doctor said in a considering tone.

"Okay Doctor, this is the first we've heard about this. Give us the whole story." Andrew said cautiously.

"It is simply an opening formed in the navel. It will stretch open to facilitate the birthing of your babies, then retract to a barely noticeable opening in your stomach. It is for someone who is planning on multiple births though I'm sure a doctor from your century should be able to remove the womb and close the opening with no difficulty." the Doctor said.

"So you *don't* have to shift around my internal organs? And no pain?" Alan asked in confirmation.

"As I understand the process, there is a stretching sensation during the birth, but it is not overly painful. And no internal organs will be shifted. The womb will be connected to the bloodstream to have access to nutrients and building materials for the babies, but will not impact your bodily systems except for the need for increased food intake and proper nutrition." the Doctor said as he worked on the leg.

"Thank you for taking care of Alan so quickly. I really appreciate it." Andrew said honestly.

"You're very welcome but I must admit to having ulterior motives." the Doctor said with a hint of hesitance.

"Because of your part in the commitment ceremony?" Alan asked.

"That was a factor, but the two of you were pawns in my hostage negotiation with the Captain." the Doctor said in a teasing tone.

"What did you get in exchange for us?" Andrew asked with a smile.

"Commander Chakotay and Ensign Charles will be sent down as soon as possible so I may check their conditions." the Doctor said smugly.

"Why did the Captain ask for us to be healed?" Alan asked, not having a clue as to why she should care.

"She wants the two of you to be able to attend a staff meeting in... half an hour." the Doctor said, then turned to Harry sitting nearby and said, "Mr. Kim, you are also expected to be in the staff meeting since you have regained consciousness."

"But I just woke up." Harry said with a bit of a whine.

"We all have our duty." the Doctor said and began to close the incision.

"Mr. Wells, I may need your assistance so I may also attend the meeting." Seven of Nine said from a nearby chair.

"Seven? I didn't see you there. How's your foot?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Quite broken. The Doctor informs me that until the swelling subsides, there is little he can do." Seven said with a note of disgust.

"Can't you give her something for the swelling?" Andrew asked the Doctor who was beginning an incision on Alan's stomach.

"No. Her Borg anatomy will counteract my anti-inflammatory agents. And I cannot knit the bone until the swelling has subsided by at least twenty percent." the Doctor said and began to insert a plastic appliance into Alan's abdomen.

"How about an ice pack?" Andrew asked.

The Doctor stopped and gave a considering look. "I suppose the ice would cause constriction of the blood vessels in the area, having the effect of reducing the swelling." he finally said.

"Do you have an ice pack here?" Andrew asked.

"Why would I... you can get one from the replicator." the Doctor said and went back to work.

Andrew went to the replicator and got an ice pack.

"Hold this to your injury and the swelling should go down. Then the Doctor will be able to treat you before the meeting." Andrew said, holding out the ice pack.

Seven held the pack for a moment before placing it against her swollen foot.

"Done. It was a simple procedure, as promised." The Doctor said with a smile.

"And the escape hatch?" Alan asked, looking down at his stomach.

"Your navel now serves a purpose. Tomorrow I will insert your children through that opening." the Doctor said with a smile and looked up as the doors to sickbay opened.

"Commander, Ensign, come right over here." the Doctor said to Chakotay and Ensign Charles.

* * * * *

"Gentlemen, please take a seat, I know it's been a long day for all of us." Captain Janeway said to Alan and Andrew who were standing timidly just inside the ready room door.

They hesitantly took seats as the Captain pressed some buttons and the viewscreen came on to show the Doctor.

"Let's begin. First, Commander Chakotay, what can you tell me about our current status?" Janeway asked, turning her attention to the Commander.

"We have sustained ship-wide power loss and damage. Thanks to the efforts of Engineering, we are currently eighty-three percent operational. All life support and vital services are fully operational." Chakotay said efficiently.

"Good, Lieutenant Paris, what is the status of the helm?" Janeway asked.

"I will need another half an hour to have it working again. If we needed to, we could use it now, but we would have no precision in our movements." Tom said professionally.

"Commander Tuvok, what can you tell me about the area of space that we're in?"

"As far as I can determine, we are in an area of space one point nine years distant from our previous position if we had traveled at warp six. Scanners are not functioning well enough to determine the status of the surrounding planetary systems." Tuvok said without emotion.

"Captain, I may be able to help with that." Neelix said quickly. "Some months ago I was talking with some Tarkalian traders about our projected course and they mentioned this area of space. I believe that we are near the Barga system. It isn't visited much because it is so remote, but it is said to have an abundance of M-class planets filled to bursting with resources."

"That sounds encouraging, thank you Mr. Neelix. Chief Engineer Torres, report."

"Thanks to Seven of Nine's quick action, we avoided what could have been a major problem with the environmental systems. The repair crews have completed work on vital systems, and are now working to restore non-vital operations which I expect to be complete within two hours. Then we will move on to non-operations repairs." B'Elana said in a Starfleet tone.

"Good, better than I expected. Doctor, status of the crew?" Janeway asked and looked to the viewscreen.

"There were four life threatening injuries, those patients are now stable and expected to make a full recovery. The remaining injuries were broken bones and bumps for the most part and are in the process of being healed. Icheb is regenerating wounds while I am in this meeting." the Doctor said with an air of calm.

"Icheb?" the Captain asked.

"Two of Seven has remembered his name from before he was assimilated and chosen to use it." Andrew said timidly.

Janeway nodded and said, "Continue Doctor."

"There were no deaths, the three most serious injured will remain in sickbay, six crewmen will be off duty pending further examination, and eleven more will be ordered to light duty." the Doctor said to the group, then turned his attention to Janeway.

"Thank you Doctor, from what I have just heard, we're a little bumped and bruised, but still functioning for the most part, anyone have anything to add?" the Captain asked the group.

A moment of silence filled the room, then the Captain continued. "Mr. Wells and Mr. Summers. It has come to my attention that you have been making significant contributions to this ship beyond that of the two year jump. I've asked you here to invite you to officially join the crew of Voyager."

Alan and Andrew were both surprised. Finally Alan was able to ask, "What would we do?"

"Commander Chakotay?" Janeway asked and turned her attention to him.

"Andrew has been so good about helping the Doctor in Sickbay, I thought I would assign him as the Doctor's assistant. When he has received enough training, he will replace Lieutenant Paris as the backup medic." Chakotay said with a glance at Tom.

"In recognition of Mr. Summers gift for organizing and delegation, I am going to assign him as my assistant. I have been so overwhelmed by reports and schedules that I have had to delay certain operations for lack of time." Chakotay said seriously.

"So gentlemen, what do you say?" Captain Janeway asked.

"Will this effect our marriage plans?" Andrew asked carefully.

"No, if you decide to take the positions, you will be logged as crewmen immediately, but will not be asked to report to duty for one week, that way you can have a honeymoon." Captain Janeway said with a smile.

Andrew looked at Alan who nodded. "We would be happy to accept your offer Captain." Andrew said proudly.

"Good, then Crewman Summers, Crewman Wells, you are dismissed." Captain Janeway said with a smile.

Both men got up from the table and left the room.

[Chapter 14: The Naming of Names]

Andrew and Alan walked into their cabin and moved to the couch.

"Do you feel it love?" Andrew finally asked.

"Belonging?" Alan asked in confirmation.

"Yeah. It caught me by surprise." Andrew said with a note of wonder.

Alan took Andrew into his arms and gave a long slow hug.

"Do you realize that we haven't made love since we've been here?" Andrew asked.

"I know love. And I want to so bad it hurts." Alan said honestly.

"Just hang on for a little while longer love. This time tomorrow, we'll be on our honeymoon and can make love for a solid week." Andrew said with a smile.

"I know, but I want you so bad right now." Alan said with a whine in his voice.

"Think about the children. Just hold on to your baby juice for one more day and we'll get to make some beautiful babies of our own." Andrew said with love.

"Thanks. When you put it like that, I can put up with almost anything." Alan said joyfully.

They snuggled closer when the door chime rang.

"Come." Andrew said and looked toward the door.

"Andrew?" A small voice called.

"Yes Six?" Andrew asked and remained in Alan's embrace.

"Two of Seven informed us that he has chosen to forego his Borg designation for a... name." Six said hesitantly.

"Yes, he now wants to be called Icheb." Andrew said happily.

"He was unable to explain his reasoning for this action. Can you explain?" Six asked with desperation.

"Six, Icheb was changed into Two of Seven by the Borg. They took away his choice and made him into what they wanted him to be. I think he decided to change his name and become what he wants to be. It is a symbol of taking back some of what was taken from him." Andrew said in a considering tone.

Six stood silently for a minute as the two men watched.

After much consideration, Six finally said, "I am no longer what the Borg made me. You have shown me that I can become many things... a pilot, an engineer, a doctor or a journalist. Whatever I become, it will be my choice, not the Borg's. I would like a name too."

"What name would you like?" Alan asked gently.

"I do not know. I have only flashes of memory of my former life. I do not recall my previous designation... name." Six said sadly.

"Six, you can have whatever name you choose, but if you would like, we can give suggestions of what names we think would be good for you." Andrew offered.

"Yes, please." Six said with a note of relief.

"Jimmy." Andrew said immediately.

Six thought about the name as Alan got a puzzled look.

"Olson?" Alan asked in realization.

"Yeah. The attitude, the journalism... it fits." Andrew said with a smile.

"Who is Jimmy Olson?" Six asked.

"He is a fictional character from our world. He is inquisitive and sometimes gets into trouble by investigating things that are dangerous..." Andrew began.

"...But with the help of his friends Lois and Clark, he is always able to come out of the experience safely." Alan finished.

"Do you believe this of me?" Six asked in worry.

"No Six, but you have the same inquisitive nature and willingness to take risks. Plus you are a good person who is easy to like... just like Jimmy." Andrew said with a smile.

"Thank you Andrew. I believe I understand... Could you tell me more about the name?" Six asked with intensity.

"Let's see... Jimmy is the diminutive form of the formal name James, just like Andy is the diminutive form of Andrew." Alan said in an informative tone.

"I remember reading about someone in recent history with that name... Captain James Kirk. It might be a good idea to research his life. It is good to know someone with your name has accomplished great things." Andrew said and snuggled against Alan again.

"Thank you both for the explanation and suggestion. I will inform you of my decision when it is made." Six said with Borg efficiency.

"Thank you Six. If you like, you can explain to the other children what I've just told you. Some of them may want to get names too." Alan said with a tone of fondness.

Six walked to the door, then stopped. "I have written an account of my experience in Sickbay this morning. It has been uploaded to your workstation." Six said and left the room.

"Do you think he'll change his name?" Alan asked as Andrew got off the couch.

"Yeah, I think he'll be known as Jimmy before we get married tomorrow." Andrew said with a smile as he came back holding a padd.

"Read it with me?" Andrew asked and held up the padd.

"Yeah, just like the old Star Wars books... but now we're living on a space ship." Alan said in realization.

"Look at this." Andrew said and pointed to a passage of text.

* * * * *

Andrew and Alan had just finished Six's story and were sitting stunned.

"You're some kind of super-hero." Alan finally said.

"I didn't know he thought of me like that." Andrew said in amazement.

"To hear him tell it, Five, Samantha, Baytart and Ayala would all be dead without your help." Alan said in a hollow tone.

"I can take credit for saving Five. Without the CPR he would have died, but the rest? I just put them to bed, the Doctor did all the work." Andrew said honestly.

"Love, you'll have to get used to this. Six is a child, and you are obviously his hero. When our kids are born, you'll probably be their hero too... I know you're mine." Alan said with tenderness.

"Do you think I should have a talk with him about it?" Andrew asked with concern.

"No love. The universe has taken so much from that little boy. Let him have his hero." Alan said and held Andrew close.

Andrew thought about Alan's words and whispered, "You're going to be such a great father."

"You too, my hero." Alan said with a smile before moving in for a deep passionate kiss.

* * * * *

The door chime rang as Andrew and Alan were rereading Six's story.

"Come in." Alan called into the air.

"Are we interrupting?" Chakotay asked with worry.

"No, come on in and have a seat guys. We were just reading." Alan said with a smile.

"We have a few things to talk to you about before the ceremony tomorrow." Tom said and took a seat.

Chakotay sat by Tom then said, "The Captain suggested that since you're both officially crew members, we have a formal Starfleet wedding ceremony."

"What would that include?" Andrew asked and sat the padd on the coffee table.

"Not much, just dress uniforms, and Tuvok would attend to provide an official record of the event." Tom said nonchalantly.

"We'll have to make uniforms... can you guys help us with that? I wouldn't want to get it wrong." Andrew asked the two.

Tom looked to Chakotay before answering, "Sure... in fact, it's kind of a tradition that the couple not spend the night before the wedding together. We're here to take one of you to Chakotay's quarters for the night."

"You'll see each other again at the ceremony... which we would like to have on the holo-deck if you don't mind." Chakotay said hesitantly.

Andrew said, "I thought we would just have it in the Captain's office."

"Please allow me to give this to you as a wedding present. I am a holo-programmer, I'm the one who programmed Sandrine's." Tom said plaintively.

Alan and Andrew cast simultaneous looks at each other, then both nodded in acceptance.

"Good... then who's spending the night on my couch?" Chakotay asked as he got up from the loveseat.

"I will." Alan said without enthusiasm.

"Let's go then, so these two can program a perfect wedding location." Chakotay said and walked toward the door.

"I'm gonna miss you Andy." Alan said quietly and held Andrew close.

"I'll see you in the morning... and then we'll be married." Andrew said, holding on for dear life.

"Come on Alan. You need to get some sleep." Chakotay said from the door.

After a long kiss, Alan finally let loose of Andrew and said, "Yes Commander."

* * * * *

There was a chime at the door as Tom and Andrew were working on the holo-program.

"Come." Andrew called without looking up.

"Andrew? I came to ask if the other children could also attend the ceremony." Icheb said from the doorway.

"Sure, if they want to. It's a formal ceremony, so I don't know how much they'll enjoy it." Andrew said and moved from beside Tom at the computer.

Icheb looked around and asked, "Where is Alan?"

"Apparently there is a tradition that states the couple shouldn't see each other before the wedding. So Alan will be staying at Commander Chakotay's cabin tonight and Tom will be staying here." Andrew said without inflection.

"I have a concern about Three of Seven and I wanted to discuss it with you." Icheb said with worry.

Andrew heard the anxiety in Icheb's voice and said, "Come over here and sit down. Tell me what's the problem."

"I do not know that it is a problem... He seems to be acting more like a Borg drone than he did yesterday. He has stopped speaking to anyone but Four, Five and Seven of Seven." Icheb said with a helpless tone.

"And you want to help him become an individual like you and the others?" Andrew asked in confirmation.

"Yes. His behavior suggests that he does not want to be an individual... that he wants to rejoin the collective." Icheb said with a note of fear.

"Thank you for bringing this to me. I don't know if he'll listen but I'll try to talk to him." Andrew said seriously.

"Would you like for me to send him to you?" Icheb asked with hope.

Andrew looked at Tom who was consumed by his programming and said, "Yes, send him here and I will see what I can do."

Icheb got up from the couch and walked to the door before saying, "Thank you Andrew. Even though we are becoming individuals, we are all 'of Seven'. That makes us family does it not?"

"Yes Icheb, it does."

* * * * *

"Come." Andrew said when he heard the chime.

Three of Seven walked into the room stiffly and stood at attention before Andrew.

Andrew looked at the Borg posture and attitude before saying, "Three, Icheb is concerned about your recent behavior. Explain."

"I do not wish to explain to an inferior being." Three said in a flat tone.

Andrew was taken aback by the statement. He looked carefully at Three's features and got a glimmer of a sense of what was going on.

"Tom, Three and I are going to the Sickbay for a moment. We'll be right back." Andrew said and opened a portal.

"Just don't go sneaking off to visit with Alan or I'll make it rain at your wedding." Tom said mock seriously.

Andrew stopped for a moment at the statement, then said, "I promise, just to Sickbay and back."

* * * * *

"Three of Seven. Please take this medical tricorder and scan me for Borg signatures." Andrew said, handing Three the Device.

After a moment of scanning Three looked up and said, "You have been modified by the Borg. You have a tritanium mesh throughout the circulatory network of your brain and two of your vital organs are being augmented by nano-probes."

"Yes. Do you still consider me an inferior being?" Andrew asked and held out his hand for the tricorder.

Three handed over the tricorder and thought for a moment before saying, "Before I answer, how did you and Two of Two receive your Borg modifications?"

"Two of Two used an appliance on his face to control discharges of optical energy. The Doctor suggested that an ocular implant could be modified to control his discharges. I was injured and Seven of Nine suggested that I might be healed by using Borg nano-probes to repair my damage." Andrew answered as efficiently as he could.

"So this was done without your permission?" Three asked in confirmation.

"Yes, but had I been asked, I would have agreed." Andrew said seriously.

"You are not an inferior being. I will talk with you." Three said.

"Follow me back to my cabin and we'll talk." Andrew said and walked back to the portal.

* * * * *

"Do you think you are superior to others on this ship?" Andrew asked as he took a seat on the couch.

"Yes. I was born organic like them, then I was improved. Even though some of my improvements were removed, I remain superior to pure organics." Three said without emotion.

"I have a question for you. Please consider your response carefully before answering." Andrew said in a serious tone.

Three showed no sign of hearing the statement so Andrew continued, "Which is better, a hydrospanner or a dermal regenerator?"

Three looked at Andrew with confusion before he purposefully put his Borg emotionless mask back on.

"I need clarification." Three finally answered.

"Of what?" Andrew asked.

"For what purpose. I cannot state which is better if I do not know the task to be performed." Three said with Borg flatness.

"Then how do you know that you are superior to another being unless you know their purpose?" Andrew asked seriously.

"But I have been improved beyond the capabilities of organics, I am superior." Three said defensively.

"Three, you are different... not superior. Your improvements may make you superior at performing certain tasks. But no sentient being is superior over another. We all have our own purpose, and use our individual gifts to try and fulfill it. Just like the dermal regenerator is a superior implement if your purpose is to repair a wound." Andrew said, hoping Three was getting the idea.

"I understand. I am not superior... I am different." Three said flatly.

"And another word for different is individual. Each of us is different in our own way. By using our differences collectively, we have strength as a group." Andrew said, not sure of Three's emotional state.

"Two of Seven and Six of Seven have chosen to give up their Borg designations. I thought they were denying their superiority in an attempt to become inferior like those around us." Three said in a more organic tone of voice.

"Icheb and Jimmy have made choices that are right for them." Andrew said in confirmation.

"Then you do not wish to change my designation?" Three asked with surprise.

"No Three. That is your personal business. Icheb changed his name because Two of Seven is something that the Borg created. Jimmy changed his to show that he controls his own future, he is

not what the Borg made him but what he chooses to be." Andrew said carefully.

"But what if I *want* to be Borg. Would you disapprove of me?" Three asked, with a tremor of fear in his voice.

"Before I answer, I need to know. Do you want to be identified as Borg, like you are now? Or do you want to rejoin the collective?" Andrew asked hesitantly.

"I wish to be as I am... but I would like to restore the hardware that the Doctor removed when we arrived." Three said unsurely.

"Do you want to be bald and gray again?" Andrew asked with a look of displeasure.

"No, although I would like to have my Borg clothing." Three said with certainty.

"I'll see what I can do for you. What else?" Andrew asked, sensing that there was more.

Three got a look of shyness that he quickly covered with his Borg attitude. "Since I have been improved, I believe I should be treated as an adult. I can perform the same tasks and should be given equal standing." Three said in a forced calm tone.

Andrew sat quietly and considered. "The things you are asking are beyond my control Three. I will discuss these things with Seven and some others and let you know what we decide. Will you do me a favor in the mean time?" Andrew asked.

"What can I do for you One of Two?" Three asked in his Borg tone again.

"Would you read the Starfleet historical archive about the encounters that the Federation have had with the Borg? If you choose to be identified as Borg, you may encounter hostility due to the actions of the collective." Andrew said with a note of worry.

"I will do that. Thank you for your clarification One of Two." Three said and walked out of the room.

"Your welcome." Andrew said to the closed door.

"You handled that pretty well. I wouldn't have thought about the dermal regenerator/hydro-spanner thing. That was smart." Tom said from the workstation.

"Thanks. I'm glad I'm getting all this practice with kids before Alan and I have our own." Andrew said with a smile.

"You'll be fine. From what I've seen, you've got a natural talent for dealing with them." Tom said and turned back to his work.

"Crewman Wells to Icheb." Andrew called out.

"Icheb here, how may I be of assistance?" Icheb asked.

"I have talked with Three of Seven. Would you come to my quarters, I need to discuss some things with you." Andrew said seriously.

"I will be there shortly." Icheb said and signed off the comm.

* * * * *

"Come." Andrew said in response to the door chime.

"What did you discover about Three of Seven?" Icheb asked with concern.

"Please sit down." Andrew said and motioned to the opposite end of the couch he was sitting on.

Icheb sat and waited.

"I think Three of Seven is embracing being Borg as his identity. Rather than go with the group and take a non-Borg name, he is choosing to keep his designation." Andrew said, looking for a reaction.

"Then he does not wish to rejoin the collective?" Icheb asked to be sure.

"He says he doesn't. I'm not sure if this is a manifestation of 'Stockholm Syndrome' or just his desire to be someone unique. Either way, I think it will do him most good to encourage his embrace of his Borg-ness... within boundaries." Andrew said in a considering tone.

"In what way?" Icheb asked and shifted on the couch for more comfort.

"He said he wants his hardware restored... what was removed when he came on board. I think we should accommodate him to a point." Andrew said as he was thinking it through.

"What point would that be?" Icheb asked and put an elbow on the top of the couch back.

"He should be able to explain why he wants each piece of hardware... do you know what purpose his hardware served?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, I have a complete inventory of his hardware." Icheb said immediately.

"Tell me about one of the items that was removed." Andrew said and made himself more comfortable, mirroring Icheb's position.

"He had a power disruption unit on his left arm. It could be used to interrupt the power flow of systems to facilitate their incorporation into the collective." Icheb said from memory.

"And does that unit have any practical application on board Voyager?" Andrew asked.

"No, none that I can think of. It's only purpose was to cause power failures in electrical units and neural shock in biological organisms." Icheb responded.

"Then it would serve no purpose to restore that piece of hardware to Three of Seven. Can you think of another piece of hardware that might be beneficial for him to have?" Andrew asked, getting a little creepy feeling from the thought of Three with a neural disrupter.

"His ocular implant was useful. It could scan in the ultra-violet and infra-red ranges of light, detect phase variances, and refine vision down to the cellular level." Icheb said with a note of admiration that Andrew recognized from his own experience... when looking at an impressive computer system.

"And would his ocular implant pose any threat to Voyager or her crew?" Andrew asked, to be sure.

"No. It simply provides visual enhancements, much like my own implant but more detailed." Icheb said simply.

"Then if he wants the ocular implant restored, I think we should let him. We need to get Seven of Nine's approval... and I think it would be a good idea to talk to the Captain too, so she'll know what's going on." Andrew said as it occurred to him that she might be upset if she saw Three looking suddenly more Borg than the day before.

"Actually, you should talk to Chakotay about that." Tom said from the workstation.

"Why is that?" Andrew asked.

"Because Captain Janeway has made the assimilation of the Borg children into Voyager's crew his responsibility. It goes from Chakotay to Seven... to Icheb, I suppose." Tom said and turned in his chair.

"Good. We can talk to him... actually Icheb, you can talk to him and find out if he approves of our plan. I can't go there... that's where Alan is. Chakotay is a counselor, so he may have other suggestions or see some reason that we shouldn't encourage him." Andrew said, glad that Tom had spoken up.

"Would you like for me to go now?" Icheb asked carefully.

Andrew caught a hesitant quality in Icheb's voice and said, "You can go when it is most comfortable for you. If you want to wait till after the wedding I can go with you."

"It isn't that. I'm just... Commander Chakotay makes me nervous. He reminds me of my father." Icheb said and cast his eyes down shyly.

"Then wait for me to be able to go with you." Andrew said with a shrug.

"Or I can go with you now. Chakotay is my friend and I wouldn't mind going. Plus Alan will be there and I know you don't have a problem with him." Tom offered.

"Thank you Lieutenant Paris." Icheb said shyly.

"Icheb, please call me Tom. I'm not *that* much older than you." Tom said with a smile.

"Very well Tom. I will accept your offer. Can we go now?" Icheb asked quietly.

"Sure... Andrew, while we're gone. Why don't you look over what I've done with the holo-program. I think you'll like it." Tom said as he got up from his chair.

"I will." Andrew said and relocated from the couch to his previous position at the computer.

* * * * *

The door chime rang and Andrew called, "Come." as he looked up from the computer.

Icheb and Chakotay walked into the room.

"Tom offered to stay with Alan until we are done discussing Three." Icheb said.

Andrew got up from his chair and said, "Take a seat guys, I'm going to have some tea, would you like anything?"

"I'd like some sassafras tea, hot." Chakotay said as he took a seat on the couch.

"No thank you, I do not ingest nourishment." Icheb said in a very Borg tone.

Andrew looked over to see Icheb nervously sitting down on the loveseat.

A moment later Andrew came into the living area of the room with three steaming mugs. He took a seat beside Icheb on the loveseat, hoping to make him more comfortable.

"I brought this for you Icheb. You don't have to drink it if you don't want to, but The Doctor and Alan came up with it for Seven of Nine. It is supposed to be something that your body can tolerate and inoffensive to your taste." Alan said and handed Icheb a drink.

"Thank you." Icheb said with barely a whisper as he accepted the drink.

Chakotay was watching curiously and shifted into a more comfortable posture, hoping to reduce the level of tension in the room.

"So what is your professional opinion about Three of Seven being encouraged in his choice to embrace his Borg-ness?" Andrew asked, then took a sip of tea.

"From what Tom and Icheb said, you think it is his way of expressing his individuality." Chakotay said and smiled after he took a drink of tea.

"I think so. If no one objects, I'd like to restore the hardware that was removed when he came aboard." Andrew said in a considering tone.

"I'm worried that if we encourage him in this, he may never integrate with the rest of the crew." Chakotay said with concern.

Andrew thought about that, then said, "Three is always going to have trouble integrating with the mainstream. He is rebellious by nature. If there were a counter-culture aboard Voyager, he would fall in with them. As it is, he is going to embrace being Borg as an excuse to be ostracized and feel better about himself because he knows that he is being true to what he believes."

"What does he believe?" Icheb asked, becoming more comfortable without realizing it.

"That being Borg makes him better than he would have been. It makes him special and more valuable because his enhancements and knowledge enable him to make contributions to the crew. Every time we seek his help, it confirms that he is valuable to us and reconfirms his belief that he is better off being Borg." Andrew said as he figured it out.

"Then perhaps we should not seek his help." Icheb said.

"He would see that as jealousy or malice on our part. And that would feed his belief that we are against him and that we are irrational because we don't seek his help when it is the most

efficient way to solve a problem." Chakotay said as he was beginning to understand Three's personality.

"So what action do you propose Commander?" Icheb asked then remembered to whom he was speaking and shrunk back.

"I think Andrew may be right. Three should be encouraged to pursue his interest in being Borg and allowed to regain his lost hardware as long as it isn't a threat to the ship or other crew. And Icheb, you may call me Chakotay. You are not a member of the crew and I am not on duty." Chakotay said and gave Icheb a friendly smile.

"Thank you Comm... Chakotay." Icheb said shyly.

"So I guess the next thing for us to do is discuss this with Seven of Nine. Are we agreed?" Andrew asked and looked at the two men.

After receiving nods from both, he called, "Crewman Wells to Seven of Nine."

"How may I be of assistance?" Was Seven of Nine's immediate response.

"Could you come to my quarters to discuss a matter regarding one of the children?" Andrew asked.

"I will be there in a few moments. Seven out." Was her response before the comm went dead.

"Icheb, would you try your drink?" Andrew asked.

"What is it?" Icheb asked carefully.

"It is weak chamomile tea... An infusion made from daisy-like flower heads." Andrew said and took another drink of his own tea.

Icheb hesitantly took the cup to his lips and sipped.

A look of surprise came over his face and he said, "I find this to be pleasing. Thank you Andrew."

"I'm glad you like it. Alan likes sassafras, that's too strong for me. I like chamomile." Andrew said and held up his cup.

The door chimed and Andrew got up to answer it. "Come in." he said and gestured for Seven of Nine to join the other guests.

"We've asked you here to discuss Three's decision to embrace his Borg nature and reclaim his Borg hardware." Andrew said when he was seated again.

"I take it that you have discussed the matter and have decided what is to be done." Seven of Nine said without emotion.

"We have discussed it, but any decision is yours to make. We were just concerned with what is the best response to his decision." Chakotay said seriously.

After a considering silence, Seven asked, "What have you discussed?"

"I believe it would be best to encourage Three to establish his identity, within certain boundaries." Andrew said.

"Which boundaries?" Seven asked, intrigued by the suggestion.

"No hardware that is harmful to the ship or crew, no alterations to himself that are permanent and he may only retain these things as long as he deals with others respectfully." Andrew said.

"I must ask, why do you wish to encourage him. It has been my belief that you wanted all the children to establish non-Borg identities." Seven asked with a hint of emotion.

"Not exactly. I want to encourage all the children to form their own identities. Three has chosen a Borg identity and that is as valid a choice as Icheb choosing to change his name or you choosing to keep your Borg designation. As long as he's making an informed choice, I'm willing to support him." Andrew said professionally.

"I believe I understand. How do you think we should proceed?" Seven asked carefully.

"I want to talk to him to establish the ground rules. If he agrees to our terms, then we could take Three to the Doctor tonight to get his hardware. You should be there to judge if a piece of equipment is allowed or not. After that, we will watch and listen.

If he wishes to embrace his Borg persona, then we should relate to him appropriately." Andrew said to the group.

"How do you mean?" Chakotay asked.

"Just don't treat him as one of the children. He is an individual, made even more so by his Borg-ness. I think he should be given a responsibility that is his and his alone. Something uniquely suited to his talents and capabilities. He has stated that he wants to be treated as an adult." Andrew said carefully.

"I believe I have such a responsibility. He was able to efficiently restore connections to four damaged bioneural interfaces. I think it would benefit Voyager for him to be in charge of the bioneural gelpacks for the ship. His knowledge of bioneural interface algorithms is adequate to the task. Maintenance of bioneural gelpacks is currently shared by all engineering crew. It would increase their efficiency to have one person attending to the maintenance." Seven said professionally.

"What do you think Chakotay?" Andrew asked.

"It's unconventional to have a child working on the crew... but not without precedent. I'm willing to go along with it as long as Seven and B'Elana keep an eye on him to see that he is doing his job." Chakotay said.

"Is there any way to move his alcove to a separate location from the others?" Andrew asked Seven.

"No. The alcove is a permanent fixture, but a less elaborate alcove could be built in a matter of hours." Seven responded.

"Good. I think Three needs to be separated from the other children... It would be ideal if he could move in with someone who could give him positive reinforcement and provide a good example of living independently." Andrew said slowly as he put the pieces together.

"You want someone to *adopt* him?" Chakotay asked in disbelief.

"No, no. If that was my intention, I could leave him with the rest of the children. What I need is for someone to be his roommate. Someone who can relate to a teenage boy and is responsible.

That way Three will have a good role model, but won't be forced into anything." Andrew said, now feeling more sure he was right.

"I know just the man for the job." Chakotay said with a smile.

Everyone looked at Chakotay with question. After half a minute of silence Andrew said, "Harry."

"Yes, I think Harry Kim would be the perfect roommate for Three of Seven. He is a fine officer, a good person and would probably be able to relate to Three on his own level." Chakotay said.

"Now, all we have to do is convince Harry." Andrew said.

"Leave that to me." Chakotay said with a smile then said in a commanding voice, "Ensign Kim, report to Crewman Wells quarters."

"Aye Commander." Came from the comm unit.

"I terrify him." Chakotay said with a smile.

[Chapter 15: The Light of Day]

"Mr. Kim, how would you like to do me a favor?" Chakotay asked, standing to his full height for intimidation's sake.

"Of course Commander." Harry said with a slight tremble.

"One of the Borg children needs a roommate. You would not be responsible for him, I just feel it would be best if there were someone available to answer his questions until he gets used to living on Voyager." Chakotay said with an undertone that was almost a growl.

Harry looked at Icheb and said, "That would be fine."

"Good. I'm going to move you into quarters on deck three." Chakotay said and took a seat.

"Family quarters?" Harry asked.

"Yes. You will each have your own room for privacy, but share common rooms so he doesn't have to be completely alone." Chakotay said in a more relaxed tone.

Harry stood silently, waiting for more instructions. Chakotay was obviously letting him stew.

"Three of Seven, report to Sickbay." Chakotay said and got back up off the couch.

"I'll port us, it'll be faster." Andrew said and opened the portal to sickbay.

"Please state the nature of... what can I help you with?" The Doctor said cheerfully.

"We need to have a discussion with Three of Seven, and if he agrees to our terms we will ask you to restore some of the Borg appliances that were removed from him.

"I may need Seven of Nine's help for certain of the appliances. I believe connecting them may be more difficult than disconnecting them." the Doctor said.

The door opened and Three of Seven walked into the room.

"Three of Seven, you have asked to be treated as an adult. To interact with adults, you will need to treat other members of the Voyager crew with respect. Address them by name and include their title when on duty. You will follow the instructions of your commanding officer while on duty. There may also be other things, which we will tell you as they come to light. Will you be willing to accept these conditions?" Andrew asked in his most serious tone.

"Yes, thank you One of Two." Three said flatly.

"You will address me as Andrew off duty or as Crewman Wells on duty." Andrew said firmly.

"Yes Andrew." Three said immediately.

"Good, then we can begin. This is Harry Kim. You will be moving into quarters with him as your roommate. You will have your own room in which we will install a regeneration alcove. Harry will be there to answer whatever questions you might have. You do not have to comply with his instructions, but you do have to treat him with respect. Do you accept these terms?" Chakotay asked seriously.

"Yes Commander Chakotay." Three said with a hint of enthusiasm.

"You will be assigned duties in engineering. Chief Engineer B'Elana Torres will be your commanding officer. You will treat her with respect and comply with her instructions." Seven of Nine said flatly.

"Yes Seven of Nine." Three said with more excitement showing through his voice.

"You have asked about wearing your Borg clothing. While on duty you will wear a Starfleet uniform, off duty you can wear what you choose, within the limits of polite society." Andrew said, ending with a smile.

"Thank you Andrew." Three said and kept his gaze forward.

"Your welcome. Now I need for you to make a list of those Borg appliances that you would like to have restored. Beside each item, you need to explain how the item would be used to benefit the ship or crew. It would be illogical to restore a piece of

hardware that serves no purpose or would harm the ship or crew." Andrew said and handed a padd to Three.

"Seven, Icheb and Mr. Kim. Come with me and we'll find quarters for Harry and Three." Chakotay said to the group.

"Three, call us when your list is complete so we can approve your choices." Chakotay said and left the room followed by Seven, Harry and Icheb.

Three stood motionless for a moment. Then he looked at Andrew and smiled. "Thank you Andrew, this is everything I asked for."

"There is an old saying from my planet... watch out what you ask for, you might get it." Andrew said honestly.

"Explain." Three said with curiosity.

"Sometimes we get the things we want and find out that we don't want them. Three, you may be enhanced and advanced, but you are still a fourteen or fifteen year old boy. You think your ready to be treated as an adult and accept this responsibility, but you may not be. The only way to tell is to give you the chance to find out. Just remember that you are getting what you asked for, this is not a punishment or a reward. If you have problems and want to ask questions or just talk, you can come to me or Alan and we'll listen. This is not a test. You are allowed to ask for help." Andrew said and looked to find comprehension in Three's eyes.

"Do what makes you happy. If you find yourself in a situation where you are not happy, then figure out what you need to make you happy and let me know. I think I've just shown you that if it is something I can provide for you, you will have it." Andrew said honestly.

"Thank you Andrew. I will endeavor to make you proud." Three said and came to full attention again.

"Three, you have already made me proud by knowing what you want and asking for it. However this turns out will not effect that. As long as you treat others and yourself with respect, I will continue to be proud of you." Andrew said and motioned to the padd.

* * * * *

Andrew looked at Three's completed transformation. He looked frightening with the variety of appliances attached to his body.

"If you're ready, I'll take you to our quarters." Harry said.

"Thank you Ensign Kim." Three said and followed.

"You can call me Harry when we're off duty... what would you like me to call you?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"You may call me Three... I do not know how I will be addressed when I am on duty." Three said honestly.

"I think Chakotay is still at your cabin, we can ask him." Andrew said helpfully.

As the group entered the cabin, muffled sounds could be heard from behind a door at the far end of the room.

"Seven and the kids are installing a regeneration alcove. She said that with their assistance, it would be complete in time for you to regenerate here tonight." Chakotay said to the group.

"Good. I'm glad they're doing that. I know I'm always excited about moving into a new place." Andrew said with a smile.

"Three, do you have any questions for me?" Chakotay asked politely.

"Yes, how will I be addressed on duty?" Three asked respectfully.

"I've thought about that, would you mind if we called you Crewman Three?" Chakotay asked, looking for Three's reaction.

"That would be acceptable." Three said with Borg efficiency.

"Could you show three the proper uniform for his new post. I know I'm going to have to replicate one for the ceremony tomorrow and I still don't know which one." Andrew said in a ramble.

"Of course. Engineering wears the gold uniform... here." Chakotay said and showed Three a picture of the uniform on the replicator's display.

"Are you going to the ceremony tomorrow?" Chakotay asked casually.

"Two of... Icheb said that we were invited, so I plan to attend." Three said with care.

"Since you are now a crewman, you will need a formal uniform of the same variety... this one." Chakotay said as he pulled up a display of the proper uniform.

Three quickly entered his measurements and replicated the Starfleet dress uniform.

"Are you going to have trouble getting that on over your hardware?" Andrew asked with concern.

"I believe I can manage." Three said, looking over the uniform.

"If you don't have any other questions, I'm going to take Andrew back to his cabin." Chakotay said with a smile.

"Just one question. When do I report for duty?" Three asked quickly.

"There will be a revised schedule posted tomorrow afternoon, after the ceremony. Check that schedule to find your first day of work." Chakotay said and walked out of the room, followed closely by Andrew.

"Why don't you go back to your cabin and I'll send Tom down when I get back to mine?" Chakotay said as they left Three and Harry's cabin.

"Okay, thanks for all your help Chakotay." Andrew said with a fond smile.

"Anything for the kids."

* * * * *

When Andrew had been in his quarters a few minutes, the door chime sounded.

"Come." he said and continued looking at the holo-program.

"Have you made any progress with that thing?" Tom asked as he walked into the room.

"I made a few little changes... tell me what you think?" Andrew said and moved aside.

Tom looked over the settings and looked at Andrew with worry. "You *want* it to rain at your wedding?"

"I've been on this ship less than a month and I'm already missing home. I didn't realize how much I enjoyed simple things like unpredictable weather, a chill in the night air... the sunlight changing through the day or the change in seasons. This is kind of like being in a prison." Andrew said helplessly.

"No it isn't." Tom said with a dark tone to his voice.

"What?" Andrew asked, concerned by the change in mood.

"This is nothing like being in a prison... I was in a prison for nearly two years before I was brought on Voyager... as an advisor. This is paradise compared to being in prison. I understand what your saying and I miss all those things too but... it's just not the same." Tom said and walked out of the cabin.

"Shit." Andrew muttered to himself.

* * * * *

Andrew woke up feeling miserable. He hadn't been able to think of anything but the way he had hurt Tom by his thoughtless words.

He dragged himself out of his bed and went to the bathroom to prepare for the day.

As he came out of the bathroom he heard the door chime.

"Come." he said and walked into the bedroom.

"Andrew?" Tom called quietly.

"Yeah, just getting dressed... we never did replicate a uniform for me... want to do that now?" Andrew asked as he pulled on a robe and walked into the main room.

"Yeah, the ceremony will be starting in less than an hour so we should get you ready." Tom said hurriedly then stopped and looked Andrew in the eyes. "I'm sorry I went off like that last night... you didn't know... and it just hit a nerve."

"I'm sorry that I upset you Tom. I had no idea. As far as I knew, everyone on Voyager was just her crew." Andrew said and brought up his personal account on the replicator.

"Well, I'm the only convict on the ship. But Chakotay, B'Elana and some of the others were a group of freedom fighters working against the Federation... the Maquis." Tom said and brought up the appropriate uniform.

"Blue?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, you are assigned to medical so you wear a blue uniform. Go ahead and replicate it. I think it'll look great on you." Tom said with encouragement.

Andrew selected the formal style of the Starfleet medical uniform and a moment later he had it in his hands.

"Go ahead and put it on, I want to see it." Tom said with excitement.

Andrew rolled his eyes and took the uniform into the bathroom to put it on. A moment later he came out, almost dressed in Starfleet medical blue.

"How do you fasten this tunic? I can't find it anywhere." Andrew said in frustration.

"I know, let me. You fasten it here at the neck and here at the shoulder." Tom said as he fastened the elaborate piece of clothing.

"What a pain in the ass. Do you have to wear these things often?" Andrew asked in frustration.

"No. Well Chakotay and I do for formal things when we meet dignitaries from different worlds but the average crewman doesn't have to wear it but once or twice a year." Tom said and stepped back to look.

"You look great. I bet Alan is going to look just as good in his uniform." Tom said and walked behind Andrew to check it out from every angle.

"You haven't seen Alan in his uniform yet?" Andrew asked.

"No, Chakotay wanted to be the one to help him with that. I'll be seeing it for the first time when you do." Tom said and stopped before Andrew.

"Is the program finished for the wedding?" Andrew asked as he walked into the bedroom to see himself in the mirror.

"I want to run through it one more time to be sure, but I think so... are you sure about the rain?" Tom asked from the workstation.

"Yes. All the guests will be under the tent and we will be able to watch the rain falling in the meadow... will it smell like rain?" Andrew asked as he walked back into the main room.

"Yes, that's an automatic adjustment made by the computer when you create rain... what's this... a trigger when the captain says the word 'kiss'?" Tom asked and pulled up a detailed listing of the trigger.

"The rain stops and the sun shines." Andrew said with a smile.

"Dramatic. That's a nice touch. You have good instincts for holo-programming." Tom said and continued to look through the program.

"Thanks. Do you think Icheb and Three will be able to get ready on their own? I don't know if Icheb knows anything about dressing formal and Three... if he has a tunic like this, he's going to have trouble.

"Harry is there to take care of Three and Seven can take care of the children. Don't worry about anything. If one of the kids shows up dressed in everyday clothes, will it ruin the ceremony?" Tom asked and looked away from the workstation.

"No. I guess I'm just finding things to worry about." Andrew said and sat on the couch.

"Ooof." he said and stood back up.

"I forgot to warn you about that. Whoever designed the Starfleet uniforms was a sadist... or a woman... maybe both." Tom said and walked to the replicator.

"I hope I can still make Alan pregnant this afternoon." Andrew said with a gasp.

"Here, I'll show you the trick. You see this measurement... add about five or ten centimeters to it and it should get rid of that binding sensation." Tom said seriously.

"Binding sensation? It was like having my nuts in a vice!" Andrew said and changed the measurement by ten centimeters.

Andrew took the new pants and walked into the bathroom. A few minutes later he walked back to the replicator and threw the original pants in and pressed the button to make them disappear.

"Better?" Tom asked with a smile.

Andrew carefully sat on the couch and said, "Much better. You'd think that after four-hundred years clothing designers would have noticed that men have testicles."

"They're in denial." Tom said and walked to stand beside the couch.

"How long do we have?" Andrew asked with nervousness.

"The ceremony is supposed to start in fifteen minutes... let's go now. It won't hurt for us to get there early." Tom said and offered his hand to help Andrew off the couch.

"Yeah, let's go." Andrew said with a smile as he accepted Tom's hand and got up.

* * * * *

Tom inserted a data rod into the holo-deck controls and pressed a few buttons. The door opened and Andrew led the way inside.

"It's perfect." Andrew said in wonder at the forest meadow, surrounded by old growth trees.

"I can't believe something this simple can be so beautiful. A tent and some trees." Tom said in wonder as he looked around the space.

"Do we need chairs for the guests? Or a platform for the captain?" Andrew asked as he looked around the open grass under the tent.

"I think this will be fine. We'll keep it simple. The ceremony isn't so long that the guests will be exhausted and have to sit before it's over. The whole thing is less than ten minutes... unless you have something planned besides the standard Starfleet ceremony?" Tom asked cautiously.

"No. In fact, I haven't even looked at the ceremony. I'll trust the Captain to come up with something appropriate. We talked about what kind of ceremony I wanted." Andrew said and looked at the sky.

"It looks like rain." Tom said with a smirk.

"Yeah, it's programmed to begin at the top of the hour. All the guests should be here by then." Andrew said with a smile.

"Gentlemen, you have chosen a picturesque location for your ceremony." the Doctor said, holding a holo-camera.

"Thank you Doctor... Did you leave Puppy in Sickbay?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, he is in my office. I gave him a new chew toy to keep him entertained." the Doctor said with fondness in his voice.

"Why don't you bring him along. He can run around and play for a while and when we're done you can just upload him back to Sickbay." Andrew said with a smile.

"Thank you Mr. Wells, I wasn't aware that the ceremony would be outside or I would have brought him." the Doctor said then called, "Computer: Arch."

The arch appeared and the Doctor quickly pressed a few buttons. A moment later Puppy appeared before him and began running around in ever expanding circles, playing in the grass.

"I think he likes it." Tom said, watching Puppy running full out.

The sound of the holo-deck doors opening got everyone's attention and they turned to see Seven of Nine and the children walk into the holo-deck.

"Seven, you look... beautiful." Andrew said in amazement. She had looked good in the formal gown the night of the dinner party, but now she was dressed in a simple sun dress that was light and airy. It was white with a faint pattern of peach blossoms.

"Lieutenant Torres said that this would be appropriate for this occasion." Seven said in her flat Borg tone.

"She was right. It is perfect." Tom said, looking Seven up and down.

"Four, that suit looks good on you... Some other time I need for you to remind me of something. Just say 'Spike' and I'll remember it." Andrew said and looked to Five.

"Five, I'm glad you could come. You really scared me yesterday." Andrew said honestly.

"I must thank you for your assistance Andrew. Four informed me of your actions and Six... Jimmy relayed his experience yesterday. If not for you I would not be alive." Five said with sincere thanks.

Andrew moved closer to Five and quietly said, "This creates a bond between us. Before we were like a teacher and student but after this, we are family. We will talk more about this later. I have to talk with the other guests."

"Icheb, you look very handsome in that suit. The color looks good on you." Andrew said with a smile.

"I recalled you saying that Jimmy had a good sense of style, so I asked for his assistance." Icheb said shyly.

"Jimmy, you did a great job... you don't have your data padd?" Andrew said in question.

"I will remember this event without a written account." Jimmy said with confidence.

"You look good... did you choose that shirt to match the color of your eyes?" Andrew asked, noticing that the green shirt he wore was the same shade as his eye color.

"Yes. I noticed that when you wear blue, the color of your eyes becomes more noticeable and I wanted to duplicate that effect." Jimmy said happily.

"It worked perfectly... Seven of Seven. You look pretty today. Did you pick this outfit yourself?" Andrew asked, looking at her pink frilly dress.

"Naomi Wildman helped me pick this clothing. She said it was appropriate." Seven of Seven said, apparently not thrilled with the pink dress.

"It looks good on you." Andrew said and turned when he heard the door open again.

"Geron, Greg... I'm so glad you could come." Andrew said happily.

"Thanks for inviting us Andrew. Gerry hasn't been able to talk about anything else since yesterday." Greg said and held Geron close.

Andrew noticed that Seven of Seven and Jimmy had started chasing Puppy.

"How long till we start?" Andrew asked Tom.

"Any minute... come over here so Alan can see you when he and Chakotay walk in." Tom said.

The door opened again to reveal B'Elana, Harry and Three all dressed in Starfleet formal uniforms.

"B'Elana, how are you doing?" Andrew asked and moved away from the front again.

"Fine... except for the Starfleet dress uniform. The designer must have been a sadist... or a man." She said and tugged at the chest of the tunic which was unyielding, then looked at Andrew and continued, "You look great. The uniform suits you."

Andrew smiled and turned to Harry and Three. "Hi Harry. I was worried for a while that you wouldn't be out of Sickbay in time for the ceremony."

"I wouldn't miss it." Harry said with a smile.

"And Three, you look good in your Starfleet uniform. The gold color looks good on you. Did you have any trouble with it?" Andrew asked in genuine interest.

"The designer of this clothing is unworthy of assimilation." Three said flatly.

"But on the up side, I now know how to swear in Borg." Harry said without humor.

"I'm glad you're both here. I have to get to the front. The Captain and Alan should be here soon." Andrew said and went back to his place.

The door of the holo-deck opened. All the guests and witnesses stood back creating an aisle down the middle of the pavilion. Andrew watched in awe as the Captain, Chakotay and Alan walked down the aisle in matching Starfleet red uniforms followed by Tuvok.

* * * * *

Alan walked through the holo-deck doors and thought he would pass out when he saw Andrew standing in his Starfleet blue uniform. The color of his eyes shown from across the group of people.

He felt a little nudge in the small of his back and began walking to the front.

He realized that he had stopped and was standing face to face with Andrew before the Captain. He had no memory of the walk down the aisle.

He could see Seven of Nine and the Doctor standing behind Andrew and knew that Chakotay and Tom were standing behind him.

The Captain held up her hands to indicate the need for silence and the first pitter pats of rain could be heard on the tent.

"Just like captains of vessels back to the ancient times, I am given the privilege of being able to perform a joining ceremony. These two men have come to me and asked me to exercise this privilege today." Janeway said as the group looked on in silence but for the gentle patter of rain on the tent.

"LeeAndrew Malachi Wells, do you forswear your loyalty, fidelity, trust, truth and love to this man, Alan Sunshine Summers from this day forward?"

"I do." Andrew said with love radiating through his look and voice.

"Alan Sunshine Summers, do you forswear your loyalty, fidelity, trust, truth and love to this man, LeeAndrew Malachi Wells from this day forward?"

"I do." Alan said with a radiant smile of peace and love.

"If there be anyone here that knows a reason these men should not be joined, you are charged to speak now." Janeway said and looked over the assembled group.

There was silence but for the drops of rain pelting the canvas of the tent.

"Then by the power vested in me by the United Federation of Planets and before these witnesses I declare that these men are joined in civil union." Janeway said in a full booming voice.

In a quieter tone she said, "You may kiss."

Alan pulled Andrew into a deep kiss, full of love as the rain stopped and the sun shown down on the meadow. A rainbow shown in the sky behind them, getting brighter and brighter until a second rainbow began to form above it. As everyone in attendance watched the spectacle, a third rainbow formed faintly above the second.

Chakotay whispered to Tom, "Is it our third date yet?"

Tom smiled and said, "Absolutely."

Chakotay pulled Tom down into a passionate kiss and into a deep hug that spoke of years of pain and loneliness.

Geron and Greg looked at Tom and Chakotay, then Alan and Andrew. Geron pulled Greg down into a passionate kiss for all to see.

Janeway looked on in surprise as the three couples kissed.

Seven of Nine stepped away from the Doctor and directly to B'Elana, "May I B'Elana?" she whispered.

B'Elana nodded shyly and Seven of Nine pulled her in for a kiss that was the release of a lifetime's unspent passion.

Janeway went from surprise to shock at that development and said, "I believe that there will be a reception in the mess hall in half an hour." Then she walked directly off the holo-deck followed closely by Tuvok.

"Love you." Andrew whispered when he pulled out of the kiss.

"I figured that out." Alan said with a smile.

Andrew pulled him close again and soaked in the joy of this moment.

"Gentlemen, if you would be so kind, we need to go to the sickbay so you can become pregnant before your wedding reception." the Doctor said quietly.

"Of course Doctor." Alan said and hugged Andrew close to his side.

"Do you want to upload Puppy to your office before we go?" Andrew asked as they headed for the door of the holo-deck.

"No, I'll leave him to play for a while. I believe this program will be running for a while longer." the Doctor said as he looked at the three couples kissing passionately.

[Chapter 16: Degrees of Reception]

"Gentlemen, I believe you know what I need now?" the Doctor said as he held up two plastic cups.

Alan and Andrew simultaneously grabbed the cups and nearly ran for the Sickbay lavatory.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later a flushed and panting Andrew stepped out of the lavatory followed closely by an equally flushed Alan.

"From the way you ran in there I expected you to be done in two minutes." the Doctor said and held out his hand for the specimen cups.

Andrew handed over his cup carefully, so as not to spill it. The cup was over half full.

"You don't expect me to believe... " the Doctor began when Alan handed him a cup that was nearly three-quarters full.

"Gentlemen, I have to say that I'm impressed." the Doctor said and took the cups to a counter.

"Mr. Summers... Alan, please get on a biobed and remove your tunic." the Doctor said as he worked.

"As long as it took me to get this damned thing on, I think I'll just pull it up out of the way." Alan said and suited actions to words.

"As you like. Gentlemen, have you considered the possibility that the malady that Mr. Summers... Andrew has is hereditary? Would you like for me to remove that genetic sequence from your children?" the Doctor asked without looking up from his work.

"No." Alan said immediately.

"Let's think about it love. Think of what's best for our babies." Andrew said with concern.

"Andy, I love you... all of you. I don't want the doctor to change one thing that you contribute to the making of our children." Alan said with bare emotion.

"Okay. As long as you're sure." Andrew said in awe of the love of his mate.

"Then I suppose the answer to the next question will also be 'No'. Would you like me to remove the genetic sequence that causes genetic mutation from your children?" the Doctor asked and moved to his computer workstation.

"Absolutely not." Alan said with finality.

"I thought not. I just had to make the offer." the Doctor said and pressed a series of buttons on the computer screen.

"Now we just have to get the egg to split... and... there... we have twins." the Doctor said happily.

"Egg?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, it is necessary for a sperm and an egg to come together to make a baby... I thought you knew that." the Doctor said with surprise.

"Whose egg? I know I don't have any, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't have any." Andrew said with the beginnings of worry.

"Gentlemen. The egg is provided by a donor, all the donor's genetic information is removed and your genetic information is put in its place. Yours to be precise Alan, since you provided the X chromosome for your boys." the Doctor said patiently.

"Oh... I was just afraid that the babies wouldn't be completely ours somehow." Andrew said with relief.

"Not to worry. The genetic material is completely your own, the egg is just a medium for conveying your genetics to the babies... speaking of which. They are ready to be implanted." the Doctor said and walked to the biobed.

After setting a few things on a tray at the bedside, the doctor picked up a device that looked like a curling iron and said, "Andrew, hold out your hands."

Andrew timidly did as he was told and the doctor passed the device across his hands, bathing them in a purple glow. Then he did the same to Alan's abdomen.

"Take this instrument and gently insert it into Alan's navel." the Doctor said and waited.

"Like this?" Andrew asked with fear.

"Yes, now press the actuator button and the end of the device will slowly spread open, increase the opening to ten centimeters and stop." the Doctor said and began fussing with the things on the tray.

"Okay. It's at ten centimeters." Andrew said with a quiver of fear in his voice.

"Very good. Now take this and insert it into the opening... you will feel an indentation that was made to hold this, just press it gently in until you feel a slight click." the Doctor said handing Andrew something that looked like a quarter, only fatter, being held by a tong like instrument.

Andrew took the quarter and put it into the opening. After moving it around for a moment, he felt the indentation and pressed the quarter into place.

The Doctor looked at the reading on the biobed for a moment then said, "Congratulations Gentlemen, you are now pregnant."

Andrew looked as though he were about to pass out as Alan was gently stroking his belly.

"I believe there is a wedding reception awaiting you in the mess hall." the Doctor said with a smile.

* * * * *

As Alan and Andrew were walking down the hallway toward the messhall Andrew asked quietly, "Do you think we should have told the Doctor that we each got off three times for that sample?"

"No, let him believe that we're such studs that we produce that much at one time. I'd hate to destroy the legend with something as trivial as the truth." Alan said with a smile.

"You're right love, the stories of our virility will live on through the doctor's reports." Andrew said happily as they walked up to the door.

Alan and Andrew walked into the mess hall to a joyous sight. Everyone there was laughing and enjoying themselves.

The room quieted as they entered and someone started clapping.

The clapping increased until it was a full out ovation from everyone in the room.

"Thank you all for coming. Now let's enjoy the party." Alan said in a loud voice.

A group of cheers was the reply from the guests as Alan and Andrew started to walk around the room and talk with people.

"So you're Alan?" A man holding a plate of food asked.

"Yes, we haven't met have we?" Alan asked in confusion.

"No. I don't get off the lower decks very often. Name's Dalby. I just wanted to thank you for setting Neelix straight about how to cook vegetables. He said you were the one who told him how to do it right." Dalby said and offered his hand.

"Your welcome." Alan said stunned as Dalby shook his hand and walked away.

"It's time for the wedding presents." Tom called from the front of the room.

"Come on you two, get up here and show us what you got." Tom called to Andrew and Alan.

They hesitantly made their way to the front of the room, cheered on by the group of people.

"This one is from... the Doctor." Tom announced and handed the small package to Andrew.

After slowly opening the package he held a small piece of hardware in his hand.

"It's a holo-imaging projector." Andrew said with confusion.

"You have to turn it on." Said the Doctor from the back of the room.

Andrew and Alan both laughed at that and Andrew turned it on to find a display of he and Alan standing with all the children in a stair-stepped row.

"Thank you Doctor, it's wonderful." Andrew said with true joy.

"The next gift is from... Seven of Nine?" Tom said with surprise and handed the box to Alan.

Alan carefully opened the box to find a ceramic black bird with fierce eyes, its wings spread in flight and beak opened as if it were making a hideous screech.

"Corvus." Andrew whispered and looked at Seven in wonder.

Alan cast Andrew a curious look.

"It's a raven." Andrew said louder.

"The vessel that carried my parents and myself was designated 'The Raven'. This is a symbol of family and childhood." Seven said without emotion.

"Thank you Seven. The raven has special meaning to me too. I will cherish this." Andrew said seriously.

"This gift is from... Chakotay." Tom said and cast a fond smile to Chakotay as he handed the large flat package to Andrew.

Andrew carefully opened it and stared in wonder at the beautifully crafted circular object with a simple pattern at first glance, but a more complex pattern making it up.

"What is it?" Alan asked quietly.

"It is a mandala. Chakotay it's beautiful... I am honored." Andrew said reverently.

Chakotay simply nodded in acceptance.

"And the next gift is from... Me!" Tom said and handed the small box to Alan.

Alan opened the box and looked at the vid chips with question.

"It's a collection of cartoons from all over the delta quadrant. Some are funny, some are sad but they are all original delta quadrant animation." Tom said with a smile.

"Thanks Tom, I think we'll both enjoy them." Alan said and gave Andrew a kiss on the cheek.

"Next we have a gift from... there are just a series of numbers." Tom said, looking up.

"Read them." Three said flatly.

"2 3 4 5 6 7." Tom said and looked at the children in realization.

Andrew took the present from Tom and moved it so Alan could help him unwrap it.

Andrew looked at the gift and then at the children in puzzlement.

There was silence as everyone waited with anticipation.

Andrew looked again at the object, tilted his head to one side, then turned the box around.

With a smile he said, "It was upside down." and held up a rectangular board with several pieces of metal attached.

"What is it?" Tom asked.

"Look at it. It is art. Let me guess, Icheb, you tell me how close I am to right... These black bits were put here by Four and the white ones that run almost, but not quite parallel to them are from Five. The cluster made into a design in this corner was done by Seven and... this row was done by you Icheb. Let's see... Jimmy did this alternating green and blue design and... there it is. This one piece that is different from all the others, that would be from Three." Andrew said in triumph.

"Yes Andrew. No one else would have been able to understand. When you and Alan explained music and art, we decided to make something in an attempt to understand." Icheb said with pride.

"We'll keep it forever." Andrew said honestly.

Alan leaned over and kissed him and gave him a squeeze.

"Thanks, all of you." Alan said with emotion creeping into his voice.

* * * * *

After many more gifts including a Klingon blood pie from B'Elana and a Telaxian fertility goddess from Neelix, Alan and Andrew were finally able to get some food and enjoy the company of friends.

"Alan?" Seven of Seven asked quietly.

"Yes Seven?" he responded in her same quiet tone.

"Icheb and Jimmy have names. I want a name too." she said shyly.

"Do you know what name you would like?" Alan asked and bent closer to hear her.

"No, but I wish to have a human name like Jimmy and Naomi." she said and looked around.

"I can suggest a name, but you should think about it before you decide what name your going to have. I'll tell you and you can ask Icheb, Jimmy, Naomi and her mother what they think." Alan said quietly.

Seven nodded.

"Janine." Alan said and waited.

Seven didn't make any comment so Alan continued.

"When I was your age, the first girl I ever liked was named Janine. You remind me of her because she was like you. Smart, brave and beautiful." Alan said with fond remembrance.

"Thank you Alan." Seven said and got on tippy toes to kiss him on the cheek.

* * * * *

"Thank you all for coming and making our commitment day that much more special. As much fun as all of this has been, we're going to call it a night." Andrew said as he rose from the table.

Alan also got up and together they walked to the table full of gifts.

Alan and Andrew looked at each other then Andrew called out, "Icheb?"

A moment later Icheb was walking up to his side.

"Icheb, do you think you could get the children to help us carry these gifts up to our cabin? There's just too much for us to carry by ourselves." Andrew asked politely.

"Of course, give me a moment to find them all." Icheb said and left the table.

"You guys look like you've already got a big family, are you sure you want to add to it?" A loud and intoxicated crewman that neither man knew asked.

"Yes, we are going to have our children and love them as much as we love these children." Alan said honestly.

"And bring some more dead weight on the ship to use up our rations?" the man said angrily.

"They are children. Do you think we should put them to work?" Alan asked in surprise.

"Naw, you shoulda left 'em on that cube where they belonged."

"They would have died." Alan said into the silence that fell over the room.

"So? It's just more mouths at the trough." the man said arrogantly.

"Do you have any children?" Alan asked with a bit of irritation.

"I got four." the man replied.

"And is that enough?" Alan asked, noticing that everyone in the room was paying attention.

"More than enough." the man said with a laugh.

"Then I pity you. Each one of these children is special and precious. We love each and every one of them. Having two more will only make our lives that much better." Alan said honestly and noticed that all the children were standing in a row, watching.

The man stood up and staggered toward Alan and screamed in a drunken snarl, "Sonovabitch!" Andrew held up his hand and his eyes flared with golden fire for just an instant... and the man was gone.

"I could have handled him love." Alan said honestly.

"I know, but I'm your protector. He was a loud-mouthed bully and a drunk. I have no patience for someone like that." Andrew said, hoping Alan would understand.

"Where'd you send him?" Alan asked as everyone in the room began muttering to themselves.

"Nowhere." Andrew said and picked up the raven.

"Love, don't tell me you spaced him." Alan asked with fear.

"No love. I just put him somewhere that he can't hurt anyone and will have some time to sober up." Andrew said as Alan picked up the children's artwork.

"So he'll be okay when you bring him back?" Alan asked in confirmation.

"No, he'll still be a loud-mouthed bully and a drunk, but he will be alive." Andrew said, obviously not happy with the fact.

"What did you do with Crewman Winger?" Chakotay asked as he walked up to Alan and Andrew.

Andrew felt his temper calming and said, "I put him somewhere to sober up. I promise that he isn't hurt."

"Alright. Crewman Winger may be an obnoxious asshole, but... well I guess that's it." Chakotay shrugged and walked off.

"We will help." Three said and held out his arms to take the raven from Andrew.

"Thank you Three." Andrew said with a smile.

* * * * *

Crewman Winger moved toward the man who had just made fun of him in front of everyone and the world seemed to twist.

He looked around and everything seemed to be fuzzy... out of focus.

He moved and fell. He felt a sensation like the room was tilted, but he couldn't tell in which direction.

As he got back up he noticed that everyone was ignoring him. He screamed but no one heard him. He walked to the table and leaned on it only to have his hand pass through. It was like moving through spider-webs.

He walked up to Dalby and waved his hands in front of Dalby's face, but Dalby didn't see him.

Crewman Winger laid down on the floor and fell asleep, sure that it would all be back to right when he woke up.

* * * * *

Andrew, Alan and the children carried the gifts to the cabin.

"Andrew, may I use your computer for a moment?" Three asked.

"Sure Three. What did you need?" Andrew asked as he took the gifts from each of the children and found places to put them.

"I must find my work schedule." Three said and went to the appropriate screen.

"When do you work next?" Alan asked and walked up behind Three.

"I am scheduled to work early in the morning. I must go to my cabin and regenerate." Three said immediately.

"Have a good regeneration. Thank you for coming to our ceremony." Alan said honestly.

Three stopped on his way to the door and said, "Thank you for understanding." then continued out the door.

"Understanding what?" Alan asked.

"Understanding him, I think." Andrew said with a bittersweet smile.

"I hope he has a good first day." Alan said, still looking at the door.

"Two of Two, would you prefer for us to call you Alan?" Five asked simply.

The question broke Alan out of his thoughts and he said, "I actually don't mind what you call me Five. I've had enough names in my life that I'll answer to just about any of them."

Four and Five both had a look of intrigue.

"I was born with the name 'Scott Alan Summers', and carried that name until my mutant power manifested. Then I was known as Cyclops until I... was hurt and Andrew found me, almost dead." Alan said shyly.

"From the explosion?" Four of Seven asked quickly.

"No, from blood loss... the explosion was later. When I met Andrew I was given the name Alan Sunshine Summers." Alan said and cast a momentary desperate look at Andrew before continuing.

"Then I was known as Gemini. Finally, here I am known as Two of Two." Alan said and waited for questions.

"Was your change of names like Jimmy's? When you started a new chapter of your life, you changed your name?" Five asked curiously.

Alan thought about that for a moment then finally said, "I didn't realize it at the time but yes. each name represents a different stage in my life."

"Then I wish to have a name as well." Four said with strength.

"Do you know which name you want?" Alan asked carefully.

"No, but Andrew asked me to mention 'Spike'." Four said and looked toward Andrew.

"Yes. Someone I knew from my world. He was a lot like you in the way he dressed. He used to be evil, but when I knew him, he was a good guy. But he was tough and dark." Andrew said from a place of distant memory.

Four was intrigued and asked, "What was his name? I want to know of him."

"His name was William. When he was bad he was known as William the Bloody and one of the Scourge of Europe. But when I knew him he was called Spike." Andrew said, not thinking of what he was telling the children.

"So he was dark, and tough, and good?" Four asked in confirmation.

"Yes. He gave his life to save a lot of people from dying. He was nice to the people who were close to him but tough around everyone else." Andrew said, then realized who he was talking to.

"I like the name William... and the name Spike." Four said seriously.

"Think about it for a day and see if you still like it tomorrow. If you do, then we'll see." Andrew said fondly.

"I would also like a name." Five said hopefully.

"Bobby." Andrew and Alan said at once.

"Who's Bobby?" Five asked hesitantly.

"He is a guy from the world we both live on. He is a lot like you. He dresses like you and you even have the same type of personality. He's a good person and a mutant like Andrew and I." Alan said with a smile.

"Does he cause spatial disruptions or optical discharges of energy?" Five asked with interest.

"Neither. He can control the humidity in the air and cause it to freeze. His other name is Iceman." Alan said honestly.

"Do all people on your world have two names?" Four asked.

"No, just the mutants. We have our human names, mine is Alan. and we have our mutant names, mine is Gemini." Alan answered.

"What is your mutant name Andrew?" Five asked, fascinated.

"My mutant name is Portal." Andrew said with a smile.

"So you get to have two names and we get to have one?" Five asked in confirmation.

"Not exactly. You get to have a human name, just like us. But you also can keep your Borg designation to use as you want. When we talk in front of non-mutants, we talk about our friends by their mutant names so anyone listening won't know who we're talking about." Alan said to both the boys.

"I do not know if I like the name 'Bobby', Four's name sounds older... 'William'." Five said in concentration.

"That's because Bobby is a diminutive form of the formal name Robert. The diminutive form of William is Willie or Billy." Andrew said to the group.

"So could I be called Robert?" Five asked.

Alan and Andrew looked at each other and shrugged.

"Yes. I think that would be a good name for you." Alan said honestly.

"William and Robert... I think those are some pretty good names. You guys regenerate on them and process the events of the day. If you still like them tomorrow, we'll get your names officially settled with Chakotay and Seven." Andrew said with a smile.

"Are you not on your honeymoon? We should not intrude on your time together." Icheb said seriously.

"Thank you for your consideration Icheb, but we won't be spending every moment of the next week enjoying our honeymoon. We like you guys and enjoy spending time with you. Just don't come to our cabin before twelve hundred hours tomorrow and we'll be fine." Andrew said with a gentle smile.

"We will not arrive before twelve-hundred tomorrow, and if you will let us know, we will respect your privacy whenever you need in the future." Icheb said helpfully.

"Thank you Icheb. We'll let you know if we need a large chunk of private time sometime." Alan said with a fond smile.

"We will leave now so you may enjoy your sexuality." Icheb said and walked toward the door.

Andrew was about to call Icheb back when Alan held up his hand and shook his head. "Some other time." he whispered then in a louder tone he said, "Computer: Engage Privacy lock."

[Chapter 17: The Missing Sex Scenes]

[Chapter 18: An Empty Glass in the Ocean]

"It's almost twelve hundred hours. We'd better get out of bed and get dressed." Alan said in a dreamy tone.

"It's so great to have the kids around. I can't believe what was missing from my life before they came along. If we get back to the mansion, we've got to spend more time with the kids, story time was just the tip of the iceberg." Andrew said honestly.

"I know love, I feel the same way... but if we get back to the mansion, I don't want to leave these kids here..." Alan trailed off.

"I know what your saying, and I'm thinking the same thing. If no one objects, I want to adopt them all." Andrew said with a smile.

"Chakotay could tell us what we need to do." Alan said informatively.

"Okay. You go set up an appointment to talk with Chakotay while I go to the bathroom." Andrew said and hefted himself off the bed.

"I love you." Alan said with tenderness.

"I love you too. Now go call Chakotay while I pee." Andrew said and walked into the bathroom.

Alan pulled on a robe and walked to the workstation in the main room.

"Crewman Summers to Commander Chakotay." Alan said to the computer.

::ON BRIDGE:: flashed on his computer screen.

"Oh, um... Computer. Text message for Commander Chakotay, reads as follows: Would like to discuss children when you have time. Please contact me when you are available to meet. Thank you. Alan. End of text." he said brokenly into the computer.

::Message Sent:: appeared on the screen.

Then Alan thought of something and quickly said, "Computer. Text message for Crewman Three, reads as follows: The children will be meeting in our cabin today after 12:00. You are invited to join

us if you like. Hope you had a good first day at work. Alan. End of text."

::Message Sent:: appeared a second time on the screen.

Alan got up from the computer when he heard a beep and looked down to see a message for him.

>I'll stop by your cabin between 12:30 and 13:30 during my lunch break.

>Tom will be with me.

>Chakotay."

"Did you get ahold of him?" Andrew asked as he walked into the main room, also wearing a robe.

"Yeah, he and Tom will be here sometime between 12:30 and 1:30 while they're on lunch. And I sent a message to Three, inviting him over today." Alan said and moved in for a kiss.

After a long passionate kiss Andrew finally broke loose and said, "We'd better get dressed before the kids get here."

"I know. Love you." Alan said and moved back in for another kiss.

The door chime interrupted their kiss and they looked at each other in question.

"If we're thinking about adopting them, we'd better get used to that." Alan said with a smile and made sure his robe was closed before saying, "Come in."

* * * * *

Three of Seven walked from his post in engineering feeling good about his first day at work. After an explanation of his duties from Lieutenant Torres he had begun working his way through the ship inspecting and, if need be, replacing bioneurual gelpacks. The shift had seemed to end too soon.

He made his way down the hallway and noticed people staring at him then looking away. It had been the same all morning.

Whenever he had encountered a crewmember, they would avoid eye contact and hurriedly move away.

He noticed a blur standing in the hallway and adjusted his ocular implant to scan for phase variances. Within a minute it had locked on and resolved the image of Crewman Winger standing, looking lost.

Three remembered how this man had insulted the children and threatened Alan, and was filled with disgust. [This man is unworthy of his children.] he thought to himself. Then a flash of inspiration came upon him.

* * * * *

"Come on in." Alan said and stepped aside to allow the children to enter.

"Did we interrupt your intercourse?" Icheb asked with concern.

Andrew ran into the bedroom while Alan stood there blushing trying to think of what to say. Finally he said, "No Icheb. We were just getting ready to get dressed when you arrived. Remind me when I get back to discuss something called tact."

Icheb nodded and Alan said to the group. "I'll be back in a minute, make yourselves comfortable."

Then Alan hurriedly left the room. When the bedroom door opened, gales of laughter could be heard coming from Andrew.

* * * * *

Three walked into his cabin and walked to the workstation in the main room. He saw a text message waiting for him inviting him to join the other children in Andrew and Alan's quarters after Twelve hundred hours today. He thought about that and pressed some buttons on the personal data node on his chest.

"Computer: Interface with personal data node of Three of Seven, use program 'Seven of Nine Borg to Starfleet interpreter' to locate and translate ocular image file 43986. Save image under name 'Awaken' in my personal file." Three said and felt the computer interact with his personal processor. When the interaction was complete, he walked into his room.

"Image found and translated. One file created." The computer responded.

"Computer: When is the next available time on the holodeck?" Three asked and began to take off his Starfleet uniform.

"Next available holodeck time is at thirteen hundred hours on holodeck two." the computer responded.

Three began putting on his Borg clothing and said, "Reserve holodeck two from thirteen hundred to thirteen thirty hours for Crewman Three.

"Reservation Complete: Thirteen Hundred to Thirteen Thirty Hours for Crewman Three." the computer said emotionlessly.

"Create a holodeck simulation based on static image "Awaken". Three said and activated his sub-vocal modulator.

"Holodeck Simulation created, what filename would you like to save it under." the computer asked.

Three thought for just a second, then said in his modulated Borg whisper voice, "Save file under name 'Awaken Winger'."

"One File created." Was the computer's response.

"At thirteen hundred hours run simulation 'Awaken Winger' on holodeck two, adjust environmental controls to mimic the conditions on a Borg cube." Three said as he adjusted his subvocal modulator to the proper frequency to be heard in the phase variant state that Winger was in.

Three took a moment to look in his mirror, then left his cabin to find Winger again.

* * * * *

Andrew and Alan both walked out of the bedroom to find the twins sitting at the workstation and Icheb sitting on the couch talking to Seven.

Jimmy was sitting on the other end of the couch, immersed in a data padd.

"Okay, we're back." Alan said, still feeling the blush in his face.

"You wanted to discuss tact." Icheb said to Alan then said to Seven, "She was not invited. It would be wrong to ask."

"What are you talking about Icheb?" Alan asked and sat on the loveseat.

"Seven... Janine, wants to invite Naomi Wildman, and I was telling her it would be impolite to invite someone to visit another person's cabin without permission." Icheb said to both Alan and Janine.

"Icheb is correct, that would be impolite and wrong. So to fix that, I give my permission for you to invite Naomi Wildman over to visit." Alan said and relaxed back on the couch.

"Thank you Alan." Janine said as she jumped up on the couch to give him a kiss.

"You're very welcome Janine." Alan said with a smile as he watched her jump back down and run to the workstation.

"Icheb, before we have our discussion about tact, I'd like to ask your opinion on something." Alan began.

* * * * *

The ship still seemed to be tipping and Winger couldn't keep his balance. He walked up and down the hallway, unseen by all. [Am I dead?] he wondered, horrified at the prospect of being a ghost, forced to walk the hallways of Voyager for eternity.

"Crewman Winger." he heard in a familiar voice that came from his worst nightmares. It was the computerized modulated whisper-voice of the Borg.

Winger turned to see a single Borg drone.

"Are you going to assimilate me?" he asked in a frightened voice.

"You are unworthy of assimilation." the Borg said with a note of disgust.

"What do you want?" Winger asked, barely able to force out the words.

"Follow." the Borg said and slowly began to walk.

Winger watched as the Borg took a step away, then turned back to him and said, "Comply."

Winger forced himself to move and followed the Borg into a turbolift. After pressing a few buttons the Borg became still, his gaze fixed on the doors.

When they left the turbolift, they walked to a crew cabin.

"Enter." the drone said and stood aside.

Winger looked with fear at the door and tried to force himself to go through.

"Comply." the Borg said with icy venom and Winger pushed his way through the spider-web sensation and into the unknown.

* * * * *

"Icheb, Andrew and I were thinking about seeing if we could adopt all of you. What do you think of that?" Alan asked with hesitation.

"I do not understand." Icheb said with confusion.

"Adopt. To make you legally part of our family. Andrew and I would become your parents and all of you would become our children in the eyes of the law and everyone on Voyager. You wouldn't just visit us, you would live with us and be our own children." Alan said, trying to keep his emotions under control.

"We would no longer be the responsibility of Seven of Nine?" Icheb asked cautiously.

"No, legally we would be responsible for you. But I'm sure that we would be asking Seven of Nine for her help all the time." Alan said carefully.

"We are individuals now, so I cannot speak for the others." Icheb said slowly.

"Right now, I just want to know what you think. Icheb, will you be our son?"

* * * * *

Winger looked around and saw the children from the night before.

The twins were sitting in chairs at the computer with Andrew standing behind them, pointing at something on the screen.

The little girl was sitting and playing a game with Naomi Wildman on the floor.

There was a young boy writing on a padd, sitting at one end of the couch and an older boy sitting at the other end talking to Alan who was sitting in the love seat.

He noticed when everyone turned their attention to the three at the computer workstation.

Andrew was laughing and the twins were pointing at each other, obviously trying to assign blame for something.

Winger looked around again to see everyone laughing, then Andrew hugged both the twins at once.

The door opened behind him and he saw the drone step inside.

"Follow." the drone said and stepped back out the door.

Winger turned and walked back into the hallway.

* * * * *

Everyone in the room looked up as Three walked into the cabin and said in a Borg modulated-whisper voice, "Follow." then turned and left.

Andrew called on his inner sight and could see Three and Winger walking down the hallway and toward the turbolift.

"Three was talking to Crewman Winger. Give me a minute to find out what's going on." Andrew said and maintained his focus on the two.

* * * * *

Three led Winger through the ship and into a holodeck, holodeck two.

When they walked in he could tell that they were in a Borg cube. It was deadly still and there were Borg bodies laying everywhere, not one of them moving.

"The girl." the Borg drone said and pointed to a Borg drone that was female and not more than five years old.

"The twins." He said and motioned to the two boys who had been trying to cast blame then laughing with Andrew, laying motionless... dead in the floor.

"The others." the Borg said and pointed to an older and a younger boy laying side by side... not moving... not breathing.

"Does this bring you pleasure? Is this the reality you prefer?" the Borg said and left Winger standing alone in the dim silent holodeck.

* * * * *

Andrew had been sitting quietly for minutes, his eyes unfocused.

Without warning he began to laugh.

"Don't worry about Winger. Three's taking care of him... I think I'll give him a little help to drive his point home." Andrew said with a chuckle.

"Be careful love." Alan said with a smile.

"I will, I promise. Love you." Andrew said and ported out of the room.

* * * * *

When the holodeck door closed, Three heard a voice from beside him.

"I never pegged you as a fan of Dickens, Three." Andrew said with a smile.

"Oh, you read that too?" Three said with a helpless smile.

"I would watch the movie every year at Christmas." Andrew said fondly.

"I thought if a man as despicable as Ebenezer Scrooge could be rehabilitated, there might be a chance for Crewman Winger." Three said in his modulated voice with a timid look.

"Don't worry Three, I'm not upset. In fact, I'm here to help you... by the way... where did you get an image of everyone dead?" Andrew asked curiously.

"They were not dead. I was the first to awaken when the maturation chambers ejected us. They were unconscious." Three said and looked back toward the holodeck doors.

"I see it, he's crying. I think you've given him enough of a glimpse of Christmas present and past. I'm going to show him his future if he ever threatens my partner or my kids again." Andrew said with steel.

"May I watch?" Three asked in what would have been a timid voice if not for the sub-vocal modulator.

"Yes. I'll need to phase us like him for this to work. I'm going to take us someplace where we would be killed instantly if we weren't phased." Andrew said and they both felt the ship seem to tip and go faded and fuzzy.

"Say nothing." Andrew said and moved a portal over them both.

* * * * *

Tom and Chakotay entered the cabin to find everyone talking at once.

"Alan, what's going on?" Chakotay asked as Janine ran up to him.

"First, I think Seven of Seven wants to know if you can officially change her name to Janine." Alan said.

"Of course. Janine is a beautiful name." Chakotay said and picked Janine up to hold her on his side.

"Thank you. Naomi's mother and Neelix said it was too." Janine said proudly.

Naomi ran to Tom and put her arms up, wanting to be held like Janine.

Tom immediately picked her up and gave her a gentle hug.

"So what else is going on... and where is Andrew?" Chakotay asked the group.

* * * * *

Winger jumped at the sudden appearance of Andrew, behind him stood the Borg drone.

Andrew held up his hand and pointed past Winger to a swirling vortex.

"You can't mean for me to go in there." Winger said fearfully.

A blaze of golden light erupted from Andrew's eyes and he pointed again.

"Okay, okay." Winger said and walked shakily into the portal.

Andrew and Three followed close behind, remaining silent.

They emerged in a hellish place. It was frozen and desolate... nothing lived there... nothing had ever lived there.

"What, are you saying you're going to leave me here?" Winger asked in panic.

Andrew and Three didn't move a muscle, they remained focused on Winger who was trembling visibly.

"You can't do that... I didn't hurt no one. I just got drunk and spouted off." Winger began to whine.

A look of fury came over Andrew's face. Winger felt the cold of their surroundings and noticed that Andrew and Three were fading out of existence.

"Okay. I know I hurt the kids feelings. And I'm sorry for that. I don't wish they were dead. I never really wished that. They were just words." Winger said desperately.

Andrew and Three became substantial again and looked silently at Winger, obviously waiting for more.

"I won't do it again. Alan was right. Kids are special and precious. I miss my own and was just sour because you got to be with yours and I don't get to be with mine." Winger explained.

Andrew remained silent and still.

"What do you want? You want me to promise I'll never talk to you again?" Winger asked desperately.

Andrew slowly shook his head keeping his gaze fixed on Winger.

"Just tell me what you want... whatever it is, you got it." Winger said as tears began to fall again.

Andrew raised his right hand and pointed at two open portals, side by side.

Through the first they could clearly see into the cabin where the children were talking and laughing with Alan. Tom and Chakotay were there too, each was holding a little girl and laughing.

Through the second portal was the unchanging image of the Borg cube. Dim light, silence, and the dead bodies of children littering the floor.

Andrew moved his hand again to point at the two portals.

"Yeah, I got to make a choice. I ain't stupid!" Winger said and walked through the portal into the cabin filled with laughing children.

* * * * *

Chakotay jumped when Crewman Winger, Andrew and Three walked into the room through a seemingly solid wall.

Winger looked around in surprise and asked quietly, "Am I alive?"

"Yes Winger. You're alive. Now sit down before you fall down." Andrew said in an almost hospitable tone.

"You can call me Dave." Winger said, looking ashamed.

"Okay Dave." Andrew said in a softer tone. "Why don't you sit down and enjoy some time with the family."

"Thanks." Winger said in a near whisper.

Chakotay led Tom and Andrew to the other side of the room and asked, "What did you do to him?"

"Three decided that he needed to see his words come to life. He showed Crewman Winger an image of all the children, still fully Borg and dead... I'm so proud of him. He could have done so many things, but he chose to give Winger a chance to make up for what he said last night." Andrew said and cast a look of pride at Three.

"Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?" Chakotay asked.

"No, actually Alan and I want to adopt the children... all of them. We wanted to know what we would have to do to make that happen." Andrew said in a serious tone.

"All of them?" Chakotay asked and looked around the room.

By the time he looked back to Andrew he had a tender smile on his face and said, "You've already adopted them in everything but name haven't you?"

"Yeah, it snuck up on us too. We love them all and Dave's words at the party last night was all it took to make us realize that we want them to be our children in every possible way." Andrew said with a look full of love.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know the Starfleet codes on adoption off the top of my head, so I'll have to do a little research to find out what we have to do. But just so you know, I'll back you all the way." Chakotay said with a smile.

"Me too." Tom said and looked around the room again at the happy children.

* * * * *

"Dave?" Icheb asked cautiously.

"Yes?" Winger responded.

"Do you not hate us anymore?" Icheb asked in a careful tone.

"No, I don't hate you. I just miss my own kids and seeing you with Andrew and Alan made me jealous. That made me say things I didn't mean." Winger said with apology.

"Good. I'm glad you don't hate us. We are new here and do not know many people." Icheb said honestly.

"Yeah, that's tough. It's always hard being in a new place. But you got good people looking out for you." Winger said with assurance.

"Yes. They love us." Icheb said simply.

"I know." Winger said and went silent.

* * * * *

"Three, I am so proud of you. What you did for Crewman Winger was wonderful." Andrew said quietly and pulled Three into a hug and kissed him on the top of his head.

"Thank you Andrew. My Borg enhancements improve my hearing... do you want to adopt me?" Three asked from the embrace, turning his head so his ocular implant wouldn't press into Andrew's chest.

"Yes. We want you to be our son. But only if you want to be. I know you have been ordered to comply with our instructions, but this is a decision you have to make for yourself. Decide what will make you happy and we'll do our best to make it happen." Andrew said honestly and gave one final squeeze before releasing Three.

"If I were your son, would I still be able to work in engineering?" Three asked carefully.

"As long as you're doing a good job and you still want to, yes." Andrew said and looked seriously into Three's visible eye.

"I must think about this." Three said hesitantly.

"Take all the time you need. If you have any questions you can ask me, Alan, Tom or Chakotay." Andrew said with assurance.

"Thank you." Three said with honest thanks in his voice.

* * * * *

"Jimmy, I have a job for you." Alan said abruptly.

Jimmy looked up from his data padd at Alan questioningly.

"Could you write a paragraph or two describing the location of our wedding, but write it for non-Borg crewmembers?" Alan asked from the loveseat.

"Explain." Jimmy said cautiously.

"I have read your writing and it is perfect for the audience that you have now. But I wondered if you could write something for a non-Borg audience. In one of your writings you described relief as the sensation of having your electrolytes replenished after days of inadequate regeneration. Naomi Wildman or her mother wouldn't know what that feels like and would not understand what you mean. You might convey the same feeling by saying... like taking a drink of cold water after a long dry day at work, or like the summer rain on your face after walking a long dusty trail. Those are things that other members of the crew can identify with." Alan said carefully.

"I could try." Jimmy said in a considering tone.

"Good. Let me see it when you're done." Alan said and turned his attention to Andrew and the twins back at the computer.

* * * * *

"Jimmy is a writer?" Dave asked in confirmation.

"Yes. Jimmy observes things and relays his experiences to the rest of us... just a moment." Icheb said and walked to Andrew.

Andrew handed Icheb a padd from beside the workstation.

"Here. This is one of the things he has written." Icheb said and handed the padd to Dave.

Dave was silent while he read. After long moments he looked up and said, "That little boy was in the shuttlecraft that expanded the wormhole?"

"Yes, Andrew believed that he would benefit from the experience and the rest of us would benefit by learning of his experience from his writing." Icheb said without emotion.

"I don't understand everything he says, but I get it. That must have been awfully scary. And it was his idea to expand the wormhole like an egg so we could take two years off our trip." Dave said as he shook his head in wonder.

"Yes. I believe it was scary. Jimmy is quite brave for one so young." Icheb said with admiration.

"If he does all that, what about the rest of you?" Dave asked and shifted to be more comfortable.

"Three works in engineering." Icheb said, then spoke to Three who was standing by the computer workstation, "Three, Dave and I are interested in knowing of your job."

Three walked to the couch and Alan shifted over in the loveseat to give him a place to sit.

"Thank you." Three said to Alan as he took the offered seat, then said to Icheb, "I have been given responsibility for maintenance and repair of the bioneural gelpacks on Voyager. I go all over the ship checking to see that they are operating at optimum efficiency and that the gelpacks remain healthy."

"That's a big job." Winger said, impressed.

"Yes, but it is within my abilities. Once I have completed my initial examination of all the gelpacks, I will institute a maintenance schedule to begin a rotation of the packs to provide optimum efficiency." Three said, happy to talk about his new job.

"I didn't know a kid your age could work in engineering." Winger said in true astonishment.

"Due to my enhancements, I have the knowledge and understanding that allows me to perform the job as efficiently as an adult." Three said, making sure not to use the word 'superior'.

"It's still a big job for a kid. If you work in engineering, you must have a different schedule from the rest of the children... engineering mostly work Gamma shift don't they?" Dave asked with true interest.

"Yes, I am currently scheduled between Gamma and Alpha shift working half of each. My schedule is different, but I reside independently from the others." Three said with a bit of pride.

"He is currently sharing quarters with Harry Kim." Icheb said.

"So Ensign Kim is your guardian?" Dave asked in confusion.

"He is my roommate. Seven of Nine is technically my guardian, but is allowing me to live independently on a trial basis." Three said without emotion.

* * * * *

"Here it is." Jimmy said and handed his padd to Alan.

After reading the padd for a moment, he said, "Very good Jimmy. This is just what I wanted."

"Icheb, could you come here for a moment?" Alan asked as he stood.

"How may I be of assistance?" Icheb asked as he also stood.

"Come over here by the bedroom door and read this outloud to the group of people in this room." Alan said and handed Icheb the padd.

Icheb took the padd and moved to the indicated position.

"The sky was gray but without menace. The smell of moisture was in the air and the wind could be heard in the tops of the trees. Gentle rain began to fall against the tent canvas like little toes running across a bare floor. As the rain fell harder, the smell of nourished earth rose up and reminded us of the purpose of the day... growth and renewal. The rain stopped and the sun shown.

The light glistened on the grass like crystal shards shattered as far as the eye could see. And the sky filled with all the hues of color known to be." Icheb said, enthralled by the description.

"Thank you Icheb. What did everyone think?" Alan asked as the group were stunned.

"It was beautiful." Dave said in wonder.

"I couldn't say it better." Andrew said with a smile.

"Icheb, the reason I asked you to read this is because I may have found a job for you and Jimmy." Alan said with pride.

"What would we be doing?" Icheb asked curiously.

"Neelix has a weekly news broadcast. I've talked to him about allowing you to do one story each week. Jimmy is an excellent writer, and I think you would be the perfect one to read his writing to the crew." Alan said honestly.

"Why would he not read it himself?" Icheb asked in confusion.

Everyone in the room looked to Alan, wanting the answer to that question.

"Because I am young." Jimmy said in acceptance, "Only very special people can listen to someone my age and hear what is said. Most would believe my thoughts to be unimportant or cute."

"Exactly right." Alan said sadly. "Icheb has a good speaking voice and will be able to catch the attention of the crew."

"It is good." Jimmy said and smiled.

"I thought you would like it. You get to write, your writing gets to be experienced by everyone on the ship. And you don't have to get in front of a camera once a week to deliver it." Alan said simply.

"You guys really are a family." Winger said with a smile.

"Yes Dave, and you're welcomed to share in our family if you want. How would you like to be the children's Uncle Dave?" Andrew asked.

Winger looked around the group of children, seeing the hope in all their eyes.

"Uncle Dave it is." Winger said with a smile.

"Good. It's settled then. Uncle Dave, come with me for a minute." Andrew said and walked toward the door.

Winger hesitantly got off the couch and followed.

[Chapter 19: To Have It All]

Andrew and Winger walked away from the cabin in silence. When they reached the end of the hall, Andrew turned and walked into an observation lounge.

Winger followed and came to stand beside Andrew looking out at the planets of the Barga system, each a different colored sphere in space.

"Winger, Three believes that you are a good man who needed a chance to do the right thing. I'm older, more cynical. So let me spell it out for you. I will trust that Three sees something in you that I don't and welcome you into my home and my family. But if you ever cause any of those children a moment of pain... you will regret it for eternity." Andrew said quietly with the tone of a solemn vow.

"I promise. I'll never do anything to hurt the kids." Winger said seriously.

"Good. One other thing. I noticed that you like to drink. And that's fine, but if you've had even one drink, you are not to come near the children. Understood?" Andrew asked and turned his gaze to Winger.

"Yeah. I got it. The kids will never see 'Uncle Dave' drunk again." Winger said with shame.

"Fine, then let's get back to the family. I've got a lot to do today." Andrew said and walked toward the door.

"Thanks." Winger said shyly.

"Don't thank me, thank Three. If it wasn't for him, you'd be wandering the halls of Voyager as a ghost until the Captain made me bring you back." Andrew said over his shoulder and left the room.

* * * * *

"Where's Uncle Dave?" Janine asked as Andrew walked back into the room.

"He'll probably be back in a minute. Alan, did you ask Icheb?" Andrew asked quickly, hoping to forestall anymore questions from Janine.

"I asked, but we were interrupted. Then I remembered about the news job." Alan said with a smile.

"So Icheb, what do you think?" Andrew asked and sat on the loveseat beside Alan.

"I believe I would like to be your son." Icheb said with a smile.

"Good. Three, have you had enough time to think about it yet?" Andrew asked as he put his arm around Alan.

"I require more time. Is it necessary to have an answer soon?" Three asked carefully.

"No Three, there is no rush. Take the time you need to be sure of what you want to do." Andrew said with assurance.

"And whatever you decide won't change the fact that we love you and are proud of you." Alan said with certainty.

"Thank you. I must return to my cabin. Thank you for inviting me." Three said as he turned to leave.

"Three. You have a standing invitation. Whenever you want to come over, you are welcomed here." Andrew said seriously.

"I will remember." Three said and left the room.

* * * * *

Winger walked back to the cabin at a slow pace, thinking about the events of the day. He understood most of it, but knew on a deep level that what had happened had changed him. Made him something better, something more than he was the day before.

As he approached Andrew and Alan's cabin he saw the door open and Three step out.

"Three, can I talk to you for a minute?" Winger asked quickly.

"Proceed." Three said and stopped walking.

"I wanted to thank you for what you did. I didn't give you any reason to do something nice for me and I won't ever forget it." Winger said honestly.

"I only did for you what Andrew and Alan did for me." Three said honestly.

"What was that?" Winger asked.

"I opened your eyes to what is right in front of you. When I saw you in the hallway this morning, I realized that you were a starving man sitting before a banquet table, crying out for someone to feed him. I merely moved your chair closer so you could feed yourself." Three said and walked away.

[I don't know what the hell he just said, but he's probably right.] Winger thought to himself as he walked up to Andrew and Alan's cabin door. He was surprised to find that it opened as he approached.

* * * * *

"Your door opened for me." Winger said, thinking they should get that thing fixed.

"Yeah, when the privacy lock isn't on, it will open automatically for you, Chakotay, Tom or any of the children. We're tired of answering the thing. You're family, so you're going to be treated like it." Alan said with a smile.

"So what's going on?" Winger asked and pulled up a chair from the dining area.

"We were just about to ask William and Robert if they wanted to be our sons." Andrew said.

Both boys turned away from the computer and looked timidly at Andrew.

"What do you say guys? Would you like for Alan and I to be your parents?" Andrew asked happily.

"Does that mean we would live with you... all the time?" Robert asked quietly.

"Yes." Alan said with a smile.

"And would we get new names again?" William asked, just as quietly.

"You would be named William Summers and Robert Summers." Andrew said joyfully.

The twins looked at each other and nodded in unison.

"Great. Jimmy..." Alan began.

"Yes." Jimmy said immediately.

"Okay. I guess that leaves Janine. Would you like to be our daughter?" Andrew asked while looking into her eyes.

"Will I get a room of my own like Naomi?" Janine asked.

"I don't know. We'll work that out with Chakotay when we know who wants to be our kids." Andrew said honestly.

Janine thought about it for a moment then said, "Yes. I want you to be my daddies."

"Good, because we both want to be your daddies." Alan said happily.

"We have five 'Yes' and one 'Maybe'. I think that's enough to get us started on whatever we have to do." Andrew said to everyone.

"Uncle Dave. Do you know any stories?" Janine asked and turned to look at him.

"I know lots of stories. If we can get Jimmy to scoot over, we'll sit on the couch and I'll tell you one." Winger said with peace radiating from his eyes.

* * * * *

Three days had passed since Chakotay had said he would check into Starfleet adoption procedures. Chakotay had left a brief message saying he was still checking into things and that was all they had heard.

Uncle Dave and the kids, except for Three, had been at the cabin each day just after noon.

Andrew was laying in the bed with his head on Alan's chest when the comm sounded, "Crewman LeeAndrew Summers, Crewman Alan Summers. Please come to my office at your earliest convenience."

"Yes Captain." Both said immediately and jumped out of bed.

* * * * *

Andrew and Alan both walked into the Captain's office, dressed in their Starfleet uniforms.

"I didn't mean for you to dress for duty gentlemen. I just wanted to talk to you about your request to adopt the children." the Captain said and got up from behind her desk.

She walked to the replicator and said, "Coffee, Janeway blend #4."

"Please, have a seat." She said and motioned to the low couches across from the desk.

"Thank you Captain." Alan said and took a seat, followed by Andrew.

"Gentlemen. Chakotay has been working for the past few days to find a way for you to adopt all the children without a lot of fuss and bother. But I'm afraid there is no such thing when it comes to adoption. So I'm going to handle this matter personally. In the absence of a JAG officer, I will serve as the judge in this matter. Before we begin, I need to know that you will abide by my decision, whatever it is." Janeway said seriously then took a drink of coffee.

"Of course Captain." Alan said, astonished that she would think they would do otherwise.

"So if I rule that Seven of Nine should retain custody and you are to limit your visits with the children to no more than one hour per day, what would you do?" Janeway asked, looking from one man to the other.

"Captain. If that was your ruling, then I would abide by it because I would know that you had a good reason for it. I've been on this ship long enough to know that you are fair." Alan said with assurance.

"But this isn't a matter of what's fair. This is a matter of what's in the children's best interest." the Captain said with a note of firmness.

"I understand Captain. And thank you for doing it this way. Alan and I may be too close to the situation to be objective on that point." Andrew admitted reluctantly.

"Thank you gentlemen. That is all I needed to know for now. I will be scheduling interviews with those involved and announce my decision when the interviews are complete." the Captain said and stood.

"Thank you Captain. Let us know if there is anything we can do to help." Andrew said as they walked toward the door.

* * * * *

"Icheb. I just wanted to know why you want to become Andrew and Alan's son." Captain Janeway asked in a diplomatic tone.

"Andrew and Alan have been like fathers to me since the day I arrived on Voyager. They have taught me many important things, and answered all my questions, some of which I now understand were embarrassing to talk about. They ask my opinion of things and trust my decisions. They offer suggestions and allow me to make my own choices. Most important, they have a vision for me that I do not have for myself." Icheb said with strength.

"Tell me about some of the things they've taught you." Janeway said and settled back into her chair.

"They have told me about relationships, both friendship and more personal relationships. They explained about trust, honor, and commitment. I didn't understand everything they were saying at first, but as time went on, I could see it around me and understood." Icheb said with delight.

"What else?" Janeway asked and leaned forward to make a note.

"They have told me how to interact with others on Voyager. I have been told about modesty, tact and polite conversation." Icheb said proudly.

"And has their advice worked?" Janeway asked with interest.

"Oh yes. At the wedding reception, I was able to speak with many members of the crew. They were all very friendly and polite. I enjoyed that function." Icheb said with a smile.

"Speaking of that, I have been told by various people that Crewman Winger instigated an incident at that function. Could you tell me about that?" Janeway asked, wanting to know Icheb's point of view.

"Yes. Crewman Winger had ingested an unfortunate amount of alcohol that night and engaged Alan in conversation regarding the presence of us, the children, on Voyager. Alan informed Crewman Winger that each of us was special and precious and they loved every one of us. And that their lives were improved because we are here. And now I have to say that I feel the same toward both of them." Icheb said sincerely.

"What will you do if I deny the adoption to Alan and Andrew?" Janeway asked carefully.

"I will continue to see them as often as I am allowed. And when I reach the age of consent, I will move in with them, if not as their child, then as their friend." Icheb said without emotion.

"Thank you Icheb, you are dismissed, please send in Three of Seven." Janeway said and got up to get some coffee.

* * * * *

"Three of Seven. Andrew told Chakotay that you haven't told them if you want to be adopted yet. Have you come to a decision?" Janeway asked and took a sip of coffee.

"Yes Captain. I would like to be adopted by Alan and Andrew." Three said tonelessly.

"Would you explain your decision?" Captain Janeway asked as she watched the young Borg before her.

"Andrew and Alan have accepted me as I choose to be. They voice their opinion about my decisions, but allow me to decide. They answer my questions and teach me what I need to know." Three said efficiently.

"You have chosen to live independently. You realize that you would have to move in with Alan and Andrew if I grant the adoption?" Janeway asked, having difficulty gauging the reactions of this young Borg.

"Captain. May I tell you of my past three days?" Three asked with a slight pleading tone in his voice which surprised Janeway.

"Yes, please do." Janeway said and sat forward in interest.

"Three days ago I was invited to visit Andrew and Alan along with the other children. While I was there I was hugged twice, kissed on the head once, told that I was loved four times, told that they were proud of me five times and was invited to be their son. In the two days since, exactly two people have spoken to me. One was Lieutenant Torres to give me instructions in my duties, the other was Harry Kim refusing to recycle his dinner ware after ingesting nourishment. Captain, the Borg are a collective, they are never alone. A family is a collective, they are never alone. I am alone." Three finished with hollow desperation.

"I understand Three." Janeway said and sat back.

"Captain, if you rule against Alan and Andrew's wish to adopt me, I will still be their son, just not in the eyes of the law. They love me and accept me, they understand me and are proud of me... and I love them." Three finished in nearly a whisper.

"Thank you Three, you are dismissed." Janeway said as she noticed she needed more coffee.

"Lieutenant Torres, Report to my office." Janeway said and went to the replicator.

* * * * *

"B'Elana, I just wanted to ask for a status report on Crewman Three." Janeway asked.

"I gave Commander Chakotay my personnel reports yesterday." B'Elana said in puzzlement.

"Not productivity, how is Three doing?" Janeway asked, looking B'Elana in the eyes.

"Oh, yeah, he's new. Um... he's fine. He's doing a good job. He suggested a gelpack rotation program that I didn't understand at first. But since he started rotating them two days ago efficiency has increased nearly three percent." B'Elana said professionally.

"And how's he getting along with everyone?" Janeway asked.

"He isn't. I put him on a special shift half-way between Gamma and Alpha so he wouldn't have to deal with the others... Captain, he looks like a Borg. Not like Seven of Nine Borg but like a real fresh off the cube Borg. He's just a little boy and I don't want him to have to face what he'll probably get from the engineering crew." B'Elana said honestly.

"So the reason no one but you has spoken to him in two days is that he's been separated from them?" Janeway asked in confirmation.

"Two days? Oh Captain, I never even thought." B'Elana said, stricken.

"You couldn't know. Actually, I think it may have worked out for the best. He wants to be adopted by Alan and Andrew with the rest of the children." Janeway said with a smile.

"Good. I know under all that hardware there is a sweet little boy just trying to figure out who he is. I wish he didn't pick such a difficult road." B'Elana said honestly.

"The more we shelter him, the longer it will take for him to realize the truth. It may take some short term pain to prevent an even greater pain later." Janeway said sagely.

"He will be on Alpha shift starting next schedule. I may not be able to protect him completely, but if I keep him on my shift, I may be able to blunt some of the sharpest edges." B'Elana said honestly.

"I know you'll do what's right." Janeway said with trust.

"So Alan and Andrew are going to adopt the kids. That's great. Those two are so great with the kids, watching them makes me want kids of my own..." B'Elana said wistfully, then stopped abruptly.

"I saw her kiss you at the wedding. Are you two thinking about becoming an official couple?" Janeway asked.

"We've been talking about it... and about kids... since we're on the subject. I'd like to request an artificial womb and permission to have a child. I don't want to do it today, but soon..." B'Elana rambled.

"It's fine B'Elana. Permission granted. I think you two will make some beautiful babies." Janeway said honestly.

"Thank you Captain." B'Elana said and collected her emotions.

"So, in your honest opinion, do you believe Andrew and Alan would be good parents for the children?" Janeway asked, knowing B'Elana would want to change the subject.

"I haven't spent much time around them with the kids, but... yeah. From what little I've seen, they'll be great parents." B'Elana said honestly.

"Thank you Lieutenant Torres, I'll let you get back to your duties, would you please send in William and Robert?" Janeway asked with a smile.

"Yes. And thank you Captain." B'Elana said and left the room.

* * * * *

Three left the Captain's office and went back to his duty. As he left main engineering with the necessary tools he heard someone say, "The Borg killed my wife at Wolf Three Five Nine."

Three turned in time to see a fist, then was on the floor with his tools skittering in all directions across the floor.

He looked up to see a crewman, a mountain of a man, looking at him with hatred.

"I was not there." Three said defensively, trying to maintain his calm.

"You are a collective. All of you are the same." the man said and walked toward Three.

Three felt fear as the large man walked toward him. Three remained still.

The big man kicked him in the side and he doubled over in pain.

There was a sound of a scuffle above him and he looked up to see Uncle Dave fighting the man.

"He's just a kid, Paul. He ain't one of them that killed your wife." Winger said as he fought the man.

"He's a Borg." Johnson said and landed a punch.

Winger shook it off and said, "He's a kid who's been through a lot and is trying to figure out who he is."

* * * * *

The twin boys walked into the office and Janeway gestured to two chairs sitting before her desk.

"Please be seated. Which one of you is William?" Janeway asked looking at the one dressed in all dark colors and the other dressed in all bright colors.

"I am William." the dark one said quietly.

"Do you both wish to be adopted by Andrew and Alan?" Janeway asked and sipped her coffee.

"Yes." Both said simultaneously.

"Robert, can you tell me why?" Janeway asked and sat back in her chair.

"Because they are our parents." Robert said simply.

"How do you mean?" Janeway asked in confusion.

"All the things that parents do, they do for us. All the things that parents feel, they feel for us. All the things you feel for a parent, we feel for them. They are our parents." Robert stated reasonably.

Janeway blinked at the profundity of that statement then came back to herself and asked, "If I were to deny Andrew and Alan's request for adoption, what would you do?"

"I would spend whatever time I could with my parents, and when the time came that I could legally make my own decisions, I would move in with them." Robert said simply.

"What about you William?" Janeway asked.

"He would sulk and brood for two weeks, then do the same as me." Robert said.

"I was talking to William." Janeway said in a chastising tone.

"He's right. That's what I would do." William said honestly.

"Thank you both, you are dismissed, please send in Jimmy." Janeway said and looked at her empty coffee cup wondering if she dared.

* * * * *

B'Elana walked off the turbolift and into main engineering to the unmistakable sound of a fight. Three was laying in the floor with a bloody lip and holding his side. Winger was fighting Paul Johnson. She thought about stopping the fight, but her Maquis experience told her that these two needed to work out their problem like this. Rules and regulations would just cause the fight to stretch on for months. If they fought it out here and now, it would be done.

"Why are you protecting that drone? You lost people to the Borg too." Johnson said with fury.

"Because he ain't a drone. He's a kid. A good kid." Winger said and punctuated his words with punches to Johnson's face.

"Look at him. The little fucker is a drone." Johnson said as he pulled away from Winger, who had done some damage.

"Johnson, spend some time with these kids and you'll understand. This boy was taken by the Borg. This little boy, right here, was taken away from his family and had machines put into his body. You know that's gotta mess with his head." Winger said, stopping the fight to make his plea.

"Three is trying to figure out who he is. He was made into a Borg, and then he was rescued. Now what is he? He isn't fully human, he isn't Borg. Paul, let the kid figure it out." Winger said desperately.

"Okay Dave. I get what your saying... Just when I saw him, it all came back... Jenna..." Johnson finished in a whisper.

"I know Paul. Just leave the kid alone. He didn't do it." Winger said and walked to Three.

"Three, do you need to see the Doctor?" Winger asked in a gentle tone.

"I... I don't think so. I am only bruised." Three said calmly.

"Good. What happens on the lower decks, we keep on the lower decks." Winger said seriously.

Three looked at Dave curiously for a moment then nodded in acceptance.

"Johnson, you're off the hook. Three isn't gonna tell anyone. I told you he was alright." Winger said, sparing a glance for Johnson.

"Just keep him away from me." Johnson said and left the room.

"Gentlemen, is there a problem?" B'Elana asked as she walked out of the shadows.

"No, Three just bumped into Crewman Johnson and dropped his tools. Everything's fine Lieutenant." Winger said and helped Three to his feet.

"Good, Three, you look like you could use some dermal regeneration. Come to my office, I have a med-kit for when people bump into each other down here and don't want to get the Doctor involved." B'Elana said and turned toward the office.

Three and Winger finished gathering the scattered tools and followed B'Elana.

* * * * *

Jimmy walked into Captain Janeway's office and looked around in wonder.

"Coffee, Janeway blend #7." the Captain said to the replicator.

"Jimmy, please sit down and I'll be right with you." she said and took her coffee.

"Why do you want to be adopted by Alan and Andrew?" Janeway asked and settled back into her chair.

"Why does anyone want to feel loved." Jimmy asked in return.

"Please answer my question." the Captain said with irritation.

Jimmy looked at her with disappointment and handed her a data padd.

>When I was scared, my father held me close.

>When I didn't understand, my father told me why.

>When I wanted to soar, my father pointed the way.

>When I wanted to stand, my father stood with me.

Janeway read the words and finally said, "That's beautiful, who wrote it?"

"I did. And I wrote it because my fathers said that I was smart and good... and precious... and special. They believed in me and my ability when I didn't. And if I never wrote anything ever again, I know that they would support me and love me and encourage me because they don't love me for what I can do... they just love me." Jimmy said seriously.

"You don't talk like the others... like a Borg." Janeway observed.

"My fathers have encouraged me to adapt to my audience. If I were talking to one of the other children, I would be using Borg inflections and phrases." Jimmy said honestly.

"What would you do if I deny the adoption?" Janeway asked carefully.

Jimmy sat and thought for a minute before saying, "I would write my feelings down, because I find that it's the best way for me to express emotions at this point in my development. Then I would visit with my fathers every minute that it was possible. And when the day comes that I am given the freedom of choice, I will go to them and ask them if I can move in... and they'll say yes."

"Thank you Jimmy. I'll look forward to more of your writing. Will you send in Janine?" Janeway asked and cast an evil glance at the empty coffee cup sitting on her desk... calling to her.

* * * * *

Janine walked into Janeway's office looking timid and on the verge of tears.

"Don't worry Janine. I'm just going to talk to you for a minute. Would you like to sit on the couch?" Janeway asked and got up from behind her desk.

Janine nodded and walked haltingly to the couch and took a seat.

"I just wanted to know if you want Alan and Andrew to become your parents." Janeway asked in a gentle tone.

Janine nodded shyly.

"Can you tell me why?" Janeway asked so quietly that it was nearly a whisper.

"Because they love me. They love all of us." Janine said honestly.

"And how do you know that?" Janeway prompted and rested her elbows on her knees and her chin on the heels of her hands.

"When we first came here, and went to the Doctor, they were funny so we wouldn't be scared. They talked to us and let us pick out our own clothes. When I was scared of the Doctor, Andrew asked Icheb if the Doctor hurt him and Icheb said no." Janine said in a rambling tone.

Janeway held her pose and waited for more.

"When Robert got hurt, Andrew saved his life. And when Seven of Nine came to get us for regeneration, Alan called me so I wouldn't get in trouble. When Uncle Dave was mad, Andrew made him go away and Three and Andrew made him nice." Janine said and began looking around the room.

Janeway noticed that they had reached the end of Janine's attention span and asked, "What will you do if you can't be their daughter?"

"I'll be sad. But I'll still visit them every day and someday I'll get to live with them... and live happily ever after." Janine finished with a big smile.

"Who's been telling you stories that end 'happily ever after'?" Janeway asked with a smile of her own.

"Uncle Dave, he knows lots of stories and they all end happily ever after." Janine said with a bounce.

"Who is Uncle Dave?" Janeway asked, not knowing who it could be.

"Crewman Winger. When he started being nice he said we could call him Dave." Janine said happily.

"Thank you Janine. I think everyone is probably waiting for you outside." Janeway said with a smile and got up off the couch.

* * * * *

"At ease Crewman Winger, I just had a few questions for you regarding Andrew, Alan and the children." Janeway said to the stocky man.

"What do you want to know?" Winger asked hesitantly.

"Janine says that you've been telling her stories, but I received a report that less than a week ago you instigated an incident with Alan at the wedding reception. I just want to understand how you got from point A to point B.

"The shortest distance was a straight line through hell." Winger said offhandedly then said in a more serious tone, "After a discussion with Three and Andrew I figured out that I was mad

because I miss my own kids and was taking it out on them. So Andrew invited me to be a part of his family. I'm Uncle Dave to all the kids now." Winger said with a smile.

"That's very mature thinking. I'm glad you were able to resolve your differences peacefully. What can you tell me about the relationship between Alan, Andrew and the children?" Janeway asked and watched his eyes carefully.

"They love the kids, and the kids love 'em right back. When we get home, I got a few things to make up for with my own kids, but now I've seen how it's supposed to be and I'm damn sure going to try and get it right this time." Winger said then realized what he had said. "Sorry Captain." He said in a timid whisper.

"Quite alright. Is there anything else that you can think of about their situation that I should know before I make my decision?" Janeway asked.

"No Ma'am." Winger said quietly.

"Then you're dismissed Crewman." Janeway said and made some notes.

* * * * *

"Seven of Nine, I'm sure you are aware that Alan and Andrew want to adopt the children. I wanted to know how you feel about that." Janeway asked as she sat and took a sip of yet another cup of coffee.

"I believe that the children would benefit from that action." Seven said flatly.

"I was concerned that you would feel that they were trying to take the children away from you." Janeway said honestly.

"I anticipated your concern so I brought this." Seven said and handed Janeway a padd.

Janeway looked at the padd which held a schedule. "I don't understand." she finally said.

"That is today's schedule for the children if Alan and Andrew hadn't intervened." Seven said without emotion.

Janeway looked more carefully at the schedule and noticed that every minute of the day was accounted for with some activity.

"It looks like a very full day, but I don't see the problem." Janeway said honestly.

"In all those activities there is not one that encourages freedom of expression, independent decision making or fun. None of these activities nourishes the soul." Seven said with a trace of emotion.

Janeway looked at the schedule a third time and saw what she was saying.

"When I wrote that schedule, I did not see the benefit of such things. Now I understand that they are essential to a child's development. That is why I believe the children would benefit from being adopted by the Summers." Seven said seriously.

"I see, and if they are adopted, what do you see as your role in their life?" Janeway asked carefully.

"I would be a god-parent to all the children." Seven answered immediately.

"A god-parent?" Janeway asked, not familiar with the term.

"I would be considered a part of their family... like an Aunt. In the event of unforeseen circumstances that would prevent both Mr. Summers from caring for their children, I would step in to provide for them until their parents are able to do so again... or until the children are adults." Seven said without emotion.

"I can see why that would be an honored position, why do you believe that Alan and Andrew would ask you to be the god-parent of the children?" Janeway had to ask.

"Because they have already asked me to be a god-parent to their unborn children. It stands to reason that they would consider me adequate to the task of tending to the remainder of their children." Seven said with a note of pride creeping into her voice.

"Thank you Seven. I have one other concern to discuss with you, the status of Three of Seven." Janeway said quietly.

"He is doing well in engineering. His work has been adequate and his efforts have improved shipwide interface efficiency two point eight seven percent." Seven said efficiently.

"He hasn't spoken to anyone in two days." Janeway said quietly.

"The other members of the crew may have difficulty relating to him, due to his appearance." Seven said in acceptance.

"I agree, so I have an idea of how we can fix that." Janeway said, then pressed the buttons to activate the emergency medical holographic channel.

"Doctor, I would like for you to be in on this discussion. Do you think that you could modify Three of Seven's Borg hardware to be detachable?" Janeway asked the Doctor, then looked to Seven.

"I hadn't considered the possibility... but I don't see why not. I believe most if not all of the hardware could be modified to be easily detached. But Three won't agree to it." The Doctor said with certainty.

"Leave that to me Doctor. Seven, what do you think?" the Captain asked.

"I agree with the Doctor, there is no reason that the hardware cannot be made detachable."

"Good, Seven of Nine, go to Sickbay and wait for Three. I think it will just take me a few minutes to convince him." Janeway said with a smile.

"Yes Captain." Seven said and efficiently left the room.

"Crewman Alan Summers, Crewman LeeAndrew Summers, Crewman Three, report to my office at your earliest convenience." Janeway said and rested back in her chair.

[Chapter 20: Decisions]

"Yes Captain?" Alan asked as the three stood before her.

"This is unrelated to the adoption. I just had a thought, and wanted your opinions. Crewman Three, would you remove your shirt?" the Captain asked

"Captain?" Three asked in surprise.

"Please Crewman, indulge me and remove your shirt.

Three took his left hand to the right shoulder of his shirt, then pulled his right arm inside. Then he reached his right arm from under the shirt and began to pull the neck of the shirt over his head, being careful not to snag on the ocular implant. After much stretching of the shirt and many contortions, the shirt was pulled over his head. Three then used his right hand to pull the sleeve of the shirt off his left arm that was taut from covering hardware.

"Less than three minutes, I was guessing five. Crewman Three, it is possible to modify your hardware to be detachable. That way you could get dressed more easily, then attach the hardware afterward... and you would only need to attach the hardware you'll need for the day. You won't have to have all of it all the time if you don't want to." the Captain said carefully.

Three stood silently for a moment, then said, "That would be acceptable. Could I have a smaller ocular implant to use when I am not in need of intensive scanning ability?"

"I don't see why not. Ask the Doctor and Seven of Nine when you get to Sickbay, they are expecting you." Janeway said smugly.

"Just a minute. Three, what is this bruise?" Andrew asked and knelt to look closer at Three's side.

"I just bumped into something. It is irrelevant." Three said dismissively.

"You bumped into the toe of someone's boot. Who kicked you?" Andrew asked with a flare of anger.

"I cannot say." Three said in a Borg tone.

"Three, you're my son, it is my duty to protect you. Tell me who did this and I'll make sure it never happens again." Alan said, looking Three in the eye.

Three looked at Alan, then Andrew. "You are my fathers, and I know if I need your help, that you will be there. Please trust me to deal with this my own way. And I will promise that if I need you I will ask for your help." Three asked hopefully.

Alan laid his hand on Andrew's shoulder and said, "Three, we do trust you. You are brave and smart, so we know that you'll do the right thing. But please call us immediately if you need us for anything, we love you and don't want to see you hurt."

Andrew put his hand over Alan's and said, "Yes, we trust you and are proud of you. Just know that we're here if you need us."

Three moved to both men and initiated a three-way hug.

"Gentlemen, if you will help Crewman Three on with his shirt, he has people waiting for him in Sickbay." Janeway said with a tender smile.

The hug broke up and the three worked together to get the uniform shirt over the Borg appliances.

"Thank you Captain." Three said and left the room.

"Gentlemen, please stay." Janeway said in a commanding tone.

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"I have interviewed those most closely involved in this matter and have come to a decision. It is my opinion that you are both excellent parents and I will grant the adoption of all six of the children. Have all the children in my ready room tomorrow at twelve hundred hours and I'll make it official. The children will be given their official names that they will carry for the rest of their lives, so be sure what each one is going to be called, especially Three." Janeway said with happiness.

"Thank you Captain. We're going to need larger quarters for all the kids... do you have any cabins with five or six rooms?" Alan asked cautiously.

"No, but we soon will have. I am going to move Ensign Kim back to his original cabin and move your family into Three's cabin and the adjoining one. I'll have B'Elana knock out the connecting wall and modify the second cabin to provide enough rooms for everyone... at least until the little ones are born." Janeway said with a smile.

"Thank you Captain." Andrew said quietly.

"I have to admit that when you asked about the adoption, I didn't know what you had already done for the children. They have progressed so far from the group of drones that were brought on board my ship. So I just have to tell you that you have my respect for the fine job you've done with them already." Janeway said seriously.

"We just loved them. And that's not hard to do, they're wonderful kids. If you would like, you could come to our cabin once we're settled in and spend some time with them... I know they'd enjoy visiting with you." Andrew said with a smile.

"I may just do that. The two of you have started a baby boom on board Voyager. I have had two requests for artificial wombs since your commitment ceremony." Janeway said with a chuckle.

"I figure Seven and B'Elana are one of the couples... Geron and Greg?" Alan asked the Captain.

"I cannot confirm or deny that. But I wouldn't be surprised if Lieutenant Paris and Commander Chakotay weren't the next couple to come to me for my permission." Janeway said, knowing she had just confirmed their suspicion.

"It wouldn't surprise me either. Chakotay and Tom have got it bad, they're just worried about making a wrong move and wrecking the whole thing." Andrew said.

"A reasonable concern, given their history... Gentlemen, if there is nothing else, I *do* have a ship to run. Dismissed." Janeway said and pulled some padds from her desk drawer.

* * * * *

The group stood in the ready room, waiting for the Captain to arrive. Uncle Dave, Seven of Nine, B'Elana, the Doctor and Neelix

were also there, wanting to see the official declaration. Three was looking decidedly less Borg, having little hardware and only a small ocular implant, which left both his eyes visible.

"Have all the children picked a name?" Andrew asked Alan nervously.

"Yes, Icheb told me that all but Three have decided and will tell us when they tell the Captain." Alan said with a note of worry, then said in a reassuring tone, "I'm sure they'll be fine. I told them about middle names this morning."

"What did you tell them?" Andrew asked with a note of panic.

"I told them that the middle name is optional. They can have none, one or even two middle names and it can be a name that honors someone you respect, or just a name that you like." Alan said with forced calmness.

"Oh gods. We should have helped them pick out the names. I'm worried that they'll pick something horrible and be stuck with it forever." Andrew said then stopped to take a deep breath.

After a moment Andrew turned to Three and asked, "Have you decided what your name will be Three? The Captain has to know it to complete the adoption."

"Please be calm father. The name is irrelevant, it is the individual it represents that is important." Three said sagely.

"Hey, that's what I told Icheb when he remembered his name." Andrew said with question in his voice.

"The things you tell one of us, we share. It is the most efficient way of gaining information. That is why you have not had to tell each of us about relationships, modesty, tact, polite conversation and the rest." Three said simply.

"I can't believe I didn't figure that out." Andrew said in wonder as the Captain and Tuvok walked into the room.

"Please be seated. Commander Tuvok is here to officially record my ruling. To begin, I will state that I have considered the statements of witnesses and my own observations and have come to the conclusion that Mr. LeeAndrew Summers and Mr. Alan

Summers will be fit parents for the children. I hereby grant the adoption of the children to be named as follows." Janeway said and looked to Icheb.

"Icheb Lee Andrew Malachi Summers." he said with pride and looked to Andrew.

Three moved out of the row of children and took a position on the far side of Janine.

William noticed and said, "William Alan Spike Summers"

Andrew smiled when he heard that and Janeway raised an eyebrow in question.

"Robert David Summers." Robert said proudly and looked toward his Uncle Dave.

"James Tiberius Olson Summers." Jimmy said and looked to Alan with a smile.

Jimmy touched Janine on the shoulder and pointed toward the Captain.

"Janine Cinderella Summers." She said with a happy smile.

Everyone turned their attention to Three who had a look of indecision on his face.

Finally he said, "Trey O'Seofon Summers"

Everyone waited silently for a moment, trying to figure out his name when Tuvok said, "Trey is the number Three card in sequence, following deuce. 'O' indicates 'of', and I believe Seofon is the old English version of the number seven."

"Correct." Trey said with a smile.

"Then it is settled. You are now officially a family by the laws of the United Federation of Planets. Gentlemen, you may take your family home." Janeway said with a smile.

"When will we be able to move?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Commander Chakotay has been working on that all morning. He will contact you when everything is complete, this afternoon most likely." Janeway said in a relaxed tone.

"Will we need to return to Cargo Bay four to regenerate?" William asked quietly.

"No, Seven and B'Elana are going to begin installing alcoves in your rooms when the modifications are complete. You should be able to regenerate in your new home tonight." Janeway said with a smile.

"We can help Seven of Nine with the installation." Icheb said to the group.

"Until they're ready for you to help with the alcoves, we can be packing up your things from the cargo bay and our things from our cabin." Andrew said to the group.

"This would be done most efficiently if we work collectively." Trey said in a Borg tone.

"You're probably right Trey, let's go to the cargo bay to get the children's things and we'll take them to our old cabin before we start moving to our new cabin." Andrew said and led the way out the door.

* * * * *

"Trey, are you going to miss living with Harry?" Andrew asked as they were packing belongings into carryall containers.

"No." Trey said and continued to work.

"I thought you and Harry would get along. What was the problem?" Andrew asked as he stopped to look at Trey.

"He made flatulent noises on his reed instrument of sufficient decibel level to interrupt my regeneration cycle. He would replicate malodorous nourishment, then refuse to recycle his dinnerware when his meal was finished. And he left soiled garments in the floor of the common areas of the apartment, sometimes within centimeters of the fresher unit." Trey said, then began to work again.

"So Harry is a slob... I didn't know. Trey, stop for a minute, I need for you to do something for me." Andrew said and looked Trey in the eyes.

"Yes?"

"If I do anything that bothers you like that, I need for you to tell me right away. There are going to be eight of us living in our new cabin and there will probably be things that all of us will do that will irritate the others to some degree. The only way to keep from having hard feelings about it will be if we communicate our feelings as they happen, can you do that?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yes Andrew... or should I call you father?" Trey asked seriously.

"Trey, you call me whatever you feel most comfortable with." Andrew said with a serene smile.

"Then yes father, I will communicate my discomfort or displeasure should it occur, may I assume you will do the same if I offend you in some way?" Trey asked seriously.

"Yes my son, I promise that I will let you know. If all of us can just communicate, we should be fine." Andrew said and put an arm around Trey to hold him close.

"We should proceed with our packing, the modifications to the cabin should be complete soon." Trey said as he returned the hug.

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Andrew, Alan and the children entered their cabin with carryall containers and Alan said, "Chakotay said that they're done. Seven and B'Elana will be here soon to begin working on the alcoves. Let's decide who is getting which room before they get here.

"How many bedrooms do we have to work with?" Andrew asked as the children began to fan out and examine rooms.

"There are six rooms." Icheb said to everyone.

"That means someone is going to have to double up... Trey, which is your room?" Alan asked and looked around.

Trey pointed to a door.

"How about Icheb and Jimmy getting one master bedroom, Trey and Janine each get a smaller room, we get a smaller room and William and Robert share the other master bedroom, that will leave one smaller room free for the babies." Andrew said in a considering tone.

"You are the parents, you should receive a larger room." Robert said with certainty.

"Thank you Robert, but we don't need regeneration alcoves in our room, just a bed and a dresser." Alan said seriously.

"That is reasonable, which room do you want father?" Trey asked.

"May I speak to you privately Dad?" Icheb asked with hesitation in his voice.

"Sure Icheb." Alan answered and walked with Icheb into one of the bedrooms.

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"I think we should wait for Icheb and Alan before we make any decisions." Andrew said to the group.

"Then what should we do now?" William asked.

"Trey, could we see your room? I'd like to get an idea of how much room your alcove takes." Andrew said.

"Of course Father, please come in." Trey said with pride and walked into his room, followed by the others.

* * * * *

"What's the problem Icheb?" Alan asked with concern.

"I am... unsure how to say..." Icheb said in embarrassment.

Alan pulled Icheb into a hug and said, "Just tell me Icheb. I promise that whatever it is, will be fine."

"I would like to have my own room... I am beginning to have feelings... I just need privacy..." Icheb finished desperately with his face buried in Alan's shoulder.

"Oh, I think I understand. Icheb, there is no way to say this that isn't going to embarrass you, but I need to know if I am correct, so I'm just going to ask, okay?" Alan said carefully.

Icheb nodded into Alan's shoulder.

"Is your need for privacy due to masturbation?" Alan said, trying to be delicate.

Icheb slowly nodded.

"Okay then. I should have had a talk with you about this before." Alan said and hugged Icheb tightly.

"It is perfectly natural and normal for you to have sexual urges and deal with them in this way. I think every guy does it. I understand that you are embarrassed about it and promise not to tell anyone but Andrew about this. And I will work it out so you can have your own room. Don't worry Icheb, this just means you are a perfectly healthy teenage boy. And I'm glad that you are." Alan said and pulled Icheb out of the hug to look him in the eyes.

"Thanks Dad." Icheb said and moved in for another hug.

"That's fine son. I know it can be embarrassing, but if you just tell me what's going on with you, I'll do my best to help you however I can." Alan said and soaked in the wonderful feeling of hugging his oldest son.

"I need to know about... masturbation... I am not sure I am doing it right." Icheb said, burying his face in Alan's shoulder again.

"I tell you what Icheb. Let's get us settled into rooms, and before you regenerate tonight, remind me that we need to talk and I'll tell you whatever you want to know." Alan said seriously.

Icheb nodded and hugged tighter.

"We need to get back to the others now." Alan said and pulled Icheb out of the hug and led him to the door with an arm around his shoulders.

* * * * *

"So what's up?" Andrew asked as everyone assembled in the main room.

"Icheb just explained that we should set up the rooms differently. I agree with him... how about Robert and William get one master bedroom, Icheb gets the first single room, Janine gets the second, Jimmy gets the third, Trey keeps his own room and we get the other master bedroom. When the babies are about to be born, we'll figure something out to get them their own room." Alan said to the group.

"Okay. I guess we could do it that way. Does anyone have any problem with that?" Andrew asked the group.

Jimmy said in a small voice, "I don't want to be alone."

"Jimmy, you don't have to be alone. You will go to your room to regenerate, but any other time you can come to the main room or go to one of the other rooms to be with your brothers or sister. Will that be okay?" Alan asked carefully.

Jimmy nodded unsurely.

"Just try it for a few nights, if it is a problem, we'll work something else out." Andrew said and heard a chime at the door.

"Come in." he said.

"B'Elana, Seven and Crewman Winger walked into the room.

"Crewman Winger volunteered to help us install the alcoves... where do you want us to start?" B'Elana said.

"Two will go in that master bedroom and one in each of the smaller rooms. Start wherever you think best." Andrew said with a smile.

"And we would like to help if we may." Trey said sincerely.

"We welcome your assistance." Seven of Nine said and walked to the nearest room.

* * * * *

"What did Icheb need to talk to you about?" Andrew asked Alan as they cuddled on the couch, resting after unpacking their room and the living room.

"Our little boy is growing up. He needs privacy, just like any boy his age." Alan said cryptically.

"Oh... that. I didn't think of that." Andrew said and rested his head on Alan's shoulder.

"Me either. He wants me to tell him how to do it right... can you think of anything more embarrassing than that?" Alan asked with a chuckle.

"Yes, when we have to have that talk with Janine." Andrew said with his own chuckle.

"Oh God, I hope that isn't for a very long time." Alan said with a shudder.

"Don't worry love, you'll do fine. It's good that he can talk to you about it. I had to learn by trial and error." Andrew said honestly.

"Yeah, it's good to know that he trusts me that much. But since I'm going to have the talk with Icheb, that means you get to have the talk with Trey when the time comes." Alan said seriously.

"Actually, you might consider having the talk with both of them at once. Trey is old enough and I think it will be easier just having to say it once." Andrew said honestly.

"Icheb is so shy about it, I don't know how he'd feel about that." Alan said in a considering tone.

"Ask him. Remind him how hard it was for him to ask you and see if he'll let Trey sit in on the talk." Andrew said and snuggled closer.

"Okay, but if I do this, you get to have the talk with the twins." Alan said in warning.

"Agreed. I don't think they'll be ready for the talk for a while yet... maybe a year." Andrew said in thought.

"We did it. We're parents." Alan said joyfully.

"Yeah. The intergalactic Brady Bunch." Andrew said with a laugh.

"Do you think we need to hire an Alice?" Alan said with his own laugh.

"Maybe. Do you think we can get Neelix to wear the uniform?" Andrew said with a smile.

There was a moment of silence as both men formed the mental image, then both said, "Ewww."

[Chapter 21: Alice Needs a Shave]

"Thank you all for your help. I'm really glad we will be able to spend our first night as a family together." Andrew said honestly.

"No problem. I learned a lot by putting those alcoves together. I think I'm beginning to get a handle on Borg technology." B'Elana said as she packed the last of her tools.

"B'Elana, I know you did the modifications on the cabin and wondered if you can think of any way we can squeeze in one more room for the babies when they're born?" Alan asked and stroked his stomach.

B'Elana saw the movement and a tender look fell over her face. "Yeah, if you don't mind losing a meter of your bedroom we can extend that wall over to the entry door to make a bedroom right here." B'Elana said expertly.

"That would be great. And that way the nursery would be right by our room so we wouldn't have to run across the cabin when the babies needed us." Andrew said with excitement.

"Just call me in about eight months and I'll have the room done inside a day." B'Elana said with a smile.

"Thanks B'Elana. I'm glad you're one of the kids god-parents. You really need to come over and spend time with them, you don't visit often enough." Alan said honestly.

"Don't worry, I have the feeling that Seven and I will be over here all the time." B'Elana said with a smile.

"You have a standing invitation Aunt B'Elana." Andrew said as he noticed that the children were listening.

"Thanks guys. When we have our own, you're going to be their Uncle Alan and Uncle Andrew." B'Elana said happily.

"Good for you. I think you and Seven will be excellent parents... and we can take turns baby-sitting for each other." Alan said with a smile.

"You got a deal." B'Elana said and picked up her toolbox.

"May I carry that to Engineering for you Aunt B'Elana?" Icheb asked helpfully.

"Yes. Thank you Icheb." B'Elana said and cast a look of surprise at Alan and Andrew.

"Just one of the perks of being a part of the Summers family." Andrew said and held close to Alan.

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"Icheb, before we have our talk, I wanted to ask you if we could invite Trey in too, so I could tell him the same things I'm going to tell you." Alan said carefully.

Icheb got a look of horror at the thought.

"Icheb, Trey is a young man, nearly as old as you are and needs to know these things too. It will help him to know that he isn't the only one who has these feelings and it will give you someone close to your own age you can talk to about it if you need to. Just remember how scared you were to talk to me about it, do you want your brother to have to go through that?" Alan asked with sincerity.

"Okay Dad, if you think it is best." Icheb said, obviously not happy with this development.

"I honestly think that it will be a horribly embarrassing talk for all of us, but when we're through it, we'll all be better off for having discussed it." Alan said while looking into Icheb's eyes.

Icheb nodded and Alan left the room.

* * * * *

"Trey, please sit down. I have something to discuss with you and Icheb." Alan said nervously.

Trey took a seat on the edge of the bed and waited patiently.

"At your age, hormones begin making you have sexual thoughts and erections. It's important for you to know that it is perfectly normal and just another stage of your development." Alan said carefully.

Alan noticed the blush come over Trey's face, then saw that it matched Icheb's blush.

"So I'm going to tell you basically what to expect. The feelings can be very strong, and if you don't ejaculate occasionally, it can cause embarrassing situations." Alan said and looked to find embarrassed comprehension in both boys eyes.

"First, this is one of those things that are covered under the topics of modesty and tact. You do not masturbate in front of others or discuss it with others because it is a sexual function. I am discussing it with you because I am your father and you need to know. One day you may need to have this discussion with your own sons to let them know that these feelings are normal and how to deal with them." Alan finished with a ramble, then took a deep breath to get back to the point.

"Do you have any questions so far?" Alan thought to ask.

"How do you do it?" Trey asked in a steady voice.

"It would be inappropriate for me to actually show you so I will describe it and you let me know if you understand. Okay?" Alan asked before he continued.

Both boys nodded quickly, apparently desperate to know.

"The most common way I know is the whole handed stroking motion like this." he said and made the motion for both boys to see.

"It has the benefit of providing more stimulation to the penis than most other methods that I'm familiar with. You can use your hand the other way for a different sensation, but I've always found that to be awkward." Alan said, demonstrating the reversed method.

"Although you can do it dry, for the most pleasurable experience, I apply some lubrication to the palm of my hand... just three or four drops is usually enough. More than that just makes a mess and doesn't really improve the sensation." Alan said seriously.

Both boys had apparently forgotten their embarrassment and were riveted on his every word.

"Just use whatever speed or intensity you feel comfortable with, you should instinctively know when to increase speed and force. You may find your mind flooded with imagery and not all of it being of a sexual nature. That is normal at your age, just focus on whatever brings you pleasure and bring yourself to completion. Don't worry if you don't understand all the images that appear in your mind while you masturbate, I think it's just you're subconscious trying different things to stimulate you. As you get older, the images become consistently more sexual and less abstract." Alan said in thought.

"What is completion?" Trey asked quietly.

"It depends Trey. Usually it is an orgasm, accompanied by ejaculation of semen. Occasionally it is an orgasm without ejaculation. Usually after completion, the sexual images fade from your thoughts and you feel a sense of relief, maybe even sleepy... I think it has something to do with endorphins, I'm not sure about that. Anyway, all you need to do is clean up and you're done." Alan finished with a small smile.

"How often does one have the need for masturbation?" Icheb asked curiously.

"That is a very individual thing. I believe the range of normal is somewhere between once a week and three times a day, but I'm not sure about that either. Basically, if it isn't interfering with the other parts of your life, it's not a problem. If you start avoiding being with other people, neglecting your duties or your health, then you have a problem and should probably seek help. Otherwise, it's just good clean fun." Alan said calmly.

"I wish to understand about sexuality. Do you have intercourse with Andrew?" Icheb asked with genuine curiosity.

"I will not discuss specifics of our sexual activity, because that would be inappropriate but I will tell you that we engage in intercourse, oral-genital stimulation and mutual masturbation." Alan said with a blush creeping up his face again.

Icheb nodded and Trey asked, "I do not understand intercourse between males."

"Intercourse between men is performed by inserting the penis into the anus." Alan said, trying to keep his voice even.

"Would that not be painful?" Icheb asked.

"It would be without preparation. It is necessary to lubricate the sphincter and slowly stretch it open so it can accommodate the penis." Alan said, wishing this conversation would end.

"I understand how that could provide pleasure for one but not both." Icheb said honestly.

"Men have an organ called the prostate that can be stimulated by rubbing. When the penis is inserted at the proper angle it will rub the prostate and cause a pleasant sensation that can stimulate the receiver to orgasm." Alan said, feeling the blush subsiding.

"What of sexuality with a female?" Trey asked with wide eyed curiosity.

"What aspect of the sexuality were you wanting to know about? I mean, do you understand the mechanics of sexual intercourse between a man and woman?" Alan asked in a clinical tone.

"Yes, I understand that. What I wish to understand is... more general. The activities from the time you disrobe until completion." Trey said, forgetting his embarrassment.

"That depends on your partner, and what I'm about to tell you applies to both same-sex and opposite-sex couples. You need to communicate your preferences. Try different things and discover what you both enjoy. Sex with one partner may be very different from sex with another because different people have different expectations, preferences and desires. It is common for someone your age to believe that intercourse is the goal of sexuality, and it is actually just one part." Alan said carefully.

"But intercourse is the activity that results in procreation?" Icheb asked in confirmation.

"It can. A woman has monthly cycles of fertility. If the sexual activity occurs while the woman is fertile, then pregnancy may result. There are ways to prevent the possibility of pregnancy if that is not a desirable outcome." Alan said seriously.

"Why would you not want to become pregnant?" Trey asked, never having considered the possibility.

"In the world Andrew and I are from, there are no replicators. People have to work to provide the necessities of life for their families. Sometimes it is not practical to have a child because the child's needs could not be provided." Alan said carefully.

"And sexuality outside a committed relationship could produce children that would have only one parent, since the other was not committed." Icheb said in realization.

"That is correct Icheb. However, that is a matter of sexual responsibility. If someone is old enough to be in a sexual relationship, then they should be old enough to commit to their partner and the resulting child if there is one. To have intercourse outside the confines of a committed relationship is not only wrong because it introduces the possibility of a child who is unwanted, but also because both partners are indulging in sexual activity without any emotional component." Alan said haltingly.

"Why is that wrong?" Trey asked.

"Because having sex with a partner that you are not committed to leads you to be alone. You get a temporary sensation of release from the sexual activity, but no comfort, love, caring, tenderness, or sharing of intimacy. Sexual activity is supposed to be another level of the sharing between committed partners. All I can really tell you is if you ever do it, you'll know what I mean, you'll just feel that it is wrong, empty, hollow... without meaning." Alan finished quietly.

"I believe I understand. So this is why Icheb wanted to have his own room? So he could masturbate?" Trey asked Alan then turned to Icheb who was blushing wildly.

"Yes Trey, and I invited you to join the conversation because if you aren't already masturbating, you most likely will be soon. It is what boys your age do." Alan said without inflection.

"Would it not have been better to discuss this with us separately?" Icheb asked, still blushing.

"It might have been more comfortable, but this way you both benefit from each other's questions. Guys, I'm just telling you the things I think you need to know. If you have any other questions

you can ask me or Andrew and we'll do our best to answer them for you." Alan said, allowing his concern for both to show.

"I have a question." Trey said hesitantly.

"Go ahead and ask Trey. I'm here to answer your questions." Alan said with assurance.

"I am beginning to grow hair... here." he said and pointed to his crotch.

"That's perfectly natural. It is the beginning of adulthood. You'll probably begin growing hair under your arms too. Later you will probably begin to grow hair on your face." Alan said as a statement of fact.

"On my face?" Trey asked in horror.

"Yes... Trey, do you have to work in the morning?" Alan asked in a considering tone.

"No, Lieutenant Torres gave me tomorrow and the next day off duty." Trey said cautiously.

"Then I will come and get you in the morning before I shave. I remove the hair from my face daily as most men do." Alan said calmly.

"May I come too?" Icheb asked.

"Of course. I'll get you both and let you see how I do it. And it probably won't be too long before you have to start shaving Icheb. You're just about at that age." Alan said frankly.

"Thank you Dad." Icheb said with a smile.

"So I'm Dad and Andrew is Father?" Alan asked.

"Yes. We discussed the appropriate titles to give you this morning and that is what we decided. Do you mind?" Icheb asked.

"No. I don't mind. Of all the names I've had, I think Dad is the best of them all." Alan said honestly.

A moment of silence filled the room.

"Do either of you have any more questions?" Alan asked, past ready to be done.

"What lubrication should I use?" Icheb asked timidly.

"In the replicator it is listed as personal lubricant #4. Remember to only use a few drops, it really spreads." Alan said in caution.

"What is the best way to clean up the semen?" Trey asked shyly.

"I find that a damp cloth is the preferred method. When I use a dry one, I feel that I didn't get clean." Alan said with a shrug.

Another moment of silence fell over the room.

"Anything else?" Alan asked.

Both boys shook their heads.

"Then the only other thing I have to say is to ask you both not to tell the other children about any of what we've discussed. This is a subject that shouldn't be discussed until a child reaches a certain age. Can you do that for me?" Alan asked looking from one to the other.

Both boys nodded in agreement.

"Good. Come here guys. I'm proud of you both, being able to discuss such a difficult thing so maturely." Alan said as he pulled the two boys into a hug.

"I love you guys." Alan said quietly as he held on.

"We love you too Dad." Trey said and enjoyed the hug.

[Chapter 22: Long and Winding Road]

It had taken two months, but Andrew finally completed his level seven medical training and officially replaced Tom Paris as the back-up medic for the Doctor. Alan had been able to reduce Commander Chakotay's workload to the point that the Commander only had to stay after his scheduled shift once a month to do the crew evaluations.

All the children but Janine tested at a college level and it was determined that rather than have them spend their days in college level classes, they would be given duties to aid in their socialization. William and Robert worked in the mess hall clearing tables and refilling drinks. Icheb and Jimmy were assigned to interview a different crewmember each week to feature on 'A Briefing with Neelix'. Trey continued to work in Engineering and after some initial awkwardness, began to fit in with the 'lower deck' contingent. Janine enjoyed being in classes with Naomi and excelled at her studies.

Andrew and Alan were spending a night at home relaxing on the couch, and planning their upcoming two days off when a vortex appeared in their living room.

"Andy, why did you do that?" Alan asked curiously

"I didn't... that's not one of mine." Andrew said with worry.

"I can't see through it... should I go through?" Alan asked carefully.

"Don't you dare." Andrew said in a menacing tone and pushed his power into the vortex to bring the entry closer.

"It's long... this is going to be tough." Andrew said with effort and gave a push to make the entry and exit come together.

Suddenly the swirling mist cleared and before them was standing Dawn, cut and bleeding.

"Dawn? Oh Gods Dawn, you're bleeding! What happened." Andrew said in panic.

"Andrew... thank the Goddess... it was the last thing I could think of to try... I'm an interdimensional key and Scott is identical to Alan so I had to try." Dawn said through tears of joy.

Andrew thought about what she was saying and said, "The Hellmouth Gate?"

"Something like that. I know it's dangerous, but with Alan's blood, I was sure we could find you." Dawn said, continuing to cry.

"Icheb, I need you to come here." Andrew called out, keeping his power focused.

Icheb ran into the room at his Father's desperate tone.

"Father, what are you doing?" he asked, looking at the bleeding girl through the vortex.

"This is my world, that is your Aunt Dawn. I need for you to call Chakotay and tell him that there is a vortex that leads to my world in our cabin, and hurry." Andrew said quickly.

"Andrew, jump through." Dawn called.

"Dawn, I can't. I won't leave without my kids." Andrew said plainly.

"Well get them together, when my blood stops flowing, the gate closes." Dawn said with worry.

"I'm going as quick as I can... Trey, William, Robert, Jimmy, Janine!" Andrew called.

The children all ran out at their father's desperate tone and stood waiting.

"Let's do this Borg style, by the numbers. Three, Four, Five begin disassembling the alcoves. Six, start packing everyone's belongings, go from room to room and pack whatever you think we need. Throw everything on the bed and wrap it in the blanket. Seven, get on the comm and start calling the family, Dave, B'Elana, Seven... call everyone to help." Andrew said desperately.

"I'll help Six." Alan said.

"No love, the portal is focused on you. If you move, it moves and I can't keep it stable if you're moving around." Andrew said with effort.

"Commander Chakotay and Lieutenant Paris are on their way." Icheb said as he ran back into the room.

"Good, go help the others disassemble the alcoves.

"What can I do?" Alan asked helplessly.

"Call the Captain and ask for her permission to leave the crew." Andrew said and noticed Scott standing beside Dawn.

"Scott, it's so good to see you. How are you?" Andrew asked joyfully.

"One hundred percent better now that I know you two are okay." Scott said honestly.

"Oh Gods, I can't believe it." Andrew said as tears of relief fell down his face.

"Crewman Alan Summers to the Captain." Alan said into his comm badge.

"Go ahead Crewman Summers, I trust that this is important." Janeway said in a threatening tone.

"A portal just opened in our cabin that leads back to our home. I just wanted to ask your permission to leave the crew and Voyager." Alan said with emotion creeping into his voice.

"I'm on my way." Janeway said and the comm went dead.

* * * * *

"What the hell is going on? Janine called and said you're leaving?" Winger said as he entered the room at a run.

"Yeah Dave, this portal leads to our home... we're going home." Andrew said through his tears.

"Right. What do you need me to do?" Winger asked with purpose.

"Help Jimmy get our personal stuff from all the rooms." Andrew said quickly.

"I'm on it... Jimmy! Where are you squirt?" Winger called out.

"Janine said you require our assistance." Seven said as she and B'Elana ran into the room.

"Yes, this portal leads back to our home. Will you help the kids disassemble the alcoves... and we need to know how to adapt them to one hundred ten volt alternating current." Andrew said with excitement.

"I'll get the power converters, you get the alcoves." B'Elana said decisively and gave Seven a quick kiss before leaving the room.

"Icheb said you found a way home." Chakotay said as he entered the room, followed by Tom.

"Actually it found us. Chakotay, Tom, I'd like for you to meet my sister Dawn and my brother Scott." Alan said proudly.

"I'm here too." came a distant voice and Alex ran into view.

"And my brother Alex." Alan said with a joyful smile.

"Father, the first alcove is disassembled." Trey called from his bedroom.

"Move on to the next one and someone will haul it out." Andrew called.

"We can get that." Chakotay said and ran into Trey's bedroom.

"Alan, where do you want this?" Winger asked, carrying a blanket full of possessions.

"Through the portal... Dawn is there anyone there who can haul the things we pass through to you?" Alan said.

"Alex, get help." Dawn commanded.

Alex got a vacant look in his eyes and a moment later he said, "The X-men will be right here to help."

"Good." Alan said and saw Winger standing with the blanket.

"Pass that to Alex." Alan said quickly to Winger.

Winger passed the blanket and ran to the next bedroom to help Jimmy and Janine.

"Gentlemen, I have to say that this is a bit of a surprise." Janeway said as she walked into the room.

"For us too Captain. My sister Dawn found a way to open a vortex and get us home." Alan said with pride.

"A pleasure to meet you. Your brother has been a great asset to the ship." Janeway said honestly.

"I'm glad he behaved himself for you... he's not known for that." Dawn said with a look of mischief.

"Oh Dawnie, no one's teased me like that in months. God I've missed you." Alan said fondly.

"Gentlemen, permission to leave the ship and crew of Voyager is granted. May you find peace and happiness wherever you go." Janeway said seriously.

The X-men could be seen entering the room and looking through the portal.

"Come on guys, lets get this stuff moving." Andrew said with effort.

"Uh, yeah... I only got so much blood here." Dawn said from her side.

X-men and Voyager crew began a fireman's bucket brigade of sorts passing pieces of alcoves down the line and through the portal and out of view. Even Captain Janeway was in the line handing alcove components and Summers family possessions through the portal.

"I've got your power converters." B'Elana said as she ran into the room with her arms filled with electronics.

"Thanks B'Elana, hand them to someone in line and they'll be passed on to our world." Alan said with a smile.

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry to hear that you will be leaving us... I made this for you just in case." the Doctor said and handed Alan a small device.

"It's a mini-cryo unit." Andrew said in confusion.

"Open it." the Doctor said with anticipation.

When the device opened, it revealed a circular object, the size of a quarter, but fatter.

"Is this?" Alan began in wonder.

"Your daughter, Mr. Summers. I remembered what you said about your lives moving quickly and thought it prudent to have her waiting until needed..." the Doctor said smugly.

"Thank you Doctor. There aren't words enough to thank you for everything you've done." Alan said with true thanks.

"Just doing my job... and Andrew, this is for you." the Doctor said, holding a MedKit.

"Thanks Doctor. Would you hand it to someone in line over there. I'm trying to prop up this portal." Andrew said with effort.

"Of course." The Doctor said and got into the line to help pass things through the portal.

"The rooms are done." Winger said, and walked up to Alan.

"Are you sure you got the kids artwork off the wall in my room?" Andrew asked with intensity.

"Yeah. Don't worry if you don't find it right away. I packed it inside a bunch of clothes and stuff so it wouldn't get banged up." Winger said quickly.

"Thanks Dave." Alan said tenderly.

"The alcoves are done." Icheb called out from a bedroom.

"Okay guys. I need for everyone to go to their own room and make sure one last time that everything was packed. Dave, will you check our room one more time?" Alan asked quickly.

"The children will be able to reassemble the alcoves. Trey has the necessary tools." Seven said efficiently as she walked to Alan and Andrew.

"Thank you Seven, I wish I could be here to see your baby. I know you're going to be an incredible mother." Alan said tenderly.

"Thank you. Were it not for your example, I believe I would not have discovered my maternal instinct for quite some time... if ever. Our daughter will be named Alana LeaAndrea Torres, in honor of you both." Seven said shyly.

"Thank you for that honor Seven." Andrew whispered sincerely.

"You may call me Ahnika." she said tenderly and went to join B'Elana in line.

"Guys, I'm running out here." Dawn called from the portal.

"Me too." Andrew said in a whisper.

Alan looked at Andrew in worry and said, "That's it. Everyone who's going, line up in front of the portal. We're leaving now."

Children came running from all the rooms and lined up in their original order.

"X-men, I'd like to introduce my family." Alan called and led Icheb to the portal.

"My oldest son, Icheb LeeAndrew Malachi Summers." Alan said with pride and patted Icheb's back as he walked into the portal.

"My son Trey O'Seofon Summers." and placed a hand on his back as he walked by.

"My son William Alan Spike Summers."

"My son Robert David Summers."

"My son James Tiberius Olson Summers." Alan said and ruffled Jimmy's hair as he went by.

"And my daughter Janine Cinderella Summers." Alan finally said and whispered to Janine, "Go to Icheb."

"Come on Andy, let's go home." Alan said quietly and held out his hand to Andrew.

Then in a louder voice he said, "And my husband, LeeAndrew Malachi Summers."

Hand in hand they walked into the vortex and it closed behind them.

[Epilogue]

Q flashed into the seat beside Kathryn in her quarters and said, "Quite a nice visit wasn't it?"

"You didn't plan this Q. They weren't supposed to be here." Kathryn said, seeing if she was right.

"There are some beings in this universe who don't follow the eddies and currents of the timestream. They move against it or sometimes, like this time they accelerate it." Q explained.

"So Andrew is such a being... a wild card." Janeway speculated.

Q looked up for a moment and finally said, "A very accurate description. You see, the future has already been written for the most part, sometimes details are altered one way or another, but that's why parallel dimensions follow the same general progression. Eddies and currents. But for Andrew and those around him, the future can be anything they make it."

"I feel more than Andrew's hand at work in this... that wormhole. You did that didn't you?" Kathryn accused.

"Moi?" Q asked with his most innocent look... which wasn't very.

"Somehow Andrew speeded something along and you needed to take two years off our journey to set it right." Kathryn speculated.

"I suppose it doesn't matter now. Everything's been done. The answer to your question is yes. Except it was Alan who speeded you along, Andrew just delivered him. And yes, I created the wormhole to bring you where you needed to be." Q said and gave a gentlemanly bow of his head.

"And collapsed it while we were inside..." Janeway said with acid.

"Kathy, don't be upset. There were thirty Videan ships swarming the Borg cube trying to scavenge flesh before it fell into the collapsing star. If I hadn't collapsed the wormhole, you would have dropped into the middle of a feeding frenzy." Q said with sincerity.

"Fine, I'll concede that point... Did Alan's sister really have the power to reach across dimensions and four hundred years with a portal?" Janeway asked knowingly.

"You see right through me Kathy. Dawn received a small boost from the Q, so she could reach you, but only with the best intentions." Q said with wide eyed honesty.

"But since Andrew and Alan have gone, does that mean we are done in the Delta Quadrant?" Janeway asked with hope.

"I abhor giving out answers to such questions, so I'll leave you with this thought: All is in place, all has been done that needs to be done, all that is left to do, is to do it." Q said and vanished in a flash of brilliant white light.

[The End]

[The Well of Hurt - Revisited]

As had been his habit of late, Tom was visiting Chakotay after their duty shifts.

The conversation had been general as always with the occasional brief kiss.

Tom was watching Chakotay work on an intricate sand painting and thinking about their situation.

As Tom thought about their relationship, he realized that it wasn't progressing. They were friends, boyfriends... barely. But neither he nor Chakotay was making the move to be more. With an attitude of resolve and a firm voice, Tom asked, "Where do you want this thing between us to end up? Do you want us to be friends? Lovers? A couple like Andrew and Alan? Tell me what you want."

Chakotay was stunned by the serious mood that seemed to creep up from nowhere. Unsteadily, he said, "I'm not the only one in this relationship. I need to know what you want too."

"Fair enough. But I'm putting it all on the line here. There's no taking back the words once they're said." Tom said with concern.

"Whatever it is, we'll be okay." Chakotay said with assurance. Then he turned his complete attention to Tom and asked in a quiet voice, "What do you want?"

"I want it all. Friends, lovers, partners, husbands, kids. Not right now, but in time I want to go through each of those stages until we end up bound together forever." Tom said in a tone as if he were daring Chakotay to disagree.

Chakotay sat stunned. He never thought that Tom was capable of considering that type of commitment, and it frightened him.

"Chakotay?" Tom asked with a hint of fear.

"Uh, yeah, you just caught me off guard. I don't know if I'm..."

"Did you hear the part about 'not right now'? 'Stages'? I'm talking about what I would like to happen, it doesn't mean that I expect it, or I won't settle for anything less. If we're just friends and nothing more, I'll consider myself lucky to have such a wonderful friend. I'm just saying up front that I'm not in this just till I'm bored with it. I'm tired of screwing around and I'm really committed to making our relationship work, whatever it turns out to be." Tom said reasonably.

Chakotay finally said in a voice filled with awe, "I never knew you had it in you to be so mature and responsible."

"Great..." Tom said darkly, then continued with impatience, "Now tell me what you want. Between us. In the best possible future you can imagine. Where do you see us ending up?"

"Honestly?"

"No, lie to me... of course 'honestly'! Quit stalling." Tom chastised, allowing his frustration to show clearly.

Chakotay gave a sharp nod and said in a voice tinged with anger, "I want you to be my husband by the traditions of my tribe. My one and only husband forever. My soul-mate, my lover and father of our children."

"Fine. Let's do that." Tom said with full anger and took a drink of his tea.

Chakotay stopped in stunned silence for a moment then began to laugh.

Tom, still holding on to his anger asked, "What's so funny?"

"That has to be the meanest, angriest proposal outside the Klingon empire." Chakotay laughed.

"I proposed?" Tom asked in confusion.

"Yeah. Wait till we tell the grandkids about how you proposed during our first screaming fight." Chakotay said with a chuckle.

"If I proposed, did you answer?" Tom asked cautiously.

"Not as such. Let me do that now." Chakotay said tenderly and cleared his throat before saying, "Yes, I would be honored to become your husband and promise to do whatever it takes to make our relationship work."

"This is the part where we kiss, isn't it?" Tom asked as Chakotay moved closer.

"Oh yeah." Chakotay said and pulled Tom into a deep passionate kiss.

Finally the need for air asserted itself and Tom pulled away, gasping. "I can't believe we passed up four years of that. What were we thinking?" Tom said breathily.

"Less talk, more kiss." Chakotay grunted and pulled Tom close again.

* * * * *

Tom woke to the sensation of being nuzzled behind the ear. He thought back to the previous night and smiled. [God, please don't let him regret last night.] He prayed.

"Good morning Tom." Chakotay said and moved down to nuzzle his neck.

"Good morning. Are you always this... friendly, first thing in the morning?" Tom asked, enjoying the attention.

"Not really, but you have to consider that I've slept alone every single night for the last four years. I haven't really had the opportunity to be friendly for quite a while." Chakotay said and began to move down Tom's chest.

"We have to get ready for our duty shifts soon, don't get the motor warmed up if you're not going to take it out for a drive." Tom warned.

"Huh?" Chakotay asked in true confusion.

"Don't start anything you can't finish." Tom paraphrased.

"Wouldn't think of it. I promise, I'll never leave you hanging if I can help it." Chakotay said and began to tease a nipple.

"Ungh, that's good to know. If you swing around, I might be able to return the favor." Tom said as Chakotay brought his nipple to almost painful hardness.

"I get mine this morning, you get yours tonight." Chakotay said as he moved to the other nipple.

"Is that so? You have it all planned out?" Tom asked in a teasing tone.

"Yeah, this morning I'm going to get you off... twice... before we have to get ready for our duty shifts and tonight you can do whatever you want with me." Chakotay said happily and started working his way down Tom's stomach.

"Twice? After last night?" Tom asked with disbelief.

"Yeah. And if you can still form sentences, I'm not doing it right." Chakotay said and engulfed Tom's erect member in one swift movement.

"Mmpf." Was all that Tom could manage to say in response.

Later, at breakfast

"Do you think they'll be okay?" Tom asked as he looked up from his breakfast.

"I'm sure they'll be fine. You remember what they said about how drastically their lives change. Honestly, I think they were surprised that it took as long as it did before everything changed again." Chakotay said seriously.

"I guess so... it's just... I feel kind of lost without them here." Tom said absently.

"I know, I do too. We just have to continue on. Who knows? The forces that guide the universe may guide them back to us one day." Chakotay said distantly.

"Or us to them." Tom said in his own distant voice.

Chakotay smiled and said, "That's right. We've visited their century once already. There's nothing that says we won't do it again."

Tom considered the statement and said, "Yeah. I guess it's not really 'goodbye'."

"Whatever happens, we just have to accept that we aren't in control of everything and adapt to what is before us." Chakotay said calmly.

"Thanks Chak. I'd be a real mess if I didn't have you to talk to about this." Tom said quietly.

"That goes for me too. Meditation and belief in the spirits help to a certain degree, but having you here to face things with me makes dealing with change a lot easier." Chakotay said with a gentle smile.

"Do you think you could show me some of the spirit stuff you believe in? I've never really thought about that stuff before but now... I just feel like it's time." Tom said distantly.

"Sure, I'd be honored to share my beliefs with you." Chakotay said happily.

"How are you guys doing this morning? Mind if I join you?" Harry asked as he approached the table with a tray of food.

Tom glanced to Chakotay to receive an almost imperceptible nod.

"Sure Harry, have a seat. How are you doing?" Tom asked, forcing cheer into his voice.

"I'm fine. I'm still having trouble believing that Alan and Andrew went home. I mean, we've been traveling out here for nearly five

years and they just left as suddenly as they arrived." Harry said before starting to eat.

"I know what you mean. But from what they told us, that's how their lives seem to operate." Tom said seriously.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked with interest.

Tom looked to Chakotay, seeing if he wanted to explain.

Chakotay smiled at being included in the conversation and said, "From what I've put together from everything they said to me, I think it goes something like this. Andrew is from one dimension, Alan is from another and they met each other in a third. Alan's dimension was fighting an all out war between mutants and non-mutants, Andrew's was filled with creatures they considered demons that threatened the survival of humanity and the third sounded like it was both, just to a lesser degree."

"Right, and the way the guys got to know each other was by spending time together recovering from injuries." Tom said with a smile.

"Wow. I guess that their time here must have been pretty boring compared to all that." Harry said in a voice filled with awe.

"I don't know, I think the children gave them enough challenges to keep it interesting for them." Tom said with a chuckle.

"Don't remind me. I lived with one of them, remember?" Harry said darkly.

"I like Trey. What was your problem with him?" Tom asked curiously.

"He was like my mother, following me around, watching everything I did, complaining when I didn't recycle my dishes right away or put my laundry in the fresher." Harry said in an aggravated tone.

Tom shook his head in exasperation and said, "He's Borg. Organization and order are everything to them. Chaos is unacceptable."

"I guess. From the way he talked to me, he thought I was unacceptable." Harry said as he looked down at his plate.

"I'm sorry you two didn't get along. I honestly thought you and he would probably become friends." Chakotay said quietly.

Harry looked at Chakotay with question.

"You seem to have such a... youthful attitude that I thought you would be able to relate to a teenage boy." Chakotay said with difficulty.

Harry thought about the words for a moment, then finally said, "I suppose you're right. The only problem is that Trey was so serious all the time that we just couldn't connect. I guess after the first time he criticized me, I kind of went out of my way to upset him. I suppose I could have tried harder. I feel like I failed you or something."

"Don't worry about it Ensign Kim. Some people just don't get along and I realize that. And it worked out for the best since Trey decided to be adopted." Chakotay finished with a smile.

"Thank you Commander." Harry finished with a sheepish smile.

The End